

Desire and Yearning

by Connor

Disclaimer: not mine, never will be

This is a work of fiction. I'm only borrowing the characters to play with them (NO, not that way – sheesh). This story is a complete Alternate Universe. Brian and Justin are the same age – around 24 at the beginning of this tale. Everything else will be revealed as the story moves along.

“Brian? I asked you a question! How do you like it?”

Brian sighed and rubbed his aching forehead. He had woken up with his head throbbing like a fucking jackhammer and it hadn't let up since.

So – how did he like it? He remembered making a noncommittal sound and then giving a nod that could go through as approval. After that ... well, it was lost in a haze of booze, drugs and sex to be honest. Hence the jackhammer headache.

He glanced at the clock. Two hours before he had to leave. Two hours before Justin would do the fucking deed. Two hours before Brian's dreams would go down the drain.

Dream?

Not fucking likely. He'd stopped dreaming so long ago that he could hardly remember what dreams meant. Dreams were stuff written about in fairytales, stories mothers made up for their kids. Other mothers, that is. Brian's mother didn't know what dreams were either. He couldn't blame her. Finding herself pregnant and then forced into marriage with a drunken brute was nothing anyone would dream about.

How had he liked it?

He had fucking hated it. The glimmering gold and the red ruby stone, the sign for commitment Justin intended to give to his future bride. He hated what it stood for, hated that Justin's eyes were shining when he spoke or thought of her, and he hated even more that it would never be his.

Never be his.

Not that anyone would believe it anyway. Brian fucking Kinney wanting a commitment – yeah, right. He was Brian the fucking machine, Brian who had everyone he wanted. They had no idea. None of his so called friends knew what went on behind the façade he showed the world, that fucking a gorgeous guy was a good thrill but left him empty in the end. They didn't know that he was yearning for the one he couldn't have, the one who insisted on being straight and in love with a girl, the one who had resisted Brian.

They met in college, Justin Taylor from an upper middle-class background and Brian, the blue-collar Irish boy attending Dartmouth on a scholarship he had earned for his brains even though he could kick a mean ball on the soccer field. They hit it off from the get-go, and it hadn't hurt that Brian had fallen for Justin's best friend, the blond and blue-eyed Lindsay Peterson, daughter to Craig Taylor's business partner and Justin's intended.

However, along the road, Lindsay had realised she was preferring to munch on unspeakables, while Brian fell for cock with a solid thud. And Justin, after frowning for a week, had given them the expected pc-smile and then promptly fallen for Daphne Chambers, dark skinned but not less upper-middle classed and everything was right with the world.

Not.

Because what nobody knew, and nobody was ever going to find out – Brian had it bad. Had fallen for the other man the moment they set eyes on each other. It had taken a while for him to realise that it wasn't just comradeship that bound them together. Not that it would change a god damn thing. It was just as well – just another bad joke the universe was playing with Brian's life. As if being cast out by his family and shunned by all his childhood friends wasn't bad enough.

But Brian being Brian, he had given them the mental middle finger and not spoken to his parents since the fatal day he'd come out to them, the day his father had taken an old family gun and tried to kill his fairy son while his mother had prayed one rosary after the other while not taking one step to help her son. So that was that.

And now Justin was getting married.

Big fucking cosmic joke. Really, Brian was laughing so hard he was probably popping a fucking artery any time soon.

Not.

He sank down on the nearest chair and did what he hadn't done in years. He cried like the baby he couldn't remember he ever was.

Part 1 – Unexpected Bedmates

“What do you know – some people just have all the luck.”

Brian barely managed not to snarl at the person talking, and took a big swig of his beer instead. Which was a bad idea because he'd had several of them before, but after the

day he'd had – it was really all coming down to What The Fuck anyway. So – what the fuck?

“What kind of luck are you talking about? Because, honestly, the idea of having to do it with the same woman for the rest of my life freaks me out a little bit.” Emmett paused for emphasis before continuing, “Or with any woman for that matter.”

“Phew,” Ted mock-swiped his forehead. “You had me really scared for a moment there.”

Michael gave them all a look. “I don't mean the obvious ick-factor of doing it with a woman, okay. I'm just thinking about making a life-long commitment, spending all your days and nights with a person you love and trust.” He sighed, lost in a world of his own that had Emmett rolling his eyes.

“Love and trust,” Brian scoffed, then turned away to look at the couple twirling on the dance floor. Fair and dark, black and white, male and female. They fit – and he wanted to throw up. Instead he took another swig of beer.

“She is very sweet.”

Oh, now his day was almost perfect.

“Linds,” he acknowledged without looking. “I knew I couldn't escape your TLC.”

“TLC my ass,” she said and he could hear the grin in her voice. “However,” her voice turned to a seductive shade he only remembered too well. It made him queasy.

“However?” he repeated, wishing he could escape, wishing he could just bury himself in a dark corner and forget. Or better yet, bury himself in a tight, hot ass.

“I met someone,” she announced in a whisper.

Christ. “You did?” Faking interest had never been a problem for Brian. It was one of his most tuned skills when finding a fuck-partner for a night.

Lindsay took the bottle out of his hand and tipped it. Licking her lips, she smirked, “She is hot. Law-student. Jewish.” She rolled her eyes at his look, “Yeah I know. The parents won't like her.”

Brian took his beer back, intrigued despite himself, and saluted with the bottle.

“Welcome to club doom. But as someone who has some experience at a parents-free existence I'm telling you that one can live very happily without them.”

She laughed and leaned her head against his shoulder for a moment. “You are terrible, Brian, but I love you.”

“Don’t make we want to throw up,” he shot back giving her his best evil smirk.

It made her laugh again. “It’s not so much about my mother,” she said. “We never got along well, but my dad ... He and I have always been close.”

Which wasn’t going to help one bit. Brian didn’t know Lindsay’s parents well, but he saw enough to know that it was her mother who blew the whistle in the family. “What about sister dearest?”

“She will give them the grandbabies they so crave. She’s gotten engaged to a Harvard Law student.”

“Hot?”

She shrugged. “How would I know?”

“You used to go for cock once, as I recall.”

“Yours, sure. But Harvey is a bore.”

He gave her a long look. “Harvey? What kind of fucking name is that?” Some parents obviously hated their children more than his.

“He even has the ears to go with that name,” Linds told him with a grin. “They’re big. Not fluffy, though.” She lifted her head from his shoulder. “What about you? Anything on the horizon that will hold your interest longer than an hour?”

“Why should I tie myself down like that?”

Again she laughed. He did too but his chest was tight. She loved him, she’d said, and in a strange way they’d become friends after a lot of tears and heartbreak. But she didn’t know him.

“What are you two whispering about?”

“Michael,” Lindsay turned around with a welcoming smile. “So nice to meet you again.”

WASPy polite, Lindsay sounded genuine. And maybe she was, maybe she was glad Michael, Emmett and Ted had come. Or maybe she was just glad all those upper-middleclass assholes had something else to whisper about behind their lilly white hands than Lindsay Peterson being a lesbian.

“I can’t fucking believe we’re here between all these rich people,” Michael said, looking around in wonder. He’d done that a lot tonight, as if he was shell shocked by what he saw.

Lindsay laughed her melodic laugh. "We're not rich, Michael. We're well settled. That's the accepted term."

But Michael wasn't listening. He was staring open-mouthed at the wedding cake that was brought in right that moment. It was huge, mostly white with a happy couple on top. Someone had even taken the time to make sure the skin colour matched the real couple, who walked towards the cake just then. Justin had his arm around Daphne's waist and she was laughing, her pretty eyes sparkling in the light of artificial candles. Then Justin's mother was there, handing them a knife with a smile and Brian wondered if it was maybe sharp enough to slit his wrists.

The groom was feeding the bride and then they kissed, their mouths smeared with cream and they were laughing again and Brian turned away, emptying his bottle in one big gulp.

"That's so romantic." Emmett clapped his hands. "I love weddings."

"I thought you were freaked out by the idea of straight sex," Ted said.

"Puh-bah," Emmett replied, waving his hand meaningfully. "That doesn't mean I can't appreciate the romance factor of all this."

Yes, he was definitely going to throw up while his friends gushed and cooed over the happy couple.

"Hey!"

Brian closed his eyes and wished he hadn't emptied that last beer bottle all on his own. "Hey," he managed on a croak, feeling as if sandpaper was rubbing his throat raw.

"It'll be time for your speech soon," Justin said with a wide smile. "Be nice, okay?"

"Nice?" Brian patted himself on the shoulder for the herculean effort it took to behave completely casual. "It's the sacred duty of the best man to not be nice. In fact, I've even read it in the handbook."

"Handbook?" Justin cocked his head his blue eyes shining with delight. "What kind of handbook is that? The rules according to Brian Kinney?"

"Exactly."

"You are so full of shit," Justin said, running a hand through hair Brian knew was soft to the touch. And he had to stop this right now or he'd completely embarrass himself. He looked into the crowd and saw Craig Taylor, face like a thundercloud, glaring at both of them.

“Your father is probably going to kill me as the evening moves along.”

Justin’s smile vanished. “He isn’t so bad, Brian. Just ... you know, protective of me and all that. Really. Most of the stuff I know, he taught me. And he’s voting for the Democrats.”

Brian snorted. “If you say so.” Justin was delusional where his father was concerned, had been that way as long as Brian could remember. The first time Brian had met the older Taylor he’d instantly detested Justin’s father. Apart from being an obvious homophobe he was also condescending and arrogant – in short a complete asshole. Why an intelligent woman like Jennifer Taylor had fallen for said asshole belonged into the category for eternal mysteries.

“Whatever. By the way,” Brian said, his gaze lingering on Justin’s lips, “you have something there.”

He pointed at Justin’s cheek where a little bit of wedding cake lingered, then reached out to remove it. Beneath the morsel was skin, soft and warm and Brian wondered how it would taste if he ran his tongue over it, and if Justin would push him away or if he would maybe lean into it, start to enjoy it even despite himself, and then maybe ...

Brian snatched his hand back as if Justin’s skin was hot iron. “Shit,” he muttered and turned away, realising that he was hard and praying that Justin hadn’t noticed. The last thing he wanted was to ruin the wedding by making it publicly clear that instead of toasting the happy couple he’d rather fuck the groom, preferably right in the middle of all these rich assholes and their assorted families.

On top of the wedding cake.

Fuck.

“Brian? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he gritted out between clenched teeth. He took a deep breath. Then another. And then another. “Really.” He turned back to look into concerned blue eyes. “And ready to dish out everything I know about you.” He gave Justin an evil laugh as the blond blanched a little.

“Everything?” he asked faintly.

“Everything,” Brian replied, then slung a friendly arm around Justin and led him towards their seats at the table.

“Brian? Do you have a moment?”

Fuck. Just what he needed. Jennifer Taylor on a mission. He didn't know the woman all that well, but he knew enough to expect the worst. She was that kind of caring mother. Not that he knew about caring mothers. But her love for Justin was obvious.

He sighed, leaning more securely against the wall, a full glass of champagne in his left hand. "Sure," he said, giving her the fake smile he'd perfected.

She cocked her head ever so slightly and studied him for a moment in a very disconcerting way. "What you said," she started, "you know, before. It was nice."

Brian acknowledged it with a nod, then sipped. He was starting to feel the buzz of not quite being drunk and managed to relax despite those knowing eyes on him. "It was the truth."

"Yes, I know." She smiled at him the way a proud mother would. At least he thought she did. Brian didn't have any experience with proud mothers.

"I already miss him," she then said, leaning against the wall beside him with a sigh. The happy couple was off to some godforsaken island in the Caribbean for their honeymoon. "They're both so young. I remember when Craig and I got married ..." She trailed off and sighed again.

Brian looked at his glass. "They love each other," he said, not because he wanted to but because, that too, was the truth.

"Yes." He heard her shift beside him but he didn't glance over. "It's what I wanted to talk to you about." Brian tensed. There was a pregnant pause – and then: "You are in love with him, aren't you?"

The glass slipped from Brian's fingers and shattered on the pavement. He and Jennifer both jumped in surprise and Brian was grateful for the moment of distraction. Still, he had to squeeze the word out. "Wh-what?" was all he managed.

"I'm not blaming you," she said quickly, putting a hand on his arm, forcing him to look at her. "I can't blame you for it. And I won't. But I want to beg you never to do anything to endanger their marriage."

Brian stared at her, too stunned for words. He shook his head.

"Yes, I know Justin just married her but ... he cares deeply for you. And I am not blind. I see the kind of power you have if you put your mind to it."

"Are you ... ? What exactly are you saying?" he asked, not quite believing the strangeness of this conversation. She was afraid he could endanger the marriage? What the fuck?

“Are you shocked now?” she asked instead of answering his question. “I know Justin says he’s straight, and he hasn’t shown any signs of being anything but. However,” she paused, scratching the ground with a shard of glass, “I’m his mother, not his father. I’m not blinded by prejudice.”

“Are you saying that Justin might be bisexual?” Brian prided himself on his gaydar, and he’d never even got a whiff where Justin was concerned. Or had he? Was Justin that good of an actor? Or what the fuck was this all about?

“I’m not saying anything. I’m just ... I ... I want him to be happy. And he is happy with Daphne. She is such a sweet girl and she loves him. She is ... THEY are perfect for each other. It’s the kind of connection that could actually last. They have so much in common. I just don’t want that threatened by some spur of the moment thing.”

Ouch. That hurt. More than she could probably imagine. It ripped Brian wide open, sliced through his heart and finally settled in his gut. “I won’t threaten anything,” he heard himself say, wondering what was wrong with him. These words didn’t belong to him. He didn’t owe her one damn thing.

There was a moment of silence, then she straightened. “Good.” She gave him another smile. “I’m glad you are his friend.” With those words she left, her high heels clicking on the pavement as she walked back into the house, leaving Brian raw and open and bleeding all over the place.

“Justin, over here!”

Emmett had to shout to be heard over the noise, and just in case Justin still wouldn’t hear him he was exuberantly waving his arms.

The smaller blond man smiled widely and then found his way through the dancing half-naked bodies to his destination, not even flinching when a leather clad biker-type grabbed his ass. Michael had to admire Justin despite himself. Justin Taylor was the only straight guy he knew who had no problems being the only pussy muncher inbetween cock worshippers.

“Hey,” Justin greeted the circle of friends and his greeting was returned with smiles and ‘heys’ and a grunt that could have been anything from ‘I’m glad to see you’ to ‘Fuck off’. Yes, Brian was in great form tonight. Michael had no idea what the problem was but ever since Justin had gotten married something had crawled up Brian’s tight ass and no probing whatsoever (and unfortunately not in the literal sense) had gotten Michael an answer.

At Brian’s non-verbal greeting Justin’s smile slipped a bit but reinstated itself only a moment later which was no surprise. The smile was a constant these days with Mr.

Taylor who seemed so happily married that there had been moments where Michael – God help him – had wished to be straight, if it meant finally finding a life partner and living happily ever after. In his saner moments, however, he knew that giving up cock simply wasn't an option.

Justin slipped into a chair and after a moment the very hot waiter appeared at their table and with a wink took his order. The club they were meeting in was new and the main part was a combination of dance floor and tables in the back, complete with a dark room in the basement. It had only opened four weeks ago and Emmett had insisted they finally check it out.

“So, how is the fair Daphne these days?” Emmett asked with a clear ‘spill it, I’m desperate for news’ look in his eyes.

Justin grinned. “She is fine. Actually, there’s some news I have to share. It’s why I wanted us all to meet tonight.” He was looking at Brian but Brian wasn’t looking back. Instead his gaze was glued to the dance floor, clearly checking out a potential trick for the night.

“Don’t mind him,” Ted said with a wave trying to distract Justin. “We stopped minding him long ago.”

Which was the most blatant lie Michael had ever heard. Nobody ever stopped minding Brian. He certainly had never stopped – and by God he wished he could. Wished that the sway of Brian’s hips wouldn’t send a shiver of lust through him and make him throb with need, wished that Brian’s face and lips weren’t still the last thing he could see when he fell asleep. God, how he wished he could just fall for someone and finally leave these unfulfilled dreams behind.

It should have been easy. Brian was a man with simple tastes. He would tell anyone who wanted to know – and quite a few who didn’t – that only a few things were needed to make a gay man completely happy. Not complicated things like trying to make a relationship work, or becoming the first gay president of the United States; not even things like wealth (even though Brian definitely wanted to become successful and financially independent) or the exhilaration of winning the World Cup Soccer final, which was unlikely anyway.

No, there were only a few simple pleasures. Pared down to essentials, if there were essentials with Brian Kinney to begin with, all he needed was healthy food, good booze, good drugs, good friends and good sex; although to be honest, he’d probably take sex of any quality so long as it was hot and frequent. So it came down to only five things with sex going for gold, no questions asked.

Brian had grown up in an abusive home. And with abusive, Michael didn’t mean just the usual. Yes, Brian’s father was a drunk and from time to time he had gotten lost in a drunken rage and beaten the crap out of his son. Michael would never forget the one

time he'd found Brian on his porch, barely able to open his eyes that were completely swollen shut. But it was actually the other abuse that was much harder to bear and that had left traces in his friend, Michael wasn't sure could ever be erased.

Much worse, so his mother Debbie had once explained him, was the fact that Brian had grown up in a loveless home. At first Michael hadn't understood. Why was that so bad? So Brian wasn't getting any love – so what? But Debbie had explained it to him, had explained what happened to people who were never hugged, never cared for, never loved. They became loners, people who didn't know how to love themselves, who were unable to accept love. It explained so much – and it made Michael sad.

For a while he had thought that he was the one who could save Brian. Maybe if he just loved him enough then Brian would see the light – or so to speak – and realize that Michael was his salvation. Of course, no such thing had ever happened. And it never would. Only if it weren't so hard to accept.

"So what's the big news?" Emmett asked, eyes glued to Justin, and Michael shook off his maudlin thoughts.

"Yeah, dish," Ted begged, and Michael wondered if he was just as pathetic as his friend sometimes. Ted was the oldest of their group, but other than his good grades hadn't really anything to show for his years.

Justin's eyes once again flickered to Brian, trying to catch the other man's eye. It was futile. Michael wasn't sure if Brian was simply too interested in the guy on the dance floor or deliberately trying to avoid Justin's gaze.

Justin sighed, clearly torn, but then just blurted. "Daphne's pregnant," he announced, his eyes shining.

Silence.

Well, as much as silence was possible in a loud, overcrowded club.

But clearly everyone at the table was holding their collective breaths.

Then Brian was the first to react, his eyes never meeting Justin's. "Wow, that was fast. Or was there already a bun in the oven when you were binding – whatever you were binding?"

Justin blushed. "Uhm – maybe. We didn't know though." He stared at Brian's profile. "Aren't you going to say 'congrats' or anything?" The hurt in his voice was unmistakable.

"You want my congratulations? For what? For knocking her up? Or for looking forward to years of supporting a wailing, flailing infant? So – congrats. And now," Brian stood,

eyes on the dance-floor, “I leave you to your celebrations. I have a hot date with a hot guy and no intentions of spawning.” With that he left, and they watched him find and score a trick for a quick trip to the back-room, Justin’s news momentary forgotten.

“I ... uh ... need to ...” Justin stared after Brian, then stood. “Bathroom,” he mumbled and was gone, leaving the other three on their own.

“Wow. That was awkward,” Emmett murmured.

“What the fuck!” Michael exclaimed, feeling completely left out of the loop. What on earth was going on here?

“Did they have a fight we don’t know about?” Ted asked.

“No,” Michael was quick to reassure them. There hadn’t been a fight. Besides, if there was, Michael would have been the first to know about it, he was sure of that much. Whenever something went wrong in Brian’s life, he sought out his best friend and they talked.

“So,” Emmett turned to look at Michael. “What’s going on them? I mean, I’ve seen Brian in a pissy mood, but usually Justin can get through his armor.”

Michael shrugged, wishing they weren’t waiting for him to explain. He hated to admit it, but he didn’t have a single clue. He and Brian were best friends, and he was certainly so familiar with Brian’s mantra that he could recite the criteria that made Brian’s life worth living. He was only guessing here, but based on years of knowing more of Brian’s emotional life than was good for his own peace of mind, he thought that in the last couple of months Brian had been different.

Michael had no idea what exactly had happened and the changes were marginal, and only visible for those who knew Brian well, but changes were noticeable.

So – what the fuck had happened?

Brian was still tricking and drinking, nothing had changed there, and yet – in a very subtle and barely recognizable way, Brian was different ever since Justin had gotten married to Daphne.

Had someone – say Daphne – said something to Brian? And if she had – what could it be? And why would she say something in the first place? Fuck. Michael could wrack his brain until Bush would vote for the Democrats and not come up with an answer. Brian was an enigma for him – and would stay that way for all times. His mom was right, a relationship between them would never work – not in a million years.

“Does that mean we have to swim in murky waters, so to speak?” Emmett looked at Michael with a heavy pout.

“Sorry, guys,” Michael replied, sighing heavily. “I can’t help you there. I wish I knew.”

“Well, whatever crawled up their asses, it’s something big and ugly,” Ted commented, his voice laced with doom.

Michael rolled his eyes. “Brian’s been completely fucked up for months.”

“What?” Emmett’s eyeroll was much more expressive. “Did wittle Brian refuse to play in the sandbox with you?”

“Fuck you,” Michael snarled, tempted to just leave and brood in silence, in his room, in his house, all on his own – preferably with his Mom bringing him a mug of hot milk and some cookies. God, his life was pathetic beyond belief. He rolled his head on his shoulders, feeling a sudden tension sneaking up on him.

“Michael.” Ted’s voice was soothing. “You know how he can be sometimes,” he said with a nod towards Emmett who looked contrite.

“No, it’s okay.” Michael was instantly mollified. He loved his friends, was glad he had found people he could always count on. “Maybe Brian’s mood is contagious.”

“Let’s hope not,” Emmett said with mock horror, then ruined the impression by giggling girlishly. “Although, maybe something else could be contagious. I could do with a little more Brian in me.”

“God save us.” Ted rolled his eyes and groaned – and barely avoided getting slapped by his best friend.

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Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Brian zipped his pants, not even glancing at the guy kneeling before him and left the back room, for once ignorant of all the hungry looks cast his way. They were insignificant. He’d gotten the blow-job he came for and the guy back there was old news, already forgotten in the mass of bodies that came and went in Brian Kinney’s life.

Fuck.

Brian bit back a savage snarl when he saw his friends still sitting at the same table he’d left only ten minutes ago. They were pathetic. Their lives were pathetic. Michael with his

boy next door looks, always hoping for a fairy tale and yet lost in what seemed like a constant rewind of the same tape. Emmett, glamorous and colourful, a great guy all in all but also hunting dreams that would never fulfil. And Ted, the pathetic schmuck, the guy whose greatest wish was to be Brian Kinney for a night, and probably not even remembered the last time someone had looked at him in a sexual way.

And then there was Brian. Getting his rocks off on a regular basis, good looking, prime meat in the back room, smoldering eyes, luscious lips, lean and sexy – and yet, the sad truth was, he was the most pathetic of them all. Because despite all mother nature had gifted him with he'd done the one thing a gay guy never should, had gone against the number one rule – he'd gone and fallen in love with his best friend, even though Michael would probably argue the point.

However, the worst part was that he'd not only fallen in love with Justin Taylor. The kicker – he was sure his so called friends would get a year's worth laugh out of this – Justin was straight as they came. Brian had tried every trick in the book – and some that had never been written down but Justin had resisted.

Brian hadn't been quite bold enough to just kiss the guy – he cherished their friendship way too much to risk it that way – but he'd done all he could to make himself the focus for Justin's fantasies – but nothing had worked.

He looked over at the table again where Justin was thankfully absent and decided that he'd had enough for the night. Seeing Justin and thinking about the baby would only made him want to throw up. Again. As if watching the guy getting married wasn't enough torture for one gay man. But no, oh no, this wonderful life had a load full of shit ready for Brian Kinney and right now he was wading in it. His father would be rolling in his grave with laughter, God damn his sorry, abusive ass.

Leaving the club through the back door, Brian breathed deeply trying to get some air into his lungs. He felt dizzy for a moment and had to hold on to the wall to steady himself. Booze and drugs were never a good mix and even less when life dealt you another blow beneath the waist line.

He took a deep breath, then another, and felt the dizziness pass from his brain. The night air was cool and soothing and Brian straightened to find his car although driving in his current condition was out of the question which meant he wasn't that far gone if he could still think straight. No pun intended.

He chuckled a little at his own stupid joke when he suddenly heard a noise. Still a little unsteady he turned – but was one split of a second too late.

There was a cracking noise and a moment later pain lacing through his skull, then another crack and Brian felt his wrist break, realizing only then that he'd raised his hand to protect his head. Another blow to his ribs and he felt those break as well, felt himself gowing down and wondered for a moment if he was going to die in the aftermath of a

medicore blowjob here in this dark alley behind a gay club before another blow landed on his head and his world went black.

Pain.

His world was pain. And more pain. And yet more pain.

Blimps. Beeps. Light flashes.

Voices.

Another spike of pain.

Christ.

Shit.

Shiit. Holy fucking shit.

“Mr. Kinney?”

Not a familiar voice. Female. Cool. Effective.

“Mr. Kinney, can you open your eyes for me?”

What time was it? Why was a stranger asking him to open his eyes? And why was there pain? No, not just pain. A motherfucker of pain, pain he had never experienced before. And he was no stranger to pain.

“Mr. Kinney?”

Someone was forcing his eyes open, shining light into them, blinding him.

“Pupils responsive,” the same voice said. “Reflexes okay.”

“He’s going to make it.” Another voice. Also unfamiliar.

“Pity.”

“Shut up, Hank. I want you and Jim to load him into the ambulance and then you’re excused from duty.”

“What?”

“You heard me. I don’t need your homophobic bullshit here. We’re saving lives, not commenting on lifestyles.”

Fear spiked. Something was wrong. Something was terribly wrong. Why couldn’t he speak?

Brian tried to move his lips but they wouldn’t obey. His hands wouldn’t move either.

Was he paralyzed?

He felt his heart rate speed up.

“Shit. He is going into shock.”

Hands on his face, his neck. Warm. Soft.

“No, he’s not going into shock.” A pause. “Mr. Kinney.” A hand on his hand. “Can you hear me? If you can, try to press my hand.”

He tried to. Did his best. But nothing happened. Or so he thought.

“That’s it.” A smile in the female voice, relief evident. “I knew you were with us.” Another pause. “Mr. Kinney, I know you are in pain, but I can’t give you something strong for it before we know more about your head injury. Do you understand that?”

He tried squeezing again, even felt his fingers move this time.

“You were attacked in an alley behind a gay club.” There was no accusation in that voice. “My name is Doctor Brand. We’ll be transporting you to the hospital now.”

Attacked? Behind which club?

“Okay.” At least that’s what he tried to say. To his ears it sounded more like “g-gahy”.

He felt a needle pricking his arm. Another needle to his thigh. The pain lessened a little, but not much. Then he remembered, no real painkillers allowed for now. Fuck.

“Mr. Kinney – did you take anything?”

“D-drinks,” he managed. The one pill he’d taken had been hours ago – hadn’t it?

“Okay.”

He felt himself lifted, heard himself groan. The pain was intense now, so intense he couldn’t breathe. He reached out with his left hand, glad to feel it move but there was

only empty air, nobody to take it.

“Brian!”

“Mister, you can’t get in here.”

“Brian! Let go of me.” Justin’s voice. High pitched. Frightened. “I said – let. go. of. me.” Angry now. “What the fuck happened to him?”

“Are you a relative?”

“A friend.”

“Shit, another faggot.”

“Hank. Go home. Now.”

“You’re not the boss of me.”

“Here I am. And I’m ordering you to leave. Right now.” A pause. “Now.”

“Yes, ma’am. Boss, ma’am.” A sneer. The homophobic prick.

“Are you a good friend?” Doctor Brand.

“I’m ... oh my God, what happened?” A hand on his leg. “Brian?” The voice a whisper now.

“Mr-“

“Taylor. Justin Taylor. Brian and I are friends. What happened?”

“Mr. Kinney was attacked in this alley. He has a head trauma and extensive other injuries. We’re getting him to the hospital now.”

“Can I ride with you?” Yes, please, stay with me, Justin. Don’t leave. Brian reached out, and he felt Justin take his hand.

“I’m here,” Justin said, his voice as soft as his hand. “I’m here.”

“You seem to have a calming effect on him, so jump in. But we’re going now.”

Doors closed, an engine was started. Then the ambulance was moving. Brian kept his eyes shut, too weak to open them but he also kept a firm hold on Justin’s hand.

“I’m here, Brian.” Justin’s voice was shaky. “Will he be okay?”

"I've got no x-ray vision, unfortunately," Doctor Brand said, amusement lacing her voice. "He's got at least three broken ribs, a broken wrist, and maybe a broken clavicle. I'm not quite sure on that. The head trauma is the unpredictable factor. But he is stable, and responding, so I'm carefully optimistic."

"Do you know what happened?"

"Only that he was attacked – obviously."

Justin snorted. "Yeah." A pause. Then Justin's voice again, uncertain. "Can I ... can I touch his face?"

"Sure. Just be careful with the bruises."

A hand came to stroke his hair, his forehead, his cheek. "Oh God." Justin's voice was choked now. "Brian. Oh God."

"We informed the police."

Another snort. "They won't do shit. Just another gay guy being beaten up."

"Mr. Taylor–"

"Don't even try to deny it. They don't care that he is a human being who was hurt, they just care that he's gay, that it happened behind a gay club. File closed."

The doctor sighed. "There are homophobes everywhere." No shit, doc. Does the name "Hank" ring a bell? Brian groaned again when the car went over a bump.

"It's okay, Brian. We'll be there soon. Right?"

"Yeah. Just another five minutes, Mr. Kinney. After they check out your head, they'll give you the good stuff."

Yes. Please. He wanted the good stuff. And he wanted Justin to continue touching him like that. It made the pain almost bearable. Almost.

He suffered through the rest of the drive, managing to keep quiet and listening to Justin's soothing voice, whispering to him. Then the car stopped, the doors were opened, and he was lifted, then wheeled around and he felt Justin's hand slip from his.

"Jus-in."

"I'm here," Justin's anxious voice replied, but he was fading. "I'll be waiting. You'll be okay, Brian."

“Jus-in.”

But Justin was gone. Then there were new voices. And light again. And pain.

“Mr. Kinney, my name is Doctor Ellis.” This one a male. Older if the voice was any indication. “We’ll check out your head injury now.”

“gay.”

“Yes, so am I.” A grin in that voice and Brian tried to understand the joke. “Try to lie as still as possible. Can you do that for us?”

“y-ys”

“Good. This’ll only take a few minutes.”

He was moved. Slowly. And something was moving over him.

“You are doing great, Mr. Kinney.” Doctor Ellis voice soothed him. But he wanted Justin. Justin didn’t want him though. Never wanted him. Brian felt tears slip from his eyes, felt them running down his cheeks, stinging on his mangled skin.

“Just a few more minutes. Then we’ll get you on pain medication and this will be nothing more than an old nightmare.”

He didn’t get it. Nobody got it. Neither did Justin. Justin would never understand.

He was a freak. His mother had told him so. His father had said it. Even his sister had called him an abomination. No wonder Justin didn’t want him. How could he when there was lovely Daphne?

Nobody ever wanted him. His dick, sure. His talented mouth. His nimble fingers. But not him. Never him.

“We’re done. There are no major injuries to your brain, Mr. Kinney. You were lucky.”

Lucky. Oh yeah, that was the word he was going for. He was feeling really lucky there.

“Jus-in”

“You will be transferred to a regular room now, Mr. Kinney. A nurse will check on you regularly tonight, but apart from that I want you to sleep. Do you understand me?”

“y-s”

“Good. Now, Mr. Kinney. Can you try to open your eyes for me?”

It was a herculean effort, but Brian managed and had to blink against the light. He was looking into a forty something face with brown eyes and a gentle smile. “Doc-tor El-lis?”

“Yup. That’s me. Gay as they come.” The doctor laughed and Brian once again missed the joke. “This is Nurse Jones,” he introduced an African-American woman. “She’ll be taking care of you tonight.”

“kay”

“Now, Mr. Kinney – or may I call you Brian?”

“d-n c-re”

“Brian it is then.” She had a kind face, warm eyes, a kind smile. Not like his mother. The warden. He could hear his father’s voice. ‘She is like ice. Don’t look at me this way boy. A man needs some warmth in his life.’ Bastard. He’d gotten her pregnant. She’d been only seventeen then. A girl. He’d been twenty five. A man. Should be glad nobody had called the cops. But instead of being glad for the jail free card he’d hated his wife, and their kids.

Again Brian felt hands lift him, then a guernsey move. A door opened. And there was-

“Brian. Oh, I was so worried.”

“Jus-in”

He was there after all. Hadn’t left him. But he still didn’t want him.

Disgusting queer.

“Will he be okay?”

“Are you his – special friend?” Nurse Jones’ voice was gentle.

“I’m his – friend,” Justin said, but didn’t elaborate.

“I see.”

Brian opened his eyes, saw her wink at Justin and saw the blond blush. “Jus-in”

“I’m here.” Instantly a warm hand engulfed his. “Hey, you’re all here,” Justin said with a smile. It was blinding in its intensity. He’d fallen in love with the smile first, Brian remembered.

“Mr. Kinney will be getting his meds now. He’ll be asleep in a whiff.”

“Can I stay for a while?”

She seemed to think about it for a moment. “Okay,” she said finally and smiled first at Justin, then at Brian. “But only another ten minutes.”

“Okay.” Justin gave her his blinding smile. Brian wished it were for him, and only for him. God, he was pathetic.

“Daph-ne?” he asked.

“I called her. She knows where I am. She sends her love.”

Love. Right. Nice. Friendly Daphne. How he hated her, wished her out of existence, wished his fucking life were different, wished he were whatever Justin wanted, whatever Justin needed. But he wasn’t, would never be.

Useless fag.

“Mich-el?”

“Now, Mr. Kinney. This will make you sleepy, but you’ll welcome it.” Nurse Jones put a hand on his forehead, then smiled. “You’ll be okay soon, you’ll see.” She turned to Justin, and said sternly, “Ten minutes.”

Justin smiled again and she left with another wink.

“I couldn’t get Michael,” Justin told him. “So I called Debbie and she wanted to come but I told her not to. Because you would be asleep.” He blushed. “And – well, because I wanted to be with you. By myself.”

What?

“God, I was so worried when I saw you on that stretcher. Did you see who did this?”

“N-no,” Brian managed. “D-dark.”

“There was a detective here before,” Justin reported, his face clouding. “An asshole. He was assigned the case but he hates it. Hates queers too, I guess.”

Brian wanted to answer, wanted to keep looking at Justin but he felt his eyes droop.

“Don’t worry about that now. Just sleep.”

He felt Justin’s hand stroke his hair, the touch feather light, and he wanted to stay

awake.

But he fell asleep nevertheless.

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“Why the fuck didn’t you call me last night?”

Justin jerked awake and groaned at the kinks in his body. Falling asleep on a hospital chair wasn’t what one would call relaxing. “Michael?” he muttered, looking into the furious face looming over him.

“I came home this morning and my Mom told me what happened. What the fuck is wrong with you? I’m Brian’s best friend.”

“I did call you,” Justin said, rubbing unsteady hands over his face to wake himself up properly. “Check your cell.”

Michael glared at him. “I saw your number but why in hell didn’t you leave a message?”

“I was a little preoccupied,” Justin shot back. He was starting to get annoyed. “Besides, there wasn’t anything you could have done. They checked him out, then put him to sleep.”

“I could have sat with him.”

I sat with him, Justin thought but didn’t say it. He wasn’t getting into a fight with Michael Novotny in a hospital. Or anywhere, really. He and Michael did get along fine usually but Michael was possessive where Brian was concerned and once or twice they’d butted heads when Justin had overstepped an invisible boundary that only existed in Michael’s head.

“He is still asleep,” he said now. “They will check him out later and do surgery on his wrist.”

“Shit.” Michael ran both hands through his hair. “Did they get the guy who did this?”

“No and I’m not sure they’re interested in doing so.” Justin couldn’t help the sarcasm infiltrating his voice. “Bunch of homophobic assholes.”

“Mr. Taylor,” Nurse Jones was walking in their direction. “You can go in and see him now. In thirty minutes they will start prepping him for surgery.” She smiled at Justin and left.

“Thanks.” Justin got up – and felt a hand on his arm. He’d completely forgotten about Michael. Shit.

"I'm going in," Michael stated, his voice and expression holding a trace of hostility. "Thanks for staying with him but I'm family."

Justin flinched but covered it quickly. "I told him I'd come back," he said quietly and removed Michael's hand from his shoulder. "And I usually keep my promises."

"Don't be ridiculous." Michael gave him another dark look and marched towards the room. "Who do you think he wants to see? You, a straight guy with a baby on the way or me, someone who can really understand what he's going through right now?"

Justin stared at Michael's back, stunned speechless for a moment. Before Michael reached the door handle, however, he found his voice again. "How would you understand? As far as I know, nobody ever laid a hand on you."

"I understand because I know what it means to be gay," Michael said, not turning to him. "You're straight. It's different for you."

"How?" Justin was honestly puzzled. Yes, he knew gay people were facing a lot of prejudice and hate but why wouldn't he understand? He'd been friends with Brian for so long, he knew how spiteful people were, and what homophobia could cause. He couldn't put a finger on it but he had a feeling that Michael's reaction had more to do with jealousy and less with actual concern.

"It just is," Michael snapped.

"Be that as it may," Justin said, walking towards the door and reaching for the handle before Michael could. "I might be straight, but I'm his friend. I told him I'd be back and that's what's going to happen." He turned and looked the other man straight in the eye. "I did call you but you weren't available last night. It's not my fault that I was there when you weren't. And now, excuse me, I will see a friend who is expecting me."

With that he went into the room and left Michael open mouthed and no doubt seething in the corridor.

Janet Jones had become a nurse because she thought her vocation was to help people. It was the reason most people were seeking that special profession, but unlike her, a lot became disillusioned over the years, feeling themselves torn apart by a tightly woven time schedule, permanent overtime with no extra pay and doctors who thought that nurses were far beneath them and therefore used them as targets to get rid of their frustration and stress.

Janet, however, was an exception – or so she liked to think. She'd gotten pregnant when she was sixteen and her so called boyfriend had left her high and dry. But instead of pitying herself she'd beaten all the odds, had managed to finish high-school at

eighteen, found a nurse's school that offered evening classes and gotten her degree when she wasn't even twenty-one, thanks to her parents who stood beside her, steady as rocks.

Finding a position had been a piece of cake, her being top of her class, but after her mother had gotten sick with ovarian cancer, she'd dropped out of it to take care of the older woman full time. Watching her mother die piece by piece had taken a lot out of her but she'd been steadfast just like her mother had been with her and she'd held her mother's hand as Leticia Jones had taken her last breath, her father standing beside her almost despairing at the loss.

After that, her father had never been the same and Janet had to find a part time job to take care of her infant daughter who had graduated from med school only two years ago and was now doing her residency in New York.

Now, at age 46 she was head nurse of the night shift and happy with her life. Or as happy as anyone could be who didn't get sex on a regular basis she thought with a little snort as she walked down the hallway, carrying a tray to get blood from the patient in 603.

Brian Kinney.

Poor kid. Being the victim of a hate crime sucked. Being a victim usually sucked but hates crimes and rapes were the worst. Not only were they committed by usually despicable human beings, they left the victims bereft and not few of them struggled all their lives with the aftermath.

Janet had no idea why Brian Kinney got to her like he did. It had been quite a while since it had happened. The last was a six year old girl who had lost her leg after a car accident that left her without a father and a mother who was paralysed from the waist down. But Carly had made it, was now one of the top five in her track and field team. Janet got Christmas cards from her regularly from Florida where she was now living with her mother and aunt.

Brian would make it too. This kid – and he really wasn't more than a kid in her eyes – was tough. She had seen it in his gaze that night when they'd brought him in, only half-conscious and confused why life had dealt him that kind of blow.

She shook her head as she walked down the hallway and stopped when she saw the blond man standing there. He looked incredibly young, even younger than Brian Kinney, but she had seen the wedding band on his third finger and his eyes were those of a grown up. Once he'd brought his pretty wife but she hadn't gone inside with him, had waited for him the way he seemed to be waiting now.

"Mr. Taylor," she greeted him with a smile. "Back again?"

He blushed a little and gave her a loop sided grin. "Sorry."

"No need to apologize. I'm glad he has friends. He'll need them, now more than ever." He nodded, obviously agreeing with her statement, and she cocked her head. "Why are you standing out here?"

"He has another visitor." He was leaning against the wall, legs crossed, his blue eyes holding annoyance.

Janet suppressed a grin and settled for a smile. "Is that the angry young man who came the very first morning?"

"Michael." The name was said on an expressive sigh. "No, it's not him. Another friend." He smiled. "Female. He does have them too."

She laughed and nodded at the tray in her hand. "I have to do my nightly routine on him now, so his guest will have to leave." She leaned forward and lowered her voice to a whisper, "And then you can go in for another fifteen minutes before I shove you out, okay?"

He smiled a wide and sunny smile at her. "You are the best."

"Honey," she put a hand on his shoulder. "You are a ray of hope in a dark world. It's not every day that I see a straight and a gay guy being best friends. So I'm cutting you some slack here."

She gave him a wink and entered room 603 with a cheerful, "It's me again, Brian, coming to touch you in an inde-" and froze when she saw the female visitor straightening up from what seemed like a full mouth-to-mouth.

The beautiful blonde blushed prettily and coughed. "Oh – uh – I'm sorry." She patted down her skirt and smiled first at Brian, then at Janet.

"No need to apologize," Janet told her briskly while she put the tray down and took the first syringe from it. She applied it to the i.v., then put the empty one back on the tray, glad she had a reason to occupy herself. She chided herself for being surprised at the sight of the blond woman kissing her patient, but damn if that sight hadn't completely taken her aback. Which was absolutely stupid but there you go. Brian Kinney certainly wasn't the first gay guy being kissed by a woman, for God's sake.

"Hello, Janet," Brian croaked with a slight grin. "This is my very good friend Lindsay. In fact, she was my idea of a perfect life before I discovered cock."

Janet laughed, pleased to find her charge so upbeat. "I see." She acknowledged Lindsay with a nod. "Now, pretty girl. I have to ask you to leave. Besides, bringing the patient's blood pressure up is not allowed."

Another pretty blush from the blonde and a laugh. "Okay," she said. "I'll be seeing you Brian."

Brian waved at her with the fingers of his left hand, the right laying in a cast on the bed. "See you," he said, his voice raw. Janet could see the bruises on his neck, he'd probably gotten a fist to his larynx. She turned quickly away from the bed, hiding the absolute rage she felt this very moment. She was an experienced nurse but seeing the result of unnecessary violence always made her want to punch something.

"Janet?"

"Everything's fine, honey," she said and heard him chuckle. She turned. "What?"

"Michael's mother usually calls me honey, too. You two should meet one day, you'd fit."

Janet laughed. "I take that as a compliment."

"It's meant that way."

"Oh – and by the way, your other pretty blond is waiting outside." He looked at her questioningly and she said, "Mr. Taylor. Justin, I believe."

His eyes lit up, then clouded over quickly. She sighed inwardly. This kid knew far too well to mask his emotions. Damn. "It's a pity you're gay," she said, changing the subject. "I have a daughter, a doctor, who would be perfect for you." Before he could respond, she continued, "Of course, for that she'd have to be straight as well, which, alas, she is not. She is happily living with her partner in New York."

They shared a laugh. "So, are you a PFLAG mom?" he wanted to know.

"Yup. Fifteen years and counting."

"See, you and Debbie would fit."

"Debbie?"

"Michael's mom." Brian sighed. "She is about your age, I guess. Had her kid right after high-school. Raised him on her own."

Janet smiled. Brian was nothing if not perceptive. "Yeah, we'd fit," she agreed. "You seem to have devoted friends."

"So it seems," he replied, not elaborating on the statement. "Lindsay and I were dating for a while in college. Right until the moment we both turned gay. Was quite the shocker for our families."

She took another syringe and pulled back Brian's cover. "This one goes into your tight butt."

"I bet you really want to know how tight it is," he joked.

"Honey, there were times when my butt could have fit into those tight leather pants you wore the night you were brought in."

He laughed, then winced when needle went into muscle tissue.

"There, all done," Janet announced, rightening the bed covers. "So," she said after a moment while she busied herself with her tray and kept her back firmly turned, "I guess your parents weren't bringing flowers to your coming out."

"Funeral flowers, maybe." She heard him sigh, heard him trying to find a comfortable position in the bed which was difficult with his various injuries. "No, they didn't join PFLAG. Lindsay's parents tend to just ignore the fact that their daughter munches on unspeakables while mine -" He broke off and she wondered if he was collecting his thoughts.

When he continued his voice was even rougher than before and Janet knew that it had been bad, that they had hurt him terribly with their rejection. "My father was an abusive drunk before he found out I was gay. When he did – well, I was too tall and strong, so he opted for not hitting me. Instead he told me he wished I was dying instead of him." He laughed and Janet wanted to weep or hit his father or maybe both. "He died three months later from lung cancer."

Janet had to swallow hard. "And – your mother?"

"She is the bible thumping sort. No love from that side of the fence."

It was a statement, delivered coldly, almost clinically. Janet felt a tear slip from her eyes and quickly wiped it away. "The way I see it," she said after a moment. "They never deserved you in the first place."

He said nothing and she turned back to him in time to see him blink rapidly. She didn't comment, busied herself with his cover instead, even though she'd already straightened it. "I swear there are some parents who don't deserve to be called that way. Carol, my daughter, she has a life partner. Not officially, of course, but they share living wills and things. Her partner, Alicia, comes from Iowa. Big family, fourteen kids, very religious, probably never even heard about contraception." She chuckled to herself.

"Anyway. Alicia was completely freaked out about coming out to them. She took Carol with her. And guess what happened – Alicia's family fell in love with my Carol. They're not absolutely happy that their daughter turned out gay but the way they see it – God

made her that way, so why change perfection.”

“And why exactly are you telling me this tale of love and acceptance?”

His voice was sarcastic but Janet figured he had a right to be that way. “I’m not really telling you anything. Just ... there are different kinds of parents. And being religious doesn’t make people homophobes.”

“It did with my mother.”

“Is she still alive?”

“Still praying for my salvation.”

“Any siblings?”

He laughed again. “My sister is an unhappy, unsatisfied housewife with a cheating bastard of a husband and two small kids but that’s still better than a gay son with a scholarship, right?” He shook his head and winced when the wound at the back of his skull came in contact with his pillow. “Claire got all the straight genes of the family and I got the looks.”

Janet laughed. “Sometimes fate can be fair.”

He laughed too – and winced again, this time because of his ribs. Or maybe because of the incision right under his last rib. They had to go in to take care of some internal bleeding a few days after he’d been brought into the hospital. Now, a week after his arrival he was hoping to get released soon.

“So – what is it with the pretty blond in the hallway?”

Brian’s eyes focussed on her for a moment before they slipped away. “You’ve missed your calling, nurse Jones. You sure you never wanted to become a priest?”

Janet laughed. “One. I’m female – so becoming a priest was out of the question because, two, I’m also Catholic.”

“Ouch.”

She gave him a warning look and raised her fingers. “Three. I told you to call me Janet. And four – even though I’m Catholic I would never spread their nonsense.”

“As for the pretty blonds. I fucked the one, always wanted to fuck the other. But, alas, he turned out straight.”

Janet shot him a sympathetic look. “His wife is gorgeous. Seems nice too.”

“She’s all that,” Brian agreed.

“But you hate her.”

He raised his hand and rubbed his face where his beard was prickly. “Not really. Daphne is a great girl. She and Justin are perfect for each other – to quote his mother. And they probably are. Have known each other forever.” He chuckled. “Christ. I haven’t babbled so much nonsense for years.”

“Maybe I really should have been a man – and a priest.” Janet glanced at the man in the bed, bruised and beaten, and for a second she got such a flash of loneliness radiating from him that it took her breath away. “What about Michael? He seems devoted to you.”

“Mikey. It would never work with us. He’s hot in a next door kid kind of way. I’d fuck him but ... he is no challenge. He adores me and would bore me to death within a day.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Brian. You are the kind of man every mother would wish for her child.”

This time he stared at her. “You are deluded.”

But she shook her head. “No. You are intelligent, good looking, and a nice guy.”

“No, Janet. I may be some of those things you mentioned but I’m definitely not a nice guy.”

“The number of your friends contradicts that statement. As does my own feeling – which is really all that counts here.” She smiled at him. “And now I’m leaving you to the pretty blond waiting on the floor to see you. And this one doesn’t have an ‘e’.” With a last grin she left the room, hoping that one day Brian Kinney would find someone who could take the loneliness away and give his life the love it deserved.

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“Stop hovering, Mikey, you are giving me a headache.”

Christ, if this was going on any longer, he was going to end up in jail for murdering his friend.

“You have been the victim of a horrible attack, Brian. You need to take care of yourself.”

“Yooohooo, it’s meeee!”

“Christ!” Brian glared at Michael. “What did you do? Invite the whole family?”

It was all he could say before Debbie descended on him, and engulfed him in a mist of cheap perfume and love. “Brian, honey! You are still so pale. Have you talked to the police? Do they have any idea who did this?”

“Debbie, stop squeezing me – my ribs were broken,” Brian hissed, then groaned as his ribs protested against so much touchy feely love.

“Oh, sorry.” She looked at him, then spit on her thumb and wiped the lipstick she’d left on his cheek, grinning when he grimaced which was more a reaction of habit than real disgust. They both knew they loved each other – everything else was just posturing.

“Mom. Give Brian a little space.”

She glared at her son. “Don’t you talk to me about giving Brian space,” she said. “If you had more of a real life instead of crowding Brian’s you would make me a very proud and happy mother.”

“Mo-om,” he whined and Brian had to grin. He knew they weren’t the perfect idea of a mother-son relationship but there were moments when he wished his mother were a little more like Debbie Novotny.

“Michael, go and make the Q-mart happy with your presence and leave me and your mother so we can indulge in our secret and sordid affair.”

“That’s not funny.” Michael glared at him. “Thank God you are gay.”

“Amen,” Brian replied and they shared a grin. “Now, hush – go.”

“I really should be going,” Michael said and sighed. “Okay. You take care of yourself and stay in bed as much as possible. You heard what the doctor said.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Brian waved him away, using his right hand. It was much better now. He only wore a light, flexible cast since he’d left the hospital a week ago. He was still on sick leave, due to doctor’s orders, though – much to the displeasure of his boss. Ben Bruckner, owner and founder of one of the biggest advertising agencies in town, was usually stoic like Buddah but when it came to work, he was the proverbial overachiever.

But Brian was happy where he was. Not only was Ben a thoroughly good guy, he was also gay which made Brian’s life at the agency much easier than it could have been anywhere else. It also gave room to speculations, in particular when it came to their relationship. Brian liked it that way, and he had the feeling that Ben was also secretly pleased by people wondering if they were fucking their brains out.

Which they had. Just before Brian had started at the agency, fresh out from college he’d won a ticket to the most famous White Party in Miami where he’d met Ben and they’d spent a memorable weekend not enjoying the beaches.

They'd both stared at each other, instant recognition in their eyes when Brian had applied for a position at Ben's agency but both had been grown up enough to put their past experience aside and had worked very well with each other ever since. Which was not really that difficult because other than being a hot fuck for the weekend, Brian found Ben mostly boring with his healthy lifestyle and stoic nature. Not the kind of guy he wanted to fuck on a regular basis or, so God help him, have anything like a relationship with.

"Now," Debbie said, pulling Brian from his thoughts and giving him a stern look. "Tell me how you really are."

He wondered if maybe he'd get away with a lie, but decided against it. Debbie Novotny knew him way too well. "I'm getting there." At her hard look, he sighed. "Really, I am."

She patted his good arm. "I know you are," she said and sniffed.

"No waterworks," he warned. He was not suffering through another tears and snot festival. She had those down pat and he didn't need it. Not when he spent his nights weaking up in sweat, screaming while unknown assailants attacked him, scaring the hell out of him.

"No, honey, don't worry." She patted his arm again, then stood and walked to the table in the corner of the apartment he'd found out of sheer luck. It was modern, not as big as he would have liked it but even though he was doing well at his job his income wasn't enough to rent anything bigger yet. This one bedroom apartment had to be enough for now.

"I've made you the Cannoli you and Michael love. You need to take care of yourself, honey, Michael was right." She paused, then pushed on the way Brian knew she would. "Have you told your mother?"

The compassionate look in her eyes was too much and he stiffened. "No. And you won't either. She doesn't need to know. Neither does Claire. I don't want them here."

"Brian-

"No," he sat up and glared at her. "And I don't want to talk about it." He stood with painful effort, trying to distance himself from her and from the subject she'd raised. He was not going to talk to her about his family. She might be the closest he'd ever come to having a mother but this was off limits – even for her.

He heard her sigh behind him. "Alright. Have it your way. Have you talked to Justin lately?" she then asked, deftly changing the subject.

"On the phone," he said, again feeling on shaky ground. Justin was another of the

subjects he didn't want to discuss. He could barely stand looking at the blond, and the joy in those blue eyes when he talked about becoming a father. Or at Daphne when she'd come to the hospital to hold his hand.

Christ, he was so pathetic, he sometimes wondered how he could stand living with himself.

"Emmett and Ted?"

"God save me from those two," Brian snapped and limped over to the small kitchenette, getting himself some bottled water. "You want one?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Got some beer?"

He laughed, pulled a bottle of European beer out of the refrigerator and handed it over to her. She tasted and pulled a face and that made him laugh. "It's the most expensive available here."

Debbie glanced at the bottle, then at him. "Never understood the prejudice about American beer."

He laughed again. "It's an acquired taste, I guess." He opened his water and took a sip. "You ever thought about getting married?" he asked, not sure why the thought had popped in his head.

She gave him a shrewd look, then shook her head. "Not really. Why bind myself to one man?"

He grinned. "That's the spirit." He took another sip. "I only try to understand why people would bind them that way. All the married couples I know have started hating each other after some time, but they stayed together because of a stupid document, making each others lives a living hell."

"You can't take your parents as an example. There are a lot of happy relationships out there."

That's what all the straight people said, and some of the gay ones, that there were so many happy couples all around. Only, he hadn't met them. "Show me one."

"Justin and Daphne." At his look she nodded. "Granted, they're still newlyweds. But Justin's parents seem happy."

"That's one," Brian held up a finger. "One happy couple, if they are really all that happy. I refuse to live in any kind of relationship just because it's become either convenient or because I feel obligated. That's fucked."

"I agree." Debbie thoughtfully sipped from her beer. "Michael's father wasn't marrying material either."

He felt a frown coming up his face. "I thought he died never knowing you were pregnant?"

Debbie stared at him. "Don't tell me you believed that lie all these years."

Brian grinned at her bluntness, remembering why he loved this woman. "Well, you've done your best to make it convincing."

She made a slashing motion with her hand, taking another sip. European beer – at least that one he had – was much stronger than American beer which seemed to loosen Debbie's tongue. "He and I went to school together. Had one memorable night after Graduation which left me pregnant." She emptied the bottle and at his raised brows nodded.

Brian handed her another beer. "So he left you pregnant – and then what? He just left, period?"

"To be fair, he didn't know about the pregnancy when he left, and neither did I. It was my grandmother who told me – but that's a story for the archives never to be told."

Yup, she had to be drunk because otherwise she'd never tell him her most protected secret. "Michael has no idea."

"Michael can never know. He'd hate me."

Brian went over to her, sat down beside her and put an arm around Debbie's shoulders. He wanted to laugh because her statement was completely ridiculous. Mikey would never hate his mother. He'd be mad at her, maybe not talk to her for a week or two but he would never hate her. "Why did you never tell him? I mean the father. And why can't Mikey know?"

She leaned his head on his shoulder and sighed. "Michael's father is gay," she said almost conversationally, then ruined the show by hiccuping. "Worse, he's a transvestite who is on stage every night."

Brian did his best to hide his shock. He'd expected a lot of things but finding out that Michael's father was gay... "Did you know he was gay when you slept with him?"

"Did I know? Not really. But I had a suspicion. I'd caught him staring at Vic's ass more than once."

"And you still slept with him?"

“Yeah. What can I say? I was eighteen, stupid and in love and I just didn’t care. Vic warned me. He never outright told me about him but he dropped some hints here and there. I just didn’t want to hear them.”

“Debbie. Michael would never hate you for it.”

“Oh yes, he would.” She nodded vigorously. “He would hate me. He grew up thinking his father was some war hero. And now I’ll present him an overaged drag queen? Of course he’d hate me, I’d hate myself.”

“That’s nonsense, and if you were sober you’d know it too.”

She sniffed and Brian rolled his eyes. The things one did for love. “How about you lie down for a moment?”

She gave him a doe eyed look. “Just a moment?”

“Just a moment.” He stood and she sank into the cushions of his sofa. Her eyes closed. “Wake me. I have the late day shift at the diner tomorrow. Have to be there at two.”

“Alright, I will,” Brian said but she was already asleep.

He chuckled. He’d felt lonely all on his own, sometimes even claustrophobic, but thinking about companionship he’d never pictured a mid-forties, slightly overweight waitress snoring in his living room. Strangely enough, however, he had a feeling that nightmares wouldn’t be a problem tonight.

Daphne Taylor who had once gone by Daphne Chanders wasn’t a fool. Some people probably thought so because she could be flirty and her laugh sounded silly at times but that didn’t mean she was stupid. Which was the reason she had gone back to bed extremely irritated and had woken up raving mad and with a pounding headache that was so bad that she went against her own rules and took two pain pills. She had sworn she wouldn’t take anything now that she was pregnant but this mother of all headaches would never go away on its own.

The pounding had calmed down to a dull throbbing when she entered the dining room at her in-laws’ house and to her utter surprise found it empty. This was certainly new. Usually after a fight Justin would be contrite and apologetic and trying his very best to lighten the mood. She had expected for him to sit with his dad making jokes. Not so today. Today he was quite obviously missing.

Daphne frowned and tried to ignore the slight nausea at the thought of breakfast when right that moment the door behind her opened and a cheery voice said: “Oh you are up.

How are you this morning, honey?"

"I feel like shit," she gritted out between clenched teeth and was surprised not to feel any guilt about using that kind of tone with her mother-in-law. It was a new experience. Jennifer Taylore was one of the nicest people Daphne had ever met and she had once loved the older woman but after last night she was through with being nice and compliant. She was through with being the perfect daughter-in-law.

She heard the slight hesitation in Jennifer's voice before the older woman said: "I'm very sorry to hear that."

At that Daphne whirled around. "Don't tell me you think this is a morning like any other!?"

Jennifer's eyes widened for a moment while her hands first tried to reach out for her daughter-in-law, then found each other and clenched. "I'm so sorry you had to witness this ... heated discussion."

Daphne felt her chin hit the ground and she needed a moment to get her mouth back in working order. "Excuse me, heated discussion? That was a heated discussion for you? What kind of world are you living in? Justin and Craig almost went for each other's throats."

Jennifer's knuckles were white. "They both have quite a temper."

Daphne turned away and walked over to the window that gave her a look over the garden. "What Craig said was unforgivable, Jennifer," she said quietly, not daring to glance at her mother-in-law. She knew that Jennifer hated fights, knew that she always tried to keep peace in the family. Daphne, who had grown up in a family where her parents fought all the time had always admired that determination to keep peace. Now, after listening to Jennifer trying to rationalise what had happened, she wasn't so sure anymore.

"I ... I agree that he shouldn't have used that kind of language-"

"No, he shouldn't have," Daphne interrupted her. "Brian is a grown person, how he leads his life is his business and nobody else's, certainly not Craig's. Brian is Justin's best friend, he was the victim of a horrible crime and can be happy that he's still alive."

"Yes, yes, I know. And I'm deeply sorry that something like that happened to Brian. However you have to admit-"

"No," Daphne interrupted again. "No, Jennifer. There is no reasoning there. It was a crime. I've heard Justin defend his father time and again and it hurt him terribly to have to listen to that kind of homophobic bullshit."

Jennifer said nothing and Daphne turned back to her. The other woman was white, her eyes in stark contrast to the papery colour of her skin. "Daphne, it isn't good for you to get excited like that."

"Excited?" Daphne stared at Jennifer incredulously. "I was so mad last night, I thought about clogging Craig over the head with this expensive statue he keeps in his study if I had any hope it would get some sense into him. Unfortunately I fear it's way too late for any of it."

"Oh, Daphne." Now Jennifer had tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry if that upsets you, Jennifer, but that's how I feel. How can a father, any father, tell his son that he thinks his son's best friend has earned what's happened to him. Why? Because Brian is gay? Because he's promiscuous? Because he refuses to live after a moral code that is in need of an urgent update?"

"Honey, I know that it must have sounded to you like that. But believe me if I tell you that some of it was said out of fear."

"Fear?" Daphne shook her head. Was this woman real?

"Yes. Fear that his son, his wife and your unborn child might get targeted by association."

"That is just so incredibly stupid that I can't believe the words came out of your mouth," Daphne snapped and this time she had to stomp down on guilt raising its annoying head. But she bravely went on. "Are you listening to yourself? This isn't about Craig being afraid. Jennifer, your husband is a homophobe. He's always been one. Because Justin is a nice person he tried to defend his dad but last night was just too much. Even for someone as loyal as his son."

"I just ..." Jennifer went to the dining table and sat down. "I'm just trying to keep this family together. So many marriages are falling apart because people don't put enough effort into it."

"And I'm admiring you for it." At Jennifer's tearful look Daphne nodded. "I do. But sometimes ... there are things that can't be rightened, not even with the kind of effort you put into it." She walked over and sat down next to the older woman. "Jennifer. Craig has crossed a line. There are things that can't be taken back, or smoothed over. Last night was one of them."

It had been horrible. Daphne wouldn't forget it as long as she lived. She'd almost missed it because being pregnant made her constantly sleepy and so she'd decided to go to bed early. She'd kissed Justin good-night and went up the stairs. They were staying with her in-laws because they couldn't move in their own house yet.

An hour later she'd woken up and felt a craving for hot milk and cookies and had gone back down where she'd heard them.

"What the fuck does that mean?" she'd heard Justin scream, barely recognising his voice laden with such fury.

"Oh, come one," Craig had said in that condescending tone only he could use. "Look at the guy. He's a whore. And whores can't complain when someone takes action against them."

"Oh – so because Brian fucks guys he has earned almost being beaten to death?"

"If you want to see it that way."

"You are such an asshole."

"Don't you take that tone with me, Justin. I'm still your father."

"Yeah, I'm sorry to say that you are."

"What's that supposed to mean? You are associating with the kind of scum Brian Kinney represents but you are ashamed of your own father?"

"I couldn't have said it better."

Daphne had been leaning against the door by then and her heart clenched. She'd had no problems recognizing the hurt underneath the fury in her husband's voice.

"Justin, don't be stupid. You have a great future ahead of you, don't ruin your chances by being friends with people who are simply not worth it."

"I can't believe I defended you."

Now Justin hadn't sounded furious anymore, he had sounded defeated. And Daphne hated to hear him that way. It just wasn't like her husband to give up. So she'd entered the study quietly and had found Justin and Craig Taylor staring at each other like two raging bulls.

"Oh, sorry," she'd said, looking from one to the other. "I didn't want to interrupt."

Craig had given her a hard look before he'd turned away and Justin had to shake himself like a wet dog. Then he'd taken a deep breath. "Is something wrong, Daph?"

"No. I just wanted to have some milk." She'd indicated the mug in her hand. "That's when I heard voices." She hadn't said it but she'd seen in Justin's eyes that he'd understood. She'd heard at least part of their fight.

He'd nodded. "We're leaving tomorrow," he'd told his father and Craig hadn't responded.

And that had been that.

And now Jennifer Taylor was sobbing at her shoulder. Really, her life was becoming a soap opera. Daphne shook her head in silent disbelief. Not what she'd imagined when she'd agreed to marry Justin.

Then a thought occurred. "What were you and Brian talking about?"

Jennifer gave her a puzzled look, her tears momentarily forgotten it seemed. "Excuse me?"

"I heard that you and Brian had a long talk just after Justin and I left for our honeymoon."

Something flickered in Jennifer's eyes but was instantly gone again. "It was nothing," she obviously lied.

It made Daphne frown. Something strange was going on. Her question had been innocent, merely something to talk about, so Jennifer would stop crying and to put an end to something they wouldn't find a solution for. At least not today. Daphne knew that Jennifer would ask her to stay in their house and she also knew that it was something Justin would never agree on. Hence the question. Which meant a completely new set of questions she'd probably get no answers for.

"Nothing?" Daphne asked with a raised brow. "You don't sound like nothing."

Jennifer sighed and stood, distancing herself from her daughter-in-law. It made the whole thing even more suspicious.

"What's going on?" Daphne asked. She stood up as well, followed her mother-in-law and put a hand on Jennifer's shoulder.

"He was Justin's best man. We were talking about what a lovely couple you are."

Another lie. It was so blatantly obvious, Daphne almost laughed. But she didn't feel like laughing. And then another thought occurred. "Were you telling him off?"

She saw Jennifer freeze and it made her stiffen. "Telling him off?" the older woman asked.

"Are you supporting the bullshit Craig is sprouting?" Daphne demanded.

“What?” Jennifer whirled around and stared at her. “No. Of course not. Daphne,” she reached out and framed Daphne’s face with her hands. “You know that I think everyone should be free to chose their lifestyle.”

“I hope that’s true,” Daphne said and looked her mother-in-law deep in the eyes.

The older woman stared right back. “How can you doubt me?”

“Because you are trying to rationalise Craig’s behaviour. Justin has done the same for a long time. I know you both love him but he’s overstepped an invisible barrier last night.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to leave the house,” Jennifer told her desperately. “I love having you here. And I will talk to Craig-“

“No.” Daphne took both of Jennifer’s hands and removed them from her cheeks, but still held them in her own. “Justin and I talked about it last night. It’s the only way. Maybe distance can heal a fraction of what has been destroyed.”

“Oh, Daphne.” Jennifer stepped back and her hands slipped away. “It’s what I’ve always been afraid of.”

“It was only a matter of time,” Daphne said. Jennifer knew Justin, she had to know that even though her son was loyal to the point of foolishness, he wasn’t stupid. And one could push Justin only that far.

Jennifer shook her head. She was pale and sweat had formed between her eyebrows. She was clearly distressed and Daphne felt the rising of pity in her chest. Then she thought of Molly Taylor, of her reason for leaving this house, and she beat the feeling down. Jennifer Taylor was a nice woman, but this nice woman had watched her daughter leave without defending her.

“I love my children, Daphne,” Jennifer said, and her eyes were luminous.

“I know.” She did. She knew that her mother-in-law was convinced of loving her children.

“When Brian came into Justin’s life, I was afraid this would happen.”

Daphne tilted her head, a lightbulb going off inside of her. “Was that what you were talking about the day of our wedding? That he should stay away? Because he hasn’t been around much lately and it’s hurting Justin.”

“Honey.” The word came on a heavy sigh. “Brian and Justin are very close.”

“So?” Daphne felt herself bristle. “That’s what friends usually are.”

Jennifer was wringing her hands again, then running them through her hair, a sure sign of extreme distress. "That's not ... not what I mean." She shook her head, tried again. "Have you ever watched Brian when he is with Justin?"

Daphne felt a puzzled frown coming on. "I'm watching them all the time. What are you telling me – or not telling me, for that matter?"

Her mother-in-law gave a slight, desperate laugh. "You say you are watching them, but you see nothing. Daphne, Brian is in love with Justin."

Daphne had always wondered what it might feel to get shot. She'd read about it. The feeling of being thrown back by the impact, the surprise it had hit you and finally the searing pain. Well, now she knew.

"Wh-what?" she stammered, feeling the sudden need to sit down.

"That's what we were talking about," Jennifer finally admitted. "I told him not to act on it."

"What did," Daphne had to lick her dry lips. "What did he say?"

Jennifer shrugged and sat down beside her. "Nothing definite. You know Brian, he likes to play around with people."

"Not with Justin," Daphne said quietly, things suddenly clicking into place inside her head. She'd always admired it, had seen it for a sign of their close friendship, the way Brian was so different with Justin, never used Justin, never played him. Oh God, she had been so stupid. Or hadn't she? She felt so confused, so out of her depth.

"No, not with Justin." Jennifer's voice was equally quiet. She put her hand on Daphne's. "Justin was always ... different. As a child he was mine. Later he spent a lot of time with his father, admired him, but he was always mine. Molly was Daddy's girl. I know Justin. He's the ... best person I know. He's without prejudice and he loves with all he has in him."

"Yes," Daphne heard herself agree. She had described Justin accurately. He was all that. And more. It was the reason she had always liked him, and it was also the reason she had fallen in love with him in the end.

Jennifer's fingers tightened around her own.

"Are you-" Daphne had to start again, she felt so completely lost that very moment. "Are you suggesting that Justin might be in love with Brian, too?"

"I don't know. But I know that Craig would never accept that. He would reject my son. It would destroy everything."

Daphne nodded. Could Justin be gay? The thought was ridiculous, wasn't it? She and

Justin had sex on a regular basis. He was a considerate lover, liked to take it slow, took his time to bring her to orgasm, never took her forcefully, never got lost in passion. It was alright with her – had been alright with her, she corrected herself. She couldn't reach orgasm quickly, so slow was her own pace. And yet – in this new light of things – it made her wonder.

Could it be true?

She heard a sob and to her own surprise realised it came from her own mouth. "Oh God," she said, feeling nausea. Not the kind connected with pregnancy. It was different, deeper, more desperate.

"Does he ... know?"

"Justin? No." Jennifer squeezed her hand again. "Daphne, listen to me. I'm not sure either. It's just a feeling. I could never really shake it off, but Justin's never acted on it – as far as I know."

Daphne nodded, still lost in confusion. Then another thought struck, and her head came up with a snap. "Why did you never tell me?"

Jennifer looked away but not before Daphne had seen the flash of guilt. "I had no proof. And you are so happy with each other. There was no reason to."

"And now is?" Was the resentment she felt real? Did it make her a bad person? Daphne wanted to leave the house and scream. Then she wanted to find Justin and scream some more. But would it change anything? Would he even know what this was all about?

God, she wanted to lie down, pull the covers over her head and pretend these two days hadn't happened.

"I never wanted to tell you. I was hoping that ... it would never be of any importance."

"You mean you hoped we'd continue living a lie?" Daphne knew her voice was louder now but she didn't care. She felt like a pawn in a dirty charade. These people had used her. No, correction. Jennifer had used her. This nice, friendly woman had used her. To keep her family intact, to keep everything under wraps.

Daphne stood and walked away.

"You aren't living a lie," Jennifer insisted.

"But we could be."

Her head was reeling, her mind in turmoil. What was she going to do? How was she

going to look at Justin and not say a thing? And what about the baby? Oh God, what about the baby?

"He loves you, Daphne. You know that."

It was the truth. Justin loved her. And she loved him. But was it real? Was anything real? And why on earth had Jennifer told her. "Why did you tell me?"

"Because ... Maybe because I couldn't keep it anymore."

Honesty for a change. It was a nice touch. Daphne knew she was sarcastic now, but she didn't care. Why should she? Nobody had cared for her feelings. No, that wasn't true. Justin cared for her. God, what if it was true? Could he be gay? And what would that mean for him?

And what about Brian?

"Does Brian know?"

"I don't think so. He seemed honestly puzzled."

What should she tell Justin? Why had Jennifer never brought the subject up? Oh, right, because it would destroy her perfect little home. She whirled back to her mother-in-law.

"You are such a liar. You say you love Justin, but all you care for is yourself. And your perfect idea of family and home."

"Daphne-"

"No." She took a step back, not wanting to be touched. "You can tell yourself what you want, but for me, you are worse than Craig. At least he was always honest."

"Oh, honey-"

"No. I don't want to hear it. As soon as Justin is back, we'll leave."

"What are you going to tell him?"

Daphne looked at her and felt nothing. "That's not your problem now. Justin is a grown up. He is my husband. The father of my child." She paused, walked over to the door and opened it. "But I can promise you one thing. I won't lie to him the way you did. I'm not that cruel." With that she walked out and closed the door. It was like closing a chapter of her life.

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“Fuck.”

Brian took a shallow breath to get through the pain, and then another, then he wrapped an arm around himself. Christ. It definitely sucked being Brian Kinney. At least right now.

To make his day even worse, or so it seemed, the doorbell rang.

“Fuck.”

Brian swore again and still keeping his arm firmly around his middle, he shuffled to the door to find Justin Taylor there, blond, blue-eyed and sweating.

“What the fuck?” he said and winced because he’d taken a deep breath.

“Hey.” Justin smiled at him. “Long time no see?”

Brian tried his best to give him a shrewd look, then stepped back to let him in. “What brings you here?”

“Wow, what a greeting,” Justin joked but his eyes were serious.

Brian rolled his eyes. “I’m not my shining best these days. So – what’s wrong?”

The blond took a deep breath. “I had a fight with my Dad.”

“What? You couldn’t agree on a name for the kid?”

“Ha, ha, very funny.”

Brian took a shallow breath and his ribs stayed silent. “Why don’t we sit down and you can tell me all about it. Want a drink?”

Justin waved him away. “Sit down. I can get it. Water?”

“Sure.”

“Same for me,” Justin said and returned from the kitchenette with two bottles of water, handing one over to Brian. “Too early for a drink,” he explained.

Brian opened his bottle, took a sip and focussed on his guest. “What happened?”

“It was bad. Daphne and I are moving out.”

That sounded bad. “I’m – uh – sorry.” Christ, he was a bad liar.

"You are such a liar," Justin said and for a moment a grin came and went. "You always hated him. And rightfully so."

Uh-oh. This was really bad. "What did he say?"

"A lot of homophobic bullshit in general and more about you. In short, I'm an idiot for associating with you."

No surprise there, but Brian knew it was a blow for Justin who had always defended his father.

He was about to reply but Justin held up a hand. "I know, I know, you always said so. I just," he shrugged, a helpless gesture that stirred Brian's heart, "tried to pretend that he wasn't an asshole."

"He's your Dad, Justin. You love him."

"Loved. The word is love-d."

"No." Brian shook his head. "You still love him. It doesn't stop just because he's an asshole."

"Was it like that with your dad?"

A loaded question. Had he ever loved his father? Brian honestly didn't know. "I remember loving my mother," he said instead. "The way she held me and hugged me when I was still little."

"But not your dad?"

"He never hugged me." It was all Brian was ready to admit. He changed back to Craig. "Does that mean you're not hugging anymore? You and your dad I mean."

Justin snorted. "Hardly. Daph was great. She kept us from killing each other, I think." He laughed a little laugh. "I never thought my father would say those things to my face, that he'd have too much respect for me to tell me that kind of shit." He sipped from his bottle and grimaced. "Maybe I need something stonger."

"No, you were right." Brian reached out and put a hand on Justin's arm. "It's too early. Also, he isn't worth it."

Justin turned and looked at him. "It's thrown me a curve ball. One I'm not sure I'll recover from."

"You're strong, Justin," Brian said and looked right back. "You will recover. Believe me, I'm the voice of experience here."

The blond shook his head slightly and laughed. "How do you do it?"

"What?" Brian asked and felt his throat tighten. Being in close quarters with Justin never was a good idea. Not anymore.

"You always know how to make me feel better."

Brian shrugged. His heart fluttered at the compliment and he had no idea how to deal with it. "Uh – you're welcome, I guess."

Justin laughed again. "You are so full of shit. You want people to believe you are a hardass while deep inside you are such a softie."

"I'm not a softie. That's an insult."

He'd meant it as a joke but involuntarily Justin's gaze flickered to his groin. And to his dick.

His loaded erection.

Brian sucked in a sharp breath, and Justin's gaze shot up.

Their eyes met. Brian swallowed hard.

"Justin–"

"Is that," Justin licked his lips and Brian's dick started to throb painfully, "for me?"

Brian looked away. "I'm sorry–"

"No." Justin's voice was soft and Brian's head turned back with a snap. His heart pounded like a jackhammer.

"Justin."

"Does it make me gay if I really want to kiss you now?" Justin asked softly.

Jesus Christ.

"Uh–"

Wow, articulate Kinney. You're a real master of the word.

"He said you were a whore."

Brian shook his head, trying to understand what Justin had said. "A whore?" he asked.

"Hm. And that I was stupid to be with you."

"Justin-"

"Shh. Don't talk, Brian. Can I kiss you now?"

"Uhm."

"I'll take that as a yes."

Yes. Yes. Yes.

And then there were lips. And heat. And hands. And Brian gave up.

Because there was nothing he could do but surrender.

"Can't you walk a little faster?"

Emmett rolled his eyes at Michael Novotny's annoyed tone. "You try walking faster in these shoes," he replied, pointing at the mentioned article of footwear. It was a superb pair of shoes, finest leather, exquisitely colored in pink and the last scream for the gay man who already had all the shoes he wanted. They were also extremely uncomfortable.

The things one did for beauty.

"Don't insult the shoes," Ted remarked drily and grinned when Michael gave an irritated huff. "I've been living with them – or the idea of them – for the better part of a month. It was all about 'should or shouldn't I buy them'."

"Well, it is an important decision," Emmett piped up. He felt slightly insulted but he knew that his friends loved him and always meant well. He also knew that playing the game was part of his image. He was the queenish, flirty, southern boy in the group. Ted was the serious accountant, Michael the reliable boy-next-door type and Brian. Well, he wasn't really sure what Brian was. He wasn't even sure Brian knew who Brian was.

"You could both do with a makeover," he told Michael and Ted now, because it was expected of him. "A facial would do you a world of good," he said to Ted. Then he turned to Michael, "And for you some actually fitting clothes would probably turn your life around."

“Hey,” Michael cried. Then he frowned. “What’s wrong with my clothes?”

“What’s not wrong with them?” Emmett snapped. “Look at this shirt. It probably came from the church fund for the needy.” He ignored Michael’s shout and went on mercilessly, “And don’t even get me started on the pants.”

Michael gave him a dark look. “There are times I think you and Brian are related.”

Emmett cocked his head. “Brian might be a lot of things, but he knows how to dress.”

“Can you two stop bickering like five year olds?”

“There speaks the voice of reason. Yes, we will obey, oh ancient one.” Emmett laughed when Ted tried to punch him.

“Fuck you,” Ted snarled, but he laughed as well. Michael merely rolled his eyes.

They walked in silence for a minute or so, before Ted asked. “Why are we going to Brian’s again?”

“Because he needs his friends,” Michael told him with a ‘duh’-voice. “He’s still on sick leave and alone at home all the time.”

“I’m sure he can find something to entertain himself,” Ted said with the air of someone who had measured himself against Brian Kinney and come up missing an inch or ten.

“He is not fucking around.” Michael was outraged on Brian’s behalf. “For one, he’s way too sick to do anything. His ribs are broken.”

Emmett gave him a look. “Oh please. Not only are you wearing horrendous clothes, you are also still such a kid. I could show you at least ten positions that don’t need you to move at all.”

“Thanks, but I think we can live without your educational efforts.”

Emmett glared at Ted. “You go on with your boring sex lives. I prefer having fun now and then.”

“Talking about fun,” Ted mused. “You think Brian will be happy to see us?”

“Of course.” Michael was sure of it, Emmett could see. It was the sort of conviction he envied his friend for, this certainty of being appreciated and loved by another person.

There were times however, when he dreaded it.

Like now.

Intruding Brian's privacy wasn't always a good idea and had ended in fights more than once. It seemed that Michael's memory was selective there, purposely or otherwise, he still wasn't sure.

He gave Michael a look, but decided comments were not welcome for now. With difficulty he surrendered himself to silently follow his friends into the hell, also known as Brian Kinney's wrath.

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Justin woke up slowly. It had been that way as long as he could remember. Throughout school his mother had had a hard time getting him out of bed, and more than once he'd been late for class. It was strange because his parents and his sister never had a problem in the morning, always got up bright and ready to take on the world. With Justin there was heavy need of caffeine to become at least comprehensive and he did his best work after three in the afternoon.

He felt his nose twitch at the smell of fresh coffee and yawned, wondering if Daphne was bringing him breakfast in bed. It would be a surprise. Ever since she was pregnant, she couldn't stand smelling any kind of food before noon and if she did, hello vomitron.

Justin stretched and felt a twinge in his groin. He stretched again.

And there was something strange.

He frowned, then blinked but shut his eyes again as bright sunlight hit him full in the face.

He heard clatter, then caught the unmistakable smell of toast and eggs, heard a radio play from a place that seemed far away.

Without opening his eyes he sat up in bed – and groaned.

What the fuck had happened to him?

And why was his ass burning as if someone had set it on fire?

"Daph?" he called out and everything around him seemed to freeze. The clatter stopped, the radio was turned off and Justin was suddenly shrouded in silence.

He blinked again, his eyes opening fractionally, and saw bright light, strange walls, and curtains he couldn't remember buying.

What the fuck? A hotel?

“Daph? Are we at the hotel?”

“No. You are not.”

Justin’s eyes snapped open and he was suddenly wide awake.

“Brian?”

It was the moment the well broke and the memory returned. Justin heard himself gasp as he remembered what had happened.

The kisses.

The touches.

He remembered pressing Brian into the sofa, remembered kissing him almost frantically and Brian giving in, kissing him back.

He also remembered undressing, urgently, with frantic motions, desperate to feel skin, to touch, to explore, to fulfill.

His eyes snapped to Brian’s face. “We ... you ...” was all he could manage.

“We fucked.”

Two words. Short. Precise. Sugarcoating nothing.

“Don’t even try to pretend you didn’t want it.”

Brian’s voice. Rough. But cold too. Hard. The hazel eyes were clear, daring him to disagree.

Justin shook his head. He didn’t understand.

“I’m not ... g-gay,” he stammered and Brian laughed. It was a short, disbelieving sound.

“Gay, straight, bi – who cares. But you certainly enjoyed taking it up the ass.”

Crude. Why did Brian have to be so crude? And no wonder his ass hurt like a bitch. Justin’s gaze involuntarily went to Brian’s crotch where nothing was hidden underneath the silk boxers he was wearing this morning.

“Why?” He thought the question was extraordinarily stupid but it was all that came to his mind that very moment.

Brian gave him an incredulous look that clearly spelled ‘duh’.

Justin shook his head. There was a noise in his ears he couldn't get rid of. "I mean ... I know ... I think, I remember. I ... Daphne." He groaned and fell back on the bed. "Oh my God, Daph."

He heard Brian move away from the bed without further comment.

Justin closed his eyes again. He wanted to go back to sleep, then wake up once more to a world where everything was normal again, where he was married to the best friend he'd ever had, where he was happy he was going to be a father, and where he didn't have to wonder if maybe, possibly, he might be bi. Or gay. Or what the fuck ever.

But, alas, this was no fairy tale and there were no rewinds or alternate endings. It was time to face the facts. After the big fight with his father he'd not slept for a single moment and gone to Brian's as soon as he thought he could intrude on his friend. But instead of talking to Brian, the way he'd intended to do, he'd more or less attacked Brian and initiated sex.

Double Fuck.

Justin groaned again.

This was a completely fucked up situation. One didn't have to be a brainiac to figure it out. The fact that he'd had sex with another man and – to make it even more difficult – enjoyed it, was the least of his problems. How was he going to tell his family? Daphne? Daphne, his wife, the woman who loved him, trusted him, and was expecting their baby.

Justin sat up once again, his eyes searching for something to put on. His jeans. Where on earth were his jeans? He looked around and to his horror saw them draped over the sofa. Which meant he had to get up in the nude and walk over there. He wasn't a prude, but the idea of walking around naked in front of Brian suddenly seemed unthinkable.

"Could I maybe have my pants?" he asked, hating the sullen sound of his voice.

Brian came back into view. He picked up the pair of jeans and threw them onto the bed. "Get dressed. Breakfast is ready."

Justin snatched the jeans up and held them to his chest. "I'm not hungry," he said, glaring at Brian. "How can you act so normal?"

Brian's left brow came up. His face was cool, controlled. Justin wanted to hit him.

"How do you want me to act? Do you want me to queen out? Would that fit your idea of a gay morning after?"

“Stop it,” Justin shouted. “This isn’t a regular morning after sex.”

“It isn’t?” Brian turned away again, then reappeared a moment later, holding Justin’s shirt. He tossed that one on the bed as well.

“No, it isn’t,” Justin gritted out, “and you damn well know it.”

“And what, pray tell, makes it so different? Are you suffering from the illusion that you are unique, unforgettable even? Let me enlighten you, Justin. I’ve had you. Or the likes of you. Straight guys with wives and children who refuse to accept that they crave cock. You’d like to pretend that nothing has happened or changed, but you can’t. Because you can’t forget it.”

Justin laughed. “Your ego is incredible.”

Brian gave him a long, hard look. “I’ve earned it.”

Justin wanted to scream, to rage, to do something to make that cool, controlled façade disappear. He did none of it. Instead he stared at the man in front of him. A man he had shared a college dorm with, a man he saw as his closest friend. Right after Daphne.

Oh God. Daphne.

No, don’t think about Daphne. Not now. Later. He would deal with that disaster later.

“Why didn’t you stop me?” he asked, not sure if he wanted to know.

Brian shrugged. “You are hot. You clearly wanted it. Why would I turn you down?”

Justin blinked. Was this man his friend? The Brian Kinney he knew? “That’s it?” he asked. “That’s your reason?”

Brian shrugged again. “What do you want me to say?”

Justin pulled his shirt over his head. “Nothing.” Really, what could Brian say? What would change if he said – anything? And did it really matter?

“You want coffee now?” Brian asked.

And something in Justin snapped.

“How can you be like that?” he shouted. “How can you act as if nothing has happened? We had sex last night! We slept with each other! Everything has changed. How do you propose we go on from here? What am I supposed to do? I have a wife and a child on the way. How am I supposed to look at Daphne again?”

He stared at Brian, breathing hard, feeling his heart hammer in chest. He didn't even realise he'd gotten up and stood before his friend, holding his jeans like a shield between them.

"I've ruined everything! Daphne is my best friend. I love her. She trusts me. And I betrayed her. For a cheap fuck I betrayed the one person who is more important to me than anyone else."

Justin thought he saw Brian flinch, but he was too angry, too confused to let it matter to him. He yanked his jeans on, then stormed past Brian to find his socks and shoes. His jacket was hanging over a chair. Brian seemed frozen on the spot, didn't say a word, didn't follow him. And Justin didn't care.

He shoved his feet into his shoes and stuffed his socks into his jacket. He didn't look at Brian as he stormed towards the door. Then he stopped.

"I don't want you to call me," he said, needing to lash out, needing to get rid of his anger and guilt before he went home and faced Daphne. "Stay away from us. You are not the kind of friend I need in my life."

He walked out and almost ran into Michael, Emmett and Ted. The trio stared at him in surprise, but he simply shook his head. There was no way he was dealing with them on top of the whole mess that was his life. Instead he ran down the stairs, wondering if anything could be salvaged from it.

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It was as if things were happening in slow motion.

It was strange. Almost unreal.

He saw his bed, the clear evidence of what had happened last night. He could smell it. Even feel it on his skin, the shower hadn't changed a thing.

"Brian! Something is burning in here. Brian?"

He shook himself, and frowned. Who was there?

"Holy shit. Ted, give me the towel. Fuck, Brian. What did you do – got sidetracked with a handjob?"

Mikey.

It was an effort. But Brian pulled himself together. Thank God, he'd had a lot of practice in his life.

“Mikey,” he said, and his voice sounded almost normal. He turned and saw that he had more than just one visitor. “Ted, Emmett. Did you lose your home or why are you gracing me with your presence at this time of the morning?”

“We were worried about you, asshole,” Michael said, throwing skillet and eggs away. “You need a new skillet,” he announced. “This one’s ruined.”

“Why were you worried about me? Did I give the impression that I am anything but fabulous?” He glared at his friends, daring them to disagree.

“Fabulous?” Michael scoffed. “You were almost killed.” Clearly Mikey didn’t know the meaning of fabulous. Brian had managed to fool him a lot, but there were times when Mikey didn’t buy his shit. It was the reason Brian loved him. Right now he wished Mikey was far away, preferably on the other side of the globe.

“By the way,” Emmett piped up, picking up a magazine from Brian’s kitchenette counter, “we met Justin on his way out. He seemed angry. Did you have a fight?”

He was not going to discuss Justin with them. Or anyone.

“It’s none of your business,” he said evenly. He would not let them see it. Nobody would ever see what had happened. Nobody would ever know that his heart had been ripped out, trampled on, and because of a miracle still beat in his chest.

It shouldn’t have been a surprise. He had known it would happen. The moment he had given in to Justin’s advances, he’d known it would end badly.

He’d gotten up early, showered, then sat on the sofa for at least an hour, waiting for Justin to wake up, steeling himself for what was to come. Clearly, Justin would be upset. That was to be expected. He’d always thought of himself as straight, had always seen them as nothing but friends.

Everything was different now.

Brian could still feel Justin’s lips, his hands, could hear the whispered words, could remember the feeling of sliding into Justin’s body. He would always remember the noises of pain and eventually of pleasure, the desperate way Justin had clung to him as they’d reached orgasm. And had reached orgasm again. He would never forget holding Justin, and holding on, to the ridiculous hope that he could have this, that for once something good was happening in Brian Kinney’s life.

Justin had fallen asleep in Brian’s arms, utterly exhausted and sated, his body heavy and smelling of sweat and sex. It had been the happiest moment in Brian’s life. And for that moment he’d let himself indulge in that happiness, let himself believe it was his to have and hold, had let himself forget that there was a wife and a child and that life never gave Brian what he desired. That fate always got a laugh when fucking with his life.

He had not expected for Justin to be cruel. He'd not been prepared for being treated like he meant nothing, had not expected Justin would cast him out of his life.

"Brian – did you hear me?"

"What?"

He turned around and hoped that nothing was visible on his face. When Michael rolled his eyes he knew he'd been successful in concealing emotions.

"I wanted to know how you are?"

"I told you I'm fabulous. But you're clearly not listening. Don't you have your own life to meddle with?"

"Fuck you."

"Mikey. I told you time and again, it's not going to happen-"

"Fuck. You." Michael pronounced the words clearly. "Don't even try to treat us like we're some stupid assholes." He looked at Ted and Emmett who were trying to be invisible, clearly uncomfortable with the whole situation.

"Mikey." Brian walked over to his friend and slung an arm around the smaller man's shoulders. "I'm grateful you care. But right now I'm really tired and I need you to leave so I can get my beauty sleep." He glanced at Ted and Emmett. "And take those two clowns with you."

He ignored their combined and affronted 'heys' and steered Mikey towards the door. "I know you mean well, but can you do that later – preferably tomorrow?"

Michael stopped and looked up at him. "Promise me that you'll rest. And eat."

"Yes, mom."

Michael grinned at him. Brian bent down and kissed his temple. He felt Michael shudder slightly in his arms and for a moment wished that life could be easy, that he could fall in love with Mikey.

"Okay. But I'll check up on you tomorrow."

"You do that."

Ted and Emmett followed them to the door and Brian was relieved when they all left without further questions. When the door closed behind them, he leaned against it.

Then, as if his legs had suddenly lost all their strength, he slid to the floor. He gasped at the pain when his ribs protested against the treatment. But the pain was superficial and not important. Neither were the tears streaming down his face.

It was dark before he got up and walked into his bathroom where he turned on the shower, standing underneath it with his boxers on, not caring that they were wet. Not bothering to dry himself as he went to his bed and lay down, burying his nose in the smell of Justin and staring at a darkness that seemed to swallow him whole.

“Daphne, please don’t leave. Please.”

Jennifer felt as if running an uphill race. She felt breathless and her stomach war hurting and she had one hell of a headache. Her daughter-in-law stood in the big living room, a study in stubbornness.

“That’s out of the question. I told you before, Justin and I will be leaving as soon as he’s back.”

“But we want you to stay.”

Daphne sighed and ran a hand through her long curls. “Jennifer-“ she started when the front door opened and closed and footsteps could be heard in the foyer.

“Mom? Daph?”

“Justin!” Jennifer turned to her son as he entered the room, then gasped. He looked dreadful. He was very pale, his eyes were puffy and his clothes looked rumpled as if he’d slept in them. “What happened to you?”

He gave an impatient sigh. “Not now, Mom.” His eyes found his wife, “Daph,” he said and Jennifer felt herself frown. Something wasn’t right. She couldn’t say what exactly but Justin was different somehow.

“Is everything okay, honey?” she asked in concern.

“Mom.” Justin closed his eyes for a moment, took a deep breath and opened them again. “Can we please not do this right now. I need to talk to Daph.” He frowned. “Where is Dad?”

“He had to leave,” Jennifer informed him.

“He left,” Daphne said coldly the very same moment. “After I made it clear that I didn’t care breathing in the same air he did.”

Jennifer saw her son grin at his wife and the two of them shared a quick, fierce look.

There was no doubt, those two were right for each other, always so in synch, always on the same wave length. Best friends made the best partners, Jennifer was sure of it. And Daphne was strong. She would always be there for Justin, would steady him, even keep him up when he needed it.

“Mom, can you give Daphne and me a little privacy, please?” Justin asked, looking at her with those familiar blue eyes. She remembered him as a baby, staring up at her. Even then he’d had these incredible eyes. Craig had told he’d lose the color, that the eyes would change as they did with most babies. But she’d been sure. ‘No’, she’d told him. Had told him that she knew that her son’s eyes would stay that way.

She had been right then. And she had been right later. That morning when she’d caught him trying on her shoes and had done her best to hide the fact from Craig. She loved her husband, but she also knew that he would not take kindly to that kind of discovery. Later she’d seen Justin staring at a young Tom Cruise as if he was a God come to Earth. And once again, she’d hidden it from her husband. And had given Justin a picture of Cindy Crawford and told him she was pretty.

She had not lied to Daphne. Justin had never acted on it. Had probably never even known it. Not consciously anyway. And even if there had been flashes, Craig had done his best to discourage them, albeit unknowingly. Craig with his talk about real men, and a future that included a wife and children, and all his expectations Justin had been forced to carry with him throughout his life.

Jennifer had watched her son. Had watched him grow and mature, had seen him turn into a teenager, then into a man. She had seen him with Daphne, had encouraged and supported their friendship, had somehow known that he would be with this woman or no woman at all. She wasn’t sure if it had all been deliberate, and she prayed that most of it had been done because of motherly love and not as Daphne suspected because keeping her image of a happy family had been more important to her than anything.

“Mom?”

Jennifer blinked. “Yes?”

“A little privacy – please?”

She heard the impatience in Justin’s voice, saw it in his face. Something was most definitely off. But she also knew her son well enough to understand that he would not talk to her now. So she nodded and left the room, walking slowly through the foyer of their upper middleclass home into the big, sun-lit kitchen where she leaned against the counter and closed her eyes.

They would leave. Daphne and Justin would leave and there was nothing she could do to keep them here. It shouldn’t have been that big of a deal. They’d been staying with her and Craig only as long as it took to get their house ready for moving in. It had been

a temporary arrangement from the start, but after what had happened between her husband and her son, Jennifer knew this could be a very serious rift, something that would probably take years to heal, if it could be healed at all.

Jennifer sighed and turned to the coffee maker, then dismissed the idea. She was jumpy enough already, she didn't need caffeine right now. Maybe Justin would want a cup? She sighed again and shook her head, chuckling to herself. She really was a sad case. Would she ever stop wanting to mother Justin?

Unwillingly her thoughts wandered to her other child. She wondered how Molly was, if she was alright. She had told Daphne the truth there too. While Justin had always been her child, Molly had been Craig's. Right after she had been born she'd given her Dad a big, toothless smile while her mother's sight had her in tears. And while Craig had done his best to groom Justin to become the son he wanted, Craig had always loved his little daughter.

As a result Molly had become a spoiled girl, used to getting what she wanted, sullen when things didn't go her way. It was Craig's fault, Craig's way of giving in to all her whims she had turned her back on her family and left when her father had finally drawn the line and told her he would never finance her attempt at becoming a rock-star. The next morning they'd found her room empty, her clothes gone and had not managed to find a trace of her ever since.

Jennifer sighed and remembered the young girl she herself had once been. Oh yes, she'd been a wild one, jumping from one house party to another, never with the same boy for longer than a week or two. And then she'd met Craig Taylor. He'd been different from the boys she was used to. For one, he was older, already out of college, already with a purpose in life. He was also very attractive and his focus seemed solely on her. He was pursuing her with the single-mindedness of a cruise missile. An unstoppable force.

One she hadn't been able to stop either. Her parents had been thrilled to see them dating, and that had been a nice change, too. They'd been so disappointed in her lifestyle ever since she'd left home for college and to see her mother smile and her dad look at her fondly had meant more to her than she could have put into words.

So she and Craigh had gotten married, with five hundred guests, an obscenely expensive wedding gown and a cake that was still remembered in certain circles. She'd gotten pregnant after only a year and all her great ideas of becoming an independent woman had flown right out of the window. She'd still thought she could have a job and a baby but then Molly had come along and with two children to take care of, pursuing a career of her own had been out of the question. Instead Craig had climbed the ladder, Jennifer had been comfortable and had settled.

Was that the reason she'd fought so hard to keep everything under wraps? Because it was all she had to show to the world after 26 years of marriage? Was she really so

pathetic?

She felt a tear tickle down her cheek and impatiently wiped it away. She frowned when she heard a loud, angry voice from the living room and tensed when the other one got even louder. Were they fighting? And if they were, why were they angry?

Justin had looked awful before, and he'd been very serious. Guilty even.

Guilty of what?

Stop that, she scolded herself. They are married, grown-up, a couple. You can't meddle with their lives all the time. And yet, her very soul screamed in urgent need to go and help her favourite child. Instead, she gritted her teeth and stood rooted in the kitchen, knowing that there was nothing she could do. Worse, even, she knew for certain that help would not be wanted.

And then the phone rang.

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"Daph. I'm – I'm so, so sorry."

Daphne pressed her forehead against the cool glass of the window. What was she supposed to say? Was she supposed to scream? To rant? To throw things? How did you act when your life was falling apart?

The thing was, she felt actually torn. There was one Daphne, the life-long friend, who wanted desperately to be just that, to understand, to maybe even soothe. And there was the other, the furious one. The scorned wife and soon-to-be mother. Both of them were fighting in her body, whispering in her head, having heated discussions right above her left eye. Where they conveniently had also placed a drum that was beating a steady rhythm.

And then there was a third Daphne, a woman who was watching the whole scene in a strange, detached way, wondering why this was happening and what the whole thing had to do with her. It was the cold Daphne who asked: "Does that mean you're gay?"

It was almost like an out of body experience. She could ask a life shattering question and feel nothing.

"No," Justin said firmly but then faltered. "I mean ... I ... maybe ... I." He lifted his hands in a helpless gesture that was eerily familiar to her. He'd done the same when he'd involuntarily destroyed her sand cake when they were both four years old. "I have no idea what I am."

It sounded completely miserable and the betrayed wife in her rejoiced at the pain she

could hear in that voice. The friend, however, bled a little for the man. “Did you ... like it?” asked the cold one again.

She heard Justin gasp. What? Had he expected her to scream? What kind of woman did he think she was? “Daph. I can’t believe you’re asking me that kind of question? Do you really want to know?”

Daphne was surprised to discover that, yes, she did. “Tell me,” she demanded.

“I ... yes.” His voice was only a whisper.

Miserable. Miserable. Miserable. Chanted the scorned woman.

“And now?” the detached one inquired.

She didn’t turn around to look at him – she wasn’t sure she’d be able to keep her cool if she did that – but she still knew he was lifting his shoulders in a helpless shrug. She knew him that well. He was as familiar to her as her own face. She had known him for almost all her life. And she had never – not once – suspected that he could be gay. What did that say about herself? Did that mean she was an idiot?

“Does that mean we’re getting a divorce?”

“A ... divorce?” There was real shock now, and a part of her wanted to hold up a fist in victory. Yes, yes, I want you to hurt like I do. I want you to suffer the way I suffer. You stupid, unfaithful asshole.

“What else can we do?” she asked, and it sounded a lot like the life-long friend. “We can hardly stay married if you’re gay. I’m not living a lie. And you’re not cut out for that either.”

“I don’t know if I’m gay,” he cried. “Daphne, can you at least look at me?”

“No,” she said simply, and kept her forehead pressed to the glass. There was a robin in the garden, picking up food. Did robins cheat, she wondered?

“All I know is that I feel awful because I ... I know you trusted me, and ...”

“... we’re having a baby?”

She hadn’t meant to say that, but it had slipped out.

“You have to believe me,” Justin said, “that I didn’t have a clue I was ... maybe ... attracted to men.”

Daphne remembered her conversation with Jennifer and knew that to be true. Whatever

moments Justin might have had, Craig and Jennifer had done their best to discourage them. They hadn't ranted against gay people, no, they'd been much more subtle about it, and much more successful. Daphne put a protective hand over her belly and swore that whatever her child turned out to be, she would not follow their example. She would love her baby, no matter what. And she would make sure that her child knew.

"I wouldn't have married you had I known."

She knew that too. God, he sounded so sincere, and so desperate. Was she a bad person for not taking him in her arms?

"Daph. You have to believe me, please!"

"What about Brian?" And where had that question come from? Why was she suddenly concerned about Brian? Or was she just curious? Cruelly curious even? Did that make her a monster?

"Brian?" Justin seemed honestly puzzled at the question. Then she heard him laugh, an abrasive, painful sound that hurt her ears. "Oh, he's okay. He got what he wanted."

Strange. Somehow Daphne had the feeling she was missing something vital. She was almost puzzled with herself that she could now turn around and face him. The scorned woman was silent. As was the detached one. The friend however, was back. She had played with this man when they were still children. He had been her friend forever. That had to count for something.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

He slashed the air with his hand, a sure sign of inner turmoil and turned away, now that she was facing him. "He-" he started but then seemed to think about it and turned back to her. "Daph. How can you ask me something like that? I cheated on you. With Brian. And now you're actually asking me how Brian is? Are you ... like, insane?"

She laughed. At the same time she felt tears running down her cheeks. She quickly wiped them away, then shook her head, mostly in disbelief. "It's either that or pounding my head against the wall," she told Justin honestly. "And I like my head."

"You are incredible, do you know that?"

"Don't," Daphne said sharply. They might be friends but right now they were ... Daphne didn't know what they were, but she didn't feel like joking with Justin.

He looked instantly contrite. "Sorry. But this is freaking me out. All of it."

She had to smile. She didn't know why. She was feeling so many conflicting emotions, she thought she might implode at one point.

So she took a deep breath. "I wish I could just be your buddy here," she said.

"But you can't," he replied quickly. "And that's okay. I feel like an asshole."

"You are an asshole." There was no need for sugarcoating. When he stared at her, she gave him a 'duh' look. "Well, you are. You fucked around on me. Let's not try to pretend you did just open one of my private letters."

Now it was Justin's turn to laugh. "Okay, now you're *really* freaking me out. Are you schizophrenic or anything?"

"No," she shouted, stomping her foot. "I'm just a little overwhelmed that in one moment my whole life is falling apart!"

Score.

Justin looked so guilty, she instantly felt bad for it. And why on earth was she feeling bad? He had cheated on her. F.U.C.K.E.D. around on her, damn it. He *should* be feeling guilty.

She sighed.

"Look. I agree, I'm freaking out. But I'm also Daphne. So," she took a very deep breath. Then another. And another. "How is Brian?"

Again Justin stared at her. Then he laughed. Then he shook his head. "Are you serious?"

Daphne grit her teeth. "Yes," she forced out. She also really wanted to punch Justin in the face, but that had to wait. She tapped her foot. "So?"

He let out a breath and ran his fingers through his hair. "To tell you the truth, you're not the only one freaking out. I did a lot of freaking with Brian." He stopped and groaned. "I said some pretty harsh things. But Brian was such an asshole." He chuckled and gave Daphne a loopsided grin, "I guess that shows how well we fit together."

"Two assholes?" She cocked her head. "Not very likely. I suppose he's just a dick."

It took Justin a moment to get the meaning, but then he laughed. "Daph." The laughter died. "God." His eyes actually filled with tears. "I wish I knew what we should do. I love you. I ... can't imagine my life without you."

And just like that, she was jelly. Because she knew it was the truth. She had to blink hard. "I know. I love you, too. Maybe that's the reason ... we got married. I mean ... Did we ever stop and think if that's what we wanted?" And wasn't that the greatest load of

bullshit she'd ever told? She never wanted anything else, never wanted anything more. It was Justin and had always been.

Or hadn't he?

Maybe it was really possible that they were just so comfortable with each other, so well suited that nobody had ever thought of anything else. Justin and Daphne. Daphne and Justin. That's how it was meant to be.

Or wasn't it?

She looked at Justin's familiar face, the blue eyes, the lashes that were long and beautiful and clearly visible even though he was a blond. Everyone had always told her that familiarity was the best foundation for lasting relationships. Daphne had believed it and acted on it.

But could it be wrong?

"Daph?"

She blinked. "I'm sorry, did you say something?"

He was about to reply when there was a knock at the door, a moment later Jennifer stuck her head in. "Sorry to interrupt," she said, sounding anything but sorry. Daphne wanted to throttle her – or hug her. God, she was so confused.

"Mom." Justin sounded annoyed. "Is the house falling down or what?"

Jennifer stared at him, clearly taken aback by the tone of his voice. "No. Of course not. But I need to talk to you both."

"Talk about what?" he snapped.

"Your father just called. He will be back for lunch. He says he needs to talk to you." It was so clear that Jennifer was uncomfortable being a messenger for her husband, but Daphne could also see a glimmer of hope in the older woman's eyes.

One that Justin was obviously determined to quench. "There is no need to talk. I'm not staying in this house. Discussion over." He glanced at Daphne. "We," he corrected himself. "We're not staying."

"Oh, Justin."

"No, Mom." He walked over to his mother and took her hands. "I'm sorry if this hurts you but I'm not staying in the house with Dad."

“Honey. You know how your father is, you two are so alike. You both have a temper and sometimes things are said that ... shouldn’t have been.”

Daphne could hardly believe her ears. Was this woman real? And before she could stop herself, she blurted: “Shit, would you just listen to yourself for a moment!” Both Jennifer and Justin turned to her, looking startled. “Well, it’s true. Stop lying to yourself and face the truth. Craig is not a nice man. He isn’t a great father. Let’s stop pretending that he is, okay?”

She looked at Justin, and he was grinning at her, that familiar, you’re-my-best-friend-grin, and Jennifer was staring at her, speechless.

What had she just said?

Oh. My. God.

Had she really just said those things to her mother-in-law?

Then she thought fuck it. It was the truth, wasn’t it? Craig was an asshole. So why pretend he was not? And Justin was gay. Oh, shit.

Feeling suddenly weak, Daphne reached for the chair and sat down.

“Daphne, honey, are you alright?” Jennifer was at her side in an instant.

“Daph?” Justin was there too. But he wasn’t as close, just hovering near by. Daphne had always known he was clever. She wouldn’t have wanted his touch, probably would have slapped him

“I’m fine,” she hissed and Jennifer actually backed away. “And for God’s sake, would you stop looking at me like that!”

“Like what?”

“Like ... like I just killed your favourite pet.” God, Jennifer Taylor needed a reality check. Bad. “You have no right to look like that, you’re just as responsible for this mess as Craig.”

“Oh, honey.”

“Stop calling me that,” Daphne cried, completely exaggerated. “Don’t you want to say something?” she shot at Justin, who simply held his hands up in a gesture of surrender.

“Coward,” she sneered. And yes, she knew she was acting irrational but she just didn’t care. Her marriage was falling apart, her husband was gay and her in-laws, who she’d thought were the perfect couple, turned out to be assholes. And on top of all she was

going to become a single mother. Wow, if that didn't make her day, nothing else would.

Or maybe something could still make it better. She gave Jennifer her sweetest smile, saw Justin's eyes widen, and then with her voice smooth and soft, she said: "Oh, and by the way, did Justin tell you he's gay?"

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Craig was running late. For the past ten minutes he'd been constantly looking at his watch and cursed traffic. By the time he was turning into his driveway his blood pressure was up and his mood down and he wondered why he'd called his wife in the first place. Damn her for persuading him to a family lunch. What was Jennifer thinking? Was she thinking at all? Did his wife actually think that he and Justin could wipe their differences away as if nothing had happened?

Jennifer was clearly delusional. Or in need of professional help. A lot of women had their shrinks, maybe he suggest one to her?

He turned off the ignition, got out of the car and walked towards his house. It was a big house, in an upscale neighborhood it spoke of success and achievement and Craig was proud of it. He was almost at the door when it opened and revealed Jennifer – who had been crying?

"What happened now?" he asked, already annoyed. Really, he should suggest a shrink soon.

"They are leaving," she told him with a broken voice. "They are leaving this very moment."

His annoyance level sparked. "Then why did you have to make all that noise about lunch? I have a load of paperwork waiting for me in the office."

"For God's sake, he is your son," Jennifer cried, new tears in her eyes. God save him from emotional women! "Isn't it enough that your daughter left without a word?"

"Molly made her own bed," he told her coldly. "She has to lie in it now." Molly was his worst disappointment, his golden girl, his princess. As for Justin. Well, if he preferred fraternizing with sick assfuckers then good riddance to him, too. He gave Jennifer a dark look. No wonder his children were losers, their mother was one too.

"Is that your answer for everything?"

"Keep your accusations to yourself, Jenn." He was not doing this. He was not the bad guy here. "Where is he?"

"They are upstairs." Jennifer put a hand on his arm. He looked at it, and she pulled it

away. "Please, try to be nice to him. For me."

For her? "Are you insane?" he asked, not even trying to play nice. Not to her. Not for her. He was done playing. "Or are you actually taking his side?" Maybe a shrink wasn't enough, maybe an institution was more what she needed.

She stared at him, incredulous. "Side? What side? He is your son. Our child. There can't be sides."

In what kind of delusional world was his wife living? There were always sides. "Get out of my way," he snarled and pushed past her into his house. Justin and Daphne were on the stairs, coming down, both carrying luggage.

Justin stopped when he saw him. "Dad."

His voice was cold, he sounded like a stranger and Craig was glad. Things would be much easier that way. "Justin." He glanced at his daughter in law. "Daphne."

"Craig." She sounded just as icy. At least she was loyal, it was more than he could say about Jennifer. He shouldn't have been so stupid all these years ago. Just because she was beautiful, he'd been blinded and forgotten all about Helen Fortescue, who had been butt ugly but rich and self-possessed. The ideal wife for someone with big plans, Helen wouldn't have let emotions run wild the way Jennifer had.

"So," he looked at his son. The defiant set of his chin, the clear eyes, his gaze not wavering for a second. "You are leaving." Craig didn't make it a question, because there was none.

"Yes."

"Justin, please. Craig."

God, how he hated the whine in her voice. "Jennifer," he snarled, "shut up."

"Don't talk to her like that."

Of course, Justin was jumping to his mother's defense. It was just so typical. "That's between your mother and me. Keep out of it."

"Don't tell me what to do." Yes, Justin was still furious.

"Where are you going? Your house isn't done yet. A hotel? Or maybe you're staying with one of your fag friends. Although with your wife pregnant you should think about it twice. Who knows what kinds of diseases your child could catch?"

"Dad, save it. I don't want to your bullshit."

"Being gay isn't the same as being sick, Craig," his daughter-in-law told him with conviction. He saw her looking at Justin in a very peculiar way but had no idea what it meant. "But narrow-minded people like you will probably never understand that. It's a pity, really. You're missing so much."

"I'm not missing a thing."

"You're missing so much, Dad, you don't even know it."

"Don't be ridiculous, Justin. And you're an idiot."

"Craig!"

He rolled his eyes, and wished he'd stayed at the office. "He is an idiot." And he was. There was no sugarcoating, his son was stupid. "Only an idiot would want to be seen in the company of faggots. It's a sure career killer."

"Thank God not all people are such narrow-minded bigots," Justin said.

He was not a bigot. Craig resented being called one. And by his son of all people. "If you weren't leaving right now, I'd throw you on the street by myself."

"Craig!"

"Jennifer, will you shut up." He was not having this. Not in his own house. He had worked hard for all he had achieved. And now his children were destroying his dream. He looked at Daphne. Maybe one day, he would give it to his grandchild.

"Justin, can you wait a moment?" Jennifer's voice quivered wildly. What the hell was her problem now?

"Mom?"

"I need to pack a suitcase. Can you take me to the hotel with you?"

"Jennifer, don't be stupid," Craig said coldly. Were they all losing their minds now?

"I'm not staying here with you. Justin?"

Justin and Daphne exchanged a quick look, then they both nodded. "Sure, Mom. It's no problem." Jennifer gave him a look of relief and ran up the stairs. He heard their bedroom door open and close.

"You are all insane," Craig snarled, and turned back to the front door. "Tell your mother if she should ever come to her senses, she can call me."

Justin didn't respond. And Craig shut the front door with a final click.

"Brian! Over here!"

Michael's voice was clearly to be heard even over the noise in the bar and Brian moved easily through queers whose hungry gazes seemed to be glued to his person. He didn't mind being visually devoured, revelled in it if he were honest – which he always was. He liked being the center of attention, liked bodies trying to get close, to get in touch – and more.

Not tonight, though.

Tonight he shoved the bodies away, snarled at people who got too close and glared in a way that made the crowds part before him like the Red Sea. He didn't pay any attention to anyone in his path and didn't look at his friend when he sat down at the table Michael had found for them.

"Still in a pissy mood, I see," Michael said with just enough sulk in his voice to set Brian's teeth on edge. "What did crawl up your ass?"

"Nothing," Brian lied smoothly and ordered a double Jim Beam from the hot waiter he'd been eyeing for the past two weeks. Tonight he didn't even glance at the man.

"Should you be drinking?" Michael asked and Brian glared.

"If you don't fucking stop mothering me I'll leave." Brian finally looked at his friend. "This is really getting old. Sure, my ribs are still a bit sore and the arm isn't fully functional yet but I'm fine, Mikey. And I'm also of age, so I can drink if I want to." He hummed the last few words, turning them into a reference to an old song. It had the expected effect and Michael grinned.

"Ben called me," Michael told him then, changing the subject. "He wanted to know how you were. By the way, he has a very sexy voice."

"Go and fuck him then. He's hot."

"Brian!"

"Who is Michael going to fuck?"

Emmett, dressed entirely in pink and lilac lowered himself gracefully on another chair.

"Christ," Brian exclaimed. He simply couldn't help himself. It was either that or watch his own eyes bleed out in horror. "What the fuck are you wearing?"

"It's the latest chic," Emmett said, pouting a little. "Just because none of you are able to appreciate my worldly style, I don't have to put up with your disparaging comments."

"We all love you, Em," Michael said quickly and Emmett was instantly mollified.

"Talk for yourself," Brian grumbled and was grateful when the waiter brought him his drink. He ordered another one after draining his double in one go. He grimaced when the liquid burned his throat, but he also appreciated the warmth it created. "Just for the record, I don't love you," he told Emmett who grinned in return. "Where is your attachment today?" he then wanted to know.

"My attach-" Emmett stopped, then laughed. "Brian, you are a bad, bad boy. Teddy is my friend, not my attachment. And don't even pretend that you care if he is here or not."

No, he wouldn't pretend. He didn't very much care about Ted on a good day. The guy was a pathetic schmuck, an insult to any gay man alive as far as Brian was concerned. But he was also a friend of sorts or whatever you called the fact that he was hanging around all the time.

But Emmett was wrong. Tonight Brian wanted Ted to be around, wanted everyone to be here, to annoy him, to bore him, to do anything to distract him.

The waiter brought his second drink and he drained that in one, too. Before the waiter could turn away he grabbed his arm. "Bring me another and a beer." The man nodded and left, but not without giving Brian a suggestive wink, and before he turned back to his friends, Brian knew Mikey would give him a disapproving look.

"Are you self-destructing or what?" Michael demanded, giving him, yes, a very disapproving look. He really needed some new friends, the ones he had were too fucking predictable.

"Mikey. What did I tell you before?" Not that he had any hope Michael would listen. None of them ever listened to him.

"I don't care if you hate your friends looking out for you. We love you and care for you." He nudged the man at his side. "Tell him, Em."

"Yes, yes," the dream in pink and purple agreed even though his gaze was scanning the crowd, no doubt seeking his Mr. Wonderful for the night. Emmett was constantly on the lookout for the love of his life, or so he kept saying.

Brian was about to reply when he was distracted by a blond head appearing in the crowd. He felt his breath stop for a moment while his heart started to hammer. Then the guy turned and Brian's tension eased. It wasn't him. Only someone who looked a lot like him.

Fucking great.

He was so lost, he was even more pathetic than Ted, the loser. Christ, he wished ... he wished for so many things tonight, he didn't know where to begin. But wishing didn't change a damned thing, so he stopped wishing and decided to face things head on.

The truth.

The truth was he was completely obsessed with Justin Taylor. In love. Maybe. Possibly. Probably. If Brian knew what 'being in love' really meant. Fact was, he couldn't stop thinking about Justin, hadn't been able to from the first time Justin had laughed in his face, his eyes alight.

The waiter brought his beer and the drink and Brian took the larger glass. The drink was for later. For oblivion. He was sure he'd need it to drone out Michael's annoying voice.

He instantly felt a flash of guilt. Mikey was his friend. He was the one person who'd always been there for him, stood by him no matter what. He loved Mikey. But sometimes he still wanted to strangle him. Brian wondered if that made him an asshole or maybe just as normal as the next guy.

"... who Michael's supposed to fuck?"

Brian blinked and tried to focus on the question Emmett had asked. "What?"

Emmett gave a long, drawn-out sigh. "Michael's supposed fuck?"

"Ben," Brian said without thinking. There was no need to think. He knew Ben had it bad for Michael. Not that his boss had ever acted on it. Or that Michael even knew the guy. But Ben had seen Michael now and then and if the way his boss' eyes darkened were any indication, Ben was definitely thinking about fucking Mikey. There was one problem, however, but it wasn't Brian's to tell.

"Ben?" Emmett looked first at Brian, then at Michael. "Who is Ben?"

Mikey rolled his eyes. "He is Brian's boss. I don't even know the guy, just to make that clear."

"Honey," Emmett put a hand on Michael's arm. "If Brian tells you the guy is hot, he is hot." Then he seemed to think about something. "Is he hot?"

"Yeah, he's hot," Brian said. "He's also a great guy."

"Why don't you bring him with you then?"

It definitely had been a mistake to come here, but Brian had been desperate to get away from his apartment, from the place where he could still smell Justin, where he could still see them – together – kissing – touching – making fucking love.

From the place where silence was too much to bear.

“Ben is my boss, Honeycutt. I’m not inviting him after hours.”

“Why not? He isn’t your boss after work,” Emmett insisted. Then he added on an afterthought: “And don’t call me Honeycutt!”

Brian gave him a look. “What’s your problem? It’s your name, isn’t it?”

“Brian, stop being an asshole,” Michael chided him, but he grinned. Christ, they were a pathetic trio tonight. Ted would fit right in.

“Man, it’s crowded in here. I almost didn’t find you.”

“Hey, Teddy!” Michael seemed honestly pleased and Brian turned away, nursing his beer instead. He wasn’t going to sit here, watching Ted watch Mikey the whole night. Really, their circle of friends should be named circle of losers instead.

Ted was in love with Mikey, had been lusting after him for years, but was too much of a coward to say a word while Mikey was lusting after Brian, not making a secret of it but living with rejection as if it was his daily food. Then there was Brian himself who wanted the one thing he could never have. Which left Emmett as the one sane in their group and that should have them all run screaming.

Brian chuckled to himself and sipped and felt his thoughts wandering to a certain blond man.

Aw, fuck.

He didn’t want to think about Justin but his brain had a mind of its own. It was as if there was a split personality in his head, not wanting to shut up. It was whispering to him, even when he’d tried to sleep earlier, would visit him in his dreams and generally be a fucking nuisance.

Brian turned, put down his beer glass and emptied his double Jim Beam, then belatedly realized that – of course – his friends had been watching him the whole time. “What?” he snapped, giving them his best ‘stay-the-fuck-out-of-it’ glare.

Naturally, Mikey didn’t get the hint – or just pretended not to get it. Brian still had to figure out if his friend was just playing clueless or if he was really that thick.

“Drinking won’t help, Brian,” he now said with all the wisdom of his 25 years combined

with the fact that he'd grown up Debbie Novotny's son, the woman who had answers for everything.

"Honey," Emmett looked at Michael. "Sometimes it does, believe me."

"He should rather talk to us. We're his friends," Michael replied sulkily.

Emmett shook his head and gave Brian a look. "Sorry, I tried."

"How about you and I take a trip to the dance floor?" Ted asked and after another pout in Brian's direction, Michael agreed.

Which left Brian with Emmett. It was a relief. Despite all his pink and lilac queenliness, Emmett Honeycutt was a pretty decent human being who had a lot of insight if he wanted.

"He loves you," he said now and smiled slightly when Brian rolled his eyes. "He does. Even though it's hopeless, he can't help himself." He paused, then added on a wistful sigh, "It's a common occurrence among us mere humans."

Brian almost swallowed his drink the wrong way and spluttering, he stared at Emmett. "Please, don't tell me you want to get into my pants too."

Emmett stared right back for a moment, then laughed. "No. God, no."

Brian laughed too but he couldn't help being a little annoyed as well. "Thanks," he said drily.

Emmett shook his head. "You don't need an ego boost. I'd have to be dead not to find you fuckable, honey. But do I need to fuck you to feel happy and loved? That's a definite 'no' for you."

"You know," Brian raised his glass and clinked it to Emmett's, "Mr. Honeycutt, you're not an all bad guy."

Emmett lowered his lashes the way a woman would. "Mr. Kinney, you're making my heart all aflutter."

They shared another laugh. It was a strange companionable feeling Brian had in his gut and without thinking, he said, "What would you do if you were in love with a straight guy?" Fuck – had he really said that?

Emmett gave him a long look, then sighed. "It's always bad, honey. Mostly everyone ends up hurt, so I'm trying to avoid straight guys." He paused, then turned his gaze to his drink. "Are you – in love with a straight guy?"

Definitely not a bad guy.

"I fucked a straight guy," Brian said, not looking at Emmett either. "As for love," he let out a long breath. "I'm not sure I know what that is. But I'm ... I want to be with him again." He laughed, and it was not a happy sound that came out of his mouth. Fuck, he was so doomed.

"What about him?"

Or maybe Emmett was an idiot after all.

"I just told you – he's straight."

"You sure?"

And that was the million-dollar question, wasn't it? He had been so sure that Justin was unavailable. He'd tried every trick in the book – and some that weren't anywhere – and Justin had resisted, hadn't even blinked. But last night, Justin had come to him. Justin had kissed him. Justin had initiated sex.

What the fuck did that mean?

Was Justin merely confused? Or was he just plain cruel? Was he playing with Brian, and getting a kick out of it?

No, definitely not. Justin wasn't a cruel person, and he'd been shell shocked this morning. But why on earth had he done it? Why had he come to Brian and kissed him?

"I'm not sure of anything," he told Emmett, who was still staring in his drink. He was a clever guy, no doubt about it. And he was the only one Brian could talk to. There was no way he was talking to Ted, and Mikey was out of the question, for more than just the obvious reason of jealousy.

"I once had a thing for a straight guy," Emmett mused, almost as if talking to himself. "He was ... my best friend." He didn't glance up when Brian drew in a sharp breath. "He was hot. But married. A kid on the way."

Brian stopped breathing and his heart started to hammer. "Emmett–"

"He was ... older than me," the other man continued, and for a moment his eyes rested knowingly on Brian, then slipped away again. "I knew he cared for me, too. Unfortunately I was too much of a coward to ask him if there was more to it than that."

"Aw, fuck." Brian exhaled. His insides were doing somersaults. "He told me not to come near him again."

Emmett did look up then and straight into Brian's eyes. "He must be completely freaked out. Besides, since when do you take no for an answer?"

"I just ... And I swear I'll castrate you Honeycutt, should you ever tell anyone ... but I have no idea what to do. He's ..." He took a deep breath, "Justin's too important. I want him to be happy."

"And he is happy with Daphne. Is that what you're saying?"

"I have no fucking clue, okay? He came to me last night, he kissed me, he shoved me onto the bed. How was I supposed to resist that?"

God, he felt raw, like bleeding inside out. And he had no idea how to stop it.

"Fuck." Emmett's voice was awed. "He came onto you?"

"Yeah." Brian exhaled again. "Just like that. Wham. Bam. Out of the blue."

Emmett didn't say anything. The silence seemed to stretch for a long time even though it was really only seconds. Then Emmett took a deep breath. "How long have you been in love with him?"

"I just told you—"

"Yeah, yeah. I heard it. You have no idea what love is — blah, blah, blah. Since when?"

"Forever." Brian laughed — and felt like crying. "At least it feels like forever."

"A bad case, then."

"Awful." A tear slipped from Brian's eye and ran down his cheek. He was the most pathetic of them all. He wanted to crawl in a hole and never come out. Instead he gave Emmett another laugh, then stared into his beer.

"Aw, damn." He heard Emmett get up, then sit down again beside him. After a moment an arm came around his shoulders. "Justin's a good guy. Talk to him. I'm sure he'll listen. Just give him a day or two to come to terms with what happened. I'm sure he feels pretty raw, too."

Brian was sure Emmett was right. He was also sure that the other man was a much better friend anyone gave him credit for. "You know," Brian said and looked up.

"Beneath all that color and attitude, you're a great guy."

"Be careful, or you're gonna make me cry," Emmett warned on a watery laugh.

They shared a smile, and Brian wondered if — in all these years — he'd ever shared a

similar conversation with Mikey. He came up empty.

Emmett withdrew his arm. "Here comes Michael now. Hey," he said, all cheerful queen, "where did you leave Teddy?" Brian was grateful he had a moment to compose himself which, obviously, had been Emmett's intention.

"Some guy hit on him." Michael's voice was full of accusation. "Can you believe it?"

"How about we shake our butts then?"

"Brian?"

Brian looked up with a smile. He and Emmett looked at each other. Emmett's lips curved slightly, and Brian gave him a small nod. Then he turned his gaze on Michael. "Go. I'm fine."

Michael beamed. "Great. Order me a beer."

Brian watched them go, saw Mikey laugh at something Emmett was saying, saw Emmett raise his hands and laugh as well. They were a mismatched pair but they seemed to have fun. He stood and gave them another glance and shook his head on a laugh. Life could be so strange sometimes, it came in all colors and shapes. As did friends. Sometimes it just took a while to really appreciate them.

He turned away from the table, walked over to the bar where he paid for his drinks and left a tip for the waiter. Mikey could get his own beer. He'd probably rant and rave because Brian had left without saying goodbye but Brian was sure Emmett would handle him. And tomorrow everything would be forgotten.

They might be pathetic, but they were friends. And Brian knew that he was lucky to have them.

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"I'm so glad you waited for me."

Justin looked in the rear mirror and at his mother whose make-up was smeared, evidence to the tears she'd shed earlier. Thanks to his father, the asshole. The man he'd idealised his whole life, his Dad, his role-model.

Fuck.

He was such a fool.

"Of course we did," Daphne said. "Craig is losing it, if you ask me."

"I can't believe he said those things." Jennifer shook her head, as she tiredly ran a hand through her hair. "I feel as if I don't know him at all."

God, his mother sounded tired too. Damn you Dad, damn you, Justin thought. And then another thought occurred. He couldn't go back to work. Ever since graduating with honors from Dartmouth, Justin had worked for his father who, with a partner, owned a construction company specializing in on upper class homes. His father was an architect but he'd met this other guy, Bruce Fortescue, right after college and they'd decided to go into business together. Craig did the planning and Bruce was hands-on guy. And there had been another plus. While Craig had been an honor graduate, Bruce came from real money, and with knowledge, hard work, and dollars they'd made a lot more dollars over the years.

There had never been a question that Justin would join in as soon as he was through college and he'd been handling the financial side of things ever since. He hadn't done badly, at least he wanted to think so, even though his heart wasn't in it. He'd done it nevertheless, because it made his Dad happy, made his Dad proud.

Oh yeah, he'd done a lot to make his father proud.

He had been so stupid.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. God, how could he have been so stupid? How could he have never seen what - and more importantly - who his Dad really was?

The answer was clear as day. He had loved his father. Had overlooked his faults, had done all he could to have a good relationship with the man. Even given up his dream of becoming an artist because he'd known his father wouldn't approve.

"Where are you taking us, honey?"

Justin once again looked at his mother through the rearview mirror. "Daphne and I found ourselves a room in a private Bed and Breakfast kind of thing. A friend of Daph's told us about it - she usually has her parents there when they come to visit." He stopped at a traffic light and turned to look at his mother properly. "She lives in a one bedroom flat. So, anyway, Mrs. Hoover has more than one room. We'll go there now and ask if you can stay as well. Mrs. Hoover is really very nice."

"A grandmother type," Daphne put in. "Likes to take care of people. Dana, my friend, told me she loves to bake and is constantly offering cake and cookies. Dana's mother insists that she's gaining at least three pounds at each visit."

Justin saw his mother returning a watery smile before he turned back around and drove on. Every time he saw the look in her eyes, every time he thought about what his father had said tonight - it made him hate Craig a little more. Maybe if he hated his father enough this hurt would go away and he could just ... hate him, and not wonder if maybe

underneath all this shit, he still loved the fucking bastard.

"If – if there is no room left, you can always take me to the nearest hotel. I'm fine with that too." His mother's voice was firmer now, she obviously was trying very hard to put up a tough front. For his sake. For Daphne's. His mother really was a very strong woman. No wonder he'd fallen for Daphne. She and his mother were alike in many ways. And so different too.

"Jennifer. Don't worry, okay. Our house will be done in two weeks. You can stay with us then."

Justin held out a hand and Daphne took it. Squeezed it.

"Are you ... going to stay together?"

Justin looked at Daphne, then at his mother, wondering the same thing. Were they going to stay together? Was it even possible?

"We haven't worked out the details yet, mom," he said then, trying to be as honest as possible. "Daphne and I have a lot to talk about."

"What's to talk about?" Daphne let go of his hand. "You're gay, Justin. I'm not living a lie."

Justin glanced at his mother in the back. Jennifer's eyes were wide and she was watching them both with great interest. "Daph, can we please to this later?"

"Your mother already knows you're gay. She has known for years." There was a sullen look on Daphne's face. Justin wondered if he was responsible for her sudden mood swings or if they were a result of her pregnancy. As they had only surfaced tonight, it was a pretty safe bet that he could congratulate himself for it. Well done, Mr. Taylor.

Then what she'd just said sank in. He frowned.

"What do you mean for years? Don't you mean hours? I didn't know I was ... whatever I am before last night."

"No, I meant years." Daphne wasn't looking at him, she was staring out of the side window. "She's known it forever. Just did her best to keep it from you. Kind of like your father did."

What?

"Justin, watch out!"

The very last moment he stepped on the brake and the car lurched to a stop in front of a

red light. "Sorry," he said, but didn't mean it because ... "What the fuck?" he shouted and turned to his mother, who shrank back at his unexpected outburst. "Mom?"

Jennifer's eyes for the briefest of moments snapped to Daphne, then were back on him. "Honey, can we please talk about this later?"

It really held a very sweet irony that she had used the words he'd voiced just before. "No," he said. They were not talking about this later because ... "WHAT THE FUCK?" he roared not caring that his mother almost jumped out of her seat.

"Justin – maybe you should drive first and talk later?" Daphne suggested.

He shot her a look. "You brought it up. And now you want me to forget about it?" Women just were too complicated for him, he'd never get how their brains worked. Maybe he really was gay. It would only be logical. Men, he got. Men, he understood. Their world was logical. Then he thought about his father and knew that he had to review the statement. Maybe he just wasn't wired to understand other people.

"I don't want you to forget about it. I just think now isn't the right time to discuss it."

"Maybe you should have thought about this before bringing it up right in the middle of traffic," he snapped and drove on.

Women. They were all fucking nuts.

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Somewhere in the same city a telephone rings in the middle of the night.

"Yes?" a sleepy voice says.

"Let me talk to him."

"Huh?"

"Let. Me. Talk. To. Him."

She rolls over and nudges the sleeping body beside her. "It's for you."

"... the fuck?"

"For. You."

"Yeah. Yeah. Who the fuck is this?"

"It's me."

“Why are you calling in the middle of the night?”

“Why is Kinney up on his feet again? I thought I made it clear what I want.”

“We got him pretty good. You said to rough him up.”

“And put him out of commission for at least two months.”

“It’s not my fucking fault he’s tougher than he looks.”

“Make sure he’s taken out longer this time.”

“Whoa. Whoa. This time? I’m still waiting for my money from last time.”

“You didn’t do your job. Money’s due when he’s out.”

“Out? What do you mean out? I’m not killing nobody.”

“Who said anything about killing? I just want him gone for a while. Can you do that or do I need to find someone else?”

“I’m good for it.”

“Fine. See that it’s taken care of.”

The line goes dead.

“Who the fuck was that?”

“Shut up, bitch. I need to think?”

“What was that about killing someone?”

“I said, shut up!”

“I’m not killing anyone!”

“I get ten grand for roughing up some gay dude,” he tells her and she is quiet.

“Ten grand?”

“Yeah.”

“Why would someone want to rough up a gay guy?”

“Why not?”

“Huh?”

“Well, he’s a fag. Roughing up is part of the plan.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“But you love me anyway.”

She laughs. Then kisses him. “Ten grand, huh? You still didn’t tell me why he wants the guy roughed up?”

“Didn’t tell me. And I don’t wanna know.”

“Geez.”

“Want me to fuck you?”

“Sure. And just think about what we can do with ten grand.”

“Yeah. You could even have your boobs done.”

“Fuck yeah.”

Fade out.

“You know, Paris is fucking amazing.”

Brian laughed as Justin swung himself around a streetlight and beamed at him. His eyes were an incredible blue in the summer sun. Other people stopped and looked at him and Brian didn’t care. Justin was his and his alone.

“I can’t believe you brought me here,” Justin said and threw his arms around Brian’s neck, then kissed him – right in the middle of the Champs d’Elysees. Now people were looking at them both, but they were friendly, some even envious. Brian loved it.

“You said you’d love coming here – so here we are,” Brian told him and swung Justin around. He was heavy for someone who was a little height challenged but Brian didn’t mind. He didn’t let go, he held Justin closer instead.

“Can you believe all the art that’s in this city.” Justin let go and they walked together, both happy and carefree.

“And the designers,” Brian threw in. As expected, it made Justin laugh. And made him

laugh some more. And more. And more. Then the laughter suddenly changed into choking. And finally Justin couldn't breathe. There was nothing Brian could do. Justin was lying in the street and people were walking by, as if nothing was happening here, as if Justin wasn't dying right in front of them.

Brian woke with a yell and sat straight up in bed. He was panting and his face and upper torso were wet with sweat. His heart was beating a mile a minute and when he looked at his hands in the dimness of his bedroom(,) he realised they were shaking.

It had been a dream. Only a dream. Justin was fine. He wasn't lying in the streets of Paris, choking his life away as Brian kneeled beside him, damned to be useless.

Brian got up and walked naked through his apartment, only illuminated by the light of the almost full moon. He got himself a bottle of cold water from the fridge, opened the cap and took a small sip, then stepped to the window and just stood there, looking outside into the night. The apartment opposite to his was dark, no movement visible.

He grabbed a pack of cigarettes from the near by table, lit one with difficulty as his hands were still not quite steady, and savoured the first draw. The streets underneath were empty and quiet for a change, the asphalt still slightly wet from the previous rain. A car with lights on was there but nobody was inside, which meant there would be at least one person beside him who'd start the new day with a really bad mood.

Brian took another drag, then another sip before he set the water bottle on the table and rested his palm against the glass, watching his fingers glide over the surface leaving slight smears. With a strange feeling of detachment he watched his hand, the fingers long and lean, the nails perfect due to a manicure he had treated himself only a few days ago. These were the fingers that had touched Justin, it was the hand that had wrapped around his cock and brought him to orgasm only 24 hours ago.

Here in his lonely apartment in the middle of the night it seemed unreal, hardly believable that it had actually happened, that they'd actually made ... fucked in the bed behind him, had whispered words only one of them still remembered, and only one of them meant.

Or maybe not?

Brian leaned his heated cheek on the glass and took another drag, watched the smoke travel along the surface up to the ceiling. He wished he had a way to be sure, wished he could just pick up the phone and call him, ask him if there was something Justin remembered, something he thought of fondly and not in disgust and shame. But he couldn't do that. Justin was lying in his bed, peacefully slumbering next to his pregnant wife.

Brian jerked back from the window, opened it and threw out the cigarette with a vicious snarl on his lips. Then he stood there, breathing hard, the night air cool on his skin,

even cooler as he felt his face was wet.

Because he was crying. Bawling like a baby, bawling in a way that would have been truly embarrassing but was permitted here, in his home, all by himself. And then he screamed, once, twice, three times. He saw light going on in the apartment building across the street, and quickly closed his window, retreating back into darkness, into safety, but the sobs kept on coming. Brian sank to the floor, rough carpet beneath his skin, beneath his palms, so different from the smooth surface of the glass, rough and raw – just like his soul.

Fucking. Fucking. Shit.

He pounded on the floor before he slid down to lie on it, and his tears insisted on coming, not letting up even as he struggled to stop them.

God.

He wished he could stop them, could stop this feeling of loss and being lost, of wanting and never finding, of finding and yet never getting it anyway. He felt like fucking shit, lying here on his floor, crying his heart out for some dream that would never come true.

So what if Justin had had an epiphany, it still didn't mean they'd have anything together, let alone a future. They had fucked. So what? Did that change one fucking thing? Of course it did – and yet, it didn't.

There was no doubt, the fact that they'd had sex had changed things. For one, they could never go back to just being friends. Even if Justin could, Brian knew he wouldn't be able to. He couldn't stand by and watch Justin live his happily ever after life. He'd been barely able to do so before, but now, after tasting him, touching him, watching him – as he came, as he lost himself in total bliss – no, there was no fucking way Brian could just stand on the sidelines again.

He finally got himself together enough to sit up. God, he was a fucking mess. Brian stood up like an old man and slowly walked into his bathroom. He needed a shower. Yeah, that would help. Maybe with dirt it would also wash away his pain.

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She loved mornings. They had always been quality time for her, quiet moments before life would intrude on her, before her children came down, noisy, demanding voices, so full of life and laughter, and sometimes pain.

Mrs. Hoover's breakfast room was actually her winter garden, a small attachment to her pink, well-kept house, stuffed full of plants during winter and open for guests during spring, summer and autumn. Jennifer should have loved it, should have felt right at home, especially at her time of the day – and yet, she sat in her chair, staring at her

coffee, and all she could feel was dread.

God, how she dreaded this day and what it would – could – bring. She was still hardly able to believe what she had done last night. Had she really packed her things and left her husband? Had that been her – or maybe some spirit had invaded her body and forced her to do something so ... so completely unlike her. She wasn't a spontaneous person, at least she hadn't been spontaneous for a very long time and for her to just ... She shook her head on a chuckle. She was mad. Raving mad. Craig was probably right and she should get herself admitted in the next facility available.

Or maybe not. Maybe she could just try being Jennifer again, instead of Mrs. Craig Taylor, dutiful wife and mother, boring, dependable – an idiot.

“Hey.”

Jennifer looked up, startled by the unexpected voice of her son but as always(,) the sight of him made her smile.

“Good morning, honey,” she greeted him. He was adorable with his tousled hair, the sleepy eyes, the soft baby skin he'd probably not lose until he reached his 50th birthday – or maybe never.

Justin sat down at the breakfast table, poured himself a cup of coffee and emptied half of it before he focussed on her. “Can we talk?”

Direct question. It was so like him, Jennifer fought another smile that threatened to slip out. “Of course,” she said even though she dreaded it. She also knew that she owed it to him. Owed him much more than just talk.

“We were all tired last night.” He took another sip. “But I need to know, Mom.”

Jennifer knew. She understood. That didn't change the fact that she dreaded this conversation, had dreaded it for years. She tried to steady her voice and took a deep breath. “Of course, Justin. And the answer is...” She trailed off, not quite knowing what to say. What was the answer? And was there one?

“Mom?”

“I'm ... I'm sorry, honey. I ... this is difficult.”

“Don't tell me about difficult. Have you any idea how I'm feeling right now?”

The terrible truth was, she had no idea at all. Jennifer sat across from her son, from the child she had carried for nine months, the child she had felt close to from the moment she'd known of his existence – and here she sat and had no fucking clue what went on in his head. Well, maybe that wasn't quite true. She probably had an inkling, but there

was no way she could see the whole picture.

She also wanted desperately to touch him. She didn't. "Justin – I wish I knew what to say."

"Is it true? That you've known for years?"

"Known?" What did that mean? Had she known? "I ... I can't ... I ... There were hints, maybe. You were ... I saw you staring at the picture of ... a man when you were pretty young. And other ... moments. But did I know? Justin, the honest answer is – I have no idea." She wished she knew for certain, wished she could give him the answer he wanted. God, how she wished she could have been the mother he deserved.

Instead she was a failure. And worse. So much worse. Daphne had been spot on there. Had she been in denial, Jennifer would at least have an excuse – but no. There really was no excuse. She had fucked this up, and royally so. There was nothing left to do but face it – and deal with the outcome afterwards.

"What picture?"

"What?" Jennifer knew she was staring at her son but she couldn't help it. "Picture?"

"You said you caught me staring at a picture." Justin sounded impatient.

"Actually, I first caught you trying on my shoes," she said and had to smile. Five year old Justin standing before her, his feet swimming in her red high heels. "You looked so cute–"

"Mom." Now his voice was annoyed. "Can you please not turn this into a 'little-Justin-was-so-cute' thing?"

Jennifer mentally shook herself. "Sorry, it's the mother in me. I can't help it."

"Try," he replied drily. "So – your shoes?"

"Yeah." She sighed – and caught herself quickly. "As for the picture ... it was Tom Cruise. Naked. Well, half–"

"Tom Cruise?"

"-naked, but he looked hot. I'll give you–"

"Tom Cruise?"

"- that. And–"

“Oh my God. Tom Cruise. I can’t believe I was drooling over Tom Cruise.”

“Justin?” He looked slightly sick, a little green even and Jennifer finally did reach over and touch his arm. “Honey, are you okay?”

His gaze held disgust. “God, Mom. Tom Cruise. He was, like, hundred years old.”

“Thanks,” Jennifer said and grinned when he grimaced.

“Also ... so not hot. He’s a little guy and I’m not sure but if he might not be impotent, too.”

“He has a baby.”

“Oh, please. That’s clearly an AI-baby. I mean, Nicole never got pregnant. They get divorced, she finds a new guy, who by the way is much, much hotter than Tom, and bang, bun in the oven. Do you know what they’re saying about Katie? Do you?”

Jennifer could only laugh. This conversation was not going the way she had anticipated. She’d expected accusations. She never expected Justin to freak out over Tom Cruise. “No, what are they saying?” she asked because it was clearly expected.

Justin shook his head. “Don’t you read? They say she was cast for the role of his wife. Geez.” He shook his head. “Are you sure about that? Tom Cruise?”

Jennifer shrugged her shoulder, the gesture half apologetic, half helpless. “Sorry.”

He let his head sink to the table, where it came to rest beside his coffee cup. “Kill me. Kill me now.”

“Honey, it’s not that bad.”

“Not bad?” His head came up with a snap, and he sent her a chilling glare. “How can this not be bad? Was I taste challenged or what?”

“He was a very attractive young man,” Jennifer put in. She smiled. “I thought so too.”

“Oh no. No. No. No. I was not attracted to a guy my mother found cute – tell me it wasn’t so. Tell me!”

“Sorry,” she said again because, really, there was nothing else to say.

“I am so gay. So gay.” And like that, all traces of lightness were gone from his eyes. “I think I’m gay, Mom.”

“I know, honey.” It was all she could give him now. Understanding. Acceptance. Things

she should have given him years ago. And hadn't. She was the worst kind of mother one could imagine.

"When you ... uhm ... saw me looking at Tom Cruise, what did you do?"

That was the question she had been dreading. Why? Because the answer was more damning than anything could be. She was his mother and she had betrayed him and the answer was proof for it.

"I ... I took the picture away," she whispered, not able to look him in the eye. Her fingers were playing with the knife. There was a water spot on it, she could see it clearly.

"Just away? That was it?"

"No." Being a witness in court had to be easier. "I showed you pictures of nice girls, told you how pretty they were and you ... you believed me. Soon after, you were telling me of a pretty girl in your class." It sounded sterile, innocent. It was anything but.

"You-" Justin stared at her, almost as if he'd never seen her before, as if he was looking at a complete stranger. And maybe he was. She tried to put herself in his place. She had been 12 when she'd found out that their family lab had not died of natural causes. Her dad had taken him to the vet where he'd been put down due to cancer. Jennifer had felt as if looking at a stranger then.

"I'm so very sorry," she told her son, wishing with all her heart that one day he would understand, that one day he could forgive her for what she'd done. Intentionally. Consciously. God, she really was a monster, had lost any right to be called a mother. Revulsion with herself made her stomach clench.

"How could you do that?" He frowned. His voice was soft, Jennifer had to strain her ears to hear it. "You're ... I trusted you. You were ... Mom. With Dad it was always different, but you ..."

"Justin-"

"No." With a swift motion he stood up and whirled away from her, his arms crossed for a moment, then loose again, shaky hands ruffling his hair.

"Do you -" He stopped, turned back to face her. "Do you think I'm disgusting?"

The question took her by surprise. Disgusting? He was her child, her baby, her first born. "What?"

"You tried to de-gay me, or whatever the fuck you want to call it. Now that I've fucked a man, what does that make me?"

What? Fu- Justin had had sex with a man? What man? And what about Daphne? No, no, Daphne knew. They were talking about getting a divorce. "What man?"

"God, Mom!" Justin was clearly disgusted with her. "Can you maybe focus on the important point here? So I've fucked a man? I'm gay, so what?"

"Are you?" Jennifer didn't know if she should even be asking the question. Part of her felt like a traitor to do it. Another part, the screaming mother inside her, needed to. "Gay, I mean?"

"Fuck you!"

"No." She stood up as well. "Listen to me, Justin. I didn't mean it that way. And for the record, I love you. The fact that you're gay doesn't disgust me."

"Then why did you do it? Why did you try to ... discourage me, or ... Why?"

"I wish I could tell you, darling. I ... Maybe I really was selfish and tried to maintain harmony in the family. Daphne said that and maybe it's true. But ... I don't know." She made a step towards him and Justin stepped away. It hurt so much, Jennifer wanted to sink down to the floor, curl into a ball and weep. As it was no option, she instead kept her head high and forced herself on.

"When I ... found you with that picture all I could think was ... God, what's Craig going to say? What will he do? I was so afraid that he'd hate you. I knew he was ... that he would never accept a gay child. Your father is ... he was a great father. He spent a lot of time with you despite his busy job and you adored him. I ... didn't want that to change. We were so happy, so ... perfect." Jennifer almost choked on the word. Perfect. Nothing was perfect anymore.

"Do you realise how fucked up that sounds?" Justin demanded.

"Yes. But then ... Then I thought that it was my duty to protect my family." She made a helpless gesture and hoped that Justin wouldn't hate her. "Or maybe I just wanted to protect me. I ... But." Again she dared to step in his direction and again he refused closeness. Her heart cried out. Her soul wept. "Justin, you have to believe me. I always loved you. Parents aren't perfect, they make mistakes, but ... Maybe there were selfish reasons present but the idea of you ... of Craig treating you ... I couldn't let that happen. No matter what. I know now that it was wrong of me, that instead I should have told you ... But I'm human. Please, Justin."

Begging with her hands, she held them out to him, urged him to trust her, with her eyes as well as with her body.

He turned away.

“What selfish reasons?” he asked. He didn’t look at her, didn’t even acknowledge her presence other than through words. He was a stranger, this man, had made himself a stranger to a woman who had betrayed him. Where was Daphne? Why wasn’t she here to comfort him? Could she comfort him? Would she? Justin had slept with a man. He had cheated on his wife. Was that her fault, too?

Was there a penance hard enough to redeem her?

Jennifer tried to focus on the question. “I ... was very young when I met your father. Just out of college, and ... well, I wasn’t what you’d call a parents’ dream.” He quickly glanced at her and Jennifer forced a rueful smile and a nod. “I was pretty wild. Went out with several guys. And then ... there was this older guy, handsome, well-mannered, intelligent ... already on his way to become a successful business-man.

“My parents loved him, and they loved it even more when I went out with him. And I was thrilled. They finally approved of what I was doing. They were happy with me, proud of me even.” Her Dad had taken her in his arms and told her that she was the best daughter he could imagine. “Don’t get me wrong, I ... fell for Craig. He was charming, and he had a lot more experience than the other guys I’d been with.”

A bit of teenager broke through Justin’s rejection and he grimaced. “Mom!”

“Anyway. We got married, had the kids. We were good. And I did everything I could to keep it that way. As much as I loved Craig, I also realised that he wasn’t perfect. That even though he was open minded in a lot of ways, he could be pig-headed in others. I had this friend, Alice. She was a little older than me, had her fourth child when I had you. We met in a mother-child group. Her oldest son, Terrence, was from her first marriage and he was fourteen. A beautiful boy.”

She could still remember him. A lanky teenager, dark, with the Asian eyes he’d inherited from his father, and a killer smile, he was already on the way to become a heart breaker.

“I told her as much. She only smiled and then told me that Terrence was gay. Alice was a great mother, she told me that it made no difference for her, nor did it for his stepfather. Later that day I told your father about it ... and he ... said some terrible things.”

It had been awful. Craig had gone apeshit at the idea of one of his children being gay, had made it perfectly clear that he would never accept it, that a gay child was not welcome in his home.

“So you decided to hide me.”

It was no question, only a statement, and there was really nothing she could say to that.

“When I saw you staring at that picture of Tom Cruise, all I could think was that should your father ever find out ...” She trailed off, the horror of her discovery crashing down on her again. Justin with his dreamy eyes, the slack mouth, her baby boy staring down at Tom Cruise as if an archangel had come to earth and morphed into a man. It seemed like yesterday, and Jennifer remembered her frantic thoughts, the panic, and also her relief that Craig was out of town for business for a week. That gave her time to deal, gave her time to make it right.

“I was such a coward,” she said now, finally facing the truth. “I should have stood up to him. I should have taken you and Molly and left. But I didn’t think clearly. It’s no excuse, but maybe one day ... when you look into the eyes of your child you will understand that irrational behaviour is part of being a parent.”

It didn’t really make her feel better but it was the truth nevertheless.

“Yeah,” Justin said after a moment, his voice quiet and steady. It scared her. She wanted him to scream, to rant, to hiss, but this almost normal voice made her shiver.

“Last night, when I drove here,” he told her, “I thought about Dad. You know, the way he behaved and what he said. And he didn’t even know about the gay thing yet. I’ve been so stupid to ... to believe in him. I’m not sure he ever loved me, or that he’s even capable of loving someone at all.”

Jennifer wanted to interrupt, wanted to tell him that he was wrong, that the man she had married and loved wasn’t the monster he was describing. Only, she knew it would have been a lie. And she had let that man touch her, had born him two children, had been his wife and partner for more than half her own life.

“He was awful to you, too,” Justin went on, uncrossing his arms and wrapping them around himself as if he were cold. He was such a lonely figure in the room, as if there was nobody he could count on to protect him.

“He was very angry last night,” Jennifer said. What else could she say?

“Yeah. He was.” Justin shuddered slightly, then took a deep breath. “Brian once told me that Dad hated him. I laughed. But Brian was right. Dad really hates him, hates them all.”

“Yes.” Craig had hated seeing the friendship between Brian and Justin. Jennifer hadn’t liked it much either – but for entirely different reasons. Craig simply hated Brian, not only because Brian was gay, maybe even more because Brian never apologized for what he was, never backed down, never gave an inch. In other men Craig would have admired such a trait, in Brian it scared him. Because it was perfectly clear that, no matter what, he would never be able to corrupt Brian, to taint the friendship the gay man had with his son.

“I wish he weren’t my father.”

It broke her heart. Because that was her fault, too. She had chosen this man to father her children, and she had to live with it. “Justin-“

“Don’t even try, Mom. The way he talked to me, then to you, and to me again. Mom, there is no coming back from there. Some things you can’t take back. Even if he makes a u-turn and starts wearing a rainbow tie around his neck, our relationship will never be the same.”

He was right, of course. Nothing would ever close the gap that had opened between father and son. If Craig were a different man, then maybe they could bridge it with time but the way things were ... Jennifer doubted that Craig would have any intention to associate with Justin after finding out his son was gay.

And maybe, in the long run, Justin would be happier for it. It was sad. But it was most likely the truth.

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Evelyn Bruckner had died at the age of 42. They’d found her lying in a ditch, her body already cold, her face smeared with make-up and blood, her neck broken by blunt force. When the police had come to her apartment, the one room with two beds, two chairs, a table and an oven that refused to work most of the time, her 12 year old son, who was greeting them on one leg, had told them that Evelyn had been a cheap whore and that he was glad she was finally gone.

They’d ruled Evelyn’s death a homicide but the killer had never been found and nobody had cared enough to investigate any further. She’d been buried in a poor man’s grave and soon it was forgotten that a woman called Evelyn Bruckner had ever existed.

But there were times, however, when Ben Bruckner, who would be celebrating his 30th birthday in a few weeks, found himself trying to remember the exact shape of her mouth or the color of her eyes – and came up empty. There were no pictures of his mother he could use to trigger his memory and he’d never bothered to find any relatives, let alone the man who’d fathered him. Evelyn had never mentioned him, and Ben figured he’d been one of her johns. It didn’t matter anyway. It wasn’t as if it would change anything.

Ben sighed and looked up when there was a knock on his door. “Come in.”

He was surprised when Brian Kinney stepped inside, looking like shit. “Hey,” the younger man greeted, his face bare of expression.

“Hey.” Ben let his eyes wander over the too thin frame of his one time – one weekend – lover and shook his head. “You look like something ate you, found you indigestible and

spat you out again. Maybe you shouldn't be here yet?"

Brian glared at him, which had been a lot more effective weren't his eyes half closed from obvious lack of sleep, and slumped into a chair on the other side of Ben's desk. "Bite me," Brian snapped, then squinted. "Do you have to have so much light in here?"

Ben chuckled. He stood up, lowered the blinds a bit, then poured Brian a big mug of fresh coffee and placed it in front of the other man. "Drink," he ordered. He paused for a moment and put a hand on Brian's shoulder, "Are you really okay for work?"

Brian picked up the mug, gulped half of it down – obviously not caring that it was hot, put the mug back on the desk and nodded. "I'm okay. I just had a rough night."

Ben grinned but Brian's renewed glare stopped him. "Oh," was all he could say.

"Yeah. Or rather, ouch. Look, can we not talk about rough nights. I'd rather get updated. Also – Mikey says hi."

It was Ben's turn to glare. "No, he doesn't," he snapped. "He doesn't even know I exist."

Brian shrugged. "That's entirely your fault. You are the one hiding out in that ivory tower of yours." He held up a hand before Ben could protest. "I've heard it all. So stop right there. So what if you're not walking on your own legs, you're still a hot guy. I should know, and Mikey might be clueless most of the time but believe me, he's got the biggest heart. Also, he has the craziest mother on this planet. If anyone loves people no matter what, it's Debbie."

"It's one leg and ... thanks, I guess."

It was strange, this friendship that had developed between him and Brian. Ben would never have expected it, not after their one, very intense weekend where they'd fucked their brains out – almost literally. He'd thought Brian was one of those pretty boys who were interested in nothing but their own reflection and getting their dicks sucked by who ever was available.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

Sure, Brian loved sex, he loved getting his dick sucked, and at times he wasn't even very selective about his fuck buddies, but Brian was much more than that. First and foremost he was the most talented, most aggressive ad agent Ben had ever met. He singlehandedly had brought in no less than six major accounts this past year and Ben still celebrated the day he'd decided to hire him – despite their past experience which could have proven really awkward had it been anyone else but Brian Kinney.

Who leaned forward and rested his elbows on the desk this very moment. "So it's one leg. Big fucking deal. Get over it, get out and get the guy."

That was Brian for you. Honest. Brutally sometimes. And always, always, right in your face. “Get over it?” Ben repeated, giving him an incredulous look. “How am I supposed to get over it?” He lifted his left leg and placed it on the edge of his desk. “This is real.” He pulled up his pant leg and revealed his prothesis.

Brian didn’t even look. “Put that away, Bruckner. It doesn’t shock me.”

“I know it doesn’t. It’s still a fake leg.”

“It’s a highly developed piece of technique,” Brian shot back. “You can walk like any other guy, you can run, you can certainly fuck, so stop feeling sorry for yourself. Besides, it’s really pathetic.”

“That’s rich coming from the guy who has everything.” He was not feeling sorry for himself, but Ben thought he had the right to get a little defensive. Brian had no idea what it meant growing up with a whore for a mother who couldn’t care less for a little boy and whose only comment to the loss of his leg had been that it was too bad because nobody would want to fuck him now. Brian had also no idea what it meant to look into the eyes of a hot guy and see nothing but disgust at the sight of Ben’s ugly stump.

Brian had also been the first man who’d taken a look at Ben’s naked body and shrugged. ‘Your dick’s working, right?’ had been his only comment. Ben had desperately wanted to fuck him – and had done so, several times.

“Everything?” Brian laughed. “Don’t I wish. But let’s not go there either.”

Ben gave him a long look, then shook his head. “Okay, then,” he said finally, “let’s talk business. Faulkner is coming in later.”

“Hooray.” Brian didn’t sound thrilled – which wasn’t a big surprise. Faulkner Industries was one of Ben’s important clients, he was rich, he was successful, he was demanding – and he was also an asshole. He never liked the ideas they presented, always argued for hours, only to agree on the initial idea in the end. Yup, they were in for a couple of fun hours.

Ben grinned at Brian who rolled his eyes. Then Ben remembered something. “Oh, and there is a new client. I only had one meeting with him yet.” He bent down and fished a file from his drawer, then opened it on the desk. “He wants our best man – which happens to be you.” He shoved the file in Brian’s direction.

“What kind of business?” Brian asked but he was already reading the first page and not looking up. Ben was about to ask, when Brian seemed to freeze for a moment, then started to chuckle. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“What? Why?”

“TayFor? Holy Christ.”

What the fuck? “Brian?”

“Taylor and Fortescue. Craig Taylor.” Brian was laughing by then. “Oh, this is just too good to be true. Craig Taylor is actually hiring a gay agency.”

“We’re NOT a gay agency. I’m gay, you’re gay-“

“- Steve is gay, Patty is a big, scary lesbo, oh – and let’s not forget Pierre.”

Ben sent Brian a glare. “So some of my employees happen to be gay. That doesn’t make the agency gay. Besides, what’s that got to do with anything?”

“Oh, nothing,” Brian said, still chuckling. “Only that Craig Taylor is maybe the biggest homophobe I know. I also happen to know his son.”

“Is the son gay?”

Something flickered in Brian’s gaze but Ben couldn’t quite catch it, it was gone too quickly. “The verdict’s still out on that one. It’s not the point anyway.”

Ben grit his teeth. Sometimes Brian Kinney could test his patience to the limit. “What’s the point then?”

“Craig Taylor hates my guts,” Brian said simply, and with a strange glint in his eyes.

Great. That was just great. “Perfect,” Ben said surly. “Will you still be able to work with him?”

“Sure.” There was no hesitation, no doubt in Brian’s voice. “I’ve worked with bigger assholes. But Taylor will have a problem with me. You can bet on it.”

“Shit.” Then something occurred to him. “Did you fuck the son? Is that the reason he hates you?”

Brian didn’t answer, was suddenly very interested in the file in front of him.

“You did, didn’t you?”

Still no reply.

“Brian.”

"It's none of your fucking business," Brian finally spat. He looked up. "You're my boss, Ben, not my fucking priest."

"I thought I was also a friend," Ben replied quietly.

Brian held his gaze for a moment, then sighed. "You are. But ... things with Justin are ... complicated. He's not ... Okay, so we fucked but he's straight, or thinks he's straight, he's married, his wife's pregnant. Worse, he and I have been friends ever since college. It's fucked up, and I'm right in the middle of it."

Aw, shit. "I'm sorry," Ben said, not sure what else there was.

"Also, I don't know if Daddy-Craig knows. I suppose not because otherwise I'd be a dead man by now."

Holy – "You think he could be violent?" Craig Taylor might be a future client, but Brian was his friend and no way he would endanger him by throwing him together with a potential threat.

Brian sighed again. "No. I don't know. I don't think so. I can imagine him doing something out of a spontaneous rage but he's not ... No. Not really."

"So–"

Brian held up a hand. "Look. I can do it. I'm a professional, I don't care if the client's an asshole or not. He pays, we deliver. But maybe you should stay close by just in case. And talk to Richard. He could take over should need be."

Ben nodded. A good idea. Richard Brown was good. And straight. He also had a gay brother but Craig Taylor didn't know that. "Okay," he nodded. "Let's try it that way."

Brian closed the file and stood up. "I'll be down with the graphic guys for the next hour or so."

"Good. Faulkner will be here at noon."

"I'll be there." Brian walked to the door, grabbed the handle and opened it. Then he paused and turned back to Ben. "As for Mikey. Don't be an idiot, Ben. He's a good guy."

Of course Brian wouldn't just let it go. He never did. "Brian–"

"I know you're ... But if you want him, if you think he could be ... Don't miss it just because you're scared."

Ben cocked his head. "Are we talking about me here?" he asked.

“Fuck you.” Brian shook his head. “Have it your way. See you later.”

With that he was gone and Ben could only stare at the closed door. “Shit,” he muttered. He sighed and grabbed the TayFor file. He had enough to worry about, his love life – or the lack of it for that matter – had to wait.

“We need to talk, Justin.”

He knew. He also very much didn’t want to talk. God.

“Justin.”

“I know,” he snapped, and instantly felt guilty. He had no right to snap at her, she was the injured party in this ugly mess. His part was clear too. He was the villain.

Daphne, who had been brushing her hair, stopped right in the middle of doing so and with the brush hovering above her head, she looked at Justin through the mirror. “Don’t think I want to talk about it. I wish we could just forget it ever happened – alas, it happened and we can’t.”

“Yeah. I’m just not sure what you want me to say. I mean – do we get a divorce or what?”

Daphne put the brush down slowly, then very carefully placed it on the small dressing table and turned. She looked lovely, with her smooth skin, dressed solely in her white, lacy underwear – and there was a very dangerous glint in her eyes, one Justin had learned to dread. The first time he’d seen it, she had dumped the contents of her milkshake on his head.

“Are you suggesting we should stay a couple?” Her voice was soft, too, but it had an edge to it.

“Daph.”

“Don’t ‘Daph’ me,” she warned, and picked up the brush again. Justin wondered if she would let it fly any time soon. “Justin, I know you’re probably confused but I’m not going to live like this.” She pointed her brush first at herself, then at him.

“I just don’t want to lose you,” he whispered, finally voicing his greatest fear. The idea of a life without her in it was nothing he wanted to imagine. She was his ally, his confidante, his best friend, and he needed her with him.

Daphne threw her hands in the air. “Who said anything about losing anyone? You can be such an idiot sometimes, but then, what else is new?” She sighed and started to brush her hair again. “Right now I might be mad as hell but it will pass, I’m sure. I never

could stay mad at you for long.”

Justin could hardly believe what he was hearing. “You know, you’re taking this remarkably well.”

“What part of ‘mad as hell’ went right over your head?” And there it was again, that dangerous glint – more forceful now. Uh-oh.

Justin held up his hands in a soothing gesture. “I got it. But ... I don’t know, I expected a little more drama, I guess.” Where were the tears, why wasn’t she screaming at him?

“Drama?” She put the brush down again, and took a step towards him. “Look at me, Justin.”

What? “Uhm ... I’m looking,” he stammered because, really, what was he supposed to say in a situation like this? She stood before him, with perfect curves, perfect mocha skin, her lacy underwear not more than a breath on it.

“You are looking?” She cocked her head. “What do you see?”

Okay. He tried to test several answers in his mind, but nothing felt right. Justin felt weird vibes coming from Daphne, and had no idea how to handle them. What did she want him to say? What did she expect? And how on earth could he come out of this without bleeding from his every pore? “You,” he said finally, feeling stupid. “I see you.”

She stared at him for a moment, then threw up her hands again. “Argh,” she exclaimed. “How can you be so dense? I know you’re not that stupid, Justin.”

Stupid? Why was his intelligence suddenly in question? “Okay, now you’ve lost me,” he told her.

“God.” Daphne rolled her eyes. “You are such a man! Here I am, naked – okay, almost naked – and all you can say is ‘you’? Which, by the way, DUH!”

“Duh?” Justin repeated stupidly. So maybe his intelligence was the question after all.

“Yes, duh. Hello, half-naked woman in the room. And not just any woman. I’m your sexy, needy wife. But nothing is happening.” She gave his groin a pointed look.

Justin felt himself blush. Unfortunately, however, she was right. Nothing was happening. He wasn’t sure what he should say, so he finally settled on: “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, dammit.”

“I’m sorry,” he said again. At her glare he added quickly, “I just feel I should. I mean, geez, you’re my wife in sexy underwear. Isn’t it kind of insulting that, well, there is

definitely nothing happening here?”

She contemplated him surly. “Yeah, well, let’s not go there, okay? Or I might kill you and prison is so not in my plans for the future.”

Justin laughed. It bubbled up – he couldn’t help it. “Daph.”

Daphne held up a warning finger. “Careful there, buster. I’m not your friend right now. Not even close.” She turned away from him, walked to the bag next to the bed, pulling out pants and a tee-shirt, which she pulled over her head. “I know this is a completely messed up situation right now. Not just because of me and you and ... There is your mom, and the fact that she just moved out of her house. And then there’s Brian-“

Now it was Justin’s turn to hold up a hand. “No. Leave Brian out of this, okay.”

“But-“

“No.” No way, he was not discussing Brian with her again. It was just too weird. Maybe one day they could talk about it, and oh how he wished this was the day, but it wasn’t. It was too early, for her, for him, for them both. They could pretend it was okay, and Daphne – great friend that she was – would probably play her part in it, but he knew it’d hurt her and he was not doing that. Not after what he’d already done to her.

“Okay,” Daphne gave in after a long look into his eyes. Whatever she’d seen there, it had obviously convinced her he meant it. “Anyway. We still need to talk about things, decide ... I mean, I know it complicates things even further but I’m pregnant, which means I will have to take care of the baby – at least for a while.”

“What?” Once again he’d lost her. “Of course you have to take care of the baby.” Why was that even a question? Or ... “I guess I could take care of the baby, too – if you want.”

Daphne laughed. “That’s good to hear but I was actually talking about money, because I don’t think you’ll go back working for your father?” She made it a question even though they both knew it wasn’t one. However, that didn’t mean they had to starve.

“No, I won’t be going back. But remember Great-Grandma Taylor?”

“You mean the very crazy Great-Grandma who asked me if I ever thought about becoming a lesbian because life without men was so much easier?”

“What?” Justin stared at her. God, his great-grandmother had been even crazier than he’d thought. “You never told me that. But anyway, she left me a trust fund.”

Now it was Daphne’s turn to stare. “A Trust Fund? Like in the movies?”

“Yeah. It’s not huge. I’m not getting millions but it’s enough to get by. I’m not getting it in one sum, but I’ll be getting monthly payments. So whatever happens, we’ll be okay, Daph.”

He had never wondered before, but now Justin asked himself if maybe his great-grandmother had expected problems between him and his father? It wouldn’t surprise him. She’d been a shrewd woman, that great-grandmother of his.

Daphne was staring into space, probably thinking about what she’d just heard. It had to be a relief to know that she and the baby would be okay, no matter what. Had she really worried about that? Well, she was a mother-to-be, so ... yeah. His mother had told him once that children changed perspectives. Justin had to agree. The idea of becoming a father was humbling and terrifying at the same time. What if they fucked up their kid’s life? What if their kid hated them? What if ... There were so many ‘what ifs’ it made his head spin.

It had all seemed so easy the night he’d proposed. Daphne in her new pink dress, Justin actually wearing a tux for the third time in his life. His first had been his high school prom where he’d danced with Daphne, then taken her home and kissed her at the door. The second time had been after graduating from Dartmouth. His Dad had taken them out, even Molly had been with them then, to celebrate the event.

Daphne had looked so beautiful, impossibly young, excited, and she’d cried when she’d said yes. Justin had cried too.

It seemed like a lifetime ago.

He remembered thinking that now all his dreams were coming true. It had felt right, perfect.

It didn’t feel right now. He felt like the world’s biggest asshole.

And he was gay. Or wasn’t he?

God, he was so confused. How could he be sure?

Sex with Brian had been incredible. Mindblowing. Beyond anything he’d ever experienced in his life.

But was that enough?

Was one night of mindblowing sex enough to define you? And why hadn’t he ever felt it before? Could you wake up and suddenly be gay? Was being furious with your father enough of a trigger to go and fuck your friend?

Your male friend.

“Why haven’t you ever told me before?”

Justin blinked, forcing his thoughts back to Daphne. “What?”

“About the trust fund.”

“Oh. I forgot. I mean, I was doing well on my own. You were earning some money with your writing. It somehow never came up.” He shrugged. “Sorry.”

She waved it away. “No need to apologize. It just surprised me. So – what now?”

Justin sighed. He wished he had the answer to her question. “You ... want a divorce?”

She gave him a ‘duh’ look. “We can hardly stay married. I mean, sure, we could but it would suck. I love you, Justin but ...” She paused, looked at him.

“But?”

“Are you sure you’re really gay?”

And wasn’t that the one million dollar question? “No,” he said honestly. “How can I be sure?”

Again she just looked at him and he wished he knew what was going on behind that forehead of hers. Or maybe not. He really didn’t want to know, or he’d probably sink into the ground and never come up again.

“What about you?” he asked her now, because, really, it was up to her.

“I’m not gay,” she shot back, clearly annoyed.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

“I don’t ... Daph, I can’t just ignore what happened. I need to know what it means. Am I really attracted to men, or to men and women both? And what does that mean for us? I mean, if I’m bi-sexual we could stay married and –“

“Whoa, whoa. You expect me to watch you fuck men-“

“No.” Dammit. If he lived to be hundred he would never understand women. “Fuck, Daph. How am supposed to answer all these questions when I don’t know what it means?”

“Then what do you propose we do? Because, honestly, I’m not willing to live like this. I’m not going to become one of those wives whose husbands fuck guys but present the world an image of matrimonial bliss.”

Did she really think him that much of an asshole, Justin wondered? Well, obviously she did or she wouldn’t have said it. “It’s not what I want, either, I swear. Daph, you’re the most important person in my life. I want you to be happy.”

“Damn,” she muttered, and blinked. “Okay. So, what now? Do you, you know, want to explore your gay side or whatever the fuck it is?”

“Geez, Daph.”

“What? Does it make you uncomfortable if I talk that way? Well, tough luck, get used to it.”

“I ... I’m not sure what we can do. A separation maybe?” he asked. Could it work? They’d separate for a while, he’d try to figure out what he wanted and/or needed and then they’d talk about their future.

“A separation,” she repeated. “You mean ... living separate lives for a while?”

“Yeah.” It hurt him to lose her, even temporarily, but she was right. No way she could sit at home while he was out fucking men. He wouldn’t want that for her either.

“Does that mean I can fuck other men, too?”

What? “Do you want to?” It was a stupid question, one he had no right to ask but he’d done it anyway. He really was an asshole.

“You know,” she told him, pulling on her pants with more force than necessary, “you went out and fucked someone without discussing it with me first.”

“What – you want some sort of payback?” He was getting angry now. It felt good. Much better than that crushing brickload of guilt he’d been carrying around ever since he’d fucked Brian.

“Don’t you think I’m entitled to a little payback?” She was pissy too.

Fine. Great.

“This isn’t about fucking around, Daph. It’s about finding out who I am. If you want us to get a divorce now – fine. You can have one. Because, yeah, I fucked up. And yeah, I’m an asshole. But I’m not going to do this.”

He meant it. He was not going to play games with her. But she was also right. She was

entitled to live her life while they were separated. If only it weren't so hard to let go. It wasn't just Daphne. It was everything their marriage stood for.

"If you want to be with other guys, well ... I hardly have the right to ... say no."

Daphne looked at him as if she was considering his words. "It's strange," she then said, almost if she was talking to herself. "I've been thinking about ... us. You know, what it means, what we mean to each other, why we are together. And I asked myself. Daphne, I said, why are you and Justin married? You getting the point?"

"Uhm." Because he didn't get the point there was nothing else he could say. Sometimes the way Daphne's mind worked scared him.

"Of course not." She sighed dramatically. God, she could be such a queen sometimes. And damn, that had been a really queer reference. Was that a hint? A definite first sign?

"I always thought we got married because we loved each other," Justin told her. It was what he believed. There wasn't a time when he had not loved Daphne.

"We do. We love each other, but, Justin, are we **in love** with each other? Don't get me wrong, I love you, you are maybe the most important person in my life but ... I'm wondering."

Justin stared at her.

"See," she went on, pulling on her socks. "The question I ask myself is. Did we get married, maybe because we were in love with the idea of being a couple? We are so comfortable with each other and, really, everyone expected us to get married."

Again, Justin could only stare. Could she be right? Had he married her because she was comfortable? Because he knew her and trusted her completely? Because everyone expected it? And exactly how pathetic did that make him?

"Maybe," Daphne told him while she slipped into her shoes, "you just married me because deep inside you already knew. You know, that you're gay. But you were so deep in the closet, you didn't even know yourself. Maybe it was your subconscious that made you do it." She stood and sighed. "I want someone who really loves me, Justin. Who is in love with me, who can't live without me, not just because it feels comfortable. And dammit, I don't just want it – I deserve it!"

She did. There was no doubt about it. Daphne was the best person he knew. She was open-minded and the only one he knew who seemed without prejudice. It was remarkable.

"And you know what?" She was looking at him again, her eyes soft and warm. She was

the best friend, the girl who'd beat up Gavin MacDonald after he'd pushed Justin into a pond when they both were five years old.

"What?" he asked, his voice like sandpaper.

"You, Justin, deserve it, too."

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"Good Afternoon, Mr. Bruckner."

Ben nodded in greeting. "Mr. Fortescue, good to see you again." The two men shook hands, then Ben turned to the man next to him. "Let me introduce you to our best ad man. This is Brian Kinney."

"Mr. Kinney."

Brian took the offered hand and was surprised by the firm handshake. Tristan (and yes, it was the guy's real name) Fortescue didn't look particularly firm, or strong. He was a forty something guy with a pouch and a balding head and very bad style in clothing – just like eighty percent of the other breeders Brian had met in his not so long life. Unlike some other men Brian knew, Fortescue had startling light grey eyes that seemed to see a lot more than he let on and he had a ready smile that came with great frequency. No doubt, Tristan Fortescue was comfortable in his skin, and to his own complete surprise, Brian found himself liking him on sight.

"Mr. Fortescue."

"How about we skip the formalities, Brian?" Fortescue said with one of his startling smiles. "I'm Tristan, but please call me Tris."

What was even more startling than the smile, was the fact that Tristan Fortescue spoke perfect Oxford English, which begged the question if he was either born in England or had been educated at one of the prestigious colleges there. Ben had said he came from money – so maybe it was both.

"Fine with me, Tris," Brian told him and meant it.

"Same here," Ben said and motioned them all to the conference table where Cynthia, Ben's personal assistant, had laid out files. As they sat down, Ben walked over to the intercom in the corner and pressed a button. "Cyn, if you could come in. And tell Johnny to bring us all," he looked up at Fortescue. "Is coffee okay with you, Tris?"

"Actually, I'd rather have some tea." He looked at Brian with another smile, then back at Ben. "I picked up the habit in Cambridge and haven't gotten rid of it since."

Ben nodded, "Tell Johnny to bring us tea and coffee asap. ... Great." He turned back to the other men. "She will be with us in a minute. From what I understood, your partner was supposed to meet with us too?"

"Craig will be with us a little later. He had some urgent private business to take care of." Even though Fortescue smiled, it was clear that he didn't like the fact that his partner was absent. "But we can begin. Even though I'm more of the hands-on guy, I'm still 50 percent of TayFor."

Ben nodded again and it was clear that he also liked Fortescue. "Fine." The door opened and Cynthia slipped into the room. Ben introduced her to Fortescue and after they shook hands, Cynthia sat down with them. "Alright," Ben went on. "I gave Brian an outline of what you need."

"That's right." Brian opened the file in front of him and the other occupants of the room did the same. "I only had a few minutes to brainstorm some ideas, but here you can find what I came up with so far. From what I understand, your business is marketing upscale houses?"

"That's our main focus, yes," Fortescue confirmed. "We mainly target people who want something special and can afford to pay for it. The business is good, don't get me wrong, but we could do with a boost or two."

Meaning that things weren't all that smooth. Or maybe something else was off. Brian couldn't put his finger on it – yet – but there was a strange kind of vibe he was getting off Tristan Fortescue. He exchanged a quick glance with Cynthia, dressed smartly today in a cream coloured blouse and a dark grey skirt that ended just above her knees. Combined with the new haircut Brian had suggested a few days ago, she exuded an air of competence.

Cynthia gave him a barely recognizable nod. Yep, they understood each other and were thinking the same. They'd first met when Brian came to work for Ben and Cynthia had tried getting into his pants until he'd made it clear that getting underneath her skirt was the very last thing he was going for. They'd gone out that night, gotten drunk together and had been friends ever since.

"We usually find an object that's a little worn down," Fortescue explained. "We buy it, fix it up, find a client and finish it after the clients expectations. We have a long list of clients, the problem is we can't find enough houses to satisfy them."

He paused when the door opened and Johnny came in, carrying a tray that held tea and coffee. Johnny Briggs was their new intern, fresh from college, blond, freckled and baby-faced. And one hundred percent gay.

"Here you go." He put down the tray with flourish, smiled brightly at Ben, a little less brightly at Fortescue and ignored Cynthia completely. He was one of those gay guys for

whom women were nothing but freaks of nature, and he did his very best to forget they even existed. He poured the required beverages, smiled at Fortescue again and winked at Brian before he slipped back out of the door.

Ben gave Brian a raised-eyebrow-look over his glasses, and when Brian shrugged, he shook his head on a silent chuckle.

Tristan Fortescue watched the exchange with wide eyes and his gaze followed Johnny out of the door with a big questionmark over his head. Brian wasn't sure what to make of it. Fortescue had to know Johnny Briggs was gay, there was just no way anyone could miss it.

Fortescue cleared his throat. "Interesting staff you have here, Ben."

Ben smiled politely at that. "Mr. Briggs is our new intern. You were talking about a lack of available objects, Tris?"

Fortescue blinked, then forced his gaze away from the door. "Yes. Not enough houses. The thing is, people who ... have fallen down their luck usually hate to admit that there is a problem, instead of approaching someone who could help them."

"You."

The man nodded. "Yeah. Us. We are willing to pay hard money, we are discreet and fair."

"So what you're actually looking for is a campagne that will tell people that you can help them and that their secret is safe with you." Brian picked up a pen and scribbled some notes into the file in front of him. "However, you can't advertise in a grand scheme. The ads have to be discreet as well." He didn't look up, nodded to himself and scribbled again. "High gloss flyers maybe. Or a very vague, very discreet ad in one or two of the upscale magazines."

It was clear what they had to do. And Brian already had an idea how to do it.

"Will Brian be personally responsible for our project?" he heard Fortescue ask.

"Yes," Ben replied. "He is at your disposal and-

"My apologies for being late."

Brian had been so focussed on the file he hadn't even heard him come in, but he would recognize the voice anywhere.

"Mr. Taylor, welcome," Ben stood and walked over to the man. They shook hands. At least Brian thought they did. He was purposely keeping his gaze on the paper in front of

him.

“Craig.” Fortescue’s voice held an unmistakable edge.

There was definitely something going on there. Brian made a mental note to keep an eye out for it. There might come a time when the knowledge would be of use.

“This is my personal assistant, Cynthia Mondalvo.”

“Charmed, Miss Mondalvo.”

“And this is Brian Kinney who will be responsible for your ad campaign,” Ben went on and Brian very slowly raised his head.

He and Craig Taylor locked eyes in an instant. He saw the color drain from the other man’s face, saw the pupils contract, saw the jaw tighten. Brian could have predicted all of it, Craig Taylor held no secrets for him.

“Is this supposed to be a joke?” Taylor was barely holding on to his anger.

Ben gave Brian a look, before he schooled his features into neutral. “I’m sorry?”

“I’m not working with Kinney,” Taylor ground out.

Brian saw Fortescue stare at Taylor in honest puzzlement. He definitely didn’t have a clue what this was all about. “Craig?” he asked.

“Craig and I have met,” Brian said slowly, deliberately using the man’s given name. He heard Ben sigh. “His son and I are friends.” He desperately hoped that it wasn’t a lie now, that Justin would maybe one day want to be his friend again. But he was not going there, not in front of someone who’d love to see Brian fall apart.

“You know Justin?” Fortescue seemed surprised. “He’s a very promising young man. Has done great work for us. That probably means you know Daphne as well? Of course you do. I wanted to be at their wedding but unfortunately my wife and I booked a cruise almost a year ago and it fell on the wedding date.” He turned to Craig, “If he’s friends with Justin, what’s the problem?”

Craig’s eyes never left Brian. “The problem is, he’s a fag,” he said with such disgust in his voice, as if the fact was the most horrible thing he could imagine. Which for Craig Taylor, probably was the truth. Christ, the guy was such an asshole.

“A ...” Fortescue narrowed his eyes. Brian knew what was going to happen. Fortescue might be nice for a straight guy, but he was still a straight guy and Craig Taylor was his partner.

“An asslicker,” Craig ground out. “A faggot.”

“Mr. Taylor.” Ben’s voice was polite but held a definite edge. “I would advise you to use a different language in my conference room. Mr. Kinney is a highly esteemed employee of this firm and I’m not going to stand by and let you insult him.”

“Don’t worry,” Brian drawled. “There’s no way he could ever insult me.”

Ben gave him a ‘shut-the-fuck-up’-look and Brian rolled his eyes. Ben was a great boss, a good friend, but he could be a pain in the ass sometimes.

“You little-“ Craig started, but he was cut off by Fortescue.

“Don’t be an asshole, Craig,” he snapped. “What does the fact that Kinney is gay have to do with anything? He’s an ad exec and he’s good. I made some inquiries,” he glanced at Brian, “and all my sources told me he’s the best. We want the best.”

And maybe there were some straight guys who could surprise Brian after all.

He had to bite his lip so hard it almost bled. It would hardly be appropriate to giggle. Besides, Brian never giggled. Never. Yet, watching Craig Taylor getting his ass rimmed – and not in a good way - by his business partner would definitely have been worth a giggle. Taylor looked as if he was going to pop a vein in the very near future. Brian would gleefully watch him bleed out – and not call an ambulance.

“I don’t care if he’s the fucking emperor of China,” Craig said, his hands balled into fists. Oh yeah, the man would definitely love to punch him one, Brian thought. He and Craig had first met while he and Justin were still in college and it had been dislike at first sight, even before Craig Taylor had found out that Brian was a fag. Maybe it was because Brian knew guys like Craig and never bought into his bullshit. Whatever it was, they’d never gotten over it and Brian was glad. At least there had never been a reason to make nice with a man he detested so completely.

“Mr. Taylor-“ Ben said and this time Craig cut him off.

“You’re probably one of them too,” he gritted out. “God, you disgust me. Perverts, all of you.”

Ben was speechless for a moment. Brian had seen it happen before – but it was a rare occurrence. Usually Ben had a clever word for anyone.

“Craig.” Fortescue was truly horrified by his partner’s behavior. “Have you lost your mind?”

“It was you, wasn’t it?” Craig Taylor seemed to have forgotten where he was. He was staring at Brian now.

“What are you talking about?” Brian was puzzled. Maybe Fortescue was right, maybe the man had really lost his mind.

“What did you say to Justin?”

Brian had no idea what this was about. Had Justin told his father about their night? Was Craig freaked because of it? Even though Brian and Craig had never gotten along, it had never been like this. Craig had always managed to keep his cool before.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Brian said.

“I’m talking about the fact that Justin sent me his resignation this morning,” Craig told him. He turned to his partner. “He sent me his resignation. I’m his father and he sent me a fucking letter.” His gaze came back to Brian. “I knew you were bad for him from the moment I saw you, you perverted bit of white trash.”

“Craig!” Fortescue reached out to grab Craig’s arm but he was pushed back.

“White trash?” Brian scoffed. “Have you been reading cheap romance novels lately, Craig?”

“Brian.” Ben shook his head, damn peacekeeper he was. But it was too late. Way too late to keep quiet.

“I’m not working with you, Kinney, not even if my life depended on it.” He got into Brian’s face and raised a warning finger. “Stay away from Justin, do you hear me!”

Brian only laughed, not intimidated at all. “Or you do what? Last time I checked Justin was 25 years old. He hardly needs to ask for your permission if he wants to see someone.”

“You arrogant, little motherfucker,” Craig bit out.

Craig was beyond angry. He was so furious, Brian wondered if he’d maybe have a heart attack. And why had Justin sent his father a letter of resignation? Then he remembered Justin telling him about a fight with his father. What had that been about? Damn – why had he let himself get distracted by Justin’s lips and hands? Fuck!

“Craig, we’re going.” Fortescue held Craig’s arm in a firm grip now. He gave Ben and Brian an apologetic look. “I’m so very sorry for this. I never ...” He shrugged, clearly embarrassed. He shot Craig a lethal look. “We are going – NOW!”

He pulled Craig with him and Craig was still staring at Brian when the door shut behind them.

Ben let out a low whistle. "You weren't exaggerating," he said and his eyes held concern. "You okay?"

Brian smiled at him. "Me? I'm fabulous."

"Don't be an ass too," Ben said.

"I'm not." He wasn't. Well, not now anyway. "Craig Taylor always hated me. I told you so."

Ben sighed and rubbed his forehead. "So you did. Fuck. You think he found out about you and his son?"

Brian thought about it for a moment, then shook his head. "No. Or he'd probably have brought a gun."

"Jesus, Brian, don't joke about something like that. The man has serious issues – and not just because of you. I wouldn't want to be on his shit list." Ben was radiating worry, which meant Brian had to make a joke because no way he could deal with that kind of honest emotion from his friend. At least not right now.

"He's probably had to keep it in his pants for way too long," he quipped.

Ben narrowed his eyes. "This isn't funny."

Brian turned away from him. He needed to move, would have loved to go to the gym to burn off the violent energy that was churning through his body. A fuck would do fine, too. Unfortunately(,) there wasn't anyone around right this very moment.

"Look," he said, staring out of the window, "if this is about Taylor and the account–"

"Fuck the account," Ben snapped, unusual vehemence in his voice that made Brian turn back to him. "He can go to hell with his campaign. We're not some desperate newcomers who have to take his kind of shit. The guy is deranged. He is also a homophobe, and a bigot. You actually think I want him as a client?"

No, Brian didn't think that. He knew Ben. Well enough to know that even though Ben had made a lot of compromises to get where he was now, he had his limits. Obviously, Craig Taylor had reached one of them. However, Taylor wasn't alone in this.

"Fortescue seems okay, though."

Ben nodded. "Yeah. One wonders how they came to be partners. They are so very different."

"Justin once told me that at some point Craig was dating Fortescue's older sister. Then

he met Jennifer, Justin's mom."

Ben gave him a look. "Anything else you want to share?"

Brian shook his head. "No. We never really talked about Craig. Justin and I, I mean." And if it was up to Brian they never would. No, thank you very much. He could live a full and happy life without ever talking about Craig Taylor again.

He dragged his mind away from Justin with difficulty. "So what about Fortescue?"

Ben sighed. "To be honest. I actually liked the guy, but if he comes with Taylor as an attachment – I don't want the asshole anywhere in this building. And I definitely don't want him anywhere near you."

"Aw. I'm touched by your concern."

"Be an asshole if you want but I'm telling you, the guy is dangerous. Stay away from him."

"Yes, *Dad*."

Ben looked at Brian for another moment, then with a sigh turned away and shook his head. Brian knew his friend was genuinely worried. On one hand he was touched by the concern, on the other he was annoyed. Brian was a grown up. He was strong. He was capable. He didn't need anyone's worry or – worse – pity.

And he definitely needed a change of subject.

"Talking about staying away. Have you been thinking about Mikey?"

Another sigh from Ben. This time definitely annoyed. "That's none of your goddamn business." He rubbed his forehead again, no doubt trying to get rid of a headache. Or maybe to forget Brian Kinney had ever come into his life and become the bane of his existence.

He was also right. It wasn't any of Brian's business.

Besides – it wasn't as if Brian could give anyone advice on relationships. He had never had one in his life, and the only one he'd ever wanted he'd fucked up but good.

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Justin was nervous. Or maybe terrified would be the more accurate description. He'd been nervous when he'd first gone to school, when he'd been accepted at Dartmouth, when he'd proposed to Daphne.

This was something entirely different.

He swallowed hard, his mouth and throat dry, and tried to wipe his sweaty palms on his pants.

This was it.

After tonight he would know.

At least he hoped he would.

He blinked when he saw a middle-aged, balding guy in tight leather pants and a leather vest walk by, giving him a wink in passing.

Shit.

Justin felt his stomach clench.

The music was loud. No, fuck that. It wasn't just loud. It was pounding in his head and Justin welcomed it, loved the way the beat seemed to penetrate not only his skull but his entire body, seemed to vibrate around him and deep within him. The glittering lights were painting fast changing patterns on the walls, reflecting themselves on the gyrating bodies of men moving to the music, rubbing against each other. Sweat was in the air, but not the stale kind you smelled in gym lockers. No, this kind of sweat was hot. Intoxicating. Arousing.

He took a deep breath and moved a step forward. He was standing on a balcony above the dance floor, just behind the entrance. He'd been standing outside the club for the past two hours, wondering if he could do it. He'd watched men walk by, had seen them check him out, had turned away once, twice, three times. But he'd turned back, unable to move away, drawn in by an invisible force, a longing he hadn't even known existed a few days ago.

Brian.

He'd been afraid to meet Brian, he admitted to himself, had been afraid to see the other man, had been terrified by the idea of Brian with another guy, of Brian kissing another guy, of Brian fucking-

No, he was not going there. It wasn't as if he and Brian were any kind of ... anything, really. They'd been friends for years but Justin wasn't sure they still were. They were lovers – fuck buddies – whatever. Had been, anyway. For one night. A night that had shattered everything Justin had thought certain in his life.

The music changed, the bodies didn't. Some men were moving to the back, disappeared behind a wall. Justin could guess what they were doing. A part of him was

disgusted, horrified, but another, a far more insistent part, was fascinated.

Justin removed his jacket, let it fall to the floor, not caring that he'd probably never find it again. He moved, driven by something deep within him, walked down the stairs and into the crowd. A body was brushing against him, sending a jolt through his own. He felt eyes on him, knew they were checking him out, sensing new prey in their midst.

He wanted to shrink back, wanted to run, to deny, but couldn't.

He felt a hand on his bare arm and turned. The man was young, maybe even younger than him but he wasn't a newbie. Green eyes wandered over Justin.

"Hey." The voice was rich, low, sexy.

"Hey." His own was breathless. Terrified. Thrilled.

His heart was pounding.

"You wanna dance?"

He couldn't speak. So he nodded. Green eyes pulled him close.

"You are so hot."

There were no words in him. Only excitement. He let himself pull in an embrace, took the music and let it carry him. Another body was behind him now. Green Eyes looked annoyed for a moment, then relaxed again.

He could feel them, one in front of him, one behind him.

Hard. Hot. Heavy.

He was hard, too. Felt hot.

"Let's take this somewhere else," the voice behind him whispered.

He felt heavy, boneless. As if he had no will of his own.

He nodded.

"Ever been in a back room?"

The voice behind him was amused.

Back room?

He shook his head. It wasn't important anyway. As long as they kept going. He didn't want to be anywhere else.

Justin closed his eyes.

He felt hands pulling him from the dancefloor and into a darkness he welcomed and dreaded.

A loud knock on the door woke Brian from a fitful sleep and he jerked himself upright, blinking against the brightness of the day. He squinted at his bedside clock and groaned. Nine o'clock in the morning. He'd gotten home around four last night and because today was Saturday he'd been prepared not to wake up before noon.

A groan came from beside him. He turned slowly and focussed his eyes on a dark haired body before he turned away again and dismissed it instantly.

Another loud knock sounded through his apartment.

Fuck.

Grabbing his sweatpants with one hand, he reached behind him with the other and shook the unknown occupant of his bed awake. "Get up. Get dressed. Then get out."

"Can I shower first?" came the reply. It was a deep baritone and it was utterly unfamiliar. Yep, last night had been particularly bad. But he was not going there. No fucking way. Because thoughts of last night would inevitably lead to Justin and he was in no shape to deal with Justin on top of everything else.

"Suit yourself. But then you get out."

He heard the bed rustle behind him and stood when the knocking became even louder.

"Yeah, yeah, keep your pants on." He jerked the door open. "What the fuck do you – uhm."

"Hi Brian."

He blinked. Then blinked again. But the image in front of him was no imagination. Jennifer Taylor, dressed smartly in a dark blouse and beige pants still stood there, hair not as perfect as usual and no smile on her face. Christ.

"Mrs. Taylor?"

"I told you to call me Jennifer," she chided automatically and it was clear from her posture that she wanted to come in.

Brian stepped back, then closed the door behind her.

“Nice apartment,” she commented as she stood and let her eyes sweep around. “You’ve known Justin – how long exactly? And I’ve never been here before.”

This was unreal. “Jennifer. It’s early. I had a long night. Did you really come to look at my apartment?”

She sighed, clearly hating that, no, she hadn’t come just for that. “I didn’t”, she finally admitted. “I’m sorry, I’m not at my best right now.”

No kidding. She had heavy shadows underneath her eyes and they weren’t part of a weird make-up.

They both heard the shower start in the back and Jennifer raised her brows, didn’t comment it though. “How about you put something on and then offer me a cup of coffee because I really could do with one – or two? I need to talk to you, Brian.”

Brian barely suppressed a wince. Talk. She didn’t look homicidal, so she probably had no idea that he and Justin had done the deed after all. Still, he’d always hated talking to parents of friends – the only one he was comfortable with was Debbie Novotny. And she didn’t really count. She might be Mikey’s mother, but in Brian’s eyes she was every gay kid’s parent.

He let out a silent sigh and motioned for Jennifer to go into his combined living room and kitchenette. “I’ll be back in a moment,” he then said and went into the bedroom, closing the door behind him. The very same moment the shower was turned off and baritone man appeared in the doorway. Absentmindedly Brian let his eyes wander over him. Hot. But yesterday’s news. “Why are you still here?”

The guy stared at him. “I ... thought we could maybe talk.”

Talk? “What part of ‘get out’ did you miss?” God save him from talkative tricks.

Hurt flashed in brown eyes. “Maybe we could meet again,” he suggested and picked up his clothes.

“No.” No repeats. It was one of Brian’s iron rules. Otherwise it could get ugly, and he wasn’t doing ugly.

The guy sighed. “Pity. We could be great together, you know.” He fastened his pants, then pulled his tee-shirt over his head.

“No, we really couldn’t. I’m great on my own, I don’t need someone to shine beside me.” It was a load of bullshit, but Brian knew that most people he met instantly bought it.

So did last night's guy. "You are a real asshole."

"Think whatever helps you to live a long and productive life," Brian said. He grabbed a shirt from his dresser, then opened the door, shoved his guest out, past Jennifer and then out of his apartment without another word.

"Anything I can help with?" Jennifer asked. She'd been watching the whole thing with wide eyes. Justin's mother might look all of her years this morning but she was still an innocent. What would she do if she knew Brian and Justin had fucked? Scream? Rage? Cry?

"No." Brian shook his head. "Coffee will take a moment." He walked behind his counter and rumaged around, filled his coffee maker, then switched it on. Taking a last fortifying breath, he looked at Jennifer Taylor. "You said you needed to talk. So talk."

"First of all," she began, "I need to apologize."

"Apologize?" Brian knew he sounded stupid. But he couldn't help it. Why would she need to apologize?

"Yes. For what I said to you after the wedding. Do you remember?"

How could he ever forget? Stay away from Justin, she'd said. Don't destroy his marriage. The words were branded in his mind, in his very soul. And he'd surrendered to them. Not that he'd ever thought he could have a chance. Not with Justin. Who was straight.

Right.

"I remember," he said quietly, watching the coffee machine work its miracle. God, he needed coffee. Bad.

"When did you realise you were gay?"

Shit. Justin had told her. But what exactly had he told her?

"That's a tough question." He kept his voice cool, kept his posture relaxed.

Jennifer cocked her head, seemed to muster him closely. "Why?"

"Because there isn't an easy answer." Maybe she was just curious. Any mother would be. He thought about his own. No, not any mother. "I admitted to myself and to the world I was gay during college. But my first conscious memory of being attracted to a guy ... I think I was twelve."

Jennifer studied him again, then slowly, almost meditatively nodded. "Twelve. Justin was about ten when I caught him drooling over Tom Cruise."

Aw, fuck.

"Jennifer--"

"No." She held up a hand. "This isn't about me. It's ... I just want to understand."

Brian rubbed his neck. "Maybe you should talk to Debbie, Michael's mother. She's a real PFLAG queen. And she's raised about half of gay town around here."

"I will talk to her. She's next on my list."

There was a list? Justin had told him once that his mother never did anything by half. He was very obviously right about that.

"I came to you because, well ... you are gay."

Brian had to grin. "And?"

She shook her head, the left side of her mouth quirking up a little. But it was only a momentary change. "Do you think I'm a bad mother?" she asked with obvious effort.

He had no idea what to answer to that. Was she a bad mother? He'd grown up with the worst of them. So how could he be any kind of expert? "Justin loves you." It was an evasive answer, he knew that, but there was nothing else he could say without sounding like an idiot.

"Not so very much right now." She laughed. But it wasn't a ha-ha, I'm so happy kind of laugh, it was more of the 'my-life-is-shit-and-I-want-to-be-anywhere-but-here' sort.

"Believe me, he does."

She rubbed her forehead. Obviously he was giving everyone a headache these days. He wondered if Ben was over his by now. "I feel as if I'm the worst kind of mother. I knew Justin was ... attracted to men. Or at least interested. But I did what I could do discourage him."

Brian shook his head. "A lot of parents do that kind of thing." He knew. He'd met enough men who had told him similar stories.

"Somehow that doesn't make me feel better." Jennifer sighed. "How is that coffee coming along?"

Brian turned towards the coffee maker and saw it was done. He took two mugs from the

shelf above and filled them, then placed one in front of Jennifer Taylor. "Milk? I'm afraid I don't have any sugar."

"Black is good for me," she said and took a sip, then grimaced. "This is strong. It's fine, don't worry, I'm just not used to it anymore. I gave up coffee a few years back."

Which told him a lot about the distress she was feeling.

Brian stared into the blackness of his own coffee. Maybe that's what his soul looked like. If he had a soul, that is.

"Justin and Daphne are separating," Jennifer told him after a sip. Brian almost choked on the one he was about to take.

"What?"

"He told her – and me – that he might be gay. Or bi." She was talking more to herself now. "And they have reached an agreement, I think. Daphne even seems okay with it." She laughed a desperate laugh. "It was my worst nightmare. Or so I thought."

"Jennifer–"

But she didn't seem to hear him. "Now I think that having two children hate me is far worse. Well, maybe hate is too strong a word. But Molly and I were never close, and Justin is looking at me and ... there is this wall in his eyes. It's killing me, Brian."

He had no idea what he could say or do. And why on earth had she chosen him for this? Or maybe it was his penance for fucking her son. Not that he was religious but from time to time his mother's bigotry caught up with him. Mainly when it was most inappropriate. Like now.

Penance was for shit.

"I'm sure it won't be for long. Justin has to come to terms with a lot right now."

Jennifer blinked, her eyes swimming when she looked at him. "Thanks for trying to be nice."

Nice? "I'm not nice."

"Oh, Brian." Now she laughed through her tears and it was genuine. "Don't try this with me. You can't fool me. This tough-guy exterior hides a very soft, and very vulnerable core." Brian snorted and she shot him a look. "It's true. Why do you think I was applying to that core at Justin's wedding? I've always been good at finding other people's weak points." Her voice turned self-loathing in the end.

“Does your husband know about Justin?”

Her eyes filled with horror. “No. And I don’t even want to think about that. Craig and Justin had a terrible fight a while back. As a result Justin and Daphne moved out of the house.” She paused, took another sip. “And I went with them.”

Brian had to blink. “You ... left him?”

Jennifer shrugged. “Kind of, I guess. We haven’t talked. But ... in a way I did.” She shrugged again. “The really weird part is, all I feel is relief. What does that tell you about our marriage?”

She looked at him expectantly but Brian had no idea what to say. He couldn’t care less about the Taylor-marriage. He shook his head. “You want to talk about weird?” he said instead. “Ever had the mother of a friend confess to you?”

That made her laugh again. Aloud. “I’m sorry. I know this is ... highly inappropriate. I mean ... But maybe because I know you hate Craig-“

“Whoa. Stop right there. It’s Craig who hates my guts. I don’t hate him. In truth, I don’t care one way or the other.” He didn’t tell her that he would have to care unfortunately, didn’t tell her of the confrontation he’d had with her husband. Why should he? It wasn’t any of her business and it would only cause more problems.

And when exactly had he chosen to become a saint? Christ!

“You really don’t hate him?” She picked up her cup, realised it was empty. “I need more,” she announced and Brian refilled the mug. “Pity. Because I hate his very guts.”

“Jennifer-“

This was the ultimate twilight zone. It had to be. Or maybe he was still in his bed having a terrifying nightmare. Brian refilled his own mug, picked it up, drank – and burned his tongue.

No, definitely not a nightmare.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I know it’s pathetic. I should be talking to a friend. Unfortunately all my ‘friends’ are our friends. They’d feel very uncomfortable hearing me saying these things. And I would feel uncomfortable telling them. I’m sure that makes me a sorry kind of woman.”

He was feeling uncomfortable too. But obviously because he was Brian fucking Kinney, Jennifer thought it was okay with him. He only hoped she didn’t expect him to comfort her by hugging. He didn’t do hugs. Especially not with middle aged women in emotional turmoil. These things could turn ugly.

Brian took a deep breath. He had to do something or she would dissolve into tears right in this room. "Jennifer. I don't know how I can help you."

She blinked, then let out a watery, highly embarrassed laugh. "I'm really sorry. You want to know the really funny thing? It wasn't why I came."

"It wasn't?" Hallelujah for that. Maybe there was a way out of this horrifying scenario after all. "Why did you come?"

"I came because I thought Justin was staying with you."

What? "Excuse me?" She thought Justin was with him?

She nodded. "He didn't come back to the hotel last night. Daphne was worried."

Daphne? "Didn't you tell me they were separated?"

"In a way. They're still in the same room. Suite. And his bed wasn't slept in." Her own problems were forgotten. Gone was the Jennifer in the confessional and back was the concerned mother. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Or not.

Because – where the fuck was Justin?

And why the fuck did he care? Justin was a grown up. Hadn't Brian said the very same to Craig? Justin was twenty five years old. He was no baby. He wasn't a virgin – not in any sense. Brian had made sure of that.

Christ.

Talk about a guilty conscience. He and Jennifer would make a really pretty, really dysfunctionial couple.

"But obviously he isn't here." Jennifer was staring into her coffee again.

"Obviously," Brian quipped.

Her head came up again. "Or maybe ... he ... I mean ... people do threeways. I did ... I mean ... I ..."

And now she was blushing furiously. And he so didn't need to know about Jennifer Taylor and threeways. He'd probably never get the image out of his head and it'd cause permanent impotence.

"I'm sorry." She pulled a tissue from her purse and dabbed her eyes. "I'm such a mess."

No kidding.

He had to stop this. “Look, Jennifer. Being confronted with the fact that you might be gay can be confusing. I told you that before. A lot of people act ... “ God, how did you tell a mother that her son had probably gone out and ended up fucking some guy. Brian had no idea what Justin was going through right now but he could take a guess. He knew Justin well enough, though, and it would be the typical thing for Justin to do. He had an inquiring mind.

And inquiring minds wanted to know. Needed to know.

And Brian’s gut clenching was not because he hated the idea of Justin fucking any random guy. Not. Not. Not. Brian didn’t do jealous. Only – the gut clenching didn’t let up.

“Jennifer,” he said as steadily as he could. “Justin isn’t here.”

She sighed. “I know. And I feel completely stupid for looking for him. I should probably go and find a very good shrink.”

That was one possibility. Or maybe she was just the kind of mother Brian would have loved growing up with. Someone who cared. “You love him,” he said quietly. “And love worries.”

Love worries.

Shit.

Fuck.

Brian told himself he was NOT worried.

Unfortunately he was. Very worried. He could pretend he wasn’t but he had never lied to himself and he wasn’t starting now. It wasn’t a secret anyway. He had told Emmett. He had wanted Justin from the first day they’d met. When he’d thought Justin was straight, he’d settled for friendship. Would he have done that without caring for someone? Of course not. If Justin wasn’t so important, Brian would have tried to get into his pants anyway. He’d done it before. And succeeded.

Not so with Justin.

With Justin he’d backed away, and done his best to build a lasting friendship. Because he cared. Because he lo-

Fuck.

When he looked at Jennifer again, she was just emptying her second mug of coffee. She'd probably be hyper for the rest of the day.

"Love and accept him. It's the best you can do," he told her. Because it would comfort her. But also because it was true. Brian never got it from his parents, and Justin wouldn't get it from Craig. But maybe getting it from Jennifer would be enough.

Jennifer put her mug down, and picked up her purse. "Thanks for talking to me," she said and Brian walked around the counter. She reached out and put a hand on his arm. "You are a very good friend. I'm glad Justin has you to turn to. I hope he will soon."

With that and a last smile, she turned and left.

Five minutes later Brian was still standing rooted on the very spot. 'I hope he will soon,' she'd said. God, he hoped Justin would, too.

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"I'm still waiting for my fries with half-fat mayo!"

"Where's my pink plate special?"

"Where can I find Mrs. Novotny?"

Debbie was in the process of loading plates when the completely unexpected question reached her ears. It was surprising for several reasons. For one, nobody around her called her Mrs. Novotny. And two – there wasn't a soul down here who didn't know who she was. In the past twenty five years she'd made very sure that everyone knew her, and knew her well.

She turned around, gave the blond diva in the pink shirt her most evil eye and delivered the first plate to a table with three leather clad bears. They all three were wearing matching rings on their left hands. Go figure. Debbie didn't even bat an eye. Growing up in a loud, boisterous Italian family and with a gay brother, she'd grown up tough, and with the firm knowledge that love came in all forms and colors. That finding love was precious and that questioning it was stupid.

"Here you go, my lovelies." She smiled at them broadly. "When's your fifth?" she asked. "Isn't it coming up soon?"

The oldest of the trio, a scary looking guy with a scar that ran from the corner of his right eye over his cheek and ended just above the end of his jaw, returned the smile. "Ten days. We're still discussing if we're having a private party or a big celebration."

"I'm all for privacy." Caleb, the youngest, was also wearing leather but his sweetly freckled face and the big blue eyes ruined the image. Then he winked, and there was so

much mischief in his gaze, Debbie laughed out loud.

“You always think with your dick.” Gage was in the middle. He and Zeke, the oldest, had been a couple already when Caleb came along and after a few months had joined them for a happy and lasting threesome. Debbie had been witness to the whole drama. And it had been a drama.

Gage had cheated on Zeke with Caleb which had resulted in Zeke and Gage splitting up. Zeke had been miserable until one night he’d taken Caleb home. He’d been drunk and not really caring for who was sucking his dick that night. To make a long story short, after two weeks, all three had been joined at the hip and it had stayed that way ever since.

Zeke was laughing now. “As if you mind.” He and Gage exchanged a look of pure heat, then Zeke cleared his throat. “Should we decide for a real party, we’ll send you an invitation Deb.”

Debbie reached out and ruffled his hair. “You do that, honey. But only if you’re not planning an orgy.” She paused, grinned, “On second thought-“

They all cracked up. “Debbie. TMI,” Gage said.

“Excuse me, are you Mrs. Novotny?”

Again with the Mrs. Novotny crap. Debbie gave her favourite threesome one last smile, then let the smile fade away before she turned. “Who wants to know that?” she asked and turned to look at the annoying stranger. This was her kingdom, and she hated intrusions.

The stranger fumbled in his pocket and withdrew an ID. “Carl Horwath. I’m a detective with the Pittsburgh PD. I need to talk to you.”

Police? Debbie chewed on her gum, blew a bubble right in his face and enjoyed his wince when she popped it. “What about?” she asked. She could already see the wheels in his head turning, saw him categorising her, dismissing her for a stupid diner waitress. Asshole. Who was he to judge other people? Compared to the usual clientele here he stood out – and not in a good way. His rumpled coat looked as if it had been chewed on, digested and spit out again, and she wouldn’t even start commenting on his suit.

“Is there a place we can talk in private?”

Dread slammed into her. “What happened? Is someone hurt? Michael? Is this about Michael?”

“Michael?” He was completely puzzled. “Who is Michael?”

Not Michael. Debbie's heart slowed again. Vic was in New York. She'd talked to him last weekend. He and his lover were disgustingly happy. He was society's darling, the hip chef everyone talked about. If anyone happened to Vic it would probably be announced in the Times, not delivered by a third class detective with a bad haircut.

Who shrugged. "I want to talk to you about a ...," he looked at his notepad, "Mr. Kinney. He was attacked a few weeks back."

It was about Brian's attack. Dread was gone. Anger and disgust settled in instead. "You didn't care before. How come you do now?"

Horwath looked around, clearly ill at ease. "I really would prefer if we could talk in private."

Debbie gave him a look, then said: "Why? Everyone here knows that Brian was beaten up and nobody in your department gave a shit." She made sure her voice was carrying, reaching even Marty in the kitchen. "But then, he's just a fag. So he got what he deserved, right?"

"Mrs. Novotny—"

She once again popped her gum. And once again he winced.

Score.

"I'm Debbie," she told him. "Everyone around here knows that. And whatever you want to ask, you can do it in front of everyone here because I'm sure they would all like to know why all of a sudden Pittsburgh PD is taking an interest in a gay bashing."

"We don't know if it was a gay bashing."

She scoffed. "Sure. And you're my long lost son. Get real. A gay boy is mugged in a dark alley. What else do you think it was?"

"I could also ask what was he doing in that dark alley in the first place." Now there was a challenge in his eyes. They were sitting in a face that was almost as rumped as the coat. But strangely enough Debbie liked looking into them. She shook herself.

"So because someone is in a dark alley doing ... whatever he was doing ... he deserves to get beaten up?"

"If you want to put it that way. I was more thinking along the lines of tempting fate."

"Because he was getting his dick sucked?" Whatever she had seen in his eyes, she couldn't remember it. He was an asshole. What else was new? He was a cop. They were all homophobes.

Again he winced, this time at her language. Too bad. "Do you know who might want to do that to Mr. Kinney?" he asked, probably wishing he'd not gotten out of bed this morning. Or maybe he was glad he could go to work. Debbie enjoyed the idea that his wife made his life a living hell.

"No, I don't," she snapped. "Brian's a good kid."

He gave her a 'right' look, but scribbled something on his pad. "You know him well?"

"Over ten years," she said.

He nodded, scribbled some more. "You mentioned him performing illegal acts in public," he said without looking up. "Is he known to do that?"

Debbie seethed. But she bit her tongue. No way she'd give this asshole an opportunity to throw her ass in jail. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"We need to know if someone came upon him by accident or maybe could have watched him over a time and then waited for the right opportunity." He still had his gaze glued to his note pad. Debbie cleared her throat and he finally looked up.

"Brian Kinney is a friend. He is a good man. Whatever he does, whoever he fucks, nobody had a right to beat him up that way. Whoever did that was an asshole. You should spend your time and energy on finding that asshole, not digging into Brian's private life."

"You go, Deb."

"Yeah, find the bastard."

Horwath let his gaze sweep around. Debbie wondered what he saw. A bunch of useless homos? Perverts? "We want to find the one who did it," he said loudly. A chorus of 'sure' or 'right' was his answer, so he added. "I promise--"

"Don't promise," Debbie cut him off. "The boys here don't need promises. They've had enough of them. Just do your job. That's all we want."

Horwath sighed. "It's what we want too." He looked at her. "I admit that I didn't volunteer for the case but I've been with the force for almost thirty years, and I'm good at my job."

"That's good to hear. It still doesn't explain why you want to talk about Brian." Debbie walked around the counter. "You want some coffee?"

He nodded. "Thanks." Debbie had to grin when she saw him look over his shoulders. Did he really think someone here was checking out his ass?

“You know,” she said when she placed the cup in front of him. “Despite the rumors, gay men are very selective when it comes to fucking a tight hole.” Horwath choked on his coffee. Debbie shrugged “Just in case you were afraid something might happen to you in here.”

He gave her another of those weary looks. “There could be a reason Kinney was targeted. I’m just trying to understand if it might be possible.”

That was good enough for her. “Brian’s a good guy, I told you that before. But he’s never been particularly good at keeping it in his pants. So, yeah, you could dig out some guys who are still nursing broken hearts.”

“He is a player?”

Debbie pursed her lips. “Not really. Brian doesn’t promise anything. He is upfront about what he wants.”

“Meaning sex.”

She nodded. “But I wouldn’t be surprised to find out that some of his former tricks were hoping for more.”

“And maybe more than just disappointed for not getting it,” Horwath mused, and scribbled some more on his notepad. When he looked up again, he smiled. He didn’t have a bad smile, Deb decided. Good teeth, too.

Good teeth, too?

What the fuck?

Was she actually noticing teeth in a rumpled, homophobic police detective? Was she so desperate that even someone like Horwath looked marginally attractive to her?

Honest answer? Yes. She was desperate. She wasn’t even forty-five and couldn’t remember the last time she’d had sex. Okay, so that wasn’t really true. She could remember the guy she’d had sex with but that’s where her memory ended. It had been too insignificant, the man too much of an asshole. She’d forgotten about it as fast as possible. And stayed away from assholes, a.k.a. men. Was that enough to justify this disturbing attraction – and God help her, it was attraction – she felt for this detective?

“I also checked into Kinney’s family. It seems his mother wasn’t very happy with his life choices.”

“This woman doesn’t deserve to be called mother,” Debbie snarled. Horwath actually flinched but she didn’t care. “She is a cold bitch. She is also a bigot. And just for the

record, being gay isn't a life choice. It's what you are. Get that in your pea sized homophobic head."

And if he was going to arrest her for that last remark, so be it.

Horwath held up the hand with the pen in it. "Hold it there. I'm not homophobic."

Debbie laughed. There was no way she could've prevented it. His reaction was so typical, and absolutely ridiculous. "Whatever," she said and popped her gum. "You want the truth? I don't care if you hate gays or not. As long as you do your job."

He looked at her for a long moment, then pocketed his pad and pen. He picked up his coffee and drank deeply. "It's good," he said after putting down the cup.

"It's on the house. If you excuse me now, there are hungry queers waiting for their dinner to be served." With that she left him standing at the counter, very aware of his eyes on her back while she was taking orders. When she finally turned, he was gone. But she had the feeling she'd see him again – and soon.

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A male groan was Justin's first indication that he was not waking up in his own bed, and that the limbs he'd felt next to him at waking up a few minutes ago were not Daphne's.

Of course not. He and Daphne were separated. For now. Maybe for good.

Justin kept his eyes closed, hoping against hope that he could go back to sleep and pretend the last few days had never happened.

"Fuck. I need to piss."

No such luck, though. Not that he'd expected it to happen. Luck hadn't been on his side for a while.

"It's right down the hall – on the left."

Two voices?

Someone close by moved, then bare feet padded over a wooden floor and a door opened and closed.

"You awake yet?" A hand touched his hip. It was rough, with callouses at the tips. A working hand. Justin remembered his grandfather having hands like that.

"No," he mumbled and still kept his eyes closed.

A chuckle was his answer. "I'm making coffee. Or do you prefer tea?"

The voice was cultured, not a local accent. "Tea would be great." He would probably choke on the tea but he had a feeling that without an answer the guy wouldn't leave. And he desperately needed to be alone – even if it was just for a minute.

"Are you hungry?" The voice came from a distance now. "I have some eggs, peppers, cheese – I can do a mean omlett."

Food? His stomach protested instantly. "No, thanks."

"Not a morning eater, huh?"

Go away. Go away. Go away. His mind chanted the two words like a mantra.

"I could do with something to eat."

The second voice was back, deeper than the first. Also not local. Southern accent, maybe.

"Hey, sleeping beauty. Rise and shine."

Shut up. Shut up. Shut up. Semeed Justin's mind had found a new mantra.

"Fuck off," he mumbled.

"Seems our blond baby is a morning grouch," deeper voice said. Justin heard a zipper being pulled up. Thank God. Once again naked feet were walking out of the room. "Hey, this smells great. Not only are you a good fuck, you can cook too."

Laughter from another room and Justin let out a relieved breath. Finally he was alone. Not completely alone, they were still close by, but at least he had some space.

Justin opened his eyes. The room was not bright, purple curtains were barely drawn back, only permitting some rays of light inside. There was a dresser in the corner, black with white handles, it looked designer made. The bed he was lying in was huge, giving comfortable room for at least four occupants, and was held completely in dark blue.

He sat up and ran his hands through his hair, wincing when he felt it sticking up in places. He sighed and looked down at himself.

He was naked,

Of course he was.

Images flashed through his mind.

A dark room, naked or half-naked bodies. The smell of sex.

Hands touching him. Incredible pleasure spiking through his body.

Painful invasion where nobody but one had been before. And more pleasure. Spiking to incredible heights. Lifting him up. Higher and higher. Then crashing down on him in waves.

Whispered words.

Promises.

A soft bed. No doubt the one he was still lying in. At least he hoped so.

More pleasure. Penetrating a man for the first time.

Giving pleasure.

Taking it.

Flying. Flying.

Oh, flying so high.

And the certain knowledge that he was home. This was his world. He wanted to fuck and get fucked. He wanted to drill and get drilled. Wanted to feel a man's cock in his ass, wanted to bury himself in one.

There were no doubts anymore. Not if he was honest with himself.

He'd once asked Brian how he knew.

Because you're home, Brian had said. Justin hadn't understood. Then. He knew now.

He had felt pleasure with women, with Daphne. But this was different. This was what he was made for.

There was no doubt at all.

He was gay. There was no bi involved. Everything that came before had been make-believe.

This was the real thing.

This was home.

“Aha. You’re finally awake.”

The owner of the apartment came into the room, placed a cup of tea on the nightstand. He was tall, muscular, and had an incredible smile.

And Justin wanted him to get lost.

“Take your time. It’s Saturday – so we aren’t in any hurry. If you want to join us, we’re over there.” He jerked his head out of the door and was gone through the same the next moment.

Alone again.

The man was good looking. But he was a stranger. He had sex last night. With a stranger. No, scratch that. Two strangers. Had they both fucked him? Had he fucked them? God, he wished he could remember. There were sensations, faces, but it was hard to put them together. How had he ended up here? Had he actually followed two strangers into an equally foreign apartment? Obviously.

Justin looked around for his clothes and found them in a pile in the corner by the window. Hoping that nobody was watching him, he left the bed and snatched them up, then pulled them on in record time. He knew it was stupid, they’d seen him last night, probably touched every inch of him, but he still didn’t want them to see him naked this morning. Somehow it didn’t feel right. Maybe it made it too real, too intimate. He couldn’t really say but it didn’t matter anyway.

He found one of his shoes underneath the bed, the other in a different corner and decided to not to speculate how they’d gotten there.

Nausea was bubbling up and Justin swallowed hard. Part of him was glad he finally knew. Another part was disgusted and horrified by what he’d done. Was that really him? He’d grown up believing that sex between people was more than just an act, more than just pure lust. That it was better, more satisfying when it meant something, when people used it as another sign of their devotion for each other.

And yet last night – at least what he remembered of it – had been a festival of pleasure, the memory of sheer lust almost making him groan out loud again. He definitely had enjoyed it.

There was a mirror at the wall and Justin looked at himself. Did he look different? His eyes were still blue, still the eyes he’d known since he could remember. How could it be that when he felt as if he was someone else, he still looked exactly the same?

He heard laughter from the next room. His two ... friends? No, they weren’t friends.

Friends were familiar, sometimes annoying or obnoxious, but you knew them. How did Brian call them? Tricks? Were they his tricks? Or more like fuck-buddies? Could they be fuck-buddies? He'd never had them before. Apart from Daphne his sexual experience was pathetically narrow.

And now he'd fucked three people in just as many days.

Was that part of being gay? Did that mean he would have fuck-buddies now instead of relationships? No, that wasn't true. He'd seen gay men having serious relationships, had seen them happy and committed. Just because Brian didn't do relationships, it didn't mean they couldn't work.

Brian.

Justin closed his eyes and tried to push the thought away, the image of Brian with his head thrown back, throat muscles straining, his eyes closed in bliss. He'd never thought Brian could look like that, never thought Brian's eyes could be so full of contentment, of peace. Before, he'd thought that the slightly haunted look in his friend's eyes was a permanent fixture, now he knew better. But was it because of an incredible orgasm – meaning did he look that way every time he fucked – or was it because he'd fucked Justin?

Yeah, right.

Earth to Justin. Come out of dreamland and get real. As if a guy as popular and sexy as Brian Kinney would wait for him to wake up and smell the honey. Besides, Brian had once told him he never fucked a guy twice. That brought the possibility of a repeat of their night together close to zero.

Justin forced an impossible dream away. It didn't help to indulge in it. It would make him miserable and he was already feeling bad enough.

More laughter came from the other room combined with breakfast noises that made his stomach churn. The tea on the nightstand was cold, but Justin picked it up nevertheless and forced a few sips down, then straightened and took a deep breath before joining the others.

"Jennifer."

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She'd expected it to happen. She'd *not* expected it to happen so soon.

She opened her eyes again and looked right into his. "Craig. How did you find us?"

He made a slashing motion with his hand, his whole posture radiating impatience. 'You

really want to marry him?’ her sister had asked all these years ago. ‘He isn’t a nice man.’ God, Evelynne had been so right. But Evelynne was the younger of the two. Jennifer thought that listening to a fifteen year old girl was ridiculous. She should have listened anyway.

Evelynne would probably laugh in glee now – if she were still alive.

“People talk,” Craig said. “And they look at me. Can you imagine how they look at me?”

She stared at him. And wondered what she’d ever seen in this man. “No. I can’t. But to be frank, I don’t care.”

“That is just so like you.” He shook his head and there was no warmth in his gaze. He didn’t love her, she realised with sudden insight. Had he ever loved her? Or had he looked at her and judged her suitable? Pretty and sophisticated enough to carry his children? The way someone chose a brood mare – or a bitch?

Hysterical laughter almost bubbled up but she forced it down. She wouldn’t let him see her weakness. He’d only use it, if not now then maybe later.

Instead she raised her brows, kept her voice cool. “Just like me?”

“Yes,” he snapped. “Always so emotional. As if it wasn’t enough to have my son turn against me. You leave the house and everyone – EVERYONE – knows. And to top it all, Tristan suddenly wants to hire Brian Kinney as our ad man.” He laughed, harshly, coldly. “A fucking fag making our ads. I can just see how people will talk.”

Deep inside of her a five year old Jennifer raised her head and cackled at the idea of Craig being forced to work with Brian, to listen to Brian, to actually appreciate Brian’s work. As for the other problem ... “Is that all you care about?” she asked him. The question was stupid because she already knew the answer. It was glaringly obvious. This man didn’t care about other people.

He didn’t answer her question, instead he started pacing the lobby of their hotel. It was empty, she and Craig were the only people, which was probably the reason he felt comfortable enough to discuss their problems so openly. “Where is Justin?”

“Do you really want to know?” The five year old in her hoped he’d ask. Then she could tell him that she had no idea where Justin was. If Craig hated one thing more than anything else, it was losing control over something or someone. Molly had defied him by leaving, now it was Justin’s turn. And Jennifer – oh yes, let’s not forget the horrible, horrible wife.

He shook his head. “No. He made his own bed, now he has to lie in it. He’ll come crawling back in a month, mark my words.”

No, Justin wouldn't come back. But Craig in all his arrogance didn't even contemplate another outcome than the one he'd predicted. "Whatever you say," she told him, feeling old and tired all of a sudden. She wasn't even fifty yet and she felt ancient. "Why did you come here, Craig?"

Another stupid question. He still needed to control them, needed to know what was going on. It drove him mad if he didn't.

But he surprised her. "I want you to stop this nonsense and to come home."

"What?" She laughed. She didn't feel like laughing but it came out nevertheless. "Craig, I'm not coming home," she told him matter-of-factly.

He frowned. He actually frowned. This man was so self-absorbed he had no idea that their marriage was over.

Done.

Finished.

It had been sudden – and at the same time it had been a long time coming.

"What do you mean you're not coming home. Of course you are."

Unbelievable.

Jennifer laughed again, meaning it this time. "No, I'm not. Craig, this is over. *We* are over."

He gave her a long look from eyes that were unreadable.

"I mean it, Craig," she told him firmly. "Leaving the house might have been a spur of the moment kind of decision but ... I've had time to think." She made a step in his direction, hoping against hope that somewhere inside she would find the man she'd once known, the man who had held Justin on his knees and told him not to be afraid.

"We've been living separate lives for a long time. I don't know what you feel for me, but I don't love you anymore."

"What's that got to do with anything?" His voice was detached, as if he was discussing a business deal. "We are husband and wife. You are *my* wife."

"I'm also a human being," she shot back. The way he'd said 'my wife', he could have spoken of his house, his car, or any other of his belongings. "I'm not your possession."

"Don't be ridiculous, Jenn." He sighed, as if dealing with the mentally challenged. "Are

we talking divorce here?” Again, there was no emotion in his voice. “You realise that you signed a marriage agreement. You’ll be left with nothing.”

Did he really think she cared about that? Yes, that’s what he thought. That was how his mind worked, how he lived his life. It was empty and without joy and Jennifer suddenly knew that apart from disappointment and anger, she was pitying him. It was a freeing discovery.

“But I’ll be free,” she told him. “And that’s more than I had for a long time. And now, if you will excuse me, I need to take care of something.” She turned and walked towards the elevator, but his voice stopped her.

“You will hear from my attorney.”

She didn’t turn around. “Fine. I’m looking forward to it.” She stepped into the elevator. As the doors closed, she turned – and Craig was gone.

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The guy over there was totally checking him out.

Justin tried to concentrate on the painting in front of him. He’d always loved it, had loved coming here with his mom when he was still a young boy. He’d come here to think, to deal with everything that had happened these past days.

He dared another glance.

Oh yeah. No doubt about it.

He was Justin’s age, a dirty blond, taller, with blue eyes, and a very sexy smile.

God.

What the fuck was he doing?

Was he actually thinking about ...

Geez. Did he actually contemplate having sex with a complete stranger – again? His dick certainly did, because it was getting hard. Fuck. He was turning into a sex maniac. He remembered Michael Novotny telling him that gay men thought about sex every nine seconds. So maybe he was just a regular gay guy now.

Oh man.

The guy was cute. He was giving Justin another lopsided grin, then quickly turned back to the woman at his side. His wife? What had Brian once told him about straight guys

sometimes getting down and dirty with a man? Maybe that's what it was.

Justin looked at the dirty blond from the corner of his eye – only to find him standing next to him.

"I'll be waiting for you in the men's room. Ten minutes."

Before Justin could reply, he turned away and walked back to his female companion.

The men's room. Ten minutes.

Holy shit.

Holy, holy shit.

Justin looked at his watch. Ten minutes. He wasn't sure his dick could wait that long.

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"Where have you been?"

Justin stopped short when he heard his mother's voice. Why was she sitting in his suite?

"We were worried. You were gone the whole night and almost the whole day!"

He closed his eyes and reminded himself that his mother loved him. And that he loved his mother.

"You could have been hurt. Daphne was worried, too."

"Daphne and I are separated." It was a stupid thing to say but it was the first that came to Justin's mind. Besides, it was true.

"So?" His mother's voice got louder. "She's still your friend. And I'm your mother. I worry about you. I know you're going through a difficult phase–"

"You have no idea." Enough was enough. He was not going to stand here, listening to his mother analyse his life. "How could you begin to understand?"

"Because I'm not gay I have no idea?" She sounded incredulous. "That's bullshit, Justin."

He winced at his mother's language. She rarely used words like bullshit, but when she did it, she was usually beyond pissed. "Mom, I'm not a kid anymore. I don't have to tell my mother where I go."

She sighed. It was a weary sound and for the first time today he made the effort to look at her. Her shoulders were slumped and her face drawn. Shit.

“Mom. I’m sorry. But ... I’m really not a little boy anymore.”

“I know. And I’m sorry if I overreacted. I just ... I even went to see Brian.”

What the fuck?

“Brian?” The word came out sharp like a whip, and Justin took a deep breath to calm himself. But really – WHAT THE FUCK? Why on earth had his mother gone to see Brian of all people? This was so bad.

“I thought he might know where you were.” His mother ran her fingers through her hair and he suddenly realised that he did it the very same way. Especially when he was exhausted. “He was worried too.”

Worried? Really? “Why would he be worried? Brian’s got nothing to do with it.” Liar, liar, pants on fire. You want him to be worried.

“He is your friend.” His mother was staring at him now.

Yeah. Friend. Sure.

Fuck.

“I also thought he could help me understand,” she admitted.

“Understand what? How it feels to have a cock up your ass?” She stared and he shook his head. “I’m sorry, that was uncalled for. But ... why did you have to talk to Brian of all people?”

He didn’t want her to talk to Brian. He didn’t want to talk about Brian. He didn’t want to think about Brian. Why did everything have to come back to Brian?

And why couldn’t he stop thinking about Brian anyway? They were friends, sure. But it wasn’t as if he were in love with Brian. He snorted inwardly at the thought. Only a masochist would fall in love with someone like Brian Kinney.

“He was very nice.”

Brian? Nice? Okay, so that wasn’t fair. Brian could be nice. Very nice indeed. Shit. And now he was thinking about Brian’s cock, preferably up his ass. He’d just had sex with a stranger in the museum’s men’s room and once again his thoughts were wandering to Brian.

“Your father and I are getting a divorce.”

Brian with his long, graceful fingers. His full, sensuous lips, his eyes that ... what?

“Divorce?”

“He was here a few hours ago.” Her voice was so weary, he walked over to her, sat down beside her and put an arm around her shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

She laughed but there were tears in her eyes, too. “I’m not. God, Justin, I was married to this man for more than 25 years and I’m glad it’s over. I’m glad.”

Only now she burst into tears and made a sound that was so far away from gladness, Justin pulled her to him and held her while she sobbed. Was he supposed to say something? What could he say? Apart from – do you think Dad has lost his mind? Which wouldn’t be helping. Or maybe he should just tell her that he thought his father was an ass. No, that wouldn’t help either. So he just sat, his arms wrapped around his mother and held her while she wept.

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“Mom, there’s something wrong with Brian.”

Emmett looked up from the magazine he had on his lap when he heard Debbie sigh. He sighed slightly himself. So they were back to Brian. What else was new? He turned his eyes on his reading again. He wasn’t seeing a single letter, but pretending to read was way better than getting in the middle of what would most certainly turn into something nasty very soon.

“Seriously,” Michael insisted. “He’s been strange lately. Almost distracted.”

Meaning he wasn’t really paying attention to his best friend.

“I haven’t noticed a thing,” Debbie said. She was standing at the oven where her famous Italian sauce was simmering. She’d invited her ‘kids’ as she called them to have a decent meal for a change. Ted wasn’t there yet, but Emmett had come early. He loved sitting in Debbie’s house, loved the smell, the comfortable atmosphere, and more than anything he loved Debbie Novotny. She was the mother he’d always wanted. Emmett thought Michael was one lucky boy.

“That’s because you haven’t been paying attention.” Michael was agitated, he was pacing back and forth in the small living room. “I tried talking to him but he won’t tell me. It’s not like him. Mom, he’s not himself!”

Debbie sprinkled some herbs over her sauce and stirred it before she turned to Michael. "Brian has his own life, honey. You have to respect that."

"I am." Michael's voice turned into a whine and Emmett gave up pretending. He put the magazine on the near by table, folded his hands and looked up. "But I'm still worried. He seems distracted. Did you hear anything?"

His mother shook her head. "No. I didn't. Michael, Brian is a big boy. If he needs your help he'll come to you."

"I know. Usually he would but he's acting strange, Mom. I know this sounds crazy but ... if this weren't Brian we're talking about, you know, the guy with the 'fuck-them-then-kick-them-out' attitude, I'd say this is about a guy."

Emmett thought that Michael was a good guy, but he'd also thought that Michael could sometimes be a little ... well, thick, especially when it came to Brian. It was a strange friendship they shared because they were so different in so many ways. But it seemed that Michael was much more perceptive than Emmett had given him credit for.

"Really?" Debbie's interest was genuine.

Michael sat down opposite to Emmett but he was looking at his mother. "Yeah. I mean, it's hard to imagine, but he's distracted – in a very non-Brian way."

A lot more perceptive. Emmett wasn't sure he would have noticed were he in Michael's shoes. He couldn't tell Michael that Brian had confided in him after Emmett had guessed what was going on. For one, Michael would be deeply hurt and Emmett wasn't a cruel person. There was also no way he could betray Brian's trust in him. And Brian had trusted him with his most personal thoughts – him, Emmett Honeycutt, and not Michael Novotny.

Sometimes it was really hard to be a good friend.

Emmett sighed.

And Michael's head jerked around. "What?" he snapped, quite obviously offended.

Emmett held up both his hands. "I didn't say a thing." He should have continued reading his magazine. But idiot that he was, he'd put it down – and now was right in the middle of this mess.

Shit.

"No, you didn't say anything." Michael gave him a pout. An honest to God pout. It was so unattractive, Emmett had to blink. Thank God it was gone when he opened his eyes

again. He wouldn't have been able to stand it one moment longer.

"Michael," Debbie's voice was calm. A mother's voice. "You need to respect Brian's need for privacy. I'm sure he'll tell you as soon as he's comfortable with it."

Wrong. It was the wrong thing to say. Emmett could already predict Michael's reaction. And sure enough it came.

"Comfortable with? Why wouldn't he be comfortable with me? I'm his best friend."

And there it was again. The pout. He had to talk to Michael about it – and soon. Pouts were cute on kids – on some kids – but not on gay men in their mid-twenties.

The doorbell saved Debbie from immediate reply. The door opened to reveal Ted dressed in black pants and a sparkly sleeveless shirt of silvery color. It made Emmett's eyes hurt.

"Hey everyone," Ted greeted them cheerfully. He hugged Debbie and kissed her on the cheek. Ted was the oldest within their strange circle of friends. Almost thirty and prone to becoming a little flabby if he wasn't careful, he tended to exude an air of desperation. As if the fact that he was about to hit the big 3-0 in only a few months would kill any chance of finding his soulmate. Which was stupid, of course, but that was Ted Schmidt for you.

Tonight, however, Ted was all smiles and laughter.

"Wow, it smells great in here," he said as he crossed the room and sat down beside Michael. He put a hand on Michael's thigh and squeezed it. "Any ideas about tonight?"

Instant silence.

Emmett raised his brows, wondering what he'd missed. He heard Debbie move behind him, then sit down next to him. And Michael was staring at Ted as if the other man had lost his mind.

"Wh-what?" he croaked.

Ted was staring right back. Then he laughed. "Shit. I was talking about going out after dinner," he said and laughed again. To Emmett's ears it sounded forced, strange, not at all like Ted but Michael blinked and then joined the laughter.

"Fuck, Teddy, you scared me for a moment," Michael said, bumping his shoulder against Ted's. Emmett saw something flicker through Ted's eyes and frowned. What on earth was going on? It was no secret that Teddy had had a serious crush on Michael years back. But Emmett had been sure that was over and done with. Could it be that he was wrong, that maybe Ted was still mooning over Michael? Good God.

Please, no.

Please, please, no.

Emmett prayed to any deity listening. Because no way could there be a happy ending. Michael was Ted's friend but if Emmett was sure of one thing, it was the fact that Michael felt no attraction towards Ted whatsoever. Ted was simply not his type. He was going for the tall, dangerous, unattainable, like – say – Brian Kinney for example.

In the end Ted would be alone and hurting and – no doubt about it – crying on Emmett shoulder for hours on end.

Thanks, but no thanks. Emmett was not looking forward to playing emotional nursemaid. His own love life – or lack thereof – was pathetic enough. It seemed the only one in their little group who was getting some on a regular basis was aforementioned Brian Kinney. Oh, and Justin, of course. But he was straight – or not – and married – and wasn't that a depressing thought to make for a bright and shiny evening?

Emmett shook himself. Enough with the gloom and doom. He looked up to find Ted gazing at him steadily. "What?" he asked. Michael wasn't sitting anymore. He had stood up and was now standing next to Debbie talking to her in hushed tones, accompanied by agitated hand movement.

Ted grinned. "Nothing."

Emmett narrowed his eyes. "Did you take anything?"

"Of course not. Why would I take anything?" Ted seemed genuinely hurt.

"Teddy, no offense, but you're unusually upbeat tonight. Chipper even."

"What? I can't be in a good mood?"

Good mood? If Ted's mood improved even a bit, he'd fly through the roof.

"Sure," Emmett said lightly. He was not going to fight with Ted in Debbie's house.

"What do you mean Brian isn't coming tonight?" Michael's high-pitched voice brought anything else to a halt and Emmett and Ted turned to look at mother and son at the stove. Debbie was calmly stirring her sauce while Michael stood, arms crossed.

"He called earlier," Debbie informed him, "that something came up. He'll try to join us later but he said not to wait for him and that he'd probably not make it anyway."

"What kind of shitty excuse is that?" Michael cried. He uncrossed his arms and threw

them in the air.

“An excuse we have to accept,” his mother said.

“But don’t you see? That’s what I was talking about before. He’s never skipped one of our family dinners.”

“He has,” Debbie replied.

“Yeah, when his father died.” Michael snorted. “Did anyone die tonight?”

“He doesn’t owe us an explanation.”

Emmett wondered how she did it, how Debbie managed to stay so calm. He would have whacked Michael over the head by now.

“Of course he does.” Michael wasn’t open to reason. Which was nothing new when it came to Brian. “We’re his family. And I’m his best friend. He can’t just stay away like that.”

Debbie slowly put her spoon down. “Honey.” She spoke the word as if talking to a small child. “I really wish you’d go out and find someone who I’m sure is waiting for you, instead of wasting all this love and devotion on someone who,” she stopped, clearly struggling to find the right words, “isn’t going to-“

“Stop.” Michael held up a hand. “First of all – that’s nonsense. I’m not looking for my soulmate, because that’s nonsense, too. As for Brian. He is my best friend and best friends turn into lovers all the time. You can’t say that’s never gonna happen with Brian and me.”

Emmett bit his tongue. A part of him wanted to speak up and shout that, no, Brian would never fall in love with Michael – and not just because he was head over heels in love with Justin Taylor. Another part of Emmett just wanted to run. He hated seeing Michael so desperate. It made him feel deeply uncomfortable. As did the fact that from the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of Ted staring at Michael with an intensity that he’d never seen before.

Aw, shit.

Debbie sighed. “No, I can’t. But I’m your mother, Michael, and I want you to be happy.”

“I am,” Michael insisted. “Or I would be if you’d stop seeing my friendship with Brian as something bad.”

Debbie looked at her son for another moment, then shook her head. She picked up her spoon and continued stirring her sauce. “Can someone set the table, please? Food’ll be

ready in a few minutes.”

Michael glared at her, then turned away to get plates.

Emmett looked at Ted so they could exchange an eyeroll. But Ted was still staring at Michael. And the way he did it sent Emmett’s stomach into freefall.

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The door flew open and hit the wall with a bang.

“What the-“

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Craig narrowed his eyes at the intruder, then, very slowly, put his six hundred dollar pen – a birthday gift from his wife or rather soon-to-be ex-wife – down. It wouldn’t help if he lost his temper – yet.

“Would you be so kind to shut the door,” he said. “I don’t want the entire staff paying witness to your childish outburst.” Sure enough, Elaine, his very capable but also very nosy secretary(,) was craning her neck to get a better look of what was happening in her boss’ office. It was late, but Craig had asked her to stay because they were right in the middle of finalizing a deal. Working late hours was nothing unusual in his Craig’s kind of business.

“I don’t give a fuck what they think,” Justin snapped, his eyes blazing with fury. “I just spent hours with mom who was crying her heart out because of you.”

It was just so typical of his son. It was one thing Craig had always hated, this tendency of his son to get too emotional about things. Time and again he’d tried to tell Justin that it only made you vulnerable, but had he listened?

“What happens between your mother and me is no concern of yours,” Craig said calmly. Jennifer was already a distant memory, a chapter of his life done and over with. He only hoped the lawyers would be able to work out the details without bothering a judge.

“No concern of –“ Justin shook his head as if he couldn’t believe his ears. “I’m your son.”

“Yes,” Craig agreed, stood and walked to the door. He closed it, but not without glaring at Elaine. He turned to Justin. “You are my son. Unfortunately these past weeks you haven’t acted like the Justin I know.”

“Yeah? Well, you haven’t behaved like a father, either,” Justin shot back, not backing down in the least. A part of Craig was proud. This was his son, the boy he had taught

and made a man. A larger part, however, was deeply annoyed by this – whatever it was. A rebellion? No, Justin was a little old to rebel against his father.

Craig sighed. Important papers on his desk were waiting for his signature. Justin barging in here with murder in his eyes was extremely inconvenient. “Look, Justin, how about we meet for breakfast tomorrow?”

“I don’t want to wait. Besides, what I want to say won’t take more than five minutes.” Justin straightened. “Mom told me you’re getting a divorce?”

“That’s right.” Why sugarcoat the inevitable? “She walked out on me, if you remember.”

“Yeah. I am also not seeing any sign that you tried to hold her back.”

“Why would I?” Jennifer had made her decision. What more was there to say?

Justin shook his head and laughed. It was a short, disbelieving sound. “Because you – maybe – love her?”

Love? What had love to do with anything? “Love is overrated.” He told his son what he believed with all his heart. “Jennifer and I had a good marriage for a long time. It’s more than most people get. She wants it to be over now. Fine. I’m not standing in her way.”

Justin laughed again. “God, you’re such an asshole. I can’t believe you were the hero of my youth.”

Craig had been Justin’s hero. It should make a father’s heart beat faster. Craig’s heart continued beating a slow and steady rhythm. But then, it wasn’t everyday he got called an asshole. “Watch your language,” he snapped at his son.

Justin rolled his eyes. “Not only are you an asshole, you’re also a loser. God. I can’t believe I dreaded telling you.”

“Telling me?” Not that he did really care what Justin wanted to tell him.

A knock on his door interrupted them, and a moment later Elaine’s head appeared. “Sorry, Mr. Taylor, but these papers,” she indicated his desk, “have to be ready in ten minutes.”

“I’m aware of that,” Craig said evenly, but with an edge Elaine wouldn’t miss. She nodded quickly and shut the door again. “As you can see,” he went on, this time directing the words toward Justin, “I’m busy.”

“Yeah.” There was a strange smile playing around Justin’s lips. “Alright. I can make it quick. Daph and I are getting a divorce.” He paused, no doubt trying to gauge Craig’s reaction to that piece of news, then went on, “Oh, and ... I’m also gay.”

And Craig laughed. He couldn't help it, it was so ridiculous. He saw Justin stare at him and laughed even harder. "What? Did you think you would shock me?"

"It's the truth."

Craig shook his head, more laughter bubbling up. "Don't be absurd."

"I'm glad it amuses you. However, it's still the truth. I've fucked three men in the past three days if that helps any."

And like that Craig stopped laughing. "You are insane," he managed.

"No," Justin said calmly, shaking his head. "I'm just gay."

"No, you're not."

Justin laughed. "Yes, I am."

"Is this supposed to be funny?" Craig snarled.

"No." Justin sobered. "I just thought you should know the truth. I'm gay, and I'm not going to hide it."

Craig stared at the man in front of him. "You are insane," he snarled. "Gay? How can you be ... God." He turned away, unable to look at Justin a moment longer. It was all he could do not to throw up. And then a thought occurred and he whirled back to his son. "Kinney. It's his fault, isn't it? Kinney with his perversion is playing with your head. He's confusing you. You're not gay, Justin. And I'm going to kill this pervert."

"Brian has nothing to do with it," Justin said firmly, "and you're not going to lay a finger on him. Do you understand? Should anything happen to Brian, I will tell the police. Are we clear on that?"

"Don't you see?" Craig stepped forward and reached out with his hand but Justin evaded his touch. "He's already messing with you. Telling you that you're gay. What a joke."

"He did no such thing. As for being gay – I found that out all by myself."

Craig's head was pounding as his world was spinning out of control. His daughter was missing, his wife was divorcing him and now his son was gay? It was like a sickness spreading through this city. Through this country. Through the world.

"Dad?"

“Don’t call me that,” Craig snarled and walked behind his desk. No way he was standing close to this ... this ... freak.

“I’m still Justin. I’m still your son.”

“You’re not my son,” Craig bit out. “If you insist on this perverted lifestyle, then you’re no son of mine.”

He saw Justin flinch – and felt nothing. This ... freak of nature had touched another man in a way a man should only touch a woman. The idea made Craig want to throw up. He forced the nausea down. “I want you to leave now and I don’t want to see you again – unless you come to your senses. Then, maybe, we can talk about your job here.”

Justin laughed. “What? You think this is about the job? Dad-“

“Don’t call me that,” Craig snapped but Justin ignored him.

“- this was never about the job. In fact, I hate the job. I wanted to become an artist. But you wanted me to go to Dartmouth and I wanted you to be proud of me. I did it for you.”

As any good son should. Only, this man wasn’t his son. This deviant couldn’t be of his genes. No way. “Go. Leave. Or I have to call security.”

Justin stared at him. “God. I’m glad Mom is divorcing you. She should have left you years ago.”

Craig didn’t care. All he wanted was to get rid of this man. Of this aberration. “Leave,” he said sharply. “Now.”

“I’m going,” Justin said. “It’s your loss.”

With that he turned and left the office. Craig felt another wave of nausea. And he thought of Brian Kinney. He’d known from the start that associating with this man was bad for Justin. And he’d been right.

Craig closed his eyes and rubbed his aching temples. Then he opened his eyes again and reached for the phone.

++++++

What the fuck was he doing?

Brian wondered if he was losing his mind. Maybe that would explain why he was searching the clubs and bars of Pittsburgh admittedly pitiful gay life for Justin fucking Taylor. He could be sitting in Debbie’s house right now, enjoying a plate of her famous pasta – but no. No, Brian – the idiot – Kinney was not getting his belly stuffed. He wasn’t

even getting his dick sucked. In fact he was so far from getting his dick sucked, he could have been in a monastery.

Okay, bad thought. Besides, in a monastery he'd probably have a pretty good chance of some repressed monk going down on him.

Fuck. He was worse off than he'd thought when his thoughts were on that particular path. And where was Justin anyway? And why – oh why – was he looking for him. It wasn't as if Justin would appreciate being found. Brian could most certainly guarantee that much. No, Justin would probably be pissed – and rightfully so.

Because being stalked by a one night stand was so not hot.

Double fuck.

Brian stopped in the middle of the street, gay men and women walking around him, and took a deep breath. Was he losing his mind? Was that a side effect of being in love? Because – if it was, it only added to what Brian already knew.

Love sucked.

So why the fuck had it happened to him?

The answer was easy. Because a force of nature had happened.

Because Justin Taylor had happened.

One day Brian had been fine. The next – wham-bam – there he was. Justin Taylor, blue eyes and a big smile, and Brian had been a goner. The funny part was, he hadn't even realised it until Justin had kissed him. No, scratch that. Justin had seduced him and for a first-timer he'd been pretty convincing. Not that Brian had put up a fight. One touch of those sweet lips and his fate was sealed.

It had been lust at first sight – or so Brian had thought. And then, for a while, he'd been convinced that he was infatuated with the idea of Justin

Of course, he'd known that Justin would freak. So he'd steeled himself against the anger and accusations he knew would come. Only – he was defenseless when it came to Justin. God, he was so screwed.

Brian shook his head and moved on. He wasn't even sure he was still searching for Justin. No, that wasn't true. He knew exactly why he was looking for the Justin. Because – tada – Brian Kinney, who everyone thought so cool and unshakeable, was jealous.

Yeah, look world. He was jealous.

Jesus fucking Christ.

Brian Kinney was unshakeable no more.

Someone bumped into him and he swore, glaring at the man he had never seen before, which here on Liberty Avenue meant something. Not that he usually knew everyone but the guy stood out somehow. Maybe because he actually looked straight? Yeah, right. What bullshit.

He walked on and –

Whoa.

His vision was blurry.

He blinked. And blinked again but it wasn't clearing up.

And why was he feeling woozy all of a sudden?

Brian reached out and his hand connected with a wall. He rounded a corner and leaned against it.

Damn, his legs were wobbly. And he hadn't even taken anything.

And why was he sliding down?

Was he sitting in a dirty alley?

Brian blinked again, but his vision was blurring more and more and it finally faded completely. He tried to concentrate on his breathing when panic set in, and he could feel his heart racing in his chest.

And then he didn't feel anything because just like that he fell to the side and lay there, just another body in another dark and dirty alley. The last thing he thought was that now Justin would never know how much he loved him.

Carl Horvath cursed when his telephone rang in the middle of the night. He cursed even more when he looked at his bedside clock and it read 2.30 a.m, and the caller ID on his phone told him it was the department.

"God dammit." He snatched up the phone. "You better have a damn good reason to call me at this ungodly hour."

"Horvath." The voice was sharp, and Carl knew he was screwed. Nightly calls from the

department never were a good thing. But combined with that voice Carl knew something bad had happened.

“Yeah.”

“Get your ass down here. Someone tried to kill Brian Kinney tonight.”

“What?” He scrambled out of bed, phone wedged between ear and shoulder and stumbled over his pajama pants as he shrugged them off while moving towards the chair where he’d thrown his clothes merely a few hours ago.

“As far as we know someone injected a still undefined substance in his thigh. He broke down in an alley and was found by – brace yourself – a gay bear with a leather fetish.”

Carl sighed at the laughter in the voice of the nightshift operator. Why, oh why had he told them to contact him immediately should anything connected to the Brian Kinney case turn up? Stupid asshole he was, he’d never expected it to happen in the middle of the night.

“Where is he?” he asked, pulling on his pants. He zipped up and closed the button, then slipped his right arm into a shirt.

“Central. Room – let me check. ... Ah. Here it is – he is in ICU right now. Non responsive.”

“Thanks. I’m heading over there right now.”

The connection was broken and Carl sighed again. He had his shirt inside out, so he pulled it off and put it on right. So it hadn’t been a hate-crime after all. Kinney had been targeted intentionally. Which meant the sassy waitress at the Liberty diner had been right and he had been wrong. God dammit.

He slipped his shoes on, sat down to tie them, breathing hard. He really should start using the gym, and maybe cut back on the red meat. His daughter was right, he had been gaining too much weight lately. But ever since his wife died, Carl hadn’t been paying a lot of attention to his private life, his eating habits – anything, really, aside from his job. And now his job had led him into a world he usually stayed far away from.

A world that had Debbie Novotny in it.

Who had accused him of being homophobic.

God dammit.

The worst part was, Carl wasn’t sure if she might be right or not. He liked to think that he wasn’t such a prick but then he thought about the jokes usually flowing around at the

police station, thought about the way he had laughed with the others when they'd arrested that transvestite last year for sex in public. He hadn't said anything, hadn't done anything to stop the humiliation the man had suffered that night.

Maybe he really **was** a homophobe.

Carl sighed and stood, putting on his holster, then took his wallet, keys and badge and finally slipped into his trusted coat that had seen better days. He should probably replace it, but his late wife had given it to him, and he had a hard time letting it go. He looked around. Or anything else connected to her. He was still sleeping in **their** bed, still had the old sofa with the hole in the left cushion from the time his daughter had tried burning her math book.

Carl left his apartment, ignored the elevator and took the stairs instead. Going down wasn't really any kind of work-out, but at least he was moving. That was something, wasn't it?

No, it wasn't. And he was a loser. A loser who was growing fat, and who was getting old, and who was feeling sorry for himself way too often.

And who might be a homophobe.

His car was parked right in front of his house. Carl got in, fastened his seat-belt and started the ignition.

He might be old and a loser, but he was also a good police officer. And he would find out who was after Kinney – and he'd prove to that red-haired devil that not every cop in this town was a prejudiced asshole, or that even if he was, he'd do his best despite it.

++++++

"Hello." Joan Kinney did her best to give the nurse at the information desk a smile. "Can you please tell me where I can find a patient of yours?"

The nurse whose nametag read 'Saundra' looked more through her than at her. "Name?"

"Kinney. Brian Kinney." She had always loved the name Andrew. But Jack had insisted on Brian. So it was Brian – discussion closed.

Saundra clicked on her computer, then turned bleary eyes towards Joan and said in a monotone voice, "He's in ICU. Are you a relative? Only relatives are permitted there."

"I'm his mother." Joan left out the part where she hadn't been his mother for years, or where he'd never tried to contact her, ever since the day he'd told them he was ... No, she couldn't even think the word without feeling the urge to cross herself. Several times.

But when the police had called at seven o'clock in the morning and told her that her son was in the hospital, she'd gone without thinking twice.

"Well, it's down there," the nurse pointed to a long hallway. "Keep to the left. You can't miss the signs. You have to ring the bell when you're at the door."

"Thank you," Joan said politely but the nurse was already turning away, already had her eyes back on the computer, so she went down the hallway not sure what she was doing here. The last time she'd gone to a hospital because one of her children were sick was when Claire had suffered from a burst appendix at the age of seven. And of course when Jack was diagnosed with cancer, but afterwards she'd gone and celebrated.

After that she'd prayed eight rosaries, burdened with the guilt she felt for wishing her husband would die sooner.

Joan came to a stop in front of the closed doors marked 'ICU – do not enter' and sighed. She felt completely out of place. What was she supposed to do? Ah, yes, the nurse had said to ring the bell. So she did that and waited. After a few minutes a shadow appeared and then the door opened, revealing a young woman in scrubs, also wearing a hat and latex gloves. "Yes? Can I help you?"

"Uhm." Joan suddenly felt as if speech had left her. She had to lick her lips, her mouth dry as the desert. "I ... I was told ... I mean, I got a call ... and they told me that my son is here."

The young woman looked at her solemnly. "What's your son's name?"

"Brian." Even though she had wanted him to be Andrew. "Brian Kinney."

"Oh, yes. Mr. Kinney. Yes, he is here. Do you want to see him or do you want to talk to the doctor first?"

Joan didn't know what to say. What was expected? She had no idea. "The doctor?" she said, hoping that was the right thing to say. Wasn't a mother supposed to see her son first?

"That's fine. Please wait a moment, I'll get him for you."

The door closed again and Joan was on her own, and still without any idea why she'd come in the first place. She and Brian had been close once but that was long gone. It was partly her fault, Joan admitted in the silence of the empty hospital hallway. She'd known that her husband wasn't a nice person, she'd known that he was rough when it came to Brian, she'd also heard when Jack had beaten his son.

Their son.

And she'd also seen the silent question in Brian's eyes. Those eyes had been looking at her wanting to know why she wasn't helping him. It was a question she had asked herself – and yet had to find an answer for.

But despite everything Brian had managed to get good grades, had even gotten a scholarship to a great school like Dartmouth. And for a while he'd had this very nice girlfriend, Joan had forgotten her name, but she'd been a blonde, from a good family, very pretty.

And then – all of a sudden – everything had fallen apart.

She often wondered if maybe it was God's punishment for her, for not helping Brian when he'd needed her most. She had even consulted her priest about it. Father Timothy had told her that God didn't punish people that way, but Joan couldn't shake off the feeling that with her he'd made an exception. How else could you explain that her sweet boy, the child she had carried inside of her for nine months, turned out to be something completely unspeakable?

Joan was so deep in thought that she almost jumped when the door in front of her opened again, this time revealing an older woman of Asian descent, also in scrubs and with a face that spoke of long hours and responsibility. This had to be the doctor.

"Mrs. Kinney?"

Joan nodded. "Yes."

The woman held out her hand. It was scrubbed clean, with very short nails and long, graceful fingers. "I'm doctor Wu, your son is my patient."

"Hello, doctor Wu," Joan replied and the two women shook. "How is Brian?"

"Your son was found unconscious and brought here in an ambulance. His breathing was labored, his heart rate very slow, and he was non-responsive when we tried to rouse him. We couldn't find any injuries other than signs of an intra-muscular injection in his right thigh. Unfortunately we haven't been successful so far to find out what exactly was injected into his system."

"Are you ... telling me that my son was taking drugs?" It was hard to believe, the Brian she knew would never ... but then, she didn't really know Brian. Not anymore.

Doctor Wu shook her head. "No. It's a so far unknown substance. We also have to take into consideration that only some weeks ago there was also an attack."

"What?" This was news for her. An attack. "Brian was attacked before?"

The doctor blinked, clearly surprised by the question. Joan could imagine what the other

woman was thinking. She was probably wondering what kind of mother didn't know such a thing from her only son. Joan closed her eyes for a moment. God, how could they have drifted so far apart? They'd been so close once.

"Yes. He was attacked and badly beaten," the doctor confirmed. "But I only know what I read in his file. If you want to know more you have to talk to the police. Detective Horvath..." Doctor Wu trailed off and her eyes focussed on something behind Joan. "And talking about the devil," she said with a laugh and held out her hand for another person. "Detective Horvath. We were just talking about you."

Joan turned and saw a man around fifty, a little overweight, wearing a cheap polyester suit and a rumpled coat Columbo would have been proud of. His eyes were bloodshot, and the stubble on his chin suggested that he hadn't shaved for at least two days.

"Doc." His voice was warm as he shook hands with the doctor. "Always nice to see you. How is the patient?"

"I was just talking to Mr. Kinney's mother," Doctor Wu said and introduced Joan. "Unfortunately Mr. Kinney is still non-responsive, so there isn't a lot I can tell you yet. We also have no idea what might be causing his current condition, other than the injection spot we found."

The detective sighed. He looked as if he needed strong coffee and at least six hours of uninterrupted sleep. On the other hand, he also looked remarkably the way Jack had after a night with too much booze and some cheap slut he'd met at the pub down the street. She wondered which one was right.

"Mrs. Kinney?"

Joan blinked as she found the detective's gaze focussed on her. "Yes?"

"I'd really like to talk to you as soon as it's convenient for you," he said, giving her a tired smile. "I'm sorry if this seems like an ambush—"

"No," she interrupted him. "No, it's fine. I ... " her gaze flickered to the doctor who was still standing close. "I just ... want to see him first." Which was a lie and she hoped that God would forgive it. But how could she, a mother, tell these people, these strangers, that seeing Brian was the last thing she wanted? That by looking at him, being close to him, she would come face to face with her guilt and her failures as a mother.

"Of course." He checked his watch, then sighed. "I've been up for a while so I tend to forget that it's still very early in the morning."

"If you want to follow me, Mrs. Kinney?" the doctor asked.

"Here is my card." Detective Horvath held it out to her. "Please, give me a call so we

can set up an appointment.”

Joan took the card, nodded and followed the doctor into ICU, and while the door closed behind her, she wished she could turn and run – and forget that Brian had ever been born.

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When Ben stepped into his office at nine a.m. that very morning Cynthia and Johnny were already waiting for him, both wearing identical expressions of worry.

“What happened?” he asked, not even bothering with a greeting.

“It’s Brian.” Johnny, who Ben thought was having a not so discreet crush on Brian, was quicker than Cynthia who was clearly trying to fight tears.

Oh God.

“What? What happened?”

“The police called because we were on his list of emergency contacts,” Cynthia said. “He was attacked last night. Oh, Ben, someone stuck a needle into him and he’s still unconscious.”

“What?” It sounded as if it had been taken from a spy novel, and Ben had a hard time believing it was true, but just by looking at Cynthia and Johnny he knew it was. “How is he? I mean, apart from being unconscious.”

Cynthia dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. “They don’t know. Because they have no idea what was injected they can’t give a prognosis. There ... w-was a Detective Horvath on the phone a-and he wants t-to talk to y-you.”

Jesus.

Cynthia was usually a very matter-of-fact person, an excellent assistant, and in the six years they’d been working together Ben hadn’t seen her cry once, so the tears and the sobbing he saw now made the hairs in the back of his neck stand up straight.

“Did this detective leave a number where I can reach him?” he asked.

Cynthia sniffed. “Actually, because you said that you’d be here around nine, I ... told him to come by. He should be here any minute now.” She gave him an apologetic smile that was completely unnecessary.

“Hey,” he smiled back at her. “It’s okay to be worried. I’m worried too.”

"I'm worried too," Johnny chimed in.

Of course he was. Ben nodded but inwardly he rolled his eyes. Johnny could be such a queen sometimes. His worry about Brian certainly couldn't match his and Cynthia's who had been friends with Brian for years.

"Yes, we know you are," Cynthia said and patted his shoulder. Johnny made a big show of dabbing his tears, then sobbed dramatically and left the room without another word or glance.

Ben watched the door close and rolled his eyes – this time not just mentally. "God. If he weren't such a gifted ad man, I'd throw him out."

Cynthia laughed tearfully. "If I didn't know you're gay, I'd think you were homophobic."

He shook his head. "I'm not. But Johnny is too much. This isn't about being gay, he's just so annoying sometimes. The effeminate types never did it for me."

Cynthia laughed again. "I know. Brian can't stand him either. I can't believe Johnny actually harbors the hope that Brian might choose him one day." She shook her head, then turned it when there was a knock at the door.

"I hope you are decent in there," Johnny singsonged which had Ben and Cynthia exchange another eyeroll. The door opened. "And here is that big, bad," Johnny lowered his voice at that, "detective."

Ben suppressed a laugh at the detective's uncomfortable expression and held out his hand. "I'm Ben Bruckner." He nodded toward Cynthia. "And that's my personal assistant, Miss Mondalvo."

"I'm Carl Horvath," the detective introduced himself. He was an incredibly bad dresser. Ben was no fashion model himself but he had a definite aversion to polyester. But he'd bet big bucks that the coat was of Horvath's own choosing.

Horvath and Cynthia shook hands. "Nice to meet you," the man said and gave Cynthia an extra friendly smile. "I appreciate you seeing me on such short notice."

"No problem," Ben said and motioned Horvath to a chair. Cynthia sat down too, as did Ben. "Brian isn't just an employee of this firm, he is our friend. We want to help. However, I don't see how we could."

"You both know that Mr. Kinney was mugged a few weeks back?"

"Yes." They both nodded. Yes, they knew, even though 'mugged' was a nice word for the way someone had beaten up Brian. "I understand that it wasn't really a mugging," Ben added.

Horvath gave him a long, unreadable look. “We’re still not sure about that,” he said finally. He pulled a battered pad and a pen from his inner pocket.

“Will Brian be okay?” Cynthia was wringing her hands. “And will this take long? I want to go and see him.”

Horvath shook his head. “I’m sorry. He’s still in ICU – only family is allowed there.”

Cynthia’s eyes flashed. “We’re his family. His relatives don’t care.”

The detective opened his pad and wrote something down. “Hm,” he made. “Why do you think that, Miss ... Mondalvo?”

“I don’t think that,” she snapped. “I know it. His mother is a bitch, an ice cold woman who couldn’t care less if he’s alive or dead.”

“Cyn,” Ben said quietly even though he knew she was right. He’d met Joan Kinney only once – and it had been enough for a lifetime. It was only a few weeks after Brian had started working for him. She’d stumbled into the office, quite obviously drunk, demanding to see her son. As soon as Brian had turned up she’d shouted at him, told him things no mother should say to her son. Ben didn’t remember everything but he wouldn’t forget her telling Brian that she wished he had never been born.

Brian had just stood there, stoically letting her rant. When she was done he called her a cab and had made sure she got home safely. Ben wasn’t sure he would have been able to do that.

“I’m only telling the truth,” Cynthia cried. “She doesn’t care for him.”

Ben sighed. “I know.” He looked back to the detective. “Brian’s relationship with his family is complicated. But he has friends. Not just us.”

Horvath nodded. “I’ve already spoken with some of them after the first attack.” Ben saw something like a smile on the detective’s face but it was gone quickly. He wondered what that meant.

“Mr. Bruckner,” Horvath turned his gaze on Ben. “Can you imagine anyone who would want to hurt Mr. Kinney?”

Ben’s automatic response would have been a firm ‘no’. But he paused, and looked at Cynthia. She was staring at him with wide eyes and he knew she was thinking the same thing he did. Ben nodded and looked at Horvath. “Actually,” he said slowly, “there is someone I’m thinking of right now.”

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Justin was out of breath when he finally reached Brian's apartment door and cursed the elevator for once again being out of order. He really should convince Brian to move into another house. They'd been talking about it before, but Brian had refused. He was saving his money for the apartment of his dreams, he'd said and Justin had let it go. But now, panting and sweating, Justin made a mental note to bring up the subject as soon as possible.

That thought brought Justin to a full stop.

It wasn't as if he could just talk to Brian as if nothing had happened. He couldn't just walk in, ask him out for a beer and they'd talk about Daphne and the baby and just be friends.

Because they were no longer friends.

Not anymore.

Now they were lovers.

Fuck buddies.

Whatever.

Brian was the first man he'd ever had sex with. And what sex that had been. Justin had enjoyed the fuckfest with the two hot guys he'd met at Babylon. He'd also enjoyed the quickie with the guy at the museum. But Brian ... Brian was something entirely different. Justin wasn't quite sure why it was so different – yet. He only knew it was. And he also knew that he wanted it again. And again.

But no. He couldn't go there. Not now. Maybe not ever. Besides, he'd come with a purpose, not to discuss their night with each other. That would come later. Maybe. Possibly.

Justin reached out to know when the door opened.

And revealed ... none other than Joan Kinney.

Brian's mother.

Brian's mother?

"What the fuck are you doing here?" The words were out before Justin could censor them, before he could even think.

Mrs. Kinney let her brow wander up in a fashion that was eerily familiar because he'd so

often seen Brian doing it. “Justin.” If she was equally surprised to see him, it didn’t show. She seemed completely composed, the cool, icy woman Justin had met several times when he and Brian had started college together. He had never liked her then.

He liked her even less now.

Because now he knew what she had done. When he’d first met her he and Brian had known each other no more than two weeks. Years had passed since then. He and Brian had spent a lot of time talking. And now he knew.

“Mrs. Kinney,” he said, trying to peek around her. Where was Brian? Why was his mother here? And then a thought struck. A thought that chilled his blood. “Has something happened to Brian?”

God. Please no. No.

Her expression didn’t change, but Justin thought there was a very slight tremor in her voice when she said, “Brian is at the hospital. He was attacked last night. The police called me and I came here to get him some things he might need.” She turned slightly and looked back into the apartment. “Only, I don’t seem to know ... what ... I mean...”

Hospital? Attacked?

Oh God. He was too late.

The reason he’d come here today was to warn Brian. He didn’t – not really – believe that his father would hurt Brian, but still. Craig had been so furious last night, Justin wanted to make sure Brian wouldn’t underestimate Justin’s father. Should their paths ever cross.

And now it had happened.

Again.

And there was Brian’s mother of all people, waiting for him to say something.

“What ... I mean ... is it bad?”

“He is still unconscious. Someone injected him with ... something. That’s all they know. They haven’t found what is causing his current state.”

Brian was unconscious. Still unconscious. He had been injected with something.

Oh God.

And dammit, they had contacted his mother. The one person Justin knew Brian wouldn’t want at his sick bed.

The one person looking at him expectantly.

What was he supposed to say to her? He could start out with ‘Said anything hurtful to your son lately? Yeah, she’d surely appreciate hearing that.

Fuck it.

“Have you seen him?” he asked instead, forcing himself to be friendly. It wouldn’t help Brian if Justin fought with his mother. Even though every cell in his body urged him to tell her exactly what he thought of her, and how much he wanted her to leave this apartment. She had no right to be here, no right to act as if she cared for her son.

“Yes.” Joan nodded, turning around and leaving the door open, clearly expecting Justin to follow. “He ... I barely recognized him. He’s older. And ... I haven’t seen him for a long time.”

Yeah, and whose fault is that, you old bitch? But Justin didn’t say that aloud. Instead he closed the door behind him and looked around, and was instantly bombarded by memories of Brian and himself naked on the couch, of ripping Brian’s shirt, of trailing his tongue along Brian’s hard torso, of opening his fly, of reaching for his already rock hard penis, of looking up and ...

... finding Joan Kinney staring at him.

“What?” God, was he blushing? Of course he was, he could feel the warmth spreading all over his face and neck. Even his ears were hot. Fuck. Mrs. Kinney would take one look at him and know.

“I was wondering ...,” she gave him a very strange look and Justin felt himself blush even more, “... what should I pack for him?”

Or maybe she wouldn’t know because she wasn’t like his own mother, whose warning bells would be ringing like crazy by now. No, Mrs. Kinney wasn’t like Jennifer. Jennifer loved him, no matter what. She had said so and Justin had no reason to doubt that, because – despite what she’d done when she’d first discovered he might be gay - her actions spoke for her. Mrs. Kinney had thrown her son out when he told her he was gay. She had told Brian that he would burn in hell for it, that he was damned and no son of hers.

And this woman was standing right in front of Justin and still looking as if he held the answers to a question he had forgotten entirely. Damn. What had she asked him? He let his eyes sweep around and saw an open drawer. Right! She’s wanted to know what to pack for Brian.

“Well,” Justin cleared his throat, “how long will they keep him?”

How long will they keep him?

What kind of stupid question was that? She had told him that Brian was still unconscious, that the cause of it was still unknown. Of course she couldn't know how long Brian would be in the hospital.

"I don't know," she said at the same moment. "They couldn't give me any information about that."

She looked so lost, standing there, in an apartment that was completely foreign for her even though it belonged to his son and for one moment, one split part of a second, Justin felt something akin to pity. But the next moment it was gone, wiped away by the knowledge that it was her own stupid fault for being a narrow-minded bigot.

Justin took a deep breath. "I can pack some things for him. And get them over there."

Something like hope flickered in her eyes. "Could you?" Her voice was breathless. "They only let family in."

"That's no problem," he told her. He'd tell them he was Brian's brother.

"Are you sure?"

She sounded almost happy. Justin turned away from her. If he looked at her for only another moment he'd say something he'd rather not. She wasn't worth it, he decided.

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"Well." She seemed to hesitate. "They gave me Brian's key from his things." Her voice got firmer as she spoke. Colder, too. "And I felt it was my Christian duty to do what is expected."

Christian duty. Expected. God. Justin felt cold in her presence, the way anyone would in close proximity to an ice queen.

"Hey," he said and kept his voice light. "No worries. I'll take care of it. You can go home and—" Forget about the fact that you ever had a son, he wanted to say, but instead he added, "Pray. You know, for Brian."

"Yes." She seemed greatly relieved. "Yes, I will do that. Pray for his soul, too." She turned and Justin heard her put something metallic on the counter. It had to be Brian's key. He still kept his eyes firmly on Brian's socks.

"I'm sure he'll appreciate it." Brian wouldn't give a damn. And rightfully so. Justin wished he could erase Joan Kinney from Brian's memory. Unfortunately that was impossible.

But maybe he could make sure she would never hurt him again – at least he could try. As a first step he would keep her as far away from Brian as possible.

Justin heard the door open. “Oh,” Joan stopped and Justin did look at her then. “Congratulations.” When he frowned, she clarified. “On your wedding. I heard about from a friend whose husband is playing golf with your father.”

Another asshole, no doubt.

Justin wanted to say thank you and have her gone. He opened his mouth but it wasn't thanks that slipped out. Instead he said: “You're too late. We're about to get a divorce.”

Of course, now she stared at him again and didn't leave.

Yes, it really was his lucky week. Then he thought of Brian and quickly rewinded the statement. He really didn't have any reason to complain. Compared to Brian Justin's life was a slow, steady stream.

“I'm so sorry to hear that,” Joan was saying now, but there was also disapproval in her voice. Right. She was a Catholic, they didn't believe in divorce. Or abortion. Or being gay. Justin wondered if maybe they weren't believing in life either.

“Yeah, well, shit happens and all that.” A sick part of Justin enjoyed seeing Mrs. Kinney flinch at his words. That's right, bitch. We're all sinners. And know what? You're the worst of them all despite all your prayers.

“Maybe you and your lovely wife will find a way to work things out.”

His lovely wife?

And once again, instead of just saying ‘yes’, he opened his mouth and out came: “No, we won't. You see, I just recently discovered that I'm gay. Which makes staying married with my lovely wife a lie I'm not willing to live.”

Now she wasn't just staring at him. She's also had stopped breathing. It was awesome. She had literally stopped drawing in air, even though her mouth was open. One moment later her mouth snapped shut and her face turned first red, then purple.

“That is a very vile thing to say,” she said.

“No,” Justin replied calmly. “It's the only the truth.”

Again she stared. But she wasn't cold now. Justin could see emotions in her eyes. They were flashing hot first, then came disbelief, soon replaced by disgust and anger. “How can you stand here and tell me such a terrible thing. Don't you read the Bible?”

Justin almost laughed. “The Bible? What’s that got to do with anything?”

“God tells us that men must not lay with men. It is sick. How can you separate from your wife to ... to do unspeakable things?”

“You mean to fuck men?” he said bluntly and the way her mouth tightened and her eyes narrowed filled him with ... not with joy ... but with satisfaction. In a far corner of his mind, Justin knew that he was taking out his anger and disappointment with his father on Joan Kinney but then – what did it matter? She had earned it just as much.

“It is a sin. It is ... not natural.”

“Actually, it is pretty natural. Even animals do it.” Justin was glad he’d taken the time to read a lot while growing up. “As for the Bible. First of all, God didn’t write it, men did.”

“These men were chosen by God. He gave them the inspiration. They were Holy men.” She was starting to sound like one of those crazy preachers Justin had heard on TV sometimes. “And they told us that men laying with men was ungodly.”

Justin had read that, too. It hadn’t impressed him then, it impressed him even less now. “Well. Yeah. They also told us at one point that eating pork was a sin. We came far from there, didn’t we?”

“That is blasphemy,” she hissed.

“Why? Because you don’t like it? The Bible also says not to cast the first stone. But it seems you’re only taking the parts you want to know.” Disgusted now, Justin turned away, dismissing her with his body language.

She wasn’t done, however. “I had my doubts about you, when I first met you.”

Really? Wow. Justin never would have guessed. Especially that at the time he’d been convinced that he was as straight as they came.

“No well educated, well brought up young man would socialise with the likes of Brian.”

She would be surprised how many well educated men had done exactly that – and so much more, if Brian’s stories were all true. Brian had never been shy to share his sexual conquests. He and Justin had spent more than one evening laughing together and Justin had been fascinated in a purely friendly way – or so he’d thought. How much had him excited sexually, he wondered now?

“You are just as much a deviant as Brian. You will both burn in hell. I will go home now. And pray for your poor parents. They are to be pitied.”

Yeah, she could pray for his father. Maybe Craig would be hit by lightning and find the

light after all – not that Justin put much faith in that possibility.

He let out a breath when he heard the door open, and then close again. Bracing his hands on the cool surface in front of him, he realised that his knees were shaking and that his hands weren't too steady either.

Was that what Brian had grown up with?

Good God.

How could anyone live with a mother like this and stay sane. Okay, almost sane anyway. But sane or not, beneath all his bullshit Brian was a sensitive man with so much potential for love, Justin had always been in awe. How else could one be best friends with a guy like Michael Novotny. Only a heart the size of Texas was capable of such a thing.

Justin closed his eyes.

What he would give to have at least a little piece of that heart.

He sucked in a sharp breath. Was that what this was about? Did he want Brian to love him? Be in love with him? And what about him? What about Justin? He already loved Brian. But ... was there more? He'd thought that he'd gone to see Brian that night because he had needed his friend and that things had kind of gotten out of hand. That being so close to Brian, to that sexy mouth and sinful body had caused an epiphany of epical proportions – at least for him.

But was that all?

Could it be that he'd gone to see Brian because he wanted it to happen, albeit unconsciously? That he wanted it to happen with Brian in particular because ... because he was already in love with him?

Oh God.

Justin straightened, his thought and emotions in utter turmoil. He wanted nothing more than to talk to Brian, to ask him if there could be more, if there could be a chance for ... them? But then reality raised its ugly head and Justin remembered why he was standing over an open drawer. Brian. At the hospital. Attacked.

Justin's hands started to shake again. Here he was wondering about a future with Brian when at the same time it wasn't even certain Brian had a future to begin with. What if ...

No.

He wouldn't go there. No way he would let these dark thoughts take hold. Brian needed

him. Now more than ever. Think positive, he told himself. Brian would wake up, he would recover and the police would finally find the bastard who had done that to him. Then – and only then – Justin would let himself think about possibilities. Then he would force Brian to sit down and talk to him, to tell him if the night they'd spent with each other was more than just an accident.

But first things first.

Justin went to the closet, pulled out a bag, then selected the items he thought Brian might need once he woke up. He finally zipped the bag shut, picked it up. His eyes fell on the phone and for a moment he considered calling Michael. Then he dismissed the thought. Michael would find out soon enough. Until then, Justin had Brian all to himself, even though the other man probably wouldn't even know he was there. But that didn't matter. All that mattered was Brian. With that thought firmly in mind, Justin left the apartment.

Debbie sighed when the door to the diner opened and none other than Detective Horvath stepped inside. It was the end of her shift, she'd gotten up at four this morning, had started out at five and had been in here eight hours straight. She was tired, her feet were killing her and her perfume was a mix of sweat, stale fat and coffee. Nice.

"Hello Mrs.," he started, but at her raised brow amended, "Debbie."

"Wow, the police can learn after all."

He grimaced, and she saw that he looked just as tired as she felt. At least she wasn't alone in her misery. "Can I have some coffee?" he asked, giving the dark beverage a longing look.

"You can even have one of our famous lemon bars with it if you tell me that you caught the fucker who beat up Brian," she quipped. She didn't wait for his answer, though, and went to get him cake and the much needed caffeine. She placed both in front of him and popped her ever present gum. This time he didn't wince. "So," she crossed her arms and leaned them on the counter. They were eye to eye this way. "Did you catch the asshole?"

He picked up his cup, gave it an appreciative sniff, before taking a cautious sip. Then he placed it back on the counter and looked at her for a second, before he said: "Brian Kinney was injected with an unknown substance last night. He is currently in ICU at the hospital." He picked his cup up again and sipped on steadily.

For a moment time seemed to stand still, and then it hit her. "Oh my God. What? Is he okay?" She slapped herself on the forehead. "Of course he isn't, or he wouldn't be at the hospital. An unknown substance you said?"

Horvath nodded wearily, and put his cup down. Debbie saw it was empty already and refilled it. "Thanks. I've been up since 2.30 a.m.," he informed her. "Nothing so far. I wanted to check with you because I thought you might have heard something in here."

She shook her head. "No, nothing. Shit. Poor Brian."

"By the way," he took another large gulp from the coffee, "I met his mother."

Debbie felt her brows jump up in surprise. "Joan was there?"

"Yeah. The hospital informed the next of kin."

"Geez. I'm sure she was thrilled." Debbie clucked her tongue. "She threw that boy out. I mean, sure he was over 18 but still. His father was furious, too, but it was Joan who told him never to talk to them again."

"She seems a little stiff."

Debbie had to laugh. "You can say that. Brian calls her the 'ice queen', his father called her 'the warden'.

He chuckled, but got serious once again. "I'm not sure how long he'll be in ICU but as long as he is, they'll only let relatives in. You said there was a sister?"

"Claire. But don't bother contacting her. She's," Debbie shook her head, not sure how to explain Claire Kinney. She didn't know the woman well, but the few times she'd met her, hadn't made Claire one of Debbie's favourite people. She realised Horvath was looking at her expectantly, and forced herself to focus. "She and Brian aren't close. Brian sometimes gives her money when her drunken shit of a husband loses it gambling, but apart from that they barely exchange a word."

Horvath nodded. "I see." He looked at his lemon bar. "Would you think it's very impolite of me if I'd rather have some kind of breakfast?"

Debbie chuckled. "I can wrap the lemon bar for you to take with you. What do you want?"

"Something greasy."

They exchanged a grin. "That's no problem in here," she said. "Donnie," she yelled, "I want the full breakfast program. Eggs, and extra bacon."

"Coming up," came a yell back from the kitchen.

"Also," he still smiled, "how about you and me going out to the movies tonight?"

Debbie was too shocked to say anything for at least half a second. “Are you asking me out on a date?” Her voice was just as incredulous as she felt.

He took another sip from his cup. “I guess I am.”

Holy ... “You just told me you got up in the middle of the night.” He would be tired. He looked tired now, ready to collapse in fact.

“I did. But your coffee is reviving me. And giving me ideas.” He winked at her, actually winked.

“You,” she wagged her forefinger at him, “are dangerous, Detective Horvath.”

He shrugged in a teasing manner. “I’ve heard that once or twice.”

He really was charming, rumpled clothes, wrinkled face and all. And his eyes were very nice, warm. She could get lost in his eyes – too easily. “I’m not sure I’m free tonight.”

He cocked his head. Boy, this guy saw way too much with these eyes. “How about tomorrow?”

Debbie would never admit it, but she was flustered. And feeling a little bit like the teenager she’d never really been. “Can I think about it?” she asked.

He smiled. It was a loaded smile, and Debbie realised if he could read her like that, he had to be one hell of a detective. “Of course.” He pulled something from his pocket. A card. “Here is my phone number. Call me when you know.” When – not if. Oh boy. He scribbled something on in. “I also wrote down my cell.” With that he got up.

She reached over the counter and grabbed his arm. “What about your breakfast?”

He smiled again, and Debbie had to force herself not to blush. At her age. Geez. “Give it to someone who needs it more. I need to get a few hours of uninterrupted sleep, so I’ll be my best tomorrow night.” Another wink, and Debbie did blush. Damn.

“You are a devil,” she told him, but couldn’t stop the stupid smile forcing its way up her face. Holy, holy shit.

He inclined his head. “I appreciate the compliment.” With a last grin he left the diner and Debbie. Who needed for Donnie to stand in front of her and scream to snap out of her daze.

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“And I think I ... uhm ... kind of pissed off your Mom,” Justin told Brian through the mask

he was wearing. He was holding Brian's hand that was warm and smooth but seemed lifeless. "I'm not sure she'll ever talk to you again now, but I guess that's not really great news for you, huh?"

Truth to be told, he'd been shocked at first when the nurse had brought him here. Justin had taken one look at all the machines, the tubes, and the i.v. drips and had wanted to turn away and run. That couldn't possibly be Brian, could it? That thing, pale and waxen and not quite human looking, that wasn't his friend, was it?

But, of course, it was Brian and he'd even looked like Brian once Justin had gotten close enough to actually see the other man's face.

"You can sit here," the nurse had told him with a wink. "I'm sure your *brother* will appreciate the company." Justin had caught a discreet flash of a rainbow flag pin, barely visible near her lapel.

"Do you think he can hear me?" he had asked in a whisper.

She'd shrugged. "We still don't know a lot about people who are in a state like this," she'd pointed at Brian. "But some people who wake up from comas report later that they could hear everything. So I'd say it's always worth a try. Just try not to disturb any of the tubes, okay?"

Justin had nodded. That had been an hour ago and he was still here. They'd told him ten minutes but so far nobody had turned up to throw him out and Justin wasn't going to remind them that he was still here, still holding Brian's lifeless hand.

"I'm sorry I freaked," he said now. "You know, the morning after we ... spent the night together. But I was ... it was so unexpected. I know I initiated it, I mean I kissed you after all, but I ... I don't even know why I did it. I ... I was on your couch and you were there and your face was so close and ... it seemed right, I guess." He felt warm wetness on his cheeks and wiped them with his free hand. Was he actually crying? God, he was such a wuss.

"I wish I had a time turner – you know like they had in Harry Potter? I wish I could turn back and do it over and tell you that ... it was the best night of my life. Which," he laughed even though he felt like crying all over again, "isn't really saying anything. I mean, I'm only 25 and I haven't had sex with a lot of people. Although, lately I'm seriously increasing numbers."

There was a noise from the hallway, voices, hushed and worried. When he'd first come in, he'd seen a little girl in another room. A car accident victim the nurse had told him. Justin thought about Daphne and their baby and could feel an idea of the horror the parents of the child were going through... right now.

He looked down at their entwined hands. "I wish you'd wake up so we could really talk.

Because ... when I met your mother ... God, she is such a bitch, but something good came out of it, because I had kind of an epiphany. I know you told me that you didn't believe in relationships and things but ... maybe, you know, we could ... uhm ... try? If we could be more than just friends?" Justin sniffed, "Shit. That sounds so corny. And stupid. And maybe I am. But ... gay people can make it work. I read about it. It's true, Brian."

From the corner of his eye Justin saw movement and turned to find the gay-friendly nurse in the doorway. "Hey," she whispered. "My shift is over in ten minutes. And my replacement isn't ... well, let's just say she is a good nurse but not the nicest person on this planet. So you should get ready to leave, okay?"

Justin nodded. "Thanks for letting me stay."

She grinned. "I'm a sucker for young love. If you come tomorrow, I'll be here until four in the afternoon." With that she left.

Young love? Well, in a way it was true. They were young, and Justin at least, was in love even though it had taken him a while to realise it. It was so strange. He'd always believed that he was in love with Daphne. He'd been so sure it was the real thing. That he and Daphne would grow old together, raise their kids, be happy.

And he had been happy. After a fashion, anyway. It was the kind of happiness he knew, the happiness he'd grown accustomed to. He and Daphne were comfortable with each other, trusted each other, they loved each other. And he knew Daphne was in love with him – which made this whole mess a lot messier than it would have been otherwise. Justin knew she was doing her happy face thing for his sake but she was hurting a lot. Not only was she losing the man she loved, she was also facing a divorce while expecting her first child.

Justin would do what he could to make it as painless as possible for her but it would still leave scars. And he hated it. Hated it with a passion that he was the cause for her suffering, because he was an oblivious idiot. Daphne was one of the most important people for him, and he desperately wanted her to be happy.

And he wanted Brian.

Justin lifted the other man's hand to his lips and kissed it, wondering if Brian would roll his eyes were he awake. He probably would. Brian wasn't one for demonstrative gestures, never had been. He didn't believe in PDA.

"You want everyone to think you're so tough," he told the unconscious man. "That you're indestructible. That nothing can get under your skin." Justin chuckled. "God, Brian, you're so full of it. You never fooled me the way you fooled Michael all these years. I can't believe he bought into your shit. Maybe that's the reason he could never be more than a friend."

It was an eye-opening thought. Brian was extremely vulnerable underneath all his bluster. But Michael, who claimed to be his best friend, didn't know that. He had no idea who Brian Kinney really was. Justin had always thought that Brian had never fucked Michael because he didn't fuck friends. But that didn't fit because Brian had been only too willing to fuck Justin. No, Brian had never fucked Michael because he knew that Michael would want more once they'd stepped over this invisible threshold. And despite the fact that Michael was loyal to the point of slavish devotion sometimes, he could never be what Brian needed. Someone who challenged him, who wouldn't take his shit, who wouldn't let Brian push him around.

Someone like Justin.

Justin harbored no illusions that he was perfect. Shit, he was so far from perfection, he would have to swim the Pacific ocean to reach it. But he was no pushover either. From the start he'd made it clear that he wouldn't be Brian's punching bag, no matter what. And now he knew, without the shadow of a doubt, that it was one reason Brian had liked him so much, had let him into his life, into his circle of friends.

One look at his watch told Justin that he had to leave soon. "I'm sorry I have to go now," he told Brian. "I wish I could stay, be here with you so you'll know that you're not alone." He stood, leaned over and kissed Brian's cheek.

"Ahem."

Justin kissed Brian's cheek again before he straightened and turned slowly. A voluptuous matron stood in the doorway, her gray hair cut short, forming a cap around her head. Her green eyes mustered Justin with obvious disapproval. He didn't let it fluster him. "Yes?" he asked.

"Only family is allowed in here."

Justin gave her a smile. "I'm his brother."

She snorted. "Yeah, and I'm his great-grandmother." Her disapproving eyes swept over him. "You people always think others are stupid."

Justin let his brows rise. "We people?" He knew that antagonizing hospital staff wasn't a good thing, but he just couldn't let her comment go.

She clucked her tongue. "It's indecent, that's what it is. It's bad enough that these things happen, but to publicly display them ... " Shaking her head, she went to Brian's other side, making a quick check, then wrote something on the chart at the foot of the bed. When she looked up, her lips tightened. "Why are you still here?"

Justin held her gaze. "Because I care for him. I won't just leave him because of stupid

hospital regulations.” He paused for effect, and then added, “Or because some of the personnel don’t seem able to look beyond narrow-minded prejudices.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she replied tightly, but she wouldn’t meet his eyes. Score, Daphne would say.

Justin shrugged. “Whatever. It’s not important anyway. I don’t care what you think. Take good care of him, that’s all I want.”

She straightened, clearly offended by his remark. “I take good care of all my patients. There’s never been reason to complain.”

He nodded. “Good.” Deliberately he turned back to Brian, took the other man’s hand again and squeezed. “I’ll be back. Never forget that I love you.” It was so easy to say. He wondered if he’d be equally comfortable once Brian’s eyes were open. But that wasn’t important now. Brian had to get well first. “See you tomorrow,” he whispered, then turned and left, not giving the nurse another look.

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When the door opened to Claire’s house, Carl Horvath actually wondered if he’d gotten the right address. He didn’t know what he’d expected but this worn looking, slightly overweight woman with almost empty eyes wasn’t it. According to Brian Kinney’s file she was four year his senior, which made her not even thirty.

She looked like at least forty, though.

She also looked as if she hadn’t had a good night’s sleep in months, which might as well be the truth, Carl thought with a glance at the toddler she was carrying on her hip. Carl’s daughter was around the same age, but she was vibrant and lively and her eyes were sparking with laughter and the promise of future.

“Yes?” she said with a voice that was just as empty as her eyes.

He flashed his badge. “Mrs. Callaghan, my name is Carl Horvath, I’m with the Pittsburgh PD.”

She stared at him for a moment, then sighed. “What’s it this time? Did Frank rob a bank while being skunk out drunk?”

Carl looked at the little boy at her right leg, staring at him with wide eyes, and wondered if he was old enough to understand what the adults were talking about. He hoped not. “No,” he said. “This isn’t about someone called Frank. It’s about your brother. Brian.”

“Brian?” Her brows went up and she laughed. It was a shrill, almost hysterical sound. “This is about Brian? Wow. And here I thought Frank had finally bought it for good.” She

shrugged and stepped back from the door. "Well, a woman can dream, right," she tossed over her shoulder.

Carl stepped into the house and the little boy shrank back from him, doing his best to become one with the shadows. Damn. Maybe he should give social services a call, so they'd give this family a closer look.

As he followed Claire into the kitchen, he noticed that even though the furniture was cheap and worn, the house was spotless. There was a pan on the oven, and the smell coming from it made Carl's mouth water. Obviously despite monetary problems, Claire managed to cook tasty meals and keep her home tidy. It was a strange contrast to the woman with the greasy hair, who obviously stopped taking care of herself a while ago.

Carl saw her giving the pan a quick glance, before she pointed him to a chair. "So – what did Brian do?"

"Nothing," Carl said, opting to stand. Claire had put the toddler down and he grabbed a toy and hugged it to his chest. His eyes were incredibly blue, and big, and he was watching Carl wearily. Or maybe it was just Carl's imagination going into overdrive after having been on duty for almost 14 hours straight.

"Nothing?" She gave him a look that suggested he might be a little dumb. "Why did you come here then?"

Carl shook his head. "Maybe I should rephrase. *He* didn't do anything, but something was done to him. Your brother has been attacked twice in the past six weeks."

For a moment she stared at him as if she had a problem understanding his words. Then her eyes widened slightly and she sat down. "Attacked?" Her voice was faint. Interesting, Carl thought. Obviously despite all the differences he had heard about, she did care for her brother.

"Yes." He sat down too, so they would be level for this conversation. "He was beaten up a few weeks ago and last night someone stuck a needle into him, injecting him with a yet unknown substance."

Claire's hands were folded on the table and she was looking at them. "Will he be alright?"

"The doctors hope so," he told her honestly. "He is in very good condition to begin with, which helps. But as long as they can't identify what's been given to him, they can't say for sure."

She nodded, still keeping her eyes on her hands. The toddler was sitting close to her on the floor, chewing on his toy, and the older child had joined them as well, standing in the door, watching everything with eyes that were just as big as his brother's. The children

didn't seem to be afraid of her. So it had to be the husband. Carl would definitely call social services as soon as he was back at the station.

"What I need to know is if you can imagine anyone who might have a reason to do that to your brother?"

She finally looked up, and there were tears in her eyes. "No," she whispered. "I'm sorry, I wish..." She trailed off and Carl saw a tear spill over and flow down her cheek. She was fragile now, and almost beautiful in her pain which made him wonder if maybe on top of being a homophobe, he was a sick bastard. Who else would find beauty in pain?

"I talked to your mother a few hours ago," Carl began but was stopped by a short burst of laughter.

"My mother? Saint Joan? Jesus." She shook her head, her tears gone. "I wish I could have been a fly on that wall."

Carl nodded. "It was interesting."

"I'll bet." The toddler started to cry and Claire reached down to pull him onto her lap. There he sat, sniffing. Absentmindedly she stroked the baby's head. "My mother adored Brian. He was her ideal. And then he told her he was gay. And she did a total u-turn. I told him to keep it a secret, but would he listen?"

Carl thought about what Debbie had told him about Claire. But it didn't fit. Debbie had told him that Brian gave his sister money, but sitting in Claire's kitchen Carl got the impression that the siblings were closer than Debbie thought. "So – you and Brian are close?" he prodded.

Another burst of laughter. "I wouldn't say that. But," and now she looked at the head of her son, "he helps me now and then." She took a deep breath and straightened in her chair. "My husband, Frank, has a drinking problem. He tends to forget that at the end of the month we still need money for food. So Brian helps me out now and then." She shook her head, "He never asks anything in return. And I know he's trying to save money to buy the loft of his dreams."

Yes, they were definitely much closer than Debbie thought. Interesting. Maybe Debbie Novotny didn't see everything after all.

"Does he ever come here?" Carl asked.

Claire shook her head. "No. Never. He and Frank ... well, they don't really get along."

Carl felt that there was more to it and decided to be frank. "Because Brian is gay?"

She didn't answer him right away. It was almost as if she was considering the question.

Or maybe she didn't really want to answer. In the end, she sighed. "Yes. He ... accused Brian of wanting to molest the boys." She shook her head. "It was an ugly scene. I thought they'd come to blows."

Carl filed that information away in his mind. So Claire's husband was holding a grudge. Enough to want revenge? "Is your husband a violent person?"

She hesitated at that. Damn. "Not really. He can be very sweet, you know." A smile was playing around her lips. She was probably remembering better times. "But when he's drunk ..." she trailed off and shrugged. "He sometimes forgets himself."

"Do you tell him that you go to see your brother?"

Again she hesitated. "I ... We're not talking an awful lot these days."

Which was a big ***NO*** in bold letters. Interesting. "What if he found out?"

"I'm not sure." She gnawed her lips. One of her front teeth was chipped, Carl noticed. Result of her husband's drunken rages? "I'd rather not put it to the test," Claire told him.

Yeah. Carl could see that. She was clearly worried about her husband where her brother was concerned. And talking about her brother.

"You can see him," Carl said. "Your brother, at the hospital."

"Oh." She seemed flustered by the suggestion. "I ... uhm ... don't have anyone to watch the kids. I can't afford a babysitter."

He nodded. It was painfully obvious that she wasn't lying, that she hadn't just said it to escape visitation duty. "I understand," he said and gave her a warm smile so she would see that he really meant it. Despite his expectation, Carl found himself liking this young woman who hadn't seen the sunny side of life for quite some time.

"Brian told me to file for divorce," she said out of the blue, not looking at him, looking at her kids instead. "He said that he'd take care of me. But," she sighed, "it's not that easy."

What could he say to that, more importantly, what did he dare? 'Leave that scumbag of a husband better today than tomorrow' was hardly appropriate. He was a stranger after all. So he opted for: "Yes, I understand. But there is help, you know."

Hope flickered in her eyes, but died quickly. Again she sighed, "Children should grow up with a father, especially boys."

That was true. However, some kids were better off without them, especially if they were drunken, violent bastards. Yet, once again, he couldn't tell her that. Besides, it would be

hardly news for her. He reached into his pocket. "This is the number of a lady I know at social services," he told her, gently pushing a card in her direction. "She is very nice, very discreet and has years of experience. I'm not telling you to call her," he said when he saw she was about to protest. "But sometimes it's good to have an option."

Claire didn't look at the card, didn't nod. She simply continued stroking the baby's head. "If you see Brian," she said, "if you talk to him. Please tell him that I ... I'm thinking of him."

He nodded. "I will. And maybe you'll find a way to see him anyway."

Again, she didn't comment. Carl hadn't expected her to. But he knew that his words had made an impact and maybe they were enough to give her the final push.

He stood. "Thank you for your time. Mrs.-"

"Claire," she interrupted. "Please, call me Claire." She stood as well, putting the baby down on the floor again. "It was nice meeting you." She held out her hand.

Carl took it. "Thanks for talking to me. And remember, there are people who can help."

She smiled, a very shy, slightly embarrassed smile. "I will."

It was that smile that stayed with him for a long time after he'd left her house.

++++++

"What do you mean, I can't go inside?"

Justin heard Michael's voice all down the hallway. It was strident and very annoyed, and Justin sighed, rubbing his forehead where a throbbing had started around midnight. He'd gone straight back to the hotel last night, where Daphne had been waiting for him, ready to talk some more but Justin had felt so drained, he'd fallen asleep after eating only a sandwich. He'd promptly woken up at midnight thanks to the aforementioned headache and had been unable to go back to sleep. He felt tired and cranky and the last thing he needed was running into Michael Novotny.

Shit.

Justin was glad that he was invisible behind the milk glass door that led to Brian's room because he was in no shape to confront Michael, especially not after last night. He was holding Brian's hand, still warm but also still lifeless, wishing more than anything that it would move, that Brian would squeeze his fingers, that he would finally, **finally** wake up.

"I'm really sorry, but only immediate family is permitted to visit a patient here." It was

Brian's rainbow pin nurse. When he'd come here today, she'd told Justin her name was Grace. Her voice, while being friendly, was also very strict, making it clear that she wouldn't soften to any argument.

"That's such a bullshit rule." Which didn't mean that Michael wouldn't argue anyway. "I'm his best friend, the closest he has to family. I have to see him."

"Michael," another voice cut in. It was quiet and steady and Justin realised in surprise that it was Ted. "There are reasons for rules. And Brian is in a coma anyway. He can't hear you." What on earth was Ted Schmidt doing here? Sure, he was part of their circle of friends but Justin had always thought that Ted was not really close to Brian. But then ... maybe he hadn't come for Brian.

Justin looked down at Brian's still face, seeming almost angelic. He had to laugh. There was really nothing angelic about Brian. But his face was beautiful, still or not, the straight nose, the full lips that could curve into that smile Justin couldn't get enough of. And they could kiss – man, could the man kiss. Justin hadn't even known one could kiss that way before he'd felt Brian's lips on his, had felt Brian's tongue in his mouth, exploring every inch of it, teasing, stroking, demanding – whoops. And just like that Justin had the hard on of all centuries.

Sheesh.

Justin shifted in his chair, glad that there was nobody here who would notice. Because, how would he explain that? 'I was just thinking about his tongue – and ta-da there it was' sounded a little bit crazy to him. Or maybe people would think seeing Brian lying there, unconscious, was giving him a hard on – and wouldn't that be fun. They'd send him to the loony bin, no questions asked. And rightfully so.

"Fuck the rules. I'm not leaving," Michael said petulantly. "I need to see him. And more importantly, Brian needs to see me. We've been relying on each other for more than ten years."

"That's really good to hear," Grace replied, still using her 'I'm the mother of God and you won't get past me' – voice. "However, the rules were made for a reason. So if you would please step back–"

"I'm NOT going away," Michael repeated, his voice going up and getting louder. "Listen, you bitch–"

"I am asking you to leave, now." Grace was getting louder, too. "Or I'll have to get security to remove you by force."

"Michael, I think it would be better if we'd just leave," Ted said. Justin could imagine him pulling on Michael's arm, trying to restrain him or to remove him by force. Not that he'd have any luck with that. "No need to get any security involved."

“Let go of me,” Michael hissed. “You might not care for other people, Ted, but I do.” Michael could be such an asshole sometimes. Did he ever care for other people’s feelings, Justin wondered?

“Michael.” Ted said. “Don’t be an ass.”

“I’m an ass?” Michael’s voice got indignant. “Because I care for other people? Because I care for Brian?”

“If you’ll excuse me now,” Grace said. “I really have other things to do.”

“I want to talk to your superior,” Michael told her. God, he sounded like an idiot. How could Brian be best friends with a guy like that? Justin would have kicked his ass a million times by now. Not that Michael was treating him badly or anything, but Michael annoyed him to no end. Maybe part of it was petty jealousy, Michael knew Brian on a level Justin hadn’t even begun to touch, but it was only part of the reason. The other, much bigger part was that Justin honestly thought Michael was a selfish bastard. Or maybe it was just a tiny sliver of the reason but what did it matter, anyway? Michael annoyed the hell out of him – it was just as simple as that.

“Okay, that’s it. I’m calling security.” Obviously he was annoying the hell out of Grace, too.

“That’s not necessary,” Ted’s voice was urgent. “Michael. Let’s go.”

“NO.” Geez, now Michael sounded as if he was four. Which, thinking about it, fit remarkably well.

And wasn’t he the snarky queen today, Justin thought with a laugh. It was a miracle he hadn’t found out about his own sexuality sooner, because it was so obvious right now, even a toddler would have noticed it.

“Sir, I know you’re very concerned about your friend.” Grace had probably realised that threatening Michael wasn’t helping, so she tried the friendly route again. “I can assure you, however, that he is getting the best care available. His partner is here, too. In case he’ll wake up, he’ll see a familiar face. And now, I wish you a good day.”

Justin could hear Michael’s outraged shout, “His partner? What do you mean his part-“ The rest was lost as Grace shut the door with a firm click.

Only a moment later she came into Brian’s room, shaking her head. “Some people. They just don’t take no for an answer.”

In a very strange way Justin felt compelled to apologize. “I’m sorry. Michael can be very obnoxious.”

Grace gave him a knowing look. "I see."

"No," Justin said. "He isn't, I mean, he and Brian never..." He laughed, feeling embarrassed discussing this with a nurse he barely knew.

"But he wanted to be?"

And who clearly saw a lot more than he wanted her to see.

Still, Justin had to laugh at her astute observation. "He still wants to be. He has this completely insane crush..." He had to laugh again. "No, it's not really a crush anymore, it's more like just insane."

Grace looked concerned. "Is he a stalker?"

"No. No, he and Brian *are* friends. They are close but Michael wants to be more than that, and it's never going to happen, not in this lifetime – for various reasons of which I am just one. But he doesn't seem to get it."

Grace walked over and looked at him intently. "Giving up a dream is a painful process. Maybe it helps to know that you get when he most desperately wants." She smiled. "You're the winner here."

Justin looked down at Brian's still form. He didn't feel like a winner.

Grace seemed to understand. "He'll be alright."

"You can't know that." Justin knew that he sounded just as petulant as Michael had before but he didn't care. Concern for Brian had kept up him most of the night.

"No. But we can hope. You wouldn't believe what hope can do. It can sometimes move mountains."

God, Justin wanted to believe it. He wanted to believe that his hope alone would wake up Brian, make him healthy, make him smile again. "I love him," he said, surprised that he said it out loud. "I'm in love with him."

Grace smiled. "That's pretty obvious. You would starve if you tried to earn a living as a poker player."

Justin grimaced. He wasn't sure if he should take that as a compliment or not. "Thanks for ... uh ... you know, sending Michael away." He knew he shouldn't be glad. Michael had a right to be here, maybe even more than Justin but he still didn't want Michael here. He wasn't even sure why.

“He’ll be back. He strikes me like the kind of guy who won’t give up easily.”

She got that one right. “Yes,” he confirmed. Michael wouldn’t give up. It was actually one of his good qualities. Justin had heard how Michael had not given up on Brian, how he’d always bounced back even when Brian had tried to push him away, how Michael had shown Brian that friends were there for each other even if things got rough. It was also through Michael that Brian had met Debbie, that he’d learned that there were parents who loved their children no matter what.

Yes, Michael Novotny was one of the reasons Brian had not gone insane, which was kind of funny, because Michael was also the one person who could drive Brian nuts.

Grace touched Justin’s shoulder. “I’ll be close if you should need me, okay?”

Justin nodded, touched by her concern. “Why are you so nice to me – to us?”

Grace pointed at her rainbow pin. “My brother was gay. My parents threw him out and I didn’t really help him. It took me a long time to regain his trust.”

“What happened to him?” Justin asked. ‘Was’ she had said. Shit.

“AIDS happened to him,” she said matter-of-factly. “We both wasted so much time, instead of sticking together. We were close in the end but I often wish ...” She sighed. There was no need to continue, Justin understood. In the end there was never enough time left.

“I’m sorry,” he said. And he meant it.

“Yeah, me too.” She shook her head. “Well, it’s been years so I’m okay most of the time. But sometimes it catches up... with me. Like now.” She gave him another smile. “Don’t waste precious time.”

Justin watched her go, then turned back to Brian. “I won’t,” he told the unconscious man. “I won’t waste time, but first you have to wake up. Please.” There was no response, only the steady beeping of the machines, assuring Justin that Brian’s heart was beating steadily.

Justin reached out and touched Brian’s face gently with his fingers, tracing his forehead, his nose, his cheeks, then resting on his lips. “I want to see your smile again. You have such a beautiful smile. You don’t use it often but when you do it’s incredible. No wonder nobody can resist you. But that’s got to change,” he said sternly. “You can look but touching isn’t allowed anymore. Geez.” He laughed. “Listen to me, I’m talking as if we’re a couple. I don’t even know how you feel about me. All we did was fuck. Only, for me it was so much more. I love you, Brian. I love you and I need you to come back.”

But once again, his plea was only answered by steady beeping.

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"What now?"

"Are you crazy?"

"What? You're not happy with me?"

"No, I'm not. He is in a coma, for God's sake. Nobody ever said something about a coma."

"He's out of commission."

"I never wanted him permanently hurt. Or worse. They don't even know if he'll come out of it. I'm not a killer."

"Yeah, well. You should've thought about that before you told me you wanted him gone."

"I never said gone. I said I needed him gone for three months. This was never a forever kind of deal."

"That's not what I heard."

"What did you give him?"

"Why do you care?"

"Because the doctors need to know what's been injected. Otherwise they can't really help."

"I overdosed him on a horse tranquilizer."

"Jesus."

"He'll snap out of it."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

"Jesus. Jesus."

"Stop panicking! Don't go crazy on me here."

"You are the crazy bastard."

"I just did what you wanted. He's out."

"Alright. Here's what you're going to do. You will write the name of the tranquilizer on a piece of paper and you'll send it to the hospital."

"You've lost your mind."

"No. Of course you won't sign it. Don't use your spit, so they can't trace it. Use water to seal it. That way they won't have DNA."

"Why on earth did you want him gone when you don't want him gone?"

"That's none of your damned business. Don't forget about the letter."

"I won't. God, you're a crazy bastard. Who is still owing me money."

"After you send the letter, and after we know he'll be alright."

"That was never the deal."

"That is my deal. So live with it."

"Careful, buddy. I can easily give you up to the police."

"No, you won't. By giving me up, you'll give yourself up. God, send that letter. The sooner he wakes up, the sooner you'll have your money."

"Alright. But don't contact me again. I'll not work for you in the future."

"Fine with me."

"Stupid asshole," he muttered, then went to write that letter.

"We need to talk."

Justin sighed. He was weary to the bone and wanted nothing more than ten hours of uninterrupted sleep, but alas it was not to be. Besides, he knew Daphne was right, they definitely needed to talk. He just wished they could do it when his eyes were not falling shut and his brain was not checking out every other minute.

"I know," he said, and looked at her. She was standing in the doorway of her room, dressed conservatively in pajamas that covered her from neck to toe. The fact that they were showing scenes of Sponge Bob was not lost on Justin and it made him smile. "I'm sorry I've not been around much these past days." He rubbed his forehead. "Have you

talked to a lawyer?"

She slowly walked into the small sitting room that separated their respective bedrooms. "I told her about our situation and even though she gave me some hard looks, she agreed to set up the documents we want." Daphne laughed. "I think she was shocked that we are not fighting to the bone. It seems she hasn't seen anything like that before.

"That's good," Justin said, then shook his head. "I mean, that she's willing to draw up the papers." He really wasn't up for this but how could he tell Daphne that? He couldn't was the simple answer. Not when she so obviously needed to talk. Justin knew that Daphne didn't have a lot of female friends. Okay, make that none. She'd always told him that she hated talking to other women, they were either girly giggling-machines or talked of nothing but diapers, in short they were either getting on her nerves or boring her to tears. Her relationship with her mother was strained at best, and her father wasn't the talkative kind. That left Jennifer. She and Daphne usually got along great but for obvious reasons, their relationship was a little awkward right now.

That left Justin. Her best friend.

Shit.

He really had fucked that one up but good. Way to go Taylor, you stupid asshole. The one person who had always stood by him, the one person who was his confidante, who was and had always been his friend whatever had happened, and he had gone and fucked up her life. Just because he was an ignorant asshole, too stupid to see what was right before his eyes.

"She said that the papers will be ready in a few days." Daphne gave him a tentative smile. "Which means that we can get a divorce a lot sooner than we'd thought. The fact that we're amiable about it, makes it much easier and faster." There were tears in her eyes and Justin felt like the worst kind of bastard. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

He forced himself to sit down on the sofa, then patted the spot at his side. When she sat down he bumped her shoulder with his they way he'd done when they were around twelve and Daphne had a crush on the new boy in school. She'd been watching him cow-eyed until Justin had sat her down and talked sense into her. Afterwards they'd gone to eat some ice-cream and her world had shifted back on its axis.

Ice cream wouldn't do the trick tonight. But maybe he could help anyway. "You want a large pot of chocolate, chocolate chip ice cream?" he asked, making his voice light. "I could get us one from the shop down the street." Which would mean he'd have to get up and move – which was the last thing he wanted to do, but for Daphne he would. He not only owed it to her he also wanted to do it for her. There wasn't a lot he could do for her these days.

"No." She put her head on his shoulder. "Ever since I've been pregnant ice-cream isn't

on my list of favourite foods anymore. It's more like mixed pickles or baked beans." Justin laughed and she did the same. "I know, it's gross. But I could eat them 24/7."

She bumped his shoulder with her own and Justin instantly felt better. "Sounds like a hardship," he said.

"It really is. Just think about it, I know I absolutely hate baked beans. And now I'm craving them as if there's nothing more tasty on this planet. It's disgusting."

They shared another laugh, just the way they had for years, when they were best friends, when things had been innocent and uncomplicated. It made Justin want to cry.

Or not.

Because then he'd be living a lie. Unconsciously, of course, but still a lie. These days things were complicated and far from innocent, but also – much more satisfying on so many levels, Justin didn't even know where to begin. So maybe, even though he'd disappointed Daphne and wished he could undo some of the things he'd done, it was still a better place they were in now than a few weeks ago.

"I'm sorry we're getting divorced," he told Daphne, who gave a little incredulous laugh. No surprise, because, really, he sounded like the worst kind of hypocrite, so he clarified: "I am sorry," he repeated. "I know it sounds crazy and maybe it is, but there you go. Maybe I am a hypocrite because a part of me would like to have it all."

She didn't say anything right away, she just kept leaning on him. He could feel her warmth through her flannel pajamas, and it made him remember when he'd stroked her skin, when he'd felt underneath his fingers. It was soft and smooth and it smelled incredibly good and yet – it held nothing against the slightly rough texture of Brian's.

"Yeah, me too," Daphne spoke finally. "I'd like to have it all, too. But nobody can. I think, for a short time I thought maybe we could. It was a wonderful dream. And as a result we're gonna have this baby, Justin. So maybe – even though it seems to suck right now – it was worth it after all."

"You really think so?" God, how he wished it was really what she felt. That it was worth it, that this baby wasn't a mistake but a miracle – maybe the only miracle of that kind he'd ever experience.

She laughed again, just a short burst of air. "I'm trying to convince myself of it."

He had to laugh as well – even as a part of him still wanted to weep. "Are you succeeding?"

"More and more," she said honestly. "I still have my moments but I'm sure it'll get better. At least I hope it will." She paused, then added, "Of course, right now the moments

where I want to kill Brian are not so few and far between.”

Okay, this was a surprise. “Brian?” Because, when in doubt, play dumb. Justin had learned that one early on by his father – which maybe wasn’t the most clever of advice because it came from a thorough asshole.

“Oh please.” Justin could more hear than see her roll her eyes. “Just because I’m female and pregnant, I’m not stupid.”

“I never said-“

“It was implied,” she said and there was another heavy eyeroll in her voice.

Justin sighed. “No, it wasn’t. As for Brian – I have no idea how he feels about me, Daph. We spent a night together. You know him, he’s never been serious about anyone – so why would it be different with me?”

“Duh! Because it’s you, dumb-ass.” She lifted her head from his shoulder and looked at him. “Brian’s been hot for you for years. And even if he were a one-night-stand kind of guy, which I guess he’s been so far ... You can be such a pitbull. You bite and then you hold fast, you go after what you want, if it’s important enough.” She paused for effect, before asking: “Is Brian important enough?”

“Yes.” There was no reason to hesitate. No reason to pretend. If Justin had had any doubts, they were now gone. He knew what he wanted. He had sat with Brian, held his hand, and he knew. He wanted Brian, no matter what.

She bumped his shoulder again. “There you have it.” But there were tears in her eyes. She blinked. “Sorry, I’m emotional these days. Side-effect of the pregnancy,” she lied.

“Yeah,” he took the lie and worked with it. There wasn’t a lot he could do for her, but he could do this. “Baked beans, tears – I should probably be happy to get rid of you.”

“Don’t forget the nausea and the swollen feet as the pregnancy progresses.”

Or maybe he couldn’t because this was just ... wrong. “God, Daph-“

“No.” She held up a hand and stood, moving away from him. “I ... I can’t do this.”

“I promise, I’ll be with you every step,” Justin said earnestly, meaning it with all his heart. “If you’ll have me. Me being gay has nothing to do with our baby.”

“How can you say that?” She had her arms crossed now and was leaning against the wall. “It changes everything, and I’ll hate seeing you with him.”

“I told you-“

“Yeah, yeah, that Brian’s no man for repeats. It’s bullshit. I will be seeing you together. Mark my words. And right now, I’m not sure I’ll be strong enough for that. In a few years, probably. Maybe. But right now ... It hurts, Justin. Because I love you, and I want you with me, and I want you to be next to me and my baby and I can’t have you. ... Because it would be wrong, and I know that. Rationally, I know it, but ... my heart ... it’s a different story.

“I so badly want to be your friend the way I always was, but I’m not sure I can.”

“Daph. I ... I know I’m villain here-“ Justin began, but she interrupted him by stomping her foot.

“God!” she cried. “You’re not a villain. Stop being such a man! This isn’t about guilt and stupid stuff like that. I know you can’t change who you are or who you fall in love with. If anyone, I want to slap your parents around their ignorant heads. But ... It still hurts. And I want my friend by my side. Problem is, I’m sure I can stand having you there right now.” She wiped her eyes. “Damn. I so promised myself I wouldn’t freak.”

“Hey, that’s okay.”

She stomped her foot again. “It shouldn’t be. Don’t let me use you that way, okay?”

Justin had to laugh. He wondered if it was really all due to the pregnancy but she was a bundle of contradictions tonight. He hoped it wasn’t just because he was such an asshole. “I’ll try,” he said.

She let out a long sigh, then shook her head before she sat down beside him once again. “So – how is he? Brian, I mean.”

“You really want to know? Because, honestly, talking with you about Brian is giving me a weird vibe.” To tell the truth, he was completely freaked out by this. But he would never tell her.

“Yeah, I really want to know,” she said. It sounded more like ‘not even if hell freezes over’, but Justin let it go. If she wanted it to play that way, that’s the way it would be played. He knew that this was going completely against her wish not to let himself be used as a punching bag, but he couldn’t help himself.

“He’s still unconscious,” he told her, leaving out the worry he felt, the panic when he was looking at Brian’s very still face, how lifeless Brian’s hand felt in his, how much he needed for Brian to open his eyes and look at him. “And they still haven’t got a clue what’s been given to him.”

“That sucks.” She said it as if she really meant it, and Justin bumped her shoulder again, then thought it wasn’t enough and turned to kiss her cheek. She looked up,

clearly surprised, and he shrugged. "I felt like doing it."

Daphne smiled. "Don't get me wrong, Brian *can* be an asshole sometimes but whoever the bastard is who did that to him needs to be caught and brought to justice."

"Brian is a good guy." He didn't even know why, Brian would probably laugh, but he felt inclined to defend his friend, lover, one-night-stand – God, this was getting too complicated. Unfortunately there wasn't a lot he could do right now to unwind this mess.

"I know that." Daphne sounded tired. "And I like him – most of the time. So, how about some sleep?"

"God, yes." He was so tired, he was just going to drop where he sat.

She laughed, then turned and returned the kiss to his cheek. "Then sleep. As soon as I get the papers from the attorney we'll ... talk again, okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks for being ... well, you."

"I love you, Justin. And you know the strangest thing?"

He looked at her, she had a wistful expression on her face. "No, what?"

"I think we make much better friends than spouses. Pity we didn't think of that before. Sleep tight now."

He watched her leave, the slight sway of her hips that was as much part of her as her hair or her smile, and knew she was right. Unfortunately it didn't make it hurt any less.

++++++

"I can't believe they wouldn't let me in to see him!"

Michael knew he sounded like a child but, fuck it, he didn't care. These hospital rules were beyond stupid. Why wouldn't they let best friends in? Didn't they know that best friends were much more welcome at sick beds than family who didn't give a rat's ass if Brian came out of this alive? And there was the little tid bit about Brian's so called **partner**. What a laugh! Brian never had a partner, he didn't look for one and most certainly he would tell Michael first if there was one on the horizon.

But, of course, neither Ted, nor Emmett, nor his outrageous mother understood any of this. Or how furious it made him that some asshole had convinced the nurse that he was Brian's partner.

Could it be Ben Bruckner? The guy had called Michael after all. Could Bruckner be that

kind of sneaky bastard? Using the pretense of being interested in Michael himself, of being Brian's friend to finally get into his employee's pants? And what kind of relationship did they have anyway? Brucker and Brian seemed to talk quite a lot. Things like these always made Michael suspicious.

"Michael." Yes, the voice of reason that was Ted Schmidt.

"I don't want to hear it," he said. He would not listen to the bullshit he'd been listening to all the way over from the hospital last night. "You said enough yesterday."

More than enough, at least where Michael was concerned. Ted had gone on and on about how being dependent on someone was unhealthy and if Brian had a partner, it was none of Michael's business. All the stupid bullshit his mother had been telling him for years. The same bullshit that meant absolutely nothing because neither of them would ever understand the depth of what he and Brian shared.

Partner? What kind of partner was that supposed to be?

No fucking way did Brian have a partner. No. Fucking. Way.

He would know. Brian would tell him.

Or wouldn't he?

Ted exchanged a loaded look with Emmett, who simply rolled his eyes but refrained from commenting. His mother, was another matter. She, of course, always had something to add.

"Honey-"

And why was she calling him honey all the time, for God's sake? It was awkward in a very humiliating way.

"- hospitals have these rules for a reason. I'm sure as soon as he's awake they'll move him to a regular room and you can visit all you want."

"But he needs me now. Why couldn't anyone understand how vital it was for Brian that he'd be there? "Haven't any of you ever read about unconscious experiences?"

His mother popped her gum – geez! "No, but I'm sure you'll enlighten us."

"I could do with a little more support," he said with a pout he just knew would soften his mother.

And sure enough, she reached out and ruffled his hair. "You're a good man, Michael."

Yeah, he was a good man – and what exactly did that help? “Mom, that’s really nice to hear but – you know, not really helping here.”

What if Brian did have a partner he had never told him about?

Fucking shit.

Debbie stared at him for a moment, then flicked her finger at his head. “Ow!,” he exclaimed. “Why did you do that?”

“Because you’re an ungrateful ass?”

That one came from Emmett, fountain of knowledge that he was, in his plait pants and lilac shirt, adorned with a pink rose on his breast pocket. If Brian were here ... but unfortunately he wasn’t. Which didn’t seem to bother anyone but him.

“I can’t believe you’re so ... so ... blasé about all this! Brian was attacked! He could die.”

“Please,” Emmett rolled his eyes in a very queenish, exaggerated way. “He’s not going to die. Your mother’s latest Pittsburgh detective told her that he is doing good, and that the doctors think he’ll be out and about soon.”

“How can they say such a thing?” Michael demanded. “They don’t ...” That’s when it hit him, and his head snapped to his mother. “Your ... what detective?” He looked back at Emmett, demanding answers.

“Ooops,” his friend said, staring intently at his coffee. They were all sitting in their favourite booth at the diner, he across from Ted and Emmett, while his mother had squeezed her oversized butt in with him. Okay, so that was ungrateful but, geez, he was feeling a little claustrophobic.

“What detective?” he asked again, now keeping his gaze on his mother, who ... blushed? Oh, fuck. “Are you dating the guy?”

“Not exactly,” she replied, mumbling more than actually speaking.

“Not exactly, my ass,” he snapped. “Are you – or are you not?”

“He did ask me out,” she admitted, blushing even more.

“He is actually kind of cute,” Emmett piped in and at Michael’s murderous glare instantly shrank back. “In a very hetero, very unkempt way I mean.”

“He is old,” Ted added, shrinking back at Debbie’s stare of doom. “Not that you’re old,” he said quickly. “Because you’re not. Old, I mean.” Sweat formed on Ted’s forehead. Not an attractive sight.

“You’d better shut up now, Teddy,” Emmett advised.

Ted zipped his lips and was silent. Good choice. However, that didn’t answer all the questions he had. “Mom, how did you even meet the guy?”

“He’s the detective investigating Brian’s case,” Emmett informed him.

The detective investigating ... Just great. “You mean the incompetent asshole who hasn’t got a clue?” he said. “And you’re dating him – why exactly?”

Now his mother got into his face. “First of all, that’s none of your fucking business, young man. And second – well, he’s doing his best. It’s not easy, you know.”

“Why?” he shot back. “Because he’s just as homophobic as the rest of his profession? Great choice, Mom, really great. But I suppose that happens if you get so desperate for a fuck that you take the first thing crossing your path.”

Silence.

Dead silence.

His mother stared at him, and Michael stared back, only now realising what he’d just said to her.

Aw, fuck.

Shit.

“Mom-“

“No.” She held up a hand, then stood slowly, with a grace the Queen of England would be proud of. “You’ve made it quite clear what you think of me.”

Shit. Shit. Shit. Why did he always let his mouth run away from his brain? “Mom, please-“

The smile she gave him was stilted, and hurt so much, he wished he could take the hurtful words back this very instant. “I need to take your orders. So what’ll it be?”

“Mom.”

But she ignored him, while Emmett and Ted, both not quite meeting her eyes, gave their orders. Michael said nothing and she left their table, her head high, her shoulders straight.

"Wow, you really know how to throw a punch beneath the waist-line," Ted said after she was out of earshot.

"I tried to say sorry," Michael defended himself even though he knew it was stupid.

"Yeah, after you stuck a knife into her heart and twisted it but good." Emmett looked at him in disgust. "Way to go, Michael. There isn't one of us who doesn't wish Deb was his mom, and you're such an ungrateful bastard, I just want to slap you around your stupid head." Emmett shook his own head. "She's done so much for you, and now she's met someone she likes and who seems genuinely interested in her – and you say something like that. You really are a piece of work."

"I'm sorry, okay. I didn't mean it. I was just ... so angry because none of you seem to care for Brian at all."

God, why couldn't they understand how badly he needed to see Brian, make sure that he would be alright? He was so very worried and it had been because of it that he'd said those terrible things to his mother. Fuck. And to make everything even more complicated, Ben Bruckner had called last night and asked about Brian and how he was doing. Michael had never really met the man, but Brian liked him a lot and Ben did have a very sexy voice.

What if the guy really was Brian's so called partner?

"And you think that makes it okay to say those things?" Ted stared at him in disbelief.

"I already said I was sorry," Michael gritted out between clenched teeth. "You know I can be an idiot sometimes, and ... shit," he cursed when his mother was back with Emmett's and Ted's orders and didn't even look at him. "Mom."

She pretended he didn't fucking exist. She simply turned away from the table and was on her way back to the kitchen window, hurt and tension radiating from her body in waves. This wasn't going to blow over easily.

Which left only one option.

"Mom," he said loudly, rising from his booth.

He had to crawl.

"I'm very sorry."

In front of everyone.

The diner was dead silent, but his mom had stopped in mid-step.

"I know I can be an asshole sometimes, and ... I also know I had no right to say such a thing. I love you, Mom."

Everyone was staring at him, the looks he received alternating between confusion and outright anger on those faces whose owners had been listening in on their previous conversation.

"I do love her," Michael addressed everyone. "She is the best mother anyone can wish for. And I also know she has the biggest heart. Mom, I'm so, so sorry."

They were all holding their collective breaths.

Until his mother turned and there were tears swimming in her eyes. "Come here, you little asshole," she said and the diner erupted into cheers as he and Debbie embraced each other, Michael making a valiant effort to keep breathing.

Geez. She was such an Italian, it was humiliating. But his mother had always loved big entries, so she loved big gestures as well. And as much as Michael hated being the center of attention, he knew it was what she needed after he'd let his mouth run away from his brain.

But fuuuuck. Those vices around his body were squeezing all air out of his lungs.

"Mom, ne-ed. to. bre-athe," he managed.

It took another long second but then the embrace loosened slightly and Michael drew much needed air. Of course his mother used that very moment to smack him a wet one on his cheek. "I love you, you little fucker."

He looked into her eyes, they were wet with tears but they shone with happiness and love. He really was a lucky bastard. "You're the only mother who can say such a thing with affection."

"Look at you, now I've smudged you with lipstick." She tried to remove it with her thumb, rubbing his cheek and when that didn't work, she produced a napkin, spat on it and repeated the procedure.

"Mo-om."

By then the noise level in the diner had increased again and people were talking, and not paying attention to them – well, most of them anyway. Emmett smiled at them and dabbed his eyes with his own napkin, and Ted had a strange glint in his eyes. It made Michael a little uncomfortable, so he looked away and when he looked back it was gone. He wondered if he'd imagined it. He probably had. There was no reason for Ted to gaze at him like that. None at all.

“Now.” Debbie finally let him go. “You said something very hurtful, and I forgave you. How about some breakfast?”

He leaned forward and very softly kissed her cheek. “That would be great.”

And it was. When he rejoined Ted and Emmett in their booth, he had almost forgotten about Brian Kinney. Or any alleged partners.

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“How is he today?” was the first thing the young, blond man with the wedding ring asked when he came into the ICU and followed Grace into the changing area. All visitors to ICU were required to put on a gown and mask to reduce the infection risk for the patients whose immune systems were affected by different kinds of illnesses.

“The same,” she said with regret in her voice, as always hating that she didn’t have better news. She’d been an ICU nurse for the past six years and sometimes her job was extremely depressing. She helped him to tie the knot in the back of the protective hospital gown, then walked with him to the room where Brian Kinney was still lying unconscious.

“Hey,” the young man, whose name was Justin Taylor, said as he sat down and took Brian Kinney’s hand. His own were pale, the skin almost translucent with short, sturdy fingers, while Brian’s were tanned with long, graceful fingers and clearly defined joints. The two young men seemed as different as their hands, and maybe they were, but somehow they fit nevertheless.

“He had a very quiet night,” Grace told Justin, feeling the need to say something encouraging at least. “And he’s in such good condition, whatever was given to him hasn’t affected it – which is a very good thing.”

“Okay.” Justin’s whole attention was on the man in the bed. As Grace watched, he reached out and touched Brian’s face. The gesture was so heartbreakingly tender, even someone as jaded as Grace Rosenberg had to blink away tears. Or maybe she wasn’t quite as jaded as she thought herself to be.

“I just wish,” Justin said and pulled her from her own musings, “something would change.”

“Sometimes no change is the best we can hope for,” she replied, smiling at him when he looked up.

“It’s just so frustrating.” She could hear it in his voice, and the impatience which she could understand so well.

“When my brother was in the final stages of AIDS,” she told him, “I kept wishing, every

day, that something would change. That that very morning they would find *the* drug to cure it, to save his life.”

Justin looked up, his eyes full of compassion. “I’m so sorry that he had to die.” His thumb kept making circling motions on the back of Brian’s hand. “Brian and I knew this girl at college, she was HIV positive. But I have to admit that it’s the closest I’ve ever come to AIDS. And Beth, the girl at college, looked completely healthy.”

“Treatment is much better these days.” It was one of her great hopes and sometimes left her so angry, she wanted to put her fist through a wall. What if Brad had been born later? Would he still be alive? Life could be so unfair. Grace had talked with her minister about it, she had tried anyway. But as soon as she’d mentioned the fact that her brother was gay, instead of helping her he’d started praying on her, and telling her that sinners sometimes were punished. Suffice to say, she’d left him with a few choice words and hadn’t gone to a church ever since. The way she saw it, she could talk to God in private, and she was sure he’d take the time to listen.

“People can stay quite healthy for a long time,” she told Justin. “There are side effects from the meds but they’re working on controlling those, too. But it’s still a horrible disease.”

Some people seemed to forget that. Grace watched with increasing concern that some young gay men were seeking out HIV positive partners in order to infect themselves deliberately.

“I know,” Justin smiled at her. “I’ve read enough about it to not want it. And Brian’s is anal about using condoms. I’m not sure he’s ever had unprotected sex in his life.”

“That’s very smart. Brad, my brother, wasn’t really careless either. But he was ... Like a lot of us, he thought that once couldn’t hurt.” She sighed, feeling another anger take hold in her gut. She and Brad had had more than one screaming match about being safe. She’d worked hard at not letting her resentment show when he’d puked on her shoes or she’d changed linens twice or three times during the night after diarrhea had set in. She had loved her brother, but a part of her wanted to hit him over the head for doing this to her. It was irrational but she had been tired a lot and frustration had been her constant companion.

Not only wasn’t there a lot that could be done to make her brother more comfortable, it was also hard to live with people’s disapproval or to watch Brad treated like a leper by some of the nurses. Sometimes even the doctors had said terrible things to her brother, such as that it was his own fault he’d gotten infected. Sexual deviants got what they deserved. Only after she’d had a very long talk with the head nurse, things had gotten better.

Never ideal though. Ever since then Grace had made a promise to herself that she would make sure people in her care would be as comfortable as possible, that she

would treat them with respect and, yes, love. That was what she was doing now – and not just for Brian Kinney who was still slumbering away. This young man, this Justin Taylor, who was so steadfastly holding onto Brian's hand had touched her heart in a way she hadn't thought possible. Maybe because he reminded her of Brad.

She shook her head. "Have you known each other for a long time?"

"We met in college." He smiled and it lit up his whole face. Grace wondered how many could resist that smile. Not many, she thought. "So it's been a while. But he and Michael – you know the guy who was here yesterday?" Grace nodded. This Michael was hard to forget. But for entirely different reasons. "Yeah, well, he and Brian go way back. They were not quite fourteen when they met."

"Brian seems to have very loyal friends."

Justin laughed. "Nice way to describe it."

Grace shook her head. "No, I mean it. It tells me that he must be very special."

Justin's face turned tender. "He is. Very special. He tries to be so tough, so untouchable, but he isn't any of that. Okay, maybe he is tough. I mean, he survived growing up with his parents after all. But ... he's got such a big heart. I've never seen him turn away from a friend in need.

"It took me a while to realise that I felt more for him than just friendship. Yeah, right – a while! Make that years." He shook his head. "Talk about being oblivious." He looked down at his own hand. "I married my best friend. A woman," he explained. "And now she has to suffer, too, because I'm such an idiot."

"You're not alone. A lot of gay men are married first. Many struggle with themselves." What else could she say. Besides, it was the truth. A lot of gay men got married, tried to live what family and/or society expected from them. For many it took years to face up to their true selves.

They both looked up when the door behind them opened and Brian's doctor stepped into the room. "Grace, good to find you here," Tim Eversleigh said. He was one of the younger doctors, very devoted to his profession, and also very good. He had also managed to stay a human being, which was something Grace treasured in a doctor.

"Hey Tim," she greeted him. "Justin, this is Doctor Tim Eversleigh. He's been treating Brian these past days. Tim, this is Justin Taylor, he is ...," she hesitated for a moment. What could she say? It was clear that Justin wasn't truly Brian's partner, but it was also clear that he loved Brian very much. She looked into Justin's blue eyes and said, "He is Brian's family."

Tim smiled at that and nodded. "That's good. I'm glad you're here then, so I can give

you the great news. We have information what might be the cause for Brian's current situation. We took a blood sample very early this morning and if that checks out the way we expect it to, Brian will wake up soon."

"Really?" Justin was clearly still anxious, but there was hope in his pretty blue eyes.

"Yes." Tim nodded and looked at Grace. "It seems he was overdosed on a horse tranquilizer. If it turns out to be the case, he merely needs to sleep it off, so to say. We'll support it by giving him a lot of fluids, so the drug will wash out of his system more easily."

"A horse tranquilizer?" Grace could hardly believe what she was hearing. "Who would do such a thing?"

Tim shrugged. "Beats me." He looked Justin. "We'll have the results tomorrow. But I'm pretty sure it is right. Everything fits."

"Can you say when he's going to wake up?"

Tim shook his head. "No. Nothing definite, I'm sorry. It could be today, even though I doubt it. But tomorrow is possible." He smiled. "It depends on how much he was given. But I'm really hopeful that it will be very soon."

"That's great news," Grace told him. "Isn't that great news, Justin?"

"Yeah." The young man's voice was choked, and he kept his gaze on the patient, obviously trying to hide that he was crying. "Great."

"Okay then." Tim took a look at Brian's chart, made a quick note on it, then put it back in the holder at the end of Brian's bed. "I need to see after another patient."

"Thanks for coming to tell us," Justin said and looked up. He was blinking, and his cheeks were wet.

Tim's answering smile was very warm. "You're welcome. But it was entirely my pleasure. We love to have our patients walk out of here on their own two feet."

Grace watched him go, then reached out and put a hand on Justin's shoulder. "See, I told you. Never lose hope."

"So you did. And I didn't. Lose hope, I mean."

She squeezed his shoulder. "I know. And I'm sure he does too. He's very lucky to have you."

"I'm lucky to have him."

Grace grinned. "Then you're both very lucky. Hold on to that, Justin. It's very precious. And now I have to leave as well. But I'm sure you won't mind a little privacy."

Justin shook his head, then turned back to Brian. "Thanks, Grace."

"My shift here starts at eight," she said, because she knew that it was what Justin needed to know. "You can either call or come here. I'm sure the lab results will be in by then."

She went out and closed the door before he could reply. She had a smile on her face anyway.

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Carl Horvath put the phone down with a thoughtful expression on his face.

A horse tranquilizer.

Wasn't that interesting? They weren't 100 percent sure yet but it seemed that they had found the cause for Brian Kinney's current condition.

Who would use a horse tranquilizer to attack another human being? And who could get hold of such a substance? A vet? Someone who worked at a vet practice? Probably. Depending on the horse tranquilizer, they'd probably be able to buy it on the street. That meant the number of suspects were up in high numbers still. Damn.

His phone rang again, and he snatched it up. "Yes?"

"Is this Detective Horvath?"

Despite his annoyance that this case was going nowhere, Carl had to smile. "Debbie. Great to hear from you."

"I thought about ... you know, your idea of going out."

His smile widened. "There's this nice little restaurant I've had my eyes on for months," he began, but she interrupted him.

"Who said I was going?"

Carl laughed. "You would really call me to say you're *not* going?"

There was silence on the other end, then her voice came back with definite annoyance in it. "Is it always like that when you date a police officer?"

“Always like what?” He knew what she meant, but the lighthearted banter with Debbie Novotny was just what he needed.

“Can you guys all read minds?”

“Comes with the job description. Mind reading is high on the list.” He’d never been able to read minds, but Debbie Novotny was an open book to him. And he truly liked the fiery red head.

“It’s disturbing, just so you know. So, okay, I’m biting. Give me the address and I’ll be there.”

Give her the – “No way. Debbie, what kind of guy do you think I am?”

“A guy in a rumpled coat.”

“I’ll have you know that I love that coat.” He hated the old thing, the only reason he’d kept it was that his late wife had gotten it for him.

She snorted. It was a peculiar sound coming through the phone. “You do not. But you can keep it. I don’t care what you’re wearing, as long as you’re paying.”

He laughed. God, this woman was better than therapy to get him to relax. “Well, then, Debbie. Would you do me the honor to go out with me tomorrow night?”

“Okay.”

Okay, huh? This girl surely knew how to play it. But then, she wasn’t a girl anymore. No, she was a full grown, hot blooded woman who had lived a big part of her life on her own, raising a son as a single mom. This woman knew left and right, no doubt about it.

“I’ll be at your house at six,” he said and hung up, the grin almost splitting his face.

When the door to his office was flung open at nine a.m. Ben knew that something was not right. Rule number one he’d installed early on was that nobody opened doors without knocking, not even the boss. Flinging doors open was even less favoured in these offices.

Of course, the furious ball of energy that was Michael Novotny had never heard of these rules.

“Good morning,” Ben greeted cheerfully. “We usually knock around here first.”

That stopped Michael dead in his tracks. It was funny to watch actually. One moment he’d been almost bursting with furious energy, the next he stood frozen in the middle of Ben’s office. It was as if he had even stopped breathing. If Ben hadn’t seen it he

wouldn't have thought it was even possible.

Michael recovered quickly, though. Taking the next step that brought him right in front of Ben's desk, he planted his hands on the surface and demanded: "Are you and Brian having an affair?"

It was so unexpected, so completely out of the blue, it was now Ben's turn to stare. "What?" was all he could manage.

"I want to know if you and Brian are fucking," Michael spat, his eyes blazing fire. His face was alive and alight, his expressive mouth slightly open, while a muscle was ticking in his jaw. It was such a turn-on, Ben had to breathe deeply, to keep himself outwardly calm.

He was also glad he was sitting down. His instant hard-on at the sight of Michael Novotny spitting fire wasn't something he wanted to advertise. Least of all to said Michael Novotny.

"One," Ben said, his voice not betraying any of it. "Good morning is the accepted greeting at this time of the day. Two. As I already told you, we knock before entering a room. Three. I don't see where my relationship with Brian is any of your business. And four. An introduction would be nice."

Once again, Michael was rendered speechless. Okay, so the introduction thing was a little stupid. Ben knew exactly who the man in his office was. But he couldn't help but think that Michael's storming into his office, hot as it undoubtedly was, had a high rudeness factor, too.

"I'm Michael Novotny," his unexpected visitor said after a moment. "You called me last night. And you **so** know who I am. Brian told me that you think I'm hot."

"Touché," Ben said with a smile. "Yeah, I know who you are. And if you already know that I think you're very attractive, it makes your initial question pretty moot, don't you think?"

So – that wasn't entirely true. He found Brian very hot. But they'd fucked their mutual attraction out of their systems that one, remarkable weekend at the White party, and now they were friends. Maybe not close friends, with Ben being Brian's employer it was a little difficult to be close, but friends nevertheless.

Michael frowned at him, as if trying to make sense of his words. "So you and Brian aren't having an affair?"

Ben had to grin. The man did have a one track mind. "Nope. But that's all I'm going to say. As I told you before, I don't think what goes on between Brian and me isn't an of your business."

"I'm his best friend."

Ben already knew that. Brian had said the same. 'Mikey is my best friend.' Yeah, he knew the tune. "That's great," he said. "It doesn't explain, however, why you stormed into my office like a missile on target."

Michael looked at him for a moment, then visibly deflated as he released a long breath and sat down on the chair in front of Ben's desk. "Sorry. These past days have been ... difficult. You see, I tried to see Brian at the hospital and they wouldn't let me in. And then they told me his *partner* was already there. His partner! I never heard of a partner. Don't you think he would tell me if he had one?"

Ben had to grin. He loved the way Michael was so passionate about his friend. "He might not. I mean, Brian is a very private person."

"Not with me." Michael's face was very alive. "We're really close and he tells me everything. It's always been that way." Suddenly his face darkened. "Then Justin turned up."

Justin. Uh-oh. Ben had to tread carefully now. "What about Justin?"

Michael shook his head. "You know they met in college?" When Ben nodded, he went on. "Brian was all hot for him. Strange. You know, it was during the time when Brian still tried to be and act straight. He even had a girlfriend then. And all of a sudden there was this kid." Again, he shook his head. "Don't get me wrong, Justin was – is – nice. He's one of the very few straight men who are friends with a gay guy." Michael looked up and directly into Ben's eyes. "Do you realise how rare something like that is?"

"I know." Ben had always been a little in awe about Justin's and Brian's friendship. It was very unusual for a straight and a gay man to be friends like that. Only, Justin wasn't quite that straight as it turned out. It was very obvious that Michael didn't know that, nor that Brian had fucked his 'straight' friend. He wondered what else Brian hadn't confided in his best friend.

"So, anyway," Michael said, leaning forward, "Justin turns up and all of a sudden he is the huge deal. It's 'Justin says', 'Justin does', 'Justin wants' all the time." Michael rolled his expressive eyes. "It got so annoying for a while, I actually thought he had a thing for Justin." He laughed, and rolled his eyes again. "Which is stupid. Brian doesn't do that. And he might fuck a straight guy now and then but he certainly doesn't fall for them." Then, as if on an afterthought, he added, "Or at all."

Aw, damn. Michael really was clueless where Brian and Justin were concerned. What was he supposed to say now?

Thankfully, Michael didn't expect for him to comment, he went right on instead. "It got

better, but Justin's always been important. Don't get me wrong, I don't resent that – or him. I even like Justin. Who doesn't, right?"

Ben had to smile. "I don't even know him."

Michael returned his smile half-heartedly. "You'd like him, believe me. He is nice. He is a great guy, he has a nice smile. My mother loves him." He laughed. "She told him he was the straight son she never had."

Ben knew all about Debbie Novotny. He has seen her once, when he and Brian had breakfast at the diner. He had found her outspoken and colorful, and had liked her on sight. "Your mother has a big heart."

Michael's eyes turned suspicious. "How would you know?"

"Brian talks about her sometimes," Ben said smoothly. "I also met her – once."

"Everyone knows my mother. She's the fucking Mother Teresa of gay Pittsburgh."

Ben felt himself frown. "You should thank God for having her."

Michael sighed. "I do. I really do. But sometimes she can be a little ... overwhelming."

Yes, Ben could see that. "So," he folded his hands on the desk, "now that we've established the fact that Brian and I aren't having any kind of affair, how can I help you?"

Michael sighed again. "I guess you can't. And I'm sorry. For barging in like an idiot."

Ben grinned. "You're not an idiot."

His visitor snorted. "Oh yes, I am. Fuck. I really should go."

Ben cocked his head. 'Go for it', Brian had told him. He took a deep breath. "You could do that. Or ... you could... Did you have breakfast yet?"

"What?"

He'd surprised Michael. Ben felt ridiculously pleased. "Breakfast. You know, the meal we take after getting up."

"I know breakfast. What about it?" Michael was getting annoyed. It was beyond cute.

And he was behaving like a complete idiot. Ben could almost see Brian rolling his eyes and snorting in disgust.

It made him grin even more. "Want to have breakfast together?"

"What? Breakfast?"

Ben laughed. "Yeah. Breakfast."

Michael frowned. "Would that be like a date?"

"Can you have a date in the morning?"

"I don't know. I suppose."

"Then we'll make it a date. If you want, that is."

He looked at Michael, and Michael was looking back. "You really think I'm hot?"

Ben laughed again, louder this time. He could feel it in his belly, even in his bones. "Yeah. I think you're amazing." Michael being coy was incredible. He wasn't beautiful like Brian. He was average in any way, height, looks, body. And yet, for Ben, he was everything he wanted. Maybe because Ben himself wasn't perfect.

He had once wondered what it would be like to live with someone like Brian. A man who was so passionate about everything, his work, his life, his fucking. Fucking Brian had been an experience that bordered on unreal. Brian was so full of hunger, but not selfish. He was all about satisfaction on both sides, he gave all and took all. It was exhilarating.

It was also like burning and being burned all the time.

Like living in a mercurial time-loop.

It was not what Ben wanted.

Sure, it was great for a weekend but he was sure that he wasn't made for something like that in everyday life. He knew that he would never be able to keep up with someone like Brian. It would exhaust him and as a result would destroy the relationship. If you could have a relationship with the likes of Brian Kinney.

But one thing Ben knew for sure. You could have a relationship with Michael Novotny. He was loyal, reliable, and to Ben he was what he craved, what he could live with, what he was seeking for.

He thought that Michael was hot.

"Amazing, huh?"

He could also blush in a very appealing way.

“Yeah.” Ben let his voice drop. “Fucking hot and amazing.”

He saw Michael swallow. “Uhm. Breakfast?”

Ben took a deep breath. “Right. Where do you want to go? Or should I order in?”

“Breakfast in your office?” Michael seemed to like the idea.

So Ben reached for the phone. “Yup. Jimmy, call Bona’s. Yeah. For two.” He looked at his guest. “Yeah. Cream too,” he said and Michael swallowed again. “A lot of cream.”

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Jennifer nervously licked her lips as she stepped into the conference room at Stabler, Rooney & Roberts, Attorneys at Law. The room was huge with a large mahogany table in the middle, surrounded by uncomfortable looking mahogany chairs. The walls were made of light wood where someone very fond of Marc Chagall had hung exquisite framed prints that gave the room a touch of lightness it missed anywhere else.

Beside her, her attorney, Charlotte Martin raised a brow, but gave her a reassuring smile when an important looking man greeted them with an outstretched hand. “Charlotte, how nice to meet with you again.”

“Gregory.” Charlotte inclined her head just a little and shook hands with the man. Then she turned to Jennifer. “Jenn, may I introduce Gregory Stabler. Gregory, my client, Jennifer Taylor.”

The man’s handshake was warm and firm, not at all the way Jennifer had expected it, as was the rest of the man. Charlotte had told her that Gregory Stabler was *the* divorce shark in town, but that she shouldn’t feel intimidated by that fact. She should rather enjoy the idea of Craig paying Stabler more than 500 \$ an hour for his services.

500 \$. Jesus.

She had expected to find an elderly, portly gentleman with a condescending attitude, and now saw a man in his late forties, with greying temples, who obviously took care of his food and worked out religiously. He was wearing an expensive designer suit and was probably spending half a fortune on his haircut. His shoes were hand made.

He was not at all what she’d expected. Worst of all – she felt herself attracted to the man. And if she was judging his smile correctly, he wasn’t all that unaffected by her either.

What a mess.

Stabler motioned to the table. "Please, let's sit down. Craig called me just before. He'll be with us in a moment."

"How is your lovely wife?" Charlotte asked. There was doubt she was trying to be polite, to fill waiting time with small talk.

The look Stabler gave her was a mixture between disbelief and amusement. "Terri and I split three weeks ago. I can't believe it hasn't made the rounds yet."

Charlotte, a woman in her early sixties, a grandmother Jennifer had met at a fundraiser some years back, was genuinely surprised. "First time I heard. I'm sorry."

He laughed a little. "I'm not." He turned to Jennifer, "Terri was my third wife. You will undoubtedly hear that she was twenty-five years my junior and that I'm only getting what I deserve for giving in to my midlife crisis, spurned lust."

"I would never say such a thing," Charlotte said. She might look like a grandmother, even be one, but she was great at her job – even thoroughly enjoyed it. She also came with a price tag Jennifer could afford.

Stabler made a dismissive gesture. "It's past history. We parted amicably. She gets a monthly payment and is already touring Florida with her new," he paused, then gave a loops sided smile, "sugar daddy, who is in his seventies, so don't look at me that way. Terri isn't a wronged innocent."

Jennifer saw Charlotte nod. "Sorry for the look. I sometimes get that way. After all, Terri is only a little older than my oldest grandchild."

Before Stabler could reply, the door behind them opened and a young woman, no doubt an assistant showed Craig inside. He let his gaze sweep around like a commander surveying his lower ranks. What on earth had she ever seen in this man, she wondered? The only explanation was that she'd been too young and too stupid to see through his polished façade to the asshole underneath.

Stabler stood. "Craig. You finally made it. Good. Then maybe we can get started."

And wasn't that interesting? Even though he was polite and friendly, there was no denying the underlying annoyance Stabler felt. With an attorney of his class, it said a lot. It seemed Craig wasn't just losing points with her, Jennifer thought, not with a little amount of glee.

Craig was sitting down, glaring first at Charlotte, then at Jennifer. "Jenn," he said, and it sounded like a snap of his tongue, as if saying her name was something he had to force himself to do. "Are your funds so stressed that you had to bring someone out of retirement?" he asked with a smirk.

Charlotte didn't react at all, but Stabler shot Craig a warning look. "It would help us all if you could focus on the matter at hand," he said firmly. "We are here today to find a way to keep your divorce as amiable as possible." He turned looked first at Jennifer, then at Charlotte. "Your client signed a prenup. I can't really see why we have to meet at all, if I can be honest with you."

"She was barely 21 years old when she and your client got married. Barely above the age of consent."

"Not in this state."

Charlotte gave him a chilling glare. "Be that as it may, you know just as well as I do that judges usually rule in favor if the party in question has been that young."

"I'm not paying one cent. Not for the kids, and certainly not for her." Craig's voice was like ice. He acted as if he didn't even know his own wife. God, how could a man like this have sired her children?

"Your children are grown ups," Stabler said absentmindedly. "You're not obliged to give them any support. Now, let's see what exactly the prenup says."

Stabler went on, but Jennifer stopped listening. She knew exactly what the prenup said. That in case she was filing for divorce she would get nothing. Not one cent. However, Charlotte had explained that it wasn't quite that easy for Craig. Jennifer had borne his children, Charlotte had told her, Jennifer had raised them, cared for them, had made Craig a home and his career possible. She had never cheated on him – not that he knew of anyway – and had been the wife he'd wanted and needed.

She had been so stupid, she wanted to smack herself on the head for it.

"Jennifer?"

She blinked and turned her head toward Charlotte. "Sorry –what?"

"Maybe we should find a good retirement home for you, if you can't even follow a simple meeting," Craig bit out, glaring at her with loathing. He turned to his lawyer. "She is getting nothing. She turned my only son gay."

"Please, Gregory," Charlotte said in her best 'I-am-God'-voice. "Tell your client that there is nonot scientific evidence that people can be turned gay, and that we will not discuss this subject. Justin Taylor is not part of this meeting, neither is his sexual orientation."

"Agreed," Gregory replied, before Craig could get a word in. "Craig," he turned to his client, "please keep from making these kinds of comments."

Jennifer could have told Stabler that trying to stop Craig was like trying to stop a cruise missile. It was one of his good qualities, actually, one that Justin had inherited with credit. "I will not," Craig shouted, jumping up from his chair. "Justin singlehandedly destroyed our marriage. Until he decided to become a deviant, our relationship was solid."

It wasn't anything, Jennifer hadn't expected to hear. It was the same nonsense he had spouted before. It was news to her, though, that he knew about Justin's sexual orientation. A part of her hurt for the fact that Justin hadn't confided in her, but her rational self knew that she had to do a lot of hard work to regain his trust.

And because of that, she couldn't just sit and let Craig tell his lies. She took a deep breath and hoped that she would seem calm and self-confident. She couldn't let him see what he did to her. He would only jump on the opportunity to use it against her. "For the record," she said quietly, "our marriage wasn't *solid*. It was ... convenient, at most. We both got used to being married. Also for the record, Justin didn't destroy anything." She locked her eyes with her husband. "You did. You and your prejudices that show what a small minded, petty human being you are. I'd rather eat dirt before staying married to you."

"Then dirt eat you will," Craig snarled. "You're not getting a penny from my hard earned money. And I don't want you to step into my house ever again."

Charlotte reached out and put a hand on Jennifer's arm. "Don't say anything," she warned.

"I won't," Jennifer assured her. "He isn't worth it."

"Don't you dare ignore me, Jenn!"

"Craig. Sit down. Now."

Stabler hadn't raised his voice, but there was so much authority in these short commands, even Craig stopped short and actually sat down.

"I apologize on behalf of my client," Stabler said and he was looking at Jennifer. God, his eyes were incredible. Stop it, stop it, she chided herself. "It won't happen again." That was said with a glare towards Craig. Then he turned to Charlotte. "Maybe we should set up a new meeting."

Charlotte nodded. "I'm all for it." The two lawyers exchanged a long, meaningful look. "Maybe we can work out some details beforehand?"

"Deal," Stabler said without even looking at his client. He stood. "Charlotte. Mrs. Taylor."

"Please, call me Jennifer."

Had she actually said that? She had to be tired, there was no other explanation for her behavior. Now she only had to bat her lashes at Stabler to truly sound like a school girl with a crush.

Stabler didn't seem to mind. His smile was very open and warm. "Gregory," he said. "I'm looking forward to our next meeting."

Oh boy.

Before Jennifer could reply to that, he ushered Craig out of the meeting room, leaving her and Charlotte on their own. Only now, Jennifer realised that her heart was beating a mile a minute.

Oh boy, indeed.

"I think he likes you."

She turned to find Charlotte watching her with a very strange look on her face.

"You mean Stabler?"

Charlotte rolled her eyes as if saying 'duh'. "Be careful. He's a known heartbreaker. Changes women like underwear."

Jennifer laughed. It sounded more than slightly hysterical. "I have no intention of doing anything with Gregory Stabler." Liar, liar, pants on fire, a little voice in her head chanted.

Charlotte gave her another of those knowing looks. The woman was far too perceptive, which wasn't really a surprise. After all, she had raised four children all by herself and was now the proud grandmother of seven. "Okay," she said, clearly not meaning it. "Let's get out of here. My God, Craig really is a piece of work."

"Yes, he is." On safe ground at last. Talking about Craig was easy. "I can't believe I once thought I was in love with him."

Charlotte laughed at that. "You're not the only one who made such a mistake. I even made it twice. But I wouldn't miss my kids for anything."

Neither would Jennifer. Not for the world. She only wished she'd chosen a better father for them.

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"He had a very quiet night," Grace told Justin as they stepped into Brian's room. "Slept

like a baby.”

Justin nodded, his eyes on the patient. When would Brian wake up? He’d called at eight and Grace had told him that the test results were in, and that Brian had been, indeed, overdosed with a horse tranquilizer. There was still enough in his blood to keep him sleeping another 24 hours but the doctors couldn’t exactly say when he’d wake up because their experiences with the effects of horse tranquilizers in human bodies were limited.

“He looks so peaceful,” Justin whispered, watching Brian for any move, any change in his breathing.

“I guess he is,” Grace smiled. “I mean, with the kind of overdose he’s sleeping off, he’s been having sweet dreams these past days while here on earth everyone was worried.”

Sweet dreams? Justin wondered if Brian even knew what that was. Had Brian ever had sweet dreams? Or was he living through nightmares without end? It wouldn’t be a surprise.

“I just want him to wake up,” he said and sat down on the familiar, uncomfortable chair. He wanted to look into Brian’s eyes again, wanted for Brian to recognize him, to react. He might look peaceful, even angelic sleeping like this but Justin would take any snarky remark instead. He’d even prefer facing Brian’s sarcasm which could be a painful as slicing skin from your body without anesthesia. He’d prefer anything over this vegetative state that seemed to go on and on.

Had it really only been a few days? It felt like weeks. How did people stand having their loved ones in a long-time coma? Even more, how did people keep up hope when every day was another disappointment, when nothing changed for an eternity. And yet, Justin had read about it, about mothers caring for their children. Children who would never laugh, never respond, never even acknowledge they were there. People had it all wrong. Sure launching into space was brave, but the really heroic acts were performed by these mothers, sisters, daughters or their male counterparts, who never gave up, not one fucking minute.

“Sweetie.” Grace’s voice was soft. “We all want for him to wake up. You told me he had the most beautiful eyes, and I’ve not seen them so far. I feel like missing out on something important.”

Justin laughed. “Don’t ever tell him that. He’d hate hearing you talk that way.”

Grace brows went up. “He doesn’t like compliments? What kind of gay man is he?”

“A very unconventional one,” he told her.

And it was the truth. Brian was not like anyone Justin had ever met, or met since. He

was – Brian. He could be sweet and thoughtful, be the best friend anyone could wish for. On another day he would be hurtful, spiteful even, his sarcasm, his sharp tongue feared not only by his friends. And yet, even when Brian was in a bad mood, Justin had craved being close to him.

God, he'd been such an ignorant idiot.

How could he not have seen what that meant? How could he have been so blind? Sure, part of it was his parents' doing, but not all. Most of it was his own stupidity. And yes, his own fear of not being what his parents, what everyone expected of him. It might have been unconscious, buried deep in his soul but there it was. Now, dragged into the open, it seemed almost silly that something had kept Justin from discovering it earlier.

"Well," Grace went for the door. "I'll leave you two alone. You know how to find me."

Justin nodded and she left, shutting the door with a soft click.

It was so obvious now, so simple and yet so complicated. It was easy because loving Brian was the easiest thing Justin could imagine. It was so clear and so strong, there couldn't be any doubt about what he was feeling. And it was complicated because there was Daphne and the baby, there were his parents. And there was Brian who didn't even have a clue what monumental change had happened inside Justin.

What would happen when Brian woke up? How did people wake up from a state of unconsciousness, anyway? Justin had never seen it happen. Sure, he'd watched TV but that could hardly be real. For one, in the movies people woke up from comas and looked lovely.

Brian didn't look lovely.

Yes, to Justin, he looked beautiful. But that beauty was seen through loving eyes. When Justin managed to put a little more objectivity in it, he saw that Brian's face was slightly blotchy, that his skin had a waxen look, that it felt dry and scratchy to the touch. No, the unconscious man in this hospital bed wasn't the same who could draw any trick he wanted, he wasn't the irresistible Brian Kinney. But for Justin he was all he wanted, and the idea of sitting at Brian's bed in fifty years and holding his hand that very same way filled him with such longing, he felt his eyes tear up.

Shit, he was such a wuss. Brian would take one look at him and hope he'd never set eyes on this weeping loser ever again.

Justin laughed a little and wiped his face.

"You have to wake up," he told Brian. "Because my imagination is running wild here. Now I'm already picturing us married with grandkids."

Justin shook his head on another chuckle, feeling thoroughly stupid. And thoroughly terrified. These feelings he had for Brian, these hopes he was harboring for them as a couple – they were based on exactly nothing.

Not one thing.

He had no way of knowing what Brian would think, what he would want when he finally woke up. Sure, they'd fucked, made love, whatever. But he had no idea what that meant for Brian. There had been a lot of panic and awkwardness on Justin's side the morning after, and Brian ... He'd said some pretty hurtful things. Justin thought – and hoped – that it had only been to protect himself. It was a typical Brian thing to do. Never let anyone see how much they get to you had been one of the first things Brian had told him.

A group of sophomore frat boys had started to harass Justin. He'd never found out why, but when he'd teared up after an especially hurtful comment, Brian had taken him aside and explained to him that all they wanted was to see him bleed.

"You have to smile. Even if they put a knife in your heart, even if they twist and turn it, you have to look at them and smile. The moment you let them see how much they get to you, you've lost."

Oh yeah, he remembered that mantra like it had been yesterday. He'd also learned that Brian was right. The next time they'd taunted him, he'd turned to them with a smile and a twinkle in his eyes, joking with them in a way they certainly hadn't expected it. After that, they'd let him be, one of them had even told him he could have his notes from the previous year if he wanted.

That incident had taught Justin several things. Apart from the actual experience and the 'duh' factor, he'd learned that Brian had a lot more life experience than he had himself. He couldn't quite decide if that was a good thing or a bad one, but it was a fact. Later, after they'd known each other for a while, and after Brian started to confide in him, Justin found out that even though it might toughen you up, some life experiences people should do without.

Like having your father beat the shit out of you.

Like having a mother who froze you out, who never touched you, who liked to pretend you didn't exist.

Who threw out her own son after he'd told her he was gay.

Grace had told Justin that Brian's mother had shown up at ICU shortly after Brian was brought here. She had also told him that Mrs. Kinney had merely stepped over the threshold, but hadn't approached the bed, had never tried to touch her own child.

Justin couldn't imagine his own mother doing such a thing. Jennifer would sit at his bed, hold his hand and weep. He laughed. That sounded a lot like what he was doing right now. His father would probably call him a pussy boy for it. Men didn't cry.

'Justin, don't weep. That's not a manly thing to do.'

He'd been five, and had fallen off his bike. His father had stood before him, staring down at him and told him to pick himself up and to stop crying. Only babies cried, only sissy boys wept because of a scratch. Justin had wiped his face with the hand that wasn't hurting and had climbed back on his bike. He was rewarded with a pat on his shoulder and a proud smile by his father and he'd smiled back and done another round.

Later, after his father had met a friend to play tennis, he'd gone to his mother. She had taken him to the ER where they'd found he'd broken his wrist. That night, his father had come to his room, sat by his bed and told him that he was proud of him. Justin remembered seeing his mother standing in the doorway, tears running down her face. When she'd become aware that he had been looking at her, she turned and left.

Justin now found himself wondering if it had been one of the defining moments of his life. Sissy boys cried. Pussy boys wept. It had been branded into his mind at an early age. Was it a surprise that his mind had pushed away any thought of him not being entirely straight and had buried it deep in his subconscious?

After he'd met Brian, and especially after Brian had come out, Justin had done what he usually did when confronted with something unfamiliar. He brooded on it for a while, and then found tons of books to try to understand. He'd read and read and read some more about homosexuality, about the people who were gay, about prejudices and about acceptance.

He'd already read a book written by the mother of a gay man. The woman had rejected her son when he'd told her he was gay. She'd needed years to come to term with reality and when she was finally ready to accept her child, he'd already been dying from AIDS. The book had left Justin shaken and he'd actually called Brian's mother. It was suffice to say that conversation hadn't gone well.

It had made Justin only more determined to be steadfast in his friendship. He'd decided that he'd never turn his back on Brian, that he'd be there for him no matter what. It was all that mattered then.

Now, with this new awareness about himself, he remembered feeling slightly uncomfortable while reading up on homosexuality, as if he was trying to reach for something he couldn't quite grasp, and certainly couldn't name.

Maybe ...

... he had felt a movement?

Every other thought went right out of the window, when his eyes flew to Brian's hand in his.

Had there been movement or had he imagined it?

He stared at the fingers, long, well shaped and utterly still. Nothing happened.

Had he imagined it?

But then it happened again. Just a twitch,

Then ... smacking?

Justin's head came up with a snap, just in time to see Brian licking his lips.

What was he supposed to do now? He didn't want to let go of Brian's hand, didn't want Brian to wake up alone, to open his eyes and find himself in unfamiliar surroundings that might frighten him. But Justin also wanted someone in here with him who knew if everything was happening the way it was supposed to.

"Grace!" he said loudly, hoping she was near by, that she would hear.

A slight groan escaped from Brian's lips and Justin could see movement beneath still closed eyelids.

"Grace!" He didn't care he was shouting. His heart was beating like crazy and he could feel sweat forming between his shoulderblades and on his upper lip.

But he saw Brian flinch at the loud noise and reached out to touch the other man's face. "Shhh. Brian, it's okay. It's me, Justin. Everything's fine. Shh. Shh."

"What's wrong?" Grace was standing next to him at the bed.

"I think he's waking up," he said, his voice unsteady, betraying all the confusing emotions he felt. Elation. Trepidation. Fear. And many more he couldn't name.

"He sure is." Grace's voice was calm. "You're doing just fine. Keep talking to him. It helps them, to hear someone familiar." Justin felt her hand on his shoulder. "Don't be afraid. It's a reason to celebrate."

It was. Oh God, it was. But Justin didn't know if he should laugh or cry. After being afraid for days the fact that Brian was finally – FINALLY – waking up was playing havoc with Justin's emotions.

"Hey." Grace's voice was now very soft, her hand on his shoulders very gentle. "It's

okay to cry. In fact, I'd be a little worried if you didn't cry."

"I'm a mess," Justin sobbed.

"No. No, you're not. You're just human. Look, his eyes are twitching."

"Is he okay?" It was the most important thing.

"All looks normal. But I paged his doctor just to make sure."

Justin nodded, his whole attention on the man in the bed. He only subconsciously realised that Doctor Eversleigh was in the room with them now, checking Brian's vitals, looking over a chart, then smiled and nodded and was gone after exchanging a few words with Grace.

"Everything's fine," she whispered after he'd left the room.

And sure enough, Brian's eyes twitched again, then opened slightly, only to close once again and Brian groaned.

"Fu-ck," he muttered.

And Justin laughed.

When Paul Webber was born 21 years ago on the day, he had hated the world. Of course, he couldn't remember hating the world, but his mother had told him that he'd fought with all his might not to live. The doctors had to hit him on the butt, had poured cold water over his head and had finally shoved a rubber tube down his throat to force air into his lungs. When he'd finally drawn his first breath on his own almost a week later, he'd cried non-stop for 24 hours.

If that didn't mean he resented living, he didn't know what else it might mean.

Not that his living was bad. Paul had great parents – even though he'd spent the better part of his puberty resenting them for creating him in the first place. He had an older sister who could be a pain in the ass but had been the main reason he'd made it through high school unscathed, and a younger brother who worshipped the ground Paul walked on. Paul had never wanted for anything, his father being a successful sports journalist and his mother working part time in her own baby boutique, money had never been a real issue.

The Webbers weren't rich by any means, but they were certainly well off, and Paul had grown up in a nice house with a dog that was now buried beneath the cherry tree. Paul's mother, blond and willowy thin even though she was approaching fifty, hugged and kissed a lot and he and his siblings had gone to bed at night with a story in their

ears and their mother's soft lips on their cheeks.

Paul's father, despite being very busy with his job, had always taken the time to come to Paul's ballet performances, had cheered the boy on and hoisted him up and on Dad's shoulders, telling him profusely what a wonderful kid he was and that his father loved him no matter what. He'd even smiled and hugged Paul, when his son had told him that going to college was out of the question. Paul hadn't missed the worry in his father's eyes but the only thing David Webber had said was that he believed in Paul and if Paul wanted to become a professional dancer, he was fine with it.

Boosted by that(,) Paul had been accepted by one of the most prestigious dance studios in New York, and had even managed to charm Professor Dimitri with his skill, when a drunk driver had missed a red light and Paul had woken up in hospital with a broken leg. It wasn't serious, the doctors had told him, but it still meant he had to take at least a three month break from school and that was the reason he found himself sitting in a park in Pittsburgh of all places – on his birthday of all days.

He also realised he'd been staring at the woman who was standing at the pond for the past five minutes. She was beautiful, but she looked tired, with dark smudges underneath her pretty eyes that were shadowed with worry and pain. Her skin was a rich mocha, and Paul couldn't be quite sure but he guessed she was a few years older than he.

Paul didn't know what made him do it, but he struggled up from his bench, and leaning heavily on his crutches, he hobbled over to her. "Hey," he said softly. "Are you alright?"

She looked up, clearly startled by his unexpected approach, and then she quickly fumbled in her purse for a tissue to dab her damp eyes and Paul saw a wedding ring gleam in the sunlight. "Uhm," she said and her voice was a little rough. "I'm," she cleared her throat. "I'm fine, thanks." She gave him a slightly wobbly smile.

He smiled and knew it was a little loop-sided. His father had told him he was the prince of loop-sided smiles. His father should know because he was the king.

"You don't look fine," Paul said softly. "I mean, you do look fine but ... you look as if you've had better days."

She gazed at him for a moment, probably wondering what kind of lunatic with a cast on his left leg was chatting up women in parks, before she laughed. "You have to work on your compliment making, do you know that?"

Paul cocked his head. "It wasn't meant as a compliment. I was observing."

She narrowed her eyes a little, squinting against the sunlight that made her skin soft and smooth, even gave it a bronzed shine. "Do you, like, as a rule observe strange women?"

Was that a polite way of asking if he maybe was a crazy stalker? “I usually have women observing me,” he said, then inwardly smacked himself. Now he didn’t sound like a crazy stalker, instead he sounded like a real asshole.

“Excuse me?”

At her raised brow and the incredulous tone of her voice, he sighed. “I’m a dancer.” Her glance wandered to his leg and back up. “I really am. A drunken idiot ran me over and I broke my leg but I’m studying classic ballet and modern dance in New York.”

Something flickered through her dark eyes, before they focussed on him with an intensity that made him want to cringe. “Are you gay?”

O-kay. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected, but having her ask him that, certainly wasn’t it. It stunned him – and amused him at the same time. He laughed. “No.” Then, because she fascinated him, he asked, “Why did you want to know that?”

She shrugged before she fumbled in her purse and produced a pair of dark sunglasses. She put them on, hiding her eyes perfectly. “No real reason,” she said.

It was a lie. Not just because of the sunglasses, but Paul could almost touch the lie, even felt it on his skin. It was the strangest thing. He’d never experienced anything close to it. “By the way,” he held out his hand. “I’m Paul Webber.”

She looked down at his hand, taking her time before accepting the handshake. “Daphne Taylor.”

“Hello, Daphne Taylor.”

Her lips turned down at that but she didn’t say anything. She just turned her head away staring at the pond. Two ducks were moving around slowly, seemingly weightless. They swam very close, rubbing their heads against each other. They were both male.

“Even the ducks are gay around here,” she remarked. “Figures.”

It was the second time she had said ‘gay’ and when she used it, it sounded as she was spitting it out in disgust. “Alright, I just have to know. Do you have a problem with gay people?”

“What?” She seemed startled by the question, no, more than that, surprised – even, maybe, slightly insulted. “No, why would you say such a terrible thing?”

Paul shrugged. “Because you mentioned the word ‘gay’ in way that got me thinking. ‘Are you gay?’” he mimicked her previous question and did a pretty good imitation of her voice. “ ‘ Even ducks are gay around here. Figures’. What happened – did a gay man

hurt you?”

She quickly turned her head away, obviously forgetting that he couldn't see her eyes anyway. “That's none of your business.”

She was right. It wasn't any of his business. Only, this woman, this beautiful stranger with her sad eyes and her tired face fascinated him. He wondered what she saw when she looked at him. He was an average guy, with dirty blond hair, green eyes, tall for a dancer but slightly built. He was coming after his mother – thank God. He loved his father, but his father was height challenged and about thirty pounds overweight. Paul was glad he didn't have to watch his eating habits all the time. His training schedule was hard enough as it was.

“Okay,” he said and allowed himself to study her profile. She had a strong chin, full lips and a straight nose. He couldn't see her eyes but he remembered her eyelashes were very long.

“I'm getting a divorce,” she said out of the blue, and Paul was the startled one this time.

“I'm sorry?” He wasn't sure it was the right thing to say, so he made it into a question.

“Don't be. I'm feeling sorry enough for both of us.” She shook her head, her curls dancing around her face. Her hair seemed incredibly soft and Paul wanted to reach out to touch it. “I'm having a bad day. Mood swings, you know.”

He knew shit, but he nodded anyway. He had a feeling that she needed someone to listen and so he'd listen. “A divorce can be pretty tough.” He would not tell her that the idea of her being free again elated him. And just how crazy a feeling was that? Paul almost groaned aloud.

“That's just it, you see. Ours isn't. My husband and I are friends. We've been friends forever and marrying him seemed the logical thing to do. I thought, that's it. It was good, and steady and familiar and I was happy.” She laughed, but it turned into a sob. “Or so I thought.”

Paul had broken up with girlfriends but he'd never been serious about any of them, so he had no idea what Daphne was going through. Daphne. The name seemed perfect for her.

“Only, it turns out he's gay.” Again she laugh-sobbed. “And I want to be angry with him and hate him for doing this to me, but I can't because he is my friend and he had no idea he was gay and ... I want to hate him anyway. God, I'm going crazy.”

He thought she was keeping it together incredibly well. He had no idea what he'd do. Scream? Rant? Beat the guy up – or have someone do it? Probably not. Paul wasn't prone to violence, in fact, he hated violence with a passion. Maybe it was because

nobody had ever been violent with him. His parents were the talking kind and they believed that even slapping ones children was something one just didn't do. Paul appreciated that very much.

"I think you're very brave," he told her. "It must be so confusing."

"It's tearing me apart. The worst thing is, I want to go to him and cry on his shoulder, because he is my best friend. But I can't because at the same time I can't stand looking at him right now."

"What do you mean he didn't know he was gay?" Paul asked. He had gay friends at the dance studio and they had known very early on on which side of the ocean their tribe lived – or so to speak. "How can someone not know?"

Daphne shrugged. "Repression I guess. Sometimes it's buried so deep, you just don't know. Also, his parents really did a number on him." She waved her hand. "It's complicated. And it doesn't matter. But I know that it tears him up, too. And that makes it worse for me, because a part of me wants to go to him and hold his hand."

"Sounds like a really tough situation." It was a lot worse, Paul thought, but knew that telling her that wouldn't help.

She laugh-sobbed again. "You have no idea."

He took a deep breath and said something he'd been thinking about ever since he had seen her stand there at the pond. If that made him a crazy stalker, so be it. "I was feeling sorry for myself, too, just before, you know." She turned and looked at him through her dark glasses. "Nothing quite as exciting. But with the cast and me not being able to dance and this being my birthday-"

"Your birthday?" she interrupted.

He nodded, smiling sheepishly. "Yeah."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

She laughed, and this time it was without the sob. "You're practically a baby."

"Am not," he said, feeling a little insulted.

She laughed some more and nodded, pulling her glasses away and finally letting him see her eyes again. "Yes, you are. You are such a baby. But twenty one is huge. Now you can drink legally."

Paul rolled his eyes. "I don't drink."

"I don't either, but now you can. It makes all the difference."

"How about we go and have a cup of coffee together?"

She paused for a moment, clearly taken aback by his invitation. "Coffee?"

Paul nodded. "Yeah. It's cool, you know. Doesn't imply anything."

"Don't you have anyone to spend your birthday with?"

He had. He knew his parents were preparing a special dinner for tonight and his siblings were coming home for the occasion but for the day he was on his own. "Not until tonight."

She looked at him again, her eyes searching for something. Then she nodded. "Okay. But make that a decaf with tons of milk."

"You can have whatever you want." It was loaded with double innuendo but she didn't catch it, she just smiled.

"Cake?"

"Sure," he grinned. He felt as if he'd already gotten his best birthday gift. "The only thing I need from you is to walk slowly."

She looked at his cast, then back in his face. "No problem. For cake I can do almost everything."

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His mouth tasted like pig-shit. It was the first clear thought that entered Brian's muddled mind. But usually the pig-shit taste came with him lying in his bed, some guy he couldn't remember next to him, and a hangover.

He tried to move his eyes and – yup, the mother of all hangovers was present. Fuck, his head hurt, and his eyelids were so heavy, he could barely open them. Not only his eyelids seemed glued shut, his whole body refused to obey his commands. His legs felt as if someone had put lead weights to them. The same went for his arms. He could move his fingers, though, and he could feel that they were enveloped in something.

A hand?

Why would someone be holding his hand?

“Shhh. Brian, it’s okay. It’s me, Justin. Everything’s fine. Shh. Shh.”

Justin was here?

“What’s wrong?”

That was a new voice. Female. Unfamiliar.

Where the fuck was he?

“I think he’s waking up.”

Damn right he was waking up. Only, he couldn’t move. And why did Justin sound so uncertain?

“He sure is.” The female voice again. “You’re doing just fine. Keep talking to him. It helps them, to hear someone familiar. Don’t be afraid. It’s a reason to celebrate.”

Celebrate what? That he couldn’t move and that he was hurting all over? Thanks so fucking much.

“Hey. It’s okay to cry. In fact, I’d be a little worried if you didn’t cry.”

Justin was crying? Why was he crying?

“I’m a mess,” Justin sobbed.

“No. No, you’re not. You’re just human. Look, his eyes are twitching.”

Twitching? Jesus. He was making a herculean effort here and all they did was twitch?

“Is he okay?” Justin again. He sounded so anxious.

“All looks normal. But I paged his doctor just to make sure.”

Then the doctor came and Brian felt himself get prodded and poked and whatever the fuck doctors did.

Doctors?

Was he in a fucking hospital again?

“Everything’s fine,” the female voice whispered after the doctor had left the room.

Fine? Nothing was fine. Brian felt like he had been run over by a truck and Justin was crying. In Brian’s book this was so far away from fine, fine wasn’t even in the same universe.

He tried to lick his lips and voiced the one word that came to his mind.

“Fu-uck.”

He was glad to hear that the word was followed by Justin’s laughter.

++++++

Carl Horvath detested Frank Callaghan on sight. It was a strong emotion, one a police detective shouldn’t have, but he couldn’t help it. It was partly due to the fear he’d seen in eyes of the man’s children or because his wife looked far older than her actual age. But Carl knew without a doubt that he would have detested Frank Callaghan no matter what.

The man was actually not bad looking, if you could ignore the mean glint in his blue eyes. He was a little taller than average, Carl estimated 5’8” or 5’9”, had reddish blond hair and was well muscled due to his work here at construction. But his body was already showing the signs of a heavy drinker, the redness of his face, the pouch that started to form.

Carl pulled his badge from inside his coat and flashed it. “Carl Horvath, Pittsburgh PD.”

Frank’s brows went up a notch. “Pittsburgh’s finest?”

Carl put his badge away. “I need to talk to you about your brother-in-law.”

“My-“ Frank stopped and stared, then laughed. “This is about the fag?”

“He was attacked a few nights ago.”

“Was he now?” Frank didn’t seem bothered by the idea. “What happened? He piss off someone by coming onto a straight guy?”

Carl hid his surprise at the reaction. What would a blue-collar boy like Frank Callaghn know about that? Unless, of course, it had happened to him. “Where were you the night of the 23rd?”

Frank cocked his head, the mean glint in his eyes strong and violent. “I didn’t beat up the faggot,” he hissed. “I wouldn’t touch him with a ten foot pole.”

Carl didn’t think Brian Kinney had ever come onto this guy. For one, he was his sister’s husband, and also, Carl had studied the Kinney file thoroughly, and beer slouching straight men didn’t seem Brian’s type.

“I still would like to know where you were that night,” he said firmly, locking eyes with

the man.

“How the fuck would I know?” Frank was clearly not liking this interrogation. “I work hard, and my wife isn’t putting out, so I go out. I usually end up at a bar and then ... well, I usually don’t remember much after that.”

“So you can’t actually remember your whereabouts?”

“That’s what I just said, wasn’t it?”

So the guy was a smartass, too. “That’s too bad.”

“Look,” Frank started fiddling with his shirt. “I don’t like her faggot brother. Hell, nobody likes faggots. Not even his mother likes him. But I didn’t go out and beat him up. I might have if I ran across him, I’ll admit to that, but I didn’t.”

As much as Carl despised the man, he sounded sincere. Damn. Carl would have liked to get an asshole like that behind bars for a while. Maybe then his wife would find the courage to leave him. But it seemed he was out of luck today.

“Can imagine anyone who would do that to Kinney?”

“Sure. Try the whole wide world,” Callaghan replied with a sneer. “It’s not natural. He’s asking for it, living it out like he’s proud of having someone shoving it up his ass.”

Carl gave him a withering look, wondering if Debbie would be proud of him could she see it. Strange, only a few days ago, making jokes about homosexuals wouldn’t have him think twice. Now it seemed – wrong.

He was about to say something when his cell phone rang.

“Horvath.”

“Dispatch here. The hospital called. Kinney just woke up.”

Hallelujah. “Great. Then I’m heading over there. Anything else?”

“No. Wait. There is something. ... We had an anonymous caller about fifteen minutes ago. Called from a public phone.”

“So?” Carl couldn’t imagine how that affected him – or his case.

“The voice was female.”

“What did she say?” Christ, getting information from Amanda Donahue at dispatch was like pulling weeds.

“To check out a guy called – wait,” there was paper rustling and then she was back, “Bobby Jae Hoskins.” She rattled off an address. Not really a good part of town.

“Anything else?”

“No. Just the name. And that it had something to do with Kinney.”

“Great.” Bobby Jae Hoskins sounded just like some good ole boy from Texas. Or something like it. Carl sighed. Seemed like his plan to get his hair done before his dinner with Debbie was jumping right out of the window. Oh, well, she’d forgive him if he told her that he had been trying to find Brian Kinney’s attacker. It might even get him some points with her.

Without another look at Frank Callaghan, he turned and left.

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“Hey.” Justin had to clear his throat, his voice sounded like sandpaper. He reached out and touched Brian’s cheek again. “Don’t try too hard.”

Brian was struggling to open his eyes. His fingers tightened around Justin’s. “Jus-in.”

Justin’s heart jumped. “Yeah. It’s me. Welcome back.”

“Wha h’pned?” Brian managed, and his eyes opened another bit.

“Someone attacked you.”

“gain?”

Brian frowned, obviously trying to make sense of the whole situation, and Justin used his fingertips to smooth out the other man’s forehead. “Yeah,” he whispered, leaning close. “Someone injected you with an overdose of a horse tranquilizer.”

Another frown. “Thirsty.”

“Here,” Grace handed Justin a cup. “Give him some ice chips. Later, when he’s more awake he can drink through a straw.”

“Christ,” Brian muttered. “I’m no’ tha’ old.”

Justin chuckled but he could feel tears were still running down his cheeks. “Thanks.” He gave Grace a grateful smile. “Here,” he told Brian and put some ice chips on his dry lips. Brian smacked them and his tongue came out to lick away the wetness the melting ice left. “Better?”

“Hm.” Another lick. “How long?”

“Only a few days,” Justin told him, even though to him it felt like years. God, had it only been a few days? “By the way, this is Grace,” he inclined his head toward the nurse. “She’s great.”

Grace grinned at that. “Welcome back, Mr. Kinney.”

“H-ey,” Brian said. “More.”

Justin gave him some more of the ice chips. “How are you feeling? Does anything hurt?”

“Tired,” Brian muttered. “Every-thing’s so hea-vy.”

Justin felt himself frown. “Heavy?”

“His limbs,” Grace jumped in. “That’s completely normal, Mr. Kinney. Don’t worry, it’ll pass soon.”

“Who?” Brian asked.

And wasn’t that the one million dollar question? “We don’t know,” Justin said, keeping a firm hold on Brian’s hand. “But the police are investigating.”

Brian made a noise that might have been a snort. “Fu-cking cops.”

“Don’t you start badmouthing cops,” Grace said with a waggle of her index finger. “One of my best friends is a cop. She’s doing great work.”

“Jus-tin?”

“Yes?”

“Why are ... you ... here?”

What could he say to that? After all, he’d told Brian not to contact him ever again. “Because I wanted to,” he said simply. “Because ... I need to be with you, Brian. God, there’s so much I have to tell you.”

“Daph-ne?”

It was just so typical for Brian to get right to the point. “We’re getting a divorce. We’ve talked and ... we decided it’s the best thing to do – for everyone involved.”

“Ba-by?”

“We need to talk about it, but I’m sure we’ll find a solution for that, too. I wish ... I’m so sorry I hurt her like this. And ... that I hurt you so much.”

Again, Brian frowned. “Hu-rt me?”

“Shh. Don’t think about that now,” Justin said and leaned over to kiss Brian’s cheek. He could see the startled surprise in the other man’s eyes. “We can talk about it when you’re better.”

“He’s been practically camped out here,” Grace said briskly, watching Brian for any unusual reaction. “We’ve had to throw him out at night.”

The frown deepened. “Really?”

Justin fought new tears. Brian always pretended to be so cool, so untouchable, but the way Justin had reacted after their night together must have hurt him even worse than Justin had thought. Could it be that Brian ... felt more for him, too? If he didn’t know it already, the way his heart jumped at the idea of Brian loving him, too, would have been an eye-opener that was hard to miss.

“Yeah,” Justin’s voice sounded choked and he swallowed. “I was a regular nuisance.”

Brian’s expressive mouth turned up slightly. “N’t thing new.”

“Will you be okay if I leave you two alone?” Grace whispered, already moving to the door. “I need to check on other patients.”

Justin nodded and she went out, but left the door slightly open.

“She your new friend?” Brian asked.

“She’s been great.” Justin was glad for the new subject. He desperately needed to pull himself together, or he’d end up a sobbing, weeping mess. In his state of half-awareness Brian was open and vulnerable in a way Justin had rarely seen. Not even when Brian was drunk, had he appeared so unprotected.

Brian licked his lips again and there was confusion in his eyes for a moment.

“What?” Justin asked, afraid something was wrong with his friend.

Brian blinked. “S’rry.”

Sorry? Why was Brian sorry? “You have nothing to be sorry for,” Justin said, squeezing Brian’s hand reassuringly. “You didn’t do anything.”

"N-no. I ... did." The words sounded heavy. "Fu-ck. I'm so t'red."

"Then sleep," Justin whispered. "I'll be here when you wake up."

"N-need to say." Brian was struggling with himself, trying to get the words out, and his grip on Justin's hand tightened. "S'rry for ... not st'pping you. Should 've st'pped you. Us."

Stopped? Realization hit with the force of a freight train. Oh God, did Brian really think that was his fault? "No, Brian," he said quickly. "I practically forced myself on you."

Brian chuckled, or at least it seemed like a chuckle the way his chest vibrated. "No f'rce nec'ary. Wanted you for so long." The last words were barely audible, but it made Justin's heart jump again, then race.

"You did?" He couldn't help himself, he had to know.

Brian's lips turned up again. "Yeah. For'ver."

My God. Forever? "That long, huh?" Justin knew his voice was choked but he couldn't help it. And he had been completely oblivious. What an idiot he was! Had been. This was definitely a had been – or so he hoped.

"It's your smile," Brian whispered and he smiled, too, no doubt caught in a memory. "You came into my room and smiled. And I was sold."

That had been seven years ago. Seven years. Justin wanted to weep. "I've been such an idiot. And ... uh ... I'm also gay."

Brian froze, and his hand in Justin's went slack. "Wh-at?"

"I know I've been an oblivious idiot. And ... But you see, sitting here, and ... I had a lot of time to think. And ... I know you don't do love and you probably hate me for saying it, but I know, I know," he repeated it, to emphasize his point, "that I love you. And I don't mean like a friend. Even though, I still am. Your friend, I mean. And if you don't want more, I can be that. I promise. No weirdness." Somewhere in the muddled depths of his brain Justin realized that he was babbling like a loon, but he was unable to stop himself. "But I need for you to know that I ... I'm in love with you. Totally. It's all I can think about."

"Love?"

There was such wonder, such incredulous disbelief in Brian's voice, Justin's gut clenched. "Uhm ... yeah."

“Rid’culous.”

It should have hurt, but it didn’t. Brian’s whole body was very still, and his breathing was shallow, and Justin knew – he just knew – that Brian was doing what he always did, what was second nature to him.

“You don’t need to protect yourself against me,” Justin said softly. “I know I hurt you but ... I’m not going to again. I mean ... not intentionally. I might, still, but then it’ll not be because I want to. And it’s not ridiculous. It’s real. I’ve loved you for so long, I was just too much of an idiot, or a coward, to admit it. But I’m admitting it now. And I’m not going to take it back.”

“You’re crazy,” Brian said, but Justin saw him blink. And then, Justin held his breath, a single tear slipped from Brian’s eye and travelled down his cheek to disappear in his hair.

“Yeah,” he whispered. “Crazy in love with you.”

Brian took a deep breath and sniffed. “So tired.”

“Then sleep,” Justin said, keeping his disappointment in check. What did he expect? For Brian, ‘I don’t believe in love’-Kinney, to declare his undying devotion? Get real, Taylor, he thought.

But then Brian surprised him by squeezing his hand. “Don’t go. Please.” The words were slurred, but Justin understood them nevertheless.

The magnitude of that admission was not lost on Justin. For Brian to ask him to stay, to not leave, a declaration of undying devotion couldn’t have been more wonderful. “I won’t,” he assured Brian. “I’ll be here. When you’re more awake, we can talk some more, okay?”

His only answer was Brian’s steady breathing.

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Bobby Jae Hoskins was not what Carl Horvath had expected. He had imagined an urban cowboy but found himself looking at a thirty something guy, tall, and dressed in black leather. From head to toe. His head was obviously clean shaven and covered with a black leather cap. There were several piercings in his face, and he was smirking at Carl when the detective produced his badge.

“No need for that.” His voice was rough, like sandpaper on gravel. “We’ve met.”

Surprise didn’t happen often to Carl anymore, but now he raised a brow. “We have?”

Hoskins chuckled. "I was looking a little more conventional then."

Carl wracked his brain and from the depth an image appeared, of a dark haired man in an expensive designer suit. "The Manson case," he said, and Hoskins nodded. Peter Manson had been a suspect in a homicide case about ten years ago. A fourteen year old girl had been raped and strangled. As it had turned out, Peter Manson hadn't done it, it had been the girl's uncle, who had been lusting after his niece for years.

"You were Manson's lover," Carl said, and looked at Hoskins.

The man inclined his head. "What can I do for you, detective? Come to arrest me for a crime I didn't commit?" There was a lot of anger in that voice but Carl couldn't really blame him. Peter Manson might have been innocent but the buzz about the murder had socially destroyed him and his business. Then, one day, the man had left Pittsburgh – at least that's what Carl remembered.

Carl felt the annoying need to apologize but suppressed the urge. "We have information that connects you to a case," he said instead, keeping his voice level and his eyes on the other man.

"Really?" Hoskins' face betrayed no emotion. "What case?"

"You know a guy called Brian Kinney?"

At that Hoskins chuckled. "Sure. Who doesn't." At Carl's raised brow, Hoskins shook his head. "I'm queer, and Kinney is a hot, young stud. Cocky. Likes to trick. Sure, I've seen him around." He smirked and Carl knew exactly what 'I've seen him around' meant. Brian Kinney and Hoskins had had sex. Interesting.

"And?"

Hoskins shrugged. "And nothing. We fucked. End of story. It might not fit your heterosexually repressed ideas but it does happen."

Carl gritted his teeth. "You're not disappointed he didn't want more?" Carl knew exactly that he was fishing here, because in all honesty, he had already dismissed Hoskins as a suspect. He just didn't fit. But Carl was cranky and tired and it annoyed him that this investigation didn't lead anywhere productive.

"No, I wasn't dis-app-oin-ted," Hoskins said with a sneer. "I had a great relationship with a man. But he was accused of a murder he didn't commit and couldn't live with the way people were looking at him."

Carl swallowed. That didn't sound good. "He left town as far as I know," he said, not looking at Hoskins.

“Yeah. He left town. Told me that I didn’t need someone like him around me.” Hoskins’ voice was hoarse. “Then, one night, he went into his new apartment in Chicago and slit his wrists.”

Aw, fuck.

“He was found a week later. So, no, I wasn’t looking for anything with Kinney. I’ve stopped looking for anything.”

Carl wanted to say he was sorry but he knew that it wouldn’t change anything. And it was not enough anyway. The kindest thing to do was to let Manson rest. “Do you know anyone who might carry a grudge where Kinney is concerned.”

Hoskins’ eyes narrowed. “There are a lot of sick people out there, detective. You should know that. A lot of gay haters, bible thumpers. Any of them could have done it.”

Carl was instantly alert. “How do you know what was done to Kinney?”

Hoskins sneered again. “News travels fast in the gay community. And when a stud like Kinney is pulled out of commission, people talk.”

That sounded convincing. “Anyone in particular who was doing the talking?” Because, in Carl’s experience some assholes liked to brag, making police work a lot easier.

Hoskins actually seemed to think about that. “You know, now that you’re asking ... there was this one guy.”

“Yes?”

“Never seen him before. I even asked the barkeep and he didn’t know him either. Tall, broad, blond hair, blue eyes. Read straight to me, but some of them like to go slumming in gay bars and clubs.”

“How tall?”

“Dunno. Six-eight maybe.”

That left out Frank Callaghan who wasn’t even close to six-eight. Damn. “Anything else about the guy?”

Hoskins shook his head. “Not that I ... no, wait. There was a tattoo. On the left side of his neck. A snake with an inscription. Sinner. Yeah, sinner. I remember because I thought it was very odd in a gay bar.”

A tattoo. Hm. “You’ve got a good memory.”

Hoskins shrugged. "I used to be an arts critic. I usually remember paintings."

Carl locked eyes with him. "I'm really sorry what happened to Manson."

The other man turned away, then after a moment, he turned back. "You've changed, detective. I remember you being a real asshole."

Carl laughed. "I still am an asshole, don't kid yourself."

"What happened?"

Debbie Novotny had happened. Damn, the woman really was in his blood. "Love happened," he said and almost choked on the word. Love? Okay, down boy. Not so fast. He hadn't even had dinner with the woman. God, he was a sorry bastard.

"A woman," he said and Hoskins grinned.

"You straight guys, always trying to be so tough, but you're jelly underneath all that blustering."

Carl wasn't sure if he should be insulted or pleased by the remark. Probably a bit of both. He pulled out his card and handed it to Hoskins. "If you should see that guy again, call me."

Hoskins studied the card, then nodded. "Don't count on it, though. I have a feeling he won't show his face around here again."

That was entirely possible. Even probable. But some assholes liked to come back and brag. "It never hurts to keep your eyes open."

"Will do. Tell me, detective, that woman – did she a brain transplant with you?"

"No," Carl chuckled. "It's Debbie Novotny."

Hoskins stared at him, then laughed out loud. "Holy shit. You and Deb. I'll be damned."

Carl rubbed his neck and sighed. "Tell me about it."

"No." Hoskins still grinned. "But I'll be watching with glee."

Daphne was actually feeling a lot less sorry for herself when she returned to her hotel room. Having coffee and cake with Paul had been fun, and she had enjoyed the appreciation she had seen in his eyes whenever they were on her. It was helping her battered ego tremendously. She didn't expect to see Paul ever again, but he would be a fond memory for her, someone who had been there when she needed him.

She closed the door behind her with a click, and was about to get rid of her shoes, when there was a knock. Sighing, she opened the door again and found her mother-in-law looking at her with serious eyes.

"What's wrong?" Daphne asked, stepping back, so Jennifer could enter.

"Nothing." Jennifer shook her head and sat down on a chair near the window. "I had a meeting with Craig, and the lawyers. Oh, and Justin called. Brian woke up."

"That's great," Daphne said with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. She was happy Brian had finally woken up, but the whole Brian-thing always left a bad taste in her mouth, she just couldn't get rid of. Not yet, anyway.

"It is," Jennifer agreed and Daphne knew that the older woman was watching her closely. What? Was Jennifer expecting for her to do something crazy. Say, like, jumping the bones of a 21 year old, very attractive stranger?

Oh God.

She barely suppressed a hysterical giggle. Where had that thought come from?

"Will Brian be okay?" she asked, because she just didn't want to get into the whole messy divorce thing with Jennifer.

"It looks like it. Justin sounded tired, but happy."

Happy, huh? Resentment flared, but died again quickly. Would there ever come a time when she wouldn't feel resentful? She hated the feeling, hated the idea of herself being petty and narrow-minded. But she couldn't help it.

And talking about divorces. "You mentioned meeting Craig?" Yup, change of subject was definitely the safe way to go.

Jennifer laughed. "Oh, that. He was ... unbelievable. He is such an asshole."

It was such an unlikely thing for her mother-in-law to say., Daphne joined in the laughter. "It was that bad?" Of course it was that bad. This was Craig they were talking about, the king of assholes.

"He behaved like an adolescent," Jennifer said. "Even his lawyer was disgusted with him." She giggled.

Giggled?

"Jennifer?"

Her mother-in-law waved a dismissive hand. "He is very attractive."

Craig? "Jennifer, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. And I'm talking about the lawyer. Gregory."

Gregory? Oh my. "Craig's lawyer?" This was so not good. One didn't lust after the enemy. "You realise that he's Craig's lawyer, right?"

And rebounds so didn't work working. But what would Jennifer, dutiful wife of the past 25 years, know about rebounds? What did she, Daphne, know about them, for that matter? The answer was easy.

Nothing. Zero. Zilch.

Jennifer laughed. It sounded slightly hysterical. "I know. God, I know. And I know it could never work, but I liked him looking at me that way, you know. As if he wants to see me naked. It's been so long a man has looked at me like that."

God, yes, Daphne could relate. Paul had looked at her that way. And she had loved it.

But this was her mother-in-law, and Daphne couldn't quite get rid of the ick-factor of the whole conversation. She didn't want to know about Jennifer naked, or any naked feelings her mother-in-law had. It was just too weird.

"Jennifer ... ah ..." What to say? "What did Craig say?" Yes, that was good, it was safe and would most definitely not include any naked thoughts. Sheesh. "Did you get anything settled?"

"Of course not." Jennifer stood and walked to the window. "Craig behaved like a raving lunatic. He told me I wouldn't be getting anything from him. And that Justin was the cause for our problems, which is just so, so wrong." Jennifer shook her head. "Oh, and then he told me I had turned Justin gay. God." She covered her face with her hands.

Was she crying? Daphne took a step closer, then stopped. "Jennifer?"

But her mother-in-law was laughing when she came back from behind her hands. "He was ridiculous. And he didn't even realise it." An almost hysterical sob escaped Jennifer's mouth and she put a hand over it. "Oh God."

"I'm sorry," Daphne said quietly, wondering what really bad thing she'd done in a former life to deserve this. Not only was her husband gay, she was now also the confidante of her mother-in-law. If it weren't for Paul Webber's adoring eyes and his sweet smile, she'd simply slump down on her bed and weep.

"No," Jennifer shook her head. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't bother you with this, but," she

helplessly raised her hands and let them fall down again, "I have nobody else. Justin is so wrapped up in Brian-" She stopped herself and turned horrified eyes on her daughter-in-law. "I'm sorry, that was-"

"No," Daphne held up one hand. "No, don't be. Besides, it's not really news. I know he's wrapped up in Brian." Yeah, and she wanted to hit Justin, scream at him, knowing that nothing would help. Because there was nothing – NOTHING – she could do to change facts. And the fact was that Justin was gay. "Sometimes," she told Jennifer, "it helps to hear it."

"Still," Jennifer was contrite. "I shouldn't have said it."

Daphne thought it was time to change the subject. "Do you miss Molly sometimes?"

Jennifer looked startled for a moment. "Molly? Of course I miss her. All the time. I ask myself if she's alright, if she has enough to eat, if she is happy. You'll be a mother soon, Daphne, you'll understand."

She already did. She hadn't even felt her baby move yet, it was still too small. There had been a flutter, just the tiniest, strangest sensation, but she'd instinctively known that it was her baby causing it. That moment, she had felt such a fundamental, such an unshakeable love for this human being growing inside of her, she knew that she would die to protect this life in the making. She couldn't fathom what it meant not to know where your child was, or if he or she were even still alive.

"She's never tried to contact you?"

"Once," Jennifer was looking out of the window again. "About four weeks after she left. She called and I talked to her for a moment before Craig took the phone away from me and started accusing her. It's no surprise she never tried to contact us again." She was silent for a moment, then added, "It's been two years."

Daphne knew that. She'd been there for the whole drama. She'd also seen the way Craig Taylor had treated his daughter, had methodically pushed her away, had made her choose. And chosen she had. Molly had left and at the time Daphne had admired her for choosing her own path, for not letting Craig hold her down. Today she knew better. She knew that running away was never an option because it made it so hard to turn around and come back.

"I was too much of a coward to stand up to him then," Jennifer was saying. "But I'll not back down now. No matter what. He will not do to Justin what he did to Molly. Justin will always know that I love him."

Justin. Justin. Justin.

Daphne wanted to scream. It was always about Justin. Damn the man to hell and back.

At the same time, she more than anything, wanted him here, telling her that things would be alright. She was such a bundle of nerves these days, she was silently wondering how she had managed not to go insane so far. She had talked to her doctor about it, and he had told her that mood swings were normal in pregnant women.

Men!

Thanks so fucking much for nothing, doc!

Why did men always explain everything by either pregnancy, menopause or 'this time of the month'? Because women, intelligent, well-educated women couldn't be taken seriously when they were in either of them? Men really were idiots! Or just opportunistic bastards. Or maybe both. Who knew. She didn't, and she didn't care either. Men were superfluous anyway.

"I know your relationship with my son is complicated right now." Jennifer's voice was soft. "And I'm very sorry for that because I know that I'm at least partially responsible for it."

"Damn right you are," Daphne snapped and she wasn't sorry for saying it, even when she saw Jennifer flinch at her frankness. But she was done tiptoeing around. It was bad enough that she had to tread carefully with Justin, too afraid to destroy a friendship that was precious and irreplaceable. She could not risk Justin. He was too much a part of her, too much part of her life, her thoughts. When things got rough, when she couldn't fathom a way out, her first instinct was to go to him, to talk things through with him. And even though she felt flashes of hatred for him right now, she knew that she couldn't lose him, lose the closeness they shared, a closeness she wasn't sure could be found again.

It was the kind of closeness that originated from knowing someone the same way, maybe even better, than you knew yourself. It came from knowing each other for years and years, from playing together as children, from going through puberty together, from discovering new exciting things, from confiding in each other. Justin knew things about her nobody else did, because she wouldn't have trusted anyone else with them. And she knew, she just knew, that they were safe with him. Because she knew him.

And everything came full circle and back to Justin.

"Daphne," Jennifer looked at her earnestly, "whatever happens between you and Justin, you have to know that I'll always be there for you, no matter what. And not just because of the baby, but because I love you just as much as I love him. Or Molly."

And fuck, now she was tearing up. Maybe her doctor was right about the mood-swings after all.

Daphne quickly turned away. "That's ... uhm ... good to know."

"Honey." She felt Jennifer's hand on her shoulder and suppressed a sob. "I know your parents love you, too."

Oh God.

"They can go to hell," Daphne snapped, hating the catch she heard in her voice. Why did Jennifer have to drag her parents into this? Wasn't everything complicated enough?

"You don't mean that, and you know it."

"My mother is a bitch," Daphne said. "And my Dad is such a fucking loser. He never stood up to her, never took my side. Never."

Without Justin she would have been all alone. Her mother was a cold, distant woman and it had taken Daphne a long time to realize that Ellen Chanders resented her own daughter, was even jealous of her. She had told Daphne herself, that one fateful night Daphne had left her parents' home and never looked back. That she hated Daphne for being younger, for being prettier, and for having a whole life of opportunities before her, Ellen had missed by marrying LeRoy Chanders.

"She told me my Dad was a loser, who would never achieve a thing, and that she hated being bound to him." Daphne heard Jennifer draw in a sharp breath. "Yeah. I asked her why she wasn't just divorcing him, and she laughed. She said that she had missed her opportunity for a better catch and now a loser of a husband was better than none at all."

"I'm so sorry." Jennifer sounded as if she were close to tears herself. "They looked happy at your wedding, though."

"Because my mother would never let anyone see. Keeping up appearances is everything to her. I hated that from the day I understood what it meant. And ... and I think my Dad was happy." She was pretty sure of that. Her father might never stand up to her mother, but she knew that he loved her. Or at least she hoped, he did. He had hugged her a lot when her mother had been distant, and he'd always praised her for being a clever girl. It had stopped when his mother had told him not to cuddle Daphne so much, but Daphne still remembered.

"Justin will always be your friend, Daphne."

"I know."

She knew, but it still hurt so much. It hurt to let go of dreams and wishes. Because Justin might be gay and in love with Brian, but Daphne was in love with Justin. Had been as long as she could remember. She couldn't tell him that. He must never know because it would destroy him.

She tried to think of Paul Webber and his smitten eyes.

Unfortunately it didn't really help anymore. Real life had caught up with her again.

++++++

Brian Kinney was awake and looking at him curiously when Carl stepped into his hospital room. The nurse who'd led him in gave the patient a smile. "Mr. Kinney, Detective Horvath is here to see you." She looked around as if searching for someone, then her gaze found Kinney again. "Will you be okay with him?"

"Sure," Kinney smirked at him. "The Detective and I are old pals, aren't we Carl?"

Carl cleared his throat. "We've met," he explained to the nurse who was grinning. He wondered if she was maybe related to Debbie Novotny. She had the same knowing glint in her eyes as she left the room. Shaking the thought off, Carl turned to Kinney. "How are you, Mr. Kinney?"

"Tired." Brian shrugged. "Feeling like shit, but hey, nothing new here, right? Last time we met, someone had just beat the shit out of me."

Carl ignored the remark and settled himself in the chair near the bed. "I only have a few questions, Mr. Kinney, and then I'll be gone."

"Brian?"

Carl turned and saw Justin Taylor standing in the door. He had talked to the young man after the first attack on Brian Kinney, and he'd also spoken with his wife, a very lovely African-American woman named Daphne.

"Mr. Taylor," Carl inclined his head. "What a surprise."

Justin Taylor stepped into the room, glaring at Carl. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Justin." Kinney's voice was quiet but firm. "Cut it, okay."

"I will not cut it," the blond snarled back, not taking his eyes from Carl. "What are you doing here?"

Carl sighed inwardly. Hostile feelings always made things more difficult than they had to be. "As I told Mr. Kinney just before, I only need answers to a few questions."

"It's okay, Justin. I don't mind."

The blond glared first at the patient, then once again at Carl before he leaned against

the wall, arms crossed, like Kinney's own personal watchdog.

"Now," Kinney's voice drew Carl's attention. "What is it you want to know?"

The man was clearly still affected by the drug that had been injected into him because he had problems keeping his eyes open.

"Mr. Kinney," Carl began. "Did you see your attacker?"

"No. I only felt ... something. And then ... nothing."

"Any idea who could have done it?"

Kinney shook his head slowly. "Nope."

Damn. It wasn't as if Carl had expected anything else, but he was still disappointed.

He sighed. "That's too bad. Because in all honesty, I have to tell you that this whole investigation is getting nowhere."

A snort came from the wall. "What else is new?"

"I also want to tell you that I'm not giving up. This whole case is very strange. I'm only drawing blanks and that's highly uncommon. Usually something turns up. But I can't even find a motive so far." Carl shook his head, "It stinks."

Kinney chuckled. "Not literally I hope."

Carl leaned slightly forward. "I talked to your sister. She asked me to tell you that she's thinking of you."

Kinney's gaze darkened. "Did you meet Frankie-boy too?"

Carl rubbed his neck, giving Kinney a wry smile. "I had the pleasure, yeah."

Kinney's gaze turned even darker. "It's probably too much to hope that he did that to me?"

"Unfortunately not. He's just a regular asshole." He and Kinney shared a look of understanding. "I talked to a guy called Hoskins." At Kinney's blank look, he explained: "Leather guy, clean shaven, around thirty five. Says he ran into you at one point."

Kinney shook his head. "Sorry."

"Anyway. He said some guy turned up on Liberty Avenue one night. Blond, blue eyed, around six-eight. Does that ring any bells?"

Kinney seemed to think about it. "No. Sorry."

Carl sighed in frustration and stood. "Okay, then. That's it for now."

He was about to turn, but a hand on his arm held him back. He looked down at Kinney. "What?"

"Claire. Was she okay?"

Carl wasn't sure what to say, but he opted for: "Yeah. I gave her the card of a friend of mine. She works at social services."

"She won't use it. I've told her more than once to leave him, but," he shook his head and winced. At the wall, Taylor straightened. "My mother did a number on her. Told her that leaving your husband is a sin and all that shit."

Carl had already guessed as much. "Maybe she'll at least think about it."

Kinney snorted. "Don't count on it." He had clearly given up hope. And he winced again.

"Okay." Taylor stepped closer to the bed. "That's enough. You're leaving now."

"I was just about to," Carl said mildly. He couldn't help wondering, though. What kind of relationship was between those two men exactly? To Carl it looked like a lot more than just mere friendship. Taylor had a protective air around him that promised violence should anyone overstep an invisible line.

"Don't get your knickers in a knot, sunshine," Kinney said and Carl watched Taylor grimace slightly.

"I don't wear knickers," he told Kinney, as he sat down on the chair. "And you should rest."

"I'm okay," Kinney replied, but his voice was hoarse and his eyes were drooping.

"You're not." Taylor was clearly concerned and his hand found Kinney's. Carl felt his own brows going up. Now, wasn't that interesting? It seemed that something had changed since the last time he'd seen Justin Taylor. Did his wife know about that? And how was she taking it?

He left, making a mental note to talk to Daphne Taylor in the very near future.

++++++

“Now,” Ben stretched luxuriously, keeping his eyes closed. “That wasn’t quite the way I imagined our first date to end up.” He grinned when he heard Michael’s incredulous snort. “Okay, so that was a lie.”

“I’d say the way my ass is throbbing, you were imagining quite a bit, Mr. Bruckner.”

Ben grinned even more. Michael Novotny had been just what he had imagined. And then some. He had also surprised Ben thoroughly and that was something he hadn’t really expected.

“Did Brian tell you about my,” he gestured towards his leg, “handicap?” He turned and looked at Michael, looking flushed and sated. He suppressed the urge to reach for him and stop any conversation by a repeat of their past hour.

“No.” Michael shook his head. “Why?”

Ben shrugged. “Just wondering.” Because Michael had not reacted the way people usually did when they saw his prothesis for the first time, especially when they hadn’t been warned that it was there. When Michael had slipped his jeans down, he had just stopped for a second, and then, almost casually, had said: “Wow, that looks like some fancy piece of equipment.”

And that was that.

After that they had fucked their brains out, in a very thorough and satisfying way, which Ben wanted to repeat as soon as possible. And thankfully, his dick agreed, too.

Michael chuckled. “I see you’re already up for more.” He reached over, but Ben batted his hand away.

“No,” he said, laughing. “I mean, yeah, I am, but ... I need to know something.”

Michael rolled his eyes very expressively. “Geez, you’re a talker.”

Ben laughed some more. “I guess I am. Like to read, too. But ... Why didn’t my leg put you off?”

“Put me off?” Michael seemed puzzled by the question. “Why would it put me off? That’s one small leg missing, I mean, it’s not even the whole leg, just ... a part of it, beneath your knee. But,” he grinned, “have you looked at the rest of yourself?”

Now it was Ben’s turn to look puzzled. “The rest of myself?”

“Yeah, the rest of yourself. You work in an office but you have to work out like a loon to look the way you do.” Michael waved his hand over Ben’s naked form. “Only a fool would not take

what you're offering, and Mother Novotny didn't raise a fool, thank you very much."

Ben laughed, knowing he could fall for this man, fall very hard. It should have been terrifying but for some strange reason it wasn't. Maybe it was because Michael had stuck with Brian for so long it made him trustworthy. Ben was ready to risk his heart. And he didn't give a damn.

"You're very special, Michael Novotny," he said with what he hoped was a fond smile.

"No," Michael laughed. "I'm not. I'm just a boy next door regular guy."

The heck of it was, Michael actually believed it. He thought he was nothing out of the ordinary. And maybe he was, in a way. Regular height, regular body, regular hair – and yet, he was so much more, and the fact that he wasn't even aware of it made him all the more attractive to Ben, who had learned the hard way that visible beauty only got you that far. The things that really counted weren't visible and never easily detected – but Ben had the feeling Michael had them by the bushel.

"Well, regular guy," Ben said, once more rolling over and covering Michael's body with his, "how about some more regular feel good –"

"Oh – I am so sorry!"

Ben froze, and so did Michael, who was staring up at him with a mixture of horror and amusement in his eyes. "I thought you had a policy around here about knocking first."

"So did I," Ben said through clenched teeth. Without turning around, he hissed, "Jimmy, close your eyes and get out."

"I'm really–"

"Out!"

The door closed, and he and Michael were on their own again. "God," Ben breathed and buried his head in Michael's shoulder, whose body was shaking with laughter.

"You should have seen the look on his face."

Ben raised his head. "He is so dead."

"Actually, he is kind of cute. And I'm sure he'll have wet dreams just thinking about your tight ass."

Ben clenched his teeth. "I don't want any of my employees having wet dreams thinking about me."

“Why not. I’m sure it helps to keep up working morale.”

“This isn’t funny.” Ben was grinding his teeth so hard, he’d probably have to see his dentist tomorrow morning.

“Lighten up.” But then a bulb seemed to explode in Michael’s head and he got serious. “Is this about your leg?”

Ben quickly rolled away, sat up and searched for his shirt. “Get dressed.”

“Ben.”

The hand on his arm was gentle and Ben sighed. “I don’t ... want it to become office gossip,” he said, forcing the words out.

“Ben, can you look at me?”

He slowly turned his head and found nothing but compassion in Michael’s eyes. “I can understand that, but honestly, I’m very sure that he saw nothing beside your ass. Ben, the boy is totally gay. You are gay. If you saw two naked guys on a floor – would you look at their legs first?”

Michael definitely had a point here. “Probably not.”

“Definitely not.” Michael smiled. “You have to stop thinking of yourself as the guy without the leg. You’re a very hot man, one I’d like to see again, to fuck again.”

Michael was so earnest, Ben couldn’t help but return the smile. “See again – when exactly?”

“What?”

“You said you’d like to see me again. How about tonight?”

“Okay.”

“Just like that? Okay?”

Michael grinned. “You think I’d let you get away from me? No way, mister.”

“Six thirty?”

“It’s a date.”

++++++

Brian had no idea how much time had passed when he woke up this time. He still felt leaden, the taste in his mouth was only marginally better, and the annoying beeping sounds hadn't ceased to exist either.

The weight on his chest was new, though.

He slowly opened his eyes and saw Justin's blond head resting on his torso. His face was relaxed in sleep but it didn't mask the exhaustion. Beneath Justin's eyelashes, barely visible they were so light, the skin looked bruised, as if he hadn't slept in days. There were faint traces of worry lines around his eyes Brian had never seen before, and the hand that rested beside his head was clenched – even in his sleep.

It was strange seeing Justin's face so close, even more so as they'd been a lot closer that one remarkable night. When Justin had fallen asleep, Brian had stayed awake, studying Justin's face in a pale light of the moon, using the few precious hours to let himself fantasize that he could have this, have Justin for more than just a good night's fuck. It was an impossible dream, but he had indulged himself in it, had given himself permission to let himself believe that there could be light at the end of the rainbow.

Of course, everything had fallen apart the next morning, as Brian had known it would. Justin was straight and that was that.

I'm also gay

Had Justin really said that? Or had Brian's muddled mind made it up? The surge of hope and yearning was so strong, Brian sucked in a sharp breath and Justin's head came up with a snap.

"Oh, God. Did I hurt you? I'm sorry I fell asleep like that."

"No." It hadn't hurt. "I'm fine." His voice still sounded like gravel. He tried to clear his throat, but winced as pain flashed as a result. "Shit," he muttered.

Justin smiled and it was incredibly tender. "They stuck a tube down your throat for the first 24 hours. They were afraid you might stop breathing. Grace told me your throat would be tender for a day or two."

Tender? "These medical types have a nice way of saying things." Because it fucking hurt like a bitch.

"How do you feel?"

Justin's face was close but seemed far away at the same time. The blue of his eyes seemed brighter than usual. "Still like shit," Brian said, because it was the truth and he felt that he had a right to complain. He had been in the hospital twice these past months – that was more than he'd managed in all his 25 years before.

“Should I call a doctor?” The concern in Justin’s voice was an almost palpable thing.

So Brian pushed down his inner cranky asshole and shook his head, glad that it didn’t feel like exploding anymore. “No, I’m really better. How long until I can go home?”

Justin stared at him for a moment as if he’d just spoken in Chinese. “Home? Are you crazy? You just woke up.”

“I’ve had it with hospitals,” Brian said. “I want to leave.”

As if on cue, the door opened and Grace wandered in, a smile on her face. “I see you’re back again, Mr. Kinney.”

“Yeah,” Justin gave her a look. “And he asked me when he can go home.”

Grace laughed. “That’s good to hear. It shows that the patient is improving.”

“And he is right here.” Brian knew that he sounded cranky again, but he hated people talking about him in 3rd person.

Grace smiled at that, took his blood-pressure and his pulse and wrote everything down on a chart. “Blood pressure is coming up, too. That’s great, Mr. Kinney. And with your partner here, I’m sure you’ll be up and about in no time.”

Partner?

Brian saw Justin blush and swallow hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down with the effort.

Grace gave Brian another smile, winked at Justin and left as quietly as she had come.

Brian turned his head toward Justin, but the blond was suddenly very interested in the bed sheets.

“Partner?” Brian asked quietly.

Justin swallowed again. “They ... uhm ... wouldn’t let me in. They ... Only close family, you know. They even sent Michael away.”

Brian had to laugh. “I’m sure that went over well.”

Justin’s eyes met his for a quick moment, then darted away again. “No ... uhm ... not really. I think he was pretty angry. And I’m ... sorry. I ... first told them I was your brother, but nobody believed it. And Grace was so nice, and I told her ... that ... uhm ... I loved you and all that and I think she assumed –“

“Justin,” Brian kept his voice as gentle as possible. “Stop.”

The other man did, but he kept his gaze firmly on the bed sheets where his hands were clenched in the white fabric, and his face flooded with embarrassment and something else, Brian couldn't quite name.

“I'm sorry,” Justin whispered miserably, his voice cracking with the effort to keep tears at bay. Brian knew the blond well enough to see what was going on. Justin was terrified that he'd overstepped an invisible line, that he'd done something Brian wouldn't be able to forgive.

“Justin,” he said quietly, “look at me.”

The fists clenched even more, but fractionally the blond head came up and around and finally Justin's eyes met his. They were luminous with huge pupils, almost shocky in their intensity.

“I understand, okay?”

Justin gulped, then slowly nodded, some of the tension leaving his body.

“I probably would have done the same.”

Even more tension slipped out of the blond. “I didn't want for you to wake up in a strange place all alone. I was so afraid you'd wake up at night when I couldn't be here.”

Justin had never been good at hiding emotions. It was one of the things Brian admired deeply, even though he knew that it made his friend terribly vulnerable. Right now, however, it made it easy for Brian to read the other man.

“But you were here,” he said with a smile. “And I'm glad I wasn't alone.”

The smile that bloomed on Justin's face was beautiful. “Me too.”

“I'm not sure I remember everything you said before, but ... did you tell me you and Daphne are getting a divorce?”

Justin nodded, his eyes full of shadows now. “Yeah. I mean, I'm gay. Staying married to her wouldn't be good for anyone involved.”

So he hadn't imagined it. Justin had meant it. “So you're gay.” He didn't make it a question.

“Well, duh.”

“Justin,” Brian tried to be as gentle as possible. “One night with a friend doesn’t make you gay.”

“Oh.” Justin’s gaze slipped away again. Now he was staring out of the single window. “I know. But ... it wasn’t just that one night. I ...,” he licked his lips, very obviously embarrassed and not sure how to say it.

“You fucked other guys, too?” It sounded coarse and he wanted it to, but Brian wasn’t sure how he felt about Justin fucking other men. It was also completely hypocritical because Brian Kinney was the last guy on earth who should be throwing stones.

Justin nodded, keeping his eyes firmly on the window. “Yeah. And I ... uhm ... liked it. I mean, I didn’t mind having sex with Daph and all, but it’s different.”

“Different, how? I mean, apart from the obvious reason.”

This was a completely surreal conversation, one Brian hadn’t imagined in his wildest dreams ever having. Least of all with Justin Taylor.

“I’m more involved and,” Justin frowned, as if struggling to get the words out, “being with you. I ... I had no idea I could feel that way – at all. I was ... everything of me was involved, not just my dick.”

I’m crazy in love with you

Brian pushed the unwelcome flash of memory away. It wouldn’t help, anyway. Love was nice for poets and romantics, but it was an illusion, nothing more.

“You’re deluding yourself, Justin,” he said quietly. Brian would never believe that Justin fucking Daphne was nothing more than getting his rocks off. They were far too close, best friends. Brian was undeniably gay, but fucking Lindsay had been more than going through the motions, too.

“No.” Justin shook his head vehemently. “I’m not delusional.”

Brian barely kept from rolling his eyes. “Only a few months ago you told me you were happy with Daphne, and you were delirious about becoming a father.”

“I am delirious about becoming a father!” Justin shot back, getting up from his chair and starting to pace. “Why wouldn’t I be? Just,” he turned and his eyes locked with Brian’s, “because I’m gay doesn’t mean I won’t love being a father. It’s probably my only opportunity to have a child. What’s that got to do with anything?”

Brian hated to admit it, but he was taken aback by Justin’s passionate reaction. And he hated even more to admit that Justin was right. Fuck. “Nothing, I guess,” he murmured. “But tell me something, when you fucked Daphne, did you enjoy it?”

Justin's eyes narrowed, he was clearly annoyed with Brian's reasoning. "When you fucked Lindsay, did you enjoy it?"

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. He'd forgotten that Justin was neither a pushover, nor was he stupid. And his memory worked, too.

Also – he was fucking right again.

"Okay, so, yeah, I did enjoy it with Linds, but I didn't know better."

Justin cocked his head. "I rest my case."

"I walked right into that one, huh?" Sometimes admitting defeat was the wisest move.

"Yup, you did."

Brian sighed. "So, okay, you're gay."

"I am." The blond's voice was firm. Then he took a deep breath and held Brian's gaze. "And I'm also in love with you." He held up a hand when Brian opened his mouth to reply. "And before you start with the delusional bullshit again. I did like having sex with other men. In fact, it was fucking great. But with you everything was different. That's why I freaked that morning, because I couldn't believe I was feeling all that for my best *male* friend."

"Love is a fairytale," Brian said, but it sounded hollow, even to himself.

"It's not." Justin came back to the bed and sat down again. "Because I feel it. I know the difference."

"How?" Brian felt himself squirming under Justin's intense eyes. "What kind of role models do you have? Your parents? That's a laugh, Justin."

"Maybe I don't have role models, but I still know how I feel. You'll not convince me it isn't true, just because you don't like it."

Justin was pissed now, and hurt. And the hurt was stronger, shrouding his eyes, dulling the blue. Brian hated that he was causing it, that Justin was in pain because of him. He didn't want that, he wanted Justin to be happy, and to be ... with him. Dammit. He wanted the dream. He wanted the impossible dream, because he was in love with Justin, too, even though every cell in his body screamed at him that it couldn't be, that it would end in heartache and destroy his sanity.

He quickly looked away.

“Brian.”

The hand on his shoulder was like a burning torch, and he was aware like hell that Justin was close, Brian’s skin vibrating with the knowledge. He could have this. Justin was offering love and understanding, he was offering himself.

He was offering paradise.

But Brian had learned early on that paradise was never for sinners. And he was a sinner. Not just in the biblical sense, but in the real one, too. What could he offer Justin? This bright, intelligent, loyal man, who was the greatest prize he could imagine.

Brian was fucked up. His parents had taken care of that. He knew he was mercurial, knew he wasn’t trustworthy, and he knew without a doubt that he’d never be able to be completely monogamous. He also knew that Justin would never be able to live with anything else.

Yes, he wanted Justin, but he couldn’t be what Justin wanted.

“No,” Brian whispered, forcing the word out.

“No, what?”

Justin was a fucking pitbull. He also had the annoying habit that he would never quit.

“It would never work,” Brian said, closing his eyes. He knew tears were in them and he didn’t want Justin to see, couldn’t let him see. “I’m not what you want.”

“Bullshit. You are exactly what I want. And you want me, too. You said so. You said you fell for my smile the first time we met.”

He had? Good God, he must have been out of his mind. How could he have been so stupid to tell Justin that? “Fucking drugs,” he muttered.

“Do you love me, Brian?”

“I told you-“

“You are so full of shit.” Justin had the nerve to sound amused. “‘I don’t believe in love’,” he mimicked Brian, “‘Love is a fairytale’, yaddy, yadda. I know them all, and I never bought them. Don’t forget who you’re talking to. I’m not Michael. I know you, I’m not buying into your bullshit.”

And wasn’t that the truth? Brian could honestly say that he loved Michael. Mikey had been his anchor for a very long time, he and Deb had saved him from becoming something he didn’t want to be. He and Mikey were close, the same way Justin and

Daphne were close. Best friends. Confidantes. Always there when the other needed them.

And yet, compared to Justin – frankly, there was no comparison. Justin had been like an earthquake. He had turned Brian's world upside down, had broken through defenses, had challenged him, had forced him to accept that Brian was capable of love after all. He had longed after Justin, had wanted Justin ...

... and now he was pushing him away.

Brian blinked, the bright light of the room hurting his eyes. His back was still turned on Justin, whose hand was lying on Brian's shoulder as if permanently attached to it.

He could have this.

He could have Justin.

And it was like a bucket of cold ice that Brian suddenly realised he was merely too much of a coward to risk it.

He was a fucking coward.

Just the way his father had predicted.

Fuck.

"Brian?" There was uncertainty in Justin's voice now and Brian hated hearing it, because he knew he had caused it.

"What ...," he had to stop and take all his courage to force himself to continue. "What if it doesn't work out?"

"What if it does?" The hope was back in Justin's voice. Brian could feel his heart expand, could feel it grow in his chest. God, he was so in love with Justin, losing him would destroy Brian. Was Justin aware of the power he had over Brian? It was a terrifying, and at the same time, an exhilarating thought.

He slowly turned around, and his eyes met Justin's. There was nothing but love in the blue depths, and the promise of forever. They were open and honest, and Brian wanted nothing more than to drown in them and never come up for air.

Justin reached for his hand. "Can you trust me?"

"I do," Brian whispered. "I ... I ... I want to try. I just ... I'm ..."

Justin smiled, and it was the sweetest smile Brian had ever seen. Only a week ago it

would have made Brian laugh in disgust. Today it made him hope.

"I know," Justin said – and kissed him.

"Stop touching your hair, you'll ruin the whole thing."

"I can't believe that's me in the mirror." Emmett laughed when Deb turned around once more, her eyes wide with wonder at her blond curls. "I thought it had all gone grey by now."

"It looks fan-tas-tic," Ted chimed in from his place where he was sitting on the sofa, giving Emmett a look. "And the dress. Perfect."

"You think?"

Emmett wouldn't have guessed it, but Debbie Novotny could be nervous like a school-girl before her first prom. And to think it was all for some rumpled detective who couldn't quite hide what he thought of gay people.

"Definitely," Ted assured her. "Your Carl will be speechless with awe."

She took another look at herself and sighed. "I wish Michael could see me tonight."

"Talking about the lost son, where is he? I thought he'd love to see his Mom all dressed up." Ted asked, and Emmett felt himself frown. He knew Ted had always had a thing for Michael, but lately it had gotten different, more serious maybe, and that worried Emmett. Michael was a great guy, that wasn't the problem. But Emmett knew that Michael would never be interested in Ted – not in that way. Which would leave Ted with a broken heart, and if Emmett hated one thing, it was to see any of his friends in pain.

"I haven't heard from him all day," Debbie said and turned to Emmett. "But I'm not the one living with him?"

Emmett straightened. "Uh ... well, we're sharing an apartment, but it's not as if we're attached at the hip or something. He doesn't have to tell me where he's going. We don't have a curfew either." The truth was, he really didn't know where Michael was. However, he could take a pretty good guess. One that would leave Deb with joy and leave Ted with the kind of puppy dog expression, Emmett so not wanted to see tonight.

When Michael had left this morning, a non-work morning, he had been furious. At Emmett's question of what was going on, he'd shot over his shoulder that he was going to find out what exactly was going on between Ben Bruckner and Brian. Emmett, who knew that absolutely nothing was going on there, or at least hadn't for a very long time, was, of course, aware of the fact that Brian's boss had it bad for Michael. The fact that Michael was still MIA could only mean one thing.

He sent Michael a silent salute and hoped his friend was very happy indeed tonight.

“You’ll probably see him tonight,” Debbie turned back to the mirror, clearly more interested in her own reflection than her son’s nighttime activities.

“Anyway,” Emmett was determined to change the subject. “I thought you were seeing that guy you met in the diner last week. What was his name ... Hank?”

Ted rolled his eyes. “He is a golf freak. When he wasn’t out playing golf, he was watching golf – he was watching golf even during sex.”

“Well, at least balls were his passion, right?” Debbie cracked up over her own flat joke, but she turned all fluttery when the doorbell rang.

“I’m getting it.” Emmett sprang to his feet and opened the door – only to come face to face with Michael and – “Oh my,” he breathed. “Look what the wind blew in front of the door.”

The man next to Michael was beautiful, there was no other name for it. He was tall, not quite as tall as Emmett himself, but a nice height with an almost perfectly sculpted face and a body to die for. The black pants and shirt only underlined the picture of sex on legs.

“Hey, Em,” Michael said, the big smile almost splitting his face.

Oh yeah, the boy had definitely been getting some. And if the look on beautiful’s face was any indication, he had been an eager participant in the getting.

Emmett closed the door after Michael and his companion had entered, and followed them, admiring the almost perfect rear end of the new guy, who – no doubt – was Brian’s boss.

Michael confirmed it when he went over to his mother and said: “Mom, this is Ben. Ben Bruckner.”

Debbie, who had been eyeing the newcomer with open curiosity, smiled. “Ben.” She held out her hand and the two shook. “I’m Debbie. And I’m ... very happy to see you.”

Michael rolled his eyes. “Mo-om.”

“What? Can’t I be happy to see him?”

Ben laughed. “I’m also very happy to see you, Mrs. – uh, Debbie. Michael’s talked about you a lot. And so has Brian. I feel as if I know you already.”

“Believe me, you don’t,” Michael said wryly.

Deb’s eyes turned a little suspicious, “You know Brian?”

And once again, her son rolled his eyes. “Ben is Brian’s boss, Mom. Of course they know each other.”

“Oh.” Deb turned to Emmett and Ted. “He is Brian’s boss,” she mouthed in that way only Deb could, as if she was already planning for upcoming nuptials. Emmett exchanged another look with Ted – or rather, he wanted to, but found his friend staring at Michael and Ben, completely transfixed by the view.

“Teddy?” he asked quietly, but there was no reaction. Ted was still staring at Michael and Ben, the expression on his face like that of a little boy whose dog had just been run over by a truck. Aw, shit. Not only did that mean that Ted was already heartbroken, it also meant that Emmett would have to deal with it. Ted would be depressed and that was never a pretty sight. He should have said something, Emmett thought. He wasn’t sure what, but something, anything, that would have shown Ted the error of his ways.

Unfortunately he was no Brian Kinney. He sucked at telling people the unmasked truth. Sometimes he really wished he could be a little more ruthless.

“You look beautiful,” Ben was saying and Emmett snapped back to the conversation in the other corner of the room. Ben Bruckner was charming Deb with the best of them. The guy had it bad for Michael and did his best to score points with his mother.

Deb actually blushed. “Let’s hope others will think that too.”

“Mom.” Michael took his mother’s hand. “He is a cop, not a prince.”

“But for your mother,” Ben cut in, “he is important. And I’m sure you’ll knock him off his feet.”

Again, Deb blushed. Emmett had to smile. Ben didn’t only seem perfect for Michael, he was perfect for Deb as well. He risked another glance at Ted. He was still standing in his corner, still a picture of misery. Emmett wondered if maybe a pornographic marathon would do the trick. It had helped before.

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“It’s me.”

“Are you completely insane to call me on this number?”

“I don’t care about insane, I care about money I still can’t find in my account.”

"I told you that it won't be a problem."

"Yeah, well, I'm all out of patience here. I have expenses."

"You will get your money."

"When?"

"Soon."

"Not good enough. You see, I thought about telling the cops."

"Then you'll hang, too."

"Not necessarily. I could have a friend tell the cops. *After* I disappear from this area, of course. The cops won't start a nation-wide search just because a fag was roughed up a bit."

"I ... I just need a little more time."

"Ah."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Just – ah. Money problems – I can relate."

"I have no money problems. It just takes a while to get everything together."

"One week. I'll give you one more week. If I don't have the money by then, our deal is off."

"Agreed. And never call me again."

"That depends on you."

"You will get your money."

"Talk to you next week."

"No, Jesus, don't you dare call me again."

"Only if I don't get my money."

"You'll get it, you'll get it. God, I wish I'd never met you."

"Tough luck for you."

“You asshole.”

“Whatever. Don’t forget the money.”

“I won’t. Now, hang up and never call again.”

When there was a click at the other end of the line, the receiver clattered to the desk. What a foolish, stupid thing to do. And worse, there was no money.

Now what?

++++++

Brian sighed and closed his eyes, enjoying the absence of the beeping. They had transferred him to a regular room shortly after Justin had left for the night and Brian was beyond grateful for it. Not that this room was comfortable in any sense of the word, but it was still better than lying in the ICU, where the noise level wasn’t helping the headache that seemed to have taken permanent residence right above his eyes.

The door opened and a familiar form appeared. “Hello, stranger,” Janet Jones said as she stepped fully into the room and closed the door behind herself. “I couldn’t believe when I read your name on the chart.” She shook her head and clucked her tongue. “What did you do this time?”

Brian gave her a dry look. “Someone stuck a needle into me, pumped me full of horse tranquilizers.” Of course, she knew that already from reading his file, but Janet Jones was good people and if she wanted it to play this way, Brian was only too happy to indulge her.

“Sounds like fun,”

He grimaced. “Not so much, really.”

She cocked her head, “Do they know who did it this time?”

“No.”

“They should whip those homophobic assholes up and down Liberty Avenue.”

Brian had to laugh. This nurse was just what he needed. “You are a woman after my taste, Nurse Jones.”

She laughed as well and the door opened again. “Hello, Brian.”

“Mother?”

Joan Kinney stood in the doorway, wringing her hands and looking more at the wall than at any person in the room. Her whole stance was terribly awkward as her brain was obviously trying to decide if staying or running was the better option.

Janet made a face. "It's not exactly visiting hours," she said, and Brian wondered if maybe she was trying to protect him. He'd told her quite a bit about his mother during his last time in Janet's care. He also knew that nurses heard a lot of shit day in day out, but Brian had a feeling Janet Jones remembered exactly that he'd called his mother a cold hearted bitch.

"It's okay," he told Janet now and she frowned at him. Yup, she did remember what he'd told her.

"I ..." Joan bit her lower lip. "I ... asked the nurse at the information desk and she said that because I was here anyway, they would make an exception."

"Well, okay, then," Janet agreed grudgingly. "I'm just outside," she told Brian and left the 'in case you need me' hanging in the air. With a last warning look at Joan, she was gone.

Which left Brian with Joan, who was still staring at the wall, as if trying to decide what exactly she was doing here. That brought his mind to a screeching halt, when her previous words suddenly registered in his brain. "What do you mean – you were here anyway?"

Her eyes flickered to his, then back to the wall, before a sob tore from her throat. Brian's heart started to hammer. "What?" he demanded.

Joan fumbled in her purse for a tissue. "It's ... Claire. I came with Claire."

Claire? Brian tried to sit up and instantly felt dizzy. Fucking drugs. "Why? What happened?"

His mother dabbed at her eyes, then suddenly turned to him, her eyes blazing. "It was that police officer. He put stupid ideas in her head and now ... now ..."

Brian stared, not understanding a word. At least for a moment. Police officer?

Holy Fuck!

Horvath. He had told Brian he'd given Claire the card of a friend. Who happened to be a social worker.

Holy. Holy. Fuck.

“What did Frank do?” he asked, because now it wasn’t really a question anymore of ‘who’, but only of ‘what’ or ‘how’. God dammit.

“He was so upset,” Joan shook her head.

Brian gritted his teeth. “What. Did. He. Do?”

His mother turned to the window and stared out into the fading light. She was still gnawing her lip. “You know how men are. Some can lose their temper.”

“He beat her up.” It wasn’t a question. Brian already knew. He’d seen Claire after Frank ‘had lost his temper’ before. He had been so close to laying hands on the bastard and only his sister’s begging had kept Brian from facing assault charges.

“I told her not to provoke him.” Joan’s voice was almost lifeless. “But, of course, she wouldn’t listen. She talked to some social worker and was suddenly having ideas about leaving him.”

Oh God. Brian had been so sure that Claire would never do it. But obviously Horvath had made an impression and Claire had called his friend, the social worker. Who, according to Horvath, was experienced when it came to that kind of thing.

Something just didn’t fit. Brian frowned. “So how did Frank find out about Claire and her plans?”

His mother flinched. It wasn’t even very obvious. More like a slight stiffening in her shoulders, a quick jerk of her head – and Brian knew. He closed his eyes. “You called him,” he said, feeling a kind of resignation, of weariness that had nothing to do with the tranquilizer still flowing through his system.

His mother turned around, all stiff body and righteous indignation. “He is her husband. They swore an oath in front of God.”

There had been times when Brian had envied his sister, especially after his mother had thrown him out of her house and told him never to darken her doorstep again. Now he knew without a doubt that he’d gotten the way better deal, and that being thrown out of that house had been a blessing in disguise.

“God?” Brian opened his eyes again and stared at his mother. “You think God would want for her to get beaten up by her drunken loser of a husband?”

“I will not stand-“

He didn’t let her finish. He’d had enough of her holy rants. “She is your daughter,” he shouted, not giving a damn who would hear this. “She is your child, your own flesh and blood and you threw her at him. When those fists were flying, you were behind them.

Don't kid yourself, Mother, those fists weren't just Frank's. They were yours."

"I should have known that you would turn everything against me," Joan hissed.

Brian had finally managed to sit up and was now struggling to stand. Shit, he was so weak, his legs felt like rubber. "Where is she?" he asked, ignoring his mother's words. Talking to religious fanatics was never worth a damn, he had learned that lesson a long time ago.

"It is people like you, who twist everything that's honest and good," his mother said. "You put ideas in Claire's head. She is a married woman, Brian."

"She is a woman who's been her husband's punching bag for years," Brian shot back, steadying himself against the wall. Everything was wobbly around him and he had to close his eyes to keep the world from spinning.

Fuck.

He took a deep breath, then opened his eyes again. "Give me her room number."

"Mr. Kinney," a forceful voice intruded. Damn, he was worse off than he'd thought, he hadn't even heard the door open. "What do you think you're doing?"

Brian gave Janet a 'duh'- look. "What does it look like? I'm getting up."

"You most certainly are not," she said firmly, taking his arm and leading him back to the bed. Brian tried to struggle, but he was too weak to even try. Janet held him while he sat down again, then she straightened and gave his mother such a withering look, even Joan Kinney's righteousness faltered under it. "What is going on here?"

"Nothing that concerns you," Brian's mother said, but her voice was uncertain. Brian gave Janet a look of pure admiration. He'd never met anyone who had been able to work such a miracle.

"I beg to differ," Janet said. "He is my patient. And when I see that someone's endangering his health, I'm making it my business." She gave Joan another icy stare. "So – what's up?"

"Not me," Brian muttered and grinned when her icy stare turned on him. He sobered up quickly, though. "Janet, you could help me by finding out the room number for one Claire Callaghan." At Janet's raised brows, he sighed. "She's my sister and her husband did a number on her."

Janet's lips thinned, but she nodded. "But you have to promise not to get up on your own again. I'll find out her number and then I'll get you to see her if it's possible right now. Deal?"

Remembering the way his legs had almost given out before, Brian gave in. "Deal."

With a last warning look at Joan, Janet left the room. As soon as the door was closed, Brian's mother straightened. "I can't believe you involved a stranger in our family problems."

"Mom," Brian said tiredly, not looking at her. "Just leave. And do us all a favor and don't come here again."

"Brian, you don't understand," she said urgently. "Claire had to come to her senses. She and her husband were joined by a holy union—"

"I don't want to hear this nonsense," he interrupted her. "And I want you to leave now. Having you here gives me a headache." It wasn't really a lie. Ever since she'd come, his headache had increased into another dimension.

"You should be ashamed of yourself," Joan said. "A son, treating his mother like this."

Brian laughed, hating the way it sounded almost like a sob. She wasn't worth his tears. Not now. Not ever. "I know, I'm a terrible son. But you know what? You're an abysmal mother."

She gasped, the righteous indignation firmly back in place. "I came here to ask for your support. Claire needs to be counselled on this—"

"Claire needs to kick the bastard's ass," Brian spat. "And more than anything, she needs to get away from your bullshit."

His mother was about to reply, but the door opened again and Janet appeared. "Good, you're both still alive," she remarked drily, then walked over to Brian and touched his forehead. "How do you feel?"

"A little claustrophobic," he said and she gave him a sympathetic look. Then she turned to his mother.

"Mrs. Kinney, it's way past visiting hours. I think you should leave now, and let the patient rest."

Joan narrowed her eyes, glared first at the nurse, then at her son, and then swept out of the room with the air of a wronged queen. Brian shook his head, before he turned his attention on Janet. "How is she?"

The nurse let out a sigh. "Broken collar bone, broken wrist and two cracked ribs are the worst of it. Bruises, of course. One eye is swollen shut. You were right, he really did a number on her."

Fuck. Brian had to blink. "Can," he stopped, his throat clogging up. He swallowed hard. "Can I see her?"

Janet opened the door and stepped out of the room. When she returned a moment later, she had a wheelchair with her. "I even brought transportation," she said with a small smile. "Let's get you in here, and then we're ready to go."

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"I still can't believe my date is a natural blonde."

Debbie grinned, and for the umpteenth time touched the curls on her neck. Who'd have thought that Emmett convincing her to get rid of her wig would have this kind of effect? "Would you have preferred a redhead?" she asked, giving Carl her best impish smile.

Carl picked up his glass and took a small sip. "I wanted a date with you, the hair color wasn't an issue."

"And yet," she took her glass as well and looked at him over the rim, "you seem enchanted with blond."

"Only because it's on your head," he shot back.

Debbie laughed and leaned back. She was enjoying herself immensely. They were sitting in a nice, quiet Italian restaurant. Carl had told her the owner was an old acquaintance of his and that the food was spectacular.

"How long have you been with the force?" she asked, liking the atmosphere, the white tablecloths, the open wine. Most of all, she liked the company.

"Almost fifteen years," he said. "I joined the army at eighteen, ran away from home. After I was done playing soldier, I was drifting a bit, and then I saw this ad." He laughed slightly. "It said something about helping people. I was always a sucker for something like that." His expression was one of embarrassment and it endeared him to Debbie. "What about you? How long have you been a waitress?"

"Forever." At his look, she shrugged. "It feels that way. I got pregnant at eighteen. The father of my son turned from being the boy of my dreams to New York's most famous drag queen. When my family found out, my mother almost had a fit." Which had been far better than her father's quiet disappointment. Her mother had ranted, and ranted, then taken Debbie in her arms and told her she loved her no matter what.

Unfortunately, however, love wasn't enough, and even though the Grassi-family wasn't poor, Debbie had learned early on that it was expected for her to pull her own weight as soon as possible. And there was her pride, that sometimes annoying thing that made

her refuse help and forced her to make it on her own.

Carl's face was serious. "They threw you out?"

"What?" Debbie stared. He had obviously misunderstood her silence. "No. God, no. They loved me. But I wanted to have my own life, my own decisions. And Marty, he owned the diner then, he offered me this job." She laughed, remembering the little Russian with the pig eyes that saw everything. "He was an asshole. Never paying enough, always short of money. But he never judged me and that was worth a lot."

Carl nodded. "I can imagine. Must have been tough."

The waiter came and served their coffee. Carl had been right, Debbie thought, the food had been great. She put sugar in her Espresso, stirred it a bit, then looked back at Carl. "It had its moments. Michael was very sweet but he had colic for three months straight, which meant I didn't get a lot of sleep." She nodded, remembering again. "Yeah, it was tough. But I wouldn't change a thing." She knew her voice sounded fierce now, but she didn't care. "Michael was the best thing that ever happened to me."

"Children have the tendency to grow on you," Carl agreed. He produced his wallet and held out a picture to her. "This is my daughter, Karen."

Debbie took the picture and looked at a pretty young woman of maybe twenty years with red hair and blue eyes. "Was your wife Irish?"

Carl smiled. "Half. But the coloring came from her side of the family, that's for sure."

"Where is Karen?"

"At law school," Carl replied and Debbie could hear the pride in his voice. "She is a freshman at Columbia."

"Wow. That's a good school." Debbie thought of her own father, and felt a little pang of sadness. She had longed to make him proud. Unfortunately he had died only a year after Michael had been born.

Debbie handed the photo back to Carl. "Michael seems like a good kid," he said, while he tucked the picture away.

"He is that."

"Was it difficult for you?" he asked suddenly, looking at her intently. "Finding out he was gay, I mean?"

"Not really." There had been one moment, a few seconds where Debbie had mourned the fact that she'd probably never have grandkids. But it had come and gone. "I knew it

before he did. In fact, I told him.” She grinned at Carl’s incredulous expression. “It’s true. I did.” She laughed, remembering. “You should have seen his face.”

“I can imagine,” Carl said, joining in the laughter. “He must have been so embarrassed.”

“Red like a ripe tomato.” Debbie cackled up, truly enjoying herself with this rumped man who’d left his rumped coat at home tonight. He’d actually put on a nice suit. And he’d complimented her – on her hair, on the dress, on the make-up. She made a mental note to have Emmett over for his favourite macaroni and cheese very soon.

“What about your husband?”

The question caught Debbie off guard, and she had to swallow, before she croaked, “What about him?”

Carl smiled. “Well, there was one. I mean, you told me you come from an Italian family, and yet your name is Novotny.”

Damn the man for being a detective, Debbie thought and stared into the blackness of her espresso. The question had never come up before. None of the guys she’d dated – all of them a very short time – had ever bothered to ask. “I ... uh ... there wasn’t a husband.”

“No?” Carl seemed genuinely surprised. “But ... I’m sorry, I assumed he married you and adopted your son.”

“No.” Debbie shook her head, hating the fact that she felt embarrassed. So, okay, yeah, she’d created a lie and held onto it for too long, but Michael already knew about his real father. So she’d conveniently forgotten about it – determined to never touch the subject again.

Until today.

Carl looked at her, and there was something in his eyes Debbie didn’t want there. “No,” she repeated. “I ... Well, I was this poor Italian girl, unmarried, with a slightly shady job at a slightly shady diner. And there was Michael. I,” she stopped and looked directly at Carl, “didn’t want him to suffer for it. So I ... I called myself Novonty, and him too and told everyone that I’d been married to this war hero who died before he could even set eyes on his own flesh and blood.”

“What about your family?”

“Oh, they knew.” Debbie thought again of her father. “Vic, my brother, even helped creating the story.”

“And Michael?”

"I told him when he was ... I think he was fifteen. He was heartbroken for a week, but he got over it." She laughed, "He was way too busy lusty after Brian then."

"So," Carl took his napkin, holding it between thumb and forefinger, "your son and Brian..." He trailed off, and Debbie had to smile. He was trying to be brave, but he was clearly still uncomfortable with the idea of two men having sex.

Then she remembered what he'd said. "Michael and Brian? God, no!" She had to laugh even though for a long time she hadn't felt like laughing when it came to Michael's obsession with his best friend. But now there was Ben – gorgeous, successful Ben. He was all she had hoped for Michael – and then some.

"So they never," Carl cleared his throat, "were lovers?"

"No." Debbie shook her head. "Brian never let it happen. I'm not even quite sure why. I mean, he once told me that he thought Michael was 'fucking hot', but ... it never went beyond friendship."

"I see-" Carl started, but was interrupted by a beeping noise coming from the inside of his jacket. "Fuck" he muttered, then gave Debbie an apologetic smile. "Sorry." He fished something out of his pocket. "It's my beeper. I'm off tonight but I told dispatch to contact me should anything important happen." He stood, "I'm sorry, but I need to call in."

Debbie watching him leave the restaurant, already dialing on his cell phone. He stopped just outside the door, and she saw that he was talking to someone, grimacing at first. Then, all of a sudden, his whole body froze, and the movement of his free hand turned agitated. Something bad had happened. Debbie had no idea what, but it was clear from Carl's body language.

She saw him end his call and enter the restaurant again. He stopped the waiter for a moment before returning to their table. He sat, his face very serious. "I have to apologize, but I have to cut our night short. Brian's sister was brought to the hospital."

"Claire?" Debbie had to admit that she'd never liked Brian's sister. The few times she'd met the girl, she'd been crying or pouting, resenting Brian for being the pretty one in the family.

"Yes. She was severely beaten."

"Oh no." No, Debbie had never liked Claire, but more than anything she hated violence, especially violence against women. "Who?"

"Her husband. And I have a feeling I'm responsible for it."

The waiter appeared with the cheque and Carl handed him his card.

Debbie leaned forward, "You? How would you be responsible for that asshole beating up his wife?"

"I told her to talk to a friend of mine." Carl was clearly distressed, rubbing his forehead. "She's with social services. Damn."

Without thinking, Debbie reached over and put her hand over his. "You did the right thing, Carl. Brian doesn't talk about her often, but I know that her husband is a real piece of work. Even if Claire can put up with his drunken rages, his boys shouldn't be exposed to that kind of behavior."

Carl sighed. Then he turned his hand and interlaced his fingers with hers. "Thanks," he said, smiling at her, "for saying that. I really needed to hear it."

"You're very welcome," she replied and smiled back at him. They were still holding hands when the waiter returned Carl's credit card.

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Claire felt herself jerk, and she almost bolted upright when the door to her room opened without warning. Her heart was beating a mile a minute and sweat was starting to form in her nape. What if Frank came here? What if he found out where she was? She closed her eyes tightly, pretending to be asleep.

The opened them, however, when she heard her brother's voice. "Claire?"

She blinked, more than a bit surprised to see an African-American nurse pushing Brian who was sitting in a wheelchair. "Oh my God," she whispered, and her eyes instantly welled up with tears. She'd always cried easily, had often cursed the fact, and had learned early in her marriage that tears didn't help. Instead they enraged Frank even more and it had taught her to suppress them.

But now she couldn't keep them at bay. "Brian."

"Hey," he said softly, and the nurse pushed his chair close to Claire's bed. He reached out and it felt so good to have him touch her. His hand was strong and warm, a man's hand, and she didn't feel threatened by it. It was a nice change.

Claire used her left hand to wipe her face. "How did you know?"

"Mom came," he said quietly, but there was something in his voice that was far from quiet. She knew him well enough to recognize his anger. But that was alright with her. She knew Brian would never hurt her.

Then it hit her what he'd said, and she struggled to sit up, wincing when her cracked

ribs sent a flash of pain through her. "Mom?"

His eyes held hers for a moment, then flickered away. "Yeah."

"Where is she?"

"Gone," he snapped, then took a deep breath. He was trying to calm himself, Claire knew. She'd seen him do it before.

"Brian." It was nurse's voice, quiet and calm. "I'm going to look after some other patients."

He looked up and gave her a smile. "Thanks, Janet. For everthing."

Claire saw something pass between them, saw the nurse smile, then squeeze Brian's shoulder before she turned and left the room. "She seems nice," Claire said.

"Yeah." Again his eyes were on her. "You look terrible."

Claire self-consciously touched her face and winced. So far she'd avoided looking into a mirror, but she knew she looked bad. The pain was indication enough that Frank had been very thorough this time. "I told him I'd leave him. That I was through with his abuse."

Brian nodded. "And then you called Mom."

It wasn't a question. Claire hadn't expected one. "Yeah." She laughed, but it turned into a sob. "I should've known she'd call him. But ... but I didn't know where to go."

"God, Claire."

"You were in the hospital. I knew that. And ... how could I just go to your apartment?" No way she would have gone there. Besides, Frank knew where Brian lived. She wouldn't have been safe.

"Where are the kids?"

Claire heard the unspoken 'don't tell me you left them with Mom' and shook her head. "The social worker took them to a safe house," she told her brother. "Mom wanted them to come stay with her, but I said no."

For the first time something like approval entered Brian's eyes. "Good for you."

She hated that her eyes welled up again, but tonight her tears seemed to have a will of their own. "I can't believe Mom called Frank. How could she do that?"

“Because she’s a bitch?” Brian winced. “Sorry, I know you don’t need my sarcasm right now.”

She was actually grateful for it, but she didn’t say that. “When she drove me over here, she told me that sinners always got what they deserved.”

“Fuck.”

Claire swallowed, feeling shaky and solid at the same time. “She really doesn’t care for us, huh?” It was something she hadn’t wanted to face before, but now she had no choice.

Brian sighed and started to rub the bridge of his nose. She had once thought it was a sign of annoyance. Now, she wasn’t so sure anymore. Maybe he was just getting a headache? It wouldn’t be a surprise, she was developing one of epic proportions herself.

“I think,” Brian said, frowning slightly, “that in her twisted mind, she actually thinks she cares for us. But her kind of caring is,” he looked up and a smile lifted one corner of his expressive mouth, “just as twisted as she is.”

“I wish she could ... be different.”

Brian laughed a little at that. “Different how? You want her to get a character transplant?”

Claire had to laugh too – and winced as her ribs reminded her of why she was in this hospital. “I’m not sure it would change her. What happened, Brian? I mean, she wasn’t always like this. I remember her holding you so gently and singing to you these Irish songs. She had a really nice voice then.”

“I don’t remember,” Brian said, but Claire could see it was a lie. He probably didn’t want to remember. “I remember her telling me I was a deviant, oh yeah, and a child molester, don’t forget that part.”

“She didn’t-“ Claire began, but stopped herself. It had been an automatic response, jumping in to defend her mother, but she realised now that Joan Kinney had meant it. It was just another part of her twisted psyche. Claire saw Brian giving her a look and sighed. “Yeah, I know. She meant it. I always thought Dad was bad, but at least he was honest.”

“Which is just about all you can say about him that’s not entirely negative,” Brian said and they both burst out laughing. “God, we really got it from the best, huh?”

“That’s for sure. You know the worst part? I really don’t want to see her again.” She had thought she’d feel bad about it. Now, she only felt relieved.

“Then you have to tell her that, Claire.” Brian’s eyes were intent. “Not that it’ll work, because she sure as hell didn’t stay away from me even after she threw me out of her house.”

“Brian, I don’t know what to do. I don’t have a job, and-“

“Money won’t be an issue,” he said, interrupting her.

“I know.” Claire took his hand. “I know you’ll help, but I need to be independent. Can you understand that?”

“Oh yes. But until you can find a job and a place to stay, you’re always-“

“No. Stop right there, Brian. You’d kill us after 24 hours.” She grinned when he rolled his eyes. “You would. You – living with little children? No way.”

“I could try.”

“And go nuts. But don’t worry. Stephanie, the lady from social services, she already has a place for me to stay. At least for a few weeks, even months should it be necessary. It’s a safe house. I need to get my head together first before I can decide what to do.”

“You can’t go back to him.”

Claire wished she could be so sure. “I don’t want to go back. Not now, anyway.” She was sure of that, at least. “But I need to think. He is my boys’ father.”

Brian withdrew his hand. “He is an asshole and a violent drunk. How long until beating you up won’t be enough anymore? When will he start on the kids?”

“He would never-“

“Don’t be stupid,” Brian cut her off, angry now. “Of course he will. It’s only a matter of time. Wife beaters almost never stop there. Think about Daddy dearest.”

Claire flinched, knowing that he was right. Strangely enough, their father had never laid a hand on her, but he’d lived out his share of rage on Brian. But even knowing that, some things were just too ingrained in your head. “I can’t just divorce him, Brian,” she said quietly. “We were married in front of God.” For some people that didn’t mean anything. For Claire, who had grown up believing what her mother had taught her, it was hard to look beyond it.

“Christ,” Brian exclaimed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Don’t give me that kind of bullshit. You think God wanted you to get beaten up?”

"The Bible is very clear on that, Brian. Marriage is a holy union. And some people have a cross to bear."

"Meaning your cross is Frank Callagan?" Brian snorted in disbelief. "Be careful, Claire, or you might end up just as twisted as Mom." He cocked his head and watched her for a moment. "The Bible was written two thousand years ago. A lot of things have changed since then."

Yes, the Bible had been written two thousand years ago, but what did that matter? Some things were eternally true. "God doesn't have an expiration date, Brian," she said softly, reaching out and taking his hand again.

"This isn't about God," he whispered. "You know just as I do that the Bible was written by men. Yes, some of them travelled with Jesus Christ, or so they claimed, but ... they were still human beings. They make mistakes, they have their views, and those views were written down in that book. According to the Bible I should have been rotting in hell for years. And yet, I'm still alive and kicking." He paused, looked at himself sitting in the wheelchair, then smiled. "Well, not quite kicking at the moment, but you get the drift."

Desperate to change the subject, Claire jumped on it. "Do they have any clue who did that?"

"Not yet. But – and I can't believe I'm actually saying this – I think that Horvath-guy is really interested in finding out." He laughed. "Listen to me, believing in a cop."

"He seemed nice. He gave me the card, you know. The social worker is a friend of his." Stephanie Rinehard was a fifty-something woman with a no-nonsense attitude, and nothing Claire had expected from a social worker. Instead of sprouting bureaucratic nonsense, she'd acted quickly and efficiently, and Claire had trusted her before she was even really aware of the fact.

Brian nodded, pushing his tongue in his cheek. It was either a sign of great stress or amusement, and you had to know him well to recognize it. "Do you think," he began, then broke off, worrying his lip even more.

Claire squeezed his hand. "What?"

"Do you think we can actually make a relationship work?"

Claire frowned, not quite sure where this was going. "Why?"

Brian snorted. "You've got to admit that our family's track record with relationships is abysmal."

"So what?" Claire tried to sound casual, she even managed to smile. But the truth was, their track record *was* abysmal. Their parents' marriage had been a disaster, and she

would not start on herself and Frank again. She straightened her shoulders. "I thought you were tough. Are you really gonna let some *track record* rule your life?"

Brian smiled at her, but it was a sad smile, one that brought new tears to her eyes. "I always thought that as long as I stayed away, it couldn't touch me. But it's touching me all the time." He looked at her, then reached out and touched the bruise on her cheek. Claire held herself still, for a moment afraid of pain, but his fingers were gentle. "And it sure as hell is touching you."

Claire caught his fingers. "Is there someone in your life, Brian?"

He rolled his lips, pressing them together hard.

"Is there?" she prodded.

He let out a long breath. "Maybe. There's someone who ... he says he loves me. And," his voice wavered wildly, "a-a-a-nd I think ... that ... I care for him, too."

"But that's wonderful." Claire didn't have to fake the happiness in her voice. She was truly glad that Brian had opened himself up, had let someone in. Her brother, she knew, was a very introverted person. For all his blustering, he had a very vulnerable soul he tried to hide behind a 'tough-shit'-attitude. Most people who didn't know him very well, usually bought into that, but Claire knew better.

Brian laughed. "I'm not so sure about that. Right now, I'm scared shitless."

"We're all scared shitless now and then," Claire told him, feeling very much like the older sister. She hadn't felt like that for a very long time. It was nice. "Not bowing down to it is the real challenge in life."

"You think?" He looked at her doubtfully.

"Yeah." She squeezed his hand again. "I'm sure. If you love him, and if he loves you ... I'm not telling you that it'll be easy, because it won't."

"Christ, Claire."

She laughed. "I don't want to scare you. But ... if it's the right thing, then it's worth it. Is he – worth it?"

Brian nodded. "He is. He is ... the best."

Claire smiled. "Then go for it. Don't let anyone stand in your way, Brian."

He returned her smile. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," she whispered, not caring that there were once again tears running down her cheek. She was so glad for Brian. She wished with all her heart that his dream prince wouldn't turn out to be an ugly frog, the way her own had.

"So this is how you found it?"

"Just like that," Brian confirmed, taking in the destruction once again. He'd been released from the hospital this morning, taken a cab home and found his apartment trashed as if a storm had blown through it. This storm, however, had to have been very human.

"Any ideas?" Carl Horvath was standing at the bathroom door, no doubt frowning at the broken mirror and the tiles where 'faggot' had been written on with red spray paint.

Brian snorted. He didn't have ideas. But he could make a pretty good guess. "How about my lovely brother-in-law? This is just his style."

Horvath looked at him and something like understanding passed between them. Go figure. "I'd love to arrest Callaghan, but can you prove it?"

"No." Brian sighed. He couldn't prove it. "It fits, though," he said. "Frankie-boy knows where I live. And I'm sure he's still holding a mighty grudge. I mean, he has no idea where his wife and kids are, and even Joan has stopped talking to him." Which was the surprise of the century. Brian had no idea what kind of agenda his mother had, but whatever it was, he was grateful for it. The last thing Claire needed right now was having her fuck of a husband bond with her own mother.

Horvath came back from the bathroom. "Well, whoever it was, he certainly does hold a grudge. Is there anything that wasn't destroyed?"

"The stove," Brian said, shaking his head. That about summed it up. The sofa had been torn up, the same went for the bed. The clothes were everywhere, either sprayed with color or cut with a knife. So far Brian hadn't found a single piece he could still wear. Which meant that he had to go shopping soon. Ben was a very relaxed boss, but Brian had a feeling that his employee turning up with torn jeans and a see through shirt wasn't Ben's idea of working attire.

"Where will you stay?" Horvath asked, and it was then that Brian realised he couldn't stay in his own home. At least not until everything was cleaned up and he'd bought a new bed. That is, if he still wanted to live here.

Something like panic curled in Brian's stomach, but he forced it down. So what? He would sleep in a hotel or maybe use Debbie's porch. Sure, he wasn't sixteen anymore, but he was well acquainted with that porch, had used it as a place for the night more than once while he was growing up. It wasn't comfortable there, but at least Jack didn't know where he was, and couldn't use him as a punching bag in one of his drunken rages.

Horvath sighed and gave Brian a sympathetic look. "Well, you let me know where to find you. And – be careful."

Brian rolled his eyes. "You already sound like Debbie." At Horvath's raised brow, he grinned. "Mikey came to see me, told me his mother was dating this run down cop." He held up his hand when Horvath frowned darkly. "Hey – these are Mikey's words, not mine. I told him I thought it was about time Debbie got herself some entertainment of the male kind."

"Thanks," Horvath's voice was full of sarcasm. "For not really helping."

Brian laughed. This was certainly an extra-terrestrial experience, he thought. Not only was this cop really trying to find the guy who had attacked Brian – twice. No, he also made Brian laugh. Christ. The next thing would be the world coming to an end, no doubt.

"Debbie is a wonderful woman. Her son, however..." Horvath trailed off, clearly troubled.

"Don't worry," Brian said. "Mikey'll come around. He can be a little dense sometimes, but he loves his mother and seeing her happy is all he wants in the end."

"I hope you're right. It hurts her that he isn't really supportive of us."

Brian shrugged. "Give him time. And don't let Debbie push you away. She's good at that." Horvath lifted a brow, and Brian frowned. "What?"

"It isn't any of my business, but last time we talked at the hospital you had your very own watchdog by your side. Yet, you left the hospital and came here all on your own."

Leave it to the ruffled cop to touch the one subject Brian didn't want to be touched right now. He knew Justin would be pissed that Brian hadn't waited for him to come and get him. If he had known about it, that is. For some reason Brian had failed to tell Justin about his upcoming release – it had slipped his mind somehow.

Yeah, right.

As if Justin would buy into that kind of bullshit. Yup, no doubt about it, Justin would not be a happy camper once he found out what Brian had done. The worst part of that was that Brian knew how fucked up his behavior was. It was classical passive-aggressive push-away strategy. And Justin, smart guy he was, would figure out exactly what was going on.

Brian probably should be glad that his apartment had already been trashed. Justin only looked like an easy-going sort of guy, but Brian had seen the blond explode on several occasions. No, that wasn't fair. Justin wasn't a violent person. He used words, instead of fists, but those words could be just as biting and leave bruises that would heal much

more slowly than physical ones – if at all.

Realising that Horvath was still looking at him, Brian sighed. “Can we not talk about that? I feel weird confessing to a cop.”

As expected, Horvath laughed. “Fine with me. Having a heart-to-heart with a gay guy is new territory for me, too. And one I can do without, just so there will be no misunderstandings.”

Now, Brian had to laugh, but it faded the moment he heard the voice coming from the hallway.

“Brian? Are you there? Why the hell did you just leave the hospital on your own? I told you I would come with you and” Justin’s voice trailed off as he entered the apartment and his eyes fell on the destruction that had once been Brian’s furniture and clothes. Justin’s eyes went to Brian, to Horvath, and then he exclaimed: “What the fuck? What the hell happened here?”

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“Hey.”

Daphne looked up, wondering what on earth had driven her to do this. “Hey,” she said, forcing a smile. She owed him a smile at least.

Paul’s answering smile was brilliant, and it made Daphne feel like the worst kind of asshole. She wondered if having your heart broken gave you bonus points, so using a nice, good-looking boy the way she was using Paul would be forgiven. He didn’t deserve to be caught in Daphne’s mess.

She took a deep breath to tell him that calling him, making a date with him had been a mistake, but all that came out of her mouth, was: “I’m so glad you came.”

Oh God. It was all kinds of wrong to be with Paul. But Daphne needed him. Because she couldn’t have Justin. Not as a husband, and not as a friend. Maybe, in a couple of years they would find a way to rekindle their friendship but right now ... Right now, she couldn’t stand to be near Justin. She couldn’t stand to see the smile in his eyes, the happiness that had nothing to do with her or her baby and everything with the man he loved.

God! The man he loved!

“And I’m absolutely thrilled that you called,” Paul said and lowered himself into the chair across the table. “I couldn’t believe it when I heard your voice.”

Daphne closed her eyes for a moment, and wished she were a stronger, a better

person. Unfortunately she was a weak, pitiful kind of woman who was so desperate for affection, for a friend, that she didn't care that she was hurting someone in the process.

Okay, so maybe that was stretching the truth a bit. She did feel sorry for using Paul. She just didn't feel sorry enough to tell him that he was nothing but convenient right now.

"Well, you said coffee was okay." Daphne found another smile. It was the least she could do for him. "You know, coffee is casual and all that."

He grinned. "Yeah. My sister says coffee is the non-relationship beverage, strong, hot, but never too intimate."

Despite her inner turmoil, it made Daphne laugh. God, being with Paul Webber was balm for her heart and soul. "Your sister, huh?" She had always wanted a sister. Or a brother. Then she had met Justin and had forgotten all about it. He'd been her brother – and so much more.

"Yeah. Sibyll. She's twenty-four. Can be such a pain in the ass sometimes."

It was said with a smile and Daphne knew that Paul loved his sister. "Any more siblings?" She took her cup of decaffeinated coffee and took a sip. It tasted like shit. Daphne wanted coffee. Real coffee. But, no, she had to be rational and careful because, yes, she was having this baby inside of her. While Justin was carefree and in love. With someone else.

Daphne took a deep breath and counted to ten. Then backwards to zero.

It fit.

Zero.

Yep, ground zero. That's where she was. Maybe even *what* she was. Jesus, she was so pathetic it was embarrassing.

"A brother," Paul said, pulling her out of her dark thoughts. He really was good at doing that. "Tristan." He rolled his eyes. "My Dad has a thing for Wagner. The German composer?"

Daphne nodded. She didn't know a lot about Wagner, but she remembered her mother saying that he'd been a racist asshole.

"I hate Wagner," Paul went on. "Too ... much. For my ears at least. My Dad says I will grow into it." He pulled a face. "Right now I'm severely doubting that."

"How old is your brother?"

“Eighteen. Just finished high school. He wants to become a doctor. God help us all.”

Daphne laughed again. Her stomach muscles unclenched gradually, the company of this man working its magic. “He can’t be that bad?”

Paul smiled. “He isn’t bad, exactly. Just ... not very organised. You should see his room. But maybe that’s the best reason to become a doctor. After all, sickness isn’t very organised either.”

“You seem to have a great family.” Daphne was so jealous, she had to concentrate on not screaming. No wonder Paul seemed so ... okay with himself, so perfectly in synch with his life. He had a safety net he could count on should things get rough.

Daphne, on the other hand, had nothing. She couldn’t count on her parents because her mother hated her and would probably love to hear about her daughter’s life falling to pieces. And her father never did anything without consulting her mother. That left exactly zero people she could ask for help.

Zero.

Yep. Story of her life.

“They’re okay,” Paul said and Daphne had to recall her last words to remember what he was talking about. “My Dad’s a journalist and my mom has her own baby boutique.”

Daphne stared at him for a moment. Then she laughed. And laughed. And couldn’t stop laughing even when it turned slightly hysterical. A baby boutique. A fucking baby boutique. Now it was official. There was no escape from the chaos that was her life these days.

“Daphne?”

Paul was clearly concerned and she took a deep breath to calm herself. “It’s nothing, really,” she said. “Only, you know, I thought that meeting you would ... I don’t know, maybe help me forget about my own mess. Turns out, whatever I try, I can’t seem to get away from it?”

Paul’s forehead turned into a puzzled frown. “Now you’ve lost me.”

She shook her head. “I’m pregnant.” His eyes widened at the news. “Yeah. End of my fourth month. I’m only starting to show – and only if I’m naked.”

“Shit.” The word was so heartfelt, Daphne wanted to kiss him. “I mean, sorry, but to be pregnant and then find out your husband swims the other way. Wow. That really has to suck.”

Truer words were never spoken.

“Yeah, well, it’s no walk in the park right now.” She sighed, thoroughly disgusted with herself. “To tell the truth, I called you because you seem to cheer me up. To be completely frank, I called you with the sole intention to use you.”

If she had expected for him to be offended, she was sorely mistaken. Instead he started to grin.

Daphne frowned. “What?”

“To use me?” He laughed. “Feel free to use me all you like.”

“I didn’t mean in a sexual way,” she told him, feeling annoyed despite everything. “Geez, get a grip. You could be my younger brother.”

Again he laughed. “Hardly. Believe it or not, my Dad was always faithful to my mom. He met her in high school and had to work very hard for six years to make her notice him at all. I think she’s the only woman he ever slept with, which on the one hand is incredibly romantic, on the other it’s actually pretty pathetic, but I prefer not to think about it.”

He had done it again, Daphne thought, when she laughed out loud. He made her laugh even though she felt like screaming. “It is very romantic. A high school romance.”

Paul snorted. “Not really. My mom dated other guys, and more or less looked down on the slightly overweight kid with the ugly glasses who seemed so besotted with her. Yeah, if you think about it, it’s not romantic at all. Pathetic is the word to use all the way.”

“But he got her in the end.”

“That’s true.” Paul seemed to consider this. “And they’re still disgustingly happy. Sometimes I wonder if any of us kids will ever be able to live up to their standards. And they’re so mismatched, you know. My Mom is so pretty and slim and really fit, while my Dad never lost his tendency to gain too much weight and is still wearing ugly glasses. He isn’t all that tall either.”

Again he seemed to ponder that. And grinned. “So, thinking about it, we would be perfect. I mean, I’m younger, also prettier,” his grin widened when Daphne threw her napkin at him, “and white.”

“Don’t forget not pregnant.”

“Exactly,” he agreed, his good mood never wavering. “It’s one thing we men really have on our side. We can have kids, but we don’t have to bear them, don’t have to ruin our

figure and never have to stop dancing.”

Glad that had given her a chance to change the subject once again, Daphne jumped on it. “You love dancing, huh?”

“Oh, yeah.” His eyes shone. “Even when I was a kid I loved it. My Mom says I danced before I actually walked.” Paul laughed. “Which is most probably a lie, but I like the story nevertheless.”

“What about your brother and sister?”

“My sister was a pretty good dancer when she was younger. But she had a growth spurt and is too tall now. You know,” he gestured with his hands, “they can’t be taller than their male counterparts. Totally sexist, but there you are. And Tris unfortunately got my Dad’s genes more than any of us.”

“Uh-oh,” Daphne said, and Paul nodded.

“Yeah, he thought it was totally unfair, and I tend to agree. He has to diet all the time if he wants to stay in shape. It sucks.” He cocked his head. “So you only called me to lift your spirits?”

Daphne made a face. “I guess, yeah. I mean, I like you ... you know, you’re funny, and smart-“

“Don’t forget pretty.”

“- and no way prettier than me,” she finished, sticking out her tongue. It was a childish gesture, but Daphne didn’t care. It felt great to not be an adult for a short while.

Paul cocked his head. “You aren’t pretty, Daphne,” he said, and there was a look in his eyes that made her squirm. “You’re beautiful.”

Oh God. A part of her wanted to run, run far away, forget that someone like Paul Walker had looked at her and told her she was beautiful. Another part, a bigger part, just wanted to bask. Daphne was so starved for appreciation she wanted to listen to Paul tell her all these wonderful things all day long.

And really, why shouldn’t she? It wasn’t as if she owed Justin anything. He had left her. Not legally, of course, they were still married, but emotionally, as a husband, he had left her a long time ago, even before he’d been aware of it. Daphne hadn’t broken any vows. She had been faithful. And fucking damn, she was still in love with him.

Would she ever be free of his blue eyes and his smile?

“O-kay,” Paul said slowly. “You want me to take it back?”

Daphne blinked and felt a tear run down her cheek. Shit, was she really crying? Was she already so pathetic that having a twenty-one year old dance student tell her she was beautiful made her weepy?

Yup, that's what she was.

Damn you, Justin, damn you, she thought, angry beyond reason at that very moment, for causing this. For not living up to all the promises you made me.

She blinked again, and finally looked at Paul. "Sorry – what?"

"I called you beautiful and you got all teary eyed. I just want to know if they are good or bad tears," he explained, gazing at her earnestly.

She sniffed. "I'm sorry. And – to answer your question, I think they're a little bit of both. Part of it are hormones, I guess." She tried a smile and failed.

"You know," Paul suddenly got up. "I have an idea."

Daphne gave him a doubtful look. "Why do I have the feeling that it's going to be something crazy?"

Paul's face was the picture of innocence. "Crazy? Moi? Whatever gave you the impression that I could be anything but completely serious?"

"Oh, please. Crazy is your middle name. Who else would spend his time with a pregnant, older woman instead of having fun?" She had intended it to be a joke, but Daphne knew that it was exactly how she felt.

"I *am* having fun," Paul said. "So – are you coming?"

"You're not going tell me what it is?" Daphne wasn't sure if she should be afraid or intrigued.

"Nope. You'll have to trust me."

The twinkle in his eyes told her that whatever it was, he was sure Daphne was going to like it.

She sighed and got up. "Okay. But you'll be sorry if it's something crazy."

"Hey, you're pregnant, I'm not going to push you from a cliff."

He held out his hand and with only the slightest of hesitations Daphne took it.

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Jennifer reached out to ring the bell, but her finger hovered over the button for a moment, wondering what had driven her to do this. The little she remembered of the woman wasn't what she'd call positive. And yet, she'd come.

Why?

What was she trying to achieve?

Could she even achieve something? Anything? And what would Justin say if he knew about her being here? He'd probably call her naïve. And rightfully so. After all, she'd married Craig Taylor and actually believed that theirs had been a love match. If that wasn't naïve she didn't what it was.

Jennifer took a deep breath and finally rang the bell. It was answered almost immediately and she was a little startled when she found herself suddenly face to face with a Catholic priest.

"Yes?" the man said, and gave her a non-committal smile. "How can I help you?"

Had she gotten the address wrong? Jennifer was sure that wasn't the case. "I was hoping to talk to Joan Kinney," she said, trying to peek around the man, whose portly stature filled the entrance almost in full. "She does live here, doesn't she?"

The smile turned a little warmer. "Yes, of course she does. Please, come in." He stepped aside and Jennifer entered a house that was very well kept, very neat, but that didn't seem to have a soul. Almost like the house she had shared with Craig and her children for more than 25 years.

Jennifer followed the priest down the hallway into a brightly lit kitchen where Joan Kinney sat on a high-stool, a cup of what seemed hot coffee in front of her. She looked up when Jennifer and the priest entered and her forehead turned into a frown that clearly said she had no idea who the woman in her kitchen was.

"Joan," the priest said with a voice that spoke of familiarity and friendship, "you have a visitor."

Joan Kinney put her cup down, and her eyes narrowed. "So I see." Was it Jennifer's imagination or was the woman's voice slightly slurred? "Only, I don't recall ever seeing you before." Her eyes were on Jennifer and they were decidedly cool. The voice was steadier now.

"Mrs. Kinney, we met once. My name is Jennifer Taylor, our sons were together at college. You came to one of the college festivities and my husband and I were there too." They had talked for a few minutes, and it had been very unpleasant. Jennifer had

seen Joan Kinney as a very hard, very unforgiving woman who took her own views far more serious than her son's well-being. She and Craig had talked about it on their way home and Craig had agreed completely. Wasn't it funny that Craig turned out to be exactly the same?

"Mrs. Taylor?" Joan gave her a puzzled frown, but it cleared quickly. "Oh, yes. I talked to your son recently." Her mouth turned sour. "It was a very unpleasant experience, actually."

"Oh?" Jennifer didn't have to fake her surprise. She had no idea that Justin had met Joan Kinney in the not so distant past. And knowing her son, Justin most probably hadn't been able to hold back when it came to Brian. Justin had always felt very protective of his friend, but with this recent development he would act like a little pitbull if provoked.

"Yes," Joan said, giving her priest a loaded look. "This woman needs your spiritual guidance, Father Peter."

Dark, almost pig-like eyes turned to Jennifer. "What burdens your soul, child?"

"What?" Was she in some bad reality show she didn't know about? Jennifer stared at the priest, then at Joan Kinney. "I don't need any guidance, spiritual or otherwise, thank you very much. I'm also not a Catholic." It didn't matter, not even if she had been a Catholic would she have confided in this priest who gave her the creeps.

"Yes, what a shame." Joan sighed deeply. "But you see, my dear Mrs. Taylor, your son confided in me, in a very abrupt and hurtful manner, I might add, that he left his beautiful wife to live a life of sin and perversion. It must be a great shame for you to see your child, your son, choose a path that leads him away from God."

"Actually," Jennifer snapped, wondering what kind of devil had told her to come here today, "I'm glad he's healthy and all I wish for him is to be happy. As for the path he chose – Mrs. Kinney, being gay isn't a choice, it's something you are born with. Which for me, makes my gay son a creature of God, because according to the Bible, God never makes mistakes."

"He is not a creature of God." The priest's voice was deep and vibrated with conviction. "The devil is in him, my child. You need to pray to God to show your son the golden path to heaven."

Enough was enough. "You don't know my son, Father and I forbid you to talk about him that way. As for you," Jennifer whirled back to Joan. "Unlike you, I will not turn away from my own flesh and blood. He will always be my child and he will always know that I love him – unlike your son, whose greatest sin was that he feels drawn to men. I wonder, Joan, if he were a murderer, would you turn away from him?"

Joan stood up, her body stiff, her head high, and her eyes full of righteousness. She shouldn't have come, Jennifer thought. She was wasting her time here, nothing else. This woman would have preferred for her son to be dead. She wasn't a mother, she was a monster.

"If he were a murderer," Joan said with a strange, high-pitched quality in her voice, "he would be a sinner, too. But he would have sinned once, and he could repent, while now ... he is sinning constantly. Without remorse, as I see it. It pains me. Because he will go to hell." A sob tore from her mouth, and she pressed a hand over her lips.

"My dearest Joan," Father Peter was at her side, his fat paw touching the woman's shoulder in what he probably thought was support. "I am so sorry for your deep pain. Unfortunately you're right. There is no hope for your son."

Or maybe she had gotten it all wrong, Jennifer thought. Joan wasn't the monster, this priest was one. This devil in the mask of God's servant was poison – even more so for someone like Joan Kinney who seemed to soak everything up like the dry desert.

Joan Kinney was a deeply unhappy woman. A woman who, according to Justin, had suffered from an unfaithful, drunken husband, and who was so insecure that she was an easy victim for people like this Father Peter, who seemed to blossom in the pain of others.

"My God," Jennifer breathed. "What kind of priest are you? Catholic or not, I can't believe your church would sanction what you're doing right now. This woman is afraid for her son's soul and instead of helping her, you're adding to her pain." She straightened and stepped toward the priest. "You are leaving this house, right now," she ordered, not even looking at Joan. "Right now," she repeated even more forcefully and delighted in the fact, that the priest seemed shaken.

"Joan?" he asked.

Fortunately Joan seemed frozen in her world of eternal damnation and didn't react at all.

"Right now," Jennifer repeated again. "Or I'm calling the police. You are not welcome here."

"Sister-"

"I'm **not** your sister. Leave. Now." Jennifer had no idea why she felt so bold all of a sudden, but this priest really gave her the creeps and she had a feeling that he was a big part of the problem Joan had with her son. Or at least she hoped he was.

Of course, maybe Joan – once unfrozen – would throw her out right after the priest, but Jennifer had to risk it. She just had to.

The priest gave her a dark look, turned his gaze to Joan, but then seemed to realize that no help would be forthcoming from there, and with a glare he left the house, slamming the door in his wake.

Jennifer let out a long breath, closed her eyes for a moment, and tried to stop the shaking in her knees. She couldn't remember ever having done anything like that before. Sure, she'd thrown out some of Justin's or Molly's friends but that was different. She'd been the mother then, not a complete stranger in the house of another complete stranger. Well, not complete, complete, but still – she and Joan Kinney were – nothing, really.

And, oh God, was she actually referencing Buffy?

That was probably what you got when you raised a gay son and a daughter who had both been into the show.

Jennifer sighed, and turned her head to Joan Kinney who didn't seem frozen anymore, and was now staring at her just as darkly as the priest had.

"Are you out of your mind?" she hissed, her nostrils flaring and her eyes narrowed. "Who do you think you are?"

"I'm Jennifer Taylor, I told you that."

"And I told you that your son is a deviant and a sinner and - not to forget – a pervert."

"Yes, you mentioned that already," Jennifer said and it sounded snippy to her. Damn.

But it seemed to impress Joan because the other woman was staring at Jennifer, obviously a loss for words. Well, well, well. Maybe snippy was the way to go here.

Jennifer took a deep breath. "Look, can we maybe start over?"

Joan was still staring at her. But then she, too, took a deep breath. "I don't know what we should start over with."

Jennifer tried a smile and was glad when it worked. Joan Kinney didn't really make her feel like smiling. She felt more like running, but for some completely fucked up reason she had decided to come here this morning and no way she was going to run, now that she'd come that far.

"Joan – is it okay for me to call you Joan?"

"Oh – yes. Yes, of course."

"It's a beautiful name, by the way. Were you called after Joan of Arc?" And where on

earth had that one come from? Jesus – Joan of Arc? Jennifer wondered for a moment if she was maybe losing it.

But, again, it seemed to work with Joan, because the other woman actually smiled. “She was a wonderful woman, a martyr for God. But no, I wasn’t named after her. There is an old Irish legend my mother always admired. The woman in it, Shona – which is Gaelic for Joanna –,” Joan waved a hand, “it’s a long, winded story. But I was named after Shona.” She gave short, embarrassed laugh, then turned away to get a glass from the cupboard and filled it half with what seemed like whiskey.

“That’s very sweet,” Jennifer said and to her own surprise meant it.

“My mother was a wonderful woman,” Joan said. “My parents’ marriage was perfect. They were such a great couple, married for over fifty years, and I never heard them fight.” Jennifer saw her lift the glass and take more than just a little sip. Then she turned around again. “I always wanted to have that kind of marriage. But Jack ... he was such an angry man. So ... cold and unforgiving. We met when I was not even sixteen. And he was so handsome.” She paused, took another sip. “Just like Brian, really. Do you think Brian is handsome?”

“Yes. Very handsome.” Brian was a beautiful man. From the moment she’d met him, Jennifer had known it. Not consciously, but there had been this feeling, this basic knowledge that he and Justin, that together, they could be very special. She remembered not being able to sleep for weeks after she’d met Brian, and now she knew why. Deep down, she had known that Brian would change Justin’s life forever.

“When he was born, I ... I already knew. Handsome men – they always have the devil in them.”

“Who told you that?” Jennifer asked and watched Joan empty her glass in one gulp, then refill it again. She remembered that Joan’s voice had sounded slurred, and now Jennifer knew that it hadn’t been her imagination. Joan Kinney very obviously liked her liquor. She wondered if Brian knew that his mother was a drunk.

“Beauty never comes without a price, Mrs. Taylor.”

“Jennifer. Please, call me Jennifer.”

Joan nodded, holding her glass in front of her like a shield. “Jennifer, then. I thought ... I always feared that maybe Brian would be a drunk or ... maybe even a criminal. He was so wild when he was a boy. But.” She stopped and closed her eyes. Her mouth, that was surrounded by harsh lines, carved by suffering, pursed. “Not in my wildest dreams did I think he could ... He ... He ... Oh, holy mother of God, he will go to hell. To hell.”

And Jennifer realised with sudden clarity that Joan didn’t hate Brian, or the fact that he was gay. Well, maybe she hated that – a little. But the woman’s deep belief and fear was that her son would burn eternally. That there was no chance for him to achieve

eternal peace. Which in return meant that in her very own way, horribly twisted that it was, she actually loved her son.

And, God, they both did have that in common.

Jennifer walked over to where Joan stood and cautiously put a hand on the other woman's shoulder. "Do you really think God is so little about love?"

Joan's head snapped up and her eyes were luminous with tears. "But the Bible tells us so."

"Really?" Jennifer kept her voice low and soft. To her, Joan Kinney looked like a wild animal that would shy away at the slightest mistake on her part. "Jesus was all about love. He told us that love was the greatest gift and that forgiving was the most precious gift we can give."

Joan blinked, and Jennifer wondered if she was lost in her own world. But then Joan blinked again and looked straight at her. "We can only forgive those who repent," she said, as if she was citing from a book. Which she certainly was. This woman probably knew the Bible inside out.

Great.

Just what she needed. Why on earth had she come here? Maybe it was punishment from this vengeful God Joan so much believed in, wanting her to repent for her sins.

Or not.

Damn, she was becoming just as crazy as Joan Kinney. And if that wasn't a dark outlook into the future, Jennifer didn't know what was.

"And yet," she said, "Jesus told them to come to him, to accept God's love and to live for eternity."

Joan looked at her again, and there seemed to be a struggle going on in the depth of her eyes. Then she said: "Not *them*. He would never welcome the likes of ... Brian into his paradise. How could he when they live and act against all laws of God and nature?"

What could she say to that, Jennifer thought? Arguing about nature and how natural homosexuality was probably wouldn't get her any points. Worse, Joan would probably withdraw and just throw her out. Which wasn't really a bad thing, but it wasn't what Jennifer had come for.

Although, whatever she had come for, it hadn't been this.

Had she really been so bad in a former life?

God, she hoped not.

She took a deep breath. Somehow she had to find a way to reach Joan Kinney. “Do you think God makes mistakes?”

“God?” Joan seemed affronted. “Of course not. How could he? He is God.”

“Well, then, how come he made such a mistake with Brian?” Please, please let this work! Jennifer had seen this in a movie once – it had worked there.

“With Brian?” For the first time Joan seemed puzzled.

“Yes.” Jennifer smiled. “Who else but God could have made him gay?”

Joan, who had been prepared to reply, stared at her with her mouth open.

Whoever had said that scenes out of movies never worked in real life? Well, whoever had it been was clearly an ignorant fool.

“You know,” Jennifer went on, seizing the moment. “When I saw ...,” she closed her eyes, “these tendencies in Justin, I tried to distract him, make it go away. But ... you can’t make it go away. It’s how God intended him to be. And I love him.”

A tear ran down Joan’s pale cheek. “I love Brian. But ... how can I accept something so ... so vile.”

“Why do you call it vile?”

“What else could it be?” Joan asked, moving away from Jennifer, putting distance between them.

Damn.

“Natural?”

Joan laughed, high pitched and scornful. “Natural? There is no nature involved when two men ... do things nature intended for man and woman to do to procreate life. It’s an unspeakable sin. One, I can’t forgive.”

“You? Why? Are you God now?” Jennifer knew this one could backfire, but Joan had given her such a great opening, she couldn’t let pass.

“Me?” Joan stared at her. “Of course not.”

“Then why are you acting like Him?”

“I would never-“

“But you do,” Jennifer cut her off. “Is it really your place to forgive or is it God’s?” She picked up her purse, realising that she’d said enough and that maybe Joan would think about it. “I think it’s something you should dwell on. And then decide if maybe – because you’re human – you made a mistake there.”

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“I’m off then,” Horvath said, and Justin didn’t even bother to look at the detective. He was so mad right now, he was afraid he might insult the man and end up in prison.

Which would be bad.

Because if he ended up in prison, there was no way he could tell Brian exactly what he thought of him leaving the hospital without telling Justin one single word about it.

“I’ll keep in touch,” Brian said, his voice still slightly hoarse. It was a leftover from the tube they’d shoved down his throat to ensure he was getting enough oxygen into his system. The doctor had told them the hoarseness would disappear in a few days. It had gotten much better already, but there were still traces left.

“You do that,” Horvath replied. “Mr. Taylor.”

“Bye,” Justin said without turning.

“Well, that was kind of rude,” Brian said after the detective had closed the door behind him.

“Yeah? Believe it or not, I’ll find a way to live with it.” Justin knew he sounded like a spoiled – and very angry – little boy, but he couldn’t find it in him to care. He wasn’t just mad, he was pissed. Like hell.

“You’re upset.”

Brian’s voice sounded so rational, so cool, it pissed Justin off even more. He whirled around and glared at the other man. “Upset?” he snapped. “Why would I be upset? Just because the man I love didn’t even tell me that he was to be released from hospital this morning? Could that be a reason?”

“Don’t be such a drama queen-“

“Don’t tell me what to be!” Justin shouted. “I’ve had it with your passive-aggressive bullshit.” He saw Brian’s eyes widen in surprise. Oh yes, Brian, be afraid, be very afraid, he thought. “I’m not going to take it anymore. And I’m so fucking mad, because after

telling me you loved me-“

“I’ve never-“ Brian interrupted, but Justin wasn’t done.

“No, you never used the words,” he agreed, “but you said it. In so many ways.”

Brian gave him a look as if he’d gone mad. And maybe he had. But he didn’t care. “You’re delusional, Justin. It could never work with us, and if you take a moment to think about, you’ll know why.”

“So I’m delusional, huh?” Justin walked over to where Brian stood and got right into his face. “Why? Because I’m in love with you? Because I’m not such a coward, so afraid of getting hurt that I’m not even gonna try?”

“Hurt me?” Brian scoffed. “Ask me again why you’re delusional.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re such a tough guy.” Justin moved even closer. Now their bodies were almost touching. He was not as tall as Brian, but right now it didn’t matter. Fuelled by his anger he felt as tall as a giant. “Only, you’re not. Underneath all that bluster you’re a scared little boy who is trembling all over at the thought of opening himself up.”

Justin reached out and put his hand on Brian’s arm. “But Brian, without doing that, your life’s gonna be miserable. Sure, you’ll fuck and get off, but ... apart from that, there will be nothing. Just coldness.”

He saw Brian lick his lips, then draw them inside, a sure sign of distress. “Justin,” he started and his voice was hoarser than before. “Maybe fucking and getting off is all I want.”

“No,” Justin whispered. “It’s not.”

Brian cocked his head in what was the slightest of movements, and his left brow went up a bit. “And what makes you such an expert of me?”

“Well,” Justin said and let his hand wander and up on Brian’s shoulder. “For one, I’m incredibly smart, but you know that already. And then ...,” he let his voice drop to a whisper. “It’s what love does to you. You know the other person. Inside out.”

Brian laughed, but it sounded shaky. “That’s the worst kind of bullshit, I’ve ever heard.”

“No,” Justin kept his voice low, “it’s not. In fact, I could write my dissertation – should I ever write one – about all things Brian.”

Again, Brian laughed. “You have no idea when it comes to me, Justin. You barely know my family, and like it or not – and believe me I don’t like the fact – but they shaped me. They made me what I am.”

It was Justin's turn to laugh. "And that's the most stupid thing *I* have ever heard. Sure, you grew in a shitty home, with a bitch of a mother and an asshole of a father, but so what? My father won't win any 'great-dad' award either. And yeah, our experiences shape us, but you know what? At one point you have to decide if that chip on your shoulder is what's going to define your life, *or*, if you grab life and define it yourself."

He wrapped his arms around Brian's neck. "Brian, our past experiences do shape us, but only as far as we let them. I know it hurt, and what your mother did is cruel and in my eyes unforgiveable. But you're not your mother. And I, most definitely, am *not* your father."

Brian's eyes seemed large, the pupils huge, and Justin wasn't sure if it was just his imagination or if there was a moist sheen in them. "Justin—"

He took his finger and put it on Brian's lips. "Shhh," he said. "All you need to think about, is that I love you." He pulled himself even closer and held fast, and then, slowly, he felt Brian's arms come around his waist and they stood like that.

Justin knew that Brian believed that loving him could only bring hurt. Brian believed that Justin was too good for him. He believed Justin would suffer because of him, that with his upbringing and background, Brian was incapable to really loving another person.

But that was utter bullshit. Justin believed that with all his heart.

He pulled slightly back and looked at Brian. "There is something else I need to say," he said and smiled.

But Brian suddenly yanked Justin up against him, so hard and sudden that it nearly knocked the breath out of the blond. "Justin," he said and his voice was harsh, "did anyone ever tell you that you talk too much?"

Before Justin could reply to that, Brian seized a handful of hair, angled Justin's face up, and brought his own head down.

Brian had his mouth on Justin's, but he wasn't kissing him. Kissing was sweet and tender and pleasant – or so Justin had thought. This wasn't sweet, this was hot and angry and wet and hungry. Brian's tongue was in Justin's mouth, his fingers were in the blond's hair, and his thigh was between Justin's legs. It felt like the rest of Brian was all over him, plastering Justin on him like a poultice over a wound.

All Justin could do was hang on. This wasn't the Brian he'd slept with before. Last time, Brian had been surprised, and Justin had seduced him. Brian had been hesitant and, yes, almost shy. But today, here in the wreck of Brian's usually spotless apartment, shyness was the last word Justin thought about.

Heat kicked in, shut off Justin's brain, and started working its way down his body. His skin flushed, so suddenly and so hard that he shivered uncontrollably. His clothes felt heavy, smothering; like an elaborate straightjacket. His thighs became shaky and everything beneath them simply disappeared.

Almost all, that is, both their erections were rock hard and rubbing against each other beneath their clothes.

Justin hadn't thought his dick could be that hard without exploding, but it was no surprise because what Brian was doing to his mouth redefined oral sex for sure.

Justin's knees buckled and he grabbed handfuls of Brian's shirt to steady himself. What had started kind of angry was now snoballing into greedy, clothes-ripping sexual starvation. Justin felt all of his control slipping and something akin to panic seized him. He moaned loudly, and Brian heard the strangled sound and broke off the kiss.

Being face to face with Brian with barely an inch between them was the most erotic thing Justin could think about right now, and all rational thought jumped right out of the window.

"Don't think," Brian said and bent again to settle his mouth over Justin's, not as hard or roughly now. His hands splayed over Justin's hips and moved and pressed him, rubbing their erections together, making Justin's dick impossibly harder.

"You like that?" Brian's whisper asked against his lips.

Justin hoped Mmmmm was an acceptable answer. That was the only sound he could get out of his mouth.

"You want more of it?"

"Yes," Justin managed, then shivered when Brian's hand brushed the shirt from his shoulders. He hadn't even realised that Brian had opened the buttons and now it was lying on the floor with the rest of the torn up clothing.

Brian's hot mouth wandered lower, his tongue marking a hot, wet trail over Justin's pulsing artery and Justin had to grab Brian's shirt harder to keep himself from simply crumbling down to the floor.

"You are so hot," Brian whispered and took one of Justin's already hard nipples in his mouth.

Justin heard someone moan, then scream, and only a second later realised it had been him.

A second later, his pants were gone, and Brian was moving him backward, through the

door of his bedroom. Justin felt his legs hit the edge of the bed and then he was falling, and falling and ...

... a weight was landing on top of him.

That was when he realised that his eyes were closed. He opened them quickly and saw Brian's face above him, that wicked, sexy mouth turned up into a smile that promised heaven and hell and everything inbetween.

"You are still wearing your clothes," Justin mumbled, wondering where he'd found what little was left of his rational brain to notice the fact.

"I took yours off," Brian replied.

And smiled.

And said nothing more.

And a little more of Justin's brain kicked in.

With a move he'd learned – he was loathe to admit it – from Daphne, he wrapped his lower leg over Brian's and flipped them around, so he was sitting on top of Brian.

Who was watching him through heavy lidded eyes.

God, the man was pure sin. No wonder everyone was dying to get into his pants. But those times were over.

He looked into Brian's eyes and said, "You're mine. Don't forget that."

Brian's eyes got even heavier. "Yours?" he asked with a voice rough and hoarse and so sexy, Justin simply ripped Brian's shirt clear off his body.

"Mine," Justin confirmed. "And I'm not sharing you."

"Really?"

"Really." Justin fumbled with the buttons of Brian's jeans –

- and the next moment he found himself on his back again, and Brian struggled out of his pants all by himself. He did it in a way that was clearly practiced and that had Justin narrow his eyes at him.

"What?" Brian asked, and one corner of his mouth lifted in amusement.

Justin shook his head. "Nothing. Just ... remember what I said."

“That I’m yours?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t belong to anyone,” Brian said and moved backward, clearly trying to distance himself again.

While they were naked.

And aroused.

And lying on Brian’s bed.

Justin reached out and grabbed his arm, yanking Brian back down and on top of him.

“No,” he said firmly. “You belong to me. And I belong to you. I love you. Stop telling yourself that’s a bad thing.”

And before Brian could respond, he kissed him again.

Brian sighed and rubbed his eyes. It was the first day he was back at work, and most of the time he was okay, but now a headache had crept up on him. The doctor had told him that this might happen after the attack, but the headaches would fade with time, that he shouldn’t be worried.

So he wasn’t worried, but the headaches were a nuisance nevertheless. Especially when the art department had fucked up this latest ad campaign. He’d told them to use Arial and they had used Gothic instead, he’d ordered them to use bright colors and he’d gotten mostly dark blue and green. He knew the art department was always short on time, but this was ridiculous.

He reached for the phone to tell them what exactly he thought of their mess, when the door to his office opened after one short knock. It was no surprise to see Ben standing there, dressed in his usual jeans, shirt and jacket.

“Hey, Ben. You look all fucked out.”

Ben grinned. “I do? See if I care.” His grin faded. “But I’m here to give you a heads-up. Michael is on his way.”

Brian’s headache intensified. “Fuck.”

Ben walked into the office and sat down on the free chair. “He feels left out, Brian. And I think up to a certain point, he’s right. You moved to a hotel and didn’t even give him the address.”

“He has my phone number,” Brian snapped, then winced. “Sorry. I ... just. It’s a bit much.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have come back so soon,” Ben said, and Brian knew his concern was genuine.

“Christ. You sound like ... someone else I know.” Justin had told him exactly what he thought of Brian’s going back to work only three days after he’d been released from the hospital. And even Jennifer had chimed in, telling him that maybe he should take it slow this time.

“Would that someone be Justin?” Ben asked with a twinkle in his eyes.

Aw, shit. He shouldn’t have mentioned Justin to Ben. “Yeah,” he said grumpily. “Look, I really don’t want to talk about it right now. I have a headache and the monkeys down at the art department need to get their asses whipped. I don’t have time for private chit-chat.”

Ben held up a hand. “Alright. But I’m sure Michael won’t let it go that easily.”

“Damn right, he won’t.”

Brian closed his eyes, torn between amusement and annoyance. He loved Mikey, he really did. He told himself that twice before he opened his eyes again. “Mikey. Hi.”

“Don’t Mikey me,” Michael said and came fully into the room. He bent down, kissed his lover, then straightened and focussed on Brian. “I’m not your buddy right now. I’m angry. No, make that pissed. What kind of bullshit is this, Brian?”

It was official. His headache was moving into epic proportions. Brian sighed. “Alright. Hit me with it, Mikey.”

“Fuck you,” Michael hissed. “First, you leave the hospital without telling a single soul about it. Your apartment is trashed, and the person telling me about it is my mother’s run down detective. And then I find out that you’re not even living in your apartment anymore. No, you moved out – to places unknown. Thanks so fucking much for being such a fucking good friend, Brian.”

Okay, maybe Ben was right, maybe Michael did have a point. However, admitting it just wasn’t Brian’s way. “You’re not my fucking mother, Mikey.”

“Too bad,” Michael snapped. “I would have drowned you at birth and spared us all the trouble of trying to be your friend.”

“Michael-“ Ben, the voice of reason, tried.

But even though he was fucking Michael Novotny, he had little experience with the erupting volcano of the same name. “You shut up,” Michael snarled. “I’m sure *you* knew his new address.”

“Okay,” Ben stood. “That’s enough. I’m not your private punching bag here.”

Michael stopped and pinched the bridge of his nose. “No, you aren’t. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have lashed out like that. Forgive me?” He gave Ben a pout a fourteen year old would have been proud of, and Ben, sucker he was, fell for it, hook, line and sinker. He kissed Michael, then gave first Brian, then his lover a long look and left.

But not before giving them some advice. “Play nice, boys,” he said and closed the door behind him.

Brian shook his head.

“What?” Michael asked.

“Nothing. Just ... you and Ben ... it’s disgusting.”

“You are such an asshole. It’s your fault. Besides, you wanted me to meet him.”

He had wanted for Ben to fuck his brains out. The man needed some relaxing and he knew that Ben was just what Michael needed, too.

“I wanted you two to fuck. Nobody said anything about falling for the guy.” He paused, then stuck his tongue in his cheek. “He is a cripple, you know.”

That made Michael laugh, just as Brian had known it would. “As if you’d care about that.”

“Okay, so I don’t care if he has one leg or two. But having to watch you two lovebirds...” Brian trailed off and gave a dramatic shudder. Then he turned serious. “Mikey – I really, I didn’t consciously shut you out. I just ... you have my cell, I thought you’d be able to reach me anyway.”

Michael sighed. “I know. But it hurt to feel left out like that. You’ve always come to me first.”

That was true. But how could he tell Michael that things had changed. That now there was someone else. Whatever Justin was. But he was definitely an important part of Brian’s life, even more important than before. And Brian knew Michael wouldn’t approve. For various reasons.

One of them being jealousy, of course.

Fucking shit. His life was becoming a soap opera, and Brian had no idea how to stop it. Worse even, he wasn't sure he wanted it to stop. Jesus – maybe he should just kill himself and get over with it.

“So,” Brian motioned for Michael to sit. “How is it going with you and Ben?”

Michael stared at him for a moment, then cocked his head. “You really want to know?”

Brian grinned. “No. But I know you're just dying to tell me.”

Michael laughed. “It's great. He really is a great guy.”

“And Deb?” Brian was pretty sure what Deb thought of Ben Bruckner. He was successful, good looking – just the kind of guy any mother would welcome as her future son-in-law. But it was fun to see Mikey roll his eyes.

“Mom is totally nuts about him. It's Ben here, and Ben there – and ‘oh, Ben, did you have enough of my Macaroni’. If I wasn't so sure that she loves me, I'd be afraid she'd abandon me and adopt Ben instead.”

Words coming from the mouth of a twenty-five year old man. “Mikey, you are so pathetic. Abandoning you? What – are you five?”

“No.” Michael was truly offended. “And I'm not pathetic.”

“Yes, you are.” Brian laughed. This was what he was used to. Light banter with Mikey. It was familiar, relaxing. “Where are Emmett and Ted?”

And like a switch, the light banter was gone from Michael's eyes. It made Brian frown. “I don't know about Emmett,” Michael said. “Probably gone off with his love of the day or something like that. As for Teddy – Brian, have you noticed something strange about Ted lately?”

What a loaded question. “You mean apart from the fact that he is boring and will end up fat and bald some time before his fortieth birthday?”

Michael didn't laugh. He frowned instead. “Can't you be serious for a change? This is ... it's really creepy, Brian. He's looking at me. Not openly, but ... once or twice I caught him staring at me. It was strange and ... and creepy as hell. I thought about talking to Emmett, but I couldn't. He and Teddy are best friends and all that-“

“Mikey,” Brian interrupted, holding up a hand. “What do you mean – staring at you?” Brian had seen Ted looking at Michael, and it had been obvious that Ted liked Michael more than just as a friend. But for Michael to notice it ... “And how was it creepy?”

Michael stood and started walking the office. “His eyes were so intense. And when I brought Ben, he looked as if he wanted Ben to drop and die right there in Mom’s kitchen.”

Okay, that was different from what Brian had seen. “But you know that he’s had the hots for you for years, right?”

“What?” Michael’s voice went up an octave.

“Sorry, I thought you knew.” Brian grinned at Michael’s shell-shocked expression. “It was pretty obvious. Remember the one time he was sick? Emmett went to his condo to get his stuff for the hospital and he found all these pictures of you.”

“You’re kidding me, right?”

Brian laughed. “Yeah, I am.” He ducked when Michael picked up a piece of paper, balled it up and threw it at him. “But Mikey, Ted’s really into you.”

Michael sat down again, slumped down, really, and closed his eyes. “Fuck.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “That’s so fucked up.”

“Yeah, it is. But then, it’s also kind of sweet.” Brian let his voice rise, and grinned evilly when Michael’s eyes snapped open. “You, Ted and Ben could be a very dysfunctional family.”

“Fuck you, Brian. This is serious. If Ted’s still pining after me, it could get really awkward. And I don’t want awkward. He is my friend, heck, he’s your friend.”

“Stop right there.” Enough was enough. “Ted’s someone I know. But he’s not my friend. Emmett, maybe, but not Ted.”

“They’re inseparable,” Michael insisted. “How can you be friends with one and not the other?”

“It’s easy.” Brian leaned back. “I never had a problem.” Emmett with all his color and effeminate appearance was a decent man with a lot of depth. He was also fiercely loyal to his friends. Ted, at least as far as Brian was concerned, was loyal to himself. He was way too concerned to stay firmly in the closet and to never step on anyone’s toes to be a trusted friend. To save his own ass, he’d let anyone take the fall.

“Yeah, well, I have.” Michael had always liked Ted. Brian knew that. And he’d never interfered with their friendship, but after what Michael had told him, Brian knew he had to tell his friend the truth. “Shit,” Michael muttered. “What am I gonna do?”

Before Brian could reply to that, they were interrupted by another voice. “Hey, Brian, it’s me.”

Michael's head snapped up and around. "What are you doing here?"

Brian closed his eyes. That was just what he needed today.

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Debbie almost dropped the cup of hot coffee she was about to serve to the conservatively dressed guy on the other side of the counter, when the door to the diner opened and none other than Joan Kinney stepped inside. If someone had told her the Pope would come to bless all queers, she couldn't have been more surprised.

Joan looked highly uncomfortable, her eyes flickering around, never resting on anything or anyone for too long. Her hands were wrung around each other and her lips were pressed together so tightly, they appeared almost white. When her gaze finally fell on Debbie, she was clearly relieved and keeping her eyes straight ahead she came over to the counter.

"Ah ... Mrs. Novotny?"

Debbie put the cup of coffee in front of the customer, before she turned. "Joan Kinney at Liberty Avenue. The world must be coming to an end." She knew she was snarky, but Debbie had no intention of playing nice with a woman who had treated her son as badly as this one had. And after what Carl had told her about Claire ... He had been vague – he wasn't permitted to relay details – but what he'd said was enough to make Debbie blood boil.

She watched Joan Kinney's right eyelid twitch. "I ... need to talk to you." Joan looked around, and her eyes widened as they landed on a man in leather trousers and a leather harness.

"That's Zeke. He, Caleb and Gage just celebrated their fifth anniversary," Debbie said, with a fond smile. They were her most favourite threesome. She also knew it would shock the hell out of Joan Kinney.

And that was exactly what happened. Joan's eyes widened even more, and she stammered: "Wh-what? A thr-threesome?"

"Yeah. First there were Zeke and Gage and they were happy. Both have a leather fetish, you know. I think they like bondage too," she gave Joan a conspirational wink and let her voice drop to a whisper. "But I've never had quite the courage to ask outright. So, anyway, then came Caleb and after some initial problems they are now the happiest threesome I've ever met."

"That's ...," Joan licked her lips, "Oh, God. Mrs. Novotny-"

“Debbie.”

“ – Debbie. Can we. Maybe. Talk somewhere else?”

“I’m sorry,” Debbie said. “I can’t leave. I’m right in the middle of my shift.” It wasn’t a lie. However, she didn’t tell Joan that she could always take ten off if she needed it. The little devil in her wanted Joan to stay inside the Diner and to see what she so desperately wanted to ignore.

“I ... I see.” Joan opened her purse and pulled out a perfectly ironed handkerchief. She unfolded it and dabbed first her forehead, then the corners of her mouth. “Maybe ... another time then?”

Debbie shrugged. “If you want. But I thought it was important.”

Joan closed her eyes, then nodded and opened them again. “It is,” she whispered and her voice wavered. “I have questions and ... I don’t know anyone else I could ask.”

At that moment Emmett made a dramatic entrance, wearing silver trousers and a purple shirt that looked like pure silk. Emmett waved his right hand as if to fan himself and climbed on a stool in front of the counter. “Deb. I need coffee. Tons of coffee. And ... something cool. Without sugar. Or fat.”

“Honey, with your figure, you can afford sugar.”

Emmett air kissed her and smiled. “What a lovely thing to say. But I need to be careful. I might look fabulous now, but I have bad genes.” At that moment he noticed Joan Kinney for the first time. In typical Emmett-fashion he instantly drew her into the conversation. He leaned over to her. “Very bad genes. My great-aunt Lulu, she was a lovely woman – God have mercy on her soul, but she wasn’t what you’d call model thin.”

“Emmett,” Debbie put a cup of coffee down in front of him, then reached over and patted his cheek. “When women reach a certain age, they either keep their face or their figure. Having seen the faces on some women, me – and I suppose your aunt Lulu too – opted not to keep our figure.”

Emmett picked up his cup, sipped from it, then put it down and seemed to consider this. Then he turned once again to Joan. “You seem to have managed to keep both,” he said, and Debbie had to bite her lips, not to laugh out loud.

Joan was actually flustered. “You ... think so?”

“Yes,” Emmett replied eagerly. “You also have great skin. By the way, I’m Emmett Honeycutt. I don’t think we’ve met?” He held out his hand, and after only a slight hesitation, Joan took it.

“Joan Kinney,” she said.

“Kinney? Are you related to Brian?”

Debbie shook her head. Emmett could be such a queen sometimes. “She’s Brian’s mother.”

“Are you now?” Emmett cocked his head and studied the woman in front of him. At the same time, his eyes cooled considerably. “Yes,” he said finally, and now his voice was cool, almost distant. Debbie wanted to kiss him. “You do have a lot in common.”

“So ... so you know my son?”

Emmett inclined his head. Sometimes he could be a queen. And sometimes he simply was one. “Yes, I do. In fact, Brian and I are friends.” There was pride in his voice, and Debbie had to admit she was surprised. Of course, she knew that Brian and Emmett were friends – of some sort, anyway. But she had never thought that Emmett could be proud of it.

Joan nodded. “That’s nice to hear.” Her smile, however, seemed forced and she fidgeted with her handkerchief.

“So,” Debbie set a glass of cold water in front of Emmett, but she looked at her unexpected guest. “What do you want to know?”

Joan finally climbed on one of the stools and sighed. “I have a trusted friend, or so I thought. Unfortunately it seems I might have trusted the wrong person. Do you happen to know Jennifer Taylor?”

Jennifer and Joan? Debbie cocked her head. “Yes, I know Jennifer Taylor. Not well, mind, but we’ve met.”

“She just filed for divorce from her homophobic prick of a husband,” Emmett chimed in and Deb could hear the glee in his voice.

Joan gasped. “A ... d-divorce. Oh. I ... I see. Oh, this is most distressing.”

“If you ask me,” Debbie said, silently congratulating Jennifer for having the courage to stand up to her husband, “she did the right thing. If confronted with the decision of children or husband, a mother should always choose her kids.”

Joan Kinney flinched at that, and Debbie didn’t feel sorry for her. This woman had thrown her own son out of her house. She had never stood up to her husband when Jack had used Brian as his own personal punching bag. She remembered finding Brian on her porch, already sporting a blue eye and blood drying on his cheek. He’d never told her what had happened, but Debbie had known. She knew people like Jack Kinney.

She also knew mothers who looked away. They were just as despicable.

"It's not easy for young men or women to come out," Emmett said. "It's worse if your family hates you for it." He gave Joan a long look. "Do you know that the suicide rate among gay teens is significantly higher than in heterosexual ones? Mostly because they have nobody they can turn to and, of course, because they lack acceptance. It's not fun to find out you're gay."

Debbie saw new sweat on Joan face, and the woman was breathing hard.

"You need a cup of tea," Debbie decided and went to work.

While her back was turned, Joan asked, "Brian never suffered from a lack of potential girlfriends. They were calling all the time."

"And – what exactly has that got to do with anything?" Emmett's voice sounded honestly puzzled. "I mean – Brian is gay. What would he want with girls?"

"My priest says that people can fight the devil in them," Joan said. "And ... people do. I've met a very nice young man, who used to be gay. He is now married with three children."

Emmett laughed out loud. Debbie turned with her tea just in time to see Joan flinch. "Here you go," she said and gave Emmett a warning look.

He ignored her completely. "Used to be gay?" he exclaimed incredulously. "Honey, the man is still gay. The only one to pity is the poor woman married to him. I'm betting half my belongings – and okay, that's not much, but it's all I have." He waved his hand, "Anyway, you can bet your ass that at least three or four times a week he's going out buying himself some tight boy ass."

Joan blanched at that. "Tight – oh God. You ... mean, he will go out and buy himself a male whore?"

"Maybe," Emmett agreed. "But they're not whores. Not really. They're usually desperate kids, thrown out of their homes and have no other means to earn a little money. They're victims, Mrs. Kinney. And half of them aren't even gay."

"Drink your tea," Debbie ordered, a little scared now that Joan might keel over. The woman was deathly pale, and her hands were shaking.

"But the Bible says it's a sin. Men should not lie with men."

"And who said that? God?" Emmett was not impressed. In fact, he looked more bored by the second. This argument was nothing new to him, Debbie was sure of that.

Joan shook her head. "I'm just ... so confused. I went to Brian's place to pick up some of his things while he was in the hospital, you know." She looked up and Debbie nodded. "And I met one of Brian's friends, Justin Taylor. He is getting a divorce, too."

"He is?" Debbie frowned. It was the first she'd heard of it.

"Yes, he told me that he is divorcing his lovely wife because he ... he found out that he is a homosexual." The words were forced out of Joan's throat. Especially on the last one, she choked.

"He – what?" Debbie almost choked with her, she was so surprised. Then she saw Emmett's nonchalant expression and glared. "You knew?"

"Not really," Emmett said, but it was clearly not the whole truth.

Debbie gave him a loaded look. Or maybe Emmett *was* telling the truth, just not the whole truth. But then, this was the Diner, not a court room, and anyway, Joan Kinney was present. Maybe the whole truth was more than she could bear.

Debbie took a deep breath. So Justin was gay. So what? It irked her terribly, however, that she'd never had a clue.

And then another thought came to her. If Justin was gay ... She turned her head and stared at Emmett, who was avoiding her gaze.

"It was a very unpleasant scene," Joan was saying as a million light bulbs exploded in Debbie's head. What had Michael told her about some partner being with Brian at the hospital? And hadn't Carl mentioned Justin acting like a pit bull around Brian?

Holy Shit.

"Our little Justin does have some balls," Emmett said with deep admiration in his voice.

"He has that," Debbie agreed, her mind still trying frantically to put pieces of information – and speculation – together. Did Jennifer know, she wondered? And Craig? And what – oh what – about Brian?

Justin might have courage for two, but he was a commitment guy. He had married his childhood friend. Sure, they were getting a divorce now, but Justin wasn't cut out for an endless string of one-night-stands or a lover who could never be faithful.

Debbie loved Brian as if he were her own son, but she had no illusions about him either. In his heart, Brian was a good guy, but he had grown up in a home where beatings were nothing out of the ordinary and where human warmth was not given on a regular basis. It was hard for people like Brian Kinney to be normal, to have real relationships. Not only had they grown up without a role model, they also had severe issues concerning

their own image.

She had seen Brian more than once, after Jack had lived out one of his drunken rages, bleeding and sporting one or two blue eyes. He'd sat on her porch, a lost boy, so lonely in the darkness, yet refusing to come inside, nursing his wounds on his own. He'd never wanted Debbie to take care of him, had never accepted any help. She'd tried coaxing him inside, but had given up soon, realising that he couldn't stand the kind of closeness she and Michael had, not when he knew that he could never have anything alike.

And this woman, this so called mother – Debbie looked at Joan Kinney, looking almost fragile in her grey suit and pristine white blouse – was one of the reasons Brian had suffered so much during his childhood and teenage years.

However, she'd also come here, into the devil's den – so to speak. What did that mean? Well, it was time to find out. "So," Debbie straightened and looked at Joan. "What do you want to know?"

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"A baby boutique?" Daphne exclaimed, and stared at Paul.

"So?" He grinned, took her arm and pulled her with him. "You're pregnant. Besides, it's my Mom's shop. She has great taste in clothes. You'll love it, I promise."

He wisely didn't wait for her reply. Instead he pushed the door to the shop open and limped inside. "Mom?" he called out.

"Paul, is that you, honey?"

He rolled his eyes, glad she hadn't called him 'pumpkin', the way she sometimes did. That would have been too embarrassing to ever live it down. "Yeah, it's me," he replied.

"I'll be with you in a second!"

He turned to Daphne. "Don't be intimidated," he told her, just before his mother came in from the back, dressed perfectly in an amber colored suit with high heels and her blond hair cut short. It made her look not a day older than thirty five, Paul thought with more than just a little pride.

Her brows went up a bit, but it was the only outward sign that the presence of the woman in her shop surprised her. Then she shook her head. "Look at you," she said on a sigh. "You might have a lot of natural grace – without the cast, of course – but unfortunately you've inherited none of my fashion sense." Her head snapped around, "And you would be?"

Paul rolled his eyes and gave Daphne an apologetic look. "Mo-om!"

"I'm Daphne Taylor," Daphne said with a coolness and grace that had his mother's eyes widen. "I'm very pleased to meet you, Mrs. Webber. Paul talks about you all the time."

"He does?"

"Oh yes. He called you willowy and beautiful and he was certainly right."

If Daphne thought his mother would be flustered by that, she was up for some heavy disappointment. And sure, enough, Karen Webber merely cocked her head – but then, she flushed.

Holy shit.

Daphne had made his mother flush.

Holy, holy shit.

His mother pursed her lips. "Willowy and beautiful," she looked at Paul who cleared his throat. Then she smiled. "I can live with that. And I like you already, Daphne Taylor."

She gave Paul one of her patented mother-looks and Paul squirmed. "Daphne is a friend, Mom."

Karen Webber's right brow went up as if saying 'ah, a friend'. To Daphne she said: "Did Paul just kidnap you or did he tell you where you were going?"

"I didn't kidnap her," Paul protested. "Sheesh, Mom. I told her it would be something fun."

"Fun?" Karen's left brow came up this time. "I obviously missed teaching my son the meaning of the word 'fun'."

"Actually, I think it could be fun," Daphne said and her gaze swept around.

The store wasn't big, but it was well equipped with everything a baby would or could need. And unlike most stores, Karen Webber had nothing in either pink or baby blue. Her colors were bright and friendly, mostly yellow, orange, red and green.

"You do?" Karen was obviously surprised.

"Yeah," Daphne confirmed and held up her left hand. "I'm married and pregnant. As Paul said, we're friends. Sort of, anyway."

"Daphne and I met in a park and we," Paul grinned, "commiserated. I was blue because of the cast and she because ... well, she and her husband are splitting up."

"I see," his mother said, looking after Daphne who had trailed off towards the section for newborns. "So she really isn't a special friend?"

Paul shrugged, not quite sure how to answer that. 'Actually, Mom, I'd love to get into her pants' wouldn't bring him any points here. "I guess," he told her. "I mean, I think she's hot."

"And pregnant," Karen said. As if she had to remind him of that.

"And older," he added. "And so not interested in me." Paul sighed. "I like her, though. And I want for us to be friends. I can live with that - for now."

"Be careful," his mother warned, and he saw the concern she felt in her eyes. "Don't get in too deep."

Good advice, but Paul wasn't sure if it wasn't too late already. "I'll try."

"So – you met her in a park?" his mother asked, just as Daphne exclaimed, "Oh my God, these are so cute."

"It's a long story, Mom."

Karen smiled at him. "I can't wait to hear it."

She walked over to where Daphne stood, holding up a yellow shirt for very young babies in her right and a red one in her left hand. Paul watched the two women for a moment, they both laughed and Daphne's whole face lit up. She was, without a doubt, the most beautiful women he'd ever met.

She was also married and pregnant, and very obviously still in love with her scumbag of a husband. But Paul was young and had to go back to New York as soon as the cast got off. Two more years of dance school. Two more hard years of aching muscles and joints.

Two more years.

Yeah, he decided, he could do that. Two more years were nothing. And then - who knew, maybe by then she'd be ready for a slightly younger, slightly prettier dancer who thought she was the most beautiful woman on this planet.

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Joan felt cold sweat trickle down her spine. She saw Debbie Novotny looking at her expectantly and the gay young man, called Emmett ... she had forgotten his last name ... was gazing into his coffee, but she knew that all his attention was on her.

God in heaven, why had she come here? What had she thought she could accomplish? How would trying to understand change one thing? Brian was a sinner – it was a fact.

And yet. Listening to Jennifer Taylor had touched something inside of her, something Joan thought long lost. It was quivering, almost shaking with fear but it was there. And it refused to be shut down again. It refused to let her fall asleep, and if she did, it jerked her awake at night, her body wet with sweat, her soul weeping with regret and guilt.

And it was that regret, that guilt, that had brought her here and that made her say, “I want to understand. Help ...,” she licked her dry lips, “me understand.”

Something flickered through Debbie Novotny’s eyes, but it was gone too quickly for Joan to figure out what it was. “Understand?” Debbie said. “What’s there to understand?”

“Why is my son like that?” It was the one thing she needed to know. Brian, her baby, her handsome son, the child of her heart – why was God testing her through him?

“Because God made him that way,” the young man called Emmett said flatly.

“God?” Joan shook her head. It couldn’t be.

“Yes, God,” Emmett’s voice was firm. “God who created us all, created also us queers.”

“But ... why would God do such a thing?” Joan was unable to see it that way. “Why would Hehe create something so unnatural?”

“Why is it unnatural?” Debbie asked. “Because they want it up their asses?”

Joan flinched. Why did that woman have to be so crude? Was it really necessary to be so descriptive? “Two men can’t create life,” she said.

Emmett shook his head. “Which means that having sex for the sake of sex would be a sin.”

It was a sin. But Joan knew that saying so wouldn’t fall on fertile ground. They would laugh just the way Jack had laughed at her. When he’d realised she was serious, he had sneered and told her that if she didn’t want to put out he’d always find willing women to give it to him.

But she wouldn’t let thoughts of Jack distract her. She’d come with a purpose, and she would find out what she so desperately needed to know. Even if it killed her. She looked up and saw Debbie staring at her. “What?” she asked.

Debbie chuckled. “I just figured it out – what you really came for, what you really want to

know. You came because you want to know where you went wrong? Why God gave you someone like Brian for a son will be a mystery for me forever.”

Joan wasn't sure, but she thought there was an insult somewhere in that. She decided to ignore it. “Maybe ... do you think it was because Jack sometimes lost his temper?”

Debbie shook her head, giving her a look heavy with dislike. “You are a piece of work, do you know that? It's ...” She turned away and busied herself with something Joan couldn't see. Over her shoulder, Debbie continued, “Brian was born gay. You can either accept it, or if you can't and I think that's the case, you should go and leave him alone. He's gone through enough, thanks to you and your sorry excuse of a husband. Neither of you should have had children.”

What a despicable thing to say. Joan knew she had made mistakes, but she had been a good mother. For years she had protected her children. Only later ... she had been unable to. It wasn't her fault that Jack was such a miserable father. What could she have done? Leaving him was out of the question. The Bible was very firm on that. She and Jack were bonded for life, God had blessed their union and there was no way she could back out just because things got rough. But someone like Debbie Novotny would never understand that.

“I will not discuss my qualities as a parent with a woman who willingly spends her time surrounded by people who have lost God.” It was no surprise that Debbie's son was gay. Joan only wished she could understand why her son had been chosen as well. She had always abided God's law, had always been faithful and true. But still the devil had reached out for her son and claimed him.

Debbie turned around. “Jack didn't just lose his temper,” she said. “Your husband beat your son up. A lot. And you stood there and did nothing. *Nothing*. You don't even deserve to be called a mother. You should be ashamed of yourself, but instead you hide in self-righteousness just like some of the religious assholes who kill gay teenagers and justify it by saying it's God's will.”

“I would never want anything to happen to Brian,” Joan protested. “And I would never lay hands on another human being.” Killing someone was a sin, too.

“No, but you didn't do anything to prevent it either.” This was said by Emmett, who looked at her disdainfully.

Disdainfully! “Young man,” Joan said, climbed down from the stool and straightened her back. “You have no right to throw stones. You are living a life of perversion and sin. You should lower your head in shame.”

“And yet I somehow manage to not do that,” he said. “I even manage to enjoy my life. And I will certainly not lower head for any-“ he paused and pursed his mouth. “Okay, so that's a lie. I will certainly lower my head, but for a nice cock and not for you.”

Outrage bloomed in Joan. It had been a mistake to come. She had known it, but she had been determined. It was her duty as a faithful Christian, but it was hard for a Christian to communicate with those who had lost their way and obviously refused to find it again.

“Emmett,” Debbie chided, but there was a grin on her face. “You are incorrigible.”

Emmett sighed. “I know. Isn’t it grand?”

Joan gave them both a scathing look. “You both have lost God. I will pray for you. And hope that God can find it in Him to forgive.”

“There is nothing to forgive,” Debbie said mildly. “And I’m sure God has enough love for all of us.”

She sounded so sure, for a split second Joan almost hesitated. But then she straightened even more. “God only forgives those who see the error of their ways. You should always keep that in mind. And now, I wish you a good day.”

She turned away from the counter, with her head held high, she walked through the Diner, and released a breath when the door closed behind her. She would never step into this den of sin again. Nothing could help them, nothing would save them, they were not willing to change. Yes, she thought, she might have lost a son, but she still had her faith in God and He would never let her down.

She left the Diner and Liberty Avenue – and Brian – with a smile on her face.

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Carl Horvath was about to leave for his lunch date with Debbie when his phone rang. One arm already inside his coat, he cursed and snatched it up.

“Horvath?”

“Are you the police officer working on the Kinney case?”

A female voice. Not young. But not old either. Carl frowned. “Who are you?”

“That’s of no consequence. Just ... think of me as a well informed friend.”

Carl almost laughed. “What do you want?”

“Always so impatient, our law abiding men. It has to be a stressful life. No wonder so many of you die young.”

Carl sighed. "Is there a purpose to your call? Because I'm hungry."

"Oh, well. I don't want you to starve, so I'll better get to it."

"If you'd be so kind. So – what's this all about?"

"Are you still searching for the guy who tried to off Kinney?"

Tried to off? Carl was instantly alert. So far he had been sure that whoever had attacked Brian had tried to hurt him, not to kill him. He kept his voice carefully neutral. "Yes, we are still searching. "Why? Do you know who did it?"

There was a pause. Then: "I might."

Carl rubbed his forehead. "What do you want?"

"You mean money?" She laughed. "I don't want money."

Not money, then. "What *do* you want?"

"I want you to promise me something."

Carl's head started to throb. "You have to tell me first what this is about."

Another pause. A heavy sigh. "My sister has this asshole of a boyfriend. And last time I saw her, she hit on me for money. I asked her why she didn't talk to her boyfriend. And you know what she said? Told me, he had problems getting his money for a job he did. So I ask her, what kind of a job? Because, see, the asshole hasn't worked one day of his fucked up life. And she says that I can't tell anyone, but that he beat up some queer guy."

Carl reached for a pen. "And why are you telling me this then?"

"Because the asshole is beating her up. I want him gone – any way I can get him." Her voice was fierce now and Carl knew that this wasn't some woman who was trying to mess with him. Because this wasn't about Brian Kinney, it was about protecting her sister.

He took a piece of paper and held his pen ready. "So, what's the guy's name?"

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"What is he doing here?" Michael turned to Brian, demanding an answer as always.

"I'm here-" Justin began, but Brian cut him off.

“He’s here because he is my friend,” he said sharply and glared at Michael. Brian felt defensive – and he hated it. So he held Michael’s gaze and added, “Just like you.”

That was a lie, in more ways than one. He didn’t look at Justin, knowing he would see disappointment in his lover’s eyes.

Fuck.

“Just like me?” Michael’s face was red.

Brian closed his eyes. His head was pounding, his mouth tasted like shit and all he wanted was to go back home, close his door and pretend he was alone in this whole wide world. Unfortunately, he had no home to back to because some asshole – yet unknown – had trashed his apartment.

And then there was the matter of Justin Taylor. A boy who had once stormed into his life, and had then stolen his heart without Brian even noticing. A boy – a man – for whom Brian had longed for from afar, someone who seemed unreachable.

Seemed being the operative word here.

Because all of a sudden unreachable had turned into very close indeed and now they were – whatever they were.

“No, not really like you,” Justin’s voice was snippy, and Brian finally looked at him. He was leaning against the wall, his arms crossed, and his eyes never leaving Brian.

Michael glared at Justin but Justin ignored him, and continued staring at Brian.

“Brian?” Michael demanded.

“What?” Brian snapped. “This is a free world. Justin can go where he wants.”

“Justin isn’t going anywhere,” the blond said, and his eyes were hot with anger. Underneath, however, Brian could see a world of hurt.

Fuck. FUCK.

That was exactly what Brian had wanted to avoid. That kind of emotional entanglement that leads straight to heartache, to hurt feelings, to broken friendships. He was no good at this kind of crap, he had told Justin, but would the man listen?

Of course not, because in Justin’s world things were clear as day. You fell in love - *love* - and then you lived happily ever after.

In Brian’s world people fucked, then left. It was clean, honest ... it was a concept Justin

would never understand.

He had told Justin that, too.

Repeatedly.

But would the man listen? Of course not. Because Justin was a stubborn SOB and when he got something in his head it was hard to convince him that maybe he could be wrong.

Yes, he had told Emmett that he was in love with Justin. And he was. But being confronted with the possibility of making his dreams reality, Brian found himself shying away like a frightened horse.

"From where I stand, this is Brian's office and if he tells you to leave, you leave," Michael snarled.

Christ.

"Mikey," Brian snapped. "Shut up."

"From where I stand," Justin said mildly, "you are sitting."

Perfect. Just perfect.

Michael had always been jealous of Brian's relationship with Justin. It had started the day Brian had brought Justin with him to one of their club nights. Mikey hadn't been able to not stare at the blond, to not glare daggers at him, to not wish him a timely death. It had been one of the worst nights of Brian's life, and with his past that meant something.

Only when Michael had realised that Justin was straight and no threat to whatever fantasy Michael still harboured about himself and Brian, their relationship had relaxed. Marginally. They talked and joked but there was always a strain in their banter, their laughter. Brian wondered if that would ever change and he hated the idea that he could lose one of them at one point. It also hurt that if he lost one of them, it would either be due to Michael's stubbornness or his own lack of emotional maturity.

"I can stand," Michael said now and stood up.

Brian closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Mikey, sit down," he ordered, not even needing to look. His friend would sit down, no questions asked. Brian opened his eyes again, saw Michael sitting with a petulant expression and Justin still standing at the wall with something akin to amusement in his gaze.

Brian took a deep breath, but before he could utter a word, Michael said, "Don't you have anything to do? I mean, you're married, your wife's pregnant. And then there's this

job you have,” he paused, seemed to ponder that. “But your job’s with Daddy, right? So I’m sure you can get the day off whenever you want.”

Brian didn’t even have to look to know that Justin was bristling. “For your information, I don’t work for my father anymore,” the blond hissed. “Not that it’s any of your business. I don’t know why you have to be such a jerk. Don’t you have a boyfriend these days? What does he say about you still being so hung up on Brian? I don’t think he’d be happy if he knew.”

“You little-“ Michael started, but Brian had had enough.

He stood up, glaring at them both. “Both of you – shut up!” They stared at him wide-eyed and Brian felt a flicker of satisfaction. “Good. Stop going at each other’s throats. This isn’t a competition.”

“But I’m your best friend,” Michael said at the same time Justin muttered, “He started it.”

“Enough,” Brian made a slashing motion with his hand. “I don’t care who started it. You’re adults, so behave that way. Mikey, you’re my best friend. That’s not gonna change. But Justin ...,” he looked at the blond and Justin was looking right back, daring him with his eyes. ‘You don’t have the courage to do it’ they said. But they also held a warm smile, showing him that no matter what, Justin understood. And that he loved him.

Loved him.

Brian closed his eyes again, then opened them and locked them with Michael’s. “Justin is my lover. You need to accept that, Mikey. Otherwise, we will have a problem.”

“Your – lover?” Michael sputtered, then laughed. “Good joke, Brian. You almost had mebe there. Remember, Justin’s straight, and married.”

“Not for long,” Brian said quietly. “He and Daphne are getting a divorce. And he’s gay. Believe me, I know.” From the corner of his eye he saw Justin blush a little and he had to smile. Maybe being a decent guy wasn’t so hard after all.

“He and Daphne ...” Michael was stunned. He turned to Justin. “What did you do? Did you wake up and decide that you’re suddenly gay.”

“No. I was always gay. You should know it doesn’t work that way. Being gay isn’t a decision.” Justin’s voice was quiet, almost a little sad. Brian felt a twinge of unwelcome jealousy and forced it down. It was ridiculous, anyway. So Justin was a little sad? Of course he was. Daphne was his best friend since kindergarten. Hurting her this way had to suck.

He had to be supportive, that was the right thing to do. Feeling jealous was stupid, it was immature – but fuck it, he felt it anyway.

“You were always gay?” Michael sneered. “Strange, somehow I never noticed. Ah, but now I remember, you got married – to a *woman*.”

“Don’t be a cunt, Mikey,” Brian said mildly. “Justin isn’t the first gay man who got married to a woman, or who lived in denial for years. I told you, he’s gay.” He permitted himself a small grin, “I tested it personally.”

“I can imagine.” Michael’s sneer didn’t vanish. “You could never keep it in your pants. You wanted him from the day he moved into your room at college. Congratulations, Brian, for finally succeeding. Just don’t be surprised when he wakes up tomorrow and decides he is straight after all.”

That was a low blow. It shouldn’t be a surprise. Michael knew him inside out, he knew what buttons to push, knew how to make it really sting. He knew that abandonment was one of Brian’s best hidden nightmares.

Brian had been heavily drunk one night, and because he had been and because Michael had been there, he’d told him that the idea of people leaving him filled him with horror and despair. Brian had almost forgotten about that night – it was typical that Michael hadn’t.

“You know,” Justin said, pushing himself off of the wall, and taking a step toward Michael. “For someone who claims to be Brian’s best friend, you can be a real asshole sometimes. Why don’t you forget about yourself for a moment and try to be supportive for a change?”

“What? So you’re suddenly the expert when it comes to Brian?” Michael laughed and it had an ugly edge to it. “Because he fucked you? Newsflash, Justin, he’s fucked half of Pittsburgh. You’re nothing special. Brian isn’t big on commitment. You should brace yourself for some disappointment coming your way. The only one he’s ever been true to is me.”

Brian saw Justin’s eyes widen, then narrow, saw the blond open his mouth. Then Justin’s eyes suddenly snapped to Brian and he closed his mouth again, before he shook his head and turned away from Michael.

“What, you’ve got nothing to say?” Michael taunted.

“No, he doesn’t.” Brian said, but he was looking at Justin’s back and the way the blond was bracing his hands against the wall. Justin was being mature, and it was time for Brian to step in. To stop something that should never have begun.

“Mikey. I want you to leave,” he said quietly, his heart bleeding.

“What?”

“Either you leave, or you will accept that Justin and I are together. It’s your choice, Mikey.”

“My ...” Michael paled. “Brian, wake up. Justin isn’t gay. He’s playing some stupid game with you. This isn’t like you!”

“Maybe you just don’t know me all that well,” Brian said, knowing it to be true. Michael was his best friend. He had been his anchor for so long, and yet ... Michael didn’t know him. Not where it counted. Not the way Justin did.

“But he does?” Michael scoffed. “That’s total bullshit.”

“No, it isn’t.” Brian had never been so sure of anything. “Justin knows me.” He looked up and locked eyes with his lover. Justin had tears in his eyes and Brian had to swallow. “And he – loves me.” He didn’t have to force the words out. They came natural and it was like the doors to another world had opened that very moment.

“He loves you?” Michael laughed. And it wasn’t a nice sound.

“I love him,” Justin confirmed and smiled at Brian. “He’s my man.”

“What? Brian, what the fuck?”

Brian shrugged. He didn’t look at Michael – he couldn’t. It hurt too much to do so. “What can I say?” he said, and kept his voice nonchalant. Michael would never know how much he had hurt him today. “If Justin says I’m his man, then I probably am. He is a very smart kid, you know.”

Brian saw a tear running down Justin’s cheek. But it wasn’t a sad tear, it was one of joy. Justin’s whole face was lit up with radiant happiness. Brian hoped with all his heart that he hadn’t said everything just to piss off Michael. It would be no surprise, defensive aggression was second nature to Brian.

How could Justin ever live with someone as damaged as him? And yet, Justin wanted it, wanted him. In Brian’s book that made him the bravest fucking hero in the universe.

Jennifer was about to leave the hotel when her phone rang. She looked at her watch, sighed, and went to answer it. To her surprise, Charlotte was calling her.

“Hey. I didn’t expect to hear from you.”

Her attorney laughed. “I’ll make it short. Stabler called. Craig accepted the divorce agreement.”

Jennifer was so stunned, she had to sit down. “What?”

“Yep,” Charlotte said. “I’m not sure what happened. But I’m far from looking a gift horse

in the mouth. However,” she paused and Jennifer felt uneasiness creep up her spine. “I want to warn you.”

Her throat closed up and she had to clear it before she could ask, “Warn me?”

“Gregory Stabler,” Charlotte said. “Be careful with him. He is a dangerous man.”

Jennifer frowned. Stabler? She hadn’t thought about Craig’s attorney for ... days. Okay, maybe not days, but she had certainly not thought of him *today*. “Why?”

“Why he is dangerous?” Charlotte was clearly exasperated. “Jennifer, you met the man. He is a lady-killer.”

Jennifer had to laugh. “A lady-killer? Charlotte – don’t be so dramatic.”

“I’m not. I’ve seen him do it. He is a ladies’ man, Jennifer. And he has his eyes on you. I can’t prove it, but I’m pretty sure he convinced Craig to sign the agreement.”

“Wouldn’t that be unethical?”

“No. Not if it’s for Craig’s benefit as well. And it is. It’s a very fair agreement.”

Jennifer knew that. Charlotte had tried to tell her that she could get more, but she didn’t want more. She just wanted what was rightfully hers and then close that chapter of her life.

Forever, if possible.

“Are you still there?” Charlotte asked.

“Yes, yes. Look, Charlie, I need this to be over.”

Charlotte sighed again. “I understand. I really do, but I still think you’re making a mistake. But I can only give advice, not force you to do it my way. And once again, be careful of Stabler.”

“He is very attractive.” Jennifer thought of those magnetic eyes, that smile. She sighed.

“Jennifer.” There was a warning in Charlotte’s voice. “He has been divorced four times. And he’s not a faithful man. He’ll break your heart.”

At that Jennifer laughed. “Charlie, for him to break my heart he would have to touch it first. Yes, I think he’s attractive, but I’m not planning to fall in love with him.”

“Famous last words,” Charlotte replied. “You can’t plan falling in love. Or not falling, for that matter.”

Jennifer snorted. "Of course I can. After Craig, I'm not looking for anything serious." She'd be crazy if she would let herself fall for a guy, even if he was sex personified. But having a hot, sweaty affair with a guy like Stabler – now, that could be fun.

"Well, it's your life."

"Thanks for the warning," Jennifer said. "And thanks for everything."

"You're welcome. You'll get my bill soon."

Jennifer laughed. "Looking forward to it." The heck of it was, she did. Because paying Charlotte meant that it was over. That Craig would be out of her life. That she could start living again, and maybe rebuild the relationship with her children. If – *if* - she could find Molly.

"Bye Jennifer."

"Bye." Jennifer put the phone down, leaned back and took a deep breath.

It was over. Well, not completely over, but it was done.

She took another deep breath. And another.

Then she buried her face in her hands and started to cry.

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"Daniel Corrigan."

The man at the reception with the greasy hair and the polyester suit scratched his head and Carl clenched his teeth.

Hard.

The man shook his head. "Never heard the name."

Carl let his eyes slide over the cheap outfit, then kept them on the man's face and smiled when the guy started to squirm. Carl slowly pulled a stick of chewing gum out of his pocket, unwrapped it, and holding it between thumb and forefinger, said casually, "Strange, from what I heard he rented a room in this," he gestured with his chewing gum, "fine house for the better part of the past three months." Then he popped the gum in his mouth and gave the man a sharky smile.

The guy, whose name tag read Corey Landowski, started to sweat.

"I also heard," Carl went on, enjoying himself thoroughly, "that he has this unique tattoo on his neck."

"Daniel Corrigan, you said?" Landowski asked as if he'd never heard the name in his life. But he pulled out a tissue and dabbed his forehead.

"Yep," Carl replied, leaning against the counter, just as if they were best buddies and about to exchange exciting gossip. Which wasn't really that far from the truth. Okay, Landowski was shaking in his non-existent boots, but if Carl did his job, he would hear the whereabouts of one Daniel Corrigan very soon.

Or so he hoped.

God, sometimes he hated his job.

"Well," Landowski was scratching his head again, "now that you mentioned the tattoo, there might have been a guy. But he moved out ... ah ... a week ago or so."

Carl frowned. That wasn't what Stella Marese had told him. She had been sure that 'Dan, the asshole' was still staying at this run down hotel. 'Too cheap to spend money on my sister', she'd said. And then had told him all about this man who was beating up her sister and beating up queers in his spare time.

Yep, Daniel Corrigan sounded like a really nice fellow.

One Carl would love to arrest and question. And then see him convicted for assault. Or even attempted murder. Now, that would be a satisfying end to this case.

If they would get a judge who was brave enough to do just that.

Which wasn't very likely.

Aw, shit.

Sometimes, like now, Carl wished he'd never even known this case existed. He wished he was still the slightly homophobic cop who was happy with his life, his job, still living in the apartment his late wife had furnished and still wearing the clothes she had chosen for him.

His life would be easier.

But it would also be without a certain redhead – sometimes blond – he wouldn't want to miss for anything. And who he had a date with – later, for lunch.

He gave Landowski a steely glare. "That's not what I hear," he said and leaned a little closer. "Look, we can do this here, or we can do it the hard way. By that I mean taking

you down to the precinct, then taking a statement, filling out forms, and maybe, if I'm convinced you're lying – and let me tell you, right now it looks that way – I might decide to keep you. We have these lovely overnight cells. You can become best friends with all the lowlife Pittsburgh has to offer.”

Landowski shrivelled. Literally. He seemed to shrink into himself, and his cheap suit, and paled even more. “I ... the guy is dangerous. Mean guy, you know.”

Carl looked at his watch. “I'm waiting here.”

Landowski let out a sharp breath. “It's on you if I get beaten up in the end.”

“I'll find a way to live with it,” Carl told him dryly. “Where is he?”

“Room 435. But he's out now. Won't be back until ... uh ... five or so.”

Five. Shit. Carl sighed. So much for his plans for a movie and maybe .. whatever.

“See,” he smiled at Landowski, “that was easy. And now you can promise me that you won't warn him.”

“Warn him?” Landowski's voice went up an octave. “No way. When he comes back, I won't be here. That's a promise I can give.”

“Smart man.” Carl nodded. “Won't be seeing you then.”

“You can bet on it.”

Carl turned away. In leaving he pulled out his phone, dialled a familiar number and told his boss that he needed some men to pick up a suspect in an attempt murder case.

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“I can't believe what he said to me, how he treated me. And all that because of *Justin Taylor*!”

Ben rolled his eyes. “I couldn't believe it the last twenty times you told us.”

Emmett giggled, then slapped a hand over his mouth, but his eyes met Debbie's and they shared a look of deep and honest understanding.

“I think it's despicable. He is your friend. Nobody should treat a friend like that,” Ted said, believing it with all his heart. He'd never been fond of Brian Kinney. Envious, yes, but never fond. Brian was too much like a cock in a henhouse – pun intended – for Ted's taste. It was also hard to watch how he used his friends, Michael in particular, with seemingly no conscience.

“At least someone is seeing it my way,” Michael said, giving Ted a grateful smile. Ted could have basked in that smile for weeks. He knew his own smile was about to split his face, but he couldn’t bring himself to care.

Until he caught Emmett giving him the evil eye. Now that look was a real shriveller and Ted’s smile disappeared as if it had never been there. ‘What’? He mouthed to his friend, already knowing why Emmett was glaring at him, but playing dumb anyway.

Emmett continued to stare at him, then turned his gaze away. “So Brian and blond, beautiful Justin are an item now?”

Since when had Emmett gotten so mean? Ted scowled. “As if anyone cares about that,” he said.

“We care,” Debbie chimed in, setting plates in front of them. As soon as her hands were free, she reached over her son and pinched Ben’s cheek, making the man wince. “Aren’t you just too cute for words. I can’t believe my idiot of a son-“

“Hey!” Michael exclaimed.

“- finally found himself such a beauty.” She looked down at Michael and glared. “And I expect you to stick to him. And now I don’t want to hear another bad word about Brian.”

“Mo-om.”

“I mean it.” Debbie was firm, and Ted glared at her but was ignored. “You should have seen that bitch Joan Kinney. Tell them Em, tell them what a bitch she was.”

“She is a bitch,” Emmett confirmed, snatching a French fry from Ted’s plate. “I thought my family was bad, but ... having *her* for a mother has to be *the* uber-suck. Talk about religious fanatics.”

“I’m sure she isn’t that bad,” Ted felt inclined to argue. At least Brian’s mother was taking an interest in her son’s life. His own hadn’t bothered to take an interest for ... years, really. Whenever he called her, birthdays and such, it had been extremely awkward as if she had no idea what to say to him. Or he to her.

“Not that bad?” Debbie stared at him. “I think this woman would be happier with Brian dead and buried than having him suck cock. Mother is not a word I’d use for her.” Without any warning she slapped Ted over the head.

“Ow!” he exclaimed, wondering if receiving a slap from Deb was like becoming a knight – Liberty style.

“Mom! Why did you do that?”

“Because he deserved it,” Debbie snapped and glared at Ted, who did his best not to shrink under her lethal glare. “Brian is your friend. And we are loyal to our friends.”

See, Ted thought, that’s where she was wrong. Friend? Oh no, Brian wasn’t his friend. Brian was ... Ted had no idea what Brian was.

When Ted had met the famous Brian Kinney for the first time he hadn’t been quite that famous. He’d been a cocky eighteen year old and Ted had run across him by accident. Or rather, because Ted had been following Michael around and where Michael was, there was Brian.

And yes, Ted had been dazzled by Brian. In hindsight it wasn’t something Ted was proud of, but it didn’t bother him all that much either. It happened to almost everyone at first contact with Brian, but unlike Michael who was still longing to be more than just a friend, Ted had gotten over it pretty quickly. Brian was beautiful, yes, he was sexy, sure, but he was nothing but a fantasy. Hot and unreachable for someone like Ted Schmidt. And if there was something Ted had learned early in his life, that it was not smart to long for things you could never have.

Unfortunately Ted had forgotten about his own rule that one time. That one day when he’d fallen in love with Michael Novotny. Not that Michael was unreachable for him. Were circumstances different, he and Michael could have been hot and heavy and very solid, but unfortunately there was Brian and now there was Ben – another beautiful man, Ted had no way of competing with.

So it was official. Ted’s life sucked and he was a pathetic loser.

Story of his life.

“... fit together.”

Ted blinked and realised that very moment that conversation had been going on around him. “What?” he asked.

Emmett rolled his eyes. “We were talking about couples. No wonder you zonked out.”

Ted glared at his best friend, then turned his head. “Who fits together?” he asked Debbie.

“Justin and Brian,” she said, as if it were glaringly obvious. Ted barely restrained himself from rolling his eyes. “They will make a beautiful couple,” Debbie gushed on. “Both of them hot and hung.” She cackled and Emmett – the traitor – and Ben – of course – joined in. Michael didn’t look pleased, though. In fact, he seemed downright pissed.

Ted reached over and covered Michael’s hand with his, “They won’t last,” he assured

the man he loved and would never have. “No way they’ll last. Brian and commitment don’t fit. Two months, tops. Then Justin will be done with him.”

To Ted’s utter surprise, Michael didn’t look comforted. Instead, he pulled his hand away and glared. “That’s a shitty thing to say, Ted.”

It had been a shitty thing to say. But Ted had expected Michael to agree, not call him on it. And now the others were staring at him, too, looking at him as if he were an extremely nasty bug crawling over their meals.

Great.

Ted tried an embarrassed smile. “I was making a joke, okay.”

It was a lie. He hadn’t wanted to make a joke, but facing the disapproval of the people who were his only friends on this planet was more than he could take. So he decided lying was okay.

Emmett looked him through narrowed eyes and Ted almost crumbled, but he forced himself to hold his best friend’s gaze. After a moment, Emmett turned away. Ted had no idea if his friend had bought the act or not, but he seemed okay – at least for the moment.

Ted turned to his other friends and only now realised that Debbie had left their table, busy again with other customers, while Ben and Michael were engaged in a heavy lip lock.

Ted quickly turned away.

Maybe it made him a bad friend, but watching Michael and Ben in their newfound happiness was more than he could bear.

He was almost startled when he felt a hand cover his underneath the table.

And he knew that despite everything, Emmett understood. It didn’t make the situation less awful, but it made everything a little less gut wrenching. It wasn’t much, but it was something.

++++++

Justin woke with a start.

When he opened his eyes he wasn’t quite sure where he was or what had woken him. A nightmare? He couldn’t remember having one. But his heart was racing in his chest and his breath was coming in short gasps as if he’d just run a mile in record time. And all that while lying down and waking up from sleep.

It was a strange sensation.

Justin had never been prone to nightmares, so waking up like this was something of a novelty to him. As his heart began to slow down, he raised his head and in looking around he saw Brian next to him, eyes closed, breathing deeply and steadily. His long lashes were painting slight shadows on his cheeks and he looked relaxed and was there a little smile playing around his lips?

Justin found himself smiling in response. He hoped Brian was dreaming good dreams, preferably of them together. There had been enough pain in Brian's life and Justin vowed he'd make sure there would be good times in the future. He also knew, though, that he wouldn't be able prevent bad things from happening.

Brian's mother was still a bitch, there was his own divorce to get through, his father whom he would try to avoid but who would undoubtedly butt in – and then there was someone out there who was trying to hurt Brian, or maybe even worse.

Justin closed his eyes for a moment, refusing to think that someone – anyone – would try to kill Brian. The idea of Brian's light extinguished was too painful to contemplate. A life without him, especially now that they finally had a chance to have something beautiful together – no, Justin refused to even think about it.

The problem was, however, that he had no idea how to protect Brian.

Sure, he could stick to Brian, but knowing his lover, Brian would never accept that, would get annoyed, probably even pissed at the unwanted protection. Brian Kinney was a proud man, a man who had always relied on himself before anyone else. He had learned to trust people despite the despicable behavior of his parents which was a fucking miracle, and had let Debbie, Michael and Justin in his life, had opened his heart to them and risked getting hurt even more.

He was not only a proud, but a brave man.

He was the man Justin loved.

"Be careful or it'll leave wrinkles."

Justin smiled and opened his eyes again, finally meeting those of his lover.

His lover.

It was such an exhilarating thought, Justin reached out and framed Brian's face with both of his hands, and Brian frowned a little in response.

"Something wrong?" Brian asked.

“No.” Justin shook his head, blinking a few times to keep threatening tears at bay. “Everything’s just fine. I ... have a hard time taking all in, though.”

“Are you talking about my ethereal beauty?” Brian asked, grinning a bit. “Because, you know, I can live with that.”

But Justin didn’t grin. “You are beautiful,” he said instead, holding Brian’s eyes with his own. “All about you is. Not just your body. Which is ... exquisite, no doubt about it.” But there was so much more to Brian. His face, his eyes, and – more than anything else – the parts nobody could see. They were not easy to see, and even harder to reach. Brian kept them hidden, well protected under layers of bravado, cynicism and the image of a sexual predator that fit only partially.

Yes, Brian was a predator, and yes, he liked to stake out his turf, to find a prey and to hunt it down. However, and Justin was sure of it, even though it was part of what made Brian the man he was, it had a lot to do with an image Brian had created early on. That of an untouchable, unattainable being, someone you couldn’t hurt no matter what.

It was a ton of bullshit, and Justin had seen through it almost from the beginning. At first he’d been disgusted but very soon he had realised that it had nothing to do with who Brian really was. And it was then that he’d decided to be Brian’s friend, to ignore his father’s sometimes acid comments – to stick to what Justin had realised could become the most important friendship of his life.

That it would become so much more one day – well, he had not counted on that but life was unpredictable and it had brought him here, lying in bed, right next to this man so many had touched on the surface – and so few would ever know.

And who was actually blushing in embarrassment at Justin’s remark.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Brian said. He gave Justin a little half smile. “I’m nothing special.”

“Yes, you are,” Justin insisted. He would never grow tired of telling Brian these things. “To me you are.”

Brian sighed. “Okay, if you think so. But you are deluded.”

Realising that Brian wasn’t ready for any kind of serious talk, Justin forced a grin of his own. “Well, your cock is a thing of beauty.”

Brian laughed. “So true. Someone once told me he’d like to have it bronzed.”

“Jeez.” Justin rolled his eyes, then gasped when Brian’s hand found his dick under the covers.

"I'd like to bronze this," Brian said and disappeared from view. Which was a good thing.

Oh yes.

A very good thing ... iiiii-nnn-deed.

Jesus God.

"M-maybe," Justin managed. "They should bronze your mouth instead."

His response was an unintelligible rumble from beneath the covers.

Which was also a very good thing.

Because it meant that Brian kept his lips and mouth where they were. In fact, he tightened his lips and Justin shot ...

... with a shout ...

... right into heaven.

+

It took a while until Justin reached consciousness again. And when he opened his eyes this time, Brian was looking down on him, actually chuckling when he realised that Justin was finally awake.

"You know," Brian said with a twinkle in his eyes, "we really need to work on your endurance."

Feeling thoroughly relaxed, Justin yawned before he said, "You should take it as proof of your master- ship. Nobody can resist you for long."

"That too," Brian agreed.

It was then Justin noticed that Brian wasn't naked anymore. He was wearing a shirt, still unbuttoned and as Justin let his eyes wander down, he saw Brian was also wearing jeans.

"Why are you dressed?"

"Because we can't spend the whole day in bed," Brian replied. "There's also the teensy little fact that I work for a living and after what some asshole did to my apartment, I'll need every cent to replace what was destroyed."

"What about insurance?"

Brian rolled his lips. “Nope. Never got around to it.” He shrugged, trying to pretend that it didn’t matter to him. “Besides, this way I can do lots of shopping.”

Justin reached out and touched Brian’s arm. He was glad that Brian didn’t pull away. “We could do the shopping together. But more than anything, we need to find out who did it. It could be the same guy who attacked you before. Twice, I want to point out.”

It was Justin’s greatest fear. What if the guy got lucky next time? What if he lost Brian? The thought was even more frightening than the idea of losing Daphne because he had fucked up her life.

“Don’t be a drama queen,” Brian said, trying to pull away, but Justin didn’t let him. Brian sighed. “Look, I know there’s probably someone who wants to do some damage, but he had the opportunity to off me twice and didn’t do it. So it’s pretty safe to say that he doesn’t actually want to kill me.”

“And that’s supposed to help us – how exactly?” Justin blinked because, damn, there were tears in his eyes. Shit, he was such a baby sometimes. “Fuck,” he muttered.

“Justin,” Brian’s voice was almost harsh and Justin’s eyes were instantly dry again. “Stop it. That’s what they want. Whoever did that, they want for us to be scared, to be shaking in our boots. But we won’t. I refuse to let my life be ruled by fear and an asshole who can’t accept that some people are different than others.” He reached out with his free hand, grabbed Justin’s shoulder and shook it slightly. “Do you understand that?”

Justin nodded, torn between the fear that was still churning in his gut and the almost crackling heat he felt at Brian’s fierce look and the tension in his body. God, how he loved this man. Brian was so beautiful and so brave and –

Without thinking twice, Justin sat up and kissed him. Hard.

Brian’s mouth opened instantly in response, pulling Justin to him, both of them trying to get closer, to achieve as much body contact as possible. It was harsh and tender at the same time, this attempt to crawl beneath each other’s skin, into each other’s bodies. It was pulling and groping and holding and pushing ...

And above everything was a desire so strong, it made Justin burn. It was scorching hot, and Justin felt his toes curl, felt his hair stand up, felt himself moving onto Brian’s lap.

He had never felt anything like this.

Not with Daphne.

Not with any other man – or woman.

Not ever.

Brian pulled him even closer, and Justin reached between them, fumbling with the buttons on Brian's jeans, then – because it took too long – ripping them open with a vicious motion and a snarl that made Brian laugh in his mouth.

"You are one ferocious beast, aren't you?" Brian whispered.

But Justin couldn't respond. All he could think was yes, I am. And you're mine. Mine. Mine.

It was like a chant in his head, like a mantra, and at that very moment he knew that if anyone ever tried to hurt Brian again, he would rip them apart, destroy them without remorse, without caring.

"Condom," Brian said, but Justin snarled again.

"Fuck the condom," he ground out and then he was on Brian, and Brian was in him and they were in each other, getting closer even, becoming one.

Justin held Brian's thighs between his, held Brian's shoulders in a firm grip and he could see Brian's surrender as he gave himself to Justin, let Justin have him, in this wild ride, this claiming and possessing that was brutal and sweet at the same time

Justin knew that it was part fear that was fuelling his actions, but it was love, too. It was also desire and yearning as he rose and fell slamming Brian into himself, clenching around him, creating a friction and fire he hadn't known existed. Not even in his wildest dreams had Justin imagined anything could feel like this. It was all consuming, all encompassing.

And then he was coming and Brian was, too, and he felt his insides being flooded and coated and he loved it. Wanted it.

Someone was shouting something but Justin didn't understand, didn't care. He was flying so high, everything else was fading to black until he was falling into the abyss.

His last thought was that if death felt like this, he'd welcome it any time.

++++++

Daniel Corrigan stank of sweat, sex and cheap booze, but he wasn't drunk. He was a big, broad and thick necked, and he was tall, probably six-two or three and if it weren't for his mean, little eyes he would have been an impressive man. Because of those pig-like eyes Carl dismissed him as the bully he undoubtedly was, and stared down at him, and the snake tattoo that was clearly visible above the dirty wife-beater the man wore.

"I didna off no queer," Corrigan declared, his voice a dark rumble in his broad chest.

"I never said you did," Carl replied, sitting across the man on the other side of the table in their interrogation room, trying his best to appear relaxed. Next to him, Officer Rachel Lieberman leaned her elbows on the surface. She was a thirty-something woman with dark hair and equally dark eyes and the sweetest face Carl had ever met on the force. But behind that façade slept the soul of a tigress. And one of the best police officers Carl had ever worked with.

"The term is 'gay'," she said mildly, but firmly.

"Fuck terms," Corrigan snarled. "They're unnatural. Cocksuckers. All they want is to suck our cocks."

Carl cocked his head. "Your cock?" he asked. He knew it sounded a little dense, but he could hardly believe what he was hearing. He had met homophobes during his time with the force, hell he was working with some of them, but this ... it was a kind of delusion that was rare. Or wasn't it?

"Sure," Corrigan spat. "Have you ever been to a locker room with a queer? The way they're looking at you? It's disgusting."

Maybe Corrigan was only saying what other straight men were thinking. Carl liked to believe that he'd never been a homophobe. Sure, thinking about two men actually doing it weirded him out a little bit, and okay, he'd made a joke now and then, but the idea of being cruel or insulting to any gay man had never really crossed his mind. Carl kept his distance and that was that.

But now he was wondering if maybe it was one of the reasons some straight men were downright disgusted by the idea of a gay man being around them.

"So," Officer Lieberman's voice was smooth. "Did any of those *gay* men ever take liberties with your person?"

Corrigan stared at her dumbly. "What?"

"She wants to know if any cocksucker sucked yours," Carl said and Corrigan actually recoiled.

"No," he snarled. "Didna let them near mine." Almost as if trying to make that very clear, Corrigan's hands went to his own lap, covering whatever was hidden underneath the camy pants the man was wearing.

Sweet. Just sweet. Carl exchanged a look with Officer Lieberman and she shook her head, obviously thinking along the same lines. This man had attacked Brian Kinney but no way had it been his own idea. Daniel Corrigan did look tough, sure, but he was no

brainiac.

Carl was done tiptoeing around the subject. He picked up his notebook and, turning a few pages, gave Corrigan a look over the top. "Let's get to business, Danny-Boy."

"I'm no Danny-Boy for you." Corrigan glared and Officer Lieberman was suppressing a laugh.

"Alright, Mr. Corrigan," Carl said. "Why did you attack Brian Kinney on the..." He trailed off, turned some more pages in his notebook and rattled off the dates. He didn't need to look them up, they were ingrained in his head, but it didn't pay to let any suspect know that a case was special.

"Kinney some faggot?" Corrigan asked.

"Don't play dumb with us," Lieberman warned. "We already know that you beat the man up. We have a witness who connects you with at least one attack against Brian Kinney. What we want to know is who hired you to beat up the man."

"Dunno what you're talking about." Corrigan wasn't just an idiot, he was good at playing one too. Which left the question if he really was as stupid as Carl had assumed. Corrigan looked around, "Can I smoke?"

"No, sorry, we have a non-smoking policy around here," Lieberman replied smoothly. It was clear that she disliked Corrigan immensely, but she was still as polite as they came. No way would they give Corrigan a reason to accuse them of anything.

"Look, Corrigan," Carl let his annoyance show a little bit. "We want the man behind the whole thing. I can't promise you anything, but I'm sure the DA will be open for a deal."

Corrigan shrugged and pretended not to be interested, but Carl saw something flicker in the man's eyes.

"If this is a hate crime, you'll go to jail for at least ten years," he said and Corrigan tensed.

"I'm not going to jail for no ten years."

"Sure you will," Liebermann smiled like a shark. "And they'll love you there. They'll even love you naked."

"You bitch." Corrigan shot up from his chair and was half way over the table before two uniformed cops stormed into the interrogation room and forced him back into his chair.

"That was a mistake," Carl said and smiled, too, because, really, he felt like smiling. The man **was** stupid and he let them play him like a well tuned fiddle. "Cuff him," he

ordered the men in uniform and they did, even though Corrigan struggled against any kind of restriction.

“A very big mistake,” Lieberman agreed. “Attempted attack against a police officer. I’m sure they’ll add one or two years to your verdict.” She tsk-ed and Corrigan blanched.

“You goaded me into it,” he said. “It’s your fault.”

Lieberman smiled her shark-smile. “And who do you think they’ll believe? Someone who has fun beating up people just because they’re a little different or a law abiding, half-way good looking police officer, whose sole purpose is to protect innocent people from the likes of you?”

“Why don’t you just tell us who hired you,” Carl said. “It could be the difference between five or ten years. Or maybe even no jail time at all.” Which was likely, as the DA usually insisted that prosecuting low-lives like Corrigan didn’t make sense. It probably didn’t get him any screen time either, Carl thought. He wasn’t very fond of the DA, they had butted heads on more than one occasion. Carl thought that David O’Leary was a pompous ass and Carl didn’t want to know what O’Leary thought of him.

Corrigan leaned over as much as his hands, which were cuffed to the chair, would allow it. “You give me that one in writing,” he said clearly and with eyes that were sober and far from stupid, “and you got yourself a deal. It’s not as if the guy paid me anyway.” He sank back onto his chair and looked at Carl.

Carl looked right back.

And wondered who had played who today.

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The incessant ringing of Justin’s phone woke Brian, and his first sensation was that he was bound to the bed, unable to move. The reason he was bound to the bed was the heavy weight lying across his body, that, at closer inspection, turned out to be the body of one Justin Taylor. His blond head was pressing down on Brian’s right shoulder and his arms were lying on both sides of Brian’s torso, as if making sure that Brian wouldn’t move while Justin slept.

Brian felt a smile creep up his face and his heart gave a tiny bump, making him wonder about his own sanity. God, he was turning into a sappy fool.

And he didn’t give a flying fuck.

He wasn’t quite ready to admit it to himself, but he was almost certain that his current state was as close to happiness as he’d ever come. And the reason for all this was the blond man sleeping so soundly, his face almost childlike in the dim light of the room. It

was a frightening and – at the same time – an exhilarating thought.

Brian knew he was putting a lot of faith in Justin but ... and that was just as scary... he had no will to resist that smile, those eyes and the sincerity in them when Justin told him he loved him and that together they could be something better, something special, and a lot more than they were on their own.

It was too tempting to ignore, even for someone as cynical and jaded as Brian, who, until Justin came into his life, has been certain that love was for fools and that all the emotional bullshit Mikey and Emmett spouted was just that – bullshit. And now, look where he was.

He shook his head and tried to shift his body but Justin mumbled an unintelligible protest, so Brian kept still tangling his right hand in the soft hair in Justin's nape, stroking and soothing and Justin smacked his lips and sighed.

If anyone would have told him that he'd relish just lying here, having Justin close to him – that this most simple form of happiness made his heart beat faster and had him battling tears – he would have sent them to the white house with the men in white coats and the padded cells.

He was in love with Justin Taylor – and in a move he hadn't even noticed, Brian's world had rocked into its axis once and for all. All the earthquakes, the shakes and the tornados seemed forgotten – lost in a sea of tranquillity that didn't seem part of him only a few weeks ago.

Okay, maybe he was getting ahead of himself here.

Justin's face might look angelic right now, but Brian knew that behind those blue eyes, hidden beneath that wide, sunny smile slept a volcano. Brian also knew that this volcano could erupt quite spectacularly, and that being in the close vicinity of this eruption could leave scorch marks that needed time to heal.

Strangely enough, however, Brian wasn't afraid to get scorched. He was actually looking forward to it. This energy, this power he felt radiating beneath the surface when he looked at Justin was part of what had drawn him to the blond, what would make living with Justin exciting and certainly, never boring.

"Mmmm," Justin mumbled and smacked his lips and Brian pulled his hand away. "No," Justin protested sleepily. "I was enjoying myself."

"You were?" Brian once again started stroking. "Does that mean you're a pussycat? Will you start purring any time soon?"

"Maybe." Brian could feel the smile on Justin's lips on his chest. "But I'd be a tiger, not a pussycat."

“A tiger.” Brian pretended to contemplate the idea, then shook his head. “Nope. A mountain lion – maybe. Stripes aren’t your style.”

Justin chuckled and raised his head, resting his forearms on Brian’s chest. “How long have you been awake?”

“A few minutes,” Brian said, not sure if he was lying. It wasn’t important anyway. Time had lost its meaning while he’d been lying here, just being with Justin – just being, really.

“I feel all fucked out,” Justin admitted on a chuckle and Brian laughed with him. It was so odd, so strange, to just be. And to just enjoy the moment. Sure, he’d enjoyed moments, fucking nameless men, lots of them, but this was so very different – and so very much better. It was ridiculous, but Brian felt like crying. In a good way.

Which was a first for him.

Damn.

“Hey.” Justin’s voice was soft, as were his fingers on Brian’s face. “What’s wrong?”

Brian shook his head, not sure he could put it into words. But then he pushed them out, making himself open and vulnerable, and not giving a damn. “I love you,” he whispered. “I’ve loved you for a long time.”

Justin’s eyes widened, and his mouth opened in a silent ‘o’. Then he swallowed. “How ... long?”

Brian drew a shaky breath. “Long,” was all he was ready to admit. “But I tucked it away. Something never going to happen. You were ... well, I thought you were straight. You read straight to me. Seems even I can be wrong at times.”

“Which is a good thing,” Justin said. “I’d hate for you to be perfect. Because if you were perfect, I’m not sure this would work.”

Brian smiled and raised his head a little to kiss Justin when suddenly his cell phone rang.

He blinked. As did Justin. They had been so focussed on each other, the intrusion of this unwelcome noise had taken both of them by surprise.

Justin shifted, so Brian could move and he rolled over to fish his cell phone from the back pocket of his jeans. “Yeah?” he said, his voice rough.

“Brian?”

The voice was female and sounded very distressed, and Brian needed a moment to realise it was his sister. "Claire? Holy shit – what's wrong?"

Justin was sitting up in bed, looking at him intently, then reached out and took Brian's hand in a silent gesture of love and support.

"Brian ... h-he took the kids. H-he came and t-took my ba-bies."

His sister's voice hard to understand, she was crying hard and her nose sounded stuffed. "What?," Brian asked. "Who took the kids?"

"F-f-frank." Claire burst into tears once again at the other end of the line. "H-he came while I was out. Grocery shopping. And he just took them."

"Aw, fuck," Brian muttered, knowing that his moment of peace was over. He instantly felt guilty for thinking it, but dismissed it firmly to focus on the problem at hand. "Did you call the police, Claire?"

"I ... no," she admitted on a whisper.

"Why on earth not?" Brian already had a strong suspicion what the answer would be, but he told himself not to assume.

Of course, Claire's next words told him that he'd been right. Not really a surprise.

"I ... I called M-mom, and she said not to involve the police. I-he is f-family after all."

"Fuck Mom," Brian snarled, ignoring the gasp that came from the other end. "Call the police and call them now."

"But Brian, Frank has custody of the boys, just like me. He's their father."

"So?" Brian tried to pull his hand away from Justin, too agitated to accept comfort, but Justin didn't let him. He held fast, and Brian gave up, accepting the warmth and the closeness. "Then call Detective Horvath. He'll know what to do. He gave you the address after all."

Claire sighed heavily, but then said. "Okay. I will." A pause. "Brian – do you think Mom is a little confused?"

Brian closed his eyes. He did not want to talk about his mother. Not ever again. "Why?"

"I know we talked about it before, but she sounded strange. And she was reciting the Bible to me. I think ... maybe, she is not sane anymore."

It was a distinct possibility, Brian thought. And it would be far more comforting than the alternative, which was that Joan Kinney had decided that there were things more important than her own children. But the cynic in him told him otherwise. His mother wasn't insane. She was just mean.

"Claire, can you tell me where you are? I know you're not supposed to tell the address but I'd like to come over, if you want."

"Oh – you would? That would be wonderful." She gave him the address.

Brian looked at Justin and when the blond nodded, he said, "I won't be coming alone. Justin'll be with me. Is that going to be a problem?"

There was a short hesitation, before his sister replied, "No. No problem. If he loves you, I'll be glad to meet him."

Brian smiled – right into Justin's bright blue eyes. "He loves me," he said and Justin smiled back. "He loves me very much."

"Good. I'll call Horvath and then wait for you, okay?"

"We'll be over in thirty minutes. Or forty – we both need a shower."

Claire laughed even though it sounded shaky. "Brian," she chided, but it was gentle.

Brian hung up and looked at Justin. "Frank is an asshole. Do you really want to get involved into this whole mess?"

"No," Justin replied and for a moment Brian's gut clenched.. "But I'm your partner. What concerns you concerns me," Justin then continued and Brian relaxed again. As much as he could relax, that is, given the fact that Frank, the asshole, had taken Claire's kids.

"Okay, then," Brian sighed. He hated that he had to do this, that they had to rejoin the real world, but maybe it was good that way. Living in a cocoon wasn't what life was about. "Let's get up, shower and get dressed."

Justin nodded, then leaned forward and kissed Brian, softly, sweetly. He smiled when he pulled back. "I love you, too. And you're a good brother."

Brian had to smile at that. "No, I'm not – yet, anyway. But I'm working on it." He patted Justin's very fine ass. "Up with you."

Justin did just that and Brian watched him walk to the tiny hotel bathroom. Then he got up as well and joined his lover – partner – in the shower.

Daphne liked spending time with Paul Webber. He was smart and funny and he was trying to make her laugh, and best of all, he made her forget about Justin and the mess her life was right now. She knew it was selfish, the way she was using him, but she'd told him how she felt and he'd been cool with it, which kept her guilt at bay quite nicely. That didn't mean, however, that she'd missed the glances he gave her from time to time, or the way he was looking at her when he thought she wasn't paying attention.

The truth was, Paul Webber, a boy barely out of high school, had the hots for her.

Okay, maybe calling him a boy was exaggerating things a little. He was twenty-one years old – he liked to remind her of that – and on his way to become a dancer. But he was still four years her junior and apart from that, with his wonderful, loving family always backing him up, he lacked experiences that had shaped Daphne and made her the cynic she was today.

Thanks to Justin she was even more jaded now. With a baby on the way by a man who had recently discovered he was gay, she was hardly the woman who could be a partner for someone like Paul Webber.

And – OH GOD – what the fuck was she thinking anyway?

Had she completely lost her mind?

A partner for Paul Webber? She wasn't even divorced yet. And hadn't she just told herself that she and Paul could never be an item?

It was official – she was going insane.

"Hey," Paul's voice, soft and concerned, intruded in her insanity. "No worrying allowed today."

"I'm not worrying," she lied. No way she was telling Paul what was going through her mind.

He gave her one of his knowing looks, clearly something he had learned from his mother, but wisely kept from saying anything. "How's junior today?" he asked instead, smoothly changing the subject.

Daphne's hand moved to her belly out of its own accord, and she smiled. "Fine, thanks." It was an almost automatic response. Her baby was fine. She was sure of it. Ever since she'd felt it move for the first time a few days ago she woke every morning, stroking her belly and talking to her baby. And then she would cry because Justin wasn't there to share it. And feel guilty because she hadn't even told him yet.

"There you go with the worry lines again," Paul said and smiled at the same time to soften his words. "Heavy thoughts today?"

She sighed, and hated that it sounded heavy and hopeless. God, she was pathetic. “I wanted to tell Justin that I felt the baby move,” she told Paul.

“And why didn’t you?”

She shrugged, feeling even more pathetic. “I haven’t seen him for three days,” she admitted, pressing her lips together to keep a sob from escaping. She would not cry. Not here. Not in front of Paul.

“I’m sorry.” His voice was quiet. Then he shook his head. “I know you don’t want me to say this, but I’d like to punch him the face.”

Daphne laughed at that, not sure what to say. A part of her was disgusted by the mere idea of violence, but there was a twisted part inside of her that wanted to cheer Paul on. The same part wanted to see Justin beaten down and bleeding, lying on the floor feeling just as pathetic as she did.

Of course, her disgusted part won out. “Don’t say such a thing,” she chided Paul. “It’s not funny.”

He grinned at her, looking barely eighteen. “But it made you laugh.”

She couldn’t deny it. She didn’t want to, either. The little devil inside of her snickered. “Okay, it did make me laugh. But it’s still a horrible thing to say. Violence can never be a solution.”

He sighed. “You talk like my mother.”

Daphne grimaced. She liked Paul’s mother a lot, but being compared to her was hardly flattering. Not when she’d actually had thoughts about herself and Paul being ... okay, not going there.

“I’m not your mother,” Daphne replied more forcefully than necessary.

Definitely not going there, damn it.

“But I’m a sensible person. And about to become a mother.” So, there. That would put things into perspective. She was having a baby. There was no time for any lusty thoughts. Mothers didn’t have lusty thoughts.

Any maybe if she told herself that ten more times, she – and her body – would finally believe it.

“Thank God you’re not my mother.” Paul gave her another of those irresistible grins. Daphne had to look away for a moment. Looking at that grin for too long wasn’t helping

at all. "I love my Mom, don't get me wrong, but I'm too old to have her around all the time."

Daphne laughed. Shit. This man – boy, think of him as a boy, she told herself – was just what she needed. The last man who made her laugh that way had been Justin. But now thinking of Justin only made her want to cry – or scream, depending on how depressed she was.

Daphne took a deep breath. "So, where are you taking me?" Paul had called her this morning, inviting her for a very slow walk – his words, and they had made her laugh for the first time today – and a surprise. Daphne had wanted to say no, but, of course, Paul hadn't taken no for an answer, and here she was, slowly walking – or in Paul's case limping – along the river.

Paul looked at her with a smile. "I told you it was a surprise."

She rolled her eyes, grinning despite herself. "I can't see anything surprising here. There's water, and nature, and – hey, more water."

Paul laughed. "No, actually, we're almost there."

"There?" Daphne looked around. It was nice down here, at the river, but apart from that – nothing was here.

"Yup." Paul pointed at the bridge.

Daphne stared at him, trying to decide if he had gone insane. After all, he had a broken leg and was probably on pain killers, maybe he was getting deluded. "A bridge?" she shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I've seen bridges before. They're really nothing special. Cars drive over it, or in some cases trains."

Paul rolled his eyes. "God, you are so jaded. Lighten up a little. Besides, this bridge is special. Just another moment, and then you'll see."

She decided to humor him for a little more, and then they were at the bridge and she didn't have to humor him anymore because she was stunned speechless.

"Now – do you like it?" Paul turned and looked at her with bright eyes.

There in a spot, just where the sun was kissing the earth, sheltered from the wind someone had set out everything for a picnic.

Daphne glanced at Paul, who was grinning like the proverbial idiot, then walked closer, taking in the yellow blanket, the cushions, the food, and there was even a music player waiting to be used.

“Oh my God,” Daphne whispered, “you **are** insane.”

“Yes,” Paul replied, limping to her side. He was laughing. “I know. And isn’t it just wonderful?”

Daphne turned around and looked at him, his sparkling eyes, his laughing mouth – and without thinking, leaned over and kissed him.

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Ben rolled away from Michael, breathing hard, sweat on his face and on his back. His body felt very thoroughly satisfied and ready to go back to sleep, while his mind was on overdrive. It wasn’t really surprising, given all the things going on in his life right now. And yet, years ago he would have simply gone back to sleep anyway.

Was it a sign of getting old?

He inwardly shook his head over his own stupidity – because, really, getting old was a fact of life, not something you could choose. Days, weeks, months, and yes, years went on, mercilessly. You could either deal with it, or, like some sad cases, try to hold up time by suffering through surgery or other even less tempting possibilities.

“Hey.” Michael’s voice was soft, a little rough and holding a trace of concern, as he sat up and looked down on Ben. “Is something wrong?”

Ben shook his head, not quite sure why he felt so maudlin this morning. Or why his mind refused to shut down. “No,” he croaked. “I’m okay.”

“You don’t look okay,” Michael said and frowned. “It can’t be the sex,” he then stated. “Because, wow, that was great.”

Ben couldn’t help but laugh at that. “It was great,” he confirmed, and Michael’s frown faded. Ben reached out, pulled Michael down and kissed him soundly, then let him go again. “I can’t really tell you why I feel so restless today. Maybe it’s all the excitement of the past weeks. The attacks on Brian, some trouble with the agency. And, of course, I met you. Which is great,” he hastened to say. And it was great. Phenomenal even. Ben could actually imagine a future with Michael Novotny.

But could Michael imagine a future with him? Or was he still hung up on the idea of him and Brian becoming a couple some time in the future? And was that the reason for his own restlessness? Was he so unsure of himself – of their relationship?

“That doesn’t sound really convincing.” The frown was back on Michael’s face. He laughed self-consciously, “I mean ... you mention the attacks on Brian and then – me.”

“No,” Ben hastened to say. “No,” he repeated. He sat up and looked at Michael.

“Meeting you was – perfect. Is perfect,” he amended. He didn’t want Michael to have any doubts. “I want us to have a future. A real future.”

“You do?” Michael smiled. “Me too.”

Ben had hoped for agreement. He hadn’t expected it so quickly. But he felt a big smile spread over his face. “When Brian told me you’d be perfect for me, I didn’t believe him. But Brian is a smart guy – I should have known he was right.”

To Ben’s surprise Michael grimaced. “Brian can be smart, but he can be incredibly dumb sometimes.”

“Meaning?” Ben was curious what this was about. He’d thought that in Michael’s eyes Brian could be nothing but perfect.

Michael shrugged. “Nothing in particular. But Brian is messed up. My Mom once said he was unable to love. That he pushes people away, trying to protect himself. And I can understand that, but it’s also stupid. No risk no fun, you know. That’s my motto.”

Ben smiled a little. It sounded good. But was it true? Was that really how his lover saw Brian Kinney? “Michael?”

“Yes?”

Ben took a deep breath. It was now or never. “Are you in love with Brian?”

“What?” Michael sat very still, his eyes huge. “How can you ask me that after what we just did?”

“It’s been bothering me. I don’t know a lot about your ... friendship. But I know it’s special. And then I heard your friends mention Brian – and how you...” he trailed off, not sure how to put it into words. “Ted said that you are still waiting for Brian to fuck you.” Ben had to close his eyes for a moment. It was so hard to say it, so hard to voice his greatest fear.

“That’s complete bullshit.”

Ben’s eyes snapped open. Michael was staring at him, his cheeks pale with red spots.

“Is it?” Ben asked, needing to know it. He realised now that it was this question, or rather the answer to it that had made him so restless.

“Yes,” Michael hissed. “It’s bullshit. Yeah, okay, I was sort of hung up on him. But I’m not waiting for him to fuck me. I ... wanted him to love me, fall in love with me. But it’s not going to happen. I know that.” Michael blinked and Ben saw that there were tears in his eyes. “I met him when we were both fourteen years old. And I was infatuated with

him, was dreaming of a future together. But at one point everyone has to grow up.” He shook his head, angrily wiping the tears away. “Besides – he has Justin now.”

“Still – it bothers you,” Ben said. A part of him wished he had never touched the subject, but the other part knew that without facing his greatest fear, there was no way he could move on and be happy with a man he cared deeply about – maybe already loved.

“No,” Michael replied, but at the same time he nodded his head, yes. Then he sighed, “Maybe. It’s strange. I had this fantasy, you know. This little boy fantasy that he and I would fuck and then fall madly in love. And then maybe grow old together. But as I said before, everyone had to grow up at some point.”

Ben looked at him for a long moment. “And did you,” he then asked, “grow up?”

Michael gave him a sheepish smile. “I guess I’m still a work in progress. But you have to understand something.” He paused and his face grew serious. “Brian and I are friends. Best friends. When he needs me, I’m there. It has got nothing to do with unrequited love or lust. It’s friendship – a concept only few understand.” He smiled again, “Even my mother has problems with the concept. She still thinks I’m pining after Brian.”

Again Ben took his time to study Michael’s face. It was a boy-next-door face, nothing special, really. But to him it held hopes and dreams – and maybe serious heartbreak. And he’d had enough heartbreak in his life already, thank you very much. So he had to be sure, or as sure as one could be.

“What about you?”

Ben blinked. “What?”

Michael cocked his head. “Are you attracted to Brian?”

Ben blinked again. Where on earth had that come from. “What kind of question is that?” And what the hell was he going to say? He could hardly tell his lover that he and Brian had spent a remarkable weekend and that in all honesty Brian had been the best fuck of his life. Wow, that would go over well.

“It’s an honest question.” Michael’s gaze was steady. “You’re working with Brian. And he is sex on legs. Don’t even try to deny it. I’ve never met a gay man in my life who didn’t want to get in his pants. And thinking about it – there were some straight guys, too.”

“I don’t want to have sex with Brian,” Ben replied and it was the truth. Okay, yes, he was leaving out the most important part, but it was still true. He didn’t want to have sex with Brian. He was over that phase.

Michael narrowed his eyes.

Ben squirmed.

And Michael's eyes widened.

"Oh my God!" Michael exclaimed. "Oh fuck."

"What?" And that was stupid, because Michael knew. He might be a boy-next-door type, but he wasn't stupid. And also very, very perceptive.

"You fucked him," Michael said, and jumped up from the bed. In all his naked glory he stood, hands on his hips and glared. "You already fucked Brian."

"Yeah." There was no reason to deny it. "But it's been years ago."

"Years ago, schmears ago," Michael quipped. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"When exactly would have been a good time?" Ben asked, feeling his heart grow tight in his chest. Michael could say all he wanted, he could even believe his feelings for Brian were nothing but infatuation, but Ben knew better.

At least he thought he did.

He wasn't an expert when it came to human emotions, so maybe he had to give Michael some credit. But right now, right this moment, Ben couldn't shake off the feeling that if he wanted to have a future with Michael Novotny, he would have to live with Michael's unresolved issues – most of them connected to Brian Kinney and the fact that Michael's best friend had never fucked him.

The fact that he had fucked Brian surely gave the whole mess another spin – and made everything a lot more complicated.

Ben tried to imagine how he would feel were he in Michael's place. What if he had a fantasy, an unrequited love, something he had wanted for more than ten years of his life – and knew he'd never have. Would he be able to just lay it to rest and not think about it again? Would anyone?

Would he be free to love someone else?

"This isn't about a time," Michael said and Ben forced himself back to the present, namely a naked Michael standing in front of him. "This is about telling the truth."

"What truth?" Ben didn't like being accused of lying. "It wasn't as if we ever discussed past fucks. It's bad etiquette anyway." He reached out for Michael, but his lover moved out of reach. Ben sighed.

“But this isn’t just some random past fuck, Ben. You knew that Brian and I were best friends.”

“All the more reason not to bring it up. Michael, this has nothing to do with the friendship between you and Brian.”

“See, that’s where you’re wrong.” Michael stuck out his lower lip in a stubborn pout. “This friendship between Brian and me is special. We talk about things. We tell each other everything.”

Ben hated to state the obvious, but it couldn’t be avoided. “And yet he decided not to tell you about us.”

Michael’s cheeks turned red. Ben wasn’t sure if it was from embarrassment or from anger – probably a combination of both. “But you should have told me. You claim you want a future with me. But you’re keeping things from me. Important stuff. I’m not a child, Ben.”

Ben closed his eyes, not knowing what to say. He was afraid Michael would never understand. “Michael, for me ... Brian and I – it was one weekend. We were both younger and didn’t know each other at all. It was at a White Party and it was insane. But it is over. Done. I don’t feel the slightest urge to do it again.” He paused, before he added, “But that’s not really the problem here, is it. It’s that I had him while you never will.”

Michael jerked away as if Ben had slapped him and for a moment Ben wished he could take the words back. But only for a moment, because he also knew that they had to be said.

“You know,” Michael said while collecting his clothes and pulling them on with angry movements. “I thought you were a really smart guy, but you aren’t. You’re just like my mother. She also thinks that it’s all about getting the fuck of my life.” He pulled his shirt over his head, then slipped into his shoes, not bothering with socks. Then he looked hard at Ben. “So maybe it’s for the best if we don’t see each other for a while.”

“Michael-“ Ben tried but his lover held up a hand.

“I don’t want to hear it. I tried to tell you but you didn’t listen. Brian is my friend. It’s not about fucking him. But we are real close. And maybe it’s hard to understand for someone who doesn’t have a friend like that. It’s kind of sad, really. But I’m not going to apologize for being close to people.” He turned to the door, then stopped. Keeping his back to Ben, he added, “Take some time to think about it. And if you can live with it, call me.” He took a deep breath and when he went on, Ben could hear that Michael’s voice was choked. “If you can’t,” he gave a helpless little shrug that made Ben’s heart clench, “then it’s maybe better that we didn’t even start on that future you were talking about.”

Ben wanted to say something smart, but it was obvious that Michael was right. He wasn't smart. He was nothing but an idiot.

He watched Michael leave. And he had no idea how to get him back.

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"This is really nice."

"Yeah," Paul replied, not quite sure what exactly Daphne was saying. He couldn't take his eyes off of her, his attention captured completely by her profile that was set off perfectly by the sun coming from the side. He knew it was stupid, knew that the quick kiss meant nothing - in fact Daphne had been terribly embarrassed after their lips parted - but he couldn't help himself. He couldn't stop staring at her.

"And the food is great," Daphne went on. She turned and looked at him and Paul had to blink. "How on earth did you do it?"

Paul blinked again. "Do - what?"

She rolled her eyes. "Are you even listening to me?"

"I'm sorry." Paul knew his smile was sheepish. "I know I promised not to mention it again, but," he shrugged, "I can't stop thinking about kissing you."

Daphne gave a little embarrassed laugh - God, she was pretty - and quickly looked away. "I'm really sorry I did that. You're my friend, and ... friends don't do things like that to each other."

"Hey." He started to reach out, but then decided against it and pulled his hand back. He had a feeling that she wouldn't appreciate being touched right now. "I'm okay. Don't stress about it. Please?"

She nodded but still wouldn't look at him. "I don't even know why I did it." She shook her head. "No, that's a lie. I did it because," now she did turn and their eyes met. Paul felt as if something sprung alive between them. "Because I think you're very attractive and I like that you think I'm too. But I can't trust myself right now. My life's a mess, and the last thing I want is to use you even more than I already am."

"I told you-"

She held up a hand. "I know. And I believe you. But there's a difference between using and using. I'm definitely not crossing that line." She suddenly let out a sharp breath, reached to her back and rubbed it, then shook her head.

"Are you okay?" Paul asked, concern making his gut tighten up. Could there be

something wrong with her? She had seemed fine so far, but she was pregnant after all. His mother always told him that pregnancy was not like being sick, but Paul – just like most men – was always a little mystified when it came to pregnant women. And also a little nervous.

Daphne waved his concern away. “I’m fine. I’ve had a few back cramps these past days. I haven’t been sleeping well, hotel bed and, well, you know.” She grimaced, and Paul knew she was talking about Justin and the fact that they were separated. “I talked to my doctor about it, though, and she told me I’m fine. So,” she laughed slightly, “I’m not worried.”

Paul nodded, but he let his eyes trail down her body, then scolded himself for being an idiot. Looking her over wouldn’t make him see if her cramps were serious. And she was right, a lot was going on in her life. It wasn’t surprising that her body would notice that too.

He took a deep breath. It was time to talk about something else. “You wanted to know how I did all this.” She nodded, obviously glad he was changing the subject. “My Mom helped,” he admitted. In fact, it had been his mother’s idea. It was almost scary how Karen Webber had taken to Daphne. Paul sometimes wondered if she was already checking out wedding planners. She was behaving so unlike the mother he knew, Paul had asked her yesterday if an alien had taken residence in her body. Karen had laughed, then hugged him hard, and mumbled something about her baby growing up fast.

Paul was still a little in shock about it.

“Your Mom is great,” Daphne said with a smile. “So different from mine.” She was once again rubbing her back, her smile slipped and she pressed her lips together.

“Different how?” Paul asked, determined not to behave like a mother hen. He knew she would hate for him to do that, and it was the last thing he wanted.

Daphne shrugged. “My mother was never loving. I think she always regretted marrying my father, but she couldn’t leave him either. She is this unhappy woman who blames everyone for her fucked up life, most of all me. She once told me that if it weren’t for me, she’d have left my father a long time ago.” She sniffed, “It was nothing more than an excuse for her own inability to take charge of her life, but it hurt and – Well, it’s suffice to say that I like your Mom a lot better.”

Daphne’s mother sounded like a real piece of work. Paul would like to meet her one day. Or maybe not. Given how averse to violence Daphne was, it probably wouldn’t be a good thing.

“I’m sorry,” he said instead and knew how lame it sounded.

"No, it's okay. I'm actually good with it – only sometimes it manages to creep up on me." Daphne's right corner of the mouth lifted a little, but instantly she tensed again. "Ow," she said and frowned. "Wow, that was a bad one."

A bad one? "Daphne, maybe you should go to a hospital," Paul suggested, nervously licking his lips. "Let someone check this out."

"No," she shook her head, "I'm ... ohhhh. Fuck."

"Daphne?" Paul's heart was hammering and his mouth was dry.

"Shit!" she said and bent forward.

Paul reached out and touched her arm. "Daph – tell me what I can do."

She gasped and pressed one hand on her back, one protectively over her belly. "I think ... I think," she looked up and there were tears in her eyes. "That I need to go to a hospital."

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Claire had met Justin Taylor only a few times before, and apart from the fact that he was a good looking boy, he had never left any lasting impression with her. He was looking at her now from very blue eyes that were serious but not unfriendly, and she wondered what he saw. She knew her hair was in disarray, her eyes bloodshot and her skin puffy from crying, but right now, with her kids missing, Claire didn't give a damn.

"Claire." Brian's voice pulled her attention to her brother who seemed restless and gave her the impression that he wanted to be anywhere but here. "Did you call Horvath?" he asked, his voice oddly choked.

"Yes," she sniffed, hating herself for being so weak. She'd always been prone to tears but she had made a vow to herself that she would do better now. "He'll be here any moment," she told her brother. "He also told me that they're already searching for Frank and the boys." She had no idea what exactly that meant. She couldn't see the full force of Pittsburgh finest searching for two boys who weren't even missing, just ... kind of misplaced, but it kept her from losing it, knowing that someone was doing something.

"Good." Brian turned away and his gaze swept through the small room Claire slept in here at the AWS, the abused women shelter. Her boys shared a room that was next to her own, easily accessible through a connecting door.

"You know Justin," he said, as if on an afterthought, but looked out of the window, not at her, his body tense.

"Of course." Claire tried a smile and held out her hand to Justin. "Hello."

“Hey,” Justin replied, obviously not sure what to say.

Claire didn’t really care. It wasn’t important to talk, she was too grateful that her brother had come when she’d needed him most. Yes, she and Brian were talking again, but when she’d called him she hadn’t been sure how he would react.

She wondered if she should offer them some refreshments, when there was a knock at the door. She turned and opened it to Detective Horvath and Stephanie Solano, both of their faces wearing equally concerned expressions.

“Detective,” Claire greeted, then turned to the social worker. “Steph – how did you find out?”

Stephanie Solano was a part Asian, part African-American woman in her fifties with curly black hair that was fashionably streaked with gray. At not more than 5’3” and with her prim and proper clothes she looked tiny and fragile, but Claire had learned early on that Stephanie was a force that could not be ignored. She’d put the fear of God in more than one bully.

“Carl called me,” Stephanie said in her no-nonsense voice, Claire found so comforting. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m scared, but I haven’t dissolved yet,” Claire tried to joke. It fell a little short as her laugh ended on a sob. Then she remembered that some of her guests didn’t even know each other. “Steph, Brian, Justin. This is Stephanie Solano, who is a social worker, but really my guardian angel. Steph, this is my brother, Brian and his ... uh ...” She looked at her brother, not quite sure how to introduce his – friend. She hadn’t lied to Brian. She was glad he had found someone who loved him, but old habits died hard, and two men in a relationship still felt wrong to her.

“We are together,” Justin said with a smile and nodded at Steph. “I’m Justin Taylor.”

“Ms Solano.” Brian’s face was closed up. Claire knew that look, knew that he was trying to assess this woman he had just met.

“Mr. Kinney.” Steph smiled. “I’m glad we finally meet. Claire has told me so much about you.”

Brian’s right brow went up. “Has she now?” He turned his gaze to Claire, “What did you tell her?”

Claire felt herself blush. “Nothing much, really.”

“Actually, she told me that you were very successful,” Steph cut in. “And that you helped her to finally leave her abusive husband.” She smiled. “Which makes you a very good

brother in my book.”

Brian looked at her for a moment, his eyes narrowing, then he suddenly cleared his throat and turned to Horvath. “Any trace of the kids?”

The detective shook his head. “Not yet,” he said and Claire felt her heart sink. How could they ever find her babies? Frank could be very clever, and he knew a lot of hiding places. “I have other news, though,” the detective said. “We arrested the man who attacked you.”

Claire saw Justin tense, and move closer to Brian who tried to look casual. “So who is he?” Brian asked. “Some queer hating asshole?”

Horvath shook his head. “He hates gay people all right. But it wasn’t his idea. He was hired to do it.”

“Hired?” Justin was pale, and there was sweat on his forehead. “You mean there is someone out there who spent money to have Brian killed?”

Claire gasped and was grateful that Stephanie was in the room. She was so used to leaning on someone, her mother, her husband – even if it was in a very twisted way - standing on her own was something she had to learn step by step.

“Whoa.” Horvath held up a hand. “Nobody said anything about killing.”

“You said someone hired-“

“Justin,” Brian’s voice was calm. “Let the man talk.”

Justin subsided but kept very close to Brian, the men’s arms almost touching.

Horvath looked directly at Brian. “You know someone called Harvey Fisher?”

Brian frowned. “Fisher? Holy Shit – do you mean Harvey – the horse – Fisher?”

The detective’s brows rose. “The horse?”

Brian shook his head. “Stupid nickname. But yeah. He’s working for another agency.” He paused for a moment. “Are you telling me that Fisher hired some asshole because of – what exactly?”

“When we arrested him, he refused to cooperate, but from what we’ve found out so far, it seems that your agency and his were trying to land the same account.”

“And he did that to Brian for some stupid account?” Justin voiced what Claire was thinking. She couldn’t believe that people would sink so low and for so little. But then,

her own mother had betrayed her. She would have to learn that people could do terrible things and still live with it.

"It looks that way," Horvath said, and shrugged when Brian shook his head. "Sorry this isn't more dramatic." But the detective smiled a bit when he said it. He turned away when his phone rang, and Claire watched Justin swallow and then wrap his arms around Brian.

"I'm so glad," Justin whispered and his voice sounded choked.

"Stop being such a drama queen," Brian said, but his voice was rough, too, and he was holding Justin just as closely.

It was the first time Claire saw two men embrace in that way, two men who weren't just friends but lovers, and she was surprised to find it sweet and comforting. She had expected to feel disgust watching them together for the first time – and now ... now Claire saw them – and it was okay.

She and Frank had never shared that kind of love and maybe she should be envious, but she wasn't. Instead, she was glad for Brian and hoped that maybe one day she would find a man who could love her the same way.

"... tell her that. Great work, Lieberman. Great work."

Claire blinked when Steph nudged her. "What?" she asked, and when Stephanie nodded at Horvath, Claire's gut clenched. But then she saw the man smile, and felt her heart beat faster. "You have them?" she breathed, not daring to hope, but hoping nevertheless.

"Yes," Horvath confirmed, smiling broader. "That was my colleague," he indicated his cell phone. "They found your husband, drunk at your mother's door. The children are with her."

"My mother?" Claire was stunned. She looked at Brian who seemed equally surprised. "Why would he bring them to my mother?"

The Detective shrugged. "Who knows? But the most important thing – the kids are fine. Your older boy is asking for you."

"Oh God," Claire exclaimed and without thinking rushed over to where Horvath stood and threw her arms around his neck. "Thank you, oh, thank you so much." She pulled back a little and then surprised him – and herself – by kissing his cheeks.

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Brian turned away from Claire kissing Horvath with a sigh. Really, what a guy had to

endure these days just to please his relatives was disgusting. When he felt a hand on his arm, he turned and found Justin standing there, watching him with concern.

"Are you alright?" the blond asked.

"Yeah," Brian replied and realised it was actually the truth. He gave Justin a smile. "Really. Don't worry."

Justin shrugged and blushed a little. "I can't help it. I love you."

Brian felt his heart swell, felt happiness bubble up, and forced it down. Getting too excited was never a good thing. But he couldn't help the smile that spread over his face. "You're a romantic fool."

"Yeah, I guess I am. But what can I say. You bring out the best in me."

Brian gave Justin a mock stern look. "Stop it, right now."

Justin stuck out his tongue at him, and Brian quickly checked if anyone was watching them. Thank God they were all still too occupied with the fact that Frank hadn't taken the boys to some godforsaken country somewhere in South America.

"What if I don't," Justin said and grinned. "Will you punish me?"

Brian closed his eyes, and laughed a little. "You are a very bad boy," he whispered and opened his eyes again. Justin's were very blue and the pupils very large.

"Yeah," the blond whispered back. "And I want you to fuck me. Long and hard."

"Christ," Brian muttered, taking a deep breath. He was trying to find the appropriate response, when Justin reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. Brian frowned. "What?"

Justin shook his head. "I just remembered that I promised Daph to call her this morning." He gave Brian a sheepish smile. "Sorry."

Brian watched Justin open his cell and took another deep breath, willing his dick to stay down, Justin was listening, then said, "Daphne tried to call me this morning. Twice." He grimaced. "Called me a prick for not calling."

Brian had to smile. "She really is something." He and Daphne weren't especially close, but they'd always kind of liked each other. Of course it was strained now, for obvious reasons, but that didn't change the fact that Daphne was a very likeable person.

"Yeah," Justin agreed, then suddenly paled. "Oh God," he whispered. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

Brian reached out but Justin pushed his hand away. If he had been slapped it couldn't have stung more. He instantly chided himself for being overly touchy, but the stab of rejection went deep, ripping open wounds Brian had thought healed and forgotten.

He crossed his arms over his chest, forced his voice to sound steady. "What's wrong?"

Justin closed down his cell and shook his head. "Nothing you can help me with," he said shortly, making Brian's wounds bleed. He wanted to tell Justin that he was – what – his partner, lover, fucking boyfriend, that he wanted to be part of this, but no words came out. It was as if Justin's behavior had closed up his throat the way it was slowly closing up his heart.

Brian watched Justin walk away, talk to Claire, then leave the room. He kept his eyes glued to the closed door, his mind reeling, his insides shaking while his body remained cool and calm on the outside. When Claire came over, he let out a long breath, steadying himself.

"We're getting ready to pick up the kids at Mom's," she told him, then frowned. "Is everything okay?"

"Fine," he said with lips that were dry and a mouth that tasted like a sandbox.

"Where did Justin go?" Claire asked. "He looked worried."

Worried? "No," he lied. "He wasn't worried. Just something he forgot."

Claire's face cleared. "Oh. Good. I thought it was something serious. I'm glad it's not." She smiled at him. "You're a really nice couple. Never thought I'd say such a thing." She laughed a little, then raised her head and kissed him on the cheek. "Thanks for coming over. It meant a lot. I'd ask you to go with us, but I'm sure you're not really eager to see Mom."

His mother? Why not – why not stomp a little more on his already battered heart? But he shook his head. "No, thanks. I've had enough of her for a while."

Claire nodded. "That's what I thought. I'll call you, okay? And thanks again."

She turned away, picking up her purse and a sweater. Brian gave Horvath a nod, ignoring the social worker completely as he left Claire's temporary home. He walked out on the street, rain dribbling down from the sky. It was okay, though, that way nobody would see that some of the wetness on his face wasn't falling down from above.

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Jennifer Taylor looked elegant and completely out of place as she stepped into the

Diner on Liberty Avenue.

She felt out of place, too.

But after getting the news about her divorce, and a good cry, she had spent yesterday shopping and had woken up in need of a sympathetic ear. When she'd knocked on Justin's and Daphne's door there had been no answer. Which left her with absolutely nobody to talk to, so instead of pitying herself, she'd gotten dressed and out and found herself in an area of the city she'd never been to before.

She didn't really know Debbie Novotny, but from what she knew of the woman, she was the mother of all that was gay and a sympathetic ear seemed to be part of her job description. She was exactly the person Jennifer needed this morning.

She saw the red wig and the bright clothes the moment she stepped into the Diner and she walked toward the counter, wishing she hadn't chosen such a tight skirt today. She managed to climb onto one of the bar stools anyway and sighed to herself, wondering what on earth she wanted to accomplish with this visit.

Did she even want to accomplish anything? Did one have to accomplish things every time?

"Honey, you look lovely but ... Holy ... Jennifer Taylor." Debbie Novotny looked at her with eyes that were wide and more than a little surprised.

"Hello, Debbie," Jennifer said and forced a smile.

"What on earth brings you down here?"

Jennifer decided to go with the truth. "Actually? I was feeling sorry for myself and I thought maybe you would listen to me bitch and moan."

Debbie laughed, a rich and full belly sound that made the buttons on her shirt jump. "Honey, you can bitch and moan all you want. But first – do you want some coffee?"

"I gave up coffee," Jennifer began, then made a slashing motion with her hand. "Oh, what the hell. Let's have some coffee. Let's get wild."

Debbie laughed again, turned away and came back with a mug full of steaming coffee and even though Jennifer knew that it was only her imagination, she felt as if the smell alone got her spirits up a bit.

"Well, honey. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

Jennifer picked up the mug, took a sip and sighed her pleasure. "Is it pathetic if I think this coffee is just wonderful?"

Debbie gave her a look that was half offended and half amused. "I'll have you know that my coffee is known for its excellence. So, no, it's not pathetic. And now, tell me what's wrong!"

"God," Jennifer took another sip. "The question should be 'what's right'. Because, right now, I feel as if everything is completely out of control. It seems as if only weeks ago my life was perfect. And now ... My marriage is over, Justin's is too. I lost my home – which-" She paused and rubbed her temples. It wasn't as if the house she'd shared with Craig had really ever been a home. It had been a house, and ... a fantasy, really. Nothing seemed real now. And she didn't miss it, either, but ... it stood for something she had wanted and lost.

She looked up when she felt Debbie patting the back of her hand. "Honey, it's okay to feel that way. Although, I have to tell you, Justin kind of threw me a loop here. I never thought he was gay."

Jennifer felt her eyes tear up and blinked. It seemed as if she was crying non-stop these days and somehow it seemed wrong. "I knew," she confessed and that felt good. Like confessing her sins – even though Debbie Novotny was so far from any priest Jennifer had ever met. And yet – it seemed completely right. "I always knew. Maybe not ... really consciously, but I knew. I saw him. And I tried to discourage any –"

"You were his mother," Debbie interrupted gently. "It's only understandable that you tried to protect him. It's a harsh out there, and being gay doesn't make Justin's life any easier."

"Yeah, I know." She did. But Jennifer also knew that it had only been part of her reason to raise Justin as straight as possible. It was a sin she would have to live with for the rest of her life. "But you didn't do it with Michael."

"No," Debbie agreed. "But then, it was easier for me, I think. My brother is gay. And Michael's father was too. I was prepared," she laughed. "Kind of, anyway."

"It's funny," Jennifer began, then suddenly became aware of her surroundings. People were coming, sitting down – and Debbie was still standing here at the counter. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don't want to keep you from your work."

"Don't be stupid," Debbie chided gently. "These boys can wait a minute or two."

"I don't want to get you into any trouble." Jennifer had already caused too much trouble for too many people.

"You're not getting me into any trouble," Debbie said firmly. "So – go on, I'm listening."

And so Jennifer did, took her heart in her hands and said, "How can I ... make it alright?"

How can I ever look at Justin again and not feel guilty – or at Daphne.” God, Daphne. She was another innocent victim in Jennifer’s schemes. And now she was pregnant and looking at a future without a husband.

And what about her grandchild?

What if Daphne became resentful and refused to let Justin see his baby? One should never say never, but for a gay man to have children – it had to be special. It wasn’t as if Justin could get pregnant.

Debbie patted her hand again. “Daphne is a tough girl. It will be hard, but I’m sure she’ll find a way to go on and even a way to save her friendship with Justin.”

“You think?” She sounded like a little girl, wanting for her mother to reassure her, but Jennifer didn’t give a damn. She felt like a little girl sometimes, too.

“I’m sure.” Debbie smiled at her. “And – I think your cell phone is ringing.”

Jennifer blinked, then realised that, yes, her phone was ringing. She fished it from her pocket and frowned when she saw Daphne’s number. Flipping it open she said, “Yes?”

And an unfamiliar male voice replied, “Are you Daphne’s mother-in-law?”

Jennifer’s frown deepened. “Yes.”

“Then get your ass down here ASAP. It would be nice if at least one of her family was with her right now.”

“Young man,” Jennifer began, only belatedly realising she was channelling her mother.

“Don’t ‘young man’ me. I tried reaching her sorry excuse for a husband, but he didn’t pick up. So – I’m calling you because she said she wanted me to.”

It was clear that the caller had not wanted to call Jennifer. “Who the hell are you? And what is going on?”

“My name is Paul Webber and I’m a friend. Daphne and I had breakfast together at my parent’s house when she suddenly had cramps. My mom said we should get her to a hospital and that’s where we are. Central. So – get down here. I don’t know why, but she says she needs you.”

Without waiting for an answer, he hung up.

“What’s wrong?” Debbie asked.

Jennifer shook her head, trying to understand what Paul Webber had just told her, then

she slowly, mechanically shut down her phone. "I ... I need ... I need ..."

"Honey – you look like a ghost."

Jennifer shook her head again, finally clearing her mind. "No, I'm fine. But ... Daphne ... she is at the hospital."

"Daphne? Oh my God. Is it the baby?"

"Something about cramps. So yeah, I guess." Jennifer tried to keep the horror she felt at bay, tried not to let her imagination run away from her. But it was hard. What if Daphne lost her child? "I need to go." she stood, then with shaking hands found some coins in her purse, but Debbie held up a hand.

"It's on me."

"No, I–"

"No discussion. What can I do?"

"I'm going to the hospital. Central. Can you try to reach Justin? I'm not sure if I can use my phone once I'm there. It seems they haven't been able to contact him yet."

Debbie nodded. "Sure."

"Thanks." She was about to turn but Debbie's voice stopped her.

"Jennifer. Don't forget what I said before. Daphne's a tough girl."

Jennifer felt a tear slip from her eye. "I hope so. And thanks."

She ran out of the Diner and knew that if Daphne lost her baby the blame – at least partly – was on Jennifer. And she wondered if she would ever find a way to live with that.

He felt like crap. Justin rubbed his forehead where an insistent ache had taken permanent residence ever since he'd found the voice mail from Daphne almost a week ago. It didn't help that he hadn't slept at all.

"Honey, why don't you lie down for an hour or two?"

His mother's voice was soft and soothing, and the hand on his arm was warm and loving.

All Justin wanted was to push it away and to yell at his mother to stop treating him like he was made of glass. But he knew he couldn't do that, knew it would be ungrateful.

Truth was, his mother had been wonderful this past week and Justin had no idea what he would've done without her.

"Mom, I'm not tired." It was a lie. He was so tired, he could barely keep his eyes open, but every time he tried to sleep his heart started to race and sweat would break out all over his body.

"Don't lie to me, Justin," his mother said. "You can't do this to yourself."

He surged up, not able to stand the closeness. "Why not?" he snapped. "There seems to be nothing else I can do."

"Daphne will be alright," his mother's soothing voice said. Justin wanted to scream.

But his voice was steady and controlled when he replied: "You don't know that, Mom."

"She is strong."

That much was true. Daphne was strong. But Justin remembered so much blood, and he remembered her screams, and the almost eerie quiet that followed.

The stillness of Daphne's face. The way she looked, lying on that white hospital bed, her eyes tightly closed, her chest rising with steady breaths. Justin had stood next to her, not a clue what to do. She would wake up, they'd told him. Her body needed time to heal, as did her mind. He needed to be patient.

What a joke.

Justin had always thought of himself as patient. Tragedy had made him discover that patience was not one of his virtues.

What had his mother just said? Oh yes, that Daphne was strong. "She's also lost her child," he said, not looking at Jennifer. "Our child," he added, almost as an afterthought. Probably the only child he would ever have. A child he would have loved and cherished and that had been swept away in a wave of blood and pain and had left his wife still and empty.

Justin had talked to doctors and psychiatrists and they had all told him that Daphne would wake up when the time was right. That physically she was alright and that there was no medical reason why she was still asleep, still quiet, still dead to the world.

"I wish I could do something to help you both," Jennifer said, her voice choked.

Yes, everyone wanted to help. And nobody seemed to be able to.

"I also wish you would talk to somebody. Brian-"

“Leave Brian out of this,” Justin said sharply, whirling back to his mother. “Brian is the reason all this happened.”

He sucked in a sharp breath, barely able to believe he had said that aloud. It sounded completely crazy to his ears and it was crazy. It wasn’t Brian’s fault Daphne had lost her baby.

“Brian is the reason?” His mother stared at him. “Why? What did he do?”

Justin shook his head. “Nothing. He didn’t do anything.” He wished she would stop talking, stop asking him questions he had no answer to.

“I don’t understand. Justin, you are shutting everyone out. Brian’s tried to call you. He even called me. Why are you closing yourself off from everyone?”

It was a good question. One Justin didn’t want to answer. “Because I do,” he snapped. “And frankly, Mom, it’s really none of your business. Brian and I fucked, it’s not as if we were a couple or anything.”

That’s what he’d told Brian the one time he’d gotten through, using a pay phone where the number didn’t show up on Justin’s cell. After that, Brian had not tried calling him again.

In the quiet hours, during the night, Justin lay awake and he wondered why he couldn’t cry, why the fact that he had pushed Brian away meant nothing, why being alone in the dark felt right. But somehow, in a very strange way, it didn’t really touch him. He felt like Teflon, as if any feeling, any emotion was not going to stick. He was clean, in a very sterile, very detached way.

“This isn’t you, Justin,” his mother’s voice turned pleading. It meant nothing.

“It is me,” he said coldly. “Get used to it.” He stood, and walked to the door of the hospital waiting room, then he turned and looked at Jennifer. “And now, I would appreciate if you would leave for a while. You look a little worn out.”

He walked down the hallway toward Daphne’s room. He would sit with her now. That’s where he belonged, where he should have been. It was his place. As her husband. Nothing else was important anymore.

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Brian frowned as he listened to his sister on the other end of the line. She had been calling him a few times over the past week, giving him updates on herself and the children – and asking about Justin.

“So he’s been really nice and he even found an apartment for me and the boys. It’s great and not too expensive. Terry at the Deli shop told me I can up my hours, so I’ll be okay with money and stuff.”

“Claire, if you need-“

“I know,” she interrupted him gently. “I know you’ll help. And I’m very grateful for it. But we’re okay.”

“That’s good,” Brian said, and meant it. It was amazing, really. His heart had been ripped out, and somehow, some way, he still managed to empathize with others. “How are the kids?” He wasn’t really interested in his nephews, but talking about them was still better than having to dodge Claire’s questions about Justin. For one, he didn’t have any fucking answers and second, talking about Justin made his head hurt.

“They’re doing fine.” Claire laughed. “Frankly, I’m amazed how they’ve come through this. Thank God, Frank didn’t do anything to them.”

“Brian? Do you have a minute?”

Brian looked up to see Ben standing the doorway of his office. He nodded and motioned for Ben to come in and sit down. “Claire?”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry, but I have to go. My boss wants to talk to me.”

“Okay,” Claire said. “Talk to you soon.”

Brian hung up. He rubbed his eyes, then took a deep breath and looked at Ben. “What’s up?”

“I need to talk to you.”

Fuck. This was just what he needed. A heart to heart with Ben. He sighed. “Fine. Shoot.”

Ben frowned and Brian cursed inwardly. He had worked hard all week at keeping his problems to himself and, as a result, kept his friends at a distance.

“Are you alright?” Ben asked and there was real concern in his voice.

Brian didn’t want concern. Not from Ben. Not from anyone. He didn’t need it. So he tried a lopsided smile. “Yeah, I’m okay. So – what’s this about?”

Ben gave him one of his intense looks, as if he was trying to irradiate Brian with his

eyes. After a moment, he sighed. "Michael."

"Mikey?" Okay, this was unexpected. "What about him?" And uncomfortable. He wasn't Emmett Honeycutt, who loved talking almost as much as he loved sex. And he wasn't Ted Schmidt either – thank God – who revelled in the bad luck of others.

Ben sighed. "Well, first of all, I haven't talked to him in almost a week."

Really? Wow, maybe Brian's condition was contagious. He almost laughed, but suppressed it at the last possible moment. Instead he gave Ben a shrewd look. "And that's my business – how exactly?"

Ben sighed again, more deeply this time. "It's not. But, frankly I'm running out of options. I tried calling him, but after a few words we were right in the middle of a fight. Whatever I say, he's purposely taking me wrong." He paused for a moment before he went on. "You're his best friend. You know him way better than me."

Fuck it, but it was the truth. "Why are you fighting?" he asked, wondering what could have happened between his best friend and saintly Ben Bruckner. He couldn't imagine Ben being anything but fair and ... aw, shit. "Is it – about me?" Because, damn. It was the only explanation. "Or rather, what happened between you and me?"

He didn't need to hear Ben's answer, seeing his face was enough proof that Brian was right, and he groaned. "Fuck."

"Quite literally," Ben said wryly.

Brian rubbed his forehead, wondering if someone somewhere had it in for him. "How did he find out?"

"He kind of guessed it. I couldn't lie to him when he asked me outright." Ben stood and walked to the wall, then leaned against it. "I'm surprised he didn't come to you the moment he found out."

Now he knew why Michael had tried to reach him the whole time. He'd ignored all calls, because he'd thought Michael had heard about him and Justin and listening to Mikey bitch and tell him that he'd known all along was more than he could bear.

Brian shook his head. "I was a little preoccupied this past week. The police had been calling me non-stop, now that they know who was responsible for the attacks on me."

"Yeah, I heard about that. It's great news." Ben smiled, then sighed. "I still can't believe Harvey would do such a thing. And for some ad campaign. The man must be insane."

"He was always an asshole," Brian said. Harvey was the typical straight asshole, always making fag jokes and always ending them with 'no hard feelings, man'. It was a surprise

that he'd gone that far, but it was no surprise that he'd chosen Brian for a target.

"True. But getting back to Michael. Brian, I don't know what to do."

Fuck. "You want me to talk to him." It wasn't a question. There was no reason for questions.

Ben leaned his head back at the wall and closed his eyes. "I know this is an impossible situation. But I love him." He laughed slightly. "It's crazy, but I do. And I want him back. It's like losing an arm or a leg – and I know what I'm talking about here."

It was like losing an arm, Brian had to agree. He didn't have any experience with losing arms or legs, but he could write a novella about losing his heart and having it stomped into the ground. He should never have trusted Justin, should never have opened himself up, made himself vulnerable in a way that had him now hurting in a way he never wanted to hurt again. Brian had thought that after growing up in his parents' home, nothing could ever touch him again.

Christ – he couldn't have been more wrong.

"Ben, I can try talking to him, but honestly – Mikey never holds a grudge for long."

"This isn't about a grudge." Ben raised his head and looked at him again. "It's far deeper than that and you know it. You've been his fantasy since he was fourteen years old. And now he finds out that I had what he always wanted, and worse, that I didn't tell him."

Mikey really could be an idiot sometimes. But what else was new? "And what do you want me to tell him?"

"I don't know." Ben threw his arms in the air. "I have no idea. But – it's the only thing that came to my mind. He listens to you. And more importantly, he loves you."

Yes, Mikey loved him. Brian closed his eyes, then opened them again and looked straight at Ben. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"No," Ben said quickly. Maybe too quickly. Then he ran the fingers of his right hand through his short hair. "At least not in the way you think. For one, I know that it will always stay a fantasy because you told me yourself that you and Michael would never work. And also," he laughed a little self-consciously and blushed in a way one could almost describe as endearing, "because I think he loves me too. He just hasn't realised it yet."

Brian pursed his lips. "Okay. I'll talk to him." Jesus, just what he needed. Mikey would instantly ask about Justin and then things could get really ugly because Brian had no intention whatsoever to discuss Justin with Michael. "But don't expect too much."

"I won't." But it was obvious that Ben was intensely relieved. And that he put a great deal of hope in whatever Brian would tell Michael. As if Brian's life wasn't already fucked up enough.

Brian nodded and expected for Ben to leave, but his boss still stood at the wall and looked at him. Brian sighed. "What?"

"If you need someone to talk to, I'm here," Ben said softly.

Aw, fuck. "No, I'm fine."

Ben raised his brows. "If you say so. But frankly, you look like shit, as if you haven't slept in days."

"Fuck you," Brian muttered, trying to sound amused and failing completely. There was no amusement in his voice, only weariness and despair. Shit.

"You haven't talked about Justin the whole week," Ben remarked almost casually. Only, there was nothing casual about Ben. Ben Bruckner was good with words and he knew how to use them. "Is *he* okay?"

Brian shrugged, "How the fuck should I know?" No, no, no, that wasn't what he had intended to say. But it had slipped out and now – now Ben was giving him another of those sharp, inquiring looks he had down pat. "We're not attached at the hip, the way you and Mikey obviously want to be. We both give each other space."

"Is that the reason you look so miserable?" Ben asked, but it wasn't a question. Ben already knew the answer and Brian jerked.

"I'm not doing this," he said sharply. "We might be friends – sort of, anyway – but I'm not going to have my life spread out in front of you."

"Maybe that's the problem." Ben just wouldn't give up. "Sharing things is part of a working relationship, Brian. If you shut your partner out–"

And just like that Brian broke. He jumped up from his seat and glared at Ben. "I didn't shut him out, okay," he snapped. "He shut me out. He's still shutting me out. He hasn't called me, hasn't talked to me in a week. If it weren't for his mother, I wouldn't even know that his wife lost her baby."

Brian stopped, breathing hard. God. He couldn't do this. He was about to fall apart, and in front of his boss. It was unacceptable. He made an effort to pull himself together. "However, I don't want to talk about it. Talking doesn't change a fucking thing." When Ben didn't say anything, Brian sneered, "What? Don't you have a few friendly words for the poor guy who was stupid enough to trust someone, another human being?"

Ben only shook his head. "I'm sorry," was all he said. "I had no idea."

"Yeah, well." Brian ran both his hands through his hair. "Life is shit and all that."

Ben laughed. "Tell me about it. God, we're a sorry pair. Forget everything I told you about Michael, okay. You have enough on your plate without my problems."

Brian bristled. If he really hated something, it was being pitied. "I'm not forgetting it. I told you I'll talk to him and I will. Just don't expect Mikey to listen to me. He can be thick headed like a bull."

"Don't I know it." Ben sighed and got serious again. "I'm really sorry about what happened with you and Justin."

"It's okay." Brian shrugged, "Look, I never expected to end up in a relationship anyway. So this is probably how it's supposed to be." He laughed, but it was without humor. "Just watch me. I'll be the oldest trick still hanging around at one of the clubs, still watching out for the latest trick." Apart from that he'd never really planned getting old, but Ben didn't need to know that. Die young and leave an attractive corpse had always been Brian's mantra. James Dean was his role model – and who knew, he might just end like the famous actor one day.

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Debbie moved quietly through the hospital hallway, very aware of the suffering that took place behind most of the doors. She had never been fond of hospitals, had hated staying in one when Michael was born, and had left as soon as possible, thanks to her grandmother who was a force of nature and had told the doctors exactly what she thought of modern medicine and that women had given birth to children since the world existed, long before anyone had ever thought of modern medicine.

God, she had loved her grandmother. She had been a stubborn old bitch sometimes, but Debbie had loved her and the old woman had loved her just as fiercely. There were times when she still missed her grandmother with all her heart. She wondered what her ancestor would have had to say to the current situation. Probably something along the lines of 'Get over it and get on with your life. It's too short anyway.'

Debbie finally found the room she had been searching for and quietly entered to the sight of Jennifer Taylor slumped in a chair, her usually perfect hair in disarray and her designer clothes rumpled. "Hey," Debbie said softly and Jennifer's head jerked up and she gasped. "Hey, hey – it's just me."

"Debbie?" Jennifer was clearly surprised to see her, but after a moment she shook herself and rubbed her eyes. "Sorry, I almost fell asleep here."

"Honey, you don't have to apologize for that," Debbie assured her quickly and sat down

beside the other woman. Jennifer's clothes weren't just rumpled, she noticed, they weren't daisy fresh either. "You must be worried sick," she said, putting a comforting hand on Jennifer's arm. "How is Daphne?"

Jennifer sighed deeply. "She hasn't woken up yet. But the doctors say there's nothing wrong with her, that she will wake up soon, that her mind just needs time to deal with what happened." She looked up and her eyes were so tired, Debbie had to fight the urge to make her lie down and sleep. "To tell the truth, I'm just as worried about Justin."

"Of course you are, honey. He suffered the same terrible loss." Debbie didn't even want to imagine what it must feel like. To feel the joy of becoming a parent and then have all that ripped away from you by something that didn't make an ounce of sense.

But Jennifer shook her head. "It's not just that. He's so distant, so unlike himself. Debbie, he wouldn't even let me touch him, as if comfort from me is more than he can take. And," she bit her lip, but a tear slipped from her eye, "he doesn't talk to Brian either."

That was news to Debbie. From what Michael had told her, Brian and Justin were stuck together like glue. "Why not?" she asked with a frown.

"I don't know. Well, in a way I do. It seems like ... like he wants to punish himself by refusing himself to be close to the man he loves."

"Loves?" Okay, it seemed Debbie had missed more than just a few things. She had imagined Justin and Brian to fuck like bunny rabbits – they were two young, healthy gay men after all, but love? She loved Brian Kinney as if he were her own son, but for the life of her she couldn't imagine him in anything even remotely like a relationship. In Debbie's eyes he was too damaged, too fucked up to be a partner for anyone.

But Jennifer nodded, her eyes very serious. "It was love. And I'm pretty sure for Brian, too. I ... saw it in his eyes. The day Justin got married, "more tears came, "and I said something terrible. And I made such a mess of their lives."

"No," Debbie put her arm around Jennifer's shaking shoulders. "Honey, no. It's not your fault."

"But it is," Jennifer's gaze was that of a desperate woman. "You have no idea what I did. And because of it, Justin married Daphne and now ... now." She broke down and started to cry in earnest, sobbing into Debbie's blouse, and Debbie held her, knowing that there was nothing else she could do for this poor woman who felt guilty for everything that had gone wrong in her family, the way women did all over the world, as if it was ingrained into their DNA.

"Shh, shhh," she soothed, patting Jennifer's shoulder. "It's okay. You'll see, Daphne will wake up soon and she is a very smart young woman. It will be hard for her, but I'm sure

she'll pull through. I know it's a stupid thing to say, but she is young and healthy, right. She will have other opportunities to have children. Don't make yourself sick over this."

"Daphne just woke up. Hello, Debbie."

Justin stood in the doorway, dressed conservatively in a suit and tie, his face pale with deep smudges beneath eyes that were dull, no trace of his usually sparkling blue in them.

"Oh honey," Jennifer was up and wiping her face. "That's great news."

Debbie expected mother and son to hug, but Justin made no move toward Jennifer and his whole posture gave 'stay away' signals. He was stiff and formal, and his eyes never met those of his mother. "The doctor is with her now." For a moment he seemed to falter, but then he pulled himself together and was once again a stranger. "She already knew the baby was gone. She woke up, looked at me and she knew."

"Is ... is there anything I can do?" Jennifer asked.

He shook his head. "Nothing, really. I think it would be best for you to go back to the hotel. Right now there's nothing any of us can do. As I said, the doctor is with her and then they want her to talk to a shrink." He shook his head as if saying 'what a waste'.

Debbie was chilled to the bone. She now understood why Jennifer had been so distressed. This wasn't Justin. This wasn't a human being. He was talking and acting like a robot. "Justin."

He looked at her, but she wondered if he really saw her. There was an invisible wall around him that seemed impenetrable. "You should go home, too. Thanks for coming, but right now there is really nothing you can do."

It was as if he was repeating the words from a broken record. And Debbie didn't like it one bit. "Have you eaten today?" she asked, catching him off guard. His eyes flickered and he frowned as if trying to remember something.

"Coffee," he answered. "I'm good."

"Nonsense." Debbie stood up and went to stand in front of him. "Everyone needs to eat. You'll help nobody if you slump down unconscious."

"No offence, Debbie, but this isn't any of your business."

Okay. So that's how things were. Well, Debbie could pull off her gloves as well. "Listen to me, young man," she snapped. "The moment you became Brian's friend you became part of my family. That makes it so my business and don't you dare tell me otherwise."

For a moment it seemed as if she'd cracked his icy shell, but then he pulled himself back behind that invisible wall. "There is really no need to worry. I'm perfectly fine and capable of taking care of my wife."

And who will be taking care of you? The question was on Debbie's tongue, but she knew that Justin wasn't in a receptive place right now. So she simply nodded. "Okay, then. But you'll keep me updated on Daphne's progress?"

He gave her a long look, before he replied, "Yes. And I will tell Daphne that you came. She'll be glad to hear it. Please, excuse me now, I need to see if the doctor is done with her."

Debbie watched him go, then turned to Jennifer whose eyes still swam with tears. "You see," she said, "he's ... not behaving like himself. Justin has never been so distant before."

"He's grieving," Debbie said softly, taking the other woman's hand. "They've both been through a severe traumatic experience. Not only have they lost their child, they were in the process of dissolving a marriage that both thought would last a lifetime. On top of that, Justin finally realises he is gay." Debbie shook her head, "Jennifer, you can't expect something like not to leave scars. Give Justin some space. I'm sure he'll come around."

"You think?" There was such desperate hope in Jennifer's eyes, Debbie reached out and pulled the other woman in her arms, holding her tightly.

"I'm sure," Debbie said, stroking Jennifer's head. "All you can do is wait and be there when he comes and needs you."

The other woman nodded against Debbie's ample chest. "Okay." Jennifer's voice was muffled, but Debbie understood. "I'm so glad you came."

"I'm glad, too."

And she was. But she was also terrified. Not for Justin. Or Daphne. Despite the recent traumatic events, she knew that both would manage to pull through. Unfortunately, she didn't have the same confidence where Brian was concerned.

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3 days later

It was about an hour later when Emmett Honeycutt wondered if maybe screaming would save his sanity. He also wondered if strangling a friend would get him a lifetime sentence. And what would happen if he strangled two?

"No."

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Of course *you* would say that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, it’s really no surprise from a guy who hasn’t had a boyfriend in, like, *ever*.”

“Guys!” Emmett tried, but nobody even seemed to know he was there.

“Thanks so much for that.”

“I can’t help it if it’s the truth.”

“The truth? How about some truth for you?”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. How about the fact that you’re still more interested in fucking your best friend instead of trying to work out your relationship problems?”

“Boys,” Emmett tried, but was ignored once again. He threw his hands in the air, leaned back in his chair and sighed loudly. Why on earth had he gotten out of bed this morning? He should have stayed there and let that hunk he’d picked up last night fuck him senseless once again. But no, stupid as he was, he’d had to get up and open his door, and now he was sitting here, listening to Michael and Ted have at each other.

“My relationship problems?” Michael shouted, glaring at Ted. “When did I send out a memo where they were made any of your business?”

“I’m your friend,” Ted shouted right back.

Michael stared at Ted and Emmett saw him take a deep breath. Oh no. No. No. No. He could not let that happen. He could see the words forming in Michael’s eyes, work their way to his lips and Emmett jumped up, about to open his mouth to keep a disaster from happening when a commanding voice cut in like a whip.

“Cut it out, will you,” Brian said loudly, glaring at Michael and Ted simultaneously – it was an impressive sight. Until Brian’s angry gaze snapped to him. Now it felt scary. “And you, Honeycutt, why are you just standing there, looking like a fish out of water?”

That was so unfair! “I’ll have you know-“ Emmett started but was interrupted rudely.

"I don't want to hear it." Brian's gaze went back to Michael and Ted. "What the hell is going on here?" he asked. "I could hear you from down below."

Ted glared. "It's none of your business."

"Excuse me?" Michael was indignant and full of attitude. "Brian is my *best* friend. Unlike you, he knows what that means."

"Okay, time out," Brian made a slashing motion with his hand, then sighed. "Just for the record, I don't care what kind of problem you two have, but why don't you tell me anyway?"

Ted stared at him, he crossed his arms and his lip came out in a very unattractive pout. Emmett looked away, not able to stand seeing his best friend behave like an idiot any longer.

He turned toward Brian instead and for the first time noticed the signs of stress on Brian's face. He looked tired, his eyes were red rimmed, the shadows underneath almost blue and there were lines around his mouth that spoke of pain. Emmett remembered Debbie mentioning a problem between Brian and Justin. Could that be the reason? Emmett had been too busy with a problem of his own to really pay attention, but it was obvious now that Brian was in a very rough spot.

"Ted was being an asshole," Michael said.

Brian stuck his tongue in his cheek. "So, what else is new?"

"Hey," Ted cried.

Everyone ignored him.

"Why are you here?" Michael asked.

"Believe it or not, I came to talk to you," Brian said. One of his brows wandered upward as he let his gaze sweep around. Then he rolled his lips. "Alone."

Michael's expression turned from incredulous to excited so fast, it was ridiculous. Then he frowned. "Uhm – this is Emmett's apartment," he said and Emmett cut right through it.

"Don't mind me," he said, grabbing Ted's arm. "We'll be going – somewhere exciting." Which was a lie, but Emmett could feel that whatever Brian had come to talk about was important.

"I don't want to leave," Ted said stubbornly and Emmett pulled at his arm.

"I don't care," he told Ted. He gave Brian a smile, "Just, close the door when you leave, will you?"

"Let go of me," Ted complained and Emmett pulled harder.

"Shut up," he hissed. "And now – out."

Emmett gave up pulling and shoved Ted out of the door, then closed it behind them.

"What are you doing?" Ted was pissed.

Well, tough luck. So was Emmett. He glared at his best friend. "What are *you* doing? Are you trying to be obtuse or what?"

"I wanted to talk to Michael," Ted said. "Talk some sense into him."

"By insulting him?" Emmett couldn't believe it. Everyone had lost their minds, or so it seemed.

"I wasn't trying to insult him, but he got so defensive and," Ted stopped and sighed heavily. "Okay, okay, I made an ass out of myself."

"That too," Emmett agreed and tried a smile. When Ted's mouth twitched he started breathing easier. "Teddy, I know you care for Michael, but – there are some problems he needs to solve on his own."

Ted hung his head. "I know." Emmett hated seeing Ted so defeated but he also knew that it was probably the only way that his best friend would finally free himself of his dreams of a happily ever after between him and Michael.

Emmett slung an arm around Ted's shoulder. "I'm sorry."

Ted shrugged, not looking up. "I love him," he whispered.

Oh Teddy. "I know," Emmett said softly. "Unfortunately he doesn't love you."

"I know," Ted's voice was miserable. "But it's hard giving up a dream."

Tell me about it, Emmett thought. He knew a lot about giving up dreams. He sighed. "How about we get some shopping done? You could do with a new pair of pants. How about something really hot?"

Ted gave a watery laugh. After a moment he snorted. "But I'm not wearing tight fitting leather."

"Oh, come on," Emmett pretended disappointment. "Think about. Something in pink,

maybe.”

“Pink?” Ted’s voice went up an octave.

“Okay, maybe not. But green would be nice too.”

He and Ted shared a laugh, their eyes met and held. Then they smiled. And Emmett knew it would be alright.

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“Will you stop hovering already?” Daphne snapped, then winced when she felt a twinge in her lower abdomen. Damn. The doctors had assured her that everything was fine and that any discomfort she might be still feeling would go away on its own. They’d only keep her for observation for another day or two and then she was free to leave. It was a moment that couldn’t come fast enough as far as Daphne was concerned. Lying here in this hospital bed was driving her nuts.

“I just,” Justin touched the bed, then let go again. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and stared at the wall. “I just want to help.”

“Yeah, well, making me feel worse doesn’t help,” she snapped, then instantly felt sorry for it. God, she was a mess these days, even worse when – Her hand involuntarily found her abdomen, coming to lay on top of it, not stroking, though, the way she’d done before, just resting there quietly.

“I ... didn’t want to make you feel worse. And,” he kept his eyes firmly on the wall, “we need to talk-“

“No,” she interrupted him firmly. “We most definitely won’t talk about that nonsense ever again.”

“But-“

“No buts. We are not trying again. Hello? Remember the fact that you’re gay, as in attracted to men?” To say she had been floored when he’d first come up with this idea was a vast understatement. ‘Let’s try again’, he’d said. That they had a lot going for them. Oh, and by the way, they could make another baby. She’d been on the verge of slapping him for his stupidity.

“Maybe,” he blinked, his eyes dry, “I was wrong. I mean, I was wrong before, right?”

Holy Mother of God. “No, you’re not wrong.”

“But.” He ran a hand through his hair, the movements jerky. “I ... I ... Without me being such a selfish asshole-“

“Okay, I’m saying this one last time. No, we are not getting back together. Besides, do you really think you can replace the baby I lost? That having another one will make the pain of losing this one less ... awful? Well, think again. And just for the record, I don’t another baby. At least not now. And maybe not for a long time.”

The mere thought of being pregnant again caused her insides to clench and her heart race so fast, she was afraid it would jump right out of her chest. The shrink who had seen her on her first day after the coma had told her it was perfectly normal to experience bouts of panic. That she should accept it, and that with time she’d get better and finally past it.

Looking at the friendly, concerned face of the woman, Daphne had experienced the wish to kill someone slowly and painfully. It was, suffice to say, that she had told her doctor she didn’t want to see the particular shrink ever again.

“Daph,” Justin said and when Daphne looked at him, she saw that he had tears in his eyes. “I don’t know what to do, how to help you.”

“You can’t,” she said, knowing that her words were brutal. It couldn’t be helped, though. Truth was brutal sometimes, and this particular truth was more brutal than others. At least where Daphne was concerned. “Nothing can help me. I lost my baby. It’s as simple as that and nothing – nothing – will make that go away. So, stop being such an idiot.”

He turned away from her then and started to pace the room. “It’s my fault,” he said. “Because I ... I was so selfish.” He turned back to her, his eyes intense, “What if I promise not to look at another man again? What if I promise never to see Brian again. I haven’t seen him for over a week. I can do it. I really can?”

“Justin.” Daphne was aghast. “Listen to yourself. Apart from the fact that it’s completely crazy, have you even thought about what it would mean for me? I’d be your second choice, and I don’t want to be. I want a husband who can love me with his whole heart, who doesn’t have to fight his nature just to stay true to me. I’m too good to be anyone’s second choice.”

He looked horrified. “Second choice? You will never be my second choice.”

“But don’t you see. I already am. Not as a friend, but as a wife? You’re gay, Justin. Gay. And last time I checked you were in love with Brian.”

He closed his eyes and Daphne saw tears leak from beneath his lids. “How can I make it better if you don’t let me?” he asked, his voice choked. “How can I ever live my life, knowing what I took from you?”

“You never took anything from me,” she cried, finally reaching out and touching him. It

felt good, familiar. She also wanted to snatch it back, but she didn't. She kept it there and squeezed. "Justin, listen to me. Do you really want to do me a favor?"

"Yes," he took both her hands. "Everything. Just tell me."

God, he was so desperate to help, to make things better, Daphne felt like crying herself. But these days the tears just wouldn't come, as if something in her had gone dry and refused to be filled up again. "Be yourself. Be my friend," she said. "I need my friend."

"I ... I." He broke off, struggling with something, and then finally nodded. "Okay. I can do that." He looked up and his mouth quirked into a ghost of a smile. "I can try."

"Good." She tried a smile too, but there was no way she could. She wondered if she would ever smile again. "And to be that friend you need to be yourself. Yourself, Justin, not some ... some robot."

He nodded again. "I'm sorry for being such a pain in the ass," he said and Daphne wanted to hug him. But like with the smile, close contact with another human being just didn't do it for her these days. She felt so weird, as if her body wasn't her own, as if some things didn't happen to her, but all around her. She had no idea how to put it into words. It was as if her body was as empty as her womb.

It was easier to help Justin than to help herself. "What was that about not seeing Brian?" she asked.

He blinked as if coming back from another planet. "Brian?"

"Yes, Brian." Now she did almost laugh. "You know, tall, handsome, sad eyes – Brian. The man of your dreams?"

"I know who Brian is," he said, making a face. "I'm not even sure he'll talk to me, and after the way I treated him I wouldn't blame him." Then he frowned. "Talking about handsome men. Who is Paul Webber?"

Daphne rolled her eyes. Leave it to Justin to bring Paul up. "He's just a kid. Thinks he's in love with me." She rolled her eyes again for good measure. "He's twenty one."

Justin grinned. "In love with you?"

She shrugged. "Go figure." It meant nothing. Paul was nice, but right now it didn't mean a thing. Well, it wasn't an issue, anyway. Paul would be going back to New York in a few weeks and Daphne ... She had no idea what she would do. Only a few days ago things had looked bright and promising despite the mess her marriage was. But there had been a baby to look forward to. And now there was nothing. Just what seemed like a bottomless void.

She was like a shell. As if parts of her were missing and she had no idea how to get them back.

But talking to Justin was still easy. It was the strangest thing. "Talk to Brian," she said.

Justin nodded. "I will. I promise. I love you, Daphne."

"I know." She simply looked at him. "I love you, too."

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"So?" Michael looked at him and Brian wanted to turn around and leave and pretend he'd never come here in the first place. He tried not to look around, but it was hard with the color explosion all around him. No wonder Emmett couldn't hold on to a guy, living here would render the strongest man blind.

"What do you want to talk about?" Michael asked.

"Sit down, Mikey," Brian said, wandering to the window, staring out on the street where two boys were having fun with an already beat up garbage can.

Michael bristled. "You can't just come here and order me what to do."

"Believe me when I tell you that coming here is not my idea of spending a nice morning." Brian turned and looked at his best friend. "But a friend asked me to talk to you."

"A-" Michael cut himself off and something in his eyes shifted, grew hard. "Ben."

There was no need to lie. "Ben. What are you doing, Mikey?"

"Excuse me?"

"What kind of shit is this?" Brian asked. "You get on my nerves for years because you want to find the perfect guy. And now that you've found him you behave like a little kid who had his favorite toy taken away."

"I'm not-"

But Brian didn't let him go on. He so didn't need to listen to one of Mikey's rants. "And why? Because years ago Ben and I met and fucked our brains out. Christ, Mikey. Grow up already. Ben didn't even know you then."

Michael's face turned petulant. "This isn't about Ben."

"What? Of course it's about Ben."

“No. It’s not.”

Okay. He so didn’t want to go there, but obviously Mikey didn’t give him a choice. Oh, Ben was going to owe him big for this one. “Mikey-“

“It’s about you,” Michael shouted. “He had you.”

“Don’t be an even bigger asshole, Mikey. ‘He had you’. What are you, five?”

“Don’t patronize me!”

“I’m not,” Brian said, weary to the bone. Fuck, he hadn’t really slept in more than a week. And hadn’t had sex in just that long – not that he’d ever tell anyone that.

“I’ve loved you for so long,” Michael said and Brian rubbed his head. Jesus Christ. “But I’ve accepted that you’re not going to ... touch me. We’re friends, best friends, and you made it perfectly clear that nothing more is going to happen between us. I could live with that, but knowing that Ben had what I can never have...” He trailed off, staring at Brian from luminous eyes.

And just like that, it was too much. Lack of sleep and emotional turmoil had brought him to a point where he just didn’t care anymore. Without thinking he reached out, grabbed Michael and pulled him against his own body. “That’s it? Just because Ben and I fucked?” He saw Michael swallow hard and then nod. “Okay, then. We can take care of that easily.”

His mind blanked out and his body took over as he lowered his lips and kissed his best friend.

It wasn’t as if Justin still cared what he was doing.

Justin was sweating by the time he reached Brian’s hotel. He nodded at the guy behind the counter, who nodded back, no doubt remembering that Justin had been here before. He stepped into the elevator, pressing the button for the fourth floor and leaned against the wall when it made its way up, breathing hard.

God. He was such an idiot. And he no idea what he was going to tell Brian. If – and that was the biggie – Brian even wanted to talk to him. He had every right to be angry and hurt, how much Justin knew now after listening to all the messages Brian had left on his cell phone during the past ten days. They had stopped four days ago, as if Brian had given up on him.

It was that what scared Justin the most.

But it made sense. Justin knew how vulnerable Brian was and he also remembered the

happy expression on Brian's face after the day they'd spent together at Brian's hotel. Brian trusted him, had opened his hard shell and let Justin in – only to have Justin trample on his carefully guarded soul.

Justin wiped a hand over his face and it came away wet. Was he crying? Or just sweating more profusely than he'd thought? Whatever it was, Justin couldn't bring himself to care. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered if Brian refused to forgive him.

The elevator finally came to a stop and the doors opened silently. The hallway was silent, too, as Justin walked down to Brian's door, each footstep set with trepidation, but also the knowledge that he had to do this. He owed it to Brian – and to himself.

When he finally reached the door, he stood there, breathing deeply. He wanted to collect himself but his mind was racing as was his heart – with fear or anticipation he couldn't say.

He knocked and nothing happened. Not a single noise from the inside. So he knocked again – with the same result.

"Brian," he then called, knocking harder. "Brian, it's me, Justin. I need to talk to you. Please, open the door."

Nothing.

Not a damned thing.

Shit.

Justin ran a hand through his hair and wondered if maybe shouting would help, then decided against it, turned and made his way back down into the lobby.

++++++

"Shhh."

Daphne opened her eyes and blinked, clearly confused as to where the noise was coming from. It was dark in the room, the only light coming from the half moon shining through the drapes.

"Daph," Paul whispered, closing the door as quietly as possible.

"Paul?" Her voice was incredulous and she was sitting up in her bed. "Are you insane?"

"Not really," he said and grinned, then remembered that with the little light she couldn't see him. "Well, maybe a little."

He heard a chuckle from the bed. "What are you doing here? It's in the middle of the night."

"Not in the middle of the night," he replied, laughing. "It's only ten."

"Only ten," she said and her voice was once again incredulous. "How did you get in here?"

"Nobody saw me," he said proudly. And he was proud. He had danced through the shadows, right past the nurse's desk. Ha.

"While you were hobbling around?" Now her voice wasn't just incredulous, it was stunned.

"Aha!" he exclaimed, walking closer to her bed. "See," he held out his leg. "The cast is gone."

"Oh." Was it his imagination or was she actually subdued at the news? His heart did a funny little flop in his chest at the possibility. "Congrats," she said, but it didn't sound happy.

"Thanks," he replied, not really meaning it either. It was one thing going to New York, while Daphne gave birth to her baby and got over her failed marriage. But leaving her while she tried to battle depression due to a miscarriage was a completely different thing.

When she didn't say anything, he pulled something from his pocket. "Also," he said, "I came to bring you this." He was finally at the bed and could make out her silhouette. He held out the small bag he'd brought with him.

She might have stared at him, or frowned, he wasn't sure, but she most definitely chuckled when she took it. "Geez. A night time present. That's a new one for me."

"Can you risk a light?" he asked and after a moment she reached out and the small lamp at her nightstand came alive. Paul had to blink, his eyes trying to adjust to the sudden brightness.

"What is it?" she asked, already opening the bag.

He shrugged, feeling self-conscious all of a sudden – and then

'Meow'.

"Oh my God."

Paul swallowed. Shit. Maybe she didn't like it.

“Oh my God,” she repeated. “Paul. What have you done?”

Fuck. She didn't like it. Damn.

'Meow' it made again, and a small head peeked out. It was mostly gray with a little white spot on the nose. The eyes were wide and curious and the whiskers long and excited.

“Oh God.” Daphne cautiously touched the small head and a purr started instantly. “Oh Paul.”

He looked at her face and the first tear fell. “I'm sorry,” he whispered, miserable. “I'm sorry-“

Her eyes found his. “Sorry? Why are you sorry?”

He shrugged, uncomfortable and embarrassed. It had seemed like such a good idea, and now it made her cry. “I promise I'll find a good home for her.”

“Her?” Daphne's voice was soft. “It's a girl?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I ... uh ... a friend's cat had kittens and I thought, I mean ... it's a Maine Coon. They're great.” God, now he was babbling.

“She is beautiful.” Daphne was stroking the tiny ears and the purr became even louder. “And you got her for me?”

“Uh ... yeah.” Maybe she didn't hate the cat after all. God, let her not hate the cat, please.

She looked up at him and her eyes were luminous. “Thank you,” she whispered. “Oh, thank you. It's ... I love her.”

“You ... do?” Oh wow. Paul refrained himself from doing a happy dance around her room, but only just.

“Oh yes.” Daphne nodded and her eyes were very soft. “Does she have a name?”

“No,” he said. “I thought, you know, that you'd like to name her.”

She nodded again, holding the bag and the kitten. “How old is she?”

“Nine weeks.” Greg, the friend who owned the kitten's mother, had told him that she would grow fast. “She'll be a big cat in no time,” he assured Daphne.

“Nine weeks. She is so tiny.”

“Not for long,” Paul said. “Maine Coons are big cats.”

“Hope.”

Paul blinked. “What?”

Daphne smiled. “I’ll call her Hope. I think it fits. What do you think?”

It was the perfect name and he told her so. “She will love you, Daph.” When I can’t, he thought. When I’m too far away to hold you, to be with you when you need a friend.

“But I live in a hotel. Cats are probably not allowed.”

“You won’t be in a hotel forever,” Paul said, giving her what he hoped was a reassuring smile. “I already talked to my Mom. Hope can stay with us for the time being. But as soon as you have your own apartment or whatever, you can take her. Is ... is that okay?”

“It’s perfect.” She smiled, but it slipped away while her fingers kept stroking the kitten. “Justin and I talked today.”

“You did?” God, it was hard to be a friend when all he wanted was to ram his fist into the fucker’s face.

“Yeah.” She nodded, more to herself. “He actually wanted to try again. Have another baby.”

What? In his head Paul screamed, but what came out was a croak, “W-what?”

“For a moment I was tempted. I mean, I love him. And he is ... you should get to know him. You’d like him. Justin is a great guy. He’s always been there for me.”

Paul turned away and closed his eyes. He had no idea how she did it, how she could talk about this man with such love and warmth. He thought of Justin Taylor – and then of murder.

And he most definitely would not like the guy.

He took a deep breath and turned back to Daphne, whose eyes seemed full of knowledge. But she didn’t say anything. So he decided to play the game with her and asked, “And then?”

“Well, I said for a moment I was tempted. But not for long. And then I told him in no uncertain terms that me and him – it would be another disaster waiting to happen. Can you believe that he told me he wouldn’t look at another man ever again?” She shook her

head. "He is almost as insane as you. Men," she added and snorted very non-ladylike.

"So you're not getting back together?" He had to ask, because the answer was important. He needed to hear the words.

"Of course not." Daphne gave him a 'duh' look. "It would be awful and we'd end up hating one another. I could never live like that. And I don't want to be anyone's second choice either." She sighed. "I admit that the idea of living on my own was a little bit scary at first, but now," she looked up and gave him a sweet smile that made his heart swell, "thanks to you I won't be living alone." She finally took the kitten completely out of the bag and held it up. Its belly was white, too, and so were three of its four paws.

"You are a beauty," Daphne decided and kissed the kitten on its tiny nose.

And Paul, sick man that he was, wished he could have been the kitten.

++++++

The guy behind the hotel counter was gay. And he quite obviously had a thing for blonds.

Justin forced his best smile and looked at the man. "Hello."

The man's pupils widened. He was thirty-ish, with reddish hair, blue eyes and tons of freckles on a face that looked almost boyish. "Well, hello there," he greeted Justin and the smile on his face was obviously meant to be seductive.

"Do you by any chance remember me?" Justin asked.

"You are Mr. Kinney's guest," the man replied and a twinkle appeared in those eyes. "But even if you weren't I would remember you. I always remember the cute ones."

Gah. It was all Justin could think, but he kept the smile in place. "That's ... uh ... good. Because, it seems that Brian, I mean Mr. Kinney, isn't in his room."

Kyle – according to his name tag – frowned for a moment, then nodded. "You're right. He is out. He left a while ago. Sorry." He lifted his shoulder in what seemed like an apologetic shrug.

Justin made himself smile wider. "Do you think," he leaned forward and let the tips of his fingers touch Kyle's, "you could let me into his room so I can wait there?"

Kyle swallowed audibly. "It's ... uh ... against the rules."

"I know," Justin said and sighed. "But it's important and you know me, right?"

Kyle seemed torn. "Well, yes, I do remember you. But I could lose my job." His hand where it touched Justin's was trembling.

So Justin let his fingers wander over the back of Kyle's hand. "It isn't as if you'd let a stranger go into a room. I'm Mr. Kinney's ... friend. He wouldn't mind me being there," he said and crossed his fingers behind his back.

Kyle licked his lips and there was perspiration above his upper lip. "I ... I ... c-could make an exception. But you can't tell anyone, okay?"

"Okay," Justin assured him with another smile. His mother had always told him that his smile was like the morning sun. He'd never thought it could come in handy like this. "I promise."

With obvious difficulty, Kyle pulled his hand from the counter and turned, then came back instantly with Brian's key card. Justin reached for it, but Kyle pulled it back. "What if Mr. Kinney gets angry?" He was clearly worried to lose his job. Damn. Justin felt like a heel, but this was too important.

"I swear he won't get you in any trouble. I'll make sure that he doesn't. I won't even tell him that it was you who gave me the card."

Kyle was torn and so Justin looked deeply into his eyes. "Please?"

After another moment and with a deep sigh, Kyle handed the card over. Justin took it and smiled, then thanked him. He was about to turn away, when Kyle's voice stopped him.

"Is the thing between you and Mr. Kinney serious?"

Justin frowned, because – what the fuck? "Why do you want to know that?" he asked and looked at Kyle. A blush was staining the freckled cheeks and he was clenching his hands.

Oh shit.

"Because, you know ... we could hook up or something. Not tonight because, well, I'm working," he laughed self-consciously.

Justin sighed inwardly, then slowly shook his head. "I'm sorry, but Brian and me – it's the real thing," he said, praying that he wasn't telling a lie.

Kyle's face fell. "Too bad. You're just my type."

No shit. "Sorry," Justin said again, then turned away and walked quickly toward the elevator. The last thing he needed were more complications in his life, he had enough

as it was.

++++++

Michael woke up with the worst headache in his life. It wasn't just the usual 'wow, I drank too much and now my head is pounding' kind of thing, no, this was the killer, the headache of the century, the 'I can't remember a thing I did last night' variety. He'd only heard people talk about it so far.

He opened one eye – and quickly closed it again.

Yep, not only his head hurt. His eyes did, too. Come to think of it, so did his entire body.

And then he heard a groan from beside him.

A very familiar groan.

His eyes shot open and the glaring sunlight would have brought him down to his knees – if he hadn't been lying on his bed, that is.

"Brian?" he squeaked and instantly cleared his throat. Squeaking was so seventh grade. "Brian?" he asked again, glad when his usual voice came out of his mouth.

"Shoot me," Brian said, clearly the smarter of them both because he kept his eyes tightly shut. "What the hell did we do?"

"I have no fucking idea," Michael managed, rubbing gritty hands over his stubbly face. Shit.

"That should have been my line," Brian muttered. "Fuck. My head is killing me. Where the fuck are we?"

Michael risked another look and winced. "In Emmett's apartment," he said. "In Emmett's bed," he then added. And oh holy shit. Holy, holy shit. They were naked. "Together," he said lamely.

Had they spent the night together in this bed?

Michael rubbed his aching head. God, maybe he had a brain tumor mysteriously growing overnight, because he'd never experienced that kind of pain before.

And then an image shot into his brain. Brian with fury in his eyes, Brian advancing, and then – then – Brian kissing him. Not just the usual friendship kiss, no this one was different. Hot, demanding, with full tongue and body contact.

Oh. My. God.

He gulped. "Brian?" he asked.

"What?" came from his left side, the voice clearly annoyed. Fuck.

"What do you remember?"

Nothing. No answer for at least a minute. And then.

"FUCK."

"God, not so loud," Michael said with a wince, before he cautiously turned his head and found Brian sitting next to him, his face shell-shocked. And Michael's breath caught. "What?" was all he managed to ask, even though the answer seemed obvious. Here they were, naked, in bed together. It took no brainiac to see what had happened. And Michael couldn't remember a damn thing.

When Brian didn't answer, just sat there, shaking his head, Michael sat up, too, and groaned. "Brian? What is it?"

"Fuck," Brian muttered, closing his eyes as if he were in pain. Which he probably was. "How much did we drink last night?" he wanted to know.

Michael looked around, which made his head almost split in half, and found at least two empty bottles of Jim Beam on the floor. "A lot," he said.

"Fuck." Brian muttered his favourite word with just the right amount of disgust in his voice. Then he looked at Michael from bloodshot eyes. "Did we fuck?"

Michael swallowed – hard. "Uh ... I can't remember."

Brian's left brow went up. "You can't remember?" Was Michael hallucinating or did Brian sound insulted?

Michael almost laughed. "No," he admitted, feeling sheepish. Jesus. He and Brian ... He swallowed again. Jesus God. He thought of Ben – and quickly dismissed the thought. It was just too confusing on top of everything else. "I ... uh ... remember you kissing me, though."

"Really?"

Okay, now Michael felt insulted. Did Brian have to sound so incredulous. Sure, he wasn't a raving beauty, but Michael had always believed that he was at least marginally attractive. In a boy-next-door kind of way.

“Yes, really,” he snapped. “Tongues and all.”

Brian rubbed his forehead and rolled his lips. “Fuck.” Then he rubbed his eyes and nodded. “Yeah, I remember, too. Shit, Mikey.” Michael saw Brian take a deep breath. “What happened next?”

“I only remember bits and pieces. You pushed me away and you were angry and then we kind of made up again and started drinking.” Michael looked down at himself then pointedly at Brian. “But I guess it’s pretty obvious what happened.”

“Yeah,” Brian agreed, his face scrunching up as if he were in pain. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I don’t remember a damned thing.”

Michael didn’t either, but images were starting to resurface. Brian kissing his throat, Brian licking his chest, biting his nipple, and then ... then ... “God,” Michael groaned, his groin heavy beneath the covers. “You,” he swallowed, his mouth like sawdust. “You fucked me,” he whispered, a part of him horrified, the other part in awe that it had finally happened.

Brian covered his face with his hands. “Fuck,” he mumbled again.

Michael wanted to reach out and soothe, but Brian could have worn a ‘don’t touch me’ sign and it wouldn’t have been more obvious that touching was the last thing he wanted.

Then Brian looked up again and there was such raw pain in those beautiful eyes, Michael gasped.

“Brian?” he whispered.

“I’m sorry,” Brian said, his voice raw. “So sorry.”

He was sorry. Michael felt his eyes well up and had to fight hard, not to have tears run down his face. It was a dream come true. But for Brian it seemed to be a nightmare.

Then another memory surfaced. Brian near orgasm. His face in deep concentration, his eyes closed, the mouth slightly open and then ...

Michael jumped out of the bed, covered his mouth with his hand and almost didn’t reach the bathroom in time, where he started to dry heave over the toilet.

God, he felt sick.

“Mikey?”

No. He couldn’t do that right now. “In a moment,” he shouted, hoping against hope that

Brian wouldn't follow, wouldn't see him-

"Mikey, are you alright?"

Of course, this was Brian Kinney and he rarely did what you wanted him to. "Go away," Michael said, and his stomach clenched again.

"Mikey-"

"No, I'm not alright," Michael shouted and turned to glare at his friend. "And you know why? Because for more than ten years I dreamed of you making love to me, of you kissing me, of you sleeping with me, waking up next to me. But ... not like this. Not -"

"I know," Brian said, his face a picture of perfect misery.

"No, you don't," Michael snapped. "Because you know what happened? You fucked me and .., and then you shouted his name." He saw Brian rear back as if he'd slapped him, saw Brian's eyes widen in shock. "Yeah, that's right, you said Justin's name. 'Justin, oh Justin. I love you.' How do you think that makes me feel?"

"Mikey-"

"Go," Michael ordered, turning away, not able to look at Brian one moment longer. "Go."

He felt Brian linger, felt him hesitate, but then he moved away, and Michael stood there, hands on the sink, staring at his own reflection in the mirror. It was his own face staring back at him – and yet, it seemed different somehow, older, tired and worn.

He heard the front door of Emmett's apartment open, then close, and knew Brian had left.

Then, and only then, he allowed himself to cry.

++++++

"Deb?"

Nothing. No reaction whatsoever.

So Carl tried again, louder this time. "Deb?"

When she still didn't react, he reached out and touched her, then pulled his hand back quickly when she almost jumped out of her skin.

"Wh-what?" she said, touching her hair, then her chest. "Carl?"

“Yeah,” he smiled at her. “You’ve been far away.”

She blinked and shook her head, chuckling a little. “Sorry. I feel silly,” she admitted and her cheeks colored a little.

She looked pretty when she blushed, Carl decided and his smile widened. “Silly, how?”

Debbie sighed. “Michael didn’t come home last night. I know, I know,” she said quickly, when she saw he wanted to speak. “He is twenty-five years old. And it’s hardly been his first night out, but I’m afraid he went and did something stupid.”

Carl chuckled. “Well, being young and stupid kind of goes together.”

“No, I mean, yeah. But,” she sighed again, more loudly. “I just don’t want him to fuck up the best thing that’s ever happened to him.”

Ah. Now Carl understood. “He and Ben still having problems?”

“They’re not talking.” Deb had been shocked at first, then angry when she’d heard about their sort-of break-up. Carl had been present at one of mother’s and son’s not so nice arguments. Michael had told his mother in no uncertain terms that he didn’t appreciate her meddling with his affairs, and Debbie had been equally vocal about doing just that whenever and however she saw it fit. Yep, that had been an evening to remember.

“Still?” Carl asked. He still had some trouble understanding the whole gay-thing, but apart from the obvious ick-factor he sometimes felt, he thought that Michael and Ben were actually kind of sweet together. Sheesh. Had he really thought that?

“Yeah.” Debbie ran a weary hand through her blond curls. After their shared dinner, Debbie had decided that being blond wasn’t really a bad thing. “It worries me because I know Michael. He can be so stubborn sometimes. And Ben, he’s a great guy, but even a saint has his limits when it comes to stupidity.”

“Do you know what caused their problems?” Had he really just asked that? Jesus, was he really discussing gay relationship problems with his girlfriend? Wow, he was glad nobody from the precinct was here or they’d decorate his locker with rainbow flags.

Debbie shook her head. “No. I tried talking to Ben, but he’s just as tight-lipped as Michael is. And I tried asking Brian but I don’t even know where he is.” She threw her hands in the air and stood. “This mess is driving me nuts.” She gave him an apologetic smile. “Sorry, Carl, now I’ve ruined our ten minutes.”

“No.” He reached out and took her hand. “I want you to confide in me. It’s part of,” he shrugged, “whatever we have.”

She looked at him for a long moment, then nodded and smiled. “Thanks. And now I

need to get back to work.”

He nodded and his gaze followed her as she walked to the counter, smiled at the drag queen who was sitting there, and all of a sudden froze, staring at something or someone. Carl felt himself stiffen, turned slowly and saw the reason for Debbie’s shock. Michael had entered the Diner.

Carl had met Debbie’s son several times, but he’d never seen Michael look like this. His face was almost gray, his eyes bloodshot, and there were bags beneath them that spoke of more than just sleep deprivation.

“Michael.” Debbie came out of her shock induced trance and hurried to her son. “Honey. What happened?” She enveloped him in a tight hug. “Baby, are you alright?” she asked and pulled back. “What’s wrong?”

Michael rolled his eyes. “Mom. Shush. I’m okay.”

“You’re most certainly not okay,” Debbie said firmly, pulling her son with her toward the counter. “Sit,” she ordered before she let go of him, walked around and poured a cup of coffee which she placed in front of Michael. “Drink.”

Carl got up from his own bench and walked over to them. “Hello, Michael.”

Michael, who was in the process of picking up his cup, stopped in mid-motion and gave him a narrow-eyed glare. “Oh, great, the homophobic cop. Just what I need today.”

“Michael.” Debbie’s voice was sharp. “Sorry, Carl.”

He held up a hand. “No need to apologize.” He let his gaze wander over Michael’s rumpled clothes, determined not to let Michael’s hostile attitude get to him. “Rough night, huh?”

“You have no idea.” It was still unfriendly, but a little less than before, so Carl booked it as a success. He knew that if he wanted his relationship with Debbie to work, he had to find a way to come to terms with her son.

Debbie put a plate in front of Michael. “Eat,” she said, glaring at him. “You look like shit.”

“I feel like shit,” he replied, his face turning green. “And get that away from me if you don’t want me to throw up all over the counter.”

“Can I have it?” The drag-queen, who had been a witness to the whole exchange, gave the plate a hopeful look.

“Sure.” Michael shoved it over and the man – woman? – took it happily.

“Now,” Debbie obviously had reached the end of her patience. “What the fuck happened to you?”

“I really don’t want to talk about it,” Michael said, staring morosely into his cup. “God, Mom,” he did look up then, “I fucked everything up.”

Debbie’s eyes widened before they narrowed, “What did you do?”

“Shit,” Michael groaned, then glared at the drag-queen. “Excuse me, can you maybe go away and mind your own business?” With an affronted huff the man left.

“Thanks for offending my customers,” Debbie snapped. “And now, out with it.”

“Does he have to be here?” Michael said, but it was a rhetoric question.

Debbie glared at her son. “He is here with me. Get over it.”

“Brian came over,” Michael said suddenly. “I’m not completely sure, but I think we got drunk and then,” he paused and sighed heavily, “we fucked.”

“Shit.” Carl looked up and saw the color drain from Debbie’s face. She reached out and grabbed the counter top. “Shit,” she muttered.

++++++

What the fuck?

Brian stopped dead in his tracks when he opened the door to his hotel room and found Justin sleeping in his bed. It was the last thing he’d have expected to see, and he closed the door behind him slowly, as if he were in a kind of trance.

It was just what he needed on top of everything else. He’d been driving for a while, then had stopped at a park and wandered around in the darkness, trying to understand what had happened. He was still in shock. He and Mikey had actually fucked. He had done the one thing, had broken the one iron rule, he had fucked a friend.

Okay, so maybe he had broken the rule twice, but unlike Justin who had come on to him, he had kissed Mikey, and Brian knew his best friend well enough to understand that Mikey couldn’t have resisted him, no matter what. It wasn’t arrogance that made him think that particular thought. No, it was his life’s experience, the knowledge that Mikey had no resistance against Brian’s charms.

But when he’d lowered his mouth to Mikey’s, Brian hadn’t given a damn.

All he wanted was for the problems to disappear, for the pain inside of him to go away, and to forget. Forget for a few hours that Justin didn’t want him, that he’d pushed Brian

away and that all his promises of love and forever were nothing but empty words. That Justin was just another person for whom Brian hadn't been good enough.

But what the hell was Justin doing here? And how had he gotten inside? Okay, so that wasn't quite such a mystery. Brian had noticed the little queen called Kyle manning the reception desk at night, and after what Brian had witnessed, Justin was probably right down Kyle's alley. Blond hair, blue eyes, sweet smile. Yup, Justin didn't have to do more than smile and Brian's key card would be his.

However, it still was no explanation what brought Justin here in the first place.

Brian walked over to the bed and looked down at the sleeping figure, the almost angelic, boyish features relaxed, the lashes painting shadows over pale cheekbones. Brian remembered kissing those cheeks, remember tasting the tears falling through those lashes, and he felt a hurt so deep, so crippling, he almost groaned.

He didn't, though, because he had learned a long time ago that showing your feelings never got you anywhere.

Instead he slammed his car keys on the nightstand.

++++++

"And you know what's the real killer?" Michael laughed hollowly, feeling as if his insides were outside for everyone to see, to stomp on. "He doesn't remember it. And he didn't want it. And ... he said Justin's name."

Michael didn't care that the asshole cop was close by. He was beyond caring. He did look at his mother, though and saw the shock and despair on her face. He felt a strange flash of pleasure at the sigh and wondered if maybe getting fucked by Brian Kinney ripped out your soul.

"Oh, Michael. Why didn't you stop it?" she wailed, her eyes filling with tears. "Why didn't you stop Brian?"

Michael could only stare at her. She was his mother, she was the woman who knew about his hopes and dreams. How could she even ask? "Did you ever have something that you wanted with every fibre of your being? I ... Oh God." He buried his face in his hands, and just sat there, the numbness settling deep in his bones.

"Where is Brian?" Debbie asked, her voice brisk.

"I sent him away," he replied from beneath his hands, before he looked up again. "I told him to leave. I don't know if I can ever look at him again, Mom."

"I know," Debbie said and came around the counter to put an arm over his shoulders.

For a moment he felt like shaking off the touch, any touch really, but then he reminded himself that this was his mother. She loved him, no matter what.

Michael laughed, and it sounded raw. "And then there's Ben. Oh God, Mom, Ben. I was so angry with him, and I told him he was wrong – and now ... now I've proven him right." How could he face Ben? What could he say? How could Ben – loving, gentle Ben – ever forgive what had happened?

"I'm sure Ben will forgive you," Debbie tried to assure him, but she didn't sound convinced

"You think?" Michael didn't feel hope, but it was so much easier to believe his mother, to hope. "You think he can really forgive me?"

"Do you want him to forgive you?" That from the cop.

"What kind of stupid question is that?" Michael snapped. "Of course I want him back." How could the asshole even ask. He missed Ben, he wanted to be with him, wanted ... Ben's arms around him, holding him, telling him that everything would be alright, that this pain would go away.

"Of course," Debbie soothed, but the look she gave the cop was one of turmoil. "But you need to talk to him, baby. And soon."

Michael frowned. "Why?"

"Because for him to hear it from ... someone else ..." Debbie let the sentence trail off, and Michael bristled.

"Brian would never tell," he said, knowing it to be true. Even after last night, after maybe destroying the only friendship he'd ever really cherished, he knew without a doubt that Brian would never tell Ben what had happened.

"But can you live with a lie?" Debbie asked, and her eyes were so sad.

He wanted to say 'yes', but Michael knew the answer was no. He'd never been a good liar, and carrying around some dark secret – no, he wasn't made for it. He'd blurt it out – probably at the most inopportune moment.

He looked at his mother, and ignored the cop. But he knew. There was no way around it – he had to tell Ben. And it was entirely up to Ben if they still had a chance.

++++++

Brian watched Justin jerk, then sit up in bed as if he'd been jack-knifed. "Wh-what?" he asked, his eyes unfocussed. "Who-" he started, but then his gaze landed on Brian and

his whole body seemed to freeze.

Brian narrowed his eyes at him. "What the fuck are you doing here?" He didn't even try to keep his voice down. He was so angry, still so hurt, and after what had happened with Mikey(,) all his emotions were so close to the surface, Brian felt like a kettle that was about to explode.

"I," Justin licked his lips, "I came to see you. You ... I mean, you weren't there, and I ... I decided to wait and ... I guess I fell asleep."

Brian glared, then turned away. He didn't want to look at Justin's sleep softened lips, didn't want to lose himself in those blue depths. "You realise that Kyle could get fired for letting you inside. Not that I care what happens to that little faggot," he added, sneering for good measure.

He heard the bed rustle behind him and knew that Justin was getting up. "Brian – can ... can we talk?"

"There is nothing to talk about," Brian said. He was at the window now, the night dark and forbidden, just like his soul, he thought. There had always been a blackness in his head, but tonight it had definitely deepened.

"But there is," Justin said earnestly. "First of all I need to apologize and–"

"No." Brian cut him off, sick of hearing apologies, sick of – everything. "You can stick your apology up your ass, Justin. I don't want it, more importantly, I don't need it." He took a deep breath, steeled himself against the man he –

He turned around quickly. "You know. I'm actually grateful. So there's no need to apologize."

"Grateful," Justin echoed, his face pale.

"Yeah." Brian nodded and forced himself to chuckle. "Can you believe that I actually thought that I was cut out for something like a re-la-tion-ship." He shook his head as if he were amused. "But thanks to you, I found out that being on my own, fucking everything that moves – that's really who I am."

Justin only stared at him.

"So." He turned away and toward the mini-fridge in the corner. "Can I offer you a drink? They don't have much here, but there's a passably good whiskey." He picked up a glass and gave Justin a look over his shoulder. "One shot? Double?"

At that Justin shook himself out of his stupor. "I don't want a drink," he said firmly. "And you can stop your bullshit right now. Because, this is me, Justin. I'm not buying any of

that 'fuck me' attitude. I'm not Michael."

Brian laughed, and this time he didn't have to fake it. He had to make sure, though, not to let it turn into a sob.

Mikey. God, Mikey.

"Funny you should mention him," he said and turned back to Justin. "Because I just fucked the hell out of him."

Silence. It was as if Justin had stopped breathing. He stood completely still, like a statue, and only a twitching in his right cheek told Brian that the blond was still alive.

So Brian went for the kill. There wasn't a moment to lose. He was so close to breaking, he couldn't risk for Justin to stay any longer. "Never thought he'd be such a good lay. I would've done him sooner." He made a tsk-ing sound and poured himself a double shot of whiskey, waiting for Justin to leave, waiting for the door to open and close.

But it never came.

Instead, he heard Justin come closer. "You – fucked Michael?"

"Yup." It was flippant. Good.

"God, Brian."

Why didn't Justin leave? What the fuck was wrong with the guy?

"God," Justin's voice was full of anguish. "I'm so sorry. So fucking sorry."

And instead of going away, Justin touched him. It was only a hand on his shoulder, but Brian was unable to suppress the shudder that went through him at the contact.

Still, he gritted his teeth. "Why are you sorry? Didn't you hear what I said? I fucked Mikey. I fucked him."

"I heard," Justin said softly, and slowly, oh so slowly Justin's arm came around his waist and he was moulding himself to Brian's back. "Do you think so little of me? Do you think I'm going to run away at the news? Just for the record, I'm not running away. But I feel horrible, because I know it wouldn't have happened if I hadn't pushed you away the way I did."

"You are mighty full of yourself, Mr. Taylor," Brian said, but his voice sounded choked and lacked conviction. Especially since his body craved the connection and his hand found Justin's, covering it.

“Must be your sparkling personality rubbing off on me,” Justin tried to joke, but Brian could hear the sadness. “Tell me what happened.”

Brian wanted to push him away and at the same time he wanted to crawl beneath Justin’s skin and stay there for all eternity. He closed his eyes. “Ben asked me to talk to him. Years ago, I met Ben and we spent a remarkable weekend fucking our brains out. Somehow Mikey found out and idiot he is, he freaked. I went to talk sense into his incredibly thick head and ... then we were kissing. And drinking. And ... I can’t even fucking remember the rest.”

“Fuck.”

A truer word had never been spoken. “I hurt him,” Brian admitted, and sighed when Justin slipped his other arm around him as well. “And I have no idea what to do. He couldn’t even look at me.”

“It is so you to take all the blame,” Justin said. “I’m sure whatever happened, Mikey was an eager participant. After all, he’s been obsessed with the idea of fucking you for more than ten years.”

It was true. Brian knew it was true, and yet, he couldn’t help feeling responsible for the whole disaster. “I know that. I know he was obsessed. And I didn’t even try to stop it. I used him.”

“I know.” The sadness was back in Justin’s voice. “But he used you, too. And in the end, despite a lot of awkwardness, you’ll both be okay.”

“You think?” God, he wanted to believe it.

“Yeah,” Justin whispered. “He loves you, Brian. And you love him. That’s the most important thing. And rationally he knows that you and he – that you never had a future as a couple.”

Brian nodded, the need to convince himself almost unbearable. “You treated me like shit,” he said and the words were out before he could hold them back. What was it about Justin that made him forget about caution, that made Brian’s need to protect himself null and void? “As if I were nothing, as if what we had was nothing.”

“Had?”

“Had,” Brian insisted stubbornly and he heard Justin sigh.

“I very much hope we still have it.” Justin leaned his head against Brian’s back. “I want to apologize and I don’t know how. All I can say is that I was in shock. When Daph lost the baby I felt as if it was my fault, as if by allowing myself to be with you, to be happy, I made it happen.”

The cosmic guilt. Oh yes, Brian was intimately familiar with the concept. “You’re not God, Justin.”

He felt Justin nod against his back. “I know. But I was ... I wanted this baby, Brian. Despite everything. And I know that Daph wanted it, too.” He laughed. It sounded slightly choked. “She is so brave, she told me what a fool I’ve been, made me come to you, while losing the baby is tearing her up inside. She called me insane.”

That sounded like Daphne. Brian had to smile. “She’s a smart girl.”

“I tried to convince myself that making our marriage work and having another baby would erase what happened. God, I really was insane.”

Justin was quiet then, just leaning against Brian, the weight of his body comforting. But Brian couldn’t take too much comfort tonight. He straightened and dislodged Justin in the process, then moved away, needing distance.

“I love you, Brian.” Justin said.

Brian didn’t turn, didn’t react. He just stood there, the words rolling over him, then smashing in his gut like an unstoppable force, and he had to stifle a groan. “Go home, Justin,” Brian said. He couldn’t deal with this. Not tonight. Maybe not ever again. Yes, he loved Justin, and yes, being with him was heaven, but nothing lasted forever. And losing Justin – no, he couldn’t do it. Not again.

“You don’t trust me anymore.” Justin’s voice held a world of sadness. “I know. And I understand. I behaved just the way everyone else in your life did, didn’t I? Well, Michael never did. But you fucked him, so you feel as if you destroyed his trust in you. God, what a mess.”

Was that what it was? Did he really think he had destroyed Mikey’s trust in him? Brian had no idea. He only felt that tonight something sacred had been broken – and he had no fucking clue how to put it back together. “I’m tired, Justin.” He felt as if he were a hundred years old.

“Yes, I know.” Justin sniffed and Brian knew he was battling tears. “But ... I’m so in love with you, Brian. Please, please don’t send me away. I promise, I’ll ... I’ll do everything to earn your trust again.”

It sounded so tempting, so fucking tempting, Brian wanted to turn, wanted to grab Justin and never let him go. But something was holding him back, maybe the last threads of sanity he still possessed. “Justin,” he said wearily, “please. Go.”

“No. I won’t let you push me away. Because we have something together, Brian. Something real, something that might really work.”

Might being the operative word here. Brian shook his head and did turn around then. "Might isn't enough, Justin," he said. "What if it doesn't work? I can't ..." He had to stop, had to take a deep breath, his throat clogged with something Brian couldn't name. "I can't do it."

"But what if it does?" Justin asked and took a step closer. "Nothing in life is certain, Brian. Don't you think it's a risk worth taking? You once told me that some things are worth any risk. Maybe you should listen to your own advice for a change."

God, Justin's eyes were so blue. Brian licked his lips, as he felt his control slip. "Justin, don't you understand? It will fucking destroy me to lose you again. You're it. You're the one chance I've got, don't you think I don't know that? But you didn't even fucking talk to me. I had to call your fucking mother to find out that Daphne had lost the baby!" He shouted the last words, but Brian didn't care. He was beyond caring. Let Justin see how much he had hurt Brian. Why not? Brian had bled like a wounded animal for days. Why not let Justin bleed a little for a change?

"I'm so, so sorry," Justin said, his eyes filled to the brim. "I know I fucked up. I know I behaved like an asshole, but this asshole still loves you. Isn't that worth something?"

It was worth everything. "It is," Brian whispered and closed his eyes. He knew Justin had won. "I just don't know if it's enough," he said and his voice was all over the place. He didn't give a damn. And, Fuck – was he crying now? Because, damn, there were sobs coming from his mouth, and he was suddenly sitting on his bed. How on earth had he gotten there?

"Do you still love me?" Justin's voice wavered wildly.

And all Brian could do was nod against his shoulder. There were no words in his mouth, but Justin was there, close, and holding him, and he was in Justin's arms crying like a baby, and he was holding Justin and it felt so right, so fucking perfect.

"I love you," Justin whispered. "I love you." He was gently pushed on his back. "Sleep," Justin murmured. "Sleep. I'll be there when you wake up. I promise."

And Brian fell asleep to the touch and voice of the man he loved.

Justin had no idea what time it was when he woke up. The room was dark, but that didn't mean anything as the blinds were closed, no light penetrating the dark blue. He was still wearing his underwear and shirt and he was lying above the bed covers. Another half-dressed body was lying beside him, still fast asleep, his chest rising and falling with steady breaths.

Brian's mouth was slightly open, but his face wasn't relaxed in sleep. There was a tightness around his eyes, and a nervous twitch that seemed to follow him in his

dreams.

For a moment Justin considered touching the face he knew so well, but then he decided against it. After the emotional roller coaster Brian had been through these past days, he needed all the sleep he could get. Justin wondered if Brian had had any uninterrupted sleep at all until tonight. Probably not.

He also had to accept that most of Brian's distress was his fault. He was the one who had done this to Brian, who had brought the man he loved to this state of despair, simply by not giving a damn.

Shit.

Justin felt his eyes fill and roughly rubbed them with his knuckles. He had no right to cry, dammit. He had lost every right the moment he'd pushed Brian away, behaving like a cold-hearted son of a bitch.

And Brian had gone and fucked Mikey.

For a moment it felt as if he was going to be sick, but Justin sat up and swallowed hard and the urge disappeared. The images, though, remained. Images, he didn't want in his mind but which came with relentless force, tormenting him with their clarity. Would he ever get rid of them? Would he ever be able to forget?

Was it his punishment for being such an asshole?

Rationally it was a stupid thought. He remembered Daphne's speech about him not being God, and yes, he knew he wasn't God. But sometimes he couldn't help but feel as if everything was a big cosmic joke. Someone sitting up there, laughing their ass off at Justin's struggle to find a path through the jungle called life.

Brian moaned in his sleep and Justin quickly looked down at him, but his lover wasn't waking up. Instead his left hand started grabbing for the sheet while the other was seeking contact where none was to be found.

"Shhh," Justin soothed, and finally did reach out to touch Brian. He kept his movements gentle, but Brian flinched nevertheless at the contact. His eyes flew open, bright and scared, like those of an animal on the verge of fleeing.

"Shhh," Justin said again, rubbing his fingers up and down Brian's arm. The skin was a little clammy, and Justin felt himself frown. "Are you okay?" he asked, then felt stupid for it. Of course, Brian wasn't okay. How could he be okay?

Brian blinked and his eyes calmed. "You're still here," he stated unnecessarily. "You didn't leave."

“No,” he said gently, trying for a smile. “I told you I’d stay.”

Brian nodded, but more to himself it seemed. “What about Daphne?”

Daphne. Fuck. Justin tried to see the digital numbers on the TV in the hotel room. 5.30. He released a relieved breath. “She’s probably still asleep,” he said. “Too early.”

“Did she really tell you to come here?”

It was such a typical Brian-question, Justin had to chuckle. “Yeah. She, like, threw me out of her room. Also, there’s this kid she’s been seeing.”

Justin saw Brian’s eyes focus on him. “Kid?”

“He’s twenty-one,” Justin snorted. “Or so she says. She also told me he was in love with her.”

“Christ.” Brian blinked, but his eyes were dry. “What a mess.”

Justin knew that Brian wasn’t really thinking about Daphne. Sure, Brian liked Daph, and the two of them had developed something close to friendship – at least before Justin had found out he was gay – but Justin was very aware of the fact that Brian was talking about what had happened with Michael.

Jesus God.

It was one thing coming to terms with what had actually happened. Justin was surprised that he wasn’t all that bothered by the fact that Brian had fucked his best friend. Maybe it was because Justin knew that it had been borne out of despair and had nothing to do with any lasting relationship Brian was secretly planning with Michael Novotny. That didn’t change the fact that it was a truly fucked up situation – for everyone involved. Justin found himself even thinking about what Michael was doing right now.

“Fuck. I stink.” Brian was rubbing his eyes and sitting up slowly, taking slow, even breaths, quite obviously fighting nausea. “I need a shower.” Justin watched him get up and stumble toward the bathroom, then close the door behind him.

Justin wanted to get up and go after him, but he stayed where he was, knowing that intruding on Brian’s privacy right now wasn’t the right thing to do. Brian needed the distance – not too much – but he needed space to pull himself together, to wrap what remained of his dignity around him. Justin would not let Brian hide or pull back from him, but he could give the man he loved the privacy he craved.

Justin sighed and stood as well, then walked to his discarded pants and fished for his cell phone, checking for any incoming calls. There was one from his mother, but it had been hours ago and as Jennifer hadn’t tried to reach him again, he decided that he

could risk ignoring it for now.

He checked the time at the TV again. It was 6am now and Daphne would be awake. The hospital kept ungodly hours with their breakfast, much to Daphne's annoyance. Bracing himself for just that, Justin dialled the number and after only two rings, Daphne picked up.

"Where are you?" she greeted him, and Justin chuckled. God, just hearing her voice was balm for his frayed nerves. This was Daphne, trusted childhood friend.

"In Brian's hotel room," he told her while he pulled back the blinds. It was still dark outside, barely a soul on the streets. "He's in the shower."

"Ah." The word held a world of meaning, but Justin decided not to ask. "I had a visitor last night," Daphne said. "No, actually, I had two." Justin could hear the smile in her voice and his heart squeezed tight. It seemed like a lifetime ago since he'd seen or heard Daphne smile. And usually he'd been the one to make her do so.

"Really?" The shower went on in the bathroom and Justin pictured Brian, naked, wet – Shit. "Uh ... who was it?" Fuck. Now he was hard like a rock. He swallowed hard.

"Paul," she said and Justin felt himself frown. Paul again. "And," this time she chuckled, "a cat."

A – what? "Uh, Daph. Are you okay?" He tried to will his erection down, without any success.

"Well, no," she replied, but the deep sadness he had heard before was gone now. Because Paul had been there. Justin had a strange twinge of what felt exactly like jealousy. And wasn't that totally fucked up? He was gay and whoever Daphne decided to date wasn't any of his business. Not anymore. Not that she was dating Paul. Or so she was saying. Problem was, Justin didn't believe her. Maybe she didn't know it herself yet, but she was sold on this guy.

Geez.

"The cat is real, though," Daphne went on. "A tiny kitten. I'm calling her Hope and she's a Maine-Coon. Paul says she'd going to be huge when she's all grown."

Her voice sounded almost happy and Justin realised that the jealousy he was feeling was for the best friend he'd ever had. He didn't want to lose her, not as a friend. But now Paul Webber was making her happy, brought her a cat for fuck's sake, and gave her a reason to laugh.

"What are you going to do with a kitten?" he asked and felt like an asshole. Why couldn't he just be happy for her?

“Paul already took care of that.” Daphne wasn’t perturbed. “Hope’ll stay with Paul’s parents until I have my own place.” She paused and Justin could hear her swallow. “Sounds strange. My own place. I kind of expected to have a place with you. Our house.” Again a pause. “Justin, what’s going to happen to our dream house?”

The house they’d planned and that was about to be finished. Justin had no idea what would happen with the house. No way could he move in there.

He shrugged, then remembered that Daphne couldn’t see him. “We’ll find a solution,” he told her. “If you want, I could help you find an apartment or something.”

“That would be great,” she readily agreed.

He would do anything to make this easier for her. After all, he’d already done his best to fuck it up but good. “You had any breakfast yet?” he asked.

“You mean that plastic roll and the week old cheese? And no.”

Justin winced. “Sorry,” he said. “Sounds – well – awful.”

“Yep.” She sounded cheerful despite the disgusting food prospect. “I would have called you anyway. They’re going to release me today.”

Today? Jesus. How was he going to do that? “Uhm ...,” he rubbed his forehead where a pounding had started just a few seconds ago. “When?”

“Justin, you don’t have to pick me up. Paul-“

“I’m your husband,” he snapped. He was grinding his teeth so hard, he wondered if he’d have any left before this whole nightmare was over.

She was silent on the other end and Justin was about to launch into an apology, when she said, “Justin, stop beating yourself up over everything that happens. I know we’re still married, but ... we’ll both start new lives now. You have to get used to me doing things on my own – without you.”

He knew that. At least his head did. His heart, his gut – now those two were entirely different problems. “I can’t lose you, Daph,” he finally admitted, his voice hoarse. “Please, don’t-“

“Justin,” she cut in. “You’re not going to lose me. Jesus, we’ve been friends forever. I love you. I-“ Her voice broke for a moment, but then she was back and it sounded normal again. “You will never lose me. I swear. Not if I can help it.”

The shower in the bathroom stopped, Justin heard the shower stall open and close and

imagined Brian standing there, squeaky clean, with a towel rubbing over that expanse of soft skin that ...

“Justin?”

Fuck. “Yeah, I’m still here.”

“How is he?” she asked, and Justin needed a moment to understand that she was actually inquiring about Brian.

“Do you really want to know?” he asked, because – well, he simply had to. Discussing Brian with Daphne held quite an amount of weird.

“No,” she admitted. “And yes,” she went on. “We have to get used to talking about him. So I suppose now is as good a time as any to start.”

Justin exhaled a long breath. “I hurt him deeply,” he said, and his eyes were tearing up again at the memory of pain in Brian’s beautiful eyes. “We have a long way to go.”

“Of course you do. Nothing worthy ever comes easy, Justin. But he loves you. He’s been in love with you forever.”

Justin frowned. “How would you know?”

“I didn’t.” Daphne chuckled. “But your mother did. She told me. She came by yesterday and we had a very long talk. She knew it all the time, even the first time she met Brian, she knew. She just tried to ignore it.”

“Denial, your name is Jennifer,” Justin bit out. God, it was a bitch to love someone who had done that to you.

“She feels terrible about it.”

Which was making all the difference. Compared to Brian’s mother – if you could call Joan Kinney that – Jennifer was a saint. “I know. She and Debbie are bonding. I’m not sure if that should please me or scare me to death.”

Daphne laughed. “Both, I guess. A little bit of Debbie would be good for her. She could loosen up a bit.”

“What about your parents?” Justin asked. “Have you called them yet?”

“No.”

O-kay. “I see,” was all Justin said. He knew Daphne well enough to realize that she didn’t want to talk about it.

She sighed. "What's there to say, anyway? Hey Mom, the baby is gone. Bye."

Justin sighed too. "Daph."

"Well, you know it's going to be exactly like that." Her voice held a definite 'duh'-note. "And my Dad's going to cry, and frankly, I can't have that right now."

He could understand that part at least. "Okay." He took a deep breath. "So, when am I going to meet Paul?"

"Soon," she promised. "Not right now. He's so pissed at you, I'm afraid he might bloody your nose."

Was there glee in her voice? Not that Justin could really blame her for it. "Soon then." The bathroom door opened and Brian appeared, clad in a hotel bathrobe. His hair was sticking out from his head and he was looking at Justin through eyes that were half-closed. "Okay, I need to go. If you don't want me to pick you up at the hospital, call my Mom." He paused and softened his voice, "Please?"

There was another pause, before Daphne said, "Fine. I'll call Jennifer. Tell Brian I said hi."

"Will do." Justin snapped his cell phone shut and his eyes met Brian's. "Daph says hi."

"Swell," Brian said and turned back to the bathroom. A moment later, Justin heard the blow-dryer come on.

++++++

Emmett stumbled from his bed where he'd spent the last ten minutes trying to decide if the relentless pounding was the result of too many drinks last night or was actually someone insane banging at his door.

"Don't beat the door down," he said loudly. "I'm coming, I'm coming."

The banging stopped instantly and Emmett breathed in relief before opening his door.

Only to find someone truly insane standing there. "Emmett. I'm so glad you're there."

Emmett blinked at the sight of Michael, soaking wet and looking more like a drowned rat than the friend he was accustomed to. "Are you completely out of your mind?" he demanded, planting his hands at his hips for good measure. "It's," he glanced at the clock and groaned. "No, I'm not going to say it, or I might never stop screaming."

"I know it's early--"

“Early?” Emmett cried it outrage.

“- but this is an emergency,” Michael went on, completely unaware that he’d pulled Emmett out of his bed after – God – two hours of sleep. It was going to be hell on his skin, Emmett thought and glared at his friend.

“An emergency?” he asked. “Aside from someone dead, I don’t know what kind of emergency-“

“Brian and I ...,” Michael flushed, then paled, “had sex.”

Emmett froze at that. “Jesus,” he breathed, finally realizing why his bed had been freshly made, why the old sheets had disappeared from his apartment. “Holy shit.”

Michael nodded emphatically at that and sank down on the sofa in Emmett’s small living room. “You can say that again.”

“Here in my bed,” Emmett stated. He wasn’t even sure why he’d said it. Probably the shock. Jesus. Jesus God.

“Yeah.” Michael actually looked contrite. “I’m sorry. It kind of happened. I’m also going to replace the two bottles of whiskey we kind of ... ah ... drank.”

Two bottles of ... Light dawned, and Emmett gave Michael a grave look. “So, you got drunk and then skunk out drunk, fucked your brains out?” It wasn’t really a question, because it was so obvious. Yet, Emmett made it one, because Michael was so miserable and clearly not at his best.

“Yeah.” Michael’s sigh was deep and weary. “Brian doesn’t remember any of it. He was shocked when he found out what we did.”

Ouch. Emmett sat down beside his friend and put a comforting hand on Michael’s shoulder. “I’m sorry,” he said, knowing it was completely inadequate for what Michael was going through right now. Emmett couldn’t even imagine what it meant to finally get your life’s dream fulfilled, only to realize that for the other person it had meant nothing. Okay, maybe not nothing. Brian was probably not feeling a hell lot better.

Michael’s eyes filled. “When he came, he shouted Justin’s name.”

Ouch. Ouch. Ouch. Brian couldn’t have made it clearer, if he’d tattooed ‘I love Justin, not Michael’ on his forehead.

Emmett pulled Michael close. “Aw, damn. What now?”

Michael shrugged miserably. “I have no idea. I don’t know if I can even look at Brian

again, and then there's Ben. Sure, we were on a break, kind of anyway, but he'll be so hurt by this."

Yes, he would. Emmett didn't know Ben very well, but it was clear as day that Ben cared very deeply for Michael, maybe even loved him, and finding out that Michael had slept with the man he'd idealised almost half of his life had to sting terribly.

"I was so angry with him," Michael went on. "When I found out he and Brian fucked, I was so angry." He laughed harshly. "I assured him that I grew up from my crush on Brian. That I was past all that shit. I couldn't have been more wrong."

Emmett had no idea what to say to that. Everything was true. And yet. He stroked Michael's back, "Do you want him back. Ben, I mean?"

"Geez," Michael rolled his eyes and gave Emmett a strange look. "Did you talk to my mother?"

Emmett was puzzled. "Debbie? No, why?"

"Because she asked me the same question."

Debbie was a smart woman, Emmett had always known that for a fact. "What did you tell her?"

"I told her that, yes, I wanted him back. The thing is, though, I have no idea how to do that. I can't just go there and tell him that I slept with Brian. Drunk or not, it's ... not something you can just bring up between saying hello and sucking his cock."

Emmett rolled his eyes. Michael could be obtuse sometimes. "Of course not. But you can call him and tell him that there is something important you two need to talk about." He shrugged and grinned, trying his best to give his friend hope. "And who know, maybe in a year or so you will both be in the afterglow of a mutual orgasm and share your fond memories of 'the night I fucked Brian Kinney'."

Michael gave him such a dark look, that Emmett pulled his arm back and straightened. "And then there's the problem with your very best friend," he said, smoothly changing the focus of the conversation.

"What about him?" Michael asked, playing dumb.

Emmett rolled his eyes again. "Please. You and Brian have been friends for how long?"

"Almost eleven years."

"That was a rhetorical question," Emmett snapped. He knew exactly how long Brian and Michael had been friends. Michael hadn't ever missed an opportunity to point it out. "But

what I was actually trying to say, if you have been friends for so long, you don't just throw it away. And certainly not over one fast, drunken fuck."

"Hey!" Michael cried, flushing red.

Emmett shrugged. "I'm only using your words. Okay, I've added the 'fast', but I think it's sufficient to say that it was fast."

"Yeah," Michael admitted grudgingly. "It was. Fuck."

Fuck indeed. "Plus, I'm his friend, too." At Michael's snort, Emmett shrugged. "We're at least well acquainted. And I kind of like him. He's funny and smart, and whip sharp when it comes to essentials. And we've bonded over one or two secrets." He grinned when Michael opened his mouth in outrage. "Ah, ah, ah. Things not to be shared, my friend."

With a sigh, Michael settled down again. "Sure. Keep them to yourself. I don't want to know them anyway."

"Liar, liar, pants on fire," Emmett sing-songed. "But my mouth is sealed." Which was a lie. Emmett wished he was more closemouthed but somehow all his secrets had a tendency to slip out at the most inopportune moments. However, this particular secret – that he'd known about Brian and Justin long before anyone else in their circle – he would keep close to his heart.

Michael looked up at him. "I'm sorry for barging in on you like this. But I didn't know what to do. I didn't sleep one bit."

"I only slept two hours." Emmett smiled at Michael, "What do you say? We're just lying down again. The bed is big enough." His smile widened into a grin when Michael rolled his eyes. "In a completely platonic way, of course." He held out his hand and wiggled his fingers.

"Of course," Michael said and laughed, too. He took Emmett's offered hand and stood. "It's a very comfortable bed, by the way."

Emmett grinned. It was a very comfortable bed. It was his most expensive piece of furniture. And now he could brag with the fact that it had gotten a good workout from Brian Kinney. There was a bright light at the end of every tunnel.

Go figure.

++++++

Brian stood at the bathroom sink and stared at his own reflection in the cheap hotel mirror, trying to keep the terror he felt at bay. So what if Justin had been talking to

Daphne on the phone. They were still married, were still friends. And Justin had told him that it had been Daphne and that she'd said hi. That was better than nothing, right?

Aw, Christ. He was so pathetic, he could hardly recognize himself anymore. He was Brian Kinney, for God's sake. He didn't take shit from anyone. Why then did he take his own?

He could hear Justin move around at the other side of the door, and his heart started beating faster, hammering against his ribcage as if preparing to jump out.

Jesus Fucking Christ.

All his life, Brian had been able to face whatever life threw at him, and thrown it had for sure. But now he was shying away from it, trying to hide, trying to protect a battered heart that was beating so furiously in his chest. There had been times when he'd actually believed his heart had been transplanted at birth, that he was going through life without one. It was for the better, he had told himself, that way nothing would touch him, nothing could hurt him – not anymore.

Unfortunately it was all a lie. Or maybe it was fortunate. Lying in bed with Justin, feeling Justin shatter in his arms in the throes of orgasm, Brian had been glad for his heart. He hadn't thought that kind of happiness existed. He'd made himself believe that it was nothing but a myth, something unreal created by people who had their own agenda, mostly straight men who could only get some by telling a tale of eternal devotion. But now he had experienced it himself – and he wanted it back.

Yes, he wanted it back, dammit. But could he risk it? And, fuck, what kind of a fucking coward did that make him?

Brian slapped his palms against the sink, then took a deep breath and straightened. Only clad in his towel he opened the door and saw Justin freeze. Damn. He hated that Justin was cautious around him. They should be comfortable around each other.

"Hey," he said, and went to get his briefs and a shirt.

Justin turned slowly and from the corner of his eye Brian saw Justin watching him, the way someone would watch a frightened wild animal.

"How are you?" Justin asked quietly.

Brian shrugged, not sure what to say. Okay would be a lie. "I slept like a log," he said instead and gave Justin a half-smile. It was all he could manage right now.

But he saw Justin relax a little and was glad. Justin pointed at the phone. "Daphne will be released today. I wanted to pick her up but she wants to ask Paul."

“So?”

Okay, so that was him being an asshole. He knew what Justin was trying to do. So why did he have to make it more difficult than necessary? Because he was a fucked up asshole, that's why. Because seeing Justin suffer and struggle gave him a strange kind of satisfaction.

He saw Justin flush, then turn away quickly, and cursed inwardly. He was worse than an asshole, he was a fucking idiot.

“Justin,” he said quietly and the blond flinched a little. “Justin, look at me.”

Slowly, the other man turned and Brian saw that Justin's eyes were moist. “I'm sorry,” the blond whispered miserably. “I want to make it better, but I don't know how. I wanted ... I thought telling you about Daph would show you that I'm not shutting you out anymore. B-but if you don't want me to ...”

Justin's eyes were so desperate, Brian let go of his briefs and walked over to where Justin stood. “No,” he said firmly, reaching out and touching Justin's shoulder. “It's my turn to say I'm sorry. It was me being an asshole, Justin. I ... I tend to lash out when someone hurts me.”

“I know.” Justin sniffed a little. “And I hurt you badly, I know.”

Brian nodded. It was truth time. If he wanted this, if he wanted Justin, then they had to be honest with each other. “You did. You ripped my heart out,” he admitted, laying himself bare. “But you also taught me that I had one in the first place. So I guess,” he took a deep breath, “we're on even ground here.”

He saw Justin's eyes widen, saw the blond swallow hard. “What are you telling me, Brian?”

Brian rolled his eyes, “Geez. And here I thought you were some brain genius. I guess,” he had to clear his throat, dammit, because he was still a coward when it came to love. “I guess what I'm saying is that I still love you and ... uh ... want to be with you.”

“Oh.” It came out in a rush of air and Justin blinked rapidly, but tears still fell. “Oh, Brian.”

“However,” Brian held up a warning finger. “There's still the little problem with Mikey.”

Little problem? Try a mountain of a problem. Christ.

“That you had sex with him.”

How could Justin be so cool and rational about it? Brian felt himself frown. “Aren't you at

least a little bit jealous?"

At that Justin burst out laughing. "A little bit? I'm crazy with jealousy, Brian. The thought of you touching ...," he paused and had to swallow. "But I also know that you didn't fuck Mikey because you suddenly think he's the man you want to spend your life with. You were in pain and ... well, things happen when we're not thinking clearly."

Brian sighed. "Only, I hurt Mikey in the process."

"I guess so." Justin obviously didn't put the blame solely on him. "But I also think that Michael didn't push you away. Or did he – push you?"

"No," Brian said. Mikey hadn't pushed him away. In fact, Mikey had clung to him, had pulled him to the bed and with him onto it. Was that a memory surfacing – or just wishful thinking? "At least I don't think so. I'm not really clear about that. Or anything, really."

"Because you were drunk."

"Yeah," he admitted sheepishly.

Justin cocked his head. "Did you bring the alcohol?"

"No." It was the one thing he knew for certain. "I went there to kick his ass for being such a prick."

"I see."

Brian stared at Justin, then abruptly turned away, too unsettled to stand still. "Mikey did not plan this," he said, not sure if was trying to convince himself or Justin.

"Of course not."

Brian stopped and gave Justin a sharp look. "He did not plan this." No way, Mikey could have planned this. He didn't even know Brian was coming.

"I know," Justin said soothingly. "I know he didn't plan it. But I'd say he took advantage of the situation."

"I kissed him," Brian said, deciding for brutal honesty. He saw Justin flinch, but he knew that he couldn't sugar-coat it, not even for Justin. Or it might hang between them for all times. "I kissed him first."

He saw Justin take a deep breath. And then another. "Okay," he said slowly. "But did Michael push you away?"

Had Michael pushed him away? "I ... I'm not sure." Dammit, why couldn't he

remember?

“I’m sure he didn’t.” There was such conviction in Justin’s voice, Brian almost had to smile. “You’re sexually aggressive, sure, but you’ve never tried to overpower your partner. You’ve always relied on your charms.”

“Or other things,” Brian added wryly. He gave a little embarrassed grin when Justin shot him a look.

“Be that as it may,” Justin went on. “But you would never have gone through with it had he pushed you away. This is Michael we’re talking about. This isn’t some nameless fuck, it’s someone you’re emotionally involved with. Nuh-uh. Nope. It would never happen with Michael. Never.”

Brian knew Justin was right, but taking the blame was almost a second nature to him and letting go of that wasn’t easy.

“Maybe,” Justin’s face was very serious, “you should talk to him. You have to talk sooner or later, so make it sooner.”

“What if he doesn’t forgive me?” Brian knew the question was stupid, but he had to ask nevertheless.

“What if-“ Justin stared at him for a whole minute before he could continue. “What’s there to forgive? Fuck, you gave him what he wanted for more than ten years. He should say thank you and move on.”

O-kay. Angry Justin was making an appearance. And dammit, it turned Brian on like nothing else. Justin with fire in his eyes was the sexiest thing he’d ever seen.

Justin blew out a sharp breath. “Sorry. Just venting a little. But it makes me so mad that you’re always willing to take the blame. You might have started it, but Mikey sure as hell was a willing participant. You didn’t rape him, you didn’t provide the booze. He wanted it, Brian. He probably thought he’d died and gone to heaven.”

“You know,” Brian said, grinning, and not really knowing why. “I love you, Justin Taylor.”

“Yeah, yeah, what else is new?” Justin grin was even wider.

And because that mouth was so red and so tempting, Brian decided to forget about Mikey for the moment and kissed Justin.

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“Hey, Daph, it’s me and –“ Paul stopped in mid-sentence, surprised to see another female in Daphne’s room. This one was older and white – not her mother, then.

“Paul!” Daphne’s face lit up and that was good enough for him. He stepped fully into the room. “This is my mother-in-law, Jennifer Taylor,” Daphne introduced him to the older woman. “Jennifer – Paul Webber,” she paused, “a friend.”

The pause settled warmly in Paul’s gut and he held out a hand and smiled. “Mrs. Taylor, nice to meet you.”

The older woman let her eyes wander over him in a completely non-sexual way. “Mr. Webber,” she said and they shook hands. “I’m afraid my daughter-in-law was about to get dressed, so I can take her ho- I mean, to the hotel.”

Paul saw Daphne grimace a little and he had to suppress a grin. “That’s okay. It’s also why I came, because I have a proposition.” He turned and looked at Daphne. “Well, I’m not sure how you will feel about it, but I talked to my Mom, and seeing that Hope already lives with us, and I’m about to leave for New York in a week,” geez, he was babbling like a loon. He took a deep breath, “How about you come and stay with us? My mother would be thrilled and ... well, I thought it might be a little awkward sharing a room with your soon to be ex.”

He could see that he had shocked both women, but while Daphne looked pleasantly surprised, her mother-in-law would have gladly killed him with a laser beam – had she been Superwoman.

Jennifer Taylor smiled politely, but her eyes were cold as ice. “I don’t think that will be necessary. For one, my son and his *wife* are sharing a suite and-“

“Jennifer.” Daphne’s voice was soft, but firm. “Don’t you think it’s for me to decide?”

Jennifer was clearly taken aback, obviously not used to having her daughter-in-law speaking up like this. But she recovered quickly and smiled, warmly this time. “Honey, you and Justin are sharing a suite. You have your own room and it’s quiet and comfortable-“

“Too quiet,” Daphne interrupted her again. “Paul, do you really think – I mean, I don’t want to be a burden.”

The words coming from her mouth were not the thoughts in her head. Paul could see it clear as day. “Nonsense. When I talked to my parents about it, my Mom was completely thrilled and even my Dad –he’s the shy one in the family – is looking forward to meet you and to have someone, quote, intelligent to talk to, unquote. So there.” He gave her his most brilliant smile and winked.

Daphne laughed. “You probably sold it to her so she couldn’t refuse.” When Paul made a face, she raised a finger, “Now, now. I know your wicked ways, Paul Webber.”

She had no idea how wicked he could be, but that could wait. She was not ready for that – yet.

“Daphne,” Jennifer Taylor said quietly, “I really think-“

“No,” Daphne shook her head. “I’ve been thinking about moving out anyway. But,” she looked at Paul, “I can’t just move into your house. So I called a hotel this morning and made arrangements for me to move in there. It’s nice and I have my own little garden there. Justin already offered to help me find an apartment.” She smiled, first at her mother-in-law, then at Paul. “Who wants to take me there?”

Paul wasn’t quite as surprised at Mrs. Taylor, but it was close. Still, he recovered quickly. “My car is parked out front,” he said. After all, he was leaving for New York and he would not pass on an opportunity to spend time with Daphne.

“It’s decided then. Jennifer,” Daphne turned to her mother-in-law. “I hope you can understand.”

Mrs. Taylor gave her a long, inquiring look, then sighed. “Yes, unfortunately I can. I know how difficult these past weeks have been for you. But please, Daphne, if you need anything...”

“I will call,” Daphne replied dutifully. “Justin already made me swear.”

“Okay, then,” Paul reached for the door. “Let’s go.”

“Not so fast, young man,” Jennifer Taylor stepped closer to him. “Daphne first has to get dressed.” She gave him a sweet smile that made his gut clench, “And while she’s busy, *we* can wait outside. I think it’s way past time that we two got to know each other. After all, as Mrs. Chanders isn’t here, I’m the closest she has to a mother.”

With that she ushered him out of the room, closing the door behind her.

And Paul knew he was doomed.

“Coffee, coffee, coffee,” Emmett cried as he entered the Diner. He had the mother of all headaches, thanks to his very good friend, Michael Novotny, who was actually a kicker in bed – in the literal sense – and thanks, but no thanks, he was *not* going to make the same mistake as one Brian Kinney. So Michael had slept in his bed, snored really, and Emmett hadn’t been able to shut his eyes once.

Oh, the things one did for his friends.

At least he’d found some halfway decent clothes to wear to keep people from staring to closely at the bags beneath his eyes.

"Coffee coming right up," Debbie said with a pleasant smile, but her eyes narrowed and she gave him a once over.

Emmett climbed on one of the stools, then noticed the slightly rumpled form of Carl Horvath sitting next to him. He made himself smile his very best smile. "If that isn't the famous Inspector Horvath," he said and lowered his lashes.

Horvath blushed from the collar up and Emmett grinned. "Morning," he said gruffly and avoided making eye contact. "And it's Detective."

"Cut it out," Debbie chided as she returned with Emmett's coffee and placed another mug right in front of her very own cop. The sweet smile she gave the man had Emmett almost choking on his hot drink, and Debbie glared at him. Emmett quickly lowered his gaze, because women could be scary creatures.

"You want anything to go with that?"

Emmett looked up again, only to realise that Debbie'd spoken to the cop and not him.

Horvath rubbed his tired face. Of course, given his age and the fact that quite obviously he'd never heard of skin products, maybe he always looked as crumpled as his coat. "No, thanks," Horvath said returning Debbie's smile.

Emmett had the sudden image of them both naked doing the unspeakable and he knew, without a doubt, that he would never want to see that for real. He loved Debbie Novotny like the mother he'd never really had, but there were certain things he did not want to think about.

Which was the exact moment he noticed Debbie was looking at him. He took another sip and gave her his innocent face, complete with demure lashes. "What?"

"Have you seen Michael?" she asked, her eyes knowing and daring him to lie. Not that lying had ever been one of his talents. In fact, he might as well be the world's worst liar.

So he sighed and nodded. "He cost me a whole night of sleep," he complained. "He snores. And he kicks."

Debbie gave him a sharp look, "You spent the night in bed with Michael?"

"Yeah," Emmett said, then rolled his eyes. "We were sleeping. As in breathing in and out. Well, one of us was, anyway." He could not tell her the reason Michael had slept in his bed, or what had occurred between him and Brian-

"He and Brian fucked."

Or maybe, Debbie was omnipotent and knew everything already. Which, obviously, was

the case. "So you know."

"Of course I do." The 'duh' was heavily implied and Debbie grinned. "Michael never could keep a secret from me."

Now *that* wasn't a surprise at all. "It's a mess alright," Emmett said, holding out his empty cup to Debbie who promptly refilled it.

"Mess is one word for it," Debbie agreed, sighing heavily. "I don't know why you drama queens can't just find a nice boy, fall in love and live happily ever after."

"Hello! It's part of the fun. Also, variety is the spice of life and all that." Emmett wasn't sure if he should be insulted by her comment or pleased. "But I've got to admit that Ben Bruckner is a hunk. I wouldn't push him off of my bed."

Debbie wagged her finger at him. "Don't you dare."

Emmett waved her warning away. "Relax. Ben Bruckner has wedding rings in his eyes. I'm not saying I won't do it one day, but right now I feel that tying myself down to just one man would be cruel to the gay population of this wonderful little town."

"Does he always talk like that?" Horvath asked and Emmett glared at him.

"I'll have you know," Emmett let the right amount of outrage infuse his voice, "that I, unlike some members of the police force I know, do have style."

"What's wrong with my style?" Horvath asked and Emmett was horrified when he realised that it had been an honest question.

He shook his head and sighed dramatically. "What's right should be the question. Honey, where should I begin?"

"Debbie?" Horvath's eyes were grave. "Do you think there's something wrong with my style?"

Emmett could clearly see how honesty and love battled beneath those newly blond locks. Unfortunately, love won. "No, of course not," Debbie lied. "I like you just the way you are."

Horvath gave Emmett and 'so there' look, while Emmett had one more proof that straight men and fashion were a rare love affair.

"Where is Michael now?" Debbie asked.

"He was still asleep when I left," Emmett told her. Actually, Michael had been in the shower, but that wasn't really lying.

"I see." Debbie sighed again. "My poor baby." She sniffed. "The little asshole, how could he cheat on Ben?"

"Well, technically-"

"Don't you dare." Debbie raised her warning finger again. "Don't even try telling me that he and Ben were on a break when it happened. Because from where I'm standing, that's not changing a damn thing."

She was probably right Emmett decided and kept his mouth shut. Instead he lifted his coffee, drank deeply and promptly burned his tongue.

Life could be so unfair sometimes.

++++++

When Brian opened the door to his office, he was not prepared to find Ben sitting there waiting for him. But he wasn't Brian Kinney for nothing, so he schooled his features into blankness and forced a smile of greeting on his lips. "Ben, what a surprise."

Ben, who had been sitting with his back to the door – quite obviously waiting for him to show up-, shot out of his chair. "Brian. You're late."

It was such a non-Ben thing to say, Ben never cared if people were a little late, it turned Brian's smile sincere. "Yeah. Nine minutes," he remarked dryly, threw his coat on the chair in the corner, and walked around the desk to sit down in his chair. He looked at Ben, who was still standing and staring. "Are you going to kick me out for it?" Brian asked jokingly.

At that, Ben deflated and a heavy gust of air escaped from between his lips. "Of course not," he said, and sank back down on the visitor chair. "I just – I didn't sleep all that much over the weekend."

No surprise there. Ben was a sucker when it came to Michael. For a while it had been almost nauseating to watch him swoon over Mikey from afar.

"So," Ben rubbed his hands at his jeans. "Did you talk to Michael?"

Under normal circumstances Brian would have laughed. Ben's voice and eyes were so full of desperate hope, it was pathetic. However, the way things stood, there wasn't a lot of laughter left in Brian. And he wondered how much there would be left in Ben if he ever found out the truth. Which, given Michael's inability to keep his mouth shut, was a more than likely prospect.

"I did," Brian said finally, picking up a pen from his desk and playing with it. He needed

something to keep his nervous hands occupied. "In fact, I thought he'd show up at your doorstep yesterday."

At that Ben's eyes lit up. "So it went – well?"

Well? Christ. Yeah, because I fucked him through the mattress was hardly something he could tell Ben. Plus, Brian had no idea if he had fucked him through the mattress. He still pulled a complete blank where the actual act was concerned. Justin had told him it was a classical defence mechanism. Whatever it was, Brian was silently grateful for it. There was a large part of him that wasn't interested in finding out if he had enjoyed fucking his best friend.

"Brian?"

He blinked, and forced himself to focus on Ben. "I told him he was an asshole."

"You did?"

"Yeah." It was the truth. He could remember that much. Brian frowned and looked at the pen. "Among other things."

"And it worked?" Ben was clearly surprised and laughed a little. "I have to remember that. So, you ... uh ... think it'll be alright?"

"Christ, Ben." Brian stood, feeling unsettled. "You did nothing wrong. I told him that. You and I met, we fucked, end of story. It's been years ago. Mikey wasn't even in the picture then. He's behaving like a prat." And since when had Ben turned into such a submissive sissy, he wondered?

Ben rubbed his eyes. "Michael can't see it that way. You know that, Brian. And you also know it's not really about the fact that I fucked you, but that you actually fucked me."

Brian didn't really know what to say to that, because, fuck, it was the truth. So he decided to play dumb. "And what's the difference? You fucked me, I fucked you. Big deal."

"It's a very big deal for him," Ben said, his face solemn. "He's had a crush on you for a very long time. You've been his not so secret fantasy from the moment you entered his life. And let's be honest, it's part of the reason you've been so close for such a long time. He adores you."

Brian pressed his thumb and forefinger on the bridge of his nose. "He doesn't adore me," he said, but knew it was a lie. Mikey did adore him. He even worshipped him at times. And Brian had taken advantage of that. Not by fucking Mikey, but over all the years they'd known and loved each other.

Ben snorted, making it clear that he wasn't fooled. "Look, I have accepted the fact that he'll always be a little bit in love with you. It doesn't threaten me, because I know that it'll always be a fantasy."

Aw, fuck.

Brian had to turn away quickly, unable to look into Ben's eyes. How could he hold the other man's gaze, knowing that they'd stepped over that invisible border.

He walked over to the small table in the corner and poured himself a shot of his very own Jim Beam. It was way too early, but today he made an exception. He drank the whiskey quickly and appreciated the burn it caused in his throat. Not turning around, he offered one to his boss.

"No, thanks," Ben said wryly. "It's not even nine a.m." The implied 'what the fuck' was left unspoken. However, Ben being Ben, he couldn't let anything go. "What happened to you? Rough weekend?"

Brian almost laughed out loud. Ben had no idea. And if Brian had any say in it, it would stay that way. So he took a deep breath, schooled his features once again into a smile and turned around. Winking at Ben, he said, "Well, you know how it goes."

Ben grinned. "Justin wore you out?"

I wish, Brian thought and rubbed his forehead. The truth was, being with Justin had actually revived him, had given him hope and the strength to face Ben and – Jesus Christ – Michael, and everything connected to that whole mess.

"You look a little pale," Ben mused, watching him with an amused expression. "Relaxed, sure, but also tired." He winked, "Probably all that pent up sexual energy he needs to release, huh?"

"Maybe." What the fuck could he say to that? "Look, Ben, I really have things I need to take care of. I mean, it's your agency but I guess losing clients over this isn't your idea of good business. Why don't you just call Mikey?"

"You think that's a good idea?"

Holy fucking Christ! "Fuck, he's your boyfriend," Brian snapped. "I'm done playing cupid here." And, shit, why on earth couldn't he just keep his mouth shut.

"What's wrong? What aren't you telling me?" Ben's voice was tense, as was his posture. "Did something happen you don't want me to know about?"

Yeah, I fucked him. And, hey, another little titbit. I don't remember one damn thing. Brian shook his head. "Nothing." He sighed. "Nothing happened." It wasn't the first time

he couldn't remember fucking someone, but this was Mikey. It should have been special. Not necessarily good or whatever, but he should be able to fucking remember fucking his best friend.

Fuck.

"You're lying." Ben was looking at him through slitted eyes. "Tell me what happened!"

Brian turned away again and noticed with dismay that his hands were shaking when he tried to pour himself another shot of Jim Beam.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

"Brian."

He hadn't even noticed Ben standing up. He was close now, right behind him in fact, and Brian tried to steady his hands. Unfortunately they didn't obey, instead the trembling increased.

"Just go, Ben," he said. "Believe me, nothing happened. Nothing you need to know about."

There was a silence then. Brian heard Ben move away, but before he could release a breath of relief, Ben was back.

"You fucked him." It wasn't a question.

When Brian was about thirteen he'd read a book, and the author had written about icy anger. It seemed stupid. In Brian's thirteen year old mind, anger was hot, it lashed out and hurt, or it ate you up inside.

Now he knew what icy anger sounded like.

Brian closed his eyes and put the empty glass down. Then he turned slowly, preparing himself for that icy anger he knew he would also find in Ben's eyes.

"Yes."

What else was there to say, really? He could have told Ben that he hadn't intended to do it. Or that he didn't even know what exactly had happened. But what did it matter?

"You fucking asshole," Ben spat, his whole body vibrating. "I thought we were friends."

"We are."

Yeah, sure. They were. Because friends fucked their friends' lovers. Yep. That was how

it was done.

"If that's the way you're treating your friends, it's no wonder you don't have many. It's actually a miracle you have any at all."

Ouch. That hurt. Because even though it was unfair, and said in anger, it also held a grain of truth.

"Ben--"

"Shut up," Ben snapped. "What? You had a nice weekend together? Laughing your asses off about the love sick idiot who trusted you?" Ben's voice got louder with every word. It seemed the ice was starting to boil after all.

"Don't be stupid," Brian snapped right back. He felt like shit for what had happened, but he would only take that much abuse. "Of course we didn't laugh our asses off. In fact, I don't even remember it. He was behaving like an idiot, and then he said ... something. And I kissed him. After that I'm hitting a blank."

"And that makes it all better?" Ben gave him a look full of loathing, then turned away as if seeing Brian for another moment was more than he could bear.

Brian stared at his tense back, the way the muscles were ticking underneath that shirt. There was nothing he could do to make it better. However, maybe all of them could take a deep breath and behave like adults for a change.

"For what it's worth," he said slowly. "Whatever bug Mikey had in his system, I think he's cured now. Maybe you should see that as a bright side of things."

And that had been the wrong thing to say, because without warning, Ben whirled around, was right in front of him and without warning, punched Brian in the face.

He hadn't expected it, hadn't seen it coming, and Ben's punch held such force, Brian had no chance of keeping himself upright. Instead he lost his balance and fell down, the side of his face stinging while something warm and wet was running from his nose.

He looked at Ben from his spot down on the floor. Ben's eyes were blazing and his teeth were bared in what had to be a snarl. But before any of them could do or say something, a shocked voice intruded from the doorway.

"Brian? BEN? What the fuck are you doing?"

++++++

"Well," Daphne turned, holding her arms out, and smiled at Paul. "What do you think?"

"It's okay," he said, not quite over her refusal to stay with his parents. He couldn't understand why it was such a bad thing? Sure, it might have been awkward at first, but Daphne was his friend. And his mother sincerely liked her. But he had to agree, the hotel room wasn't bad. Spacey, with big full length windows. It had also had room service which was what Daphne needed. After all, she was still recovering from a severe condition.

"Okay?" Her brows drew together in a frown. "Just okay?" But then she brightened. "You're just mad that I didn't come to live with your mother."

"I'm not mad," he replied, even though he was a little – mad, that is. He would have loved her in his home, knowing she would touch things he also touched. And God, he was a sappy idiot.

Daphne smiled at him knowingly, but didn't comment. Just for that he wanted to kiss her.

He quickly walked over to one of the full length windows. "Nice view."

"Yeah. I like it. I thought–"

They were interrupted by a knock at the door and Daphne walked over to open it.

"Justin!" Her mouth turned into a very genuine smile and Paul gritted his teeth. Did she have to be so nice to him. Sure, the guy was her husband, but he was also a lying sack of shit, not to forget a cheating asshole.

And now she even took a step closer to Justin and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Hey, Daph," he said, his voice a little choked.

"Come in, come in," Daphne said, all fluttering excitement. "What do you think?"

He came inside, let his gaze sweep around – and froze when his eyes found Paul.

That's right, fucker, she isn't just on her own anymore, Paul thought. He would make sure that nobody would hurt her like that ever again.

"Oh," Daphne gave them both a little nervous grin. "Paul came over. He wanted to see the new room, too."

"I'll bet," Justin said dryly, giving Paul a look. Paul held it and returned it, and something changed in Justin's eyes. They didn't really soften, but maybe it was something like acknowledgement, or even respect, that hadn't been there before.

"Paul," Justin said finally and nodded ever so slightly.

“Justin,” Paul’s voice sounded equally firm.

Daphne rolled her eyes, no doubt wondering why God had created the male animal in the first place, then shook her head and sat down on the couch that stood across the room, opposite to the windows. “Why don’t you two sit down?” she asked. “I could order some room service. Tea? Coffee?”

Justin shook his head. “No, thanks. I’ve had enough coffee.”

“I don’t want anything either,” Paul said. “But maybe you should have a cup of tea?”

“No, I’m fine.” Daphne smiled. “Sit,” she then ordered, giving both of them a stern look, pointing at the single seats on the other side of the small table.

They both sat, and Paul noted with satisfaction that even with his barely healed leg he was the far more graceful of them both.

“Daph,” Justin said. There was a strange expression in his eyes. Paul didn’t know him well enough – or at all – to guess what it meant. “Why did you want us both here?”

What?

Paul’s head snapped toward Daphne, who was giving Justin the most innocent look Paul had ever seen. It was so fake, he felt his own lips curve into a smile. He also tried to suppress his annoyance at the fact that Justin knew Daphne way better than he did.

Daphne looked innocently at Justin for another moment, then she dropped the act and sighed. “I thought it would be nice for us three to talk. Like friends.”

Justin snorted at that. “Friends.”

Paul felt that he shared the sentiment. “Daphne,” he said. “We barely know each other.”

“Exactly.” Daphne beamed and Paul realised he’d done it again. He’d run straight into her trap.

“Daph.” Justin said with the air of the long suffering. He quite obviously wasn’t so gullible where his soon-to-be ex-wife was concerned. But then, they had played together in Kindergarten, it was hardly a surprise. “You can’t force people to become friends. Remember, second grade? Toby McCullen and I continued to hate each other despite your best efforts.”

“So?” Daphne wasn’t giving up. “Just because Toby turned out to be an asshole, it doesn’t have to be that way with Paul.” She turned and smiled at him. “Sorry, Paul, you’re not an asshole.”

He grinned. "Thanks."

"So, anyway," she went on, folding her hands in her lap and beaming at both of them. "Because Paul is a nice man, and Justin ... well, he's okay too – most of the time – I think you should try to get along, and not just pass each other in hallways scowling and frowning."

"I don't scowl," Paul protested, watching Justin from the corner of his eye. The blond was rubbing his forehead. Paul had to grin.

"You do too," Daphne insisted. "I've seen it. It's pretty impressive. However, it has to stop. Justin is my friend. We've known each other forever. We've had a rough time recently, but I'm not giving up that friendship." She didn't wait for Paul to answer and turned to Justin instead. "And Paul is a friend, too. He's still new and I want to know him better, but you have to accept that he's in my life now, Justin."

Justin was looking at her, and something passed between them, some sort of silent message, before Justin smiled. "I'm good with that. And, frankly, he seems like a decent guy."

A decent kind of guy. Paul wasn't sure if he should thank the other man or feel insulted.

"As for you."

Paul realised Daphne was talking to him once again and he turned his attention back to her. "Yes?"

"Can you accept Justin? I know you feel as if you need to protect me, and it's really kind of sweet, but ... stop, okay. For one, I'm older than you. And also, I don't want protection. It's degrading. It's as if you are saying I'm too stupid to take care of myself."

"You are not stupid," Paul said automatically.

She glared at him. "That's not the answer I was hoping for."

Paul glanced at Justin, who was doing his best to ignore Paul, then he looked at Daphne. "Fine. I'll try. I promise."

"Good." She beamed again, and Justin chuckled.

Paul's head snapped around. "What? You think it's funny?"

"Sure." Justin's chuckle turned into a laugh. "She's playing you like a pro. Good luck."

Again something passed between Daphne and her husband. It was almost tender, and Paul had to grit his teeth. Would there come a time when seeing them so comfortable

with each other would not set his teeth on edge?

“Don’t listen to him,” Daphne said with a sweet smile. God, she was pretty when she smiled. Or when she didn’t smile.

Paul felt his own smile slip out. And Justin’s forehead turned into a frown.

That’s when he figured it out. As much as he hated seeing Justin and Daphne so close and friendly, Justin hated to see him and Daphne just as much. The teeth on edge thing was clearly mutual. It was a comforting discovery.

“So,” Daphne said. “Now that we’ve settled that.” She turned to Justin. “How is Brian?”

Brian? Oh, yes, the lover. Geez.

“Went to work. Where he has to see Ben. Talk about weird.”

“Ouch.” Daphne was actually compassionate. She was an incredible woman. “And how do you think that will go?”

“Frankly?” Justin made a face. “Right now? I’m just hoping Ben will never find out what happened. But knowing Michael and his big mouth, it’s probably a vain hope.” His expression turned wry. “So I’m praying for no body counts instead.”

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“Are you completely out of your mind?” Michael asked and closed Ben’s office door behind them after dragging him down the hallway – away from Brian’s office. He forced Ben to sit down on the sofa in the corner where he sat down too, and glared.

He looked so sexy, with all that anger pouring out of him, part of Ben wanted to push him down and fuck him senseless. He swallowed hard. “No,” he said slowly. “I’m not out of my mind.

“No?” Michael’s eyes narrowed. “Then pray explain why I’m finding you punching my best friend in the face! Or do you want me to guess?”

Ben felt his own anger spark again. It had drained out of him, shock erased by that punch Ben hadn’t seen coming. One moment he’d been angry, the next Brian was sitting on the floor in front of him, holding his bleeding nose.

“You know exactly why I punched him,” Ben snapped. “Don’t play dumb with me.”

Michael’s anger deflated – but only slightly. “So you know,” he stated flatly.

“I do,” Ben confirmed. “So, now you understand-“

"I don't understand shit," Michael snarled, and jumping up from the sofa, he started to pace Ben's office. "I can't believe you would do such a thing." He stopped, planted his hands at his hips and once again glared at Ben. "What do you think this is? Some sappy romance novel, and you're the hero who comes charging in to defend the innocent damsel's honor? Well, let me tell you something, pal. I'm neither a damsel, nor have I been innocent for a very long time. As for my honor, I might not look the part all the time, but believe me, I'm man enough to do it myself, should it ever need defending."

"So what you're saying is, it's none of my business?" Ben was surprised that he felt his voice vibrating with anger.

"Of course it's your business." Michael rolled his very expressive eyes. "Don't be an ass. I never said it wasn't any of your business. You're," he seemed to stumble over the word for a moment, then valiantly went on, "my boyfriend. But no way does it give you the right to beat up someone for whatever stupid reason you convinced yourself of."

"Oh no," Ben said hotly. This righteous anger he felt was so much better than the empty despair he had felt when he'd realised what had happened between Brian and Michael.

Ben pointed his forefinger at Michael. "Don't tell me you'd react that way if it was some random stranger I punched in the face. This is about Brian. Everything with you is about Brian."

"Okay," Michael said, not backing down. "Okay, let's talk about Brian. You know what, Ben. I came here to tell you what happened, and how sorry I am. And I am, sorry, I mean. But let's get back to Brian. So, obviously, I didn't really understand my feelings for Brian last time we talked. And when he came to me to tell me how stupid I was to risk my relationship with you for something that happened years ago and had *nothing* to do with me, things ... got out of hand."

"Got out of hand?" Ben scoffed. "That's a nice way of putting it." He would not make this easy. Michael had to understand how much he had hurt Ben.

"No, it wasn't nice." Michael's voice was low. "When I woke up in bed with Brian--"

"I really don't want to hear the details." Ben stood, walked over to his desk and sat down in his usual chair. He needed distance, needed some protection against Michael's presence.

"But the details are important. Look at me, Ben."

He did. And the pain slammed in his gut. He loved this man. This Michael Novotny. And listening to Michael telling him ... It was tearing Ben apart.

"When I woke up in bed with Brian," Michael started again, his eyes intent and locked

on Ben's, "I had no idea where I was. And Brian ... He doesn't remember anything. We ... Things happened. And I'd be lying if I told you that I wish they hadn't. Because a part of me is glad it happened."

Ben closed his eyes. He had been wrong. It wasn't just tearing him apart. It was ripping him in pieces.

"Don't," Michael said and Ben's eyes snapped open again.

And Ben just couldn't do it anymore. He just couldn't sit here and listen to this. "What do you want from me, Michael? Are you actually enjoying my pain?"

"I'm not doing this to hurt you," Michael cried. "But without honesty, and believe me, I've learned that the hard way. Without honesty, we don't have a chance. I've been lying to myself and that's part of the reason why this happened."

"You want honesty?" Ben snarled. "Well, here is some honesty for you. If you're so in love with Brian, tell him. And then live happily ever after. But don't use me to ease your conscience."

"But that's just it," Michael said, coming closer to the desk. "I'm **not** in love with Brian. For years, more than ten years, I thought I was. That Brian finally **seeing** me would be a dream come true. Instead, I suddenly realised that I do love Brian, but because he's my best friend. And my best friend is in love with another man. And you know what," there were tears in Michael's eyes and he blinked, "I'm glad. Because more than anything, I want him to be happy. He's had a shitty home, and horrible parents and ... he deserves happiness."

Michael stopped, walked around the desk, then stopped right next to Ben's chair. Ben watched him, mesmerized.

"But I do, too," Michael went on, a smile creeping up his face. "And after waking up with Brian, I suddenly knew that my happiness isn't with him. I'm not completely sure it's with you, but there is a definite possibility. Because ... I **do** care for you. I care for you a lot, Ben Bruckner. I want to be with you, find out if what we have might be real thing." He took a deep breath, then went on, "So, what I really need to know – do you want that, too? Or do you want to dwell on something that – at least for me – is already past history?"

Epilogue: Some Kind Of Wonderful

I've always hated family dinners. I remember the first one when my great-aunt Betty came to visit. I must have been about five. Everyone was drinking red wine, but I got a glass of raspberry juice which I promptly emptied right over great-aunt Betty's silk dress.

It was just the beginning of my career as the destroyer of family dinners.

So when Brian told me that Debbie had invited the whole gang to one of her famous family dinners, I wasn't quite jumping with excitement. Don't get me wrong, I like Debbie, and I know she's a great cook. Still, it isn't my idea of fun to spend a night with a bunch of people I still hardly know and where some of them would have preferred for me to just disappear. But Brian wanted to go, I could see it in his eyes, and so I smiled and nodded, and that's why we're sitting in Debbie's living room, all around an old table that's been handed down in Debbie's family for generations.

"Mom? Are you done yet? We're starving."

"Hold your horses. It's a fucking crowd tonight I'm cooking for." Despite the words, Debbie sounds happy.

"Why don't you lift your butt off that chair and help your Mommy?" Did I tell you that Brian hasn't lost any of his spark? No? Well, as you can see, he hasn't. Despite everything that's happened, or maybe because of it, he and Mikey are still the best of friends, have even become closer now that some unspoken barrier has been removed from their relationship.

It's a friendship I won't ever get. Not if I'll live a hundred years.

"Or you could help, Teddy." Emmett grins and pats his friend's middle. "You've gained at least two pounds. You could do with the exercise."

"Fuck you," Ted replies good-naturedly. But he does get up and walks over to where Debbie is slaving at the stove. Ted is actually a nice guy if you can overlook the fact that he's self-conscious and has a terrible crush on Michael he just doesn't seem to be able to get rid of. Brian thinks Ted is pathetic, and maybe he is, but for some reason I like him. It makes Brian laugh when I mention it, so I don't do it often, but sometimes Ted and I have coffee together and we just talk. I truly hope one day Ted will find someone who will love him just the way Ted deserves.

"By the way," Deb says loudly. "I got a call from Vic. He's doing great and he seems to have a new man in his life."

"Great," Brian mutters. "Let's exchange baby pictures next."

"Oh you." Emmett reaches over the table and slaps his hand at Brian. "You and your SO are so disgustingly happy, you have no right to mock others."

Brian flips him the bird, but a smile is playing around his lips. I reach for his hand beneath the table and he interlaces his fingers with mine, giving me a quick squeeze.

"What about you, Em?" I ask. "Any conquest worth mentioning."

"All this gay gossip is making my stomach hurt," Mel says. She is a petite brunette, and has been Lindsay's steady girlfriend for the past year. She has kind of an attitude when it comes to Brian, but I actually like her. She's smart and funny and doesn't take shit from anyone. Emmett once called her Brian's female version, which might not be far from the truth. After all, Lindsay was Brian's girlfriend once and from time to time I catch her sending longing glances Brian's way. So it's no surprise she fell for Mel.

"You know," Ted turns to Emmett. "It's no wonder lesbians have no humor. Eating pussy all the time can't be healthy."

"Hey!" Carl cries, but he is laughing. He is the strangest member of our little group. A Pittsburgh cop, he fell fast and hard for our very own Debbie and moved into her house a few months ago. That caused quite a fight between her and Michael, with Michael behaving like an asshole. But what else is new? Of course, everything was back to good a few weeks later, but it seems that despite all his boy next door attitude, Michael might be the biggest queen of us all.

"Everyone out of the way," Debbie shouts before she turns and carries a huge casserole to the table, placing it right in the middle. Emmett follows with bread and two bottles of water.

"Wow, Deb," Ben smiles up at her. "You've outdone yourself again."

Debbie beams, reaches out and ruffles Ben's hair. It makes him blush. He and Michael got back together about six months after their big fight and Brian sleeping with Michael. At first Michael stayed with his mother, but when Carl moved in, Michael went to live with Ben and it seems to be a permanent fixture. Ben has a nice, spacey house and he and Michael seem to be very happy there. Not that I'll ever get *that* relationship. Yeah, I know, that's partly my inner jealous child talking, but ... I can't help myself. How a smart guy like Ben can live with someone like Michael day in, day out and not become crazy is one of the eternal miracles the universe will never answer for me.

And don't even get me started on the Brian/Michael friendship. *That* is another mystery I've decided I can live without solving. Brian is mine, that's all I need to know. Whatever dysfunctional shit he and Michael have between them, I don't feel threatened by it. It seems after they fucked it out, their friendship is solid, but the sexual tension is gone.

"Be careful," Debbie warns. "It's hot."

"Hot," Ben repeats, but his eyes are on Michael.

Did I tell you that I'll never get their relationship? I did? Good. Because ... never, ever. Michael is nice, and I guess his body is kind of hot, but *hot*? Never ever. And yeah, they're telling me Brian's snarkiness is infectious. But who cares?

“So,” Debbie looks at me as soon as everyone has their plates full. “How is Daphne? Still in New York?”

I nod, my mouth full, too. “She called me last weekend,” I say, but it sounds more like “shecldlsteknd”, because I have to mumble around the pasta.

Brian gives me a look. “Let the kid eat,” he then says, his lips quirking into a half smile. “Daphne called last weekend. They talked for hours. I have no idea who pays their phone bill.”

I slap his arm while I chew my food, and he glares at me in mock outrage, “Hey, no hitting. I’m precious.”

Debbie rolls her eyes. “Okay, enough of the foreplay at my dinner table already. “ She turns back to me. “So she’s alright?” There is the slightest hint of anxiousness in her eyes and I smile.

“She’s doing fine. Bubbling over with excitement.”

She really is fine. Happy. In New York. With Paul.

Oh, well.

It’s not as if I want her back. At least not in *that* way. And if Paul is what makes her happy, then so be it.

Four months after Paul left for New York, Daphne went there for a visit and stayed. I wasn’t really surprised. Daphne might not have known it, but I saw their mutual attraction from the start. Paul is totally into her, and Daph, for all her efforts to deny it, is just as smitten. And I have to admit, Paul is nice, and hot. He has a dancer’s body, all lithe and bendable ... And .. uh ... I’m not going there. Because that would be just too weird.

So Daphne moved in with Paul, she brought Hope along and now they’re just the average couple with a cat. As for me and Daph, we managed to save our friendship. It’s strange, really. At first, I was afraid it would never be the same, and it isn’t. We lost something when we lost the baby, and when I fell for Brian, but in all the pain we found something else, something deeper. I’m pretty sure our friendship is something we both can count on forever.

“I’m so glad,” Debbie says and dabs her eyes. She has always liked Daphne. “And I think Paul is a dish.”

“He is hot,” Brian agrees and I give him the evil eye. He returns it with tongue-in-cheek innocence and I have to grin.

"Yeah, he is hot," Michael chimes in, and I sigh inwardly. Some things never change. My eyes meet Ben's over the table and he smiles.

"I hoped your mother would be here," Debbie tells me. "I haven't seen her for weeks."

Debbie and my mother became friends of sorts after Brian and I became officially a couple. Deb got her into PFLAG and now they sometimes seem like the odd couple. So different, and yet united by their experiences and their love for their sons.

"Mommy is out with her new lawyer lover," Brian tells her and I elbow him in the ribs. "Ouch," he says, but he is grinning.

Emmett perks up. So far he's been busy stuffing his mouth with pasta. He can eat like a horse, which is a surprise given his slight physique. "A new man? Do tell!"

I roll my eyes, making a mental note to repay Brian properly for letting that little detail slip. On the other hand, maybe I shouldn't repay him. He'll probably like it way too much.

Something of my thoughts must have shown on my face because Emmett claps his hands in front of me. "Enough with the dirty thoughts," he chides me. "Out with the details. What lawyer lover? Is he rich?"

"That too," I finally give in. Emmett is like a dog with a bone. "He was my father's divorce lawyer."

"Ohhhh," Emmett rubs his hands, his face alight with glee.

"He is actually kind of hot," Brian says, his voice bored. I give him the glare of death but he ignores me. Maybe I should just withhold sex. Only, that would be punishment for me, too. "For an older guy," Brian adds.

"Older guys," Emmett sighs, and for a moment his face clouds. He had a short affair with an older guy. We all thought it was just for the money, but Emmett genuinely liked the man and when he died of a heart condition he was crushed.

"Oh well," Emmett's face brightens again, and he grins at me. "Do you call him Daddy?"

I make a gagging noise. Words simply fail me. Brian covers his mouth with his napkin, but I can see his eyes sparkle. Oh, he is so going to pay for this.

"Don't make Sunshine lose his dinner," Debbie says, but grins.

When Mom told me she was dating Craig's divorce lawyer I was shocked. I mean, it's weird, right? But then I was okay with it. The guy is hot, Brian's right on that point, and

at least he's not my age, the way Corey was. Okay, Corey was thirty, but still. And Corey was hot, too, but give me a break. My mother dating a guy who's almost half her age, it was too embarrassing. Brian thought I was behaving like an asshole, and maybe I was, but please! And I swear Corey was ogling my ass.

"I think it's great that we're all here together tonight," Lindsay says, her smile bright. She is holding Mel's hand above the table, looking around. "And we have news we want to share." Her eyes find Brian's, then mine and when Brian nods, she beams.

"I'm pregnant," she announces.

Dead silence.

"Pregnant?" Emmett is the first to unfreeze.

"Wow," Michael stares at her as if she's an alien from outer space.

"I think it's great." Ben, always the peacemaker, gets up, walks over to Mel and Linds and they all embrace.

"A baby," Debbie is misty eyed. "Oh, honey." She, too, gets up and squeezes Linds so hard, the younger woman actually gasps for breath.

"Who is the father?" Michael wants to know, and everyone is looking expectantly at Linds, no doubt waiting for her to explain how she and Mel found an anonymous sperm donor.

"I am." Brian's voice is quiet and steady and I'm so proud of him.

"What?" Michael's eyes are huge in his suddenly pale face.

Brian and I talked about it when Linds and Mel came to us, Mel clearly ill at ease and no doubt bullied by Linds to agree on Brian as the donor. I sometimes wonder if maybe Mel's uneasiness with her lover's choice was the final reason for Brian to say yes. But it's really not important.

They told us that they wanted Brian, and not some unknown stranger, because they wanted their child to have a chance to actually know its father. Brian was deathly pale when they left and he was trembling. We made love that night, we didn't fuck, and he looked at me afterwards with eyes that were haunted and asked me if I thought he was father material.

I remember stroking his hair away from his sweaty face and loving him so much I thought my heart would burst with it. Then I told him that there wasn't a kid on this planet who wouldn't jump on the opportunity to have him as their Dad.

He got very quiet then. After a while he stood up from the bed, and when he came back he had the phone with him. "Let's call them," he said.

"Now?" It was in the middle of the night.

"I don't think they'll care." His smile was heartbreaking. "Before I lose my nerve. Jesus Christ. A father."

"Yeah." I smiled, and I felt tears slip from my eyes. "Dad."

So we called them, Linds cried, Mel cursed in the background and afterwards Brian and I slept for ten hours straight. We were both late for work, but neither of us cared.

"Did you fuck her?" Michael demands, not quite able to keep the jealousy out of his voice.

Brian turns his head slowly, and I can see everyone holding their breath. "Mikey, that's really none of your business," he tells his best friend. His voice is calm.

"But-" Michael starts, but Ben's hand on his shoulder shuts him up. Their eyes meet and Ben shakes his head. Michael pouts for a moment, then sighs and rolls his eyes.

"Holy Christ, Brian!" Debbie walks around the table and before Brian can prevent it, she has him in a bear hug. "Oh, I'm so proud of you," she whispers. "You did good."

A lot of hugging and crying follows and the dinner turns into some kind of impromptu celebration for Linds' and Brian's baby, with everyone laughing and telling stories about Brian and Linds and speculation what their baby will be like.

I tune them out after a while. I don't care what the baby looks like. I already know I will love it. It's Brian's kid, and I will love it, no matter what.

When Daphne lost the baby, I was sure I'd lost my chance of ever being a father. But Brian told me that he expected me to be a Dad as well. He said it matter of fact, then quickly turned away, knowing very well what his remark meant to me. I went to him, and held him, pressing myself close to his back, I whispered, "Thanks." His hands covered mine over his stomach and we stood like that for what seemed like an eternity.

"Are you alright?" he asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

I look at him, this man who was my friend, and who now is so much more. When I met him for the first time, back in college, he was this cocky kid, with the quick smile and the sad eyes and I felt myself drawn to him in a way I couldn't explain. Not in a million years I would have expected for us to end up like this.

I smile at Brian and take his hand. "I'm fine," I tell him.

He looks into my eyes, searching for something it seems, and he nods when he finds it. He squeezes my hand before he lets go, and turns back to the conversation around us.

I stare at his profile, the way his mouth quirks so readily as Emmett makes a joke, and I know that this is where I belong. Being with him makes me happy, fills me with a sense of wonder and joy I never knew existed. He is by no means perfect, and neither am I, but somehow we complete each other, make each other whole. Together we are better than we are apart.

And isn't that what love is all about?

FIN