

AND YOU'RE THE ONE VANSHING

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Timeline: Begins 3 years after 513. AU in which shortly after 513 Brian goes to San Francisco where he meets Justin

Warning: AU Brian and Justin meet post 513, but all other canon events and characters remain the same

It wasn't until the doctor came into the waiting room, and Brian tried to stand that realized how long he'd been sitting there. Brian hadn't moved since the nurse forced him from Justin and led him to the surgical waiting room. He hadn't bothered to wash the blood, Justin's blood, from his hands or face. He'd barely noticed when Craig arrived, and hadn't responded to the tirade Craig began about Brian encouraging Justin's "disgusting lifestyle" once he realized exactly what Brian was doing there. He'd given a statement to the police, but otherwise he'd simply sat, motionless and silent, waiting.

"How is my son?" Craig demanded as soon as the doctor arrived.

"We did what we could to relieve the pressure on his brain, but the swelling isn't going down." The doctor shook his head, "I'm afraid his condition is extremely critical. He barely survived the surgery, and barring a miracle, I don't expect him to survive more than a few hours. I'm very sorry, but there isn't anything else we can do. If there is anyone you want to call, you should do it now."

"His mother and sister are in Europe and can't make it back until tomorrow. There's no one else."

"I'm sorry," the doctor said again. "Come with me; I'll take you to him."

Brian started to follow when Craig stopped and pointed at him. "Not him. He's not family, and I don't want that pervert anywhere near my son."

The doctor looked at Brian sympathetically, but nodded. He'd probably witness this same scene more times than he could count. Brian watched Craig leave with the doctor, and then he started walking. He walked out of the hospital and kept going until he found a cab. Apparently cab drivers were used to picking up all kinds of strange people outside the hospital because this one didn't even blink at Brian's bloodstained clothes. Brian's car was the only one left on the bottom floor of the parking garage. The only sign of what had happened was a scrap of police tape fluttering from a pillar. Brian ignored it as he checked to see if his keys were still in the ignition. They were.

Brian had no destination in mind when he left the parking garage. He just knew he needed to get away. Away from the hospital where Justin was dying without him, away from the apartment Justin had all but moved into, and away from the hotel room they'd been sharing for the last few days before Brian returned to Pittsburgh for good. He drove for hours crisscrossing the city twice and finding parts of San Francisco he'd never seen in the years he'd been there.

At one point he looked at the clock, and he realized Justin was probably gone. He closed his eyes for a minute, and fought against that knowledge.

He opened them to a loud buzzing that wasn't his alarm as he'd expected, but his horn. Brian had no idea how he'd come to be driving. He watched in confusion as people scrambled around his car which had apparently hit a streetlight. His airbag had deployed and there was blood dripping into his left eye. "Fuck," he muttered as a cop knocked on his window and asked if he was okay.

It was several hours before Brian made it back to his hotel room. The cut above his eye had needed stitches, and the doctors had wanted to observe him for a few hours since the minor concussion he'd sustained couldn't explain his loss of consciousness or the fact that his last clear memory was from three days ago. In the end, they chalked it up to the mysteries of the brain and sent him on his way with a list of symptoms to look out for. Based on the rumpled tux Brian hoped he could get the blood out of and the fact he had still been out at four in the morning, Brian figured he'd forgotten one hell of a party. Once he got back, he collapsed on his bed and slept for almost twelve hours.

Brian woke up with a headache less than twenty four hours before his plane was leaving. He had started on a list of things he needed to do when he noticed the message light blinking on his phone. The call had come in last night when he was still in the hospital and was from Craig Taylor demanding that Brian call him back. Brian swore under his breath as he tried to figure out what Craig wanted. Craig had been his first big client in San Francisco and had brought him a lot of business. But he was also a homophobic prick and a pain in the ass. Brian was more than happy to hand him over to Chad, the new senior partner of Kinnetik's San Francisco office.

"Craig, it's Brian Kinney," Brian began as soon as he picked up the phone.

"Brian, I've been expecting your call." Craig interrupted him.

Craig sounded pissed which probably meant a lot of soothing his ruffled feathers. Something Brian never enjoyed. "Sorry it took me so long to return your call, but I was in a car accident last night, and I just got your message."

"An accident? I hope you weren't seriously hurt." Craig sounded more curious than concerned.

"Just a minor concussion. Unfortunately my memory of the last few days is a bit fuzzy. Was there something I needed to do for you before I leave?" Brian hated admitted any weakness to Craig, but he wasn't up to bullshitting his way through the conversation.

"That must be very frightening losing some of your memories. Does the doctor expect them to return?"

"Not really so now is the time to hit me up for something good," Brian tried to joke. He found Craig's interest in his injury odd.

"Now Brian, I would never take advantage of you like that. I just wanted to wish you a safe trip home

and thank you for all the hard work you've put in on my behalf. I'm glad you weren't more seriously hurt. People tend to forget how dangerous the roads are here even natives. My son was in an accident recently as well. Luckily it was also minor, but I don't believe you ever met him."

Brian pinched the bridge of his nose as his headache worsened. "No, I don't believe so. I met your daughter Molly, but not your son. She's in Europe with her mother right?"

"Yes, quite a summer she's having. I'll let you go, Brian. I'm sure you have a lot to do before you go."

"It's been a pleasure working with you Craig. I know Chad will take excellent care of you, but don't hesitate to contact me personally if you ever have a problem." Brian made an effort to sound sincere.

"Thank you for the offer, but I'm sure it won't be necessary." Craig hung up without another word leaving Brian wondering what exactly the whole conversation has been about.

Michael met Brian at baggage claim. Brian had shipped everything except his carry on bag, but it was one of the few places in the airport that was still accessible to the public. "Brian," Michael greeted him with a huge smile and a long hug. "I can't believe you're finally home."

"I was just here last month," Brian protested, but he made no move to break the hug.

"Visits aren't the same. You've been gone for forever," Michael dragged the last word out.

Brian nodded as they headed out to the parking lot. Sometimes it had felt that way to him as well. The year he thought he'd need to set up Kinnetik's new office had turned into almost three. He never expected to miss Pittsburgh, but he had. "You brought it," Brian shot Michael a grateful look when he spotted the Corvette.

"Of course I did," Michael grinned proudly.

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but you'll have to drive." Brian threw his bag in the small trunk before settling into the passenger seat.

"Hey, I took good care of it," Michael protested automatically.

"Just promise me you didn't let Hunter anywhere near it," Brian shuddered as he remembered the condition Michael and Hunter had left the car in after their grand adventure.

"Don't worry; I kept your baby safe. Safer than the car you had in San Francisco. I can't believe you wrecked it two days before coming home."

"That was one way to let me know I overstayed my welcome." Brian winced as he felt a headache start like one did every time he thought about the accident.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Michael shot him a concerned glance.

"I'm fine just tired. We'll just leave Babylon for another night." Brian leaned back and closed his eyes. He was asleep before they left the parking lot.

It took Brian a week to notice something was different about the office. He blamed the delay on being overwhelmed by paperwork and clients since his return. But it had more to do with the restlessness he hadn't been able to shake. He was happy to be back, but he couldn't help feeling like something was wrong, or more accurately, missing. He was trying to correct hopelessly pathetic copy when he realized there were two new paintings in his office. A quick tour of the building revealed two more, one in the conference room and one in the lobby.

"Cynthia," Brian bellowed on the way back to his office.

"Yeah, boss?" Cynthia came in right behind him.

"Who the fuck decided it would be a good idea to redecorate in my absence?" Brian scowled when she stared at him in apparent confusion. Blowing out a frustrated breath, he pointed to one of the paintings. "Where did these come from?"

"San Francisco," Cynthia finally answered. "You had them shipped here with detailed instructions as to where you wanted them. Do you want them moved?"

"No, they're fine." The anger faded quickly leaving Brian feeling drained and embarrassed at having to admit to weakness. Only Ted and Cynthia knew about the memory loss after his accident, but he would rather no one had to know. "I must have been power shopping before I came home. Maybe it will all come back to me when I get my VISA bill."

Cynthia smiled, accepting the joke for the apology it was. "There's one for your loft I put in storage. I thought you would want to get settled before putting it up. Anything else?"

Brian shook his head, "That's all. Hey Cynthia," he called her back just before she reached the door. "Have the painting delivered this weekend."

She nodded and headed back to her desk. She didn't have the heart to tell him he'd sent the paintings one by one over the last year and a half.

Brian barely noticed her leaving as he studied the paintings he couldn't remember buying. Maybe they were an impulse buy. He usually wasn't that into art unless Lindsay was dragging him to some show. Both paintings were obviously done by the same artist, but he couldn't make out anything that would pass for a signature. They were abstracts. Understated and elegant just like you'd expect in an office. But the more Brian looked at them, the more they seemed to suggest sex and power - the two keys to his business. It was almost as if they were made for him.

The rest of the afternoon was spent sorting through a mountain of paperwork. As busy as he was, Brian couldn't keep his attention from wandering back to the paintings. He was still preoccupied with

them and with ignoring the headache he'd been fighting all afternoon when he met Michael at Woody's.

"What's wrong?" Michael asked after the fifth time he had to repeat himself.

"Nothing," Brian dismissed his concern. "I'm still getting caught up on the disaster Theodore has left me."

Michael laughed knowing Ted loved Kinnetik almost as much as Brian did and would never leave a mess for Brian to deal with. "Did you ever think about staying in San Francisco?" Michael picked at the label on his beer bottle and refused to look at Brian.

"What, no!" Brian knew his answer was too quick and too loud so he forced himself to relax.

"It's just you've been on edge ever since you came back. You seemed really happy out there, and even when you were here it was like you couldn't wait to get back."

"Mikey, you're delusional." Brian racked his brain trying to figure out why Michael thought he'd been happy in San Francisco. It had been a lot of work, and while he hadn't been unhappy, he'd never considered staying. "Of course I'm on edge. I still have a lot of catching up to do with my clients here. Work will settle down soon. San Francisco was nice, but it's not the gay paradise everyone thinks it is. Unfortunately when it comes to fags, quantity doesn't mean quality. The Pitts, such as it is," Brian couldn't resist making a face, "is home. It always will be. I need another drink. You want one?" Brian asked signaling the end of the conversation.

Michael nodded happily accepting Brian's reassurance and drink offer. Brian headed to the bar glad to have that conversation over with. He really didn't know what Mikey had been thinking. Halfway to the bar, he spotted a familiar blond head in the crowd, and without thinking he took off after it.

He reached the other man grabbing his shoulder to turn him around. "Hey, J. . .," the name died on his lips when the face that greeted him had unfamiliar brown eyes and a too large nose. "Sorry," Brian mumbled stepping back, "I thought you were someone else."

The stranger smiled coyly, "I can be whoever you want me to be."

Brian shook his head and walked away no longer sure who he even expected to find. He forced a smile for Michael who stood up as he approached the table.

"Want to play a quick game before Babylon? Where are the drinks?" Michael noticed Brian's empty hands.

"Sorry to cut out on you, Mikey, but I have a presentation that's not finished. I'll catch you for breakfast at the diner." Brian quickly left before Michael could question him further. His formerly dull headache was pounding in earnest, and he just wanted to get home.

He dreamt of another blond that night. This one had blue eyes and a perfect smile. Brian watched

him across a ballroom filled with dancing couples, but Brian only had eyes for his mystery man. Brian followed him laughing into the bathroom where he pressed him against into stall and covered that smile with his mouth. He woke up hard and horny. He jerked himself off to the blond's rapidly fading image.

Justin woke up two weeks after the accident to his mother's tear streaked face. She was there every time he opened his eyes. She was there when the doctors explained that he sustained a serious head injury and had been in a coma for two weeks. She was there for every test they performed and for the discovery that he'd lost not only his memory of the accident, but of the two weeks leading up to it. She was there three days later when he was finally aware enough to realize someone was missing. "Brian?" he croaked in a voice still rusty from disuse and the recently removed ventilator.

Jennifer pressed her lips together and said simply, "He's gone."

She realized her mistake immediately and rang for the nurse as Justin began to hyperventilate. Her words immediately began running through his head and all he could think was that Brian had been killed, and no one had told him. The same accident that had injured him had killed Brian, and he hadn't known.

As the nurse drew up the sedative, Jennifer rushed to reassure him. "Brian's only gone to Pittsburgh, Justin. He's fine; he wasn't with you. He wasn't hurt."

Justin tried to grab onto the hope she offered him as the medication forced him to sleep. But his first word upon waking was again, "Brian."

Jennifer sighed deeply before answering. "You don't remember this, but you and Brian split up a week before your accident. You both decided not to continue your relationship once he returned home."

That didn't make sense to Justin. Nothing he remembered fit with what his mother was saying. They had plans; they were happy. Brian wouldn't leave him. "Does he know?"

"Yes, he knows about what happened to you. Your father spoke to him before he left. He told him what happened, but Brian didn't change his plans. He returned to Pittsburgh just like he was planning to."

Justin shook his head. "But Dad doesn't know."

Jennifer interrupted him. "Your father knew about you and Brian; he just chose to ignore it. There's no point in discussing this. It's only going to upset you."

"No, Brian wouldn't leave." His eyes pleaded with Jennifer to offer another explanation.

Frustrated Jennifer snapped, "He's not here, is he?" She closed her eyes as Justin turned away. She'd hated saying it, but it was the truth. It was why she'd so easily accepted Craig's version of events. If

Craig was lying, where was Brian? Jennifer had always supported Justin's openness about his sexuality even at the cost of her marriage. And she had liked Brian. She just thought he was too old for Justin and had disapproved of Justin's plans to move to Pittsburgh. Maybe caring for Justin would be easier with Brian out of the picture, but it wasn't her fault. Brian was already back in Pittsburgh by the time Jennifer returned from Europe.

Justin couldn't believe what his mother had told him. Brian wouldn't leave him. Brian loved him. Something must be wrong; something no one was telling him. He kept asking about Brian only to receive the same answer again and again. He planned to keep asking until someone told him the truth.

Then the drugs wore off enough for him to realize something was seriously wrong with his right arm and hand. He listened silently as the doctors explained about the angle and force of the blow he took. They talked about messages from the brain to muscles and about destroyed nerve synapses. They talked in circles until he finally asked if he'd be able to draw again, and they shook their heads.

That's when it began to sink in. Brian was gone; he was fucking brain damaged, and the one thing he'd always been good at was lost to him. Once Justin began to think of himself as damaged, Brian's absence made perfect sense.

Brian didn't think much of the package he found waiting for him outside the loft door. The bag had the standard nonapology of "We're sorry we lost/damaged/destroyed your package but we are not responsible and hey you got it eventually so don't bother complaining." Inside the bag was a battered cardboard box that looked like it had been drop kicked into a puddle. The sender's address had been completely obliterated, and while he could barely make out the loft's address it wasn't his name on the package. He squinted at it and decided it was meant for either a J. Taylor or V. Togus. He didn't recognize either name and tossed it on the counter deciding to pass it off to Cynthia. If it belonged to whoever had sublet the loft, she'd be able to track them down.

He had another dream about the blond that night. They were eating in a small restaurant not unlike the diner which might be why Brian said, "Debbie's going to love you, you know."

"You think so?"

"Oh yeah, one look at that ass, I mean smile, of yours and she's a goner," Brian teased.

The smile he got in return was almost blinding. "So the diner should be my first stop when I get to Pittsburgh?"

Brain had pulled him closer and growled "second," before kissing him.

He couldn't get the dream out of his head as he showered and dressed. On impulse he asked Debbie before he left the diner, "Did anyone from San Francisco ever stop here saying I sent them?"

"No that I can remember, Honey. Why?"

"There was a guy I met at a bar who was going to Pittsburgh for some kind of convention. I told him no visit to the gay Pitts was complete with out a stop at the diner and to tell you I said hello." Brian lied smoothly.

"Still not ringing any bells. What did he look like?"

"Young, blond, blue eyes, great ass."

Debbie laughed, "Like that narrows it down any. How about a name?"

Now it was Brian's turn to laugh, "It wasn't that kind of bar."

"It never is with you, Honey, it never is." Debbie patted him on the cheek then grabbed his chin and tilted his face up for a closer look. "You feeling alright, Brian? You look a little peeked."

"I'm fine Deb. Just a headache." He pulled his face away and forced a smile.

"You need to take better care of yourself. You work too hard in the office and at Babylon," Debbie laughed again at her own joke. She kissed him quickly on the forehead before leaving to take another order.

Brian didn't actually start questioning his sanity until the flowers arrived. He returned from a lunch meeting to find Cynthia smiling and half a dozen roses sitting on his desk. He approached them cautiously, stretching his arm out to snatch the card only to find it blank. "Cynthia," he bellowed.

"So who was insane enough to send you flowers?" Cynthia asked not evening bother to disguise her laughter.

"Someone with enough sense not to sign the card," he answered glaring at her. Turning the card over in his hand he realized the flowers were from H.K. Designs, one of Pittsburgh's most well known and expensive florists as well as a long time Kinnetik client. "Call Joe at H.K. and find out who sent these. If he gives you a hard time, get Harvey on the phone directly."

Once Cynthia left, Brian sat at his desk and studied the bouquet. Who ever sent it had good taste. Six roses just starting to bloom filled the simple vase. There was no bow, no greenery. It was as masculine as a floral arrangement can be mainly due to the color of the roses. Brian had never seen anything like them. The outer petals were a dark rust lightening to a deep gold at the center of each flower. But artistic appreciation of the flowers didn't ease his discomfort at having received them. It was too late for Valentine's Day, and his birthday was still months away. Brian was not the type of guy people sent flowers to. The whole idea made him uncomfortable.

Twenty minutes later, Cynthia knocked softly, and Brian tried to look like he'd been working as he

called her in. The uncertain smile she gave him made him even more nervous.

“Joe pulled the order. It was a wire from a florist in San Francisco. He said the order was unusually detailed as to exactly how the flowers should look and be arranged. When he called the florist, they said their records show that this bouquet and five more for future dates were ordered at the same time. They were all paid for with your credit card. Do you want me to cancel them?”

Brian shook his head wincing at the headache that was starting. “No, it’s fine. Thanks, Cynthia.” She nodded and left thankfully before he felt the need to offer an explanation they both knew would be a lie.

Hours later, Brian slammed the door to his office and headed home. The day had been a waste and his head was pounding. He hadn’t been able to concentrate on anything, but the fucking flowers. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t think of any reason he would send himself flowers. He was starting to think he’d forgotten a lot more than the three days before his accident.

Justin spent the month after he woke up from the coma in a daze. He went through the motions of living, doing the bare minimum at physical therapy and only leaving the house when he had to. Loud noises made him cower, and he flinched whenever someone approached him. He hated being afraid, he hated being useless, and mostly he hated Chris Hobbs.

Fucking Chris Hobbs, the high school bully Justin had jerked off one afternoon in the equipment room. Chris Hobbs who had delighted in calling Justin a fairy and pushing him around. Chris Hobbs who had his college football career ended by a knee injury and his coaching job terminated because of his drinking problem. Chris Hobbs who apparently felt humiliated by working maintenance at the same university where Justin was doing his graduate work at and making a name for himself as a promising artist. Chris fucking Hobbs who decided to end Justin’s success with a bat to the head when he followed Justin from what was now his last show.

It made no more sense now then it did when Justin’s mother has finally told him the truth behind his “accident.” Mostly he tried not to think about it. It was the one thing he and his mother agreed on; there was no point in dwelling on something he was never going to remember. Claiming to be drunk at the time he attacked Justin, Chris Hobbs plead guilty to misdemeanor assault and was sentenced to a combination of community service and rehab. It was a fucking joke, but Justin couldn’t bring himself to care.

Justin never asked for details about what happened in that parking garage, and everyone agreed he was lucky to avoid the trauma of a trial. But a trial would have brought many truths to light. Without a trial, there was no need to play the 911 tape for the jury. Justin never heard Brian, the man who had supposedly already broken up with him, call for an ambulance. He never heard Brian’s voice shake as he demanded help; he didn’t hear the desperation in low-voiced pleadings Brian didn’t realize were still being recorded as he begged Justin to hang on, to open his eyes, to not leave him. Justin never heard Brian’s choked promises to stay with Justin, to be there with him if he would just hold on.

Without a trial, the paramedic who treated Justin was never asked to testify. He never described the condition Justin was in when he arrived at the scene or the steps he took to save Justin's life. More importantly he never spoke about the man he found it easier to work around than try to separate from his patient. He didn't talk about placing the IV in the hand Brian wasn't holding or trying not to listen to the one-sided conversation Brian had with Justin the entire way to the hospital. Similarly, the ER nurse who met Justin in the trauma room was never asked to describe what happened when she took over Justin's care. She didn't testify about gently than more forcefully removing Brian from Justin's side as the team scrambled to stabilize him. She never told anyone how she promised Brian she would take care of Justin even though she knew it was probably hopeless or how she looked the other way as he gave Justin one last kiss.

Justin never heard any of this. He came to believe his future had been killed in the parking garage even though he has survived. He was told over and over again that Brian had walked away without a second glance. When Justin looked at what he had become, he knew Brian had made the right choice.

By the time the second bouquet arrived, Brian knew something was wrong. His dreams were filled with the mysterious blond. He dreamed of being sucked off by him, of fucking him over and over again. He dreamed about pushing him against the shower wall and fucking him behind, of bending him practically in half so he could kiss him while they fucked, of holding tight to his hands while fucking him on his hands and knees, of burying his face in his long blond hair as they lay on their sides and he rocked slowly in and out of his body. He dreamed of dancing with him and licking the sweat and glitter from his skin as they ground against each other. He'd wake up with his hand on his dick and bring himself off quickly letting the rush of pleasure wash away the sense of loss the dreams always brought.

Brian tried to ignore the dreams during the day, but he couldn't deny the affect they had on him. He hadn't fucked another blond since the dreams started. But he caught himself scanning the crowds at Woody's and Babylon, searching the faces along Liberty Avenue hoping to find someone who didn't exist. He didn't understand what was happening to him. Brian had never been interested in having a lover; one night stands and variety were more his style. So why was he dreaming of the same face night after night?

The dream that night was different. They were walking down the street together, holding hands and comfortable in a way Brian had never been with someone he'd slept with.

"Six months is a long time. You might forget about me."

Brain snorted and looked down into blue eyes dancing with mischief. "All the shitty blow jobs I'll be getting should guarantee I won't forget about you."

"I told you I'd ruin you for other men. Being a sexual prodigy has its benefits," the blond stuck out his tongue and wiggled it suggestively. "Luckily I'm also really, really good at phone sex."

Brian laughed and was about to whisper some lewd conversation starters when he was interrupted.

"I know! I'll stalk you then you won't be able to forget me."

"I won't forget you so don't even think about stalking me. Besides haven't you tried that already?"

"A few carefully orchestrated meetings do not constitute stalking. No, this is long distance stalking; it requires creativity and . . . flowers!" The blond turned and came to an abrupt stop in front of Brian.

Seeing the florist they were standing in front of, Brian held his ground when his companion tried to drag him inside. He could see this getting out of hand quickly and wanted to put a stop to it. "Under no circumstances are you to send me flowers." He tried to sound stern, but it was difficult in the face of the blond's enthusiasm.

"Come on Brian, it practically a law of stalking that the stalker send flowers. You can help me pick them out. I promise they will be tasteful and no sappy cards. That way you can pretend like you don't know who they're from."

Before he could protest again, Brian was pulled into the showroom.

Brian woke with a gasp. No desire accompanied this dream. Only a deep sense of loss he couldn't ignore. And the realization that he had no idea who the blond was, but he recognized the street. He had walked down it many times in San Francisco, but always alone.

When Brian got to the office, he threw out the flowers. He couldn't stand to look at them. They seemed to trigger a headache like the ones that came with thoughts of San Francisco and attempts to figure out his dreams. Then he called Ted and told him he'd be doing the follow up visit to the San Francisco office that Brian had planned to handle personally.

Two months after his release from the hospital, Justin finally found a way out of his depression. He couldn't say if it was anger fueled by desperation or desperation fueled by anger, but he knew things had to change. It started with his mother casually mentioning plans she was making for them to go to Europe over lunch. She said it would be good for his recuperation. Justin stared at her in disbelief as she talked about visiting the Louvre and the fountains of Venice. He got up and left without a word.

When Justin got to his room, he grabbed the first breakable thing he could find and threw at the wall. He watched in grim satisfaction as the glass shattered then sat on the bed and tried to breathe. He couldn't understand why his mother thought a trip to Europe was a good idea. How could she think looking at great works of art that once inspired him as artist would do anything but remind him of what he'd lost? He knew she was trying to help, but Jennifer wanted a quick fix. She wanted Justin to put his pain and disappointment behind him and be her son again. She loved Justin, but had no idea how to treat the angry, sullen stranger he'd become. Justin felt more alone than ever.

A few hours later, his private line rang, and Justin answered quickly, grateful for the interruption. He was shocked to realize it was one of the Deans from the Pittsburgh Institute of Fine Arts calling to let him know they had an opening in the faculty housing available near campus if he was interested. Justin accepted the offer and hung up before he could change his mind. He could feel his heart pounding with fear and excitement. He should have told the Dean the truth. That if asked today he couldn't reproduce a single picture from his portfolio, that he couldn't hold a paintbrush for more than a few minutes without his hand shaking and cramping, that he'd never be the artist he once was. But Justin hadn't said any of that.

Classes didn't start until October. That gave him over six months to figure out if he could handle the job. He remembered that as a new professor a large part of his schedule would be the graphics classes the older faculty members looked down on. But Justin could handle those. He remembered wanting to get into animation in high school. Maybe his therapist telling him he could find new ways to be an artist wasn't complete bullshit. Finding a new job might be impossible, but since PIFA had already hired him, they would be inclined to give him a chance before firing him. He would find a way to make this work.

Justin held the knowledge that he just might have a future close to him as though he were protecting it. He didn't know why his mother hadn't called PIFA and told them he could no longer accept their position. She'd been against the idea since he told her he'd gotten the job making it clear that she thought that moving across the country to be with Brian was a mistake. Maybe she had just forgotten about it in the chaos that followed his injury. Justin knew he wasn't going to remind her any time soon.

Justin threw himself into his physical therapy, but didn't tell his therapist what was behind his new found dedication. Patient confidentiality be damned, Jennifer could be a bully when she wanted to be, and Justin wasn't taking any chances. He also finally started seeing the psychologist they'd been pushing at him. He hated the idea of counseling, but he couldn't be much of a professor if he was scared of his own shadow.

PIFA was Justin's brass ring; he was going to reach it even if it killed him. One night after a shaky therapy session, he found himself thinking about Brian's reaction to Justin's job. They had met for dinner at one of Brian's favorite restaurant, and Justin was having a hard time hiding his excitement.

"Jesus Christ, Justin tell me whatever you have to tell me before your fidgeting makes me nervous," Brian had griped good naturedly.

"Well, you know I'll be done with my graduate work soon. I finally figured out what I'm going to do next."

"Thank God for that," Brian teased him. He never understood Justin's concerns about finding a job after he finished his Masters. He wondered why Justin didn't use his trust to support himself until he became established in the art world. But as Justin had explained to Brian, he needed to be around people. Given a chance he'd lock himself away in his studio and go mad. He had really enjoyed working with other artists while finishing his degree. Both the advanced instruction he received and the insight teaching the introductory classes had given him had helped him grow as an artist.

"You are looking at the newest professor at the Pittsburgh Institute of Fine Arts." Justin smiled brightly to hide his nerves. He and Brian had already discussed continuing their relationship once Brian returned to Pittsburgh, and how it made more sense for Justin to relocate. But they had never discussed specifics.

"Justin are you sure this is what you want? Pittsburgh isn't San Francisco. You've already had some successful shows here. You'd be giving up some great opportunities." Brian reached for Justin's hand and squeezed it taking some of the sting out of his words.

"Pittsburgh is close to New York, and PIFA has a national reputation. I'll be able to make a lot of contacts working there. I don't want a long distance relationship; I thought you felt the same way." Justin pushed back the momentary fear that he'd misjudged Brian. He fought the need for reassurance that Brian had been telling the truth when he said he wanted the changes he'd made in his life in San Francisco to be permanent. That he meant it when he said he wanted their relationship to continue, and he'd had enough of being the "Stud of Liberty Avenue."

"You know what I want, Justin. I think I've made that very clear, but I don't want you sacrificing your future to be with me."

Justin let the relief flood his body. He'd known Brian well enough to realize he had an often misplaced sense of nobility even if Brian would never admit it. He didn't need any the dramatic self-sacrificing gestures Brian made for Michael and Lindsay. Everything was going to be fine.

Looking back at that night, Justin wondered if Brian was already lying to him. He couldn't quite bring himself to believe his mother's story that he and Brian had broken up prior to his accident. The timing fell too conveniently in the short period he couldn't remember, and nothing in the memories he did have suggested he and Brian were having problems. More than likely, once Brian had been told that even if Justin survived, he'd be a vegetable Brian had cut his losses and left. Justin could never decide which theory hurt more.

As spring slid into summer, Brian's dreams and headaches continued. As did his general sense of unease. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was fundamentally wrong or missing. He felt like whatever it was stayed just out of his reach, but if he just looked hard enough he could find it. Eventually, despite his best efforts to hide it Michael noticed something was wrong.

Brian was suspicious when Michael called saying Ben had a late meeting so they needed a night out. Just the two of them he promised. But Brian and Michael didn't get to spend as much time together as they wanted to so he agreed easily. Michael not so subtly maneuvered them to a quiet table in the back of Woody's, but it took two drinks before he could meet Brian's eyes.

"The cancer's back isn't it?" he finally asked.

"What?" That hadn't been the question he'd been expecting. "No, I'm perfectly healthy."

"Are you sure?" Michael tried to stare him down.

"Yes, Mom, I'm sure. I had a checkup last month, and it came back clean," Brian reassured Michael. He didn't bothering mentioning that he'd scheduled the checkup himself just to make sure the headaches weren't anything more serious. His oncologist had assured him he was perfectly healthy, and the headaches were probably the result of stress or worsening eyesight. Brian was not as relieved as he should have been.

"Then what's wrong?"

"Nothing," Brian hoped Michael would drop this because he didn't have any real answers for him. He couldn't tell him he dreamed about a blond man he'd never met night after night, that he was sending himself flowers, and making major purchases, but he didn't remember doing any of it.

"Something's been wrong ever since you came back," Michael persisted. "When you first told me you were going to San Francisco, I thought maybe you wanted to get away."

Brian shrugged a little surprised by Mikey's perception, but maybe it had been obvious. At the time getting out of Pittsburgh had seemed like a good idea. Brian had always been sure of who he was and what he wanted. Then suddenly in a relatively short period of time everything had changed. He'd been fired by Vance and started Kinnetik. Vic had died, and he had survived cancer. Michael had gotten fucking *married*, and Ted, of all people, was his closest confidante. Brian had bought Babylon, watched it blow up, and rebuilt it. Then Lindsay and Mel had taken the kids and moved to Canada. Brian looked around and no longer recognized his life. Everything had changed, everyone had moved on but him. Brian welcomed the chance to go to San Francisco and figure out who he was away from role he played in Pittsburgh. But what ever answers he'd been seeking, he hadn't found them.

"You seemed, I don't know, almost lost. Like you were looking for something you couldn't find here. And you found it didn't you? It was so obvious, especially the last year, that being out there was good for you. It was the first time I ever saw you comfortable with your life. You weren't trying to prove something or live up to your image. You were really happy."

"Mikey, you're spending too much time with Ben and his yoga philosophy. If you'd visited more often you'd know I was the same person there that I've always been." Michael had visited once a few months after Brian got settled. But once Brian started making regular trips back to Pittsburgh, Michael was happy to see him at home. He hated being away from Ben, and he had the store to run. "Of course I seemed happier when you saw me. Coming home was a break for the insanity of setting up the new office, and it was nice to be on home turf."

Michael shook his head. "It was like that when I talked to you on the phone too. I'm not as clueless as I used to be Brian. I know you better than anyone. So what happened?"

"Nothing happened. Drop it, Mikey," the last was a warning.

"Then why won't you go back? Why has Ted been to San Francisco twice instead of you?"

"I'm not going to justify my business decisions to you. Look Mikey, I don't have time for this conversation. I'll see you tomorrow." Brian threw some money on the table and left.

Later that night, settled in his bed with a joint Brian knew he had overreacted. But something about Michael's questions had bothered him, and not surprisingly started another headache. Brian blew out a mouthful of smoke and turned his attention to the picture that dominated the opposite wall.

He been fascinated by the picture from the moment he unpacked it. He might not remember buying it, but he could see why he had. It was larger than the ones in the office, but clearly by the same artist. Various shades of deep blues dominated the piece only to be broken up by hints of grey and white. At first he thought it was just another abstract one that reminded him of views from the ocean where the camera was looking up to the surface. But that all changed once he mounted it.

Brian had been surprised to find the handwritten instructions on how to hang it in the crate. The note had been very detailed especially in regards to lighting. Brian assumed someone from the gallery had included the note. He had been tempted to ignore the instructions as they required some minor renovations to his bedroom that he wasn't sure he wanted to make. But underneath the neatly printed instructions had been a hastily scrawled "Trust Me!" There was something personal about those two words that made Brian listen to them.

It had taken a few days to get everything ready. Once Brian saw the painting under the lights, he could see beyond the colors. When he looked closely, the outline of two men became visible. They were lying together on their sides, legs entwined and faces turned for a kiss. It was such a beautiful image and filled Brian with such peace that he spent more time looking at that than anyone would believe.

He'd asked Michael once what he saw in the painting. Michael had looked at him uncertainly before answering, "Um, a lot of blue I guess."

Brian wondered if it was one of those images you could only see if you knew it was there. But if Brian didn't remember buying the painting, how did he know what to look for?

Brian dreamt of walking with the blond in a parking garage. They were wearing tuxedos and laughing. Brian turned to the other man. "You were amazing; you blew them away."

"Did you see their faces?" he asked Brian smiling. "I have a few things to finish up, but I'll meet you back at the hotel."

Brian nodded and pulled him in for a kiss. "Don't be long. We have a lot of celebrating to do. This will be a night you'll never forget."

They reached Brian's car, and Brian leaned against the door settling the blond against him. He was kissed again then asked, "So this is going to be the best night of my life?"

Brian laughed in response. "Ridiculously romantic," he whispered against the blond's lips before kissing him one last time. "Later," he breathed reluctantly pushing him away.

"Later," the blond echoed back licking his lips in promise.

Brian got in the car and watched him walk away in the side mirror. He opened his mouth to say something, and woke up with his heart pounding. "Jesus," he whispered in the darkness of his room trying to shake some unknown fear. He hated dreams like this. They didn't fade like the dreams of sex did. These were so real he woke up confused and questioning just what was reality. The more dreams he had the more questions he was left with. The answers he got two days later made him wish he'd never questioned anything.

Brian dragged himself into the loft after another long day and reluctantly hit play on his answering machine. Michael had been calling frequently since Brian had stormed out of Woody's, and he expected another inquiry into his well being. He was startled to hear an unfamiliar voice fill the room.

"Hello, this is Margaret Kovach from PIFA calling for Justin Taylor. I hope I have the right number. His San Francisco number has been disconnected, and he listed this as a local contact. If you could please ask Justin to call my office, I just need to fill in a few blanks on his employment file. Thank you."

It was a wrong number. It had to be a mistake. He didn't know a Justin Taylor. He didn't know a Justin Taylor. Brian repeated the words to himself like a mantra even though he knew instinctively they were untrue. The message felt right in a way nothing had for a long time. He walked blindly into the bedroom and stood in front of his painting. If he looked closely he could see initials painted into the bottom right corner: J.T. J. T. Justin Taylor. Justin Taylor J. Taylor. The combinations swam in front of his eyes.

Brian ran back to the phone and quickly dialed Cynthia's cell number. "Cynthia, what happened to that box? The one I said was delivered to the loft by mistake?"

"Brian is that you?" Cynthia asked confused by the abrupt question.

"Cynthia, the box I brought you from the loft, where is it?" he repeated more urgently.

"I couldn't track down the addressee so it's in storage at the office. Why?"

"I need it brought to the loft now. If there's no one left at the office, get someone there. I need it delivered immediately. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Brian."

Brian disconnected the call before she could ask any questions. He spent the next forty-five minutes pacing the loft and trying not to think about what was in that box, trying not to think about what the message meant. He didn't say a word to the junior executive who showed up at the loft. He just took

the box and shut the door.

It was another five minutes before he could bring himself to open the box. He expected the contents to be damaged, but everything appeared to have been surrounded by bubble wrap. He pulled the top layer aside and reached for a letter addressed simply to "Brian." He opened it with shaking hands.

If I timed everything right, this box was waiting for you when you got home. That's why it's addressed to me by the way. I wasn't sure if your mail was being forwarded or held somewhere. Step one in my stalking plan is now complete! Come on, you had to know there would be more than just flowers. So I've sent along some things to make you think of me and remember how much you love me. I know you've never actually said it but I'm an artist. I see it when you look at me. I can hear you now "I don't believe in love, Justin. I believe in fucking." I hope you can hear me laughing just like I did the first time you told me that. Sometimes you are so full of shit. Anyway even if you didn't believe in love it would still exist. We love each other whether you choose to believe in it or not. After all I don't believe in right wing republicans or clowns, but sadly they still exist.

If you are thinking this is going to be a long six months you are right. Luckily we've more or less perfected our phone sex techniques so I'm expecting a call as soon as you're done with this. And I'm sure you'll find a few reasons to drop in on the San Francisco office in the next few months. We'll be fine Brian, I'm not worried.

I love you (and from all the way across the country you can't stop me from saying it)
Justin

Words were part of Brian's genius. He knew how to use them to his advantage. He also knew how easy it was to misinterpret the written word. We are trained from birth to respond to other clues like facial expressions and tone of voice. That was why the letters Lindsay sent to keep him updated on Gus came off stiff and formal instead of chatty and friendly as she intended. But this letter was full of intimacy and conversations held so often they hardly needed to be said. The closeness the letter revealed made Brian uncomfortable.

The next thing he pulled out of the box was a thick envelope marked "Pictures." He quickly set it aside. He wasn't ready for what he was afraid he would find there, of what he knew he would find.

Brian frowned at the paint-stained T-shirt he found. There was a note attached.

This is where I confess to stealing one of your T-shirts when we packed up the apartment. I wanted a pair of your sweatpants because there is nothing sexier than you walking around in nothing but those grey pants. They hang so low on your hips I know right away you aren't wearing underwear. Such a blatant invitation to suck you off. I never once refused. But I was afraid I'd trip over the ends and kill myself so I took one of your plain white shirts instead. You know I love your James Dean look. I think I'll be sleeping in it and wearing it when I jerk off thinking of you.

Anyway, I thought it was only fair to send you a replacement. This is one of my painting shirts. You know the ones you loved taking off of me.

Brian wanted to smell the shirt, wanted to look at it long enough to remember what it looked like on someone. But he was too afraid of what he would see.

The last thing in the box was a small leather portfolio only big enough to hold 8x10s. When he opened it, the first thing he found was another letter.

I thought in addition to stalking you, I should try to win over your family. That way when I show up they will be predisposed to liking me. I'm starting with the two toughest ones, but there will be more to follow.

The first picture is for Gus. I modeled him after the last photo Lindsay sent you. If you find out he hates dinosaurs now just burn it. But assuming he still likes them, give it to him the next time you see him. Then maybe when he meets me I'll be the cool guy who drew the dinosaur picture instead of some geeky guy his dad picked up.

Brian reached into the portfolio and pulled out a drawing of Gus riding a large green dinosaur. There were other dinosaurs in the background and even flying in the sky. The detail was amazing. Gus would love it.

Michael's going to hate me no matter what. I know that, but I still have to try. I don't blame him. Daphne will probably hate you at least a little bit when she meets you unless she is completely blinded by your sex appeal which is a definite possibility. But no matter how happy Michael is with Ben, I'm sure there is still a little part of him that still thinks you two will end up together. I'm going to totally fuck that up. So maybe don't mention who it's from at first, and we can use as a surprise when he realizes I'm here to stay. I thought he could hang it at the store.

The next picture was filled with comic book heroes. They were changed just enough not to violate copyright laws, but still be clearly recognizable, especially Captain Astro in the center. Along the bottom large letters proclaimed "Superheroes Live Here." Brian could easily picture it in the front window of Michael's store.

The last one is for you, obviously. You'll know why as soon as you see it. I just wanted something to remind you of, well, of everything.

Brian did not want to look at the last picture, but he had to. Instead of removing it like he had the others, he turned the pages slowly until he reached it. It was a sketch of the image in his painting. But here the image was clearer, the figures more detailed. He quickly shut the portfolio before he could look at the faces.

He couldn't deny it even though he wanted to. The message hadn't been a mistake. He and Justin Taylor knew each other. Very well it appeared. But somehow, Brian had no memory of Justin. He couldn't possibly have met him and become this close to him in the three days before his accident.

Brian reached for the pictures. He knew once he opened them it was over. He would have to admit what he already suspected. He would have to acknowledge who Justin was. He closed his eyes and spread the pictures out over the table. There were ten of them. When he opened his eyes, the blond from his dreams was looking at him from every picture just like he'd known he would be.

A few of the pictures were of the blond, Justin, Brian corrected himself, alone. He was smiling, flirting with whoever was taking the picture. Brian imagined he was most likely the photographer. The others were of them together. There were pictures of them kissing, of them dancing, of them laughing at a bar. They were always touching, always looking at each other, always happy.

Brian suddenly knew how the dream he had the other night ended. He watched Justin walk away in the side mirror until someone else came into view. He yelled to warn Justin, he ran to him, but he was too late. He hadn't been able to stop some closet case high school bully from taking a bat to Justin's head. He remembered seeing Justin hit the ground; he remembered the blood. Brian remembered every second he spent begging Justin to live. He remembered every moment of holding on to Justin as tightly as he could as though he could keep him alive through sheer force of will. Brian remembered the realization that Justin would die without him and even more profoundly, he remembered the moment he knew Justin was gone. Those were Brian's first memories of Justin. He ran to the bathroom and threw up.

When he came back out, he carefully packed everything back into the box and stuck in the back of his closet. He remembered everything. It wasn't like every memory came to him individually; he just knew they were there. The restlessness was gone only to be replaced with crushing sadness. He'd drive his car into a hundred streetlights if he could forget again.

Brian found a mostly empty bottle of scotch. He drained it quickly and threw it against the wall where it shattered with a satisfying crash. He grabbed the first full bottle he could find and the one picture of Justin he hadn't packed away and took them into the bedroom. He drank until all he saw when he looked at the painting was a whole hell of a lot of blue. Then he kept drinking.

Minutes or hours later, Brian couldn't be sure; he heard the loft door open. "Brian," he heard Michael call. "I've been trying to get a hold of you all night. I wanted to make sure you were okay."

Brian remained silent while Michael made his way back to the bedroom. "Brian, what's wrong?" Brian didn't say anything. He just watched Michael's eyes dart between Brian's face and the now mostly empty bottle on the night stand. He knew the instant Michael spotted the picture he was clutching.

Michael took the picture. He examined it carefully then looked back to Brian. "Who is this?" he asked quietly.

"Justin, I knew him in San Francisco." Brian was surprised to find his voice still worked.

Michael nodded and sat down on the bed. When Brian didn't say anything else, he prompted "And he was your. . . ?"

Brian allowed himself a small smile. "He was the guy I fucked more than once." He knew Michael had been waiting for him to say lover or partner, but although that was much closer to the truth he couldn't admit that. Even to Michael, he couldn't admit how deeply he had fallen. He couldn't admit how easy it had been, once he was away from the myth and legend of Brian Kinney, to let someone

into his life. He couldn't admit how right it had felt to share his life with Justin. He couldn't admit how quickly he'd forgotten that people like him weren't made for love or happy endings. He couldn't admit any of it out loud, not after the way it ended.

"Why didn't you ever tell me about him?"

Justin had asked him that once. He'd been hurt when he realized no one in Pittsburgh knew about their relationship. "What the fuck, Brian? I thought we had something here, but apparently I was wrong. Is this how you're passing time in California? By fucking Craig Taylor's son?"

Brian had winced. He knew Justin had problems with his professional relationship with Craig, but he had no idea it was that bad. "Justin, this has nothing to do with Craig. I don't think of you as his son you know that. I'm doing a lot more than passing time with you."

"I'm sorry; I shouldn't have said that, but I don't understand." Justin had held his hands up in apology.

"What I have with you is something I never expected. It's something I would never let myself even think about. That's what my friends know of me. If I tell them about you, they won't understand. There will be endless speculation and questions and doubts. I don't want to deal with that. Once you are there, once they meet you it will all make sense. I want to wait until it's permanent." They had talked about Justin coming to Pittsburgh before in vague terms. This was the closest Brian would come to asking him.

Justin smiled. "You have a plan don't you," he asked as understanding dawned.

"I figure your first morning in Pittsburgh I'll take you to the diner and announce you as my live-in lover. Get the shock over with all at once."

"Drama queen," Justin teased. "But you better make it my second morning. I don't plan to leave the bed for at least the first day."

"Brian?" Michael's voice brought him back to the present.

"It was never meant to last. There was no reason to tell you." It was as much of the truth as Brian could stand.

"Like a really long vacation romance," Michael smiled when Brian nodded. "Tell me about him."

"He was beautiful," Brian began, pointing to the picture. "He had an amazing ass and gave the best blow jobs. He was smart and funny and almost a big of a drama queen as Emmett. He could be a bit of a know-it-all, but he was so serious about everything that you didn't mind. Your mother would have loved him. He was fucking talented. The paintings here and at the office are his. And" Brian took a deep breath and forced himself to say the words, "he's dead."

The look of shock on Michael's face was almost comical. "Oh my God, Brian, why didn't you say

something? I can go with you to San Francisco for the funeral. Just let me call Ben"

"Michael, it's over," Brian interrupted. "He died months ago. I just found out today."

"No one told you?"

"There was no one to tell me. He didn't work for me, and no one in the office knew him. His mother thought I was bad for him, and his father is a homophobic prick." Brian made a mental note to cancel Craig Taylor's account tomorrow and to find some way to destroy the man.

"How can you be homophobic in San Francisco?"

"Mikey, if you can find fags in Idaho, you can find homophobes in San Francisco." Brian sighed.

"Justin's family was old money at least on his mother's side. His father was all about social standing and reputation. When he found out Justin was gay, he told him faggots might move to San Francisco, but they weren't born there. They didn't speak much after that."

"Brian, I'm so sorry. Do you want to go anyway? You could say goodbye. Maybe visit his grave, you know, for closure," Michael suggested gently.

"No Mikey, Justin and I had all the goodbyes we need," he shook his head and tried to forget promises made on the parking garage floor and in the back of an ambulance.

"If you're sure?" Michael sounded uncertain. "Do you need anything?"

"No Mikey, go home. I just need time," he didn't finish because he didn't know how. What did he need time for? To remember or to forget? It was all so fucking tangled in his head.

"If you're sure," Michael said again. He stood up and handed the picture of Justin back to Brian. "You can call me anytime."

Brian watched him turn to leave, but stopped him. "I can't talk about him again so nobody else knows. Okay?"

Michael nodded and left without another word. Brian knew Justin would never be mentioned again. Once Michael was gone, Brian was at loss of what to do. He reached for the bottle then set it back down. He didn't want to sleep. He knew what his dreams would be, but now that he recognized the dreams for memories, he didn't need sleep to trigger them.

He wanted to go back. He wanted it to be yesterday again. Because wondering was so much better than this. Even wondering if he was losing his mind was better than *knowing*. It was too easy know to remember now, too easy to fill in the blanks his dreams left him with. It was too easy to think about things like the night he'd met Justin.

It had been at fundraiser Jennifer was hosting. Craig had invited Brian with promises of introducing him to potential clients. Craig said some days he might hate his ex-wife, but she still had the best

social connections so he supported her pet projects. Brian couldn't even remember what the benefit had been for. Brian had spent the evening charming Craig's friends and watching Justin from across the room. He was stunning in his tuxedo by far the best looking man there. It was ironic, Brian thought, that the first and last time he'd seen Justin they had both been wearing tuxedos. Brian wasn't sure he'd ever be able to wear one again.

Towards the end of the night, Brian had finally made his way over to Justin. He was surprised at how young he looked close up, but he shrugged that off. Brian had seen him drinking so he knew he was over the age of consent. He'd already scored as much as he could professionally; it was time for some action of a more personal nature. "Having a good time?" Brian asked openly looking Justin over.

"Not bad," Justin had smirked. "Mom throws a great party."

Brian followed his gaze to where Jennifer Taylor was standing. Fuck, he thought. "Jennifer Taylor is your mother. Which means Craig Taylor"

Justin quickly interrupted him. "I have no relationship with Craig Taylor," he said firmly holding Brian's eyes.

Brian nodded surprised at the strength Justin showed. There might be more to this kid than just his looks. "So where are you headed after this?"

"No place special."

"I can change that," Brian answered suggestively.

"I'll bet you can," Justin laughed under his breath. "One of the benefits of spending so much time in this place is I know where the private bathrooms are."

Brian gestured for Justin to lead the way anticipation already building. He'd fucked Justin in the bathroom then issued an uncharacteristic invitation to his apartment. He never stood a chance after that.

It wasn't like it was perfect. God knows they fought. And while it had been surprisingly easy to fall into a relationship, Brian had put a predicable defense. One night after a few months of seeing each other regularly, Brian made sure his trick was still there when Justin arrived. It was a deliberately hurtful thing to do, and Justin had been understandably pissed giving Brian the perfect opportunity to put him in his place.

"I don't know what you think we're doing here Justin, but we're not married. And if that's what you're waiting for you can leave now. I'll fuck who I want when I want. I'm not interested in matching cock rings and his and his towels. So if you're looking for some sweet little husband you've come to the wrong place. I don't believe in love. I believe in fucking."

Justin had laughed before Brian could finish his semi rehearsed speech. "Sometimes you are so full of bullshit I can't believe it. Look, Brian I'm not some starry eyed kid who confuses sex with declarations

of undying love. I've been around enough to know what I'm getting into with you. I don't expect monogamy, but I do expect common fucking decency. If you can't give me that then I am in the wrong place."

Brian had stared at Justin not sure what to say. He hadn't expected Justin to react this way.

"All I need Brian is for you to admit I mean something more to you than the guy who just left."

"Jesus, Justin you know you do," Brian stepped forward wanting to touch Justin. He suddenly felt like he'd been saved from making a very big mistake.

"You're right; I do, and so do you. So next time keep the panic attack to yourself. And don't ever use your tricks or your need for sexual freedom to shame me into not expecting things from you, or I'll be out the door for good."

"I'll find a new way to fuck this up," Brian wasn't going to make promised he couldn't keep.

Justin let out a long suffering sigh, "At least I won't be bored."

And then it had been Brian's turn to laugh. He thought that was why they had worked. They were always able to laugh. And Justin wasn't intimidated by Brian. He was never afraid to call him on what he saw as Brian's bullshit. He challenged Brian, but at the same time didn't expect him to be perfect. They balanced each other out in ways Brian had never expected.

In a moment of weakness, he went to the closet and pulled Justin's shirt from the box. He lay down with it and smelled it like he wanted to earlier. The memories of watching Justin paint were sharp and painful. He couldn't count the number of times he'd come back to the apartment to find Justin painting in a shirt just like this. He'd work quietly on his computer until Justin finished what he was doing and realized Brian was there. Sometimes it took a few minutes and sometimes it was hours. He would always turn and greet Brian with a huge smile and a "Hey, how long have you been home?"

Those nights usually ended with Brian stripping the paint stained clothes from Justin's body before taking him into the bedroom. Sometimes he'd slowly work the knots from Justin's back if he'd been standing in front of the easel for too long. Then they'd make love for hours. Other nights still high from creativity Justin would take charge and ravage Brian. He buried his face in the shirt and let it absorb his tears as he mourned the nights he'd never have.

At the end of August, Justin sat across from his mother at the same restaurant he'd told Brian about his job in Pittsburgh. He'd made the reservations himself. It seemed only fitting to deliver similar news in the same location.

"So Justin what's the occasion? You haven't taken me out in months." Jennifer's smile faltered when she realized what she said.

Justin sighed. This was why he had to go. He loved his mother, but she was driving him crazy. She hovered constantly torn between her desire to pretend like nothing had happened and her need to

protect him from the world. She refused to acknowledge the progress he'd made, but at the same time, she didn't want to deal with his frustrations and fears. "Mom, I wanted to let you know I'm leaving next week."

"Justin that's wonderful. I'm so glad you realized a change of scenery is just what you need. I'll call the travel agent in the morning and start making arrangements. Where do you want to go first? Paris, London, or Florence?"

"Mom, I'm not going to Europe. I'm going to Pittsburgh; I still have a job there at the Art Institute."

Jennifer gasped, "Justin you can't be serious. There is no way you can take that position, not after what happened. Your hand," she gestured weakly.

Justin shifted uncomfortably. He knew this conversation wouldn't be easy, but it had to be done. "My hand is a lot better. It will never be like it was, but I can do this. The school knows about what happened, and they are willing to work with me. You're right I do need a change of scenery. Just not such an exotic one," he tried to charm her with a forced smile.

"Oh Justin, I just don't know. It's so far away and you don't have any family there. Wouldn't you be better off closer to home? Somewhere I could check in on you, and you wouldn't have to worry about. . ." Jennifer let her voice trail off.

"I need to do this Mom. And Pittsburgh is a big city. There's no reason for me to run into Brian. I'll be fine."

Jennifer nodded and changed the subject. She wondered if this was her chance to tell Justin the truth that she'd always suspect Craig had lied about why Brian left. But what if she was wrong? If Craig was telling the truth, Justin would be hurt all over again. And Brian had never once called. She couldn't bear to see those wounds reopened so she remained silent.

Before dessert, Justin excused himself to the restroom where he let the waiter suck him off. He smiled down at the man on his knees in front of him and sent a silent "fuck you" to Brian.

Brian couldn't believe he let Lindsay talk him into this. Dinner was almost over and he couldn't be more relieved. He knew the awkwardness was his fault, but Brian could only fake so much interest in small talk. He wondered how much of this impromptu visit to Pittsburgh was about the art show she was dragging him to and how much was about checking up on him. Brian knew Michael had kept his promise not to tell anyone about Justin, but Brian couldn't completely hide his depression. Memories assaulted him at the oddest moments. Each one a reminder of what he had lost; a loss he couldn't bring himself to talk about.

Tonight had been no exception. Lindsay had met him at the loft before dinner and followed him into the bedroom while he finished getting ready. When she spotted the painting, she studied it for several minutes before speaking.

"Brian, this is stunning. I love the use of color to create the sense of intimacy. Where did you get it?"

Brian knew she could see the same thing he did when she looked at it. "I picked it up in San Francisco. The artist had a few small shows. He's no longer painting." Not a lie just not the complete truth.

"What a shame," Lindsay seemed disappointed.

"Let's go before we miss our reservations," Brian hustled her from the room as quickly as possible. But he'd spent the ride to the restaurant and the first half of dinner thinking about the night that had inspired the painting.

He and Justin had been together about a year at that point. Brian had come back from the office late to find Justin already in bed. Justin had been living with him unofficially by then. The only time he stayed at his small apartment near the university was when Brian was out of town. He never asked Justin to move in; he'd just made room for Justin's things and suggested he bring more and more of his belongings to the apartment.

Brian had showered then slipped quietly into bed not sure if Justin was asleep. He had just started to drift off himself when Justin's voice had startled him.

"What do you think when you come home and find me here?" Justin was almost whispering in deference to the darkness.

"What?" Brian had no idea what Justin was getting at.

"Are you alright with the presumption that I'll be here? My presence is kind of a given at this point, and I just need to know if that bothers you. If it makes you feel trapped."

Even now Brian didn't know what prompted Justin's questions, but he always suspected he'd had a run in with Craig. The rare occasions when he actually spoke to his father always left Justin unsettled and insecure. "Justin, you know me. I would have no trouble telling you if I had a problem with you being here. You're here, hell I'm here, because that's what I want."

"I'm being silly, aren't I?" Justin gave Brian a small smile. "I just needed to be sure."

"I know you are going to be here when I come home. So when I come home at night, I'm doing exactly what I want to do-coming home to you. Justin I want you here; I want you with me as long as it's what you want. It's your call." He kept a hand on Justin's face making sure he was looking at him. He wanted Justin to understand how serious he was.

Justin turned his face and kissed Brian's palm. "Then I guess you're going to be stuck with me for a long time."

"I can live with that," Brian let out a relieved chuckle. "Come here." He'd pulled Justin close and kissed him.

They had made love slowly that night. Brian hadn't been able to keep his hands off Justin. He used them as he swept the hair from Justin's face and stroked them slowly down his back. He'd kissed and licked every inch of Justin's body trying to give him more reassurance through his touch. Spooning behind him, Brian had pulled Justin's back to his chest and slowly entered him.

"Love you, love you, love you Brian," Justin had chanted softly.

Brian held the words to his heart, but he didn't know how to return them. Instead he used his body to say all the words he couldn't. He used his hands and lips to show Justin how he felt. They fell asleep still tangled together. And when Justin had shown Brian the sketch two days later, he knew Justin understood everything he tried to say.

Brian tried not to dwell on never having told Justin he loved him. Justin felt it. He told Brian many times that he had no doubts about Brian's feelings for him. But it bothered him that he'd never been able to give him the words. He would never be able to change that.

He and Lindsay had picked a restaurant close enough to walk to the show. Autumn was just beginning in Pittsburgh, and it was a beautiful night.

"You remember Dana, don't you?" Lindsay chatted as they walked down the quiet street. "She's thriving at PIFA. Teaching at the community college was really draining her. I'm so excited for her."

Brian wondered bitterly if Dana had been given Justin's position. He'd never returned that call from PIFA so he had no idea how they found out Justin was never going to complete his employment file. It had been hard enough telling Michael Justin was dead. He couldn't imagine saying the words to a stranger. He changed the subject to distract himself from the irony that he was attending PIFA's art show featuring their new faculty members without Justin. "So why isn't your husband joining us tonight?"

"Melanie," Lindsay emphasized the name, "is going with the kids and Michael to one of those pizza and game places. There is a similar place near our house in Toronto. She and Gus have an ongoing competition."

Even though they'd been gone for years, Brian still had a hard time believing Lindsay had just packed her family and moved to Canada. Surprisingly, it seemed to have been the right decision. "I knew I could count on Melanie to provide Gus with a strong masculine influence," he smirked at Lindsay starting an old argument for fun.

"Brian," Lindsay slapped his arm lightly, but let it drop as they reached the gallery.

He shoved the flyer he was handed in his back pocket and headed for the bar. He enjoyed a few bottles of decent and free beer while waiting for Lindsay to stop gushing with her friend. Brian spent the next hour making the rounds with Lindsay. He paid only the barest attention to the art instead occupying himself by looking for a decent trick. Finding no one worth pursuing, he excused himself for a quick cigarette.

When Brian stepped out the back door, there was only one other person out there smoking. The back of the blond's head was heartbreakingly familiar, but Brian didn't react. He learned months ago to stop reaching for strangers hoping they were Justin. But when the other man turned toward him, his heart stopped.

"Justin?" He reached out a shaking hand but was afraid to actually touch him. "You're dead."

"And you're an asshole." Justin glared at him before heading back into the gallery.

Brian stood there for several minutes frozen in place. He couldn't believe what had just happened. Justin wasn't real. He was dead, and Brian was losing his mind. He remembered the flyer he hadn't bothered looking at and pulled it from his pocket. There on the third page he found Justin's face. He didn't bother reading the bio instead he just took a moment to confirm that it said "New professor Justin Taylor." He struggled to breathe. Somehow Justin was alive. He was in Pittsburgh, and Brian had to find him.

He was almost frantic by the time he reached Lindsay terrified that Justin was already gone. "Lindsay, your friend will know him, won't she?" he pointed at Justin's picture holding it up in her face.

"I guess so, Brian." She pushed the paper away. "Why?"

"I have talk to him. I need to you to find him for me and get him somewhere private. Tell him someone important needs to talk to him. Tell him anything, but don't mention me. I need to see him alone," Brian knew he sounded desperate and crazy, but he didn't care.

"Brian, what's going on?"

"I can't tell you now. There's no time. Just do this for me. Please," he'd beg if he had to.

Lindsay still looked concerned, but she nodded. "Stay here, and I'll be back as soon as I can."

Brian spent the next ten minutes trying to convince himself Justin was real. None of this made sense, and he was afraid to hope. Finally Lindsay came back and gestured for Brian to follow her.

She led him down a quiet hallway and stopped in front of an office door. "He's in there. Brian, tell me I'm not going to regret this."

Brian hugged her hard. "I promise Lindsay. I'll explain everything eventually, but I have to go to him."

She hugged him back before stepping aside and heading back to the show.

Leaning his head against the door, Brian tried to find the courage to open it. When he entered the room, Justin was sitting in a chair facing the door. Brian crossed the room quickly and fell to his knees in front of him.

"You're dead," he whispered in disbelief. His hands trembled when he finally let himself touch

Justin's face. He was warm and real, but it was impossible to believe. "You're dead. They told me you were dead."

Justin pushed his hands away. "Brian stop it. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Tell me you're real." Brian reached for him again. "Please just tell me this is real."

Justin anger turned to confusion when he saw the tears on Brian's face. "Brian, I don't understand. You left me."

Brian heard the hurt in those last three words and guilt overwhelmed him. "I'm so sorry. They said you were dying. They wouldn't let me see you, and I couldn't stand to be there waiting for you to die. There was so much blood you had to be dying." Brian ran his finger along Justin's temple as though searching for a wound.

"But you weren't there. We broke up, and when they told you I was hurt, you left anyway. You didn't care," Justin whispered the words he'd repeated to himself again and again until he had believed them.

"No Justin, it wasn't like that. I loved you; I love you, and I would never leave you like that. No matter what you have to believe that." A noise in the hallway reminded Brian of where they were. "Come home with me," he said urgently. "We can't do this here. Someone could come in. Please just come home with."

Justin nodded. "Yeah, just let me," he gestured to the door. "I have to tell them something."

"Me too. Meet me out front in five minutes. Promise me." On impulse he leaned forward and kissed Justin. It was a short kiss, but it was full of desperation and longing.

"I promise," Justin agreed, looking slightly dazed.

Once Justin left, Brian wiped his eyes and tried to compose himself before looking for Lindsay. He found her at the bar nervously watching the hallway.

"Lindsay, can you find your own way home?"

"Sure, Brian. Are you okay?" she studied his face closely.

For the first time Brian let himself smile. "I'm good, Lindsay. I think everything's finally going to be alright. But I need one more favor. I need a day with no visits, no calls, nothing. I know I had plans with Gus tomorrow, but I can't. Tell him I'm sorry, and I'll make it up to him. I wouldn't do this if it wasn't important you know that. Tell everyone I'll make it to the diner for lunch Sunday that way I can see him before you leave, but until then I need to be left alone alone. Will you do that?"

"You know I will. I love you Brian, you know that."

Brian gave her a quick hug in acknowledgement and headed for the door. He let himself relax a little when he saw Justin waiting for him. "The car's this way," he put a gentle hand on Justin's back to guide him. Those were the only words spoken on the way to the loft. Brian had a hard time looking away from Justin to concentrate on the road. He was still too rattled for conversation.

Once they got to the loft Brian offered Justin a drink which he refused. As much as Brian wanted one, he knew he needed to be sober for whatever was to come.

Justin looked around before turning to Brian with a small smile. "It's just like you described." Justin wasn't sure what to think as he looked around the loft that was supposed to have been his home. He wanted to believe Brian. He wanted to believe Brian hadn't left him deliberately that it had all been some kind of tragic misunderstanding, but he was so afraid. But he accepted the hand Brian held out for him.

"There's something I want you to see," he led Justin to the bedroom.

It was impossible to misunderstand what Brian wanted him to see. He stood in front of the painting he'd made for Brian a lifetime ago hanging exactly like he imagined it, and his heart froze. He sat down heavily on the bed.

"Justin, what's wrong?" Brian sat down next to him confused by the fear he saw on Justin's face.

"I can't do that anymore," he pointed to the painting. "The way he hit me I should have died. There was brain damage. My right hand is permanently screwed up. I can't use it for long without it shaking and cramping up. I'll never be able to paint like that again."

"But you're teaching? And you had pieces in the show tonight?" Brian struggled to understand. He didn't have any idea what pieces had been Justin's, but obviously some had been.

"It's better than it was. There is a lot I can do using a computer, and I can draw for short periods of time now. It might even improve a little more, but it will never be like it was. It will never be like that," Justin pointed to the painting again.

"Do you think I fucking care about that? You're alive, and you're here. That's all that matters to me. I don't care if you ever pick up another paintbrush or pencil again." Brian made sure he looked Justin in the eye while speaking.

Justin shook his head. He hated saying all this, but Brian needed to know. "There's more. I'm not the same as I was before. I jump at loud noises, and crowds freak me out. I have headaches and nightmares. I'm not easy to be with."

Brian almost laughed because, Jesus, it wasn't like Brian had ever been easy to be with, but he knew Justin wouldn't understand. "I don't care," he insisted.

"But that's why you left. You knew I'd be damaged, and you left." It was the one fear he couldn't let go of.

"No, I never would have left if I'd known." Brian broke the polite distance they'd been keeping between him and ran his hands through Justin's hair and stroked his face before reaching for his hands. He needed to touch Justin. Justin has always understood his touch, and he wanted Justin to feel what he was saying. "I left because you were dead. There was a moment when I knew you were gone, and nothing can prepare you for that kind of pain. If I had any idea that you were alive, I would have stayed and found a way to be with you. Having you back is a miracle I'm still not sure I can believe in. I love you; that hasn't changed. I told you before I wanted you with me as long as that was what you wanted. That hasn't changed either." Brian was prepared to repeat this over and over until Justin believed him.

Justin threw himself into Brian's arms. "God, Brian I didn't know what to believe. I loved you so much, but you were gone. When I woke up, and they said you had left me, I didn't want to believe them. But you weren't there."

"I'm sorry, so sorry," Brian said as he kissed away Justin's tears. He wondered if they could ever completely heal the wounds their separation had left. He kissed Justin gently and felt his heart swell when Justin kissed him back. They shared several soft kisses and light touches before Justin pulled back.

"We can have this again, can't we? It's not too late?" Justin let himself hope for the first time since he learned Brian was gone.

"It's never too late. I love you," Brian had a feeling he'd be saying that a lot the next few days. He needed to say it as much as he was sure Justin needed to hear. He was rewarded with a real smile from Justin.

"I love you too. Even when I wanted to hate you, I still loved you."

Justin's words freed a pain in Brian even he hadn't realized the depth of. Full of relief and joy, his smile rivaled Justin's brightest. But it dimmed slightly at Justin's next words.

"Tell me what happened that night. I don't remember it or the two weeks before it really. I was always afraid to ask, but I want to know."

Brian nodded reluctantly. He never wanted to talk about that night, but for Justin he would try. "Let's get more comfortable. This might take a while." He moved to sit at the top of the bed leaning against the headboard. Justin settled against his chest.

Brian felt better with Justin in his arms. He stroked his hair and back while he talked needing the physical connection to remind himself that Justin was alive. "You remember you had a show right before I was supposed to leave."

Justin nodded. "I remember getting ready for it, but not the actual show."

"You were a huge success. Everything went perfectly. I was going back to the hotel before you. I had

a celebration planned and needed to get a few things ready. You walked me to the car, and then went back to finish up. I was watching you in the mirror when I saw someone approaching you. Then I saw the bat. I tried to warn you. I tried to stop him, but I was too late." Brian stopped and took a few deep breaths. This was even harder than he'd thought.

Justin reached up and laid his hand on Brian's face. "It's alright. It wasn't your fault."

It was strange to be receiving comfort from Justin, but it helped. Brian squeezed Justin's hand before continuing. "You fell, and there was so much blood. I called for an ambulance, and I held your hand while we waited. I told you that you had to live, I fucking begged you to be okay. I promised I would stay with you. And I did until we got to the hospital. Then they took you away."

"I'm here now," Justin reassured him quietly.

"The doctor came out and said," Brian swallowed hard. "He said you only had a few hours left that there was nothing they could do. Craig was there by then, and he wouldn't let me see you. That's when I left. I couldn't stay there in that building waiting for you to die and not be allowed to be with you. So I left. God, if only I had stayed."

"It's not your fault. My parents," Justin said darkly shaking his head. He couldn't believe how they had betrayed him. What they had put both himself and Brian through. He couldn't imagine ever forgiving them.

"Don't think about them. They don't matter here. When I left the hospital, I just kept going. I couldn't go back to the hotel without you. At the moment I told you about when I knew you were gone, I made myself forget. I spent a long time pretending you never happened. It was the only way I could handle it," That was as much of the truth as he could give Justin now. He'd tell him the rest later, but it wasn't important at this moment.

"I'm so sorry I believed them. I knew something was wrong, but I let them talk me into believing you didn't care."

"You had enough to deal with. But how did you end up here?" Brian figured that was a safer question, and one he really did want an answer to.

"For some reason, no one called PIFA to tell them what happened. They called a few months after I was released to offer me housing. I was really depressed at the time, and my mother was driving me nuts. Suddenly it seemed like the perfect way out. I worked my ass off trying to get well enough to take the job. I finally had something to work for. Also, I kept telling myself I couldn't let you take the job away from me too." Justin knew his anger at Brian stemmed from hurt, and it felt good to let all that go.

"Christ Justin, if I hadn't gone to the show tonight we would have continued living in the same city, but a million miles apart. I never would have known you were alive." It would have been so easy to go on believing Justin was dead. Their reunion was due to nothing more than chance. The thought filled Brian with dread.

"I would have shown up at your door eventually demanding answers. No matter what I told myself, I always intended to see you again. I couldn't let go without you telling me in person it was over." It was the first time Justin has admitted that, but he knew it was true.

Brian held Justin a little tighter thankful they'd somehow found each other. "Tell what happened to you. Your recovery and what you still need." There was so much Brian didn't know about how Justin came to be in his arms.

"Not tonight. We have plenty of time, right?" Justin smiled when Brian nodded. He turned so he was facing Brian directly. Looking in his eyes, he said seriously, "I want to be with you again. I want you inside me. I want to feel whole again."

"Are you sure?" Brian asked wanting desperately to give that to Justin, but not wanting to hurt him.

Any doubts Justin might have had were banished by the love and desire he saw in Brian's eyes. "This is what I want," he assured Brian before kissing him.

They spent the rest of the night showing each other how they felt. They relearned each other's bodies slowly and thoroughly. Their touches had a reverence that hadn't been there before. Each kiss held a little more meaning. And when Brian finally entered Justin's body, their eyes glittered with a few tears. As they lay together afterward, they whispered promises and reassurances.

The day of peace Brian had asked for was granted. He and Justin spent Saturday becoming comfortable with each other again. They talked about where their lives had taken them since their separation. They talked about the future they thought was lost, and how they could make a new one together. More conscious now of how fragile their happiness was, they shared their feelings more openly and easily.

By the time Sunday afternoon rolled around, Brian was willing if not exactly eager to share Justin with everyone else.

"Are you sure this is still a good idea?" Justin asked nervously as they approached the diner. "Given the circumstances maybe it would be better to gradually ease them into the idea of me."

"It will be fine. Trust me with this group it's better to get it over with at once." Brian stopped and gave him deep kiss. "For luck," he whispered. "Besides I've had this day planned for a long time."

"Drama queen," Justin teased forcing himself to relax.

When they entered the diner, Brian easily spotted his family. The whole gang including Hunter, Carl, Gus, and J.R. were crowded into two back booths. Debbie abandoned her customers mid order once she saw Brian and moved to stand next to Michael. Brian wrapped his arm around Justin and confidently approached the group.

"Everyone, I'd like you to meet my partner Justin Taylor. After an unexpected delay, he has finally

joined me here from San Francisco." He waited through the first beat of silence for pandemonium to break out.

Ted and Melanie's jaws hit the table. Emmett started clapping. Debbie shouted questions at him while Lindsay gave him a knowing look. The others talked among themselves. Justin moved a bit closer to Brian while he tried to take it all in. Brian kissed the side of his head, and whispered in his ear, "Don't worry they don't bite. Well, except for Melanie, but you're not her type."

The unexpected display of tenderness temporarily silenced the group again.

"Hey Dad, where were you yesterday?"

Gus's question broke the tension, and everyone began talking again. Justin was startled, but pleased when Michael stood up and greeted him with a hug. He quickly introduced everyone to Justin and pulled a chair up for him.

An hour later, Brian sat back contently and watched Justin charm each one of them. He wasn't sure what Michael or Lindsay might have said before they arrived, but they were all on their best behavior. They kept the questions basic and didn't push for more. He knew they would want more answers eventually, but today was time to welcome Justin into his crazy, screwed up family. The hard truths could wait.

He felt more than heard Justin laugh at something Emmett said. Brian had quickly commandeered the chair meant for Justin, and pulled Justin into his lap. He thought they could both use the contact. Brian knew they still had a lot to work through and figure out, but he was confident they could do it. Justin was alive, and for the first time in months, Brian was looking forward to the future.