Queer As Folk Season 6

by qaffangyrl

Summary

Timeline: Six Months after 513
April 15 2017 marks the 10 year anniversary of when I first completed and posted Queer As Folk Season 6 in its entirety on livejournal. It's been friendslocked since then but I thought it was time to bring it over here to A03. Enjoy!

I've written this fic in a way that'll hopefully give you the feel of watching an actual episode. I'm trying to include all the humor, hotness, angst, suspense and LOVE that made us adore the show. I appreciate any feedback you can give and feel free to use the comments to discuss the episode amongst yourselves! Have fun!

Disclaimer: I own nothing. It's Cowlip's and Showtime's

Notes

Feel free to create if this fic inspires you! I haven't been actively involved in fandom for a while but I'd love to chat with anyone who's interested. Comments and kudos are loved. The fic is complete.
Betas: amnch shadownyc moonriver fansee

Fanart by badbadpixie

mad this awesome cover for my
Queer As Folk Season 6.

What'd y'all think?!?
Babylon

Shanda Leer skipped down the back steps of the stage so Emmett could help her make a quick change for her final number.

“Listen to them out there. They love you Shanda. I think this is your best act ever!” Emmett squealed as he zipped up the back of Shanda’s dress.

“It’s the hair darling, it’s the hair. Men just can’t get enough of my new, long, fiery-red tresses.” Shanda replied as she dabbed beads of perspiration from her brow and reapplied her concealer and powder.

“You do look like the reincarnation of Miss Rita Hayworth. I think you might actually be channeling her while you’re up there on stage. I tell you honey, you’re an absolute hit.”

“I’m just glad Brian agreed to let me perform here. The lighting is so much better at Babylon than it is at Woody’s. Is he out there? I want to be sure and thank him before I leave,” Shanda replied as she toed on her silver stiletto heels.

“Doubtful. It’s after midnight. He’s never out on the floor this late.”

“Ah. He’s in the backroom, I suppose.”

“The backroom?” Emmett gripped the imaginary strand of pearls around his neck and continued in a scandalized tone. “Oh Shanda, haven’t you heard? Rumor has it that Mr. Brian Kinney hasn’t even set foot back there since the club reopened. Sure, he does a little dancing, hangs out by the bar, but as soon as the clock strikes twelve he goes up to his office and locks the door like he’s lord of the manor.”

“Too good to consort with the peasants of the land?”

“Who knows? One thing is for sure though. That man is not the Brian Kinney of yesteryear.”

Babylon : Brian’s Office

Brian waited in anticipation for Justin to walk into the frame of his web-cam. He mused on the fact that the simple act of turning on his PC in his private office at Babylon caused him to get hard. He let his hand rest on his crotch and tried to wait patiently for the show to begin, despite Justin’s best effort to tease him.

“Hurry up Sunshine or I’m going to start without you,” Brian spoke into his PC mic. Just then, Justin’s arm and torso appeared on the monitor as he adjusted the web-cam to get a clear shot of the twin bed in his tiny room at the East Village Artist’s Co-op.

“Don’t rush me or I’m really going to make you wait,” Justin playfully scolded as he stepped back from his desktop and looked into the web-cam. He wore a pair of low slung cargo pants and an oversized, navy blue hoodie. He smiled at Brian’s image on his monitor and asked, “Okay, where do you want me?”

“On the bed. Kneeling. Facing me.”
Justin turned from the web-cam slowly, giving Brian the chance to take a nice long look at his ass. He walked over to the bed, kneed his way onto it, then waited for Brian’s next command.

“Unzip your sweater. Slowly.”

Justin gave Brian a little grin and inched his zipper down till it fell open, exposing his milky white belly. He licked his lips and tried to imagine that Brian’s heat and scent were with him in the room.

“Show me where you want me to touch you.”

Justin’s eyes fluttered a little. He’d imagined all day where he wanted Brian’s hands, lips, tongue. Justin pressed his fingers at his waist just below his navel and dragged them up his chest to his right nipple. He used his left hand to give his nipple a tweak and his right hand to caress his neck and the soft skin behind his ears. He could feel his cock begin to stir, but he wanted to make Brian wait for the main event. Justin let out a sigh as he let his hoodie fall off his arms and pool around his legs on the bed. He slid his hands up his sides and hugged himself a little before he reached up and ran his fingers through his shaggy, blond hair. When his bangs fell over his eyes and brushed against the bridge of his nose, he heard Brian’s moan call out to him through his desktop speakers.

Although he could only see Brian’s face on his monitor, Justin was fairly certain where Brian’s hands were at this moment. It’d been nearly four months since they’d started fucking each other over the internet. Justin got a true thrill out of the fact that while Brian may be a controlling top in real life, online he could only hold onto the reigns for a matter of minutes before Justin had to take the lead.

“Brian, are you ready for more?”

“Mmmm,” Brian hummed in response.

Justin scooted back farther on the bed and reached into his cardboard nightstand for his lube and the custom made dildo that Brian sent in the mail a mere week after Justin had arrived in New York. He’d teased Brian mercilessly for making such a truly narcissistic gesture, but the truth was Justin couldn’t get enough of the damn thing. Although he did, on rare occasion, bring home a trick to top, he preferred to spend his time alone in his room filling himself with Brian’s pseudo-phallus.

Justin shed his cargos and kneeled sideways on the foot the bed. He situated himself to make sure he gave Brian a good view of both his rock hard cock and his perfectly curved buttock. He leered over his right shoulder at the web-cam and said, “I want you in my ass Brian. Do you want me to show you?”

“Yes,” Brian managed to choke out.

Justin slathered the dildo with lube and pressed the tip against his tight hole. He didn’t bother to ready himself with his fingers – he wanted it to hurt. He wanted the feeling of Brian’s cock in him to stay with him through the night and into the next morning when he awoke. Justin hissed as he worked the dildo deep into himself. After giving himself the slightest moment to adjust, he began to pump it into him with his left hand as he fucked the fist he’d made with his right hand. He was able to find an easy rhythm and he soon stilled his hands and let his hips do the work, rocking back onto the dildo then forward into his hand. All the while, with what was left of his conscious self, he concentrated on making sure he gave Brian a good, hard fuck with his blue eyes. Justin knew the power his eyes had on Brian. They’d saved their relationship on at least one occasion and now they acted as a lifeline over the internet; looking through the web-cam and directly into Brian’s heart, mind and cock.

Justin was getting close and he knew that Brian certainly wouldn’t be able to hold out much longer
so he asked, "Brian...do you need it like I do?"

"More...show me," Brian growled.

With that, Justin shoved the dildo in as far as it would go, making sure to drag it across his prostate with each thrust. He fought to keep his eyes on the monitor as he felt his orgasm burst out of him. When he saw Brian’s face begin to convulse from his own release, Justin’s come shot onto his chest as he collapsed onto the bed. He lay there and reveled in the stillness for a moment when he heard Brian’s voice fill the room again.

"Of the several thousand brilliant ideas I’ve had over the years, getting these web-cams for us has to easily be among the top ten."

"Top five," Justin laughed as he toweled himself off and straightened up the blanket on his bed.

"Why are you bothering to make your bed? The rest of your place is a total shit hole," Brian asked as he lit a cigarette and surveyed the dingy 8x6 closet that Justin called his bedroom. Sketch pads, pizza boxes, and dirty clothes were strewn about. Brian recalled that Justin had never been much of a housekeeper.

"Ah yes, but it's my shit hole. Besides, I like to get into a freshly made bed after I take my shower. It's a small consolation now that I have to wash my hair all alone," Justin sighed.

"As soon as I can figure out a way to get internet access in our showers you'll be the first to know," Brian replied after blowing a thread of smoke from between his lips.

Justin smiled into the camera then walked over to his desk and put his hand up on the monitor. Brian followed with his own hand as their fingers touched through the screen. The two men were lost in each other's eyes when a jarring vibrating noise broke the spell. Brian's phone danced across the glass desktop, pleading to be answered.

"What the hell is that? Brian, were you using a vibrator without showing me?"

"You wish. No. It's Michael...again. He called 3 times while we were fucking," Brian explained in an exasperated tone as he turned the phone off.

"It's late, maybe something's wrong? Shouldn't you call him back?"

"Hardly. The professor has introduced little Mikey to the joys of tantric sex. He’s probably just wanting to regale me with the tale of his latest six hour orgasm. Listen, I gotta close up shop in a few minutes. We should say good night," Brian said, his tone revealing his preference to stay online longer.

"When are you coming?" Justin asked as he tilted his head and fluttered his eyelids at the camera.

"I just did."

"No, I mean to The City. When are you coming to visit me?"

"Christ, you've lived in New York for less than six months and you’re already doing that smug 'The City' thing. You're not going all Carrie Bradshaw on me are you?" Brian shuddered at his own TV reference. He was going to have to stop hanging out with Emmett so much.

"Hey, you're the label queen. Not me," Justin laughed. "And by the way, it's not less than six months. It's exactly six months. Six months to the day, in fact."
"Aw, Sunshine, did I forget our anniversary?" Brian teased.

"Shut up and quit changing the subject. When are you coming to New York?"

"Interstate 78 runs both ways you know. Or is Pittsburgh too last season for you now?"

"No, but hello, you're the one with the car, not me."

"I offered to buy you a car but you turned me down," Brian said flatly. He really didn't want to be having this conversation. The fact was, he did want to go to New York but lately he'd been working seven days a week to bring in new clients. He had had to in order to make up for the revenue he'd lost when Remson Pharmaceuticals left Kinnetik. If Brian Kinney did "regrets" he would have seriously rethought refusing to let Remson use his kinder, gentler boner drug ad campaign.

"You already bought me a house!"

"Britin is an estate, actually."

"Exactly. Brian, you've done enough for me. I can't keep accepting gifts from you."

"It's not a gift. It's transportation to get your ass back here so I can fuck you properly."

"Good night Brian."

"Later." Brian switched off the PC and looked over at the drawing Justin had sent him as a congratulations present for Babylon's re-opening. The charcoal sketch depicted their bed at the loft. Justin was positioned on his hands and knees. Brian knelt behind him, his hands on Justin's hips. The drawing featured Brian in a mid-thrust action. Justin made Brian swear that he'd only hang it in his office at Babylon after Brian had jokingly suggested they enlarge the sketch to mural size and embed it in the ceiling of the club. The picture was some of Justin's early work -- it had had to be drawn while he was still in high school. Although the sketch captured both men in a frighteningly accurate state of rapture, the work was amateurish compared to the pieces Justin was showing these days. Brian knew that New York was the right place for Justin. He'd grown so much in his work in the time since he'd left. Lindsay even estimated that Justin's pieces had probably doubled in value since they were originally sold at the Sidney Bloom Gallery the year before. Brian figured that if things didn't turn around at Kinnetik he could always resort to selling Justin's early pieces, such as the Brian Kinney Nude in Repose he'd purchased during the GLC Auction years ago. Hell, a drawing of himself and his glorious cock had to yield more than the $10,000 that Michael got for that old Captain Astro comic he'd sold on eBay. The thought of Michael brought Brian back to the present and he packed up his attaché case and left for the loft.

Outside the home of Ben and Michael

"He's still not answering. How the hell I'm I going to get there? I can't ride my fucking bike all the way down town," Michael shouted out at Ben in frustration. Ben wasn't listening though. He was holding Hunter's hand as the paramedics led him out to the ambulance on a stretcher. "You're sure there's no room for me in there? I could sit on Ben's lap," Michael offered to the paramedic.

"Sorry sir. Only one passenger besides the patient is allowed on board. We could radio a cab company for you if you'd like," The young brunette paramedic suggested as he placed an oxygen mask over Hunter's pale face.
"No thanks, I can call them. You just focus on taking care of my son."

"Why don't you try Deb and Carl?" Ben offered as he climbed into the back of the ambulance with Hunter. The boy was barely conscious, but Ben was doing his best to be strong for his foster son and husband.

"All right," Michael began as he scrolled through his contacts to Ma. "But I don't know why Brian's not answering. I need him." Ben brushed Hunter's hair off his damp forehead choosing not to comment on Michael's declaration of need for his best friend. "I'll be there as soon as I can Hunter," Michael called out as the paramedic in back closed the ambulance bay door. Ben smiled sympathetically then turned his attention back to Hunter.

**Debbie, Carl and Emmett's House**

"It's two AM in the goddamn morning. Somebody better be fuckin' dead," Debbie growled into the phone while not bothering to open her eyes.

"Ma. I need you to come pick me up," Michael pleaded.

Deb immediately softened. "What is it baby? What's the matter?" Deb inquired as she sat up. Carl stirred slightly and then continued his melodic snore.

"It's Hunter, Ma. He's real sick. The ambulance just took him and Ben to Allegheny General but there wasn't room for me. I need a ride. Can you come get me?"

"Sure, baby. We'll be right there." Deb hung up the phone then got up threw on a pair of sweat pants and gave Carl a nudge. "Get up. We have to take Michael to the hospital."

"What's the matter with him?" Carl asked with concern. Over the past years he'd grown genuinely fond of Debbie's son.

"Nothing, it's Hunter. He's sick. Come on." She pushed him a little harder this time as she slid her feet into her slippers. "Move your ass."

Just then Emmett popped his head through the open doorway. "Let Carl sleep Deb. I'll go with you. I thought the call was for me so I picked up the line and heard Michael."

"No. No. Em you've got a long day tomorrow. I'll go with Deb."

"You've gotta go catch bad guys. I'm throwing a tea party for the Junior League. Let me go."

"We'll all fuckin' go. Just hurry. Michael's waiting." The men scrambled to get dressed as Debbie went to sit in Carl's car and wait.

**Kinnetik**

"When you decide you're going to start ignoring one of your friends, will you please cc me on the memo?" Cynthia chided as she walked in Brian’s office carrying about a dozen pink message notes.

She wore her hair back in a ponytail and had on a black jogging suit. Since Brian's entire staff was in overdrive these days, he'd declared the weekends as ‘casual dress days’ in an effort to stave off a mutiny. Not that any of his subordinates loyalty was in question in the slightest, particularly Cynthia’s. She'd been Brian's assistant for over ten years, ever since Brian landed his first account. She'd been by his side through his promotions, his termination and his rise back to power as CEO of
one of the most influential boutique-sized ad agencies in the country. Ad Week had even done a side bar story on her when Brian was featured on the cover.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" he asked, only giving Cynthia half his attention as he sorted through the research his staff had collected on Liberty Air's VP of Marketing.

"Michael..." She dropped the messages on his desk directly under Brian's nose. "...left 10 messages on the overnight voicemail. He's at the hospital. He wants you to come be with him."

"Ben?"

"No, Hunter. One message said something about pneumonia and viral loads or something."

Brian pinched the bridge of his nose. He could feel a headache coming on. This was the last thing he needed right now. "Fuck. All right. Have Ted lead the nine o'clock meeting with the junior ad execs. Be sure to tell him to scare the shit out of them when..."

"No can do. Ted called about a half hour ago. He's at the hospital already with Michael."

"Fine. Christ," Brian said to himself as he gathered up the papers on his desk and slid them clumsily into a manila folder. "Conference me in at nine on my cell. I'm going to rely on you to create the appropriate sense of terror in the room."

Cynthia smiled at him and replied, "Consider it done, boss."

Allegheny General Hospital

Brian made his way down the hallway to room 231. He'd had more than his fill of hospitals over the last few years. It wasn't so much that the place was filled with fucking sick people as it was the ever present sense of mortality that seemed to put a stranglehold on Brian every time he walked along the sterile, linoleum floors.

As Brian rounded the corner he saw Ben, Ted, Michael, and Debbie huddled around a doctor. Brian chose to hang back and not interrupt but Michael caught his eye, left the group and ran to Brian.

"Thank god you're here" was all Michael said as he clutched onto Brian.

Brian, in turn, wrapped his arms around his friend and stroked the back of his head. Brian could tell that Michael had been crying. "How bad is it? Cynthia mentioned pneumonia," Brian asked plainly, trying not to evoke any more emotion out of Michael than was sure to come anyway.

"Yeah, they tried to drain his lung but, I don't know, something went wrong and it collapsed. They've got him on a respirator now. I don't know what the hell is going on," Michael replied while never letting up on the frantic embrace he had on Brian.

"Listen to me. Are you listening?" Brian asked as he pulled Michael back out to arms length and looked him in the eyes."

Michael nodded and sniffled. "Uh Huh."

"Hunter is a tough kid. If anyone can pull through this it's him. What he needs now is for you to be strong for him and be the kind of father I know you are." Brian furrowed his brow, patted Michael on the cheek and kissed him.

As their lips parted Michael gave Brian a weak smile. "I'm just glad you're here. I know I can't do
"Hey, thanks for coming. It was important to Michael that you made it," Ben said as he pulled Michael into his arms. Michael leaned back against his husband’s chest, but still maintained deliberate eye contact with Brian. Ben turned Michael to face him.

"Come on. Let's sit down for a minute." Ben led Michael over to the visitors lounge area.

Brian followed a couple steps behind checking his watch for the time. The three men took a seat next to Debbie and Ted who was holding her hand.

"So," Ben began. "Hunter's test results are back."

"And?" Michael asked. Ben noticed that Michael grabbed onto Brian's bicep instead of his own.

"His HIV has progressed and his T-cell count has dropped below 500."

"Oh Christ," Debbie gasped then quickly covered her mouth.

Michael shook his head. "That's not possible. He's been on the cocktail and he's only 18. HIV doesn't progress that fast in kids his..."

Brian's phone sprang to life. "I've got to take this," Brian remarked as he stood to cross over the other side of the hallway.

"Brian! Ben's in the middle of telling us that their kid is dying and you've got to take a fuckin' phone call?" Debbie shouted.

Brian frowned and waved her off then continued to walk down the hall. "Cynthia. You've got me on speaker?"

"Yes, go ahead Brian."

Episode 601 Part 2

New York
Pierre Poirot Gallery

Justin waited in the lobby with his portfolio. It was his first appointment with Pierre Poirot, an influential art dealer who had made his reputation and a considerable fortune promoting the work of young artists.

Justin really didn't know what to expect from the meeting. Poirot's assistant had dropped by unexpectedly at Co-Op studio the week before. She reviewed his pieces for less than three minutes before asking Justin to bring in some slides for the dealer to look over. Since Justin had arrived in New York, the only work he'd shown had been in the EVACO resident exhibitions. Each of the pieces he'd hung had sold but the earnings went to subsidize his studio space and living quarters. He'd gone through most of the money from the Rage movie option, and his share of the comic sales didn't stretch very far now that he lived in the East Village.

Justin hadn't told anyone back in Pittsburgh, and certainly not any of his housemates, about the meeting. He wasn’t ready to let anyone know. In truth, Justin was nervous as hell to have his work evaluated by Pierre. Rumor had it that any young artist who he appreciated was destined for stardom. On the other hand Pierre’s critiques could also be so brutal that even the most determined..."
artist who fell victim to a bad review usually put away his brushes and easel for good.

"Mr. Taylor, how good of you to come meet with me," Pierre said as he extended his hand to Justin. The sight of Pierre made Justin's heart skip a beat. The man easily stood six foot three. He was lightly tanned and had dark brown hair, with the exception of slightly grey temples that accentuated his silver-blue eyes. His build was solid and muscular, and he filled out his black Hugo Boss suit and cashmere turtle neck quite well. Justin felt his cheeks redden as he realized his faded jeans and grey V-neck sweater didn't give off the air of sophistication that filled the rest of the gallery.

"Thank you for the invitation. It's an honor just to have my work be considered by your gallery," Justin gushed and then immediately grimaced. He didn't want to sound like he just got off the bus. "Yes, well, not all of my young foundlings feel that way after they've received my critique but I appreciate the compliment," Pierre replied. He gave Justin a slow once over, beginning at his Puma running shoes and ending at his mass of golden locks. Justin noticed that Pierre’s gaze seemed to linger for just a split second at his crotch. Being inspected in that way by such a handsome, accomplished man gave Justin as slight tightness in his balls.

"Come with me," Pierre said, then made a quick turn on his heel and led Justin in to a work room behind the receptionist's desk. The space was completely white. White walls, white easels, white work benches, white stools. The room had no windows, but the ambient lighting was as natural as the sun itself.

"So, I hear you attended PIFA?"

"Um, yes sir but only for a few semesters, I didn’t graduate."

"Too eager to join the real world, I suppose?"

"Let's just say I ended up on a path that was different from where school could take me," Justin replied as he unzipped his portfolio and started to pull out his samples but Pierre held up his index finger and waved it at him.

"Bup, Bup, Bup, not yet. I like to take my time and get to know an artist a little prior to examining his pieces. It helps give me the necessary context to see into true meaning of the work."

"Alright, what would you like to know?" Justin asked while trying to maintain his composure. He'd never been good at small talk and was even worse at talking about himself.

"Are you married?"

"Not exactly."

"Meaning?" Poirot pressed, while clasping his hands together and holding them at his waist.

"I have someone in my life but..." How was Justin supposed to define his relationship with Brian in any simple terms? "...it's complicated."

"Isn't it always?" Pierre sighed. At this, Justin smiled and blushed a little more. "And how does this 'someone' feel about your aspirations?"

"Oh, he's completely supportive. He encouraged me to come to New York. " Justin noticed that Pierre wasn't the least bit phased by his revelation that he was gay. Not that many people in New
York reacted to his sexuality at all. He wasn't sure if it's because New Yorkers were that much more enlightened than people in the Pitts or if he was just obvious in some way that he wasn't aware of.

"And what's the young man's name?"

"Brian." After all these years Justin still experienced an inner warmth every time he uttered Brian's name.

"Now, he's not the same Brian that came to your rescue after that unfortunate incident you had back in high school is he?"

"Wow, you've done your research," Justin blurted out and then immediately wished he could take it back. "I mean yes, we're still together."

"Justin, I don't think of myself as an art dealer, I think of myself as an artist dealer. It's essential for me to have you thoroughly researched so I can sell you as well as your talents. Besides, your name seemed to have made its way into the news on more than one occasion." This put Justin at a loss for words. He'd had enough of being in the public eye. It had taken months before he could walk down Liberty Avenue without being pointed at and talked about as that kid who got bashed.

"Now, there's also the matter of your impairment. Tell me about how it has affected your work."

"You mean my hand?" Poirot simply nodded for Justin to continue. "Well, I don't really consider it an impairment anymore. I mean, at first it was rough but my limitations actually opened up a variety of new ways to create art that I might never have explored otherwise."

"Like your graphic novels?"

"You're referring to Rage?" At this Justin was genuinely surprised. He really didn't talk about Rage to anyone outside his friends at home and he didn't include it on his curriculum vitae.

"Yes, I took a look at a few of the issues. Quite provocative," Pierre stated as he raised his eyebrow.

"Gay superheroes are a provocative subject, I guess." Justin had no idea where this line of questioning was going. He just wanted to show Pierre his slides, get his critique, and get out of there.

"Is the rumor true that you and your lover are the inspiration for the characters?" Pierre questioned. Justin had the feeling that the subject of Rage titillated Pierre in a way that made Justin feel truly uncomfortable. "At first, yes. I mean I fashioned Rage and JT’s looks after Brian and me but their relationship has evolved in a completely different way than ours has."

"And how's that?"

"Well, Brian isn't really a super-hero and I don't constantly need to be rescued." Justin knew his comment came off as glib but he was becoming frustrated with Pierre’s questions.

"So you're saying that art doesn't really imitate life?" Pierre asked playfully.

"Not in the case of my comic book." Justin took this as an opening to get the meeting back on track. "But I think my life is reflected in the pieces I've been working on lately though. Would you like to see them?"

"Yes, let's see what I can learn about your life from you current work."

With that Justin set out his samples on the illuminated work benches for Pierre to inspect. Each
painting he'd done had been digitally photographed and then put into slide protector sheets for review. Pierre took out a photographer's monocle, took a deep breath and began his evaluation. Justin wasn't sure what to do at this point. Pierre didn't make a sound; he just looked at one piece and then the next. He didn't comment or gesture in any way that indicated his thoughts. After what Justin felt was an eternity, Pierre lifted his head from the workbench and turned to face Justin.

"Mr. Taylor, for someone so young, you've experienced a great deal of darkness in your life. At the same time, I sense from your work that you're very familiar with the feeling of complete and total ecstasy." Pierre raised his eyebrow and waited for Justin to respond. Justin's mind raced for some appropriate way to address Pierre's comment. He was sure that Brian would know exactly what to say in a situation like this.

"I feel it's important to draw on the breadth of life experience I've had. I believe in living with no apologies and no regrets so I try to convey those ideals in my work."

"Bravissimo, Mr. Taylor." Pierre clapped his hands together a few times then continued. "Your work will not only earn you a great deal of acclaim, but also quite a bit of money for the both of us. Can you be ready for a show in six weeks?"

Six weeks was a maddeningly short amount of time to prepare his work for his first solo exhibition in New York but Justin didn't want to blow his shot.

"I'll be tight since I have to share studio place but I think six weeks is doable," Justin offered.

"Excellent. Now we have no time to waste. I have several people you'll need to be introduced to prior to the show. It's important to create the right buzz. We'll also have to work on honing your back-story for the press releases. Now, Mr. Taylor, start at the beginning."

**Kinnetik**

Brian stood at his wet bar and poured himself a shot of scotch. The day was getting away him and he still had four proposals he needed to finish before he left for the afternoon. Brian stretched his neck from side to side and scratched the small of his back with his thumb and forefinger. Just then Ted walked into the office with his own mountain of paperwork.

"Bri? You ready to go over the finances?"

"No time like the present I suppose," Brian responded as he crossed over and sat on his white Italian Modo sofa. Ted joined him and set out a stack of bills and three tiered check books on the Mies van der Rohe coffee table.

"Our cash flow is pretty tight these days but we've got the building and vendor expenses as well as payroll covered. Your travel budget is in the toilet though, so you're going to need try and web-cast your meetings with our national clients whenever possible. I think we should save any plane trips for bringing in new accounts," Ted suggested. Brian's mood was souring with every comment Ted made. "And I really think it's best that you rely on that famous Kinney charm of yours rather than wining and dining your clients at least for time being."

"Wow. Have you got any other great news for me?" Brian asked.

Ted leaned against the back of the sofa and sighed.

"Spill it Theodore."

"It's your personal accounts, Brian. You're stretched real thin. I think it's time you consider making
"Some cuts."

"Such as?" Brian rubbed his face with his hands and rose to pour himself another drink. This time a double.

"Well, you're paying $6600 a month for the Britin mortgage. I know you've only had it for a few months so it hasn't appreciated in value but if Jennifer can sell it for you then that will free up some cash."

"Britin isn't mine to sell."

"I get that you bought it for Justin. But he's in New York."

"I'll never tire of your uncanny ability to state the obvious Theodore. Selling the estate isn't an option. Next?" stated Brian as he began pacing his office.

"Well you're going to have to freeze your account with Armani. There is absolutely no way you can afford the spring line," Ted announced. This was not a negotiable item in Ted's accountant mind.

Brian plopped into his desk chair feigning disinterest. "That's fine, I'll just stop by the Q-Mart and pick up some new suits."

"And then there are the checks you're sending Lindsay. I know you love her but $4700 a month is little overly generous, don't you think?" Ted tried to ask as softly as possible. Still, he braced himself for Brian's sharp retort that was sure to come.

"Mel still isn't licensed to practice law there and they sure as shit can't live on her clerking salary," was all Brian countered with as he rose to continue skulking about from one end of his office to the other.

Brian's tone was matter of fact but Ted could tell that he was going to need do some convincing in order to get Brian to make any cuts. "Yeah, but you're subsidizing an income for a family of four in addition to paying Gus's tuition to that private school they've got him enrolled in. Brian, you just can't afford it."

"Shift some things around in my stock portfolio, do what ever the fuck it is you do. Just send the munchers their goddamn check. Do you hear me Schmidt?"

Ted shook his head. "It's not that easy Brian. If you don't sell that house and you keep sending Mel and Lindz that much money you're going to be broke in a matter of months."

"I won't be if you get the hell out of here and let me get back to work at bringing in new business. This meeting is over." Brian stopped in his tracks and looked Ted dead in the eye.

This was clearly Ted's exit cue. He gathered up the bills and checkbooks and headed for the door. Then he turned to face Brian and continued, "I know you think I'm a chicken shit most of the time. That I'm a worrier, overly cautious, but please just think about what I've said. I promise you I'm not over reacting."

Brian sat at his desk and gave no acknowledgement of Ted's statement. Just as Ted was leaving the office Debbie came crashing in.

"Debbie, what a pleasant surprise." Brian gave her one of his signature, sarcastic grins.

"Don't you 'Debbie' me you selfish piece of shit. What was with your 30-second appearance at the
hospital this morning?"

"Michael wanted me to come to the hospital. I did. What the fuck is your problem?" The little patience Brian had left was quickly leaving him. He stood behind his desk and stretched his arms waiting for Debbie's reply.

"My problem, Brian, is that my boy - your best friend - needed you last night and you weren't there for him."

"He's got a husband. I don't have the lead role anymore. I just make guest appearances."

"You think that because Michael and Ben are married you're off the hook? That your job is done?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize I was employed by Mikey."

With this Debbie walked behind the desk and stood directly in front of Brian, their chests nearly touching. "Listen here Mister. There have been plenty of times over the years when I wished your presence in Michael's life was limited. That he wouldn't need you. And you're right, he does have a husband now, a terrific husband who will always be by his side. But, regrettably, Michael is turning to you right now, not Ben, and you have a fuckin' obligation to be there for him." Debbie poked Brian in the sternum with her index finger.

Brian took a step back and slowly blinked his eyes as he felt the venom within him stir. "Hunter's dying. There's not a goddamn thing I can do about it. Besides, Michael knew exactly what he was getting into when he took the boy in. What did he think was going to happen? He relegated himself to the role of nursemaid when he chose to have Hunter...and Ben in his life. And as for obligations, yeah I do have them. To the 57 people I'm trying to keep employed here by making sure Kinnetik doesn't go under. So if you don't mind Deb, I need to get back to work." Brian walked to his office door and opened it for her.

Deb pounded across the floor after him. "You know Brian, for a while there last year, with everything that happened, I thought you had finally grown up. That you'd finally learned to put others before yourself. Clearly I was wrong. You're still the same selfish prick you've always been."

Toronto
Lindsay and Melanie's House

"Your own solo exhibition at the Pierre Poirot Gallery? Justin, that's wonderful! I always knew your art would take you far. I just never dreamed it'd be this fast. Brian must be thrilled for you," Lindsay remarked into her mobile phone as she picked up Gus' and JR's toys off the living room floor.

"I haven't told him yet. We have a regular call at midnight but I couldn't wait to let someone know. You're the first person I thought of to call," Justin explained.

"I haven't told him yet. We have a regular call at midnight but I couldn't wait to let someone know. You're the first person I thought of to call," Justin explained.

"Well, I'm sure your mother would love to hear the news," Lindsay offered, although she knew she was taking a risk bringing up Jennifer.

"She's probably busy with Tucker. I'll send her an email. Do you think you and Melanie could come down for the opening?"

"Oh, Justin I don't know, I'll have to talk to Mel. With Gus in school now and Melanie studying for the Ontario Bar it's kind of crazy around here. Half the time I don't which end is up. I would love to
be there for you though."

"I'd love it too. You know, Lindz if it wasn't for you I might never have taken up my art again after I
got bashed. I owe a lot to you."

"Sweetie, I'm just glad you're finding the success that you deserve. It's so hard for young artists to
build a career for themselves. You're lucky that you have people like Brian and your mom behind
you."

"I know I'm lucky," Justin agreed. "Hey, I've got someone at the door, I need to let you go. Give
Mel and the kids hugs and kisses for me."

"I will. Congratulations honey."

Allegheny General Hospital

Michael sat next Hunter's bed watching the machines that were helping the boy breathe. He didn't
understand what any of the beeps or lines or anything on the computers meant but he felt like he
needed to keep an eye on them nonetheless. Hunter's breathing was labored at best but at least he
was sleeping soundly.

"Here." Brian appeared in the room with a large latte and handed it to Michael.

"Thanks." Michael took a sip of the coffee. "He's dying, Brian."

"So was Vic on about a dozen different occasions. Look how many times he pulled through." Brian
clenched his teeth. His eyes were wide and intense. He stood behind Michael's chair looking over at
Hunter.

"I'm not ready for this, the AIDS. I thought I'd have more time till it came," Michael commented in
nearly a whisper.

Brian sat on the arm on Michael's chair and wrapped his arm over Michael's shoulder. "We always
think we're going to have more time that we do. That's life."

Michael turned to face Brian, his dark brown eyebrows were furrowed. "That's life? What about
Hunter's life? He spent the better part of his childhood being pimped out by his own goddamn
mother or hustling for food on the street. What kind of life is that?"

"You're forgetting about the part where you and Ben took him in, gave him a home and a family that
loves him. That's more that a lot of people ever get," Brian countered. "Certainly more than most of
his friends on the street will ever get. Where is Ben, anyway?"

"He's giving an exam. He's going to miss the evening visiting hours." Michael set the coffee down
on the tray next to Hunter's bed and then leaned his head against Brian's side. "Can you stay with
me?"

Brian began to run his fingers through Michael's hair and answered, "I'm not going anywhere."

New York
East Village Artist's Co-Op
Justin's Room
Justin opened the door to find Calista, Pierre Poirot's assistant standing in front of him. She held up a bottle of champagne and two glasses.

"Hey, come in."

"Congratulations, Justin. When I found out that Pierre offered you an exhibition I thought we should celebrate. You're my first discovery," the attractive, waifish brunette explained as she started to unwrap the cork of the champagne bottle.

Justin closed the door behind her as she entered the room then he followed her over to his desk. "I'm sorry about the mess," Justin said in a slightly embarrassed tone. Of the countless number of things Justin missed about Pittsburgh, having a cleaning lady come twice a week was definitely near the top of the list.

"Oh don't worry about it. My husband's a musician. I've learned that creative types are not the tidiest of people." Calista poured each of them each some bubbly and then raised her glass to toast Justin.

"To wonderful beginnings."

Justin tapped his glass against hers then they both took a drink of the expensive sparkling wine.

"You know, I've been an admirer of your work for sometime now," Calista began. "When I read that you'd moved to New York I just had to introduce you to Pierre. If there is anything I know, it's his taste in young artists."

"I'm flattered but honestly, I'm surprised you've even heard of me. Aside from the Co-Op shows, I've only participated in one group exhibition and that was back home in Pittsburgh."

"Really? Which one?"

"It's one of the tri-color abstract nudes you did in school. My husband acquired it while he was at student at the Pittsburgh Institute of Fine Arts."

"You're husband went to PIFA?"

"Yes, in fact he says he was a friend of yours."

This perplexed Justin. He'd never been a social butterfly. Plus, he could count on one hand the number of straight guys he knew and none of them were anyone he'd consider a friend. "Really? What's his name?"

"Ethan Gold. Do you remember him?"
Brian’s Loft

"All children, except one, grow up," Brian began. The significance of Lindsay's latest choice of bedtime stories was not lost on him. Brian looked up at his PC monitor and had to bite back a laugh. Gus was leaning into the lens of the web-cam in such a way that he looked like he was trapped inside a fishbowl in Brian's computer.

Story-time had been Lindsay's way of keeping her promise to ensure that Gus didn't forget his father. Regardless of where he was, every Monday through Thursday at 8:00 PM Brian fired up his laptop, opened up whatever e-book Lindsay had sent him, and began reading to his son.

Things had gotten off to a rocky start. Aside from his client meetings Brian had never been one for punctuality, nor had he a track record of remembering his commitments with much accuracy. But it only took one email from his now literate, five-year-old son to snap Brian into shape.

It had been a Wednesday morning and Brian was recovering from a late, yet surprisingly unsatisfying night at the Baths. He was still fighting off a hangover when he got to Kinnetik and started checking his emails. Brian opened the one from mellindzgusjr@yahoo.com. The message simply read, "Hi Daddy you forgot my story but I still love you! Love, Your Son Gus." Gus may not share any DNA with Melanie, but he certainly inherited her knack for doling out the Jewish guilt.

To help Brian get into the habit of a regularly scheduled story-time, he had instructed Cynthia to text him each night at 7:45 to remind him of what he cryptically described as his 8:00 PM conference call. It amused him to think about what she must've thought the call actually was.

Over the past few months, Brian and Gus had read through several adventures together. The only restriction Brian had put on Lindsay's choice of stories was that he would in absolutely no way, read the 'sanitized, Disneyfied' versions of the classic children's literature they were making an effort to expose their son to. Melanie had chalked this caveat up to the snobbery of Brian's Carnegie Mellon education but he'd countered her chiding by explaining simply that as the son of gay parents, Gus's life would be difficult enough without filling his head with the illusion that everyone always lives happily ever after. Lindsay had to step in and settle the argument by granting Melanie total control over story-time on Friday through Sunday while leaving the weeknight selections to Brian and herself.

Now, just as Brian was about to have to suffer through making the declaration that he did believe in
"Daddy, when did you stop loving Mommy?"

This question definitely caught Brian off guard. So much so that he now wished that he could just turn the page and start clapping his hands so Tinker Bell would come back to life. Instead, he took a deep breath and asked, "What do you mean?"

"Adam from school says that when a Daddy stops loving a Mommy he lives in a different house."

Brian easily deduced that this little pecker-head named Adam must have parents who were going through a divorce. Well, a divorce was easy enough to explain but that's not what Gus was asking about. What he really wanted to know was the nature of Brian and Lindsay's relationship. Now that Gus was in elementary school, or rather, a prestigious Canadian day school for gifted children he was quickly coming to realize that his family structure wasn't like that of any of his classmates.

When Brian had decided that it was time he shed his status as 'anti-dad,' he'd ordered a few parenting books from Amazon.com. He certainly didn't have a frame of reference regarding how to be a good father. Most of what he read was psycho-babble bullshit. However, one thing stuck in his mind that sounded somewhat reasonable. Some Dr. Know-it-all suggested that children only need answers to their direct questions. Parents often make the mistake of over-explaining, particularly when faced with answering questions regarding sensitive or uncomfortable subject matter. If the child needs more information he'll simply ask for clarification or details. "I love your mommy, Gus. And she loves me. And we both love you."

Brian felt his answer was clear but just as he was about to continue with the story, Gus interrupted again. "Do you love both my mommies?"

"Yes, of course. We're a family," Brian said, his voice reflecting his irritation at being cornered into having to express affection for Melanie. "Now, you ready for me to keep reading to you?"

"But I thought families all lived together?" Gus asked. His brow was furrowed in a way that reminded Brian of how Justin would contort his face when he was focused on planning out a new masterpiece. Brian considered how to answer this question for a moment. He knew that Lindsay and Melanie had gone over an elementary explanation of how he had two mothers while his classmates had either a mother and father or maybe just one parent or maybe lived with a grandma or aunt. They'd had the discussion when they first enrolled Gus in pre-school and he didn't seem phased by it.

Now though, Gus's questions were coming at Brian faster than he was prepared to handle. His son
wasn't just asking about living arrangements, he was asking about love. And despite the emotional revelations Brian had been able to make over the past year, he still was a bit skittish when it came to broaching the subject.

Brian thought for a moment and then decided on an explanation that would hopefully satisfy his son. "Gus, I've known your mommy since we were still in school and I love her very much. It's a friendship kind of love; the same kind of friendship love that I have for your Uncle Michael. So, when your mommy and mama needed help to make a baby they asked me to help make you, just like they asked your Uncle Michael to help make JR."

Brian waited to see if what he'd said had registered with Gus but Gus had another question. "Okay, then what kind of love do Mommy and Mama have?"

"Um, it's a special grown-up kind of love."

"The kind that makes grown-ups live in the same house together, like Uncle Michael and Uncle Ben?"

Brian was relieved. His son was getting it and Brian was going to be able to end this excruciating conversation. "Exactly. Now, where did we leave off with Peter Pan?" Brian said as he searched to find his place in the story.

"Daddy?"

Brian sighed, "Yes?"

"How come you and Justin don't live in the same house anymore?"

New York
SoHo
Chez Bernard

Justin paced back and forth along Canal Street just around the corner from the Chez Bernard, SoHo’s premiere French bistro. He didn't know why he'd yes to Calista’s invitation to join her and Ethan
for lunch. Justin hadn't seen Ethan since the night the adoring fan from Harrisburg had come to worship at Ethan's feet. It hadn't been difficult to avoid Ethan at PIFA because their break up had nearly coincided with Justin's suspension. By the time he'd returned to school, Ethan had already signed a recording contract and was head-lining on a national tour.

Justin had just decided to text Calista and tell her he couldn't make it when his curiosity got the better of him. He just had to find out how on earth Ethan ended up married, to a woman no less.

Justin entered the café, told the waiter the name of his party, and was led out to the patio to find Calista and Ethan sitting under an umbrella covered dining table. They both stood up when they saw Justin. Justin gave a half-hearted smile and a little wave to them that was reminiscent of something he'd seen Emmett do.

Ethan reached over the table to embrace Justin as he said, "Oh my God, Justin you look so..."

Justin awkwardly returned the hug as he interrupted, "Gay?" He just couldn't help himself.

"Ah, I was actually going to say you look so much like a New Yorker. And Calista tells me you've only been here a few months?" Ethan asked as they all took their seats.

"Six months. Six months last week actually," Justin replied as he looked down at himself and surveyed his black denim Dolce & Gabana's and Prada cashmere pullover. Brian had ordered the outfit online for Justin. It came in the mail with a note that had read 'You're a New Yorker now. You should dress like one. Now, go throw away those godforsaken hoodies.'

"Oh, then we definitely have reason to celebrate. They have the most amazing Burgundian collection here; over six hundred labels," Ethan commented.

"Wow," Justin replied even though he had no idea what a Burgundian collection was.

"Oh honey, don't forget to tell him about the coq au vin," Calista chimed in as she patted Ethan on the shoulder.

Ethan pinched his thumb, forefinger and index finger together and then kissed them as he affected a French accent and said, "Oui. C'est magnifique!"
Justin nodded and gave his best polite, country-club smile in an effort to keep from full on laughing at Ethan's obvious attempt to put on airs. Justin supposed that not everything had changed about his former lover. "So, you guys come here a lot then?"

"It's where Ethan brought me on our first date."

"Yes, and she fell in love with the charm of the restaurant on the same night she fell in love with me," Ethan drawled as he leaned over to kiss Calista on the cheek.

"Hey, well, you know, that's just great," Justin replied. He felt like he was in one of those Alternate Universes that were always written about in Michael's favorite comic books. "I can't tell you how surprised I was when she told me that you two were married."

"Well, I've got another surprise for you," Ethan began as he leaned over to pick something that was sitting down beside his chair. When he sat back up he was holding a baby. "This is my daughter, Allegra Grace."

"Holy shit! You've got a kid?" Justin exclaimed then immediately regretted. He wasn't sure if Calista was 'in-the-know' regarding Ethan's sexual proclivities but regardless of how Ethan had treated him in the past, Justin certainly had no intentions of outing him. Justin tried to recover by looking at Calista and saying, "You look way too good to have a baby that young."

"I love you, Justin," Calista beamed. "She's ten months actually and I've been working-out every day to get back into shape. Ethan here even got me a personal trainer to come to the house so I wouldn't skip out on my exercise." She turned to Ethan, who was buzzing kisses on Allegra's belly, and continued, "You just couldn't bear the thought of my losing my girlish figure."

Ethan was completely engrossed in making his daughter giggle so his reply didn't quite match Calista's comment when he said, "Anything for my girls."

In that instant the worst odor surrounded their table and Justin was quite sure that he'd never smelled anything that foul before in his life. Ethan didn't appear phased, though, when he said, "If you two will excuse me, I think it's time for a new diaper."

"Honey, I'll take her. You stay here with Justin. I'm sure you two have a ton of catching up to do." Calista slung a diaper bag over her shoulder then took the baby and headed inside the restaurant to
After a moment the stinky-diaper-smell subsided and Justin found himself alone staring at Ethan, in silence, across the table. Finally, he couldn't take it anymore so he blurted out, "I never realized you were bisexual."

Ethan laughed and took a sip of his iced Perrier before saying, "Neither did I, but when I met Calista something just clicked between us."

"How did you two meet, exactly?"

"At a party that my label threw for me. Glen, my agent, introduced us. She's his niece."

Now it was coming together for Justin. He nodded his head slowly and said, "Oh, so she's your beard."

Ethan flipped open his menu as he replied, "God, I loathe that expression. It's so pedestrian." He sighed and looked up at Justin and said, "I'm not saying that I don't melt whenever I see Viggo Mortenson on screen at the Cineplex, but what Calista and I have works. Besides, without her I'd never have had Allegra, and my daughter is truly the love of my life."

"So you never...offer music advice to some hot, male fan when you’re off on tour somewhere?"

"Absolutely not, there's no way I'd risk it."

Justin nodded and replied knowingly, "It'd hurt your career."

Ethan looked up and corrected Justin. "No, my career has nothing to do with it. I'd never do anything that could lead to my not having Allegra in my life everyday. I'd be completely lost without her."

"Oh," Justin said. His confusion was apparent.

Ethan rested his elbows on the table and folded his hands together as if he were about to pray and
replied, "You were right when you told me that music was the only thing I'd ever really loved, but when my daughter was born everything changed. If I had to choose between the violin and her I wouldn't have to give it a moment's thought. That's why I joined the Philharmonic instead of focusing on my solo career. I'd have missed too much of her growing up if I was always on tour. And when the Phil does have out of town dates, Calista brings Allegra and we travel as a family."

"God Ethan, I don't know what to say. I never thought you'd --"

“How could you after the way I treated you? I have to tell you, the way things ended between us is truly one of my life's greatest regrets,” Ethan explained as he reached across the table and brushed the back of his hand along Justin's cheek.

Justin discreetly leaned away from Ethan's caress. "Thank you Ethan, it means a lot to hear you say that. The reality is, though, if it weren't for you things may never have worked out for me the way they have." Justin smiled sincerely.

"Really? How's that?" Ethan paused for a moment and then he laughed, "Don't tell me. You went back to him. That Brian Kinney."

"Part of me never really left him, I guess."

"So you finally tamed him then?"

"I think he's about as tame as he'll ever be."

"I guess he'd have to be for him to move to New York with you."

Justin's heart tightened when he heard Ethan's assumption. When he and Brian decided it was best Justin go to New York they'd never even discussed the possibility of Brian moving with him. "Actually, he's CEO of his own ad agency back in Pittsburgh and I'm busy making contacts and getting my art out there so for now..."

"Justin, take it from an old married man. Don't let anything as mundane as a job get in the way of true love."
Justin's breath hitched at Ethan's words. Again, they found themselves staring at each other in silence.

Toronto
Melanie and Lindsay’s House

"Ben, there's no need to thank me. I'll drive down first thing in the morning. I should be there by lunch time," Melanie said into the kitchen phone as she worked to tie the garbage bag she was holding.

"You don't know how much this will mean to Hunter," replied Ben. "We've been on the waiting list at family court for the last six months but with Prop 14 going through in the fall the docket has been crammed with gay parents trying to get their adoptions finalized before it's too late."

"I'll do everything I can. Considering the circumstances, I'm sure I can convince Judge Harper to fast-track things for us. He was terrific when we had to get Marie legal custody of her kids after… after what happened to Dusty." That horrifying night at Babylon flashed through Melanie's mind. She still had nightmares about the explosion and its aftermath. "How is Hunter doing?"

Ben really didn't want to talk about it but Melanie's concern was genuine. "The doctor's say it's a miracle that he's still with us. The infection's spread to the point that the antibiotics aren't working. He's drifting in and out of consciousness. All they can really do now is try to keep him comfortable."

"God Ben. I'm so sorry. I don't know what to say."

"Just get here as soon as you can."

"Will do."

Pittsburgh
Allegheny General Hospital

Ben closed his cell phone and leaned back against the wall of the hospital corridor. After a moment, the door to Hunter's room opened. Brian leaned out and said, "Ben. He's asking for you."
Ben followed Brian back into the room. Brian had constructed a mini-office in Hunter's hospital room. He'd commandeered the extra hospital bed and on it were two open laptops, a dozen or so manila folders and even a few layouts for his upcoming Liberty Air pitch.

The whole gang was doing what they could to help Ben and Michael during the ordeal. Emmett covered a few of Debbie's shifts, along with Darren who dressed in full Shanda Leer garb. Carl got a few off-duty rookies to help out at The Red Cape. And in addition to holding down the fort at Kinnetik so Brian could stay with Michael, Ted had even guest lectured at one of Ben's classes on homoeroticism in Italian operas.

Brian sat back behind his computers as Ben joined Michael at Hunter's bedside, "What is it buddy?" Ben asked.

Hunter struggled to remove his oxygen mask so Michael helped to lift it off his mouth. "Promise me."

"Anything, Hunter. What do you want?" Michael asked while Brian put in his iPod earbuds to give his friends some privacy. He'd have preferred to leave the room but every time he tried, Michael would look up at him with a desperate expression on his face.

Hunter struggled to get the words out between breaths. "If...the adoption doesn't come....through in time...promise me...you won't put the name Montgomery ...on the headstone..." 

At these words Michael grabbed Ben's forearm and buried his face in Ben's shoulder. Ben readjusted Hunter's oxygen mask and replied, "Hunter, I promise you. No matter what the court or some piece of paper says, you're our son. You're James Hunter Novatony-Brucker. And regardless of what happens, we'll make sure that everyone knows that. I swear it."

Despite the thumpa-thumpa blaring in his ears, Brian was able to hear what had happened. When he saw Michael run out of the room, Brian said, "Stay with Hunter, I'll go." He followed Michael out of the room and found him at the end of the corridor, looking out a window and crying.

Brian held out his arms and closed Michael in an embrace, letting him cry for a few minutes before saying, "Michael. Michael I want you to calm down. You can't keep doing this."

"Doing what?" Michael responded incredulously. "Crying? My son is dying in there."
Brian released Michael from their embrace and placed his hands on Michael's shoulders. He gave Michael a little shake and said, "You're right. He is, and you keep running out of there and leaving Ben alone to deal with it by himself."

Michael looked down at the floor and said, "He's stronger than I am."

"That's bullshit and you know it. But you're always turning to me instead of standing by your husband's side, and that's fucked up."

Michael furrowed his brow and responded in an angry tone, "Hey, if you don't want to be here that's fine but don't tell me how to treat my husband. You don't have any idea what it's like to be married. You saw to that when you sent Justin away."

"You leave Justin out of it. This has nothing to do with him. It's about you and Ben and right now I can tell you, for sure, you're blowing it."

"Relationship advice from Brian Kinney? Now this I’ve got to hear," Michael scoffed as he crossed his arms over his chest.

Brian shook his head but continued his thoughts anyway. "I guarantee you, every time you run out that door it makes Ben wonder how quickly you'll run out when it's him lying in a hospital on his deathbed. He's watching you Michael, and your behavior is scaring the shit out of him."

"He told you this?"

"He didn't have to. I may be a self-absorbed, narcissistic prick but I can see things that are right in front of me." Brian blinked his eyes tightly to get control of himself again then said. "I was there. I know that when Ben married you, it was for forever. But the way things are, Ben's forever may not be that long."
Brian and Ted stood as Cynthia led the marketing and sales executives from Liberty Air into Kinnetik's fashionable boardroom.

"Thank you for coming to meet with us today gentlemen." Brian smiled his best ad-man smile.

A hot, well built man in his early forties who was clearly in charge of the group took a seat and replied, "Well, we generally prefer to only work with Madison Avenue firms but an acquaintance of mine who’s a VP at Dandy Lube told me that you were able to deliver results that exceeded all of his expectations. So, I thought it'd be worth our while to at least see what your little agency had to offer."

Brian and Ted gave each other a smirk then Brian continued, "At Kinnetik we commit ourselves to giving our clients the all the personal attention they desire. Now, Theodore here will get things started for us."

"Our research indicates that with the emergence of new, long distance communication technologies such as webinars and virtual meeting platforms, combined with the travel restrictions that have been put into effect since 9/11, over 85% of Fortune 1000 companies have cut back their travel budgets by a minimum of 50%. What this means for small, regional airlines, as I'm sure you know, is that the days of relying on steady revenue generated from the regular business traveler are coming to an end."

Brian broke in with, "And what this means for Liberty Air is a deliberate shift in the profile of customers you're hoping to attract. Liberty Air can no longer put its marketing dollars into attracting the business traveler, or the soccer moms and NASCAR dads from middle America taking their annual trip to Disney World. The future of your company lies in the hands of the young, unattached, upwardly mobile professional who likes making use of his or her disposable income. You want the customer who can decide, on a moment's notice, to jet down to South Beach for a weekend in the sun, or fly out to Manhattan to select the latest designer pieces from the new spring lines. You want someone who travels not for business, but for pleasure."

Upon hearing Brian's last comment, Cynthia unveiled the first layout that'd been set on the easel at the front of the room. It featured a man and woman sitting in a first class section of a plane. Their heads were thrown back in laughter while they toasted each other with champagne glasses. The copy printed at the bottom of the photo read, 'Get High On Liberty Air.'

"Let's face it," Brian continued. "In today's world it is just not fun to fly anymore. Liberty Air will make air travel sexy and exciting again." Cynthia revealed the next ad. It featured the same man and woman, this time standing close together in an airplane lavatory. They both looked to the mirror with a lustful gaze. The copy on this photo said, 'Join more than just the Admirals Club on Liberty Air.'
Ted took lead again and said, "We'll start the campaign out in major publications that sell to the demo we're going after. *Maxim, GQ, Cosmopolitan, Vogue.*"

Brian finished the pitch as Cynthia unveiled the final layouts -- duplicates of the first two, featuring two men instead of a man and a woman. "We'll also advertise in *The Advocate* and *Out* so we can reach the population segment that consistently has the highest level of disposable income -- the single, professional, gay male."

A portly grey-haired man in his sixties cleared his throat and asked, "Are you seriously suggesting that we tell people to come have sex on our airplanes?"

Brian calmly replied, "I'm suggesting that you need to do something pretty drastic if you don't want your company to go under the way several of the other regional airlines already have in the last six years."

The group at the table talked amongst themselves for few moments before the hot forty-something man said, "We're going to have to discuss this strategy a bit further before make a final decision."

Brian nodded and nonchalantly replied, "You have twenty-four hours. If I don't hear from you, I'll be pitching this same concept to your top competitor tomorrow at noon."

The airline executives stood and started filing out of the room when the hot, forty-something guy asked Cynthia where the restroom was. She smiled and replied, "Down the hall on your left. You can't miss it."

Cynthia and Ted both turned to Brian and smiled. When they realized he wasn't immediately following the man to the bathroom Ted said, "Well boss, aren't you going to *nail* the account?"

Brian shrugged, “I shouldn’t have to service every wanton queer in a suit just so they’ll retain me for my…services. If he wants the best, he’ll hire Kinnetik. He doesn’t need my dick up his ass to make that decision,” Brian gave Ted and Cynthia a little smile before turning and opening his cell phone. He hit 1 on his speed dial and after one ring he said, "Hey. It's me...I'm at work, I have my charcoal, three button Armani on. I booked you a flight on Liberty Air out of LaGuardia for tomorrow morning. It leaves at 6:40 AM ...No, I couldn't get a later flight if you want to get here in time for the service...Alright...I know...Later."
Allegheny Cemetery

Justin checked his watch as the Lincoln Towncar turned onto Butler Street and pulled up to the main gates of Allegheny Cemetery. Despite the fact that Justin had made it to the airport at a grueling 4:30 AM to ensure he wouldn't miss his flight, there had been a mechanical problem that needed to be fixed prior to take off. By the time Justin had landed at Pittsburgh International Airport he'd already missed Hunter's church service. As it was, he was barely making it to the actual burial.

Justin got out of the vehicle and tipped the driver as he handed Justin his overnight bag.

"Thanks. And I'm sorry for your loss," the driver solemnly commented.

Justin nodded in reply and started walking up the driveway to the entrance when three teenaged street kids approached him. When he met the eye of one of the kids he said, "I'm sorry, I gave the driver the last of my cash."

A skinny kid who wore dirty jeans, layers of long and short-sleeved t-shirts and flannel shook his head and replied, "No man, I was just gonna ask if you're going in there for Hunter's funeral."

"Are you friends of his?"

"We used to hang out before those guys took him in."

"Well, do you want to come in with me so you can pay your respects? I'm sure his family won't mind."

The skinny kid shook his head again and said, "Naw, that's cool. We can say goodbye from out here."

Justin gave them a weak smile as he turned and walked into the cemetery and up to Hunter's plot. Ben and Michael were seated at the graveside holding hands. They were surrounded by Ben's colleagues from the University, several of their neighbors including Eli and Monty, a few of Hunter's classmates, and their family, including Melanie, Jennifer, Ted and Blake, Emmett, Darren, Carl and Debbie. Brian was also there of course. He stood behind Michael while resting his hands on
Michael's shoulders.

When Justin approached, he stood between Brian and Debbie. Brian silently kissed Justin on his temple and slung an arm over his shoulder as Justin whispered in Debbie's ear.

Debbie looked down to the driveway and saw Hunter's friends watching through the gates. Then she nodded to Justin and walked down to the entrance.

When she approached the boys the one of them called out, "Hey you're that lady from the diner. The one who gives free peanut butter sandwiches and coffee."

Debbie smiled through the tears in her eyes and replied, "Yes. Hi. I'm Debbie, Hunter's gramma. You boys were friends of his?"

The boy who'd talked to Justin replied, "We used to watch each other's backs when he was still on the streets. He was a straight up guy, after he left he used to come back out and bring us pizza and burgers and shit."

"You know, when the service is done we're gonna have people over to the house," Debbie began as she rummaged through her purse to find a scrap of paper and a pen. When she did, she scribbled Ben and Michael's address on it and handed it to the boys. "This is where we'll be. Any friend of Hunter's is a friend of ours." When none of the boys took the paper she gave her hand a little shake and said, "They'll be lots of food there. I made enough lasagna to feed an army."

The boys looked at each other and shrugged, then the skinny kid took the paper and said, "Thanks. We might stop by. If not, we'll see you at the diner sometime."

Debbie nodded and gave a little wave as the boys walked away.

**Ben and Michael's House**

"I don't know what you said to him, Brian, but whatever it was, thank you. Michael's been a rock for the past two weeks. I don't know how I'd have managed otherwise," Ben commented as he and about two dozen guests milled about in Ben and Michael's living room.
Brian took a swig from his glass of scotch and said, "It was nothing. I didn't tell him anything he didn't already know."

"Still, I really appreciate it." Ben replied.

Brian simply shrugged and started looking around for Justin. When their eyes met, they gave each other a smile from across the room.

When Ben noticed who Brian was smiling at he said, "Justin looks fantastic. New York must suit him. How long is he here for?"

"He flies back out in the morning. He wanted to stay longer but his opening in less than a month." Brian replied without taking his eyes off Justin, who continued his conversation with Melanie and Jennifer.

Ben was doing his best to maintain his composure so he continued his effort to make small talk with Brian. "Right. We're going to try to make it out for that if Michael and I both feel up to it. Oh hey, how did your presentation go?"

Brian turned back to face Ben and replied as he raised his glass, "We got the account."

"Hey, that's great." Ben paused for a moment then continued. "You know, when you showed Hunter the 'Get High on Liberty Air' layout that was the last time I heard...I heard him laugh." Ben finished as he started to choke up.

Ben's words and the raw emotion of the situation were entirely too much for Brian to endure, particularly since he was in such a mild state of drunkenness. He looked over Ben's shoulder, saw Michael and signaled to him. "He was a good kid," Brian said as tears started making their way down Ben's face.

Brian was just about to place his hand on Ben's shoulder when Michael walked up and said, "Come on Ben. Let's go out back and get some air." Michael led Ben away and Brian found himself standing alone so he went over to join Justin and the others.

"...I'm just sorry we couldn't get everything finalized before he slipped into the coma," Melanie said
as Brian walked up. "He never got to know that he was truly, legally Michael and Ben's son."

"I'm sure he knew," Justin offered as Brian slid his arm around Justin's waist and stood close enough to him that their hips brushed together.

The group stood in what was fast becoming an awkward silence. Jennifer wanted to make the most of the little time she had with her son. He'd been so distant for the last several months and she knew that Justin still had a problem with her dating Tucker. She'd tried being harsh, reasonable, even pleading, but none of it had worked so now she was resorting to flattery. "Justin. I just cannot get over how amazing you look."

"New York definitely agrees with you," Melanie agreed.

"Brian," Jennifer asked, "Doesn't Justin look absolutely amazing?"

Justin's cheeks flushed as he felt Brian's hot breath against his ear when he replied, "He's a sight for sore eyes."

"We're going to try and scrape the money together so Lindsay can come down for your show, Justin. She really doesn't want to miss it."

"You won't have to worry about it," Brian replied then threw back his head to swallow the last of his scotch.

"Brian. We cannot take any more money from you."

"There's no need. I had Ted work unlimited travel vouchers into our Liberty Air contract. So now, for me and all of my friends and family, the sky is quite literally the limit."

"That's wonderful!" Jennifer exclaimed. "Now there's no reason you two can't see each other whenever you want." She leaned over and gave Justin a hug while he looked up at Brian who appeared lost in thought.

When Brian noticed Justin looking at him he said, "I'm going to go have a smoke. Let me know
when you're ready." He kissed the top of Justin's head and walked out of the front door.

Brian stepped outside to find three teenagers sitting on Ben and Michael's front porch.

They stood up and asked Brian, "Um. Uh is that Debbie lady in there? She said we could come by."

"Hold on." Brian opened the front door and called into the house, "Deb, there are some people out here asking for you." He turned back to the boys and said, "She'll be right out."

Brian fiddled with his zippo, trying to get it to light when he noticed the skinny kid give a wink and blow him a kiss.

At this Brian laughed and said, "You must be Hunter's friend." Brian walked past the boys down the steps and finished by saying "You two had a lot in common." Then he went to sit against the hood of his Corvette so he could smoke his cigarette in peace.

Debbie opened the door and tried to wave the boys inside, "Come in, come in," When they didn't move she added sharply, "What's the matter, you standing in wet cement or somethin'?"

The skinny kid looked over her shoulder into the living room filled with people. Debbie looked back into the house then said to the boys, "It is pretty crowded in there, huh." Despite the arrogance and cockiness most that young hustlers possessed, Debbie had learned from serving them at the diner that they also had the tendency to be skittish around large groups of strangers. "Meet me around on the side of the house by the kitchen door. It's quiet in there and I can fix you boys up some dinner."

Once inside, Debbie served each of the boys mountainous plates of lasagna and they each shoveled the food into their mouths in near silence with the exception of comments like, "This is good… MmmMmm…Can I get more bread?"

Debbie had started doing some of the dishes that had stacked up in the sink when Michael walked in saying, "Ma, we need more ice in the...." He stopped when saw the boys.

The skinny kid put his fork down and swallowed the bite he had in his mouth and said, "Hey, you're Hunter's dad right?"
Michael looked up to Debbie for an explanation; he didn't have an angry expression on his face, just a confused one. She cleared things up for him by saying, "These boys are friends of Hunter's. I met them at the funeral this morning so I invited them by for some dinner."

Michael nodded then answered the skinny kid's question, "Uh, yeah. One of them."

"Right, you're gay. Hunter told us that," one of the other boys commented.

The skinny kid continued, "Um. We just wanted to come by and tell you that we think it's cool and all, what you did. Taking him in, especially when you knew he was sick. Not a lot of people would do that."

"Not the kind of people we meet anyway," one of the other boys added.

Michael was at a loss for words so to stall he sat down at the table with the boys and grabbed a bread stick. He tore off a piece then asked, "He kept in touch with you guys?"

"Yeah, after he found out, you know, that he was positive, he used to come by and bring us condoms every couple weeks and try to convince us to get tested."

Michael shook his head and looked up at Debbie and replied, "I never knew he did that."

"Uh, do you mind if I ask you something?" asked the skinny kid.

"I guess not." Michael answered.

"When he uh, died, were you with him?"

Michael nodded and replied, "Yeah. We all were. The room was full of people."

The skinny kid smiled and said, "Hey. That's they way I wanna go."
The two other boys nodded in agreement, then one of them added, "Not alone, in a gutter somewhere."

Then the other said, "Or in a garbage dumpster."

Michael looked up at Debbie. Knowing what he wanted to ask, she took the lead by saying, "Are you boys-"

The skinny boy cut in and answered, "When we heard that Hunter was in the hospital we finally decided to go down to the free clinic, they told us that we've all got it."

**Meanwhile Outside of Ben and Michael's**

Brian opened the passenger side door for Justin and walked around to his side of Corvette, got in, and started the engine.

"If this day wasn't excruciating enough, I had to stand in the same room with you all afternoon without being able to tongue your ass. Next time you come to town, we're flying you in a day before anyone else knows you're here so I can have ample time to have my way with you."

Justin just laughed and gave Brian a light smack on the thigh.

"You ready to go to the loft?" Brian asked.

"Well, actually I was thinking that if you could contain yourself for another half-hour, we could-" 

"-drive out to Britin?" Brian concluded with a raised eyebrow.

Justin nodded eagerly and Brian said with a little chuckle, "Christ, you're getting to be so predictable."
Ben and Michael’s Home later that same evening

"Well, if someone told me five years ago that I'd be saying this I'd have thought they'd gone round
the bend, but honest to goodness Blake, you are truly the best thing that's ever happened to our
Teddy." Emmett commented as he handed an empty punch bowl to Blake.

"Thanks Em, I guess timing is everything." Blake repied as he followed Emmett into the kitchen to
finish up the last of the dirty dishes.

"So, are there going to be wedding bells anytime in the future? I'll need to make sure I'm not double-
booked if I'll be helping you plan the big day."

"Oh gee. I don't know about that. We haven't really discussed it."

"Ted hasn't discussed getting married? I find that hard to believe."

"Well sure, we've talked about the white picket fence and the Volvo in the driveway but mostly
we're taking it one day at a time," Blake explained. "To be honest, he's been so busy with work
lately that we're doing all we can just to get to know each other again."

"Yeah, that Brian can be a real slave driver, I suppose," Emmett giggled as he began loading the
dishwasher.

"What about you? Are you still seeing that guy Calvin?"

"Oh, heavens no. Don't get me wrong, he was just delicious, but I'm kind of past the whole party-
boy thing. I'm still waiting for my Prince Charming to come along," Emmett sighed.

"He will. And when he does, Emmett, he'll be the lucky one." Blake patted Emmett on the shoulder.

Emmett was touched by Blake's sincerity and replied, "Ah, thanks honey." Emmett brushed Blake's
bangs away from his forehead and then continued, "And Teddy's lucky to have you. Now you go on
and get him home so he can rest up. Lord knows Brian will have Ted's nose to the grindstone first
thing in the morning."
"God, it's bigger than I remember," Justin said as he and Brian walked into the main entry way of Britin.

Brian took Justin's hand, pressed it against his crotch and replied with a smirk, "Hmm, I wonder if anything else is bigger than you remember?"

Justin playfully pulled his hand away and walked into the living area. The room hadn't changed a bit since the night Brian had proposed. Even the white tarp they'd made love on was still on the floor by the fireplace. "The size of your cock will be forever burned into my brain. You saw to that on the very first night you fucked me," Justin replied as worked his shoes off, dropped his blazer on the floor and started undoing his tie.

"What are you doing?" Brian asked in a low, breathy tone.

"I'm getting undressed so you can fuck me."

"Well," Brian sighed, "We can do it on these hardwood floors again if you want but I'd prefer to fuck you upstairs on the nice firm mattress."

"You bought furniture?"

Brian held out a hand to Justin and replied, "Come see for yourself." Brian led Justin upstairs to the master suite. The décor of the room, though not Brian's taste, was very well suited to the Tudor style English manor. Justin surveyed the space and took in the amazing, high quality pieces that gave the room a cozy and warm, yet decidedly masculine, feel. "I was going for traditional without crossing over into Bed & Breakfast land. What do you think?"
“It’s beautiful,” Justin said as brushed his fingers along the cherry wood armoire. The decorations were sparse, with the exception of a luxuriously soft white throw rug that Justin was certain they’d make use of at some point and a few framed black-and-white photos that hung next to the massive four poster bed. Justin twisted his fingers around the post at the right corner of the bed, leaned back and used his weight to swing around onto the mattress.

Brian tilted his head, smiled at Justin’s move and said, “I knew you’d like it. I told you, you’re getting to be predictable.” What Brian didn’t say, and would never tell Justin, was that he’d purchased the bedroom set months ago. He’d planned to bring Justin back here on their wedding night. Brian reminded himself that he needed to get rid of all the candles he had purchased and stashed in the Armoire for the groundskeeper to set out and light in preparation for their arrival. No more ridiculously romantic gestures for Brian Kinney. They always backfired.

Brian shook the thought from his mind and crossed the room to join Justin on the bed. They shed their shirts and ties then expertly worked off each other’s belts, slacks and briefs. Then Brian laid Justin down on his back and covered him with his own body. Justin’s eyes were a deeper blue than Brian remembered and he held Justin’s face in his hands so he could take in the sight of Justin.

“What?” Justin asked, unsure of why Brian was hesitating.

“You’re here,” Brian replied in a near whisper.

Justin grinned a little as he let a puff of breath out through his nose and answered, “I’m here.”

Justin rose up to meet Brian’s lips with his own. He tasted of cigarettes and of scotch and, oh, of Brian, Justin thought as he let Brian suck his tongue deep into his mouth. Brian’s heat and scent intoxicated Justin. He could tell by the torturously slow moves Brian was making that this wasn’t going to be the hard, frantic fuck he was expecting. Brian was taking his time and Justin hoped that he could stay with him through the ride so it wouldn’t end too quickly.

Justin felt Brian’s hands slide down his flanks and rest for a moment on his hips while he adjusted his weight and positioned both of his legs between Justin’s. As Brian rocked his body against Justin’s to create a delicious friction on their throbbing cocks, Justin finally felt like he was back home where he belonged. He was lying beneath Brian, he was in the safest place on earth and Justin ached to be filled with all that Brian had to give him.

After Brian spent what seemed like hours licking and nipping at the soft skin behind Justin’s ears, he cupped his hand behind Justin’s neck and gently pulled him forward. Once they were both kneeling on the bed in front of each other, Brian motioned to the night stand with a nod of his head. Justin
reached over and found the lube and condoms in the top drawer. He handed the items to Brian and waited in anticipation for Brian’s next move. While still on their knees, Brian led them down to the foot of the bed and positioned himself behind Justin so they were both facing outward towards the bedroom door. Justin felt Brian’s hands on the underside of his arms as he gently indicated for Justin to take hold of the post at the left side of the foot of the bed. Justin leaned forward wrapped his arms around the post. The cool feel of the wood against his belly made his dick twitch a little. Justin heard Brian squeeze some lube out of the bottle so he scooted his knees wider apart on the mattress to help open himself up for Brian’s ministrations.

Brian rutted against Justin’s crack for a few moments before placing his right hand on Justin’s shoulder to balance himself as he worked one then two well lubed fingers into him. The pace of Justin’s breaths told Brian that he was ready for more so he retracted his fingers. He moved forward placing his knees between Justin’s. Brian positioned the head of his sheathed cock at Justin’s hole then wrapped an arm around Justin’s waist and pulled him down onto his shaft. Christ, Justin was incredibly tight. So much so that Brian had to focus on not letting himself come right then. He leaned back onto the heels of his feet and loosened his grasp on Justin.

Justin gripped the post and used it for leverage as he began to set his rhythm. He reveled in the tight grasp Brian had on his torso as he rocked up and down on Brian’s cock. When Justin felt Brian’s breath at the back of his neck he leaned his head back to rest on Brian’s left shoulder. Justin felt a shock of electricity run through him as Brian began sucking on his earlobe. Finally, Justin couldn’t stand it anymore and he let one of his hands drop to his cock. He pumped it furiously till he squeezed out an orgasm that was six months in the making.

It was Justin’s cry that brought Brian over the edge and he nearly lost his balance when his own climax shuttered through every muscle and nerve of his body.

Justin turned back to Brian and buried his face in Brian’s chest as Brian rested his chin on the top of Justin’s head. He held onto Justin as tight as he could, determined to not let their afterglow be spoiled by the realization that in a few short hours Justin would be leaving for New York once again.
“Brian? Lindsay’s on line one for you,” Cynthia called into the intercom. “Do you want to take it or should I put her into your voicemail?”

“Put her through,” Brian replied as he picked up the receiver.

“What’s up?” Brian’s tone was easy and for the first time in months it was free of irritation at being interrupted for a personal call during the work day. The influx of cash from Liberty Air had given Kinnetik the revenue and morale boost that it had desperately needed.

“I don’t know what to do Brian,” Lindsay began.

“Trouble in paradise?” Brian teased.

“I’ve been offered a teaching position at OCAD, but Melanie and I had agreed that I wouldn’t go back to work till she got her law license.”

“You made an agreement. Stick to it,” Brian answered as he scrolled through his emails for a sign of a message from Justin. Nothing.

“But you don’t understand. If things go well this quarter it could lead to a tenure-track position in the fall. Offers like these don’t just come along everyday.”

“Then take it. It shouldn’t just be about her career,” Brian offered, knowing his comment would irritate Lindsay. Still, he quite enjoyed being an ass.

“You’re not helping, Brian,” Lindsay complained. “What do you think I should do?”
“What’s more important, your career or your relationship?” Brian asked. He surprised himself by being genuinely interested in how Lindsay would respond. That question seemed have come up a lot for Brian lately. *Everything’s right. Everything’s as it should be,* Brian told himself. He refused to get maudlin, not when things were finally getting back on track at Kinnetik, not when Justin’s show was opening in just a few weeks.

“It’s not that simple,” Lindsay sighed.

“Yes it is.” Brian’s tone was now flat and devoid of emotion.

Lindsay sensed this sudden shift in Brian’s mood. “He didn’t choose his career over you, Brian.”

Brian stifled a laugh. “Lindsay, we’re talking about you and your lesbianic inability to make a decision. Take the job or don’t. Just be prepared to live with the consequences.” Brian had grown tired of this conversation and he started flipping through some headshots for Eyeconic Optics new spread he was prepping for.

“Right. Thanks for all your help Brian,” Lindsay replied sarcastically. “Oh, Mel said she’ll upload the video of Gus’s T-Ball practice for you on YouTube when she gets home tonight. Be sure and send him an email and tell him how great he did after you see it.”

“Uh-huh. Talk to you later Lindsay.”

**New York**

**East Village Artist’s Co-Op**

**Justin’s Room**

"Married?" Daphne exclaimed in disbelief as she tried to get comfortable on Justin's semi-deflated bean bag. His latest web-cam performance for Brian had gone horribly awry when thousands of Styrofoam beads burst from the seams of the bean bag and spewed throughout Justin's room.

"I couldn't believe it myself. And you should see Ethan with his daughter. He's like, totally obsessed with her. He takes Allegra everywhere, and I mean ev-ry-where, with him in one of those baby-backpack things," Justin replied while shaking his head at the mental image.
Daphne tucked her chin toward her neck and grimaced, "That's just weird." She took a swig of her beer then set it back on the floor next to her NYU Med School acceptance letter and asked, "So, does his wife know he's gay?"

Justin laughed, "Oh this is my favorite part. He told Calista that he, quote unquote, experimented with guys back in college."

"Some experiment," Daphne replied. "Does she know about you two?"

Justin shrugged, "I'm not sure if she thinks I'm just an old college friend or one of his lab rats."

Daphne laughed as she gave up on the bean bag in favor of joining Justin on his bed. "What's with all these dumb throw pillows?" Daphne asked as she tossed them to the floor the plopped down next to him.

"They came with the room. We don't all get to move to New York on a full scholarship you know."

"Yeah well it's hard to get a scholarship when you're a college dropout," She couldn't help, but give Justin a little dig. They'd always been competitive when it came to grades and school in general. "What does Brian say about it?"

"About your scholarship?"

"No. Ethan."

"Um."

Daphne propped her head up on her hand and looked directly at him.

"Justin. You did tell him, right?"

Justin stood to get another beer from his mini-fridge. "It didn't really come up."
"But you guys are online together every night?"

Justin turned to face Daphne and replied, "Daph, we don't do a lot of actual talking when we…talk."

Daphne rolled her eyes then stated, "You've got to tell him Justin. He always knows when you're keeping something from him."

"What am I supposed to say, 'Hey Brian, guess who I ran into? Ethan Gold, yeah and he’s married, has a kid, and we’re all friends out here in the Big Apple. Isn't that cool?'" Justin remarked with an exasperated tone.

Daphne scoffed at Justin’s rant before asking, "Wait, you only said that you went to lunch with them, now you're telling me you and Ethan are friends?"

"I'm friends with Calista, "Justin clarified, “But the Philharmonic is off-season right now so Ethan’s just kind of…around when Calista and I are working on the press stuff for the exhibition."

"And you don't think there's anything weird about that?"

"No, he's usually there to bring Allegra by because she's still breast-feeding."

"There's this thing called a breast-pump," Daphne replied, with an overt amount of sarcasm in her voice. "It's what most working mothers use."

"Look, I know it's a fucked up situation, but what can I do about it?" Justin began as he ran his hand through his hair and scratched the back of his neck, “My whole career is literally in Calista’s hands right now. I can't exactly tell her that it creeps me out that my ex-boyfriend, her husband, is around. Oh and that I am worried that my partner might find out that we’re hanging out together."

"There's no 'might' about it. Brian's gonna be pissed. I'm just saying you're making it worse by not telling him now."

Justin let out a chuckle. "It's stuff like this that actually makes me think life at St. James wasn’t that bad."
Ben and Michael’s House

“It’s cannelloni night!” Debbie cheerily exclaims as Ben opens the door.

“Deb, I really don’t think this is the best time…”

“This is a time for family. It’s the only thing that got me through when Vic passed.” She replied as she brushed passed Ben and headed into the house.

Ben then followed Debbie into the kitchen where Michael sat at the table, eating a bowl Cap’n Crunch.

“I’ve already got dinner, Ma.”

Deb set the cannelloni down on the table, put her hands on her hips and said, “Cereal is for breakfast. Your mother’s best Italian dish is for dinner. Now go get some plates out of the cupboard.”

Michael acquiesced and rose to set the table as Ben leaned in the entrance way of the kitchen, watching his husband follow his mother’s commands.

“I’m going for a run,” Ben didn’t usually bend to Debbie’s will so easily but frankly, he was too exhausted to deal with her at the moment.

Deb waved goodbye to Ben as she dished out the cannelloni. Then, she took a folded piece of paper out of her cleavage. “Do you care to explain this?” she asked as she smacked the paper onto the table with a thud.

“You didn’t have room in your in your purse for your little notes?” Michael suggested.

“Don’t smart mouth your mother,” Debbie sat down next to Michael then unfolded the paper and held it out in front of Michael’s face. The paper read… *closed due to death in the family.*
Michael looked up at the sheet of paper, then focused his attention back on his plate and mumbled.
“It’s the sign I put at the Red Cape for Hunter’s funeral.”

“You mind telling me why it’s still hanging on the door two weeks after the service?”

“Because I haven’t re-opened the shop,” Michael replied with a shrug.

“Michael,” Deb set the paper down and placed her hand over Michael’s, “I understand that you
need time to grieve, but sitting in the house all day isn’t good for you.”

“I’m not grieving. I’m…thinking,” Michael responded quietly.

Debbie brushed her fingers through her son’s hair and asked, “About what, baby?”

“About how pointless my life is.”

“Michael!” Debbie scolded.

“No no, I don’t mean my *life* I mean what I’m *doing* with my life. Selling comic books, what’s
the point?”

“What are you talking about Michael, you love comics. That store is your dream.”

"Yeah I know, and I love the store, but what good does it do?"

"Think of all the times you went there to feel better when you got bullied at school, or when you
were sick and tired of working at the Q, or when Brian was acting like an asshole. I'm sure the place
is the same kind of escape for a lot of your customers."

"But that's what I'm saying, if we're always spending our time trying to escape from problems how is
anything ever gonna change?"


Debbie leaned back in her chair and put her hands in her lap then asked, "Well, what is it that you want to do?"

"I don't know. I just know that I don't want be the one standing by watching or, even worse, turning my back on things that are tough. I mean Ben volunteers at the Gay and Lesbian Center. You've got your work with PFLAG. Hell, Brian took down Stock well." Michael sighed then continued quietly, "For me, it was Hunter. That's how I was making a difference. I just feel like what I do doesn't matter."

The expression on Debbie’s face softened as she said, “Sweetheart you do make a difference. No one has as heart as big yours, but you certainly aren’t going to make a difference in the world sitting here on your ass all day.”

“I know.”

**Woody's Bar**

"Well hello, Gorgeous,” Emmett cooed as he eyed a well-built Latin stud sauntering through the door of the bar. Ted and Brian turned to see who Emmett was admiring.

“Ah, to be single again,” Ted sighed.

Brian responded by saying, “Hmphf,” then turned back to the bar and began fingering a bowl of snack mix in search of a cashew.

“What? Have you started hanging out at the Greyhound station so you can fuck any new queer as soon as they get off the bus?” Ted asked with disdain.

“I didn’t say I fucked him already, I’m just not interested,” Brian replied as he signaled the bartender for another beer.

“Well,” Emmett began, “You may prefer your men to be all bright and sunshiny, but I’ll take dark and mysterious any day.” Emmett turned on his heel began to walk away when Brian grabbed him by the back of his collar.
“Hold it, Honeycutt. I changed my mind.” Brian crossed the room and whispered one of his many magic phrases into the ear of the would-be trick then led him to the men’s room.

Emmett plopped back down on to a bar stool in frustration and said, “If I had a nickel for every time he’s done that to me.”

Ted took a sip of his Perrier and replied, “Quite frankly, I’m glad he’s getting laid. Maybe it’ll get rid of the pissy mood he’s been in since this afternoon when he heard that Vangard just opened a branch in Manhattan .

“Vangard?”

“Yeah, the agency he used to work for before he got the ax.”

“Oh right. I bet that doesn’t help his separation anxiety.”

“Don’t ever let him hear you refer to his being apart from Justin or he’ll have your balls,” Ted responded, then he put on his best Brian affectation, “I’m fine, we’re fine, and it’s nobody’s fucking business but our own. Now, if I had a nickel for every time I’ve heard *that* then Blake and I would be able to get that little ski cabin we’ve been dreaming about.”

Emmett sat upright on his stool and clasped his hands together. “Oh oh, couldn’t you help Brian open a branch of Kinnetik in New York? That way he could be with Justin and they could live happily ever after,” Emmett suggested in a sing-songy tone.

“The biggest mistake a start-up can make is to expand too fast. Besides, Kinnetik is just barely solvent at the moment. I wouldn’t even think of suggesting that to Brian for at least another eight or nine quarters.”

“Well, I won’t pretend to know a thing about the business world, but I do know that Brian just isn’t right without...”

“Are you ladies coming to Babylon with me or not?” Brian interrupted as he walked up behind Ted and Emmett and slung his arms over their shoulders.
“That was quick,” Ted said with surprise.

“Yes, well I didn’t think it was possible for someone to descend to such a level of sucking…at sucking.” He grabbed one more cashew from the snack bowl that was perched on the edge of the bar between Emmett and Ted.

“Have you ever considered that it’s your basis of comparison that’s the problem?” Emmett asked

“I mean, after Drew there really hasn’t been anyone who can, uh take me to the end zone in quite the same way. Maybe you should cash in those airline vouchers and fly out to see Justin. You could make it like a regular weekend thing,” Emmett offered.

“When the fuck did Justin come into the conversation?” Brian shook his head and gave Emmett his signature what-the-fuck expression, “Besides, I’m not going fly out there while he’s working like some lonely, neglected, little twat.” Brian grabbed Emmett’s martini, drank it down in one swallow then shoved the empty glass back into his hand. “If you two plan on coming to Babylon I’ll be sure to tell the bouncers to make you wait outside in the cold with all the other fags,” Brian barked then marched out of bar.

Ted rested his hand on Emmett’s shoulder and said, “I don’t want to tell you that I told you so but…I told you so.”

**Pittsburgh ‘s Schenley Park**

Ben felt a sense of calm wash through him as he rounded the bend of the wooded trail in Schenley Park . Since the city had laid this new path it’d become Ben's preferred route for his now regular evening runs. When he realized that Hunter wasn't going to make it, Ben promised himself that he wouldn't slip back into the self-destructive behaviors he'd resorted to in the past to deal with his grief. Running, he found, gave him the solace he needed to quietly process the feelings he had regarding Hunter's death and the distance it had put between himself and Michael.

It wasn't completely Michael's fault. Ben had pulled away from Michael too. He'd spent the little time he'd been at home alone in his office writing. Words seemed to pour out of him at such a speed that it was all he could do to get them down on paper fast enough. On more than one occasion he’d fallen asleep at his desk after writing well into the night. Still, the loss Ben was feeling, for both Hunter and the strain it had put on his relationship with Michael, was fueling his creativity beyond anything he'd experienced.
The fact that he was so inspired lately made it difficult to reach out to Michael. But more than that, he suspected Michael was relating Hunter's death to what would someday be Ben’s There was no point in trying to comfort Michael with wishful thinking. Ben knew Michael would never truly understand what it’s like to live with HIV, but Ben also knew he’d never know what it was like to live with the constant fear that he’d be left all alone someday.

Ben made it back on to their street and stopped in the front yard to do some cool down stretches. When his breath steadied, he walked in the front door to find Michael sitting at the bottom of the staircase with a suitcase resting in his lap.

Ben furrowed his brow and asked, “What’s this?”

“I decided that I should spend some time with Jenny Rebecca,” Michael answered.

Ben was relieved. “Oh sure, some quality time with JR will be good for you.” He stepped into their guest bathroom and got a hand towel to wipe down his neck and shoulders while Michael stood and followed him. "So you’ll be back Sunday night then?"

Michael held on to the handle of his suitcase with both hands and looked down at his feet for a second before replying, “Actually, I think I’m gonna stay a while longer than that.”

“Uh…okay,” Ben began as he headed upstairs to their bedroom. Michael set down his suitcase and followed him up the stairs. Ben continued, “But we’ve got Justin’s show in New York next week. Did you still want to go to that?”

“Yeah, uh about that. I told Lindsay and Melanie I’d stay with the kids so they could fly down for it.”

Ben pulled a pair of jeans and a t-shirt out of his bureau then turned to face Michael. “How long are you planning to stay in Toronto?”

Michael took a deep breath and replied, “Well, Lindsay’s got this new job at the Ontario College of Art and Design, so I agreed to take care of the kids till the end of the quarter.”

“But that’s nearly three months,” Ben responded. The concern in his voice was evident.
“It’s not really as long as it sounds. Besides, I can come back on weekends anytime.”

Ben sat on the bed and started untying his running shoes. “What about the store?”

“I talked to Carl’s friends, Tony and Jess. They said they’d love to keep helping out at The Red Cape. So it’s not a problem.”

“Wait a second, how long have you been planning this?” Ben could feel anger and fear begin to rise from within him.

“I talked to Lindsay about it last week, but I just decided to go tonight.”

Ben rose and walked toward Michael. He did his best to calm himself before continuing, “Don’t you think we should have discussed this?”

“It’s something I had to decide for myself. Besides, I’ve barely seen you in the last few weeks with all your writing and exercising and stuff,” Michael answered, clearly taking the defensive.

“I just really think that it’s not good for us, or our marriage, to be apart like this. Especially right now.”

Michael took a step back from his husband. “I’m a father, Ben. It’s who I am. I can’t just turn that off”

“You can’t use JR to replace Hunter.”

“I’m going to be late for my flight,” Michael replied coldly, then turned and left Ben standing alone in their bedroom.

New York

East Village Artist’s Co-Op
Residents at the East Village Artist’s Co-Op tended to come and go at a fairly regular pace. For Justin, that was just fine. It meant that he didn’t have to bother to do more than nod at his housemates and exchange pleasantries. Aside from Barry, the director of the Co-Op, and his “old-lady” Natalia, Justin didn’t really know any of the current occupants of the five floor walk up. Barry and Natalia were 1960’s throw-backs. They both still used words like groovy and they constantly talked about how “The Man” was trying to use eminent domain laws to force the Co-Op off the block so he could build a yet another Starbucks or Baby Gap.

EVACO was a relic in what was fast becoming another one of New York’s tragically gentrified neighborhoods. Still, Justin loved the Co-Op. Sure, his bedroom was ridiculously small, but it was better than the couch at Daphne’s friend’s apartment that he’d lived on during his first six weeks in the City. The fifth floor of the building was a converted attic with amazing natural light. It was used as studio space. There was a sign-up sheet for time to work alone during in the evenings, but during each day, the studio was filled with artists working on pieces ranging from abstract to avant garde. Justin preferred to work alone, but sometimes when he was feeling blocked he enjoyed the electricity the full room had. It was as if all of the artists were drawing from the same energy for inspiration. Floors two through four of the building each had twelve bedrooms and much to Justin’s relief, his room was one of the few that contained a private bath. And aside from a modest gallery, the ground floor also had an industrial eat-in kitchen where Natalia spent time perfecting creations for her latest vegan cookbook. The common room, which always had a lingering odor of marijuana, was decorated with mismatched furniture and bookcases.

Justin made his way down the three flights of stairs and headed into the kitchen. Just like every morning, there was a hot pot of freshly brewed coffee on the burner. And as usual, The Daily News, the Times, and The Village Voice were set out on the counter. Justin poured himself a cup of French roast then turned the first paper to the Arts & Leisure section and began to read.

"No! Fuck!" Justin exclaimed as he reached in his pocket for his cell phone and immediately dialed Calista.

She answered on the first ring. "I'm so sorry, Justin. When I gave the press releases to Pierre he said they looked good and that he was only going to do a little tweaking." 

"Tweaking! None of what we wrote is even in here!" Justin yelled as he turned to the promo piece for his exhibition in each of the other papers.

"I know you're upset. I would be too," Calista began in an effort to console Justin. "But really, Pierre does know what he's doing. Since I've been here all of his shows have been sell outs."
"You mean all of his artists have been sell-outs," Justin replied angrily.

"I don't think that's fair, Justin. Pierre is trying to help you be a success."

Justin was about to tell Calista what Pierre could do with his 'help' when his call-waiting beeped. "I've got someone on the other line. We're not done with this though." Justin clicked to his other line to hear Brian laughing into the phone.

"I suppose you've seen it," Justin said with dread.

"Baby faced, gay-rights activist takes on the New York scene," Brian read aloud with a chuckle. "You're friend Calista is some copywriter. Though I would have gone with something more like, oh I don't know, 'Doe-eyed, queer crusader.'"

Justin interrupted. "It's not funny, Brian. And it wasn't Calista, it was Pierre. He's turned me into a laughing stock."

"Art is like any other product. He's just doing some marketing to get people into the store," Brian offered with what Justin considered to be a highly condescending tone.

"But the article doesn't even have anything to do with my art. It's all about how 'pretty' I am and bunch of crap from high school. Christ, he even mentioned the bashing. Why would anyone even want to know about that?"

"It's part of the packaging."

"I've moved past all that," Justin argued, "I don't want people to be thinking about what happened every time they look at one of my pieces."

"What do you think about when you look at one of your pieces?"

Brian's question deflated Justin. The truth was, the bashing was in every painting he'd ever done. Lately not as much, but it definitely was still there; a streak of black amongst yellows, oranges and reds. An underlying darkness that was nearly hidden amidst brilliant blues and greens. Even pieces
that he'd just finished for the show, the ones Calista had described as warm and hopeful, were all laced with the anger he felt about how the bashing had changed him.

When Justin didn't answer Brian continued, "Look, this Pierre guy may be total prick for not letting you in on how he was going to advertise, but I did some checking, his methods do seem to work."

"Yeah?" Justin asked suddenly tired again although it was only 8:30 in the morning.

Brian scrolled through the google search results on his screen and read, "The 'heroin addict' who found 'new highs in the New York art scene' had his first solo exhibition at the Poirot Gallery and then went on to do shows in Milan and Paris. He's now working a piece for part of the 9/11 Memorial. And here it says that the pieces done by the 'battered wife' who found 'refuge in the art world' are amongst the most coveted paintings by any female artist living today.

"This just isn't how I thought things were going to be."

"It's business, Justin. Even in your precious art world the almighty dollar is what rules."

"Money sucks," Justin replied with a little laugh.

"Yeah, well you might not think that once you actually have some of your own."

Justin sighed into the phone at Brian's comment.

"Now try to keep your pouting to a minimum today and get some work done," Brian said in a parental tone.

Justin began to smile a little. He hated to admit it, but sometimes Justin liked the 'father-figure' aspect of his relationship with Brian.

"Oh and I almost forgot, be sure and tell Calista's husband hello for me. It's been along time since I've seen Ian," Brian said in scarily winsome tone before he hung up the phone.
Justin's heart dropped into his stomach and he covered his face with hands.

Toronto

Melanie and Lindsay's House

Melanie awoke to smell of bacon frying. God, it'd been forever since Lindsay had cooked a hot breakfast. Usually it was just cereal or, if she was lucky, Lindsay had picked up a coffee cake at the market. They’d enjoy it together before Melanie shut herself up in her office to learn what felt like twelve hundred years worth of statutes and precedents while Lindsay drove Gus the forty-five minutes away to private school.

This morning, when Melanie turned on to her back to stretch she realized that Lindsay still sleeping next to her. At first panic shot through Melanie -- had Gus turned on the stove himself? Then, both relief and irritation settled on her as she remembered Michael was here.

"Good morning sleepy heads," Michael whispered cheerfully as he pushed open Mel and Lindsay's bedroom door with his foot. He carried a tray with two plates of fried eggs, bacon, toast and coffee.

Lindsay stirred as Mel sat up in the bed feeling a little guilty. Maybe having Michael here for a while wouldn't be so bad if it meant she got breakfast in bed.

"What's this?" Lindsay yawned out as she saw Michael walking up to the foot of the bed.

"Just a little pampering for my two favorite lesbians," Michael replied.

"What about the kids?" Melanie asked as she fluffed up a pillow for Lindsay and placed it behind her back as she sat up.

"Gus is dressed. He's finished breakfast and he's watching Dora the Explorer. Jenny is changed, fed and in her playpen with her brand new Wonder Woman doll," Michael answered with note of triumph in his voice.

Melanie looked at the clock on her nightstand. "But you don't need to leave to take Gus to school for another hour."
"I thought we'd head out early this morning, maybe stop by the park for a few minutes. That way you ladies can have a little alone time before you each get to work."

"Alone?" Lindsay asked as a smile made its way across her face.

Mel turned to Lindsay, "With no kids in the house?"

"All...by...ourselves," Lindsay continued.

"That's right," Michael smiled as he began to set the tray on the bed.

"Uh, Michael. That food looks delicious..." Melanie began.

Lindsay continued mischievously, "But could you put the tray on the dresser. We'll get it in a little bit."

"Sure," Michael grinned. He set down the tray and headed toward the door, "You two have a good day," he finished as he walked out door and shut it behind him.

Melanie playfully tossed Lindsay on her back, straddled her, then cupped her hands over Lindsay’s breasts. When Lindsay pulled her down and pressed their lips together Melanie thought to herself that having Michael here wasn't a bad idea at all.

**Pittsburgh**

**Debbie, Carl and Emmett's House**

"Three months, three fucking months!" Debbie yelled as she threw the dish towel into the sink. "And he doesn't even have the decency to pick up the phone and tell his own mother that he's going to be leaving the fucking country. I have to find out on the street!"

"Ben coming to the diner to tell you is hardly hearing it on the street, honey," Carl said as he sopped
up the last of his eggs with a piece of toast.

"Yeah, it's not like he headed for the hills for good like Mel and Lindsay did," Emmett chimed in as he popped a piece of cantaloupe into his mouth.

Debbie whipped around to face the men. "If I find out that you two knew about this and didn't tell me..."

Both men shot their arms in the air as if they were being held up at gunpoint. "Honest Deb, I didn't know a thing about it. Did you Em?"

Emmett shook his head, "No Deb, I swear. Michael's leaving was totally out the blue. I promise."

Deb sighed and plopped into her chair at the table, "I know he's hurting right now and that he misses JR something awful, but leaving Ben alone?" Deb shook her head, "It's just not right."

"Maybe we could do something special for Ben, you know, to lift his spirits?" Emmett suggested.

"Not a bad idea," Carl replied, "but let's not throw him a surprise party. From what I've heard, you people have a terrible track record with those things."

**Pittsburgh**

**Ted and Blake's Condo**

Blake entered the condo to sound of opera on the stereo and Ted busying himself at the stove. He began to set his satchel down on the couch but then remembered Ted's rules and put the bag in the hall closet.

He then walked around the kitchen island, pointed to the stereo and asked, "*Manon Lescaut?*

"Impressive," Ted replied as he turned to give Blake a peck. "Is the student going to surpass the master?"
Blake poured some sparkling grape juice into a wine glass then said, "I wouldn't say that, I just like Puccini." He leaned back against the counter then continued, "You're home early."

"Brian let me get out of the office at a decent hour tonight," Ted began before continuing with an air of pride, "since I'll be holding down the fort while he's in New York this weekend."

"Twelve hours on Saturday and Sunday again?" Blake asked as he picked a crouton off the top of the Caesar salad.

Ted gave Blake's hand a little slap. "Wait till we're at the table. And the hours are worth it with all the project manager duties Brian has handed over to me. It's great experience. I am still new to the ad game, you know."

Blake took a seat at their dining table. "But do you like it? Advertising I mean."

Ted and Blake took their seats at the table then Ted answered, "Developing the campaigns, that's not really my thing, but Kinnetik has such an entrepreneurial spirit that I really have had a chance to dig in to a lot of aspects of the business that don't fall under my Controller duties."

Ted took a bite of his grilled sea bass then continued, "You know what I'd really like to do?"

"What's that?" Blake asked. He always enjoyed hearing about Ted's ideas. It was so good to see him happy and dare he say, somewhat relaxed.

"I'd just loved to land my own account. You know, do the research, get the meeting, work with the junior account execs to develop a pitch, then make the presentation myself and bring a big, fat, juicy client in for Brian on a silver platter. I think it'd be the perfect thank you to him for all the faith he's shown in me the last couple years."

Blake took a sip of his juice then said, "I don't know Brian very well, but from what I can tell, he doesn't do anything on faith. He trusts you with his company because he knows you're a good business man."

"You really think so?" Ted asked sincerely.
"I do." Blake smiled and nodded then leaned forward and gave Ted a little peck.

Kinnetik

Brian cradled his cell phone between his ear and his shoulder as he stood in the break room and poured himself another cup of coffee. His lips curled into a smile as he listened to Gus recount the adventures he'd had with Uncle Michael during the past week.

"And we road bikes and we went and got ice cream and we made pisgetti dinner for Mommy and Mama..."

"...Spaghetti" Brian corrected with a grin as he walked back to his office.

"That's what I said...pisgetti," Gus replied. He was clearly irritated at his father's interruption. "Oh and Uncle Michael even let me stay up till ten o'clock so I could watch Space Ghost with him on the cartoon channel."

"Ten o'clock? Wow, that's late," Brian replied.

"Yeah. He said I could only stay up if I promised not to be cranky this morning when he woke me up and guess what?"

"What?" Brian happily replied with anticipation.

"I got up right away, like a big boy and I wasn't fussy at all!" Gus excitedly replied.

"You're getting to be quite the little man, aren't ya Sonny Boy?"

"Uh-huh," Gus replied then he whispered into the phone, "And I'm a way better thrower than Uncle Michael, but don't tell him I said so."

At this comment Brian shot out a single, sharp laugh then replied, "Sounds like you're having a good time with your Uncle."
"Yeah, but..." Gus suddenly got quiet.

"What is it, Son?"

"I just wish...I wish you could come stay with us like Uncle Michael. I miss you Daddy."

Brian felt a tightness in his chest that made him wince. "I miss you too Gus, but we see each other nearly every day on the computer," Brian replied.

"I know, but if you were here we could play ball. Mommy says I got my good throwing arm from you."

"She did, did she."

"Uh huh. And she said when we lived near you that you used to take me to that park."

"You don't remember going to the park with your old man?" Brian asked despite not wanting to hear the answer.

"Nuh-uh. But Mommy said you and me had lots of fun together. It would be way fun if you could come stay with us."

"Son, I'll try to get up there for a--" Brian began when his call waiting beeped. He checked the number then continued, "That's Justin on the other line. I need to let you go. Now you be a good boy for your moms and your uncle. Okay?"

"I will. I love you daddy."

"I love you too, Son."

"Tell Justin I love him and miss him very much."
Brian smiled and said, "I will." He clicked over to the other line, which had now beeped a second time. "Hey."

"You're pissed at me," Justin began.

"I'm not pissed," Brian replied as he blew on his still too hot coffee.

"Then why haven't you answered my calls all week?"

"I've been busy," Brian replied flatly.

Justin sighed then asked, "Are you still flying out tonight?"

"I've got my ticket right in front of me."

"That doesn't answer my question," Justin pressed.

"Have I ever missed one of your shows?"

"I swear to God that absolutely nothing is going on between me and Ethan, but the whole reason I got this show is because of that stupid painting I gave him back...back in school. That's how Calista and Pierre knew about my work."

"Well then, I suppose everything happens for a reason," Brian said.

"So you're not mad?" Justin asked again.

"I'm not mad, though that doesn't mean that you don't deserve to be punished," Brian answered in a low, breathy tone.
Justin laughed with relief. Brian being dirty was always a good sign, "I know I should’ve told you about the connection, but it was just so...so weird."

"Then you could imagine my surprise when I saw their wedding announcement on the Google search I did on Calista." Brian replied.

_That's how Brian knew_, Justin thought. He then said, "I'm a shit for not telling you."

Brian smiled. He figured he'd proven his point and made Justin squirm enough. The lack of communication all week had been a little over the top, but it was that goddamn fiddler for Christ’s sake.

"You are a shit. Though most of the time I find that to be one of your more endearing qualities."

"Asshole," Justin laughed. "I'll meet you at baggage claim?"

"Mm-hm."

"Okay, Later."

"Oh wait, Justin?"

"Yeah?"

"Gus said to tell you he loves you."

"Hmm. Tell him I love him too," Justin replied with a smile then hung up the phone.

_Pennsylvania Highway 33-North_  
_Ben’s Rental Car_
The timing really was perfect, Ben thought to himself as he turned off of the highway and on to the Saylorsburg exit. It was spring break and in the last week since Michael had left for Toronto he’d been able to finish a first draft of his latest novel. He’d never written anything this fast before, nearly two hundred and twenty pages in just under a month. This vacation would enable him to take a little break from the writing so he could come back with a clear head and make his revisions before sending it to the publishers for consideration.

When Debbie, Carl and Emmett presented him with the gift of a week long stay at Pennsylvania’s only ashram, the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Ben was genuinely touched. He’d be taking lessons in advanced meditation techniques as well as Level III yoga classes in the tradition of B.K.S. Iyengar. Strengthening his mind, body, and soul connection was exactly what Ben needed now.

Ben thought back to this morning when Carl handed him the brochures for the Buddhist Retreat.

“It was Emmett’s idea. So we all chipped in so you could go, uh, do your Buddhism stuff.”

Ben looked through the pamphlets then replied, “Guys, thank you, really. This is great.”

Debbie gave Ben a kiss on the cheek and replied, “We love you honey. Now you go and have a nice, relaxing time out there.”

“Thanks. I definitely will.”

Emmett held up a set of keys, “And, so you can travel in style, we rented you a brand new Cadillac with all the latest bells and whistles.”

“Yeah it’s even got one of those GPS systems so you won’t get lost out in the Pennsylvania wilderness,” Carl added.

Ben took the keys and said, “I’m really lucky to have family like all of you.”

“That’s right,” Debbie replied. “We are your family. Don’t you ever forget fuckin’ that.”
New York City
LaGuardia Airport

The raised eyes brows and gasps of onlookers did nothing to dissuade Brian from thrusting his tongue into Justin’s mouth and caressing the full curve of his ass as they waited for the elevator down to ground transportation to arrive. The kiss was hot and forceful and also reclaiming of sorts. Any words Brian could think of to say how he felt to have Justin in his arms would’ve seemed trite and clichéd so he used the language of his body to tell Justin everything he needed to hear.

When Justin finally pulled back to catch his breath he asked, “Which hotel did you get reservations at?”

“I thought I’d stay at Chez Crap Hole with you.”

Justin looked puzzled. After all the grief Brian had given Justin regarding the sorry state of his living space, he was shocked that Brian would even set foot there. “You want to stay at the Co-Op?”

“No. But I thought that leaving the place with the lingering scent of Eau de Kinney might make it somewhat livable.”

The elevator opened and Brian and Justin stepped in, “Your zeal for romance will never cease to amaze me, Brian.”

When the doors closed behind them Brian replied, “It’s nothing compared to my zeal for your ass.”

Brian pulled out the stop button of the elevator. He hastily undid Justin’s jeans then yanked them down just below his bottom and turned Justin to face the wall. Brian licked the back of Justin’s neck as he reached into his jacket for his travel packet of lube. He squeezed the contents onto two of his fingers then forcefully shoved them all the way into Justin’s hole. Justin let out a groan as he struggled to adjust to the intrusion. When the burn subsided, he
pushed his ass back against Brian and grunted out, “Fuck me Brian.”

Brian happily obliged. He released his cock from his slacks, effortlessly sheathed it, then entered Justin, balls deep, with a single thrust. He placed one hand on the wall for leverage and the other on Justin’s shoulder then began pounding into him, again and again.

Justin was overwhelmed. It’d been ages since Brian fucked him like this. It felt unbelievable, but he knew that he’d only be able to last for a couple more minutes. Before he knew what was happening, he shot onto the elevator wall right after he heard Brian growl into his ear, “You’re mine.”

Brian came just a few moments later. As they stepped off the elevator Brian smiled to himself. Their fuck had been quick, dirty, and perfect.
Episode 604

New York

Pierre Poirot Gallery

Justin stood in an out-of-the-way corner of the gallery and watched on as Pierre worked the room. He charmed his clients with what Justin was sure were mortifying anecdotes of Justin's struggles as an up and coming, gay, physically impaired artist. Aside from well over a hundred of Pierre’s regular patrons, Justin's mother, Tucker, Daphne and most of his liberty avenue family were in attendance at his very first New York exhibition.

Out of nowhere Brian appeared by Justin's side, "What are you doing?"

"I just needed a moment to myself to let the cheeks on my 'pretty face' recover from pinches I've received by all the old queens that are here."

"I see." Brian replied, then he waited for Justin to continue.

Justin scratched the side of his head then asked, "Brian?"

"Hmm?"

"Why is it so much easier to fuck strangers than it is to actually talk to them?"

"An age old question for men wiser than you or me..." Brian replied with an easy smile.

"There are men wiser than you?" Justin asked with a dirty smirk.

"That's a secret I expect you to take to your grave." Brian answered with a raised eyebrow.
"Cross my heart."

"Here." Brian said as he handed Justin his glass of scotch. "It's a fine social lubricant. It'll help make discourse less painful."

"You have such a way with words." Justin replied before downing the scotch in one swallow and handing the glass back to Brian. Justin sighed then continued with more than a hint disdain, "Well, my adoring fans await. Later?"

"Count on it." He watched Justin rejoin Pierre and his clients. Justin gave his best country-club smile and shook hands with the people Pierre had been working to dazzle. Brian then surveyed the room when someone moving through the crowd caught his eye. The man had dark, curly hair and had an infant riding on his back inside a baby carrier. "Christ." Brian said to himself. "Who the fuck brings a baby to an art gallery?" Then the man turned and Brian got a look at his face. Brian's lips curled into a devious smile as he made a few easy strides across the room.

"Who's your decorator?"

Ethan turned and said, "Pardon? Oh. Brian, it's you."

"In the flesh." Brian replied as he tilted his head to the side, with his tongue planted firmly in his cheek. Then he asked again, "So, your decorator. Who'd you hire?"

Ethan furrowed his brow with puzzlement. "For what?"

"The closet. I hear you're living in there full time now so I just figured you'd hired someone to help you spruce the place up a bit."

Ethan let out a sarcastic chuckle, "I see that you're the same, *old* Brian Kinney."

"While you've given up fame and fortune so you can play Mr. Mom." Brian jabbed back. He so enjoyed the occasional verbal boxing match.
Ethan's eyes narrowed as he replied, "Fame and fortune can wait for the sake of my daughter. Besides, my music will always be there but Allegra will only be a little girl for so long. Now, if memory serves, you have a son. Tell me Brian, are all your riches worth never knowing what it's like to tuck him in bed at night?"

Ethan's question came at Brian like a right hook, but he was able to shake off the burning pain of it by asking "It's pretty amazing, don't you think?"

"What's that?"

Brian pursed his lips before squarely landing a sucker punch with a final comment "That you've been able to remain *so* holier-than-thou despite the fact you're living a lie." He then sauntered past Ethan without so much as a backwards glance.

Justin had missed the entire exchange. He'd escaped from Pierre and was going over the evening's purchases with Calista. Nearly all of the placards that were placed by each of Justin's paintings had a little blue adhesive dot pasted to them, signaling that the piece had been sold.

"I think we're going to have another sell out." Calista stated cheerily she thumbed through the receipts attached to her clipboard.

"Without you, my first New York solo exhibition would've most likely been at the SoHo Coffee Hut." Justin answered with sincerity.

"It's my job. I'm a star maker." she beamed in response.

"And, hey. I'm so sorry for over reacting on the phone the other day. Sometimes, the artist in me causes me to be a bit too dramatic."

Calista flipped her hair behind her shoulder then replied, "Don't worry about it. Remember, I live with Ethan. I am more than accustomed to drama. Though in his case, I think it comes from the fact that he's queer rather than the fact that he's a musician." When she saw the look on Justin's face she continued. "Oh come on. I live in New York and I work in the art world. I'd have to be pretty dense to have not developed finely tuned gaydar by now."

"But Ethan said..." Justin began with a confused tone.
"Ethan says...what Ethan says. The fact is, we're together and it works." She shook her head and then went on. "I've told him that we don't need to make excuses or ask for permission because what we have is, well, unconventional."

"Wow. I don't know what to say." Justin replied. He was beginning to wonder exactly how much she knew about his past with Ethan when Calista gave him the answer.

"But since it's confession time, I suppose I should come clean."

"About what?"

"The painting of yours that we own really is my favorite, but that's not why I looked you up when I'd read that you had work hanging at the EVACO exhibitions."

"It isn't?" Justin was afraid of where this conversation was heading.

"After we got married, I'd catch him looking at that painting sometimes. I can only describe the look on his face as having an expression of complete and utter regret. So, I asked about who the artist was. He just said you were one of 'his boys' from his college days, but I could tell there was definitely something more to the story."

Justin softly said, "Calista..." in the hopes that it would get her to stop talking. It didn't work.

"At first we had, kind of, an arrangement but when we started talking about having a baby I agreed to it only on the condition that we were both going to be completely monogamous. That meant no other men for either of us."

"Uh Huh." Yes. This was definitely more information than Justin ever wanted.

"I want to trust Ethan, but we have a family now so I had to be sure. I figured if he was ever going to betray me it'd be with you. But after seeing you two together, I knew that nothing would ever happen. Even if it is, more so, because of you than him."
Justin couldn't believe what he was hearing. He ran his fingers through his hair and then gestured out to the room with exasperation, "So all this, my show, was just so you could see if your faggot husband was being faithful to you?"

"Oh Jesus, Justin. That's not, at all, what I meant. I'm just trying to--"

Justin held his hands out in front of himself as if to stop her, "Hey, you know what? It's fine. I've made a shit-load of money tonight and I've received a fair amount of recognition. So, I guess we're even." He started to walk away then turned back and said, "Tell Pierre I said thanks for everything."

Justin did his best to get a hold of his anger as he approached Brian and the gang. Still, he couldn't believe what Calista had said to him. It made him feel as if all of his work, his move, and his separation from Brian had been pointless. And the only thing that had made him able to stomach Pierre’s selling techniques was the fact that he felt as if he'd really been *discovered* in such a short in time after moving to New York. He'd gotten his own show. He'd done it without anyone's help, and bec ause of the merit of his work. Calista had just taken all of that away from him. Justin felt like he was no better than any of the thousands of other artists struggling to merely survive in the city. Leaving Pittsburgh had been all for nothing.

Justin took a deep breath and pasted on his sunshine smile as he walked up to Brian and the others and said, "I'm hungry."

"Well, there's a news flash." Melanie replied with laughter.

"If everyone's ready," Justin began as he took Brian's hand in his, "Brian got us reservations in Chelsea at Morimoto."

The group made their way out into the parking lot where two limousines - one standard and one stretch – waited for them. While the gang piled into the larger vehicle Brian waved off the driver so he could open the door to the back seat of the standard sized limousine for Justin himself.

As the limo made its way onto the street Brian leaned over and started sucking on Justin’s neck.

“Brian,” Justin said softly, “I don’t feel like it.”

Brian placed his hand on Justin’s crotch and said, “You don’t feel like you don’t feel like it.”
Justin let out a little laugh, “That doesn’t mean anything. I’m hard whenever you’re within fifty feet of me, I’m just tired okay?”

“Well then, sit back and let me do the work.” Brian replied as he unzipped Justin’s pants and released his hard dick from beneath his briefs. Despite Justin’s protest Brian began stroking him. He worked his hand from the bottom of Justin’s shaft up to over the head of his cock while making sure to softly trace his slit with his thumb. When Justin let out a sigh, Brian took this as his signal to continue, so he shifted in the seat and leaned over to take Justin between his warm lips.

Justin rested his hand on the back of Brian's neck. When he felt a slight pressure coming from Justin's fingers he knew he asking was for more so Brian shifted again so he could take in the full length of Justin. He'd always been able to read Justin's moves. Brian knew exactly how, what and when to give Justin what he wanted and needed during sex. Reading Justin's mind, however, was an entirely different story. That was mainly bec ause Justin was rarely at a loss for words. He'd always been able to express his feelings in an articulate, if not verbose, fashion. One thing Brian did know that when Justin was quiet, it was never a good sign.

Brian brushed his nose back and forth in Justin's pubes and took pleasure in his scent and taste. Justin did his best to keep his moans to a minimum so as not to attract the attention of the driver. Brian, being Brian, hadn't bothered to raise the divider between the back seat and the front of the car. He tried to let the hot, wet sensation of Brian's mouth and tongue wash over him, but unlike Brian, Justin had never been able to use sex as an anesthetic. If anything, fucking only made him hyper aware of all his feeling and emotions. Justin brushed his fingers through Brian's soft brown hair as he fought back the nagging feeling that moving to New York had been a mistake of epic proportions.

After a few minutes Brian took hold of Justin's shaft again and firmly stroked the base of it as his head bobbed up and down to hungrily suck on Justin's cock. Brian felt Justin's thighs suddenly tense up beneath his chest and in the next second Justin's come shot up into Brian's mouth. He swallowed, but held some of it in his tongue and rose up to kiss Justin so he could taste himself.

Brian rested his forehead against Justin's as his breathing began to steady. "Still tired?"

Justin rubbed his nose across Brian's and replied, "I'll never get tired of you."
Brian and Justin brushed through the enormous red tarps that hid the entrance to the restaurant as they led everyone into the main dining hall. A long row of tables lined the left side of the room while a fashionable, contemporary bar occupied the right side of the space. The hall was lit with soft white and cool blue lights.

“Is the place open yet?” Debbie asked as she surveyed the empty room.

“Brian, I thought you were just going to rent one of the private rooms. You bought out the entire restaurant for the night?” Justin asked as he lightly swatted Brian on the shoulder.

Brian leaned his forehead against Justin’s temple and whispered in his ear. “I just thought that after being at the gallery all evening you’d be tired of crowds.”

It was the unexpected gesture like this that always warmed Justin’s heart while truly taking him by surprise.

Of course, Brian could never leave well enough alone so he added, “Besides, this way we can take as long as we want when I take you back to the Men’s room so you can blow me.”

“Ah. I should’ve guessed.” Justin smiled.

Then, a handsome Asian man in his early thirties wearing a crisp, white chef’s uniform walked up and greeted Justin directly though they’d never met before.

“Mr. Taylor, thank you for coming to Morimoto to celebrate your triumphant evening with all of your friends. Please, everyone, make yourselves comfortable. Lo is available at the bar to take your drink orders. Your Omakase Dinner will be served in approximately twenty minutes.”

“Omawhaty?” Debbie asked.
“Omakase,” Emmett replied. He was her date for the evening. “It’s a multi-course Asian fusion cuisine. It’s absolutely divine.”

“Christ. It’s not raw fish is it? I’m not eating anything that’s still breathin’”

“They will probably bring out sushi to start with but I’m certain the later dishes will be cooked.” Emmett patted Debbie on the arm to reassure her.

As Lindsay and Melanie chatted with Jennifer and Daphne about life in Toronto Brian and Justin ordered drinks at the bar.

Justin took generous gulps of his Mai Tai as Brain sipped on his Sake and said, "You might want to take it easy with that drink, Justin. You know rum has the same effect on you as champagne has on me."

Justin simply rolled his eyes in reply as Tucker walked up to them.

Brian, do you mind if I talk to Justin for a minute?” Tucker asked.

Brian looked at Justin. He nodded so Brian slid his hand down Justin’s spine then took a few steps away while making sure to remain within earshot. Brian feigned interest in Melanie’s complaints about having to study so much for the Ontario Bar while in actuality he listened in on Tucker and Justin’s conversation.

“So, you had some night,” Tucker offered.

“It was definitely memorable,” Justin replied. Although Justin was doing his best to play nice with Tucker these days, it was still hard for him. Tucker had this ability to just rub Justin the wrong way. And he even though he knew it was a total double standard, the age difference between Tucker and his mom still bothered him.

“Your mother is so proud of you and all you’ve accomplished so quickly.”
Justin shook his head, "I was just in the right place at the right time. But I am really glad everyone could come out for the show. It means a lot."

“We’d been planning to come out to New York, so the timing really was perfect,” Tucker paused for a minute then continued, “Actually that’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Oh?” Justin responded. Despite having just received one of Brian’s, masterful blow-jobs, a killer headache began to form behind Justin’s eyes. He didn’t know if he could take another bomb-shell this evening.

“Yeah. Later tonight I’m going to propose to Jennifer.”

“…And I suppose you want my blessing” Just replied coolly

“No. I just wanted to give you a heads up so you could have a chance to get used to the idea before Jennifer tells you. I don’t want you to be taken by surprise and say something that will upset her.”

Justin sighed then asked, “You really think you can make her happy?”

“Nobody can make another person happy. We’re all responsible for our own happiness. Besides, I don’t think that’s what marriage is all about anyway.”

“Oh? Please enlighten me. What is marriage all about?”

“It’s about sharing each day with the person you love. It’s about being there to bear witness to each others lives. It’s about knowing that no matter how hard things gets, there is always going to be someone there who’s got your back.” Tucker replied in that calm matter-of-fact tone that always drove Justin nuts.

Justin stood in silence and let Tucker’s words sink in.

When Brian noticed that Justin wasn’t saying anything he walked up to him and said, “Justin, come take a look at Gus’s drawings that Lindsay brought with her. It appears that we’ll be going to one of his art exhibitions before too long.”
“Right,” Justin said as he rubbed his hands over his face. When Brian wrapped his arm around Justin’s shoulder and began leading him away Justin turned back to Tucker and said, “I hope you get what you want.”

New York

EVACO

Justin's Room

Justin leaned against Brian's side like dead weight as Brian worked the key into the lock and opened the door.

"Alright Sunshine, we're here."

Justin's eyes fluttered open. He'd surpassed mere intoxication and was now completely wasted from the several Mai Tais he'd downed during dinner. His feet felt like he was wearing bricks for shoes as he took one, then two steps forward into his room. Brian steadied Justin and then eased him onto the bed.

"Stay here. I'm gonna take a piss and then I'll help you get undressed." Brian said before walking into the tiny, rust stained bathroom. He relieved himself then looked into the mirror as he washed his hands. Brian couldn't remember ever seeing Justin this drunk before. Sure, rum drinks always gave him a nasty hang-over. Once shortly after they'd met, he really over did it after Brian had left Babylon with a trick. He came home to find Justin puking in toilet. After that night, he got Justin off rum-and-cokes and onto good single malt scotch.

But now, Justin was barely conscious. He'd been in a funk ever since they'd all left the gallery. At first, Brian thought it was Justin's irritation at having to make small talk all evening, but now he was sure it was something more. Tucker's news surely hadn't helped matters any...

Brian's thoughts were interrupted when he heard a loud thud. He turned and stepped out of the bathroom to find Justin lying on the bedroom floor with his pants down around his ankles. Brian laughed and said, "Jesus, I told you I'd help you take your clothes off."
Justin sat up and shifted to face Brian. He was holding his right arm up to his chest.

Brian could tell by the look on Justin's face that something was really wrong. "What?" he asked.

"My wrist."

**New York**

**Melanie and Lindsay's Hotel Room**

Lindsay set her suitcase on the edge of bed and began to unzip it when Melanie walked out of the bathroom with an ice bucket.

"I'm going down the hall to get some ice. Do you want anything from the vending machine?"

"Oh goodness, no. After that amazing meal I couldn't eat another bite."

"Okay, I'll be back in a sec."

Melanie walked down the corridor to the vending area to find a man she recognized from working in Pittsburgh standing at the ice machine.

"Judge Harper?"

The man turned to face Melanie, "Ms. Marcus. What a pleasant surprise. Are you here on vacation?"

"Yes, just a quick weekend trip." Melanie answered then asked, "What about you?"

"I'm here on business actually. And I guess you get to be the first to know. I'm stepping down from the bench."
"Really?"

"Yes. This afternoon I accepted the position for the new Executive Director of Lambda Legal. I’ll be moving here this summer."

Judge Harper had always been fair minded when Melanie had brought gay or lesbian issue cases before him, still the news took Melanie by surprise. "I had no idea that civil-rights for the GLBT community was such a passion of yours."

The judge shrugged and replied, "Well, I guess it was the passing of Proposition 14 that really opened my eyes to the injustice."

Melanie nodded, "I know what you mean." After all, Prop 14 was one of the main reasons she'd moved her family to Canada.

"So, when Lambda Legal approached me about taking the helm I talked to the wife. We decided that as an American I have an obligation to do everything within my power to put an end to having any person in this country be treated as a second class citizen. Oh, and you wouldn't believe some of the test cases they have in the works."

"Oh yeah?" Melanie had to admit that her interest was piqued.

"You know, if you ever decided that you wanted to take on the fight full time, Lambda could certainly use a bright, tenacious attorney like yourself."

New York

Beth Israel Medical Center

Exam Room

Brian was wiping the perspiration from Justin's forehead when he tried to lie down on the exam table.

"You've still got the spins. If you lie down you're going to get sick again." Brian said has he pulled Justin back up to a sitting position. Justin had already thrown up twice in the exam room waste
basket. He was sobering up, more so from the pain in his swollen wrist than from his vomiting. Justin leaned forward to rest his head on Brian's chest. Brian wrapped his arms around Justin and lightly rubbed his hands up and down Justin's back.

When the doctor came in the room he said, "Well, it's not broken." Brian let out a sigh of relief then the doctor continued, "but the MRI shows that you do have a Grade II Sprain."

Justin looked up from under his heavy eyelids and said, "What does that mean?"

"You have some slight tearing in the ligament. That's why you've bruised so fast." The doctor answered as Justin looked down at his dark purple wrist.

Brian furrowed his brow. His throat was dry, but he managed to ask, "Will he need surgery?"

"I don't think that'll be necessary, The doctor answered then looked back at Justin, "but you're going to need to avoid using that hand as much as possible for at least six to eight weeks. I can write you a note for your employer if you need me to."

"I'm...self employed. Or, I was, at least." Justin said as he shook his head in disgust.

"He's an artist." Brian broke in. *This isn't happening*, Brian thought. *Not when Justin's starting to really make a name for himself.*

"Oh, well in that case, I can recommend a good occupational therapist for you. It'll increase your chances of making a full recovery."

"Full recovery? That's rich." Justin scoffed. He'd been waiting for that for over five years.

**Toronto**

**Melanie and Lindsay's House**

"I can't believe I'm saying this, and maybe it's just that I've gotten used to all of Ben's health-food dishes but this tofu meatloaf isn't half bad." Michael said as he took another bite of the dinner that
Lindsay had prepared.

"I'm glad you like it, but after doing such a great job with the kids when we were in New York, we definitely owe you at least a couple steak dinners." Lindsay answered as she poured more iced tea into each of their glasses.

Melanie, Lindsay, Gus and Michael sat at the dinner table along Jenny Rebecca who sat in her high chair while working diligently at stabbing her bite sized meatless hotdog pieces with her fork so she could feed herself.

"Did Daddy say he missed me when you saw him?" Gus asked as he inspected his spinach and tried to decide if he'd dare try it.

"Yes, he did Gus. And he really liked the pictures you drew for him. He says you're very talented, but he already told you that during story time online, didn't he?"

"Yeah, but if he says it when I'm not around then he means it."

"Gus, trust me. Your father doesn't say anything that he doesn't mean," Michael explained as he wiped some mashed peas off of JR's cheek then handed her back her fork so she could continue her hotdog stabbing. She much preferred that activity to actually eating.

"That's right," Melanie continued as she looked across the table and Lindsay. "So when Brian says he misses you he is telling you the --" Melanie was interrupted by a knock at the door. She gave Lindsay a knowing smile then said, "Michael, would you mind getting that?"

"Sure," Michael wiped his mouth with his napkin then walked to the front of the house and opened the door. "Ben...what are you doing here?" Michael said with surprise.

"When two people are in love they belong with each other. So, if Toronto is where you need to be right now, then it's where I need to be too."

Michael threw his arms around Ben and hugged him, "But what about your classes and the house?"
"I talked to the Dean. She granted my request to take a half semester sabbatical and I used some of the life insurance money to pay up the mortgage for a few months." Ben replied as he followed Michael into the house.

Michael led Ben to the couch in the living room and said, "I can't tell you how glad I am to see you." He placed his hand around Ben's neck and pulled him in for a kiss then said, "Thank you. Thank you so much for coming. You know I would have asked you to come with me, but I didn't think it'd even be a possibility for you to get away."

Ben pulled Michael tightly against his chest and replied, "When a person has the strength to admit what he wants in life, anything is possible."

Pittsburgh

Jennifer's House

"So are you thinking sit down dinner or buffet style?" Emmett asked as he touched the tip of his pencil to his tongue and prepared to take notes.

Jennifer and Tucker looked at each other for a second then Jennifer replied, "Actually, we want to keep the reception pretty low-key; maybe just heavy appetizers?"

"Yeah," Tucker added as he took Jennifer's hand in his. "Considering everything, we decided to keep things simple."

"Considering what? Why wouldn't you want to shout from the hill tops that two to love-birds are tying the knot?" Emmett asked as he waved his hand in an arc over his head.

Jennifer shrugged, "Well you know, with Justin and Brian canceling their wedding after everything they'd been through and all the planning they did I just don't...I just want them to feel as comfortable as possible at ours. They're my sons." she finished with a weak smile.

Emmett reached across the table and rubbed Jennifer's shoulder, "We should all be so lucky to have a mother like--" He was interrupted by a knock at the door.
Jennifer left the dining room and answered the front door to find a man, in a dark suit, standing on her front steps.

"Are you Jennifer Taylor?"

"Yes. Can I help you?"

"This is for you. Have a nice day." The man said then he turned to walk back out to his car.

Jennifer shut the door then opened the envelope and unfolded the documents he'd handed her as she walked back to where Tucker and Emmett were sitting. "That son-of-a-bitch." Jennifer said through gritted teeth.

Tucker stood up and asked, "What is it, hon?"

She handed Tucker the papers and said, "Craig is suing me for custody of Molly."

"Oh my God. What on earth for?" Emmett asked with concern.

She put her hand on her hip and replied, "He's claiming I'm an unfit mother."

Pittsburgh

Brian's Loft

As far as shitty days went, this one definitely held a firm place near the top of Brian's list. Unfortunately, the trick kneeling at Brian's feet was doing a piss poor job of helping Brian erase the events of the day from his mind.

It started when he arrived at the office to find Ted in a state of panic. Liberty Air's legal department wouldn't approve their secondary campaign because apparently, suggesting people could have sex in the lavatory, even in jest, would open the airline up to possible liability and fines from the FAA and NTSB. Brian spent the better part of his morning reworking the campaign in time to make the three o'clock deadline with the printers. He'd had a hell of a time focusing, though, because all Brian
really could think about Justin.

The weekend before, Brian had tried to let Justin know that it was okay to come home with him if he needed help while he recovered but Justin had insisted he could manage. His exact words had been, "I don't need anyone's help." Brian knew better than anyone that if Justin was going to come home it'd have to be his own decision. It was how Brian had raised him, after all.

It was the call from Michael, though, that put the day in the crapper for Brian.

"You're all he talks about Brian. Gus must've asked me twenty times when you're coming to visit him. I don't know what I'm supposed to tell him. It's been months since you've seen Gus and he really misses you."

"I see him online all the time."

"Despite what you might think, Brian. The internet was not invented to be a parenting tool," Michael remarked with a condescending tone, "Besides, he's not a baby anymore. A few bed time stories each week isn't gonna cut it."

"I really don't see how my relationship with my son is any of your goddamn business." Brian replied sharply.

"It's my business, because I'm here. He doesn't want me, Brian. He wants you. I know what it's like to not have a father. Don't do this to him."

Brian closed his eyes before making one last comment and hanging up the phone, "Stay the fuck out of it, Michael. I know what's best for Gus."

It was barely four o'clock and Brian’s day was shot to hell. So, he left the office and went to Woody's where he found the brunette muscle boy who was sucking him off now. All Brian wanted to do was forget about his day. But, despite what some people might say, he really did have an excellent memory. For instance, he remembered perfectly the smell of Jack's whiskey soaked breathe when he would lean in close to remind Brian, yet again, that he should've never been born. He also remembered how, at age five, he discovered that the small space between the sofa and the wall made the perfect hiding place when Jack went into one of his drunken rages. And every time Brian tried to tell himself that he wasn't like his old man, he'd remember pissing all over Justin’s comic or punching Michael in the face at Mel and Lindsay's party.
Brian shifted a little on the couch to give muscle-boy better access to his balls then he reached for the remote control, turned on the TV and started flipping channels.

The trick popped his head up and with an irritated expression on his face he asked, "I'm sorry. Am I boring you?"

Brian considered the question for a second then replied, "You know what? You are." He reached for the muscle-boy's crumpled t-shirt that was lying next to Brian on the couch and threw it in his face, "Fuck off."

**Pittsburgh**

**Ted's Alcoholics/Addicts Anonymous Meeting**

The small church basement was filled with people who'd come to the support group earlier that evening. One of the members had just earned her 10 year chip so in addition to the regular coffee and stale donuts to snack on, there was also a cake with ten candles on it.

After she began slicing and handing out pieces of cake, Ted poured himself some more coffee and continued his conversation with a fellow group member. "All I'm saying, Landon, is if that if you're going to try them, make sure you get them from a doctor- not a friend - and be sure you're aware of the possible side effects."

"Yeah of course, you can't be too careful with that sort of thing. I wouldn't want to end up walking around with a hard-on for three days," Landon laughed.

Ted chuckled uncomfortably and responded, "Trust me, you definitely wouldn't want that."

"I just hate the way they market E.D. drugs. Christ, have you seen that 'Light My Fire' commercial for Boneril. Landon continued.

"Oh yeah, the one with the geriatric couple listening to their old Doors records and dancing around the room like a couple of denture wearing hippies." Ted replied. He knew the ad all too well. It'd been the one Vanguard had developed for Remson Pharmaceuticals after they left Kinnetik. When Brian had heard the news that Gardner Vance had gotten the account he threw his desk lamp through his glass office door. That was fourteen-hundred dollars down the drain.
"You know, The Doors released that song when I was four years old. I just hope when Pfister puts their new E.D. drug on the market they think of those of us who aren't using walkers to get around yet." Landon said as he handed Ted a piece of the cake that was being handed out.

"Pfister Pharmaceuticals developed an erectile dysfunction medication?" Ted asked with interest.

"That's what I read on the internet this morning. The article said they're planning to put it on the market this summer."

Ted took a bite of the cake and thoughtfully replied, "Hmm."

**Pittsburgh**

**Brian's Loft**

Brian Kinney would rather be torn apart by wild dogs than be thought of as sentimental. Sentimentality was for people who placed value on things outside of themselves, it was for people who had...attachments. People who were sentimental were governed by their hearts, not their minds. This was precisely why Brian kept random items from his past hidden under lock and key, in one the storage drawers that lined the outer walls of his bedroom. One drawer was all he'd allow himself for the yearbooks or photographs or scarves or bracelets or wedding bands that had achieved some level of significance in Brian Kinney's life.

He sat on the hardwood floor next to the open drawer and pulled out a green folder. He flipped it open and took out the first piece of slick, professional grade paper. The digitally drawn picture was semi-abstract, but he could easily make out the male figure resting his hands in front of him while reclining on a dark blue bed.

Brian remembered back to that night. He'd been doing crunches when Justin had come home full alcohol and venom. 'They all wanted to fuck me' he'd drawled as rubbed his small frame up against Brian. He remembered how he'd been disturbed by his own sense of relief when Justin had continued with, 'I told them no. I’m saving that for you.' He also recalled Justin's reaction to the computer he'd bought him. 'I'm not going to draw again. No electronic Crayola box is going to change that' he'd yelled in a nearly frantic tone.

Brian's thoughts were interrupted when he heard the heavy loft door begin to slide open. Out of instinct, he slammed the drawer shut before turning to see Justin standing in the hall - his right hand
in a sling, and his left hand carrying that same blue duffle bag he'd left with eight months before. As Brian rose and walked to the door to take Justin in his arms he noticed that same look of desperation and defeat that he'd seen on Justin's face all those years ago.
Brian's Loft

Brian turned to the last page of the book, then looked up at Gus on the monitor and smiled as Justin sat on the couch and listened in on story-time.

"Go on Daddy, what does Christopher Robin say to Pooh bear?"

Brian looked down at the last words on the page. He scratched the back of his neck then cleared his throat before forcing out the words. "Christopher Robin said, 'If ever there is a tomorrow when we're not together, there is something you must always remember. You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think. But the most important thing is'..." Brian stopped again and took a long drink of his bottled water.

Gus gave a little tap on his computer screen, "Daddy, finish the story."

"Yeah Brian, what's the most important thing?" Justin chimed in.

Brian turned and gave Justin a little smirk before finishing, "'But the most important thing is even if we're apart...I'll always be with you.' Alright Gus, that's enough for tonight." Brian closed the book, "It's past your bedtime. Go give your moms and uncles hugs and kisses for me and then go to sleep."

"Hugs and kisses to you too Daddy," replied Gus, "And you too Justin!" He called out louder.

Justin turned and waved into the web-cam, "Night Gus!" Justin called back.

"Good night, Son." Brian said before switching off the computer.

"You really are good with him," Justin commented.

Brian pulled a cigarette from the pack. He placed it between his lips when answered, "It's pretty hard
to fuck up a bed time story.” He worked the Zippo, trying to get it to light. In reality though, he was stalling so he could divert the oncoming ‘you’re a good dad’ speech from Justin.

“That’s not what I’m talking about, “Justin replied as he rose to join Brian at the computer. He walked across the room, but stopped and winced as he rubbed his thighs together.

When Brian saw Justin tug at the crotch of his jean, he realized he had an out for the impending lecture. He took the opportunity to change the subject by asking, "What the fuck, Justin? Did you pick up a case of crabs in New York ?"

"Huh? Oh, no. I can't shave with my arm in this sling. The hair on my balls is growing back and I'm all itchy." He answered as he continued to wiggle his hips uncomfortably.

Brian stood and tilted his head to the side. "Why didn't you say something?" He asked with a mischievous grin.

Justin stopped, while still an arm’s length away from Brian, his tone, now suddenly defensive, "Because, I'm not some fucking invalid."

Brian raised his eyebrow, "It's not like I haven't shaved you before," He replied then turned and walked toward the bathroom.

It was true, when Justin had first moved into the loft after Craig had kicked him out, Brian had instructed him on all the finer points of male grooming. Shaving ones genitals was one of the many lessons Justin had learned under Brian's tutelage on becoming the best homosexual he could possibly be.

"You are *not* shaving me."

Brian returned from the bathroom with a couple towels and threw them at Justin, "Quit being such a fucking princess. Now drop your pants, and spread these out on the table."

"Brian."
"I'm not going to tell you twice. Now do it."

Justin let out a dramatic sigh as he worked his way out of his jeans and then laid back on the towels he'd set out.

Brian joined him at the table with his shaving kit and the other necessary items then he sat down in a chair between Justin's legs. "Now, if you lie still and be a good boy, I promise I'll make this worth your while."

"Whatever," Justin grumpily replied as he stared up at the ceiling. In the week since he'd returned to Pittsburgh, Justin hadn't been in the mood for sex, in fact, he hadn't been in the mood for doing much of anything. His wrist throbbed with pain almost constantly and although he took the anti-inflammatory that had been prescribed, he refused to take the pain killers. He figured if he could feel the pain start to subside naturally, then he'd have a better clue as to how his wrist was healing.

It's not as if he and Brian hadn't fucked several times since he'd come home, but his heart wasn't in it and he was sure Brian could tell. Even Brian's expert touch couldn't get Justin to quit worrying that this latest injury may have ended his career as an artist. That, in combination with the blow he'd received from Calista, had put quite a damper on Justin's libido.

Brian set all the supplies out on the table. He dipped a hand towel into the bowl of hot water and then began to massage the wet towel on Justin's scrotum. He gently rubbed Justin's balls in a slow and deliberate manner. After a few minutes Brian squirted some of the expensive French shaving cream in his hands and worked it into a lather. When he started spreading the cream onto Justin, Brian heard Justin give a small sigh.

“Do you like that?” Brian asked softly.

“MmHm.”

Brian continued to roll Justin’s balls between his fingers to soften the short pubic hairs that had started to grow. Justin had been so quiet since he came back…home. Brian knew from experience that when he was ready to talk he would, but the silence was beginning to wear thin on Brian’s nerves. In the past, when one of them couldn’t, or rather, wouldn’t talk they could at least communicate with each other physically. Now though, Justin was just so goddamn distant that Brian felt as if he was fucking a ghost. Perhaps, Brian thought, he could show Justin that he was here for him and ready to listen or whatever-the-fuck he needed him to do through this little endeavor in erotic shaving.
Brian dried off his hand then placed a new blade in his razor. He then used his left hand to stretch out Justin’s ball sac against his groin. He could feel the tension radiating off Justin.

“Now relax. And try to be still. I’m in no mood to make another trip to the emergency room.”

Justin let out a little chuckle and made his best attempt to at least enjoy the experience. He closed his eyes and let the sensation of the easy strokes of the blade wash over him. He’d been hard since Brian started rubbing the shaving cream on him, but that was no surprise. Justin tried to focus on the intimacy of the situation. Brian could be, dare he even think it, so sweet at times like this. He was a master at fixing what was broken. It’s was one of Brian’s endless number of talents. The problem was, Brian’s tenderness only served to remind Justin that he needed fixing, yet again.

Brian made one final stroke with the razor, wiped the last of the shaving off of Justin, “That’s better.”

“Thanks.” Justin responded in a whisper.

“Well, we’ve taken care of your balls. Now it’s time for me to tend to the rest of you.” Brian replied as he bent over and started to lightly pepper kisses along Justin’s inner thighs. He smiled to himself when he noticed Justin’s hole begin to spasm so he began to lick along the puckered ridges of Justin’s entrance. Brian wrapped his arms around the underside of Justin’s legs then began to caress the sides of his thighs as he started to slowly fuck Justin with his tongue. He tasted rich and earthy and soon it was so much that Brian had to stop so he could release his own rock hard cock from his jeans.

He shed his clothes and stood so he could see Justin. But, Brian needed a second to push back his alarm when he saw that Justin’s face was red and his eyes were welled with tears. So, he moved forward and flicked his tongue in and out of Justin’s navel then asked, “Justin, what can I…what do you want?”

Justin sniffled lightly then replied with a sigh, “I just want you to fuck me. But -”

“- I’ll go slow.”

Toronto
Mel and Lindsay’s House
"It's pretty much a certainty that Craig's lawyer is going to make an issue of Justin's relationship with Brian and the bashing," Melanie commented as she reached into the carton and handed Lindsay another tulip bulb to plant.

Lindsay tenderly buried the bulb in the rich soil as she replied, "How could that possibly have any bearing on Jennifer's ability to be a good mother?"

Melanie shoveled another small hole for Lindsay then continued, "You're telling me that you would allow Gus to take some thirty year old slut to his prom?"

"Oh come on Mel, that's not at all how it was. You know that."

"It doesn't matter how it was or is now, it only matters how it seems. And the fact that Jennifer, if not supported, at least, knowingly condoned her son's sexual relationship with a grown man, who has reputation like Brian's I might add, is not going to help her case any."

"But the legal age of consent in Pennsylvania sixteen," Lindsay argued as she wiped small beads of sweat from her forehead with the back of her gloved hand.

"In a custody case it's not just about legality it's also about propriety. And regardless of how things have turned out, there is not a goddamn thing that's proper about Brian Kinney."

Lindsay sighed, "That's one of the things that I've always found so charming about him."

Melanie rolled her eyes and groaned, "I know."

Lindsay pulled off her gloves and stood. She then held out her hand to Melanie to help her up and asked, "Were you, at least, able to recommend a good family attorney to Jennifer?"

"Yes, Larry took her case. He may be fat, bald, straight, male asshole but at least he knows his way around a courtroom."

"Backyard"
“Is there really a chance Jennifer could loose Molly?”

“Let’s just say this, if I were still back in Pittsburgh this case could’ve made my whole fucking career.”

“Hey guys! You’re never going to believe this!” Michael exclaimed as he hurried into the backyard with JR in one hand and a letter in the other. “Comic-Con International has invited me *me* to be a panelist. Can you believe that?”

“Wow,” Lindsay said tentatively. She had no idea what Comic-Con was.

“What, exactly, is comic..uh? Melanie asked.

“Comic-Con International. It’s only the most gigantic, awesome comic book convention in the country. If not the whole world!” He handed the letter to Lindsay.

She looked it over then replied,” Well then, I guess congratulations are in order.”

“Yeah, this family could use some good news,” Melanie added as she kissed Michael on the cheek and then took Jenny Rebecca in her arms.

**Pittsburgh**

**Kinnetik**

**Brian’s Office**

Brian returned from his client meeting with the execs from Old Pitt Beer to find Ted and Cynthia sitting on his couch. They appeared to be deep in conversation, but they fell silent as soon as Brian walked into his office.

“What’s this? Are you two planning some sort of coup?”
“Of course not Bri. You know our loyalty to you is ever lasting.” Ted answered nervously.

“Ted has an idea we’d like to run past you,” Cynthia explained.

Brian took off his suit jacket then loosened his tie before taking a seat behind his desk, “Let’s hear it.”

“Well, I don’t know if you’ve heard but Pfister Pharmaceuticals is coming out with a new erectile dysfunction medication in a couple months.”

“No. Thankfully, I have no need for wretched herbal teas or little blue pills.”

“Right. Well, Cynthia and I did a little digging and it turns out that they want to take the drug to market in kind of an out-of-the-box way.”

Cynthia sat forward on the sofa and added, “That’s right, I take kick-boxing with a woman who is a sales rep for Pfister and she told me that they want to market the drug as more of a male performance enhancer rather than a treatment for a medical condition. They’re going to be going after a younger market segment too – mid-thirties to early fifties.”

“You take kick boxing?” Brian asked with a smile, “Christ, remind me to never piss you off.”

“It’s way, way, to late for that, boss. But trust me, if I were going to take you down I would have done it long ago.”

Brian just laughed in reply then asked, “So what’s this brilliant idea of yours Theodore?”

“I was thinking, that you, or maybe we, could present the concept you developed for Remson’s Boneril campaign. I think it’s just the type of thing that Pfister is looking for.”

Brian thought about Ted’s suggestion for a moment then replied, “It’s not a bad idea, but Pfister is a Fortune 500 company. You don’t just walk into their corporate office and flash your pearly whites to
get a meeting with an organization of that size.”

“We’ve already taken care of it, “Cynthia began, “My friend from class called in a couple favors with their marketing department and she secured us a meeting on the twelfth of next month.”

“That was a little presumptuous of you,” Brian commented plainly. He wasn’t angry at Ted and Cynthia’s initiative, but he wasn’t interested in making this conversation easy for them.

“We figured that since you’ve done all the work creating that campaign already we’d just get the meeting set up for you,” Ted explained while doing his best to hold his own against Brian.

“I appreciate that Ted, but none of our clients are even a tenth of the size of Pfister. Kinnetik simply doesn’t have the type of infrastructure to service a company as big as Pfister Pharmaceuticals. You should know that.”

“We can always use subcontractors,” Cynthia suggested

“And eat into our profit margin?” Brian countered.

Ted stood and walked to Brian’s desk. “Brian, at least sleep on the idea before you say no. That’s all I ask.”

Brian didn’t respond. He just pinched the bridge of his nose.

**Pittsburgh**

**Liberty Diner**

“It’s bullshit. It’s fucking bullshit is what it is!” Justin yelled out at volume that’d compete with best of Debbie’s exclamations.

“Calm down, Justin,” Jennifer said, “There’s no need for you to get this worked up.”
“No need to get worked up? He’s trying to take Molly away from you and he’s using me and Brian as his excuse!”

It’d been hard enough for Jennifer to tell Justin that Craig’s primary claim was that her acceptance of Justin’s homosexuality is what led him to engage in a variety of promiscuous and deviant behaviors. But, it was killing her to see Justin so upset.

The worst part was that Craig was absolutely going to drag Justin and his relationship with Brian into the suit. In addition that she feared that his attorney was going to have a field day with her engagement.

“It’s not just you and Brian. You’re father has been in rare form ever since I told him that Tucker and I are getting married.”

“He’s not my father. He’s a sperm donor. That’s all.”

“Justin, please don’t talk like that,” Jennifer softly responded as she put her hand over Justin’s splinted wrist.

“Mom, I *so* cannot have you defending him right now.”

“I’m not trying to defend him. I know the way he’s treated you since you came out has been awful. I just don’t think it’s good for you to carry around all this anger you have toward him.”

Justin let out a sarcastic laugh, “What exactly am I supposed do with my anger? The last time I saw him he had me fucking arrested.”

Jennifer shook her head and took a sip of her, now lukewarm, coffee before continuing, “You’ve got a lousy dad. Maybe it’s just best if you accept it and move on.”

“Accept that he’s a homophobic bastard who’d rather see me dead than being true to myself?” Justin shot back.

“Justin.”
“Tell me Mom, does he even ever ask how I’m doing when you drop Molly off on the weekends?”

“Honey..” Jennifer didn’t know what to say. She certainly couldn’t justify Craig’s actions, or lack there of, but she knew that when Justin got this way it only led to trouble.

Justin downed the rest of his coffee, “It’s not like he even gives a shit about Molly. He gets sitters for her half the time that she’s over at his house.”

“I know honey, but Molly loves your Dad and she doesn’t want to be the one to choose between us. And I’d never make her do that.”

“No of course not,” Justin agreed. He took a breath and said calmly, “You’re right, this is about Molly and what’s best for her. I just can’t believe that he’s blaming you for my sexuality. It’s unfathomable how utterly duplicitous he is. Even before I came out he never gave any indication that he gave a damn about what I did.”

“If it’s any consolation, he did try to beat Brian to a pulp.” Jennifer offered with a heavy tone of irony in her voice.

“Just what all fit parents should have a psychotic violent streak,” Justin replied sarcastically.

**Toronto**

**Melanie and Lindsay’s House**

“We’re home!” Ben called out as he worked JR’s stroller into the front hallway. Gus rushed passed his uncle and sister and ran into the kitchen. Melanie, Lindsay and Michael were all sitting at the kitchen table. Each had a copy of Ben’s latest manuscript sitting in front of them amidst dozens of crumpled tissues.

“Mommy! Uncle Ben’s the best thrower I’ve ever seen. I bet he’s just as good as Daddy!” Gus announced before continuing, “Hey, why’s everybody crying?”

“We just finished reading your Uncle Ben’s new book,” Lindsay explained.
“It had lots of sad parts,” Melanie added.

“And it reminded us of how much we miss your cousin, Hunter” Michael finished.

Gus’s five year old eyes were suddenly filled with compassion as he asked, “The one who went up to Heaven?”

“That’s right” Michael confirmed as more tears filled his eyes.

Gus crawled up on to Michael’s lap and hugged him. ”Don’t cry Uncle Michael, Mama says that Hunter’s living with the angels now. Right Mama?”

“That’s right baby” Melanie said as she folded up her tissue and wiped her own eyes again.

Ben walked into the kitchen and handed JR to Lindsay then set the baby-bag down on the table. He looked around at each of their faces before asking, “Dare I ask what you all thought of it?”

“Aside from going through two whole boxes of tissues we thought it was brilliant,” Melanie answered.

“And so moving,” Lindsay continued.

Michael set down Gus and rose to hug Ben, “I think it’s the best thing you’ve ever written. Really Ben, It’s absolutely beautiful. I’m sure your publisher will jump at the chance to take it to print.”

Melanie got up and turned on the kitchen sink to splash some water on her face before saying,

”When the gay couple finds the hustler rummaging through their garbage for food and they offer him dinner, but the kid thinks they want to hire him... Oh my god, that scene was like a kick in the gut.”

“What I can’t get over are these statistics you put in the foreward,” Lindsay commented before reading aloud, ‘twenty percent of all homeless teens in America are gay or lesbian and of that group...
forty percent are HIV positive."

“I know, the numbers were staggering when I read them on the Department of Health and Human Services website.” Ben replied, “And despite all the efforts our community has engaged in to fight AIDS its teens and those in their early twenties who have the highest increase in the number of new HIV cases.”

Michael shook his head then said, “There’s gotta be a way that we can help. There has to be more that we can do. No kid should have to go through what…what Hunter went through. It’s no way for a child to live.”

Lindsay reached out to Michael and took his hand in hers, “You’ve already done so much. It’s because of you that Hunter was able to leave this world knowing with out a doubt that he was loved.”

“But what about all those other kids out there?” Michael asked Lindsay. He then turned to ask Ben, “What’s going to happen to those boys who came to Hunter’s funeral?”

Pittsburgh

Kinnetik

“Anyway, I thought I should talk to you before I asked Justin if he could come out to San Diego with me. I can only imagine how hard he’s taking his injury,” Michael said as Brian listened on his speaker phone.

Michael hadn’t mentioned Gus again since their argument a couple weeks before, but Michael’s words still lingered heavily in Brian’s mind. “It’s his decision, but I think it’s a good idea. It’ll take his mind of things,” Brian answered though he still didn’t know what was eating at Justin.

“Hopefully he’ll have a good time. Most people who come to these conventions are there to meet the illustrators more so than the authors. So, Rage’s fans will love it if he’s there.”

“I’m sure,” Brian said a little louder than he’d planned. He changed the subject by asking, “So, when is Mel’s Bar exam?”

“What? Do you miss me?” Michael asked.
Brian blinked his eyes and smiled before answering, “Did I say that? I barely noticed you were
gone.”

Michael laughed softly, “Right and I suppose you’re having a fabulous time hanging out at Woody’s
with Ted and Emmett all the time.”

“Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do have their moments.”

“Huh?” Michael asked

“Ask the Professor, Justin took his sister to the movies this afternoon. He should be home by six.
You can call him then.”

“Sure thing. Bye Brian.”

“Bye.” Brian hung up the phone then buzzed Cynthia.

“Yeah, Boss?”

“Get Ted.”

Brian rose and poured himself a shot of scotch then sat down on his couch. After a moment Ted
walked in.

“You wanted to see me Brian?”

“Yeah. Have a seat.”

Ted sat down next to him on the couch, “What is it?”

“It took balls to get this thing with Pfister set up.”
Ted opened his mouth to thank Brian, but he stopped him. “Do you want to interrupt me or do you want me to finish what I’m saying?”

“No, no. Go ahead Bri.”

“If, by Monday, you can present me with a plan for how we can handle the Pfister campaign without, and I repeat, without neglecting any of our other clients, then I’ll take the meeting.”

Ted stood up and said, “Oh my God, thank you Brian you won’t regret this, I promise.”

“If you fuck this up, you’ll be the one doing the regretting…from the unemployment line.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve got everything under control.”

**Pittsburgh Mills Mall**

**IMAX Theater Lobby**

“Waiting for Mom to pick us up like this reminds me of when we were kids,” Molly replied with her twelve year-old air of sophistication.

“Yeah,” Justin laughed, “Remember when she picked us up after we saw The Nutty Professor?”

Molly giggled in response,” And we kept making fart noises like the Klumps on the car ride home!”

“I’d never heard her yell at us like that.” Justin replied with a smile, “But then I made that really loud one with my hands and she couldn’t help but laugh herself.” Justin had always enjoyed going to Saturday matinees with Molly. Most of the time she was a total pest, but at the movies they’d always gotten along.

“Do you go to a lot of movies in New York?”
“Not really, they cost like ten bucks a ticket. Everything’s way expensive there.”

“But you like living there?”

“It’s the city that never sleeps,” Justin replied in an effort to evade the question. He didn’t want to think about New York right now.

Molly was quiet for a moment before she said, “Justin?”

“Yeah?”

“Even though you like boys, I still think you’re gonna go to heaven.”

Her comment came out of nowhere. He and Molly didn’t talk very often and they had never talked about his being gay. Still, he could guess where her concern for his soul had come from.

Justin reached down and gently placed his hand on her shoulder, “Molly?”

She looked up at him and replied, “Yeah Justin?”

“Is Dad good to you?” Justin asked tentatively.

Molly nodded, ”Uh huh. I mean, he buys me lots of stuff. And he lets me have a friend sleep over when I stay at his place on the weekends.”

“Then you don’t need to worry about what he says about me. Okay, squirt?” Justin said with a little smile.

Molly hugged her big brother in response.

Pittsburgh
“I’ll have a stacked turkey with lettuce, dry with a side of melon and I guess, get Justin a chili cheeseburger with fries. To go” Brian told Debbie as he sat at the counter.

“How’s Sunshine doing?” Debbie asked as she wrote down the order.

“His physical therapist said his wrist is healing nicely.”

“No I’m talking about the whole custody thing with his dad and sister. He was pretty upset when he was having breakfast here with Jennifer this morning.”

Brian shook his head in confusion.

“Shit. He hasn’t told you?”

“I guess he hasn’t gotten around to it,” Brian said quietly.

“His father is suing Jennifer for custody of Molly.”

“What?” Brian asked in angry disbelief.

“And his attorney is planning to use Justin’s relationship with you to prove that Jennifer is an unfit mother. An investigator even came in here asking questions about you during the lunch rush.”

“What did you say to him?” Brian asked as he looked down at the counter.

“I told him that you’re the best goddamn thing that has ever happened to Sunshine then I told the bastard to get the fuck off Liberty avenue and go back to his snake hole across the river where he belongs.”
Brian looked up at Debbie and slowly blinked his eyes before saying, “I can always count on you, Ma,"

“It’s the least I could do after all that shit I gave you last month. I should have known you’d come through for Michael. You always do.” She gave Brian a light smack on his cheek then turned to put in his order.

**Pittsburgh**

**Brian’s Loft**

Brian slid open the loft door to find Justin doing crunches on the floor. Brian held up the bag from the diner and said, “I’ve got dinner.”

Justin jumped up and walked over to the table then replied, “Thank God, I’m starving.”

“Shocker,” Brian replied as he set out the cartons of food. He went to the kitchen to get a couple beers and some silverware then asked, “So, when were you planning to tell me about what your father’s is up to?”

“I wasn’t keeping it from you,” Justin explained. He took a bite of the burger then continued with his mouth full, “I just didn’t want to bother you with it till I knew all the facts.”

“And what are all the facts?”

“Other than him blaming you and my mother on any and everything that’s gone wrong in my life since I was seventeen, pretty much just that Craig is a total and complete asshole.”

“I thought that had been firmly established years ago,” Brian replied with a forced laugh, “Maybe you should just accept that he is who he is and let it go.”

Justin pushed away his food and quietly said, “I’ve lost my appetite. I’m going to go take a shower.”

Brian sat at the table alone for a couple minutes before undressing and walking into the bathroom.
When he opened the door to the shower Justin handed him the bar of soap and turned so Brian could wash his back. He knew he needed to talk to Justin. Since his return to Pittsburgh Justin’s behavior had been erratic, at best, and Brian was sickened by the fact that he couldn’t read Justin. He wanted to help; he needed to, not just for Justin’s sake but for his own. Brian’s instincts were urging him to run his hand down through Justin’s crack, but he resisted. He sighed then rested his chin on Justin’s shoulder and whispered into his ear, ”I suck at talking, but I can listen.” Brian heart pounded in his chest while he waited for Justin’s reply.

Finally, Justin turned around and said, “I didn’t deserve it.”

Brian furrowed his brow and asked, “Your wrist?”

Justin shook his head, “The show. It was a set up. The only reason Calista looked me up was so she could find out if there was still something between Ethan and me. I was such a fucking fool,” He laughed at himself then continued, “I actually thought that it was my talent, my brilliance that got me discovered by a hot, New York gallery in under a year. I’m just a dime-a-dozen, starving artist like the rest those hacks at the Co-op.”

Brian draped his arms over Justin’s shoulders then rested his forehead against Justin’s. He let the hot water stream down on them for a moment before he replied, “You know that’s bullshit. You’re a fucking genius,” Brian said softly, “And thanks to your show, your bank balance is well into the five digits. So, there’s absolutely no chance of you starving now.” Brian smiled in an effort to reassure Justin.

Justin took a step back from Brian and replied, “You don’t understand, with your work everything comes so fucking easy to you. I just wanted to get the show, my first * New York * show on my own merits not because of some perverted twist of fate.”

“You’re kidding me right? You have no idea about some of the pathetic things I’ve done to get a meeting with a potential client,” Brian’s copy machine fuck with Leo Brown’s assistant came to mind, but he chose not to elaborate. He simply continued with, “So Calista got you a meeting with Pierre because she was paranoid that her queer husband still carried a torch for you. Big fucking deal. She didn’t give you the show. Pierre did. And no matter how big of an asshole he is, he’s a salesman first and foremost. He would never have given you your own exhibition if you didn’t deserve it.”

“That’s the other thing,” Justin sighed, “They way he promoted my work, nobody bought my pieces because they spoke to them or because they matched their furniture. They just bought into all the bullshit stories Pierre kept feeding them.”
Brian pulled Justin to him. He did his best to keep the feel of their erections pressing against each other from distracting him. “Give it time Justin, I have no doubt that eventually you’ll be able to show your art on your own terms.” Brian wished he could fuck Justin’s problems away. That would make all this ‘relationship’ shit a hell of a lot easier, but Justin needed to talk, and Brian would be damned before he’d let himself fail at giving Justin what he needed.

“How can you be so sure?”

Brian took a gentle hold of Justin’s chin and raised his head up so they could look into each other’s eyes, “Because I always insist on the best, and I’ve kept you around this long haven’t I?”

Justin took hold of Brian’s hand and led it down to his dick. Brian knew this was a diversionary tactic on Justin’s part, but it was the first time he’d initiated sex since his return from New York. Perhaps it meant their talk had helped, at least, a little. Brian took Justin’s cock and his own in his hands. He pressed them gently together as he began to stroke them. Justin nuzzled into curve Brian’s neck and shoulder as sucked his warm, wet skin between his teeth. He knew he’d leave a mark, but as long as Brian could hide it under his clothes so he wouldn’t mind. The steady stream of water fell on them as steam started to fill the sizable bathroom and fog up the glass shower walls. Brian worked their shafts and reveled in the feel of the closeness. Justin lifted his head and reached behind Brian’s head to pull him in for a kiss. He slowly licked Brian’s lower lip before pulling it between his own to suck on it. Brian then took charge of kiss and thrust his tongue into Justin’s mouth.

After a moment, Justin moaned, “I’m close, Brian. Make me come.”

Justin’s words electrified Brian and he sped up his pace and soon they were both shooting their hot come over his hands.

Toronto

Melanie and Lindsay’s front yard

When the cab in the driveway beeped it’s horn for the third time Michael gave JR a kiss on the crown of her head and hugged Ben then said, “Okay I’ve got dinner started in the crock pot, JR has already been bathed so unless she spits up or something she’s fine for the evening. Gus, you’re gonna be a good boy while I’m away?”

“Yeah Uncle Michael,” Gus replied as he wrapped his arms around Michael’s leg and hugged his
"If you guys need anything just call me. You’ve got my cell, the number to the hotel and the convention center."

Lindsay smiled and said, “Yes but I’m pretty sure we can manage. It’s only two days.”

Melanie shook her head and laughed, “And we have been at this parenting thing for a while.”

“Right Right, of course,” Michael replied then he kissed Melanie on the cheek. He then waved to JR and said, “Bye bye honey bun.”

Melanie helped JR wave back and said, “Bye dad.”

Michael headed to the cab as Ben called out, “We’ll pick you up at the airport on Monday night.”

**Pittsburgh**

**Ted’s condo**

“I’d love to go to Woody’s with you Em, but I’ve got to get this plan ready for Brian.

Emmett leaned his head back over the edge of the couch and pleaded, “But it’s Friday night, and it’s the first weekend in months that I haven’t had a wedding or a retirement party to throw.”

Ted looked up over the top of his laptop and replied, “If I could I would, but Brian was adamant that this had to be ready by Monday morning sharp. Why don’t you go on and go, you’re looking pretty hot. I’m sure you’ll meet someone in no time.”

Emmett sighed, “Don’t want to meet just a someone, I’m so tired of all the random hotties. You’ve got Blake, Michael’s got Ben even Brian Kinney found the love of his life. Where’s my Mr. Right?”

Ted shut his computer and went over to the couch to sit next to Emmett. “You know better than
anyone how long I asked myself that question. All I can say is when the timing is right, it’ll happen for you. I’m sure of it.”

“Thanks Teddy.” Emmett replied as Ted hugged him.

San Diego

Comic-Con International

"You know, after convincing Brian to take me to Meat Hook that time, I really thought I'd seen everything. But this...this place is unbelievable." Justin said, as he showed the guard the badge that hung on his lanyard and passed through the exhibitor's entrance of the convention hall.

"Oh, you haven't seen anything yet," Michael replied, as he led Justin over to the 'mature-reader titles' section of the hall, "Just wait till the cos-players get here."

"The what?"

"Cos-players, fans who dress up in completely authentic costumes of their favorite characters. Some people spend literally thousands of dollars to make sure even the smallest details are accurate."

"It’s like comic book fans have a subculture all their own." Justin continued as he set backpack down on the table at the Rage booth.

“A fact I’m thankful for every time I do the books at the Red Cape.”

The hall was buzzing with comic authors and artists, each setting up their spaces in anticipation of this morning's autograph session. The hall was absolutely enormous and was decorated with larger-than-life-sized figures of Superman, Wolverine, Daredevil and a variety of other comic book heroes that Justin didn’t recognize. There were literally hundreds of rows of exhibitor booths, ranging from the mainstream giants from Marvel and DC to the more avant-garde, underground comics like Harvey Pekar’s American Splendor.

When Justin agreed to come out to California, Michael had assured him that it wouldn't be a lot of work. They’d just sit behind a table all day and sell comics, the new Rage, Zephyr, and JT action figures they’d had manufactured, and a modest selection of panels Justin had drawn for various back
issues. The truth was, with everything that had happened over the past few weeks, Justin welcomed the escape from real life. He figured the same was true for Michael, but he was concerned that Michael didn’t appear to be as excited as one would think he’d be to be an exhibitor at the nation’s largest and most prestigious comic book convention.

“Are you nervous about doing the panel discussion this afternoon?” he asked Michael.

“Naw, I’m one of ten speakers and I only have to answer questions. If I had to give a speech that’d be totally different, but I think I’ll be okay.”

“What about you?” Michael asked in an effort to volley the attention off of him. “Are you sure you’re going to be alright signing autographs? You won’t get too tired?”

“I can manage,” Justin replied as he started setting the small plastic Rage dolls on the table. There were some advantages to being ambidextrous, and being able to sign his name with either hand was one of them.

Justin could feel the awkward silence growing between them. The question of when and how they were going to finish the next issue of Rage was still lingering, and he knew it needed to be discussed. He was sure they’d be asked by the people who came to the booth when the next issue would be available. Still, he didn’t want to be the one to bring it up because he didn’t know what he’d say. What was stranger, though, was the fact that Michael hadn’t even mentioned the next issue once since they’d arrived in San Diego.

“Excuse me, are you Michael Novotny and Justin Taylor?” A short unassuming man in his early fifties asked he approached the booth.

“Uh yeah, that’s us,” Michael replied, as he took a seat behind the table with Justin.

“My name is Morgan Teel. I’m the Vice President of Development and Property Acquisitions for Max Comics. Here’s my card. If you don’t already have plans, I’d like to invite the two of you out for a drink this evening. I have a proposition that I’d like to discuss with you.”
Debbie pulled the pencil from behind her ear, tapped it on her pad and asked, "What'll it be, boys?"

"It's a working lunch, Deb." Emmett began. "I'll just have a couple of lemon bars and a cup of coffee."

"Ham and cheese on marble rye and a glass of OJ, got it." Deb replied, as she scribbled her version of the order on her notepad. She then turned to Darren and asked, "What about you, sweetie?"

"A sandwich sounds great, but Shanda will be really mad at me if she can't get into the new black, strapless number I bought for her performance this weekend. Can you just bring me a cup of hot tea?"

Debbie just gave Darren a blank stare, so Emmett offered, "Why don't you just bring Darren something that won't make Shanda burst her seams come show time."

"Sure thing, baby," Debbie replied before popping her gum and turning away. "Your orders will be out in a just a few."

Emmett opened his planner and began, "So, how are we coming along with the Lowenstein Bar Mitzvah?"

Darren checked his notes and replied, "We've got the DJ scheduled and Dawson 's Bakery can make the four 6-foot submarine sandwich buns for us. But, God help me, I hope no one I know will be there to see that I've made giant hoagies!"

"Perish the thought," Emmett giggled in reply.
"Oh, and I talked to the Rabbi's assistant. He said he could let us into the Temple hall at three-thirty to set up."

"Excellent," Emmett said, as he crossed the Bar Mitzvah off his to do list. "Now, did you get the guest list from Mayor Deekin's wife for their anniversary party?"

"Yes! And you'll never guess who is coming," Darren said as he handed the list to Emmett.

"Oh. My. God. The Governor and his wife!"

"Yep, and several prominent members of his staff." Darren said, as he reached over and pointed out some names on the paper.

"Darren, do you know what this could mean for our little catering business?"

Darren snapped his fingers over his head and answered, "Goodbye Bar Mitzvah, hello Inaugural Ball!"

Both men leaned across the table and gave each other a hug as they squealed with delight.

In an effort to regain his composure, Emmett patted his neck with his napkin then said, "What would the people in Hazlehurst say if they knew I was hobnobbing with political bigwigs here in the city? Goodness! So, what else do we have?"

"Well, I got a call this morning for another birthday party."

"Please don’t let it be another twenty-five thousand dollar affair for a seven year old! I mean, really, the money is fabulous, but even I have my limits when it comes to decadence."

"No, no. It's for an adult. It’s that football player," Darren snapped his fingers and closed his eyes as he tried to remember the name," Oh, you know him, the one who出了 himself after your Queer Guy segment."
“Drew...Bbboy’d? Emmett stuttered in response.

“Yes that’s him. He left a really strange message on the voicemail too. He specifically asked for you and he said to tell you he's turned twenty-one.”

San Diego

Holiday Inn Lounge

"I'm flattered Mr. Teel," Justin indicated to Michael then continued, "We both are, but what makes you think that Rage has the kind of mass appeal that'll make it sellable in places like Topeka?" Justin had heard all this before only to have the rug pulled out from under him. This time, he knew to be much more cautious.

"At MAX Comics we're not interested in appealing to the masses. We're looking for strong, dedicated niche markets to tap into and we feel that Rage has exactly what it needs to build and carry a very loyal fan base."

"And the executives at your corporate office don't think your division would be taking too much of a risk by publishing a gay comic?" Justin questioned.

"We tried it once before, before the re-organization, and they didn't have a problem with it then. You might remember The Rawhide Kid?"

Michael grimaced. He knew this comic well. The Rawhide Kid debuted right after his twenty-ninth birthday as one of the flagship characters under Marvel Comics new 'mature-reader/explicit content' label, MAX. Michael was elated when he heard the news, even though he was more into superhero comics than western comics. To have an out gay gun-slinger sounded like an awesome idea. That is, until he read the first issue. The Rawhide Kid was a foppish character who played into every homophobic, gay stereotype. The comic was full of kitsch and double-entendre and Michael hated it.

"Yeah, it only lasted eight issues." Michael replied flatly.

"Because straight guys created a gay character for straights. It was a huge mistake. One we wouldn't be making with Rage. I know how important the gay demographic is and Rage can help us tap into it. And even though he'd be under the MAX imprint he'd still be part of the Marvel Universe which
means Rage and Zephyr could keep the streets of Gayopolis safe with the occasional help from someone like Daredevil or perhaps the Fantastic Four."

Justin could see that this comment definitely caught Michael's attention. So he felt the need to bring the conversation back down to earth, "I appreciate everything you're saying, but Rage is an independent comic. We created him, so we know how raw and edgy he needs his world to be. I just don't see how he could survive in the giant corporate universe at Marvel."

"But that doesn't mean that we won't talk about and give it serious consideration," Michael broke in.

"Of course, no pressure. I'm just at Comic-con this weekend for a few meet-and-greets. You two talk it over and if you feel like Rage is ready to fight crime along side Spider-Man and Captain America then give me a call."

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**Pittsburgh**

**Kinnetik**

**Conference Room**

“Okay, we just need to be methodical and organized. These Gantt charts will help us do that. It's the whole key to being able to bring Pfister on while still being able to take care of they rest of our clients at the same level of service they’re accustomed to receiving.” Ted stated matter-of-factly.

Brian sat back in his chair. He was truly impressed with Ted’s plan, though he wasn’t quite ready to let on. “What about the strain the extra work will put on our resources?”

“Not a problem at all Bri,” Ted began as he turned to the next graph, “Cynthia was able to confirm that Pfister spends an average of 150 million dollars to bring a new drug to market. And that’s just their marketing budget. The whole process, from R&D to release, usually tops a billion. With that kind of cash insurgence we’ll have more than enough to conservatively increase staff so we can handle the extra work.”

“They’re not going to write a check of that size on the front end.” At this point Brian was just playing with Ted. He knew full well that Ted had every detail well thought out.
“No no, of course not, but we should be able to negotiate a payment schedule that’ll allow us to beef up our resources.” Ted’s heart was pounding. He just wanted Brian to say yes so they could get the ball rolling.

Brian knew that Cynthia and her partner in crime had secured an appointment with Pfister’s marketing executives for the twelfth of next month, but as per Brian’s style, he pretended to have forgotten that little detail, “When’s this meeting again?”

“A month from today actually, at ten o’clock sharp,” Ted replied, before swallowing hard.

Brian took a long drink of his water then rose from the table. “Well, you should tell the art department to get everything ready. There’s no room for any fuck ups with this one.”

“So you’re giving me the green light?” Ted needed to be sure he was hearing Brian correctly.

Brian rested his hand on Ted’s shoulder and smiled, “You’ve got the green light. Good work, Theodore.”

Toronto
Melanie and Lindsay's Home
Kitchen

"Uhhggg!" Melanie screeched as she threw one of her law texts at the back door, "The Canadian judicial system is so fucked!"

Ben, who was standing at the counter blending his energy shake turned and asked, "Studies not going so well?"

"I'm just so frustrated. I don't only have to get a clear working knowledge of Canada's federal, provincial, and municipal laws I also have to un-learn US laws so I wont confuse them."

"Going to your bar exam study group isn't helping?" Ben asked as he took a seat next to Melanie at
the kitchen table.

"Oh yeah, studying with a bunch of arrogant twenty-four year olds who've never seen the inside of a court room is a big help."

Ben laughed, "I can imagine. I don't know if I'd be much help but maybe I could quiz you?"

"Thanks, but I'm at the point where I just have to get this on my own. The exam is in just over a month and I'm if not ready for it then I'll have to wait another six months to take it."

"I'm sure you'll be ready. I wish my students studied as much as you've been."

"Yeah," Melanie responded quietly.

"You don't sound convinced."

Mel took a sip of her coffee then responded, "It's just that back in Pittsburgh I'd kind of made a name for myself. I got to pick and choose the cases I wanted to take on and having me represent a client meant something. Now, I'm starting all over. I'll have no clout, no seniority and I'll be competing with attorneys over a decade younger than me. You realize at the firm I'm clerking at I'm older than my direct supervisor? I was trying cases when he still had pimples and braces. I'd never tell Lindsay this, but sometimes I think I've gotten in way over my head."

Ben gave Melanie a sympathetic smile and gave her shoulder a little squeeze.

**Pittsburgh**

**Drew Boyd’s Condo**

“Oh. My. God. Ahhhhh!” Emmett exclaimed as he shot onto Drew’s well defined, six-pack abs.

Drew collapsed onto Emmett then nuzzled into his neck and said, “I’ve missed this.”
“I thought you said you’d sowed all your gay wild oats?”

“No. I mean. I’ve missed you,” Drew pulled himself up so he could look directly at Emmett, “I’ve missed being with *you*.”

Emmett caressed the side of Drew’s cheek, ”Aw, Baby. You don’t know how many times I wished it was you calling whenever my phone rang. But you’re sure? You’re sure that I’m enough, because, trust me, hot guys are never going to stop throwing themselves at you.”

Drew rose from the couch and offered his hand out to Emmett to pull him to his feet. He took Emmett’s face in his hands and replied, “Back in January, when I was standing on the podium getting named Super Bowl MVP all I could think is how I’d worked my whole life for that moment, but it didn’t mean anything because you weren’t there to share it with me. No hot, horny fag could ever make up for us not being together."

“You really mean it?”

“I swear it on my passing arm,” Drew smiled.

“Well then, I think we should cut your birthday cake. And don’t worry I know spring training is just around the corner so I used apple sauce instead of butter or shortening. It’s not only delicious -- it’s low in fat and calories.”

Drew followed Emmett to the kitchen and said, “You know, it’s not really my birthday.”

Emmett shook his head then looked into Drew’s eyes and answered, “Oh honey, yes it is. Yes. It. Is.”

**San Diego International Airport**

**Food Court**

Justin and Michael sat and ate lunch in silence as they waited for their respective flights. They’d both agreed to get through the convention and wait to discuss Morgan Teel’s offer to buy Rage until after
they got back to Pittsburgh and Toronto. Justin was completely ambivalent about the proposal. On the one hand, he knew that even before he injured his wrist, all of the highly detailed work it took to draw Rage was taking a toll on him. He simply didn't have the dexterity to keep it up for much longer. As it was, they'd only been able to get out one issue of Rage since Justin had moved.

But at least Rage was his, well, his and Michael's. They didn't always agree on the plot lines, but they had never once argued about how to promote Rage. Sales weren't great, but they were steady and they had a healthy list of regular subscribers to their e-commerce website. If they sold Rage they wouldn't just loose control over how it was marketed, the way his paintings were at Pierre 's gallery, the comic wouldn't even be theirs anymore. Other artists and authors would be creating Rage and that's only if MAX decided to keep Rage going as a regular series. If they sold Rage outright, then he could end up sitting in a file cabinet somewhere among other litany of super-heroes who had reached an untimely end.

What Justin really couldn't figure out was why Michael seemed so open to the idea of giving up Rage. It's the last thing Justin thought Michael would ever want to do. “So tomorrow, I'll call and we’ll talk about Rage?”

“Yeah, I’ve got some articles I can email you. They’re all about different deals that Marvel and DC have made with independent comic creators. Maybe they could help us decide how to handle it,”

Michael said excitedly.

Justin didn’t want to wait till tomorrow to find out what Michael was thinking so he said, “You seem like you really want to do it. Sell Rage, I mean.”

Michael took a bite of his sandwich then replied as he chewed, “It’s not that I *want* to sell it. It’s just that it’s such a huge opportunity. Think of everything it’d mean.”

“What? That Rage will enter the pantheon of Marvel’s super-heroes?” Justin asked a bit more caustically that he meant too.

“No, can you imagine the freedom we’d have with the kind of money we could make?”

This comment took Justin by surprise. Michael wanting to do this so he could get rich pissed him off, “You’re the last person I thought would ever sell out,” Justin said while making no effort to hide his anger.
Michael shook his head, “God, I thought you knew me better than that, Justin. I don’t want the money for me. And honestly, I don’t want to lose Rage, but I’ve read that comic book creators can make fortunes by selling to the big publishers. With that kind of money, I could really do something, you know, to help.”

“Help who?” Justin asked. He began to feel guilty for his presumption.

Michael sighed then replied softly, “You know, not all kids are lucky as you were. They don’t all have people in their lives like Brian or my Mom when they get kicked out of the house.”

Pittsburgh

Debbie, Carl and Emmett’s House

“Whatcha doin?” Debbie asked as she walked into the kitchen carrying a bag of groceries.

Carl looked up from Emmett’s laptop and said, “I just got an email from Vicky. Her doctor says she’s too close to her due date to fly out for my retirement party. It’s a shame. I really wanted you to meet each other.”

Deb set the bag down on the counter and then sat down in Carl’s lap. “Well, maybe we could take a trip out to Salt Lake to see your daughter after the baby’s born?”

“You could take off that much time from the diner?”

“Honey, if you knew how much vacation time I’ve racked up over the years you’d shit a brick.”

“In that case, maybe we could go down to San Antonio to see Carl Jr. too.”

“That is a fantastic idea.” Debbie kissed Carl on the cheek then continued, “Especially since that asshole in the White House could ship him back out to the desert at any time.”

“I don’t even want to think about that. Thank God Victoria didn’t live to see our boy go off to war. There’s no way she could have handled that.”
“The military is one organization that I’m glad discriminates against gays. Even with that idiotic ‘don’t ask don’t tell’ policy there’s no way Michael or any of the other boys could get sent off to that ridiculous, mistake of a war.”

Carl kissed Debbie lightly on the lips and rubbed her back. He didn’t always agree with her politics, but her devotion to her family and friends was one of the things he loved most about her.

Just then, Emmett came waltzing through the front door while humming to himself.

“Well look what the cat dragged in,” Carl said happily.

“We were beginning to think you were never coming back.”

“Has it been that long?” Emmett asked coyly as he joined Deb and Carl at the table.

“Four days,” Carl commented

“I guess time just stops when I’m with my Drewsie.” Emmett sighed as he propped his elbow on the table and rested his chin on his hand.

“How’s he look?” Carl asked.

Deb turned and glared at him then said, “Holy fuck, it really is contagious. Honey, you really need to start hanging out with some of your straight friends.”

Carl chuckled uncomfortably. “No, uh…Drew suffered a pretty serious concussion at the end of last season. Is he going to be ready to take the field again?”

“Well, he says he’s in the best shape of his life. And after the last few days I totally agree with him. He just kept going and going-“
Carl held up his hands and said, “I get the picture. Well, tell him we’re all rooting for him.”

**Pittsburgh**

**Brian's Loft**

“What do you think we should do?” Justin asked as he pressed his palms to Brian's. They sat on the couch together and worked on the resistance exercises that Justin's physical therapist had prescribed.

“I think you and Michael should discuss it some more then do what you both feel is best,” Brian replied as he pushed harder on Justin's finger tips while being careful not to hyperextend them.

“But, don't you at least have an opinion about whether or not we should sell Rage?”

Brian had the feeling Justin was trying to get him to tell him to stop doing the comic, for the sake of his hand if nothing else. But Brian knew if Justin wanted out then it had to be his decision. "The only thing I'd say is, before you meet with them again get yourselves a damned good intellectual property attorney."

Justin sat back and shook out his hands. His wrist was feeling better than it had in weeks, but he still didn't feel ready to pick up a paint brush. He looked at Brian who had a plain, but open, expression on his face. Sitting with Brian in the loft felt so damned good. And at this point just the thought of the comic or New York irritated Justin. It was as if everything he’d worked so hard for was slipping through his fingers.

He leaned forward and rubbed his nose against Brian's and then looked up at him under heavy eyelids. Brian knew that look. He knew exactly what Justin was asking for. Justin had learned the hard way that there was no point in using words when he wanted this. Brian would swiftly rebuff him and make him pay for even suggesting it. And wanting it was never enough of a reason for Brian to acquiesce. Justin wasn't sure how, but Brian always seemed to know when it wasn't about want, but about need.

Brian kept his gaze fixed on Justin and curled his lips into a slight smile as he raised his arms so Justin could pull off his shirt. Then, Brian lifted his hips and pulled off his jeans before standing and walking naked to the bed.

Justin followed, but his breath caught in his throat when he saw Brian lay down on his stomach. He
undressed in silence, but put his Velcro wrist brace back on to avoid accidentally re-injuring himself. He knew Brian wouldn’t look back at him as he straddled his thighs and started kneading his ass. Justin figured that making eye contact while he was topping him was just too intense for Brian. It didn’t bother Justin really, though he did wish he could see Brian’s face when he made him come.

Justin leaned forward and draped his body over Brian’s as he traced the outline of his shoulder blades with his tongue. The sensation caused Brain to shiver just the slightest bit but he was able to bite back any sound that might try to make its way out of his mouth. He shifted slightly and situated his arms that he’d folded beneath his pillow. The weight of Justin’s body on him comforted him and he wondered, just for a split second, why he only allowed this to happen on the rarest of occasions. Most of all, he was irritated by his own anticipation for feel of having Justin inside of him. Brian was nearly overcome by his craving for the feel of Justin’s cock in his ass.

Justin’s erection was pressing against Brian’s crack and Brian opened his legs just the tiniest bit. It was as close as Brian would come to telling Justin to get on with it. Justin felt him move beneath him so he drew back and repositioned himself so he could begin to lick and tease the soft place behind Brian’s balls. At this move, he was able to evoke a moan from Brian. Justin considered this a great success so early in their lovemaking because although Brian was generous with the lusty guttural noises he made while receiving a blowjob, he barely ever made a sound when Justin fucked him. He then slid his tongue up the length of Brian’s crack, stopping for a moment to linger at his opening. He let some spit collect between his lips before kissing Brian’s hole and lapping his saliva again. He had to keep from chuckling when Brian reached down and handed Justin the lube and condom. For a master of foreplay he wasn’t much for it when Justin was running the show. Tonight though, he was just going to have to wait because Justin was fully intent on taking his time. He reached up and lightly dragged his fingernails over Brian’s ass cheeks before burrowing down further between his thighs. He hungrily licked at Brian’s sac before sucking on each of his balls. When Brian spread his legs farther apart Justin knew he was reaching the limit of his patience so he decided it was time to give him what he’d been waiting for.

Brian’s eyes rolled back in his head as he felt Justin’s fingers enter him. It felt foreign, yet delicious, and Brian did his best to relax and open himself to Justin’s ministrations. He winced when the tip of Justin’s dick pressed into him and he let the sensation of that nearly forgotten burn wash over him. His mouth must’ve betrayed him because he felt Justin lay his hand on his back as he heard him say, “It’s okay. Let me know when you’re ready for more.” The vulnerability of the moment made Brian want to stop this and take back control, but he remembered he was doing this for Justin so he just pushed back to take more of Justin’s cock into him.

Justin began to slowly move his hips backward and forward as he bent over and rested his left hand on the bed just below Brian’s under arm. He kept his right arm tucked up on his own chest so he wouldn’t accidentally put his weight on his wrist. He was intoxicated by the feel of Brian’s tight ass surrounding his cock and the power he felt in the moment. He needed this. He needed to feel like he was in control of what was happening to him. He needed to be the one in charge. He pumped into Brian a few more times then pulled out so they could change positions.
Brian cursed himself for groaning at the sudden loss, but he quickly realized that Justin wanted him to move up. And soon he was grateful that his cock was no longer trapped against the mattress and left unattended. Brian was now on his hands and knees and he was startled when Justin drove full into him and began pounding away at a fevered pace. Brian drew his right hand up and started working his leaking cock. He gripped his dick and gave it long, hard strokes and just as he felt his climax begin to take over Justin cried out and collapsed onto him.

They both fell onto the bed in a breathless heap. Justin slid off Brian as he turned to take Justin in his arms. He kissed the top of Justin’s head and said with a lazy smile, “Whoever taught you how to do that deserves a medal.” Justin chuckled then playfully bit at Brian’s shoulder in response.

Pittsburgh

Kinnetik

Brian's Office

Ted pointed to the centerfold of Maxim Magazine that was spread out on Brian's coffee table. It was Liberty Air's new ad; the one Brian had come up with at the last minute before going to print. Each section featured a scantily clad, flight attendant leaning in the doorway of an airplane. He read the copy off each page, "Are you coming or going, or coming then going, or coming and staying? Seriously Brian, how do you come up with this stuff, really?" Ted laughed.

"Ted?" Brian pointed to the spreadsheets laid out before them, "My finances? Can we please finish this before you tell me what a genius I am?"

"Okay. Well with all the charitable contributions you made last year your tax return was sizable so I used that to pay off the rest of Gus's tuition."

"Tax write-offs, Ted. They're called tax write-offs, *not* charitable contributions."

Ted chose to ignore Brian's semantics and continued, "And now that Lindsay's working that helps ease things up a bit. You've also got your commissions from Liberty Air and the renewals from Eyeconic Optics and Old Pitt and Babylon is finally starting to turn a profit again so you have some breathing room now. At the very least, you have more money coming in than going out."

"Good. That news makes me feel like going shopping." Brian replied. "I should get some new shoes. I never could get this pair of Gucci's to stretch out enough."
"I don't suppose there's any point in trying to talk to you about Britin again?"

Brian's glare answered Ted's question.

"Right. Then, I think that's everything till next month. If things go well with Pfister maybe then we can discuss re-opening your Armani account."

"Gee thanks! And if I get all A's on my report card can I get that shiny new bike I've been dreaming about?" Brian said as he stood and crossed back over to his desk and started shuffling through some papers.

"Point taken. It's your money; do with it what you'd like. I'm just your humble financial advisor. What do I know?" Ted replied sarcastically. As he headed out of the office he bumped into Jennifer who was just walking in.

"Oh, hi Ted."

"Hey Jennifer."

"Like the suit."

Ted straightened his tie as he replied, "Well thank you," before leaving the room.

"Jennifer. Have a seat." Brian said as he rose from the edge of his desk where he was perched. "Can I get you a drink? Scotch? Gin and tonic?"

Jennifer looked at her watch. It was just barely noon. "I really shouldn't, but after the morning I've had...I'll have whatever you're having."

Brian smiled and began to pour two neat glasses of Johnny Walker Black.
"This family I was showing houses to had four kids under the age of eight. They would not quit fighting with each other. If you and Justin ever decide to have children take my advice and do it like I did. Have them nine years apart."

Brian choked back a laugh as he handed her the glass. "I don't think you need to worry about being called Grandma anytime soon." He could see the slightest glint of disappointment in her face so Brian decided to lighten the mood by finishing with, "We use protection."

Jennifer rolled her eyes at his comment then asked, "So why did you ask me to stop by?"

Brian took a drink then scratched the bridge of his nose with this thumbnail.

"Is something wrong with Justin?"

"No. He's doing...as well as can be expected. I want talk to you about this thing with your ex. I hear his attorney is planning to drag our names through the mud?"

"I'm so sorry about all this Brian. If he were just trying to get out of paying alimony I'd tell him to keep his goddamn money but he wants Molly and-"

"-I know. And you should fight him." Brian paused for a moment before continuing, "Look, I won't make apologies for who I am-"

"-And I'd never ask you to."

Brian closed his eyes for a second. Now he knew where Justin got his constant need to interrupt from. "What I'm trying to say is, I know I don't always use the best judgment. And no matter how you slice it, most people would believe how I chose to behave with Justin, back when he was still in high school, was irresponsible. But, I'm not going to let Justin's father use me as weapon without helping you find some artillery of your own. So, I've hired a private investigator. Everyone, even pillars of the community like your ex-husband, have things about themselves they don't want made public knowledge."

"Brian you don't-"
"Don't argue with me on this Jennifer. If this custody battle is going to get as ugly as I think it is, you're going to need all the help you can get. Besides, we're family. Let me do this."

Jennifer fought back her tears as she rose and held Brian in a tight embrace. Brian hesitated for just the slightest moment then returned the hug.

Toronto

Melanie and Lindsay's House

Lindsay sloughed off her overcoat and began to hang it on the rack by the front door when Melanie snaked her arms around Lindsay's waist.

"Ben's and Michael’s flight took off on time?" Melanie purred into Lindsay's ear.

Lindsay turned in Melanie's arms to face her and draped her arms over Mel's shoulders, "Yep. They’ll get to Pittsburgh just in time to make it to Carl's party."

Melanie nuzzled under Lindsay's chin and began kissing her neck then asked, "Do you hear that?"

"What?"

"Silence. JR is down for her nap and Gus is playing at Jake's house."

They smiled at each other then began to furiously unbutton each other's blouses as they made their way over to the sofa. Just as Lindsay took Melanie's face in her hands to pull her in for kiss a loud, growling engine noise stopped them in their tracks.

"It couldn't be?" Melanie said with astonishment.

"It's not possible, is it?" Lindsay replied with a hopeful smile.

"Well, I did send our change of address card to an old PO Box of her's."
They each pulled their shirts closed and rushed out to the front yard just in time to see Leda pull off her motorcycle helmet and shake her hair loose. When she saw Mel and Lindsay standing on the lawn she called out, "Well, how the hell are my two favorite dykes?"

**Pittsburgh**

**Elks Lodge**

"Here you go lamb chop." Ted said as he pulled out a chair at the round table near the front of the banquet hall for Blake.

"Thanks," Blake quietly replied as he took a seat and helped Ted scoot him forward to the table. Blake had been clean for years. Still, the idea of spending the evening in a room full of cops had him on edge. He looked around the hall. The head table was empty but the room was starting to fill with uniformed police officers and their dates. "Oh look, there's Brian and Justin." Blake pointed to the entry way and Ted sat up a little and waved them over to the table.

Brian crossed the room with a cigarette in one hand and his other arm slung over Justin's shoulders. Their promenade garnered more than a few stares and whispers. When they passed one of the tables that had filled Brian heard one of the cops say, "Jesus, they buzz around poor Carl wherever he goes, like a bunch of flies." Another officer answered, "I guess it's the price for working at the pink precinct as long as Carl did."

Brian whipped his head around when he heard the comment and glared at the cop as Justin wrapped his arm around Brian's waist and led him over to where Ted and Blake were sitting.

"I've never seen so many badge-wearing breeders with bullets before," Justin said with disdain as he took a seat.

Brian surveyed the room and his lips curled into a smile, "Trust me Sunshine, they're not all breeders."

Justin shook his head and laughed as Ted asked," Jesus Brian. Is there anyone you *haven't*
"Well..." Brian responded as he gave Blake a slow once over.

"Don't you even think about it Brian Kinney. Keep your hands and your dick off of my boyfriend," Ted replied in a flustered tone.

"I think Brian's just kidding around, Ted." Blake suggested with a smile as he patted Ted on the back.

Justin added with a chuckle, "And if he's not Blake, I'll make sure you go on our 'do not fuck' list, just for good measure."

Brian nodded as he leaned back in his chair and ran his fingers through Justin's hair, "It is a shame though. We all know what an affinity I have for blonds."

**Toronto**

**Mel and Lindsay's House**

"You girls really have got yourself a nice place here," Leda said as she looked out at the back yard through the window of the sunroom.

"Thanks, but we're just renting. Once Melanie is licensed we're thinking about looking for a place closer to Gus's school. When we're both working full time the drive is going to be a nightmare."

At that moment Gus tore through the room with his friend and shot out the back door. Lindsay called out, "Don't throw the ball near the windows boys!"

Leda laughed, "I can't believe how big your rug rat has gotten. And Mel, having a pup of your own? I didn't know you had it in ya' girl."

Mel poured Leda another glass of wine and replied, "Neither did I, but I'll tell you, carrying JR for nine months and giving birth to her, it was an amazing experience."
"Sounds great, but I think I'll leave the baby making to Cheyenne."

"Who?" Melanie and Lindsay asked in unison.

"Well shit, I let the cat out of the bag. My girl is freshening up over at the Motel 6. I was gonna wait till she got here to tell ya' but what the hell," Leda stood up and raised her glass, "Yours truly is here in Toronto to get herself hitched."

"Oh my god!" Lindsay exclaimed. She and Melanie both leapt up and hugged Leda. Melanie kissed her and said, "Congratulations. Cheyenne is one lucky lady."

Leda returned the kiss and replied sincerely, "Thanks babe."

As they sat back down Lindsay said happily, "Okay, I want details. Tell us all about her."

Leda leaned forward on her chair, rested her elbow on her knees, and began her story in a sultry tone, "We met last summer at the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally. I was just hanging out on Main Street watching all the hogs roll into town when there she was - hair black as midnight, skin as brown as molasses, wearing a leather vest and chaps and riding just about the sweetest Harley I've ever seen. That's all it took, girls. It was love at first sight. As soon as her kick-stand hit the asphalt I walked up, pulled her off her bike, and kissed her like only I could. We haven't spent a day apart since."

"And you two came to Canada to get married?" Lindsay asked with astonishment. This news was almost as surprising as Brian and Justin's engagement had been.

"Hey, I'm as shocked as you about the whole thing. And it's not like she's some kinda Susie-homemaker trying to put the ole ball and chain on me. Cheyenne is full blooded Cree Indian. She even grew up on one of those reservations and let me tell you, she is as wild as a coyote. But one night, we're staying in this little dump of a motel over in Jackson Hole when one of those diamond commercials came on the TV. You know the ones?"

Melanie and Lindsay nodded excitedly. They were hanging on Leda's every word.

"Well, I don't know what came over me," Leda began before getting up to re-enact her story, "I just
dropped to my knee, held out my hands to her and said, "Marry me, darling."

Mel and Lindsay looked at each other and, once again, replied in unison, "Awww."

**Pittsburgh**

**Elks Lodge**

Emmett and Drew caused quite a stir when they first arrived. They were stuck at the entrance of the dining hall for almost twenty minutes as Drew signed autographs for nearly three dozen cops. It wasn't till Debbie arrived with Carl, Ben and Michael that things broke up. "Leave him be boys," she scolded with a haughty tone, "I'm sure Mr. Boyd will sign all the autographs you want *after* Carl's dinner."

When Carl stood to take the podium he looked over at Debbie who was sitting at the head table along with Michael, Ben, the new Chief of Police and the Deputy Mayor. Carl cleared his throat and took a drink of water before beginning his speech. "I'm not really one for public speaking, but I do have some people I want to thank," Carl took a deep breath then continued, "First, my late wife Victoria. She was built to be a policeman's wife. She never complained about all the night shifts and weekends I worked, even though I know it couldn't have been easy for her when I was out walking the beat over at the eleventh precinct."

This comment elicited hoots and hollers from various cops in attendance from the eleventh precinct. Carl waved to them then continued, "Also my daughter Vicky and my boy Carl Jr. who couldn't be here tonight. Those two are just about the best kids a father could ask for. You know though, I never would've made it through these last few years without my new lady love, Debbie." He turned and smiled at her. She blew him a kiss in response. "I am so lucky to have you, our son Michael and his husband Ben in my life.

The audience gave polite, though not enthusiastic, applause at Carl's acknowledgment. But, Michael was overcome. He leaned over to Ben and whispered, "Did you hear that Ben? He called me his son." Then, he looked over to Brian and beamed at him.

Brian knew exactly what Carl's words meant to Michael. He smiled, raised his bottle of beer up to Michael and thought to himself, *good for you Mikey. Good for you.*

**Pittsburgh**

**Allegheny County Courthouse**
Justin and Jennifer were standing in the hallway outside the courtroom with Larry Jacobs when Brian walked up.

"Hey," Justin said quietly. He was exhausted from the morning proceedings where Craig spoke about what a loving, caring father he was and how he wanted nothing more than for both his children to lead happy and healthy lives. Justin was certain that Brian would have bruises on his arm from where Justin had dug his fingers into him to keep from standing up and calling Craig a lying hypocrite.

"Hey," Brian replied. He tried to give Justin a reassuring smile as he opened the door so they could all file into the court room.

After they took their seats, Larry turned around to ask Brian, "Were you able to get your schedule cleared for the week?"

"Yes," Brian replied flatly though he'd have preferred to be any where than in this court room.

"Good," Larry replied. "Craig's attorney is going to try to paint you as some sort of predator who corrupted his son. We need to establish that you and Justin are committed, loving partners."

"I got that the first dozen times you told me, Larry," Brian quipped.

"Thank you for doing this, Brian," Jennifer cut in with a weak smile.

"Thank me when you beat the bastard." Brian sighed.

"All rise. Allegheny Superior Court case number #FD00-215880 Taylor versus Taylor is now in session. The honorable William T. Stone, presiding," the bailiff called out.

Judge Stone entered the room, sat down, and struck his gavel against the bench. "Mr. Taylor will you please resume your seat on the witness stand. And remember, you're still under oath."
He took his seat as his attorney rose and stood between Jennifer and Craig. "Mr. Taylor, would you say that your ex-wife has provided your daughter, Molly with a stable and loving home life over the past five years?"

"Yes. yes I would."

"Then why, after all this time, are you just now deciding to sue for full custody?"

"Because Molly is going to be a teenager soon and I feel I can do a better job of providing her with the moral guidance and value system necessary for her to grow into an upstanding, contributing member of society."

"And you don't feel your ex-wife can instill an appropriate moral code and value system into your daughter?"

"Objection- speculation." Larry called out.

"Sustained."

"My apologies. Let me rephrase the question. What evidence do you have that your ex-wife cannot instill appropriate morals and values into your daughter, Molly?"

Craig leaned forward and spoke directly into the microphone. "It's evident that my ex-wife cannot instill appropriate morals and values in my daughter because she was unable to do it for our son, Justin."

"But, you and your wife were married for the majority of you son's upbringing."

"That's true. However, I spent the majority of my time working. I own a small electronics store in town. I'm old fashioned; I left the child rearing to Jenni-, I mean to my ex-wife. I see now though, that was a grave mistake on my part."
"And why is that?"

"Because of the life my son is leading now."

Craig's words made Brian's stomach turn and if he hadn't been soundly and repeatedly lectured by Larry that any outbursts would desperately hurt their case then Brian would have jumped up and told Craig what a motherfucker he was.

"Are you referring to the fact that your son is gay?"

_Here we go_, Justin thought. But what Craig said next surprised him.

"No. If my son wants to participate in a homosexual lifestyle I suppose that's his right."

Justin furrowed his brow and thought, _okay where is he taking this?_

"I see. Then what, specifically, are you referring to?"

"I'm referring to the fact that my ex-wife allowed our son to move out of our home before he graduated high school so he could pursue a sexual relationship with a man twelve years older than him. And since that time, Justin has engaged in under-aged drinking, stripping, illicit drug use, civil disobedience, and public sodomy with multiple partners."

"Objection, your honor! Hearsay!" Larry yelled angrily.

Craig's lawyer turned to Larry, and with a smug look on his face replied, "I'd be happy to bring forward the three dozen witnesses who are prepared to give their eyewitness testimonies," Then he looked directly at Brian and glared, "Or perhaps it'd just be simpler to call Mr. Kinney to the stand to verify Mr. Taylor's allegations. I have it on good authority that he was often present when Justin Taylor engaged in these illegal behaviors."
Mike and Lindsay's House

Bathroom

Michael leaned back in the tub against Ben's chest and nestled in close as Ben wrapped his arms around him. "You know, I've learned a lot over these past couple months."

"About being a father?" Ben asked.

"No, about being a lesbian. Who'd have ever thought taking a bath could be so much fun," Michael chuckled in response.

Ben reached for the loofa and began soaping Michael's torso. "I'm pretty sure taking a bath together isn't the only criteria for becoming a lesbian, but I'm glad you're having a good time, nonetheless."

"Yeah," Michael sighed, "I just can't believe how fast it's gone by. It's going to be so hard not seeing Jenny every day."

"I know, but she's in a completely loving home with two, happily married parents. Isn't that what you said you wanted for her?"

"It is. I just don't want her to have to wonder about when she's gonna be able to see me the way Gus does with Brian."

Ben shifted in the tub so he could look at Michael, "We've already talked about this. You can come up to see her whenever you want. And as for Brian maybe he's doing the best that he can."

"But he hasn't been up to see Gus once," Michael replied with frustration.

"You told me once that the only times you were glad that you didn't have a father were when you saw how Brian's dad treated him. Maybe Brian's trying to avoid making the same mistakes that his
father made.”

"Brian is nothing like Jack."

"Does Brian know that?"

Toronto

Ontario College of Art and Design

Women's Art History 301

Lindsay stood at the front of the Lecture hall as slides of various portraits and landscaped were projected on the screen behind her.

"It was the circumstances of her birth that caused Dora Carrington her greatest hardships in life. First, she was born about fifty years too late. Her artistic method was clearly pre-raphaelite in nature, but by the turn of the century the pre-raphaelite style was considered, at best, out of fashion, and at worst, awkward and crude. The other great blow in Carrington's life was that she had the misfortune of being born a woman."

The students began to shift in their seats and murmur to each other in response to Lindsay’s words.

She loved causing little stirs during her lectures and stood quietly and waited for students to settle down. “The egalitarian status women enjoyed in London’s Bohemian subculture didn't help her because Carrington's greatest passion in life was her love for the gay writer Lytton Strachey. Although he was grateful for her friendship and devotion he was unable to return her affections. This didn't deter Carrington though. She made it her primary goal to be a part of his life. She actively engaged in his world and even explored lesbianism, some say, to better understand Lytton's own homosexual nature. Her art took a back seat to caring for Lytton, and her ambivalence toward her own talent caused her to leave much of her work unsigned. Still, she did have an artist's heart and to this day, the Village of Wiltshire, where they shared a home, is peppered with wall murals, hanging signs, leatherwork and wood carvings that are all said to be works of Carrington. Some historians suggest that she turned to decorative arts to busy herself while Lytton entertained his endless stream of young, male lovers. Sadly, we'll never know the artist Dora Carrington could've become, because before the age of forty she took her own life shortly after her true love Lytton Strachey lost his battle with cancer."

Lindsay's class let out a collective sigh at her final words and she couldn't help, but smile. They'd
been hanging on her every word for the last ninety minutes and she felt such a rush as she stood at the front of the class. She looked at her watch and saw that time was nearly up. "Okay, that's enough for today. Be sure and read chapters twenty-two through twenty-three for next time."

As the class filed out of the room, an older, gray haired man walked up to her, "Carrington is an interesting subject. I don't believe her work has ever been studied here at OCAD."

Lindsay was packing up her brief case when she noticed him, "Dean Ketelsen, I didn't realized you were here." Her face reddened at the thought of having her boss listen in on her lecture.

"Well I had to come find out why my office has been flooded with calls from students wanting to find out what subjects you'll be teaching next quarter. Now I understand why, you had the class positively enthralled."

Lindsay continued to blush, "Oh, you just caught me on a good day."

"From what I hear you've had quite a few good days since you started filling in."

"I guess I'd forgotten how much I enjoy teaching. It certainly helps to be lecturing to students who aren't just taking Art Appreciation in hopes of getting an easy A."

"That's precisely why we're so selective in our admissions process. Students who're accepted into our programs are just as committed to art as our faculty members."

"It's definitely evident in the work they've turned in," Lindsay agreed.

"I also wanted to drop by and tell you that the board will be meeting to discuss offering you an associate professorship. Assuming, of course, you're still interested?"

"Oh yes. Absolutely," Lindsay beamed, "Would that mean I'd also have an opportunity to continue my own education?"

"Yes, any doctoral work you'd like to pursue would naturally be subsidized by the college. That is assuming the board does vote in the affirmative to have you join us. I should let you know, it's quite
a laborious process, but I'll be giving you my personal recommendation.

"Oh thank you Dean Ketelsen, I can't thank you enough for this opportunity."

"Igniting our students with the same passion for art as you have will be thanks enough."

Pittsburgh
Liberty Avenue
Outside the Diner

Emmett was about to open the door to the diner when his vibrating phone startled him. He squirmed as he dug his pocket to retrieve his phone. "Hello? This is Emmett Honeycutt."

"Hi Emmett. It's Cookie Mason. I'm Tony Bosford's girlfriend."

"Tony Bosford, number thirty-two, uh...Running Back, right? Emmett asked excitedly. He'd been working hard on learning all the ins-and-outs of the Pittsburgh Ironmen."

"That's right," Cookie happily replied, "Listen, I'm calling because I'm the social secretary for the Ironmen WGs Club. Do you have a couple minutes to chat?"

"Sure but, if you don't mind my asking what's the WGs Club?" Emmett asked as he sat down on the bench in front of the diner.

"We're the Wives and Girlfriends club. We do charity work. You know, at risk youth, the United Way, that sort of thing. We also get together to watch the away games. And when the boys are playing in town the wives do an afternoon tea and the girlfriends do a Sunday brunch. We all take turns hosting."

Emmett pulled his planner out of his bag and flipped his calendar to September. "Oh. Well, I'd just love to help you girls out. Do you want me to cater the teas and the brunches?"
"Oh no. Emmett. I'm not calling to hire you. I'm calling to invite you to join us. You're Drew's special person, so you're part of our little family now," Cookie explained sincerely.

Emmett was overcome. Drew had told him that now that they were together again he had no intentions of keeping their relationship in the closet. Still, when it came to football Emmett just assumed he'd be watching the games in the living room with Carl. "Cookie, I'm so flattered thank you for thinking of me, but I really should talk to Drew first. All of this is still pretty new for us, for him especially."

"Silly. Who do you think gave me your number? He gave me your address for the invitation too, but he told me I needed to call you to find out what you wanted to be called."

Not quite understanding what Cookie meant Emmett replied, "Just plain old Emmett is fine with me."

"No, you see," Cookie paused to find the right words, "We've never had a man join the WGs before. You're obviously not Mrs. Drew Boyd, but I thought it'd be rude to make any assumptions."

Emmett wasn't sure what to say himself. He'd be more than happy to be thought of as Mrs. Drew Boyd, but he surely wasn't going to do or say anything that'd be uncomfortable for Drew. "I know it doesn't quite fit with the name of your club, but could you just list me as Drew's boyfriend? That'd probably be simplest for now."

"Boyfriend. Got it. Thanks Emmett. I look forward to seeing you at our first meeting. Take Care," Cookie said cheerily.

"Bye." *I'm Drew Boyd's boyfriend. Will wonders never cease?*

**Pittsburgh**

**Allegheny County Courthouse**

The bailiff stood before Brian and said, "Place your left hand on the Bible and raise your right hand."

Brian looked down at the Bible presented before him, "I don't really know what good that'd do. God and I haven't been on speaking terms for several years."
The bailiff, who was clearly irritated with Brian's comment, looked up at the Judge for instruction.

"Let the record show that the witness will be making an affirmation of the truth rather than swearing an oath," Judge Stone commented.

The bailiff set down the Bible then said, "Raise your right hand," he waited for Brian to comply then he continued, "Do you affirm that the testimony you are about to give is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?"

"I do," Brian replied with his voice devoid of emotion.

"The witness may take the stand."

Brian sat down and looked up at Jennifer and gave her a reassuring smile.

Craig and his attorney sat at the table whispering to each other while giving no indication that they'd noticed Brian had taken the stand. After about a minute Judge Stone grew impatient and said, "Mr. Avery, when ever you're ready?"

Craig's attorney, Elliott Avery, approached the stand and rested his arm on the dark cherry wood. He made certain to cut off Brian and Larry Jacob's line of sight.

"Mr. Kinney, When did you first meet Justin Taylor?"

"August of 2000."

"And how old were each of you when you first met?"

"Objection, Relevance. The defense stipulates the age difference between Mr. Kinney and Mr. Justin Taylor. Regardless of which they're involved in an adult, consensual relationship that falls within the bounds of Pennsylvania state law," Larry called out.
"The plaintiff is not seeking to dispute the nature of their relationship. We're simply seeking to establish that Mr. Kinney was fully aware of Mr. Justin Taylor's age when he witnessed him commit a variety of illegal acts." Mr. Avery replied

"I'll allow it. Objection over ruled." Judge Stone declared, "Answer the question Mr. Kinney."

"Justin was seventeen and I was twenty-nine."

Brian looked over at Craig who was shifting in his chair. He wore a disgust look on his face and appeared as if he were about to vomit. Brian just shook his head and looked back at the attorney standing in front of him.

"During the four and half years that you knew Mr. Taylor, while he was under the age of twenty-one, did you ever witness him present false identification to gain admittance into a club or to purchase alcohol?"

Brian shrugged and replied, "I'm not an expert on ID cards and I never personally inspected his driver's license to make sure it was authentic. So, I can't answer your question."

"Did you ever purchase alcohol for Justin Taylor to consume when you knew him to be under the age of twenty-one."

"I don't believe by law, I'm required to answer any question that could incriminate me."

"So are you saying that you did provide alcohol for Justin?"

"No. I'm saying I don't have to answer the question," Brian calmly replied. He saw Justin smiling at him with worried eyes and Brian curled his lips in between his teeth in response.

Brian's response flustered the attorney. He went to his desk and grabbed a notepad. "Mr. Kinney isn't it true that in May of 2001 you were present at the gay nightclub Babylon when Justin Taylor won the King of Babylon stripping contest?"

"Don’t you know that nearly every contest held on Liberty Avenue is a charity event? I don’t see the
harm in Justin’s wiggling around in his tighty-whities for a couple minutes if it could help raise money to save lives,” Brian stated matter-of-factly.

Justin felt his face redden at Brian’s words. He reached up to feel his cheeks burn. Brian’s comment also elicited some laughs and a couple hoots from the gallery. The judge pounded his gavel. "There will be none of that. If you cannot contain yourselves the courtroom will be cleared."

At this point, Elliott Avery was growing angry. "On that same night, did you or did you not follow Mr. Taylor and a young man he met that evening into the back room of the club? And you did not watch while Mr. Taylor sodomized the young man?"

Now, Justin’s cheeks were on fire. Though he knew his mother was okay with his being gay, he was certain that she’d have preferred to be spared the details.

"Are you asking me if I'm a voyeur, counselor?” Brian smugly asked.

"I'm asking you to verify that you witnessed Justin Taylor engage in a variety of debauched behaviors."

"Debauchery is a relative term,” Brian fixed his gaze on Craig and continued, “Personally, I think anyone who commits adultery, leaves his family and refuses to pay for his son's education is debauched, but that's just me."

"Your honor, please instruct the witness to answer the question.”

"Mr. Kinney-"

"You want me to tell you what I witnessed?" Brian asked.

"Yes," Judge Stone answered.

Brian leaned forward in the seat and spoke directly into the microphone, "Alright, in the spring of 2001, after Craig Taylor sucker punched me, I witnessed him telling his son to deny everything he was or to never come home again. I then witnessed Justin Taylor stand up to his father with more
courage than I was ever able to muster when I had to confront my own father. And in the late summer of that year I witnessed Jennifer Taylor put her own personal feelings aside to do what she believed was best for her son."

"Your honor?" Craig’s attorney pleaded.

"Mr. Kinney. I won't tell you again. Answer the Mr. Avery’s questions."

Brian looked up at the attorney and stared him dead in the eye. "You want me to tell you what I know?"

"Yes, Mr. Kinney." The attorney sighed with exasperation.

Brian sat back in the chair and rested his hand in his lap then he began to calmly speak, "There are two things I know for sure. First, if I had been raised by someone who was half the mother Jennifer Taylor is I would be a better man than I am today."

The Judge pounded his gavel, "Mr. Kinney that's five hundred dollars. You are in contempt of court. Now quit this showboating or I'll order the bailiff to have you detained."

Brian didn't even acknowledge that the Judge had spoken. He looked to Jennifer who had tears streaming down her face then he locked eyes with Justin. Justin's face was filled with concern, but also with an overwhelming expression of love and gratitude. Brian blinked his eyes slowly and began speaking again, "The other thing I know for sure is that I am Justin Taylor's partner. I love him. And there isn't a damn thing you can do to me that'll make me say anything that would disparage or incriminate him."

**Toronto**

**Cairine Wilson Day School**

Michael pulled Mel's SUV into the pickup lane and waited for Gus's class to let out. A line of five-year-olds filed neatly out of the front doors of the school and down the steps to the curb. Gus's little blue blazer and tan trousers reminded Michael of the uniform Justin used to wear when they all first met. He smiled as Gus wheeled his oversized back-pack to the vehicle and opened the door.
"Do you need help getting in, Buddy?"

Gus sighed dramatically, "You ask me that everyday Uncle Michael, I got it, see?" he replied as he hopped up into the back, sat down next his sister's car seat and pulled the door shut.

"Be sure and buckle your seat belt," Michael said in a tone reminiscent of Debbie's

"I got it," Gus whined with irritation. Gus often got frustrated with his Uncle's overprotective mothering.

Jenny Rebecca squealed when she saw her big brother and offered him some of her drool soaked cheerios. Gus just laughed at JR and grabbed one of the several towels that were strewn about the back seat to wipe off his sister's hands. He then pulled an envelope out of his pocket. "Here, this is for you and Uncle Ben."

Michael reached back and took the enveloped and opened it as he waited for the traffic to start moving.

"It's an invitation to my kindergarten graduation. We made them for our families at school today. I made one for my moms and one for Daddy too. It's on extra big paper so it won't get lost in the mail. Do you think he can come, Uncle Michael?"

"I don't know Gus," Michael replied as he pulled out onto the street, "But I'm sure he'll be proud of you for finishing your first year of school."

"Daddy will love it if he comes," Gus replied excitedly, "We get to wear these big hats and robes and then we walk in real slow and quiet to our seats while the music teacher plays pomp and circlestands on the piano."

"You mean Pomp and Circumstance," Michael corrected authoritatively.

"That's what I said. Pomp and circlestands."

Michael just turned and smiled at Gus. Though, he couldn't stand moments like this. He hated to
always have to explain to Gus that Brian couldn't come visit. It felt like he asked about his father nearly everyday. Michael did his best to ensure Gus that Brian loved him and thought about him all the time, but it just made Michael want to go down to Pittsburgh and drag Brian back up to Canada himself.

When a familiar jingle came on the radio Gus shouted, "Hey it's Daddy's commercial! Turn it up!"

Michael turned up the volume just in time to hear the announcer say, "-Round trip flights from Toronto to New York starting at only $99.00 for a limited time. Don't Delay—"

Michael and Gus joined the announcer as he said the signature line of the advertisement. "Get high on Liberty Air."

Gus laughed. He loved it when his Dad's commercials came on the radio or TV. A moment later JR made a little chirping sound then mimicked her big brother and said, "Get high!"

"Did you hear that Uncle Michael, JR made a sentence! Way to go JR!"

Jenny Rebecca lit up at her brother's attention and started repeating, "Get high" over and over.

Michael couldn't help but laugh at the situation. Leave it to Brian Kinney. Only he could inspire a toddler to choose those two words to make her first sentence.

Pittsburgh

Allegheny County Courthouse

Main Corridor

“What if I get on the stand and tell the court everything Craig said about me was true. Then will the judge let Brian go?”

“It won’t matter what anyone says for the rest of the case. Judge Stone is going to make Brian sit in that holding cell till he agrees to apologize.”
Justin threw his hands up in frustration. “Well that’s just great. Then he’s never getting out.”

“Just when I think your father can’t sink any lower he goes and does this,” Jennifer angrily remarked.

“We didn’t even consider that he’d go after you, Justin. That was my mistake. Our whole strategy was based on his attacking your mom and Brian,” Larry explained, “Right now we need to focus on reworking our plan.”

“What’s Brian supposed to do? Just rot in prison?” Justin asked in exasperation.

“I understand your concern,” Larry began, “but, right now we need to focus on Molly and what’s best for her. You don’t want your father to get custody of her do you?”

Pittsburgh

Liberty Avenue

Liberty Video Rentals

Drew held the door open for Emmett as they walked into the store.” Remember, this time I get to pick the movie. I love you Emmett, but I just can’t watch another Joan Crawford film.”

Emmett froze and turned to face Drew. His eyes were wide as he asked, “wwwwhhattt did you just say?”

Drew shrugged and said, “I can’t watch another Joan Crawford film. Her eyebrows creep me out. They remind me of my fourth grade teacher she was-“

“No no, before the Joan Crawford thing…”

“Oh, uh I said I get to pick the movie. I was thinking something with Bruce Willis. You like him right?” Drew replied as he started to walk along the action movie aisle.
Emmett covered his face and shrieked. “Will you wait a second!” The other patrons turned and stared.

Drew walked back to Emmett. He put his hand on his shoulder and whispered, “Jesus Emmett, are you okay?”

“No I’m not okay,” Emmett answered through gritted teeth. “Did you or did you not just tell me you loved me?”

“When?” Drew asked sincerely.

Emmett was about to completely lose it, “Just now, after ‘I get to pick the movie’ and before ‘I can’t watch another Joan Crawford film.’”

Drew straightened his back and furrowed his brow as he thought, “Huh, I guess I did. Anyway, I was thinking maybe Die Hard or Armageddon,” He continued down the aisle as he spoke.

Emmett was still standing at the entrance. His voice was loud, clear, and hopeful “Drew, do you love me?”

Everyone in the store stopped and turned to see what Drew’s answer would be.

Drew tilted his head to the side and smiled at Emmett, “Of course I do. Haven’t I ever told you that before?”

“Uh no. I think I would have remembered a little thing like having Drew Boyd telling me he loved me,” Emmett replied incredulously.

Drew chuckled and walked back up to Emmett and took him tightly in his arms, “Then I guess I should say it more often. I love you Emmett Honeycutt. I love you.” He kissed him, “I love you,” Drew kissed him again, “I love you.” This time Drew dipped Emmett back and gave him a deep, passionate kiss.

The crowd of video store patrons started clapping and cheering.
Toronto

Melanie and Lindsay’s Kitchen

Everyone took their regular seats at the dinner table as Melanie placed JR in her highchair. JR had continued to repeat her knew favorite words ‘get high’ continually for the last hour and half since they’d been home. “You realize Lindz, I completely blame you for this.” Melanie chided.

“Me?” Lindsay laughed, “Why? She’s just repeating a commercial she heard on the radio.

“I think it’s cute,” Ben offered as he dished out the garbanzo bean salad onto everyone’s plates.

“Cute, It’s bad enough that we had to put in Gus’s baby book that the first time he walked was when Brian was lying on the floor after Lindsay nearly squeezed his balls off. Now this?

“balls balls balls!” JR cheered.

“Nice work Mel,” Lindsay chided.

Michael spit out his water in laughter when the phone began to ring.

“Hello?” Melanie asked as she answered the phone.

“Melanie, Oh I’m glad I got you. It’s Jennifer Taylor.”

“Hey Jennifer. How’s the trial going?” Melanie asked as she handed JR her sippy cup in the hopes that she’d quiet down. Unfortunately JR was much more interested in singing the ‘get high balls’ song she’d just composed.

“Uh, just great…unless of course, you count the fact that Brian’s in jail. The judge found him in contempt of court.”
Melanie put her hand over the receiver, “Guy’s I’m gonna take this in the other room. Go ahead and start dinner without me.”

As Melanie walked into the front room Lindsay asked Michael, “So have you and Justin given anymore thought to selling Rage?”

“He’s kind of consumed with his sister’s custody thing so we’re waiting till that’s over with to make any final decisions, but I’m leaning towards doing it.”

“It’d give Michael the financial stability to explore some of his other interests,” Ben explained.

“Other interests?” Lindsay asked before taking a bite of her grilled salmon.

“Yeah, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about what I could do that’d really, you know, make a difference and I think I’ve decided to –”

Michael began when Melanie walked back in the room and interrupted. “I have to go to Pittsburgh.”

**Pittsburgh**

**Allegheny County Courthouse**

**Detention Block Visiting Room**

Ted walked into the visitor’s room. He saw Brian sitting in a booth on the other side of the glass partition. He sat on the stool across from him. When he started to speak Brian rolled his eyes and motioned for Ted to pick up the telephone receiver that was mounted to the wall next to Ted.

“You’ve never seen an episode of Law & Order, Theodore?”
“I don’t make it a habit to memorize the appropriate steps to visiting prisoners in jail, Brian.” Ted looked Brian over. He was wearing his dress shirt and trousers but his tie, belt and jacket had been confiscated by the guards. “Jesus Brian, you look like shit.”

“I’m not in a fashion show, I’m in jail. Now can we get this over with?”

“Sure, right.” Ted pulled out his palm pilot.

“Now, Cynthia had already cleared my calendar for the rest of this week so we’re fine there. But, I still need you to stay on top of the printers and make sure they get the Dandy Lube ads ready for the weekend circulations. For next week, just have Cynthia cancel everything that she can and what she can’t, I want you to handle.”

“But, the Pfister meeting is next week.” Ted did his best to keep his rising panic at bay.

“And?”

“Exactly how long do plan on sitting in here?”

“Till the judge decides to let me go,” Brian replied nonchalantly.

“Look, there’s no need for you to miss the meeting. Just tell the judge you’re sorry and he’ll let you out,” Ted argued.

Brian scoffed at the suggestion, “I’m not fucking sorry for refusing to get up on that stand and make Justin sound like some sort of deviant. Besides there is no way I’d give that mother-fucker Craig the satisfaction of going back in the courtroom with my tail between my legs.”

Ted rubbed his forehead, “Justin isn’t all you need to think about though. You have a commitment to take care of Kinnetik too. We need you at this meeting. Are you really prepared to put the future of your company at risk for the sake of your pride?”

“Justin comes first,” Brian replied resolutely,” And I’m not putting Kinnetik at risk, I’m putting it in your hands. All you need to do is give the same old dog and pony show, there’s nothing to it.
Besides, this is your account after all. You should be the one to land it.”

**Pittsburgh**

**Debbie, Carl and Emmett’s House**

Melanie hung up the phone in the kitchen and turned to Jennifer and Tucker who were sitting at the kitchen table.

“Judge Stone’s assistant said I can have five minutes with him tomorrow morning.”

“And you think you can convince him to let Brian go?” Tucker asked.

“It’ll depend on how pissed off he is. I read the transcripts from his testimony and surprisingly enough, Brian wasn’t really offensive he was just, Brian.”

Deb came to the table with a hot pot of coffee and filled everyone’s cups, “You know, if they were allowed to legally marry they could’ve never asked Brian to get up there and testify against Sunshine like that. It’s fucking discrimination is what it is. “

“But they cancelled their wedding,” Jennifer reminded Deb.

“I’ve known Brian nearly his whole life and I can tell you for certain, that boy is married to Justin in his heart. Just like Sunshine is married to him. They don’t need flowers and a cake to belong to each other the way those two do.” Debbie knocked her knuckles on the table to accentuate her point as she sat down.

Jennifer sighed, “I agree with you Debbie, but that really doesn’t help Brian any.”

Melanie sat back in her seat and thought for a moment then said, “You know…that’s not necessarily true.”

**Pittsburgh**

**Brian’s Loft**
Justin flipped through the channels on TV before turning it off. There wasn’t anything on that could keep him from thinking about Brian and what he’d done, what he’d said that morning. Justin kept playing it over and over in his mind. He was overwhelmed by the sincerity of Brian’s final words to the attorney. He had sacrificed his own freedom for the sake of preserving Justin’s name. And Brian didn’t hesitate in the slightest in letting the entire courtroom hear how he felt about their relationship. Just when Justin thought he had Brian completely figured out, he’d surprise him yet again.

Justin jumped with a start when he heard the door begin to slide open.

“Brian?” He called out as he ran to the door.

“Uh no, it’s just Brian’s delivery boy,” Ted answered as he shifted the canvases in his arms and picked up the easel and shopping bags filled with brushes and tubes of paint.

“What’s all this?”

“Brian told me to go to the art supplies store and bring this stuff here to the loft. Oh and he had a message for you too, “Ted set the bags down on the counter and got out his Palm pilot, “I wrote it down so I would get it right. He said…here it is…if you ever want his cock in your ass again you won’t get any paint on his hardwood floors.”

Justin looked down at his splinted wrist, “But, I haven’t picked up a brush in months.”

“He said you say that. So uh, quit being a pussy and paint something.”

Justin glared at Ted.

Ted held up his hands, “Those were his words not mine. Look, I’m sure he just doesn’t want you to worry about him. I bet he figures getting back to your art will take your mind off that fact that he’s spending the night in jail.”
Brian stood in the wings of the stage as he waited for the principal to call his name. He caught a
glimpse of himself in a mirror that was propped up against the wall. He ran his hand over his head to
smooth down his bangs that always tended to stand on end at the most inconvenient times. He shifted
uncomfortably in the second hand blazer his mother had bought him. It didn’t fit quite right under the
arms but he liked the way he looked in a jacket and tie. It was the first time he’d ever been so
dressed up. When his mother took him and Clair to church, he only had to wear a dress shirt and
slacks. Now, as he was waiting to find out what place he’d won at the science fair he felt a sense of
accomplishment that he’d never experienced before.

“And the Seventh Grade first place ribbon goes to Brian Kinney.”

Brian felt a swell of pride as he walked out onto the stage and accepted the award from the principal.
Then, he looked out in the audience to wave to his family. Claire was reading and hadn’t even
bothered to look up from her book. Joan had nodded off and her head was tilted awkwardly against
her shoulder. The seat that had been saved for Brian’s father was empty.

Brian breathed caught in his throat as he woke up. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had a
dream about his old man and just the thought of Jack still caused Brian’s stomach to clench. After all
these years why did he still give a shit about what his father thought of him? No matter what Brian
had ever done, it’d never been good enough. Not once, had he ever looked out into a crowd and
seen a look of pride on his father’s face. He’d have traded just about every award or honor he’d ever
received in his life to know for certain that Jack loved him.

Brian rolled over on the lumpy jail cell cot and tried to go back to sleep.
Pittsburgh
Allegheny County Court House

Judge Stone’s Chambers

“You might have heard that Judge Harper is now the Executive Director of Lambda Legal out in New York?” Melanie asked.

“Yes, but I don’t see how that pertains to Mr. Kinney or his behavior in the Taylor verses Taylor case.”

“Actually, I spoke to Judge Harper and forwarded him the court transcripts and it turns out that Lambda Legal has taken quite an interest in the case, particularly in Mr. Kinney being compelled to testify against his partner. They think it’d be an ideal test case in their efforts to legalize gay marriage. Mr. Kinney and Mr. Taylor are partners. If they were married, Mr. Kinney would have been under no legal obligation to testify and therefore he wouldn’t have been held in contempt of court,” Melanie calmly, but firmly explained.

“Ms. Marcus, what exactly is your point?” Judge Stone asked as he crossed his arms.

“My point is that all I have to do is make one phone call and there will be hoards of protesters outside your court room.”

“Tread lightly Ms. Marcus. I don’t like your tone,” Judge Stone warned.

“And from what Judge Harper tells me, you’re also not much of a fan of controversial court cases particularly when it comes to gay rights. He mentioned that you’ve recused yourself on three different occasions when gay parents have come before your court.”

“I’m an old man Ms. Marcus. This gay thing is something for your generation to sort out, not mine. I’ve got eighteen months before I can retire and collect my pension. What is it that you want?”
As Brian rounded the corner Justin rushed up to him and asked, “Brian, are you okay?”

Brian pulled Justin to him and brought their lips together. The tension that had firmly set root in Brian’s back and neck subsided when Justin’s tongue swept hungrily against his own. Brian kissed Justin’s cheek and temple before resting their foreheads together. “I am now.”

“It’s a good thing you still hold the title of Mr. Teflon or I might not have been able to get you out so easily,” Melanie commented as she walked up to them.

“So, I have you to thank for this?” Brian asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Don’t thank me. Just know that you owe me. Big time.”

“Why does that sound so ominous?” Brian replied with a smile as Justin laughed.

“Just remember, you’re in my debt Kinney.”

At that moment Brian’s phone started ringing. “Kinney here…you did?... And what’s the next course of action?... I see. Thanks for the heads up.”

“Who was that?” Justin asked.

“The private investigator I hired for your mother. Jennifer isn’t going to need to worry about loosing Molly anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Your father is about to find out. Come on you’re going to want to see this,” Brian replied as Jennifer and two men in dark suits walked up to Craig who was standing at the end of the hall.

“This is Craig Taylor, officer. Is there anything else you need from me?” Jennifer asked one of the
men who was standing by her side.

“No ma’am we’ll take it from here.”

Jennifer walked over to Justin and Brian, “Brian, they released you. Thank God.”

“No, just Melanie,” Brian replied.

“Mom? Who are they?”

“Federal Agents from the Internal Revenue Service. I’d always suspected your father had two sets of books but I never had any evidence. The detective Brian hired was able to find the proof.”

“Craig Taylor, you’re under arrest for thirteen counts of tax evasion. Please put your hands behind your back.”

Craig stood there in stunned silence as the agents put the hand cuffs on him.

Justin walked up to the agent and asked, “Officer, may have a few seconds with my father?”

The officer nodded and Justin turned to face Craig. “Dad, despite what you might think of me and my debauched lifestyle you can rest assured knowing one thing. Your faggot son is happy. And nothing you could say would ever change that.”

**Pittsburgh**

**Brian’s Loft**

Brian tried to sit up, but Justin flattened his hands on Brian’s chest and pushed him back on to the mattress. He rode Brian hard and fast. The feel of him sinking down on to Brian’s cock again and again electrified him with a renewed energy and he felt as if he could go on forever. Brian, on the other hand, was doing his best to hold on. Justin’s strength was overwhelming and the sight of his clenched jaw and lust filled eyes went straight to Brian’s cock.
Brian reached up and brushed his hand across Justin’s chest then licked the beads of sweat he’d collected from his fingers. Justin grabbed Brian’s hand and brought to his cock. Brian stroked Justin in time with his own movements and within seconds they both lost it. Brian growled out his orgasm as he felt Justin’s ass squeeze his dick and come onto his hand.

“Christ Sunshine,… are you hopped up on... Red Bull or something?” Brian asked through short shallow breaths.

Justin rolled off of Brian and snuggled against him, “You’ve never complained about my youthful exuberance before. You’re not getting old on me are you?”

Brian raised an eye brow as he lifted himself off the bed and replied, “You talk to me like that after I went to prison to defend your honor?”

“It was quite the gallant gesture,” Justin replied, only half teasing. He knew that was as close to thank you as Brian would allow.

“I suppose you’re worth sacrificing my freedom.” Brian casually replied as he walked to the refrigerator.

Justin decided it was best not to push his luck by responding to that comment.

Brian got a bottle of water for Justin and himself, but he stopped on the way back to the bedroom when he noticed the painting resting on the easel by the dining room table.

When he didn’t return to bed right away, Justin wrapped the sheet around himself and went to see what Brian was doing.

Brian stared at the piece. After all this time, Brian was still struck by the stunning reality of Justin’s talent. “Fuck.”

“Is that good or bad?” Justin asked when he found Brian staring at his latest piece.

“It’s…comforting. Relaxing even, but at the same time it gives off this thrilling, almost dangerous,
feeling.”

Justin smiled and leaned his head on Brian’s shoulder, “It’s you.”

Brian turned and wrapped his arms around Justin. He looked into Justin’s eyes while he tried to bring himself to speak the words he didn’t want to say.

Justin spared Brian though by saying what they both already knew, “It’s time for me to go back to New York.”
New York
East Village Artist's Co-Op

Justin walked into the common room and was greeted by the familiar smell of musty furniture and marijuana. He was surprised when a feeling of being 'home' came over him. He set his bags down and went to see if he could find Barry or Natalia. He'd paid up is rent while he'd been away, but he wanted to make sure it was okay to go up to his room.

"Hey man! Long time no see." Barry, the co-op director, called out when Justin walked in to the kitchen. Except for his streaks of gray hair Justin imagined that Barry looked exactly the same as he did when he'd danced at Woodstock. Barry stood up and gave Justin a bear hug. Justin froze with his arms trapped by his sides as Barry squeezed the breath out of him and lifted him off his feet. Normally, Justin would have been offended by such an audacious violation of his personal space, but Barry was a harmless oaf who was, pretty much, always high.

When Barry set Justin back down he asked, "Is your phone broken or something? I've been trying to get in touch with you for weeks."

"You know how out-of-area service is." Justin replied. The truth was, he had received dozens of messages from 212 area code numbers, but he hadn't bothered to check any of them. New York was the last thing he wanted to think about when the ability to use his hand again had been so uncertain.

"Well you're one popular guy. We've been getting calls from agents, galleries, collectors...they're all looking for you. There's also a box full of mail up in your room. Your show at the Piorot Gallery has caused quite a stir." Barry went over to the phone and picked up a message pad then handed it to Justin.

As Justin looked over the notes Barry continued, "I'll tell ya' Justin. I've been in this scene for decades and I don't know anyone who’s gotten a response like this after just one show.

Justin shrugged off Barry's comment and set the notes down. "Oh, I bet they all just want their piece of the flavor of the month."

"Man, I hear what you're saying, but this ain't just about a bunch of bourgeois, sycophants trying to cash in on your gift. You're the real deal. You're Dylan, Warhol, Kerouac." Barry rested his hand on Justin's shoulder, "You're an artist, man. It's not what you do. It's who you are."
"We already talked about this. I don't see why you're whining about it now." Brian said without looking up from his paperwork.

Ted stood at the edge of Brian's desk and continued his protest, "But, that was when we thought you were still going to be behind bars. What reason could you possibly have for missing the Pfister meeting now?"

"I'm not missing the Pfister meeting. I'm just not going to it. It's your account, Ted. Go close the deal," Brian looked up at Ted and replied coolly.

"But but but." Ted struggled to continue.

"But nothing. You and Cynthia can handle this without me," Brian replied as he stood and started packing his brief case.

"Where are you going?" Ted asked with exasperation.

"I have an appointment, not that it's any of your business," Brian answered as he walked out of the office.

"What could possibly be more important than this?" Ted called out after him.

Debbie was settling into the rhythm of the lunch-time rush. As was usual for a Saturday, the diner took on more of a feel of a family eating establishment rather than an after hours place for the club-boys to come sober up. Strollers clogged the narrow aisle between the counter and the booths so Debbie had to do some creative stepping to avoid tripping and spilling someone's Pink Plate Special
Over the years, she'd seen an endless number of customers who'd once lived only for the pleasure seeking life of hedonism slowly shift their priorities and settle into careers, long-term relationships and families. Now, it was happening for her boys. Even Brian, who she never thought would give himself completely to another person, had begun to change. In the months since Justin moved to New York Debbie rarely overheard a trick recount his tale of having been fucked by the infamous Brian Kinney.

She couldn't keep count of the number of times she'd wanted to smack some sense into Brian to remind him that Sunshine was the best thing that'd ever happened to him. And let him know that his never-ending fuckfests and 'love is a four letter word' attitude would only cause him grief in the long run.

She knew Justin well enough to know that his move wouldn't keep him away from Brian. He'd figure out a way to make it work despite the distance. And when Jennifer told her what Brian had said in court Debbie was elated. For Brian to express his feelings so freely was more than even she thought was ever possible. Maybe Brian was learning that hedonistic pleasure and true happiness were two different things and that the latter of the two was far more valuable.

Debbie began refilling coffee for the customers seated at the counter when she looked up and saw Carl holding up his mug for her.

"Carl! When did you sneak in here?" She cheerily asked as she popped her gum.

"Eh, just a few minutes ago. I thought I'd come down and see how my favorite lady was doing."

"Oh I'm busy as ever. You hungry? The meatloaf sandwich is really good today. Oh and we have some apple pie. That'll go good with your coffee."

"I already ate lunch. I finished off the lasagna from last night. I just didn't feel like sitting around the house. This retired life isn't what I'd thought it'd be."

"But, you have all the time in the world now to do whatever you want," Debbie replied as she handed in orders to the kitchen.
"That's just it. All I've ever wanted to do was be a cop," Carl answered with a shrug.

Debbie started wiping down the counter as she suggested, "What about focusing a hobby?"

"The only hobby I have is working on cold cases."

"Deb! Where's our lunch! Jacob's getting really cranky over here," An attractive black man in his thirties called out as he bounced a toddler in his arms.

"Don't get your panties in a twist! I'm coming!" Deb shouted back before turning her attention back to Carl, "You'll find something, honey. I know you will, but I really gotta get back to work. Now you sure I can't get you a piece of apple pie?"

Carl shook his head, "I'm good. Oh, but I do have something for you." He pulled a large purple envelope made of construction paper out of his jacket pocket. "Looks like you got some mail from Canada."

Toronto

Ontario Bar Exam

Testing Center

Melanie stood outside the ominous gray building and waited in line with more than hundred law students. She remembered when she'd stood and waited to take the Pennsylvania State Bar Exam. She'd had such a feeling of exhilaration. It was going to be her final step in the years of study that prepared her to face the injustices she was going to fight head on. In her years as an attorney, she'd fought and won more battles than most of her colleagues. She'd participated in landmark cases that helped establish precedents which helped protect women, children and members of the GLBT community at large. She wouldn't presume to call herself a legal superstar, but she had definitely made her mark.

Now, almost fifteen years later, she was back at the beginning. Only this time, instead of being exhilarated, she had an overwhelming sense of dread. It wasn't that she didn't feel prepared. She knew she'd pass. Hell, she'd never failed a test in her life. It was just that moving to Canada had changed her perspective in ways that she hadn't expected. Melanie had always felt like an outsider as a Jew, a woman, and a lesbian. She'd turned her back on the straight, Christian, males who ran the United States because they didn't care about her or the safety and well being of her family. But now, after months of studying the convoluted in-and-outs of Canadian law, she felt more like an American
than she ever had before.

She remembered how her grandfather would talk to her about how America was a great experiment where dissenters, outcasts, and those who lived outside of the mainstream came together to make something wonderful. He loved the United States because, in his mind, America fought for those who couldn't fight for themselves. It broke Melanie's heart to think of what he'd think of America today. She knew it was her responsibility to take care of her wife and children, but Melanie also felt a sense of duty to honor her grandfather's memory. America was hurting. It was in danger of becoming what it had been created to stand against. Who better than she, her grandfather's little Rachaela, to care for and protect the country he loved. She was brought out of her thoughts by the sound of her phone ringing.

She dug it out of her purse and answered, "Hello?"

"Ms. Marcus. It's Allan Harper. I wanted to see how things worked out for your friend and Judge Stone."

"Oh Judge Harper, you were absolutely right. As soon as I mentioned Lambda Legal to Judge Stone he was more than willing to release Brian from his holding cell. He flat out admitted that he didn't want any part in having to deal with the gay thing as he put it."

"It's a sad reality that we not only have deal with people who's hatred towards gays motivates them to fight against equal protection under the law, but we also have to deal the great number of, otherwise enlightened people, who feel like equality for the gay community is a non-issue. Since taking over here, I've been astounded by how so many of my former colleagues refuse to acknowledge that ten percent of the United States population have to live as second class citizens. Fighting against bigotry and intolerance is one thing, but fighting against apathy is something else entirely."

"I never thought about that," Melanie responded quietly, "I've focused so much on the hatred toward the gay community that I hadn't considered that fact that some much of the battle is about trying to motivate good people who're doing nothing to make a change."

"It's such a shame that we've lost you to our neighbors north of the border Ms. Marcus," Judge Harper replied, "I have to ask. Is there anything I could say that would convince you that you belong here in New York taking on the fight full time?"

Toronto
Toronto Little League field

Gus's T-ball Game

At the sound of the crack of the bat, Gus darted off second base and made his way safely to third. Several 5-year-old infielders chased after a ball that had landed just short of the pitching mound. It was a windy, summer day and Gus's otherwise white uniform had taken on the orange tint of the baseball diamond clay. He waved to the stands at Lindsay, Michael and Ben who were standing up cheering and he smiled broadly at them as he adjusted his oversized batter's helmet. Then, out of the corner of his eye he saw someone walk up to the fence next to the home-team dugout, just behind first base. Gus squinted, wiped the dust from his eyes and then shot across the infield toward the man. He paid no attention to his coach who yelled at him to get back on base and he didn't stop when a member of the opposing team tagged him out. Nothing was going to stop Gus as he effortlessly climbed up over the chain link fence and then jumped down into Brian's arms.

"Daddy! You're here!" Gus shouted as he wrapped his arms around Brian's neck.

Brian was struck by how much his son had grown and pulled Gus's helmet off so he could get a good look at him as he replied, "There's no way I'd miss your last game of the season."

Gus squeezed his father tightly, "Nobody believed me. Not even Uncle Ben and he believes everything, but I knew you'd come. I just knew it!"

Brian couldn't find any words. He knew that anyone who had faith in him was bound for disappointment, but in this moment he was so overwhelmed to have his son in his arms he didn't want the thought to spoil the moment.

A small crowd of T-ball players congregated on the other side of the fence along with the Umpire and Gus's coach. The coach said, "Come on Gus. Climb back over so we can finish playing. You can talk to your friend after the game."

Brian felt a lump form in his throat when he heard Gus reply as he started climbing back up the fence, "He's not just my friend, Coach, he's my daddy."

Just as Gus was rejoining his team, Lindsay ran up to Brian. Her smile was as big as Gus's had been. She hugged Brian tightly and tears began to well in her eyes as she whispered in his ear, "Thank you Peter, thank you."
Ted stood with Cynthia at the front of the room and prayed that the Pfister marketing executives were laughing with him, not at him. After practicing with Cynthia for nearly three hours he'd presented Brian’s campaign idea for the potential client’s new erectile dysfunction drug, Obdural. He'd been smooth, articulate and free of any embarrassing gaffs. He felt like a real Ad Man.

Finally, as the room calmed down one of the executives said, "It's funny. It's edgy. It doesn't make me feel like an old guy who can't get it up. It just reminds me that with a little help from Obdural I can be hard as rock while fuck my brains out."

Again, the room erupted with laughter. Cynthia gave Ted a reassuring glance then said, "If you're ready to move forward then I'm sure Mr. Schmidt can have the necessary paperwork drawn up for you by this afternoon."

The exec stood up and offered his hand to Ted, "This campaign is exactly what we had in mind and if the market takes to it like we expect then, I believe Pfister and Kinnetik are going to have a long and very lucrative relationship. Good work Mr. Schmidt."

"Uh Uh...Thank you. I'm looking forward to it. We'll get contracts to your office before close of business tonight."

"You can also tell your CEO that he's lucky to have such an impressive right hand man," One of the other executive commented as they rose and began filing out of the room.

"Right this way, gentlemen." Cynthia said with a wave of her hand as she led them out of the building.

After a few moments Cynthia returned to the board room to find Ted still standing there in a daze. "Cynthia? Did that just happen?"

"It sure did Ted. You got the account."

"The one-hundred and eighty million dollar account?"
"Yep!" Cynthia laughed in reply as she put her hand on his shoulder.

"The account that's nine times bigger than our Brown Athletics contract?"

"Uh-huh. Brian's never landed an account this big, not even close. Not here or at Vangard, don't be surprised if he acts a little jealous when he hears the news," Cynthia replied as she started straightening up the room.

"Brian Kinney, jealous...of me?" At this thought Ted started to get dizzy, "Cynthia, promise me something."

"What's that?"

"If this is a dream. Never, ever wake me up."

Toronto

Lindsay & Melanie's House

Laundry Room

Lindsay pulled clothes from the washed and began placing them in the dryer as she said, "New York? But we've barely settled here?"

"I know. We still have boxes in the attic that's why I was thinking if we were going to do it, it wouldn't be that difficult," Melanie offered.

"Not that difficult," Lindsay's tone was harsh and she threw the wet shirt in to the dryer, "What about Gus? He's made so many friends here and we couldn't have hoped to have him in a better school."

"There's plenty of terrific schools in New York, I'm talking about an opportunity of a lifetime here," Mel replied as she reached and gently took hold of Lindsay's forearm.
Lindsay brushed Melanie's hand away, "So is my professorship or are we back to how your career is more important than mine?"

"Of course not Lindz, but you can teach anywhere. Lambda Legal's Headquarters is in Manhattan and as the Lead Staff Attorney I'd be the one arguing cases that go before the Supreme Court. The US Supreme Court, Lindsay."

Lindsay’s voice was deep and cold when she asked, "I thought we were Canadians now. Isn't that what you wanted? Isn't that what you said would keep your family safe?"

Melanie stuffed her hands in her back pockets, "I admit it Lindsay, maybe I was shell shocked. Who wouldn't be after what happened at Babylon."

"It's a little late to be just be realizing that now. Or is making America gay-friendly more important to you than taking care of you family?"

Melanie crossed her arms and barked despite her efforts to keep calm, "That's not fair, Lindz."

"And uprooting us again is? I gave up everything for you and what you wanted. My home, my job, my friends even Br-..." Lindsay stopped herself.

"Even Brian. That's what you were going to say wasn't it? I pay the phone bill Lindsay. You never gave up Brian," Melanie scoffed.

"Have you forgotten that he's the one who has been supporting us for the better part of this year?" Lindsay countered, "Besides, this isn't about him. It's about you thinking of yourself instead of what's best for this family."

"How can you say that when I've been busting my ass for the last nine months to get my law license here so I can take care of this family. We sure, as hell, can't survive on your teaching salary."

Lindsay slammed the dryer door closed and turned on the machine. Then she straightened her back and turned slowly towards Melanie and asked with an icy cold voice, "Melanie. You said that Judge Harper called you while you were waiting outside the Testing Center."
"Yes," Melanie replied quietly and without making eye contact. She knew she'd been found out.

Lindsay continued, "You didn't take the exam, did you?"

**Pittsburgh**

**Drew's Condo**

Ted and Blake walked up to the front door of Drew's luxury condominium. When they'd driven on to the property of the exclusive gated community they had to check in with a security guard and then were directed to guest parking. Before Ted could ring the bell the door flew open and Emmett bounded into his arms, "Teddy! Congratulations! I'm so happy you got the account."

"Thanks Em. And throwing a dinner in my honor all at the last minute. You shouldn't have gone to the trouble," Ted replied as he and Blake followed Emmett inside.

"Oh I'm not in charge of dinner tonight. Drew is," Emmett replied.

"Drew cooks?" Blake asked.

"No, he most definitely does not cook. Mr. Boyd has made that abundantly clear. He does, however, grill. He is, in fact, a master griller." Emmett proudly explained.

"I hope that's nothing like a mastur-bater." Ted teased.

"I should say not," Emmett replied as he batted Ted's arm, "Now you two come out on the patio. I made some fresh squeezed lemonade for us while we wait for dinner."

Emmett led Ted and Blake outside where they found Drew wearing a giant chef's hat and an apron that said kiss the cook. He waved an oversized pair of metal tongs as he turned to greet them. "Ted, congratulations. I bet Brian’s one happy guy.”

“I’m sure he will be, but I’ve only been able to get his voicemail. He left office this morning and didn’t say where he was going. He has a thing for acting all mysterious.” Ted explained.
“Well, I hope you guys brought your appetites,” Drew said, “I’ve got quite a feast going here for you.” As he gestured to the enormous stainless-steel, propane grill.

“We did, it smells delicious. And that’s some grill,” Blake replied.

“Thanks. It’s about the only thing Sierra didn’t get in the divorce.”

The four men settled into pleasant conversation as Drew grilled T-bone steaks, corn-on-the-cob and baked potatoes. Just as everyone was about to take their seats at the table, Drew’s phone rang.

“Hello…oh hey….What?...God, when? No. no I’m okay…Yes. Thanks for calling.” Drew’s face was ashen as he turned to Emmett.

“Baby, what’s the matter?” Emmett asked with concern.

“That was the team manager. Coach…collapsed on the way out to the parking lot. He had a heart attack.”

“Oh my God. Is he going to be okay?”

Drew slumped into his chair. With his eyes cast downward he answered, “He’s dead.”

Toronto

Mel and Lindsay’s House

Brian and Michael crept through the dark kitchen towards the back of the house. Just as Michael was about to open the door, Brian ran into the edge of the counter. “Fuck!”

“Shh! Do you want to wake everyone up?” Michael whispered as loudly as Brian had cursed.

“Just open the fucking door.”
The two made their way outside and each took a seat on the swing set. Michael pulled the joint from his shirt pocket and passed it to Brian. He lit it, took a long drag then said before he exhaled, “This Canadian shit isn’t bad.” He began blowing the smoke out in rings as he passed the joint to Michael.

Michael took a hit then replied, “I know. Don’t say anything to Lindsay, but I swiped it from her. I found it in her sock drawer when I was putting away laundry.”

“That’s my girl,” Brian laughed, “So what does Zen Ben say about you’re partaking of the ganja?”

Michael coughed then responded, “It’s juvenile, unhealthy, not to mention, illegal.”

“Must be why it’s one of my very favorite things.”

“Must be,” Michael affirmed with a chuckle, “It’s awesome though, what you did, showing up at Gus’s game like that. I bet he’ll remember this day for the rest of his life.”

“I told him I’d try to make it to a game. That’s all,” Brian said as he reached for the joint again. This time, he took an even longer drag.

“No Brian. You don’t get what a big deal it is for him. Gus asks about you everyday. You’re his hero.”

The pot was starting to have an effect on Brian and he could feel his inner filters started to turn off. “I hope you tried to convince him that it’d be a much safer bet to choose someone else to idolize.”

Michael leaned toward Brian and took hold of his knee, “No. I told him that even though the situation isn’t ideal, it doesn’t change the fact that you love him. And when he really needs you, you’ll always be there for him.”

“You sound pretty sure of yourself,” Brian replied with a sigh as he slid off the swing and laid back on the neatly manicured lawn.
“I am. I speak from experience,” Michael answered as he joined Brian on the ground.

They laid in silence and looked up at the night sky for a few minutes, in almost a whisper Brian said, “I don’t know how to be a good father.”

Michael turned on his side so he could face Brian, “You can be a great father if you just try. You’re the best at everything you do, why should parenting be any different?”

Brian turned and gave Michael little smile, “You do have a point,” he said then he pulled Michael to him and kissed him, “Come on, we should go back inside before your husband wakes up and starts to think I talked you into running away with me.”

Toronto

Mel and Lindsay’s House

Mel and Lindsay’s Bedroom

Mel lay awake with her back to Lindsay. They had hardly spoken to each other since earlier that afternoon when she told Lindsay about the job offer. The argument had been short and they’d given a stellar performance of playing nice with each other as they had dinner with Brian, Michael, Ben and the kids. They’d had plenty of experience at keeping their troubles from their friends. Still, the chill that radiated from Lindsay frightened Melanie. She didn’t want to lose her. Not again, after everything they’d been through. Melanie turned and softly placed her hand on the small of Lindsay’s back, “Lindz, you asleep?”

Without turning over Lindsay replied, “How could I be when I know you’re lying there planning our entire futures with no regard for what I want?”

“Lindz, will you look at me? I want to talk to you,” Melanie gently pleaded. Lindsay didn’t move. “Fine, just listen to what I have to say, okay?”

Lindsay shrugged her shoulders in reply.

“You know how much an opportunity like the one Judge Harper offered means to me.”
Lindsay scoffed an unintelligible reply.

“But, I had no idea how much this professorship means to you.” Melanie explained.

Lindsay whipped her head around then turned to face Melanie, “That’s because we never talk about me and my career. You only ask me about Gus and JR and if I’m lucky you ask me about how the traffic was or did if I’ve managed to find a decent kosher deli yet.”

“That’s because your art…it’s never something you’ve shared with me,” Melanie countered, “It’s part of you I’ve never been able to touch.”

Lindsay sat up. She felt a twinge of guilt wash over her. She had kept her creative side from Melanie, and the last time she’d even explored that part of herself she’d betrayed them both, “I never thought what I had to offer was worth sharing.”

“Lindz.”

“But, now it’s different. The students literally come to class early so they can get a seat in front rows. Members of the faculty sit in on my lectures, and the Dean says he’s never seen the students so inspired. And that’s because of me. Me, Melanie. I’ve finally found my place, not as Lindsay the wife, or Lindsay the mother, but as Lindsay the woman.”

“I always thought being a wife and a mother was all you wanted,” Melanie replied. She tried to hide how Lindsay’s words hurt her.

Lindsay didn’t want Melanie to misunderstand what she was trying to say, “I’ve always wanted to be those things. And I love you, the family we’ve made but I just need to feel like I’m making a difference. You do it with your court battles. I do it by helping young artists find their way to making this world more beautiful. Mel, we’re both trying to make the world a better place, we’re just doing it in different ways.”

Melanie considered Lindsay’s words for a moment then asked, “The Ontario College of Art and Design is really where you want to teach?”

“If they want me, then I want them. It all depends on whether or not I get offered the assistant professorship.” Lindsay replied.
“And you won’t find out till the beginning of August?”

“That’s what the Dean said.”

Melanie nodded. “I’ll tell Judge Harper that I can’t give him an answer now. If you get the professorship we’ll stay here. If not, can we go to New York?”

“You’re asking me?” Lindsay asked hopefully.

“I’m asking you.”

“Then, if I get the job we’ll stay and if I don’t, we’ll go.”

Pittsburgh

Debbie, Carl and Emmett’s House

Emmett had never imagined that the first Ironmen event he’d attend with Drew would be a funeral. As they walked to the front of the house he asked Drew, “Do you want to come in for a little while?”

Drew quietly nodded, “Yeah, I don’t really feel like being alone right now.”

“I completely understand.” Emmett responded as they walked inside. Despite having been to the house a number of times Drew stood awkwardly in the entry way. Emmett put his hand out to him to lead him into the living room, “You want a beer? Maybe something stiffer?” Emmett offered.

“No. training starts next week. We’re not supposed to be drinking. Coach says…” Drew stopped, realizing that he’d never play for his mentor, Coach Bic Bicfield again. He sat on the couch and shook his head, “I haven’t played for anyone else since college, Em. I wouldn’t be playing at all now if coach hadn’t convinced the owners to hire again after I came out.”

Emmett sat down next to Drew and put his hand on his knee, silently urging him to continue talking.
He knew Drew needed to let his feelings out. He hadn’t said a word at the funeral.

“I feel like such a shit, Emmett.”

“Why, baby?” Emmett asked with concern.

“Because even though I miss Coach something awful, I can’t help but worry about what’s going to happen to me?”

“I know it’s not the same but when my friend Godiva died, I told you about her right?”

Drew nodded so Emmett continued, “Well, when she died I felt like part of me died too. She helped me become who I am. She took care of me when I first moved up here. She helped me realize that I’d find my way in this crazy ole’ world. I’m guessing that’s what your coach did for you?”

“Yeah it was kind of like that, but I’m talking about what it’s going to be like on the football field, and Christ, in the locker room now that he’s gone.”

“What do you mean?”

“Remember when I got fired, Coach said it was because my being gay could get me hurt?”

“Uh Huh.”

“Well, when he realized that the only way we could make the play off was to get me back on the team he talked to the players. He told them that anyone who didn’t feel they could give me the protection on the field I needed as their quarterback and as their teammate would be released from their contracts with no penalties. Two guys took him up on the offer.”

“You’re saying they quit their jobs rather than promising to keep you from getting pummeled out of the field?”

“Yeah. And when coach said that the only thing anyone was allowed to say when they were asked
about having a gay teammate by the media was ‘no comment’ two other guys got themselves traded to other teams.”

“After that, everyone else was seemed like they were okay with it, then I found out was coach fining anyone who gave me shit ten-thousand dollars. Em, I have no idea if any of my teammates really want me to play with them.”

“What about Tony Bosford? His girlfriend wouldn’t have invited me to join the WGs if he had a problem with you being on the team would he have?

“Tony’s brother Jake is gay. He played Division I ball in college, that was until his teammates found out he was gay and broke his leg in four places. He could’ve gone pro. Now he manages Home Depot.”

Emmett covered his mouth as he said, “Jesus.”

“I just want to play ball. I don’t need them to be my best friends. Tony’s been great, but he’s a running back. He doesn’t have anything to do with keeping me from getting tackled. Football is a dangerous sport and without Coach there to make sure that I’m being fully protected out on the field, I could get killed.

New York

Whitney Museum of American Art

Sarabeth’s Restaurant at the Whitney

Justin made his way down the long main staircase of the museum to the basement level. He was immediately greeted by the scent of freshly baked bread and the sight of a variety of eclectic people all lunching on rich soups, ornate salads and colorful pasta dishes. After reading through all of the messages he’d received, Justin decided that it only made sense to meet with Adrienne Bennett first. She’d had quite an impact on him, years ago, when they first met. Her car accident, and the loss of most of her motor skills hadn’t deterred her from giving up on her art. Her situation had definitely put Justin’s struggle with his hand tremors in perspective. He hoped that she could help steer him in the right direction, once again.

The crisply dressed host led Justin to a cozy table near the back of the restaurant. It was a half booth
so it was ideal for accommodating Adrienne’s wheel chair.

“Justin, come give me a hug.” Adrienne said as she held her functional arm out to him.

Justin smiled and bent down to embrace Adrienne, “It’s so good to see you. How long have you been in New York?”

As Justin took his seat she replied, “Oh I’ve kept an apartment here for years. I come to town when the mood or the shopping bug strikes. But we’re not here to make small talk. Word has it you’ve been a virtual hermit since your opening night. And I heard all about your wrist so don’t bother giving me any sob story about that. Why haven’t you been returning all the calls you’ve been getting?”

“I guess I wasn’t prepared for the business side of art.” Justin answered honestly. In the few occasions he’d spoken with Lindsay’s friend over the years he knew she could smell bullshit a mile away.

“Let me ask you something Justin, if no ever saw your art again, would you still paint?”

“Of course. I paint for me. Showing it a plus.”

“Good answer. So there’s no need to give a fuck about people like Pierre Poirot and the tactics they use to sell your work.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but how do I protect myself from people who are trying to take advantage of me or exploit my work?”

“You surround yourself with people you can trust. And you take advice from people who’ve been there, like me,” Adrienne replied with a smile, “I’m going to have my agent, Sandra McGill, call you. I’ve been with her for almost twenty years. If you listen to her, she’ll help you build the kind of career you want.”

Justin was truly touched. He didn’t know Adrienne well. He thought, at most, she’d have a few words of wisdom for him, but nothing like this. Even with a show as successful as his had been, finding a good, trustworthy agent who was willing to take on a young artist, was no easy task “I don’t know what to say.”
“Thank you is always a good start, but I’m not going to blow smoke up your ass. Art is a business. And unless you’ve got a couple hundred grand lying around somewhere you’re gonna have to suck up your pride from time to time so you can get your art out there in front of the people who can help you make a real name for yourself. Now, where the hell is that waiter? I’m starving.”

Pittsburgh

Debbie, Carl and Emmett’s House

Emmett and Drew were resting on the couch when they heard Debbie call out from upstairs, “Emmett are you down there?”

Emmett paused the DVD player then shouted back, “Yeah. Drew and I are watching a movie.”

“Good then, both you get your asses upstairs and give me hand with all this goddamn luggage. Carl’s going to be here with the rental van in a few minutes.”

Drew followed Emmett upstairs. When they got to Debbie’s room he asked, “Are you and Carl going somewhere?”

“Oh, hey baby. I was sorry to hear about your coach. You holdin’ up all right?”

“Oh, yeah, thanks for asking. Are you going on a trip?”

“A whirl-wind, cross-country trip.” Debbie excitedly gave the details of their travel plans as Drew and Emmett helped her carry a dozen suitcases down to the living room. They were going to begin by visiting Toronto to see the girls and attend Gus’ kindergarten graduation then they were driving out to Salt Lake City and finally down to San Antonio before driving back to Pittsburgh.” We’re calling it our ‘Grandkid-o-rama’ I even got t-Shirts made, see!” She opened her cardigan to reveal a colorful t-shirt with the motto printed on along with the names off all their destination cities and iron-on photos of Gus, JR and Carl’s grand children.

Emmett put his hand to his chin and asked, “And you got a shirt just like it for Carl?”

“Oh-huh” He’s gonna love it don’t ya think?”
Drew had known Debbie long enough to answer, “Oh definitely, who wouldn’t?”

Just then, a loud, but melodious horn blared from outside.

“Oh that must be Carl with the minivan.” They all went to the door, but what Carl had driven home was by no means a minivan. Emmett stood on the front steps with his mouth hanging open in astonishment. And Drew was at a complete loss for words at the sight in front of him.

Debbie, however, knew exactly what to say. "Holy Shit! What, the fuck, is that?"

Carl stood at the curb in front of them a huge smile on his face and his arms spread wide. "They call it...the Vectra." Carl answered with pride, "It's the top of the line, Deb. The very best Winnebago they have to offer."

Debbie was stunned. She'd never seen anything like it before. The motor home was enormous, "You didn’t buy this behemoth, did you?" She asked.

Carl shook his head, "No no. We’re just leasing it. I decided that a minivan was no way for my queen to travel. Now come take a look at the inside. You're going to love it!"

Carl helped Debbie step up into the Winnebago as Emmett and Drew followed. When Debbie looked around she explained, "Christ! It's nicer than the house. It’s like a fucking mansion on wheels."

The motor home was elaborately decorated. And in addition to the full kitchen and living area, there was a bedroom with a queen sized bed. Debbie was beaming. In her mind, this was the most extravagant way one could possibly travel. She threw her arms around Carl and planted kisses all over his cheeks. Carl laughed and asked, "What do you think Emmett?"

Making use of his southern etiquette he replied, "I can honestly say, I've never seen anything like it."

Toronto

Cairine Wilson Day School
Gus sat on the stage of the auditorium with his classmates and did his best to sit still and be good as each of their names were called. He’d already received his diploma and the Head Mistress was on the letter T now so he wouldn’t have to sit there much longer. He looked out into the audience at all the parents holding video-cameras or waving to their own little boy or girl. Gus felt especially proud because his family took up almost an entire row. Mommy, Mama and his little sister were there along with his Uncles, Grandma Deb and Grandpa Carl, even Justin had shown up at just as the music started. He was standing in the back of the auditorium, now, taking pictures. But, Gus was happiest to see his Daddy sitting in the audience wearing a proud expression on his face.

In the week since he’d show up at the T-ball game, they’d spent every afternoon together either going to the park, or the natural history museum, or shopping at the mall. Daddy had bought the special dress-up outfit Gus was wearing now. It was a suit, just like the kind that Daddy wore. He felt like such a big boy wearing a real tie instead of the clip on that he wore with his school uniform everyday. That morning when everyone was getting ready, Brian came in Gus’s room to help him.

“You just about ready, Sonny Boy?” Brian asked as he stood in the doorway of Gus’s room.

Gus turned from the mirror and beamed when he saw his Daddy, “Is it time to go?”

“Just about, we need to get that tie on you first though.” Brian walked up to Gus, slid his hands underneath his arms and lifted him onto the bed. Gus stood there and faced Brian, while still wearing a big goofy grin.

“Now, do you remember how to start?” Brian asked.

“Yeah. I button my top button and flip up my collar.” Gus answered excitedly. He wanted to show his Dad that he remembered their lesson from the other day.

“That’s good,” Brian replied as he slipped the tie around his son’s neck, “And what kind of knot are we going to make?”

Gus bit his lip as the thought for a moment, “Uh…the double Windsor?” He wasn’t sure he was right.

Brian nodded and smiled back at his son but then quickly changed back to a no-nonsense expression as he continued the quiz, “And why do we prefer the double Windsor to the four-in-hand knot?”
Gus knew the answer to this question so he answered in earnest, “Because even though it’s harder to make, the double Windsor is the kind of knot that all the really important men wear. It shows how powerful they are.”

Brian laughed and kissed Gus’s forehead, “Now let’s see what else you remember. You tell me the steps and I’ll follow your directions.”

Gus nodded. “Step one…uh over and under.”

Brian did as instructed then waited for Gus to continue, “Step two is easy, out and up.”

“Are you sure?” Brian asked.

Gus put his hands on his hips and furrowed his brow, “Yes. Daddy. Don’t try and confuse me.”

“Okay okay,” Brian laughed, “Now we’re almost finished. What last step?”

“Behind…and…out!” Gus replied triumphantly. He jumped off the bed and ran up to the mirror. He pulled at the sleeves of his coat and buttoned it before and excitedly stating, “I look like you!”

Brian blinked his eyes and walked up to the mirror and stood behind his son, “You think so?”

Gus nodded, “Mommy says I’m gonna be real tall like you when I grow up and then we’ll look exactly alike.”

Brian reached down and brushed the hair off Gus’s forehead and said, “Don’t grow up too fast Sonny Boy.”
Toronto

Melanie and Lindsay’s House

After the graduation, Deb took control of the kitchen and instructed Carl and Michael on how to properly slice the tomatoes and butter the garlic bread as if she hadn’t told them how hundreds of times before. Gus and a few of his classmates played on the swing set as Ben attempted to teach Jenny Rebecca how to play catch. She was fond of retrieving the ball, but really had no interest in throwing it back to him. Melanie and Lindsay made small talk with a few of the other parents who’d dropped by. They traded baby-sitter contact info, debated which organic produce store had the freshest vegetables, and complained about the increase in next year’s tuition.

Upstairs, Brian and Justin were making use of the master bathroom, the only room in the house with a lock on the door.

Justin gripped the edges of the sink as Brian bit his neck and growled, “You didn’t tell me you were going to be here.”

“It was a last minute decision” Justin panted as Brian pulled his pants down and bent him forward towards the bathroom mirror.

“You should’ve told me, I would have rented a hotel room.” Brian continued as he spread the contents lube packet along Justin’s crack.

“Like I said... AH...it was a last minute decision.”

Brian worked two fingers into Justin, “I’m glad...you’re here.”

Justin let out a quiet moan and replied, “I can tell. Now, will you shut up and fuck me?”

Justin knew he was going to pay for that remark as soon as he said it. Brian took hold of his shirt and pulled him to the ground. He flipped him roughly over on the cold, tiled floor. He paused for a second to take in the sight of Justin’s eager and ready ass. Brian stroked himself a few times, slid on the condom and began fucking Justin with such voracity that Justin had to bite his tongue to keep from crying out and attracting the attention of the other guests. Brian adjusted the angle of his motions so he could make sure and drag his cock against Justin’s prostate with each thrust. Justin bucked up against him, trying to take as much of Brian into him as he possibly could. It’d only been
two weeks since he’d left Pittsburgh, but the hunger to be filled by Brian had become nearly unbearable. In seconds, Justin was coming.

Brian didn’t let up. He didn’t know when they’d have the chance to be together again so he was determined to make this last. He rolled his hips in the way he knew Justin loved. He reached around and gently stroked Justin’s cock, urging it back to life. Soon, Justin was hard again and he started to fight Brian for control. He reached forward and took hold of the edge of the tub and used the strength of his arms to rock himself back onto Brian’s cock. Brian sat up on his knees and let Justin pound back against him. They came together and while Brian recovered almost immediately Justin lay there, quivering on the floor. Justin felt dizzy when he tried to get up and he had to sit back down.

Brian stood and checked his hair in the mirror before looking back at Justin. He gave Justin a devilish grin and asked, “What the matter Sunshine, you’re not getting old are you?”

“I may be getting old, but I’m comforted by the fact that I’ll always be much, much younger than you.” Justin replied as he stood and wrapped his arms around Brian’s waist.”

Brian turned in his arms, “You really are a twat, you know that?”

Justin shrugged and gave Brian a big, toothy smile, “It’s why you love me.”

“It’s sad, but true,” Brian agreed, “So, are you ready to tell me what made you decide to come up here when you’ve only been back in New York for a couple weeks?”

“Well there’s Gus’s graduation.”

“And?” Brian pressed. He knew Justin loved Gus, but he needed to make sure there wasn’t something wrong. Although Brian hated that they lived apart he knew how important New York was for Justin’s career. He had no intention of letting Justin start stepping backward after all the acclaim he’d received from his show. His wrist had healed and it was time he got back to work. He’d been away from the city long enough.

“And I needed to talk to Michael, but I didn’t want to do it over the phone.”

“Oh?”
“Yeah. I’ve decided I want to sell Rage.”
Michael sat at the kitchen table and logged in to MAX Comics’ web-conferencing URL address and waited for Justin, and Morgan Teel the VP of Development & Property Acquisition to log in as well. The meeting wasn’t supposed to start for a couple minutes, but Michael wanted to make sure he didn’t have any problems navigating the site. Justin had asked his new agent to represent them during the initial meeting and once an offer was made she’d have one of the intellectual property specialists at her firm look over the contract to make sure everything was in order.

After a moment, Justin’s image appeared in a pop-up window on Michael’s monitor, “Hey Michael, can you hear me okay?”

Michael waved into the web-cam at Justin and the woman who was now sitting next to him, “Yeah, everything seems to be working okay.”

“Good. Michael this is my agent, Sandra.”

“It’s good to meet you, Michael, “Sandra with a pleasant smile, “Do you have any questions for me while we’re waiting for Mr. Teel?”

“Uh, Yeah, Justin told me you’ve worked with comic book creators in the past?”

“Indirectly. Earlier in my career I worked with a few well known illustrators who were transitioning from print work to electronic mediums. They were free lancers though, not actual creators. Our agency represents both commercial and fine artists. We pride ourselves on having a diverse client base, but remember what ever happens this is Justin’s and your decision. My role is to offer you advice and, with your permission, negotiate terms.”

Justin leaned forward slightly and added, “Rage is just as important to me as he is to you, Michael. So the worst case scenario, we just turned down MAX’s offer.”

Michael nodded, “I just want to make sure they understand how valuable the comic is.”
In the next moment Morgan Teel’s video image appeared in the pop up window on both Michael and Justin’s computer screens. “Terrific, I’m glad you’re both here, “Morgan began, “Shall we get started?”

New York

New York University Health Sciences Bookstore

Justin held the door open for Daphne as she exclaimed, “A hundred thousand dollars?”

“For each of us, can you believe it?” Justin replied with a sort of stunned, excitement, “And that’s if we retain merchandising rights, first right-of-refusal for any resells, and maintain control over any spin-offs ideas.”

“Spin offs?” Daphne asked as she grabbed a basket as she started down the aisle in search of her medical text books.

“Yeah, like if they want to give Zephyr his own series, then they’d first have to give permission and then they’d have to pay us separately for that.”

Daphne scrunched her nose up and made a face as she asked, “Why, on earth, would anyone want to make a comic just about Zephyr?”

Justin let out a laugh, “Don’t ask me but, Michael seemed to think it was a good idea.”

Daphne rolled her eyes while pulling an enormous human anatomy text off the shelf, “So, what if you and Michael didn’t want to keep those rights? Would they pay you more?”

Justin stopped in the aisle and slowly nodded his head.

“How much?” Daphne excitedly asked when she saw the expression on Justin’s face.
“A million dollars. We’d split it between us.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Daphne screamed. Other medical students turned and stared at her.

“Daph.” Justin said as he motioned for her to be quiet, “It’s not as much as it sounds, After taxes I’d only be getting like, three-hundred and forty grand.”

Daphne waved her hand in the air, “Oh only three-hundred and forty thousand dollars. I can see what it’s not that big a deal to you.”

Justin could see that Daphne’s now filled basket was getting heavy for her so he took a few of the books out and carried them, “Of course it’s a big deal but it’s not like I’m going to be a millionaire. It would give me enough security so I could be more careful about the work I choose to do.”

“And you wouldn’t need to borrow money from Brian.” Daphne added.

“I haven’t taken a dime from him since I left school but –“

“But what?” Daphne asked carefully,” She could tell Justin had something more on his mind.

Justin scratched his head, “If or hopefully when, we live together again, I don’t want to be ‘the little woman’ you know?”

Daphne pulled her chin close to her neck, “Are you talking about one of your pervy sex games?”

Justin lightly slapped her shoulder, “Uh..No. I’m talking about living expenses, bills, that sort of thing. The times when I lived at the loft Brian just kind of took care of everything. I bought groceries when I could, but that was about it. Even when he was out of work, he wouldn’t let me help with the money stuff.”

“Justin, I’ve seen the way Brian lives, I don’t think you two are gonna be 50-50 in the money department any time soon.”
"I know that, I just don’t want to be his responsibility, I want to be his partner, his equal."

"I seriously doubt Brian thinks of you as his responsibility.” Daphne countered as they walked to the checkout line.

"Why not? That’s how our whole relationship started.”

"Really, didn’t it start with him fucking you so hard you could still feel him the next morning?” At this comment the lady at the cash register started choking on her gum.

Justin made face at Daphne to try and get her to shut up.

“What?” She innocently replied.

When the cashier handed Daphne back her credit card she and Justin made their way back out onto East 29th Street. “Daph?” Justin sighed.

“Yeah?”

“When Brian proposed to me, I know it was sincere. But, I think he did it because he felt he had to in order for me to take him back, and maybe he was right about that. I hate that I put him in that position. I don’t want Brian to ever feel like he has to do something in order for me to stay with him. I just want him to want me as much as I want him.

Toronto

Melanie & Lindsay's House

Lindsay opened the oven to check on the latest batch of oatmeal raisin cookie that she and Gus had made together. OCAD was closed till the First of July when the summer session started and Lindsay was settling back into her role as a stay-at-home mom. Now that Michael and Ben were back in Pittsburgh, the brunt of the house work had fallen back on her, but surprisingly she didn't seem to mind. Gus was actually a big help, he could fold clothes, pick up toys, and keep JR entertained. Before his Uncle Michael left, he reminded Gus that as the man of the house it was very important that he help take care of Jenny Rebecca and his Moms. Gus took this message to heart and he prided himself on being Mommy's helper.
JR beat down on her high-chair tray and cheered, “Cookie! Cookie! Cookie!”

Gus started laughing. He’d been waiting for the earlier batch of cookies to cool and he agreed with his sister. It was time to have one so, he joined in her cheer, “Cookie, Cookie Cookie!”

“Okay, okay! Now, just one each before dinner” Lindsay replied as she handed each of the children a cookie. Jenny Rebecca immediately started sucking on hers while Gus broke his in half and offered a piece to Lindsay, “Here Mommy, let’s share.”

He held the cookie up to Lindsay and as she took it she replied, “Gus, do you know how lucky I am to have a little boy like you?”

Gus nodded, and matter-of-factly, “Uh-huh.”

Lindsay put her hands on her hips, “Oh really?”

Gus finished chewing the bite of his cookie then said, “Yes. Daddy says you and Mama are lucky because you get to see me every day. When he came to visit, he said tucking me in at night was his favorite thing.”

Lindsay poured a glass of milk for each of them as she replied, “You know Daddy’s very busy and if he had more time, he’d come to see you more often.”

“I know, but I bet he’d get to see me more if we lived in the same town.”

Pittsburgh

Riverside Wedding Chapel

Emmett stood in the banquet room with two enormous taffeta bows in his hands. He surveyed the
space and tried to decide where to place the tacky ornamentation that the mother of the bride had insisted upon. Emmett always wanted his clients to have the special day of their dreams though he was often alarmed by straight people’s complete and total lack of good taste.

Just as he was about to place the first ribbon on the inside of the chapel door, the door swung open and knocked him to the ground.

“Emmett! Are you okay?” Drew asked as he helped him up off the ground.

Emmett dusted himself off, “I’m fine, but I think this might be the end of this ridiculous bow. I didn’t think you were picking me up till six?”

“I know, but I couldn’t wait. We’ve got to talk.”

“Sure baby, sit down. What is it?” Emmett asked with concern. He could tell Drew was upset, angry even.

Emmett Drew sat down at one of the two dozen ornately decorated tables and Drew looked down into his lap, “They announced who they hired as the new head coach. It’s Ray Bob Brandt.”

Emmett put his hand on his hip, “Uh! You mean the Reverend Ray Bob Brandt? Mr. ‘get the godless sodomites out of office, off our televisions and out of our schools’?”

“That’s the one, he’s only one the most vocal, bigoted, homophobes in the entire NFL.” Drew answered as he shook his head.

“What are you going to do?”

“Sit on the bench, probably. I can’t see him putting me on the field. Not when he’s bringing the number two draft pick with him. He’s a quarterback from Florida State. He led the conference in passing yards and had seventeen touchdown passes last season. My arm’s got two maybe three good year’s left, and that’s if I don’t get injured.”

“Do you think he’ll have you fired?”
“He can’t, not for being gay anyway. That’s the one good thing about my coming out. The League Commissioner put out the new anti-discrimination policy. It is why the Ironmen made my contract is so strict though. If I do or say anything that brings media attention to my sexual orientation, I’m out.”

Emmett held his hands up and in a mocking tone replied, “So, football has it’s very own ‘don’t-ask don’t tell’ policy. Wup-di-do!”

Drew couldn’t help but smile. He loved Emmett’s flare, despite himself, “Some good it’s going to do me if all I get to do all season watch the games from the sidelines.”

Emmett hated to ask, considering that it would mean Drew leaving town, but felt he should at least offer the suggestion, “Have you talked to your agent about maybe getting traded to another team?”

Drew sighed, “Actually, I’ve thought about, but I wanted to talk to you first. You know how much I love the game, right?”

“It’s you’re life. It’s why you get up in the morning.” Emmett answered.

Drew looked into Emmett’s eyes, “It’s always been the most important thing in my life, until I met you, that is.”

Emmett struggled to say, “Oh. Drew.”

Drew took Emmett’s hands in his, “If I quit before the season starts. I won’t be fined for breaking my contract. Or, my agent can put out feelers see any other teams are interested in me.”

Emmett let Drew’s words sink in for a moment, “Back in Hazelhurst,” Emmett began, “There was this girl, Susie Carlyle. She had this boyfriend, Jimmy. He’d planned to work on his family’s farm while he saved up to marry her. But, right before he graduated the bank foreclosed on his father and they lost everything. He didn’t really have any other prospects so he went and enlisted in the Army. Oh Drew, you should have seen him when he got back from basic training. That uniform, and his arms! They were as solid as-“

“Em.” Drew said to gently urge him to get to the point.
“Right, well anyway. Everybody in town was all a twitter. What’s going to happen to Jimmy and Susie? It was the hottest topic down at the coffee shop down on Main Street. Then one day, before his orders came Susie walked up to him right in the middle of Dawson’s Market and said, ‘Jimmy Peters. I love you. No matter where life takes you, I’ll stand by your side. You’re my man my home is where you are. Last I heard, they’d lived in, Germany, Japan, and Italy. She followed him all over the world. I think they have, like, four kids now.”

“Are you saying you’d consider-“

“You’re my man, Drew Boyd. I love you. Talk to your agent, because where ever life, or the NFL takes you, I’ll stand by your side. My home is where you are.”

“You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me” Drew said as he wrapped his arms around Emmett and began kissing and sucking on his lower lip, “I don’t know how I got so lucky.”

Emmett drew stepped back, took Drew’s hand and led him to the storage closet. Once the door was shut, he reached down and started stroking Drew’s dick through his jeans, “You’re about to get even luckier.”

As Emmett started to kneel down, Drew asked with surprise, “Here?”

Emmett looked up at Drew and replied, “Honey, just because you’re out of the closet doesn’t mean you can’t have some fun inside one, every once in a while.”

**Pittsburgh**

**Woody’s**

Brian leaned against the edge of the pool table as he took a swig of his beer and waited for Michael and Ben share their big news. They’d been home for over three weeks now, but it was their first trip to Liberty Avenue. "So, out with it Mikey. What’s the big announcement? You’ve got us waiting on pins and needles."

Michael looked up as his husband as Ben wrapped an arm around his shoulder and said, "Go on, Michael, tell them."
"Well as you all know, this has been a rough year for us, with losing Hunter and all," Michael began. Ted nodded solemnly as Emmett reached out and squeezed Michael's hand.

"And I've been doing a lot of soul searching trying to figure out the best way to honor his memory, and really do something that can make a difference," Michael took a deep breath before he finished, "Ben and I decided have decided to open a group home for homeless teens."

"Oh my God, Michael! That's a wonderful idea," Emmett exclaimed as he gave Michael a big hug.

Ted raised his bottle of Perrier to them, "I agree, it's a commendable endeavor. But, I thought Prop 14 would prevent gays and lesbians from foster-parenting."

"We found a loop hole," Michael answered.

"Michael and I have been working on it for a couple months, we didn't want to say anything till we were approved but we found out today got qualified for 501c3 status. Now we can incorporate as a non-profit organization."

"That's some loop hole," Emmett began, "Do you think you could find one for gay marriage?"

Michael, Ben and Ted started laughing when Brian asked, "What about The Red Cape?"

"I can use the money from Rage to buy out the space entirely. So, except for employee salaries, I'll have next to no overhead."

"And as a non-profit we'll qualify for federal loans, private grants and money that the Pediatric HIV/AIDS Foundation has earmarked for various charities.

"AIDS Foundations?" Ted asked with concern.

"Uh huh," Michael answered enthusiastically, "We want to specialize in helping HIV positive boys."
The Ted and Emmett's smiles left their faces. Brian pinched the bridge of his nose and said, "Saint Michael, as noble as ever. I'm going to go get another beer."

Michael frowned and furrowed his dark eyebrows as he followed Brian to the bar. He grabbed Brian's forearm and asked, "What the hell is your problem?"

"My problem?" Brian scoffed, "Hey, I'm not the one who's choosing to be a full time grave digger."

"You take that back." Michael demanded.

“How soon we forget,” Brian said with a sneer, “I was at the hospital, remember? I was the one holding you together when Hunter was dying. You were a fucking mess. Don’t expect me to be there every time one of your foundlings starts to kick it.”

Michael's chest heaved with anger as he struck back, “I guess the only thing I should expect from you is for you to be a selfish son-of-a-bitch, as always.”

“I guess so. But, let me ask you, Mikey, are you taking in all the sick little artful dodgers out there so you can practice for when Ben’s dying?”

Brian new he’d crossed the line as soon as the words came out of his mouth but, Michael didn’t miss a beat before slapping Brian across the face and walking out the door.

**Pittsburgh**

**Brian’s Loft**

Brian rested his head back on his pillow as he brought his cigarette to his lips. It was after three in the morning, but sleep was eluding him. After leaving Woody’s he cruised the VIP lounge and the backroom of Babylon, but no one caught his interest. He was beginning to think that all the fuckable queers had left the state of Pennsylvania.

He knew he’d gone too far with what he’d said to Michael. Michael was only happy when he was playing the mother hen. He’d done it as long as they’d known each other. Brian couldn’t count the number of times Michael had nursed him through a bad trip, or kept him from driving when he was drunk out his mind, or talked him off a ledge.
Taking care of people is who Michael was, but it didn’t mean he could handle the aftermath when there wasn’t anything left he could do for someone.

Michael deserved better. If anyone had earned the right to have the story book ending it was him. Brian couldn’t understand why Michael would want to ask for so much certain heartache. That was the plus side of being alone, no pain.

Brian crushed the end of his cigarette out when the phone rang. Before he had a chance to say hello he heard Justin say, “I can’t sleep.”

Brian curled in his lips before answering, “So you thought you’d wake me up? Misery loves company, is that it?”

“Something like that.”

Brian could tell from his voice that Justin was smiling.

Justin’s tone was different when he said, “It’s worse than the last time, you know?”

“It’ll be easier once you get busy again.” Brian tried to reassure Justin. It was all he could do to keep from agreeing with him. The first time Justin had left for New York Brian was able to bury himself at Kinnetik. But now, with staff increases they were making, much of the hands-on work Brian usually tended to on his own had been delegated to Ted, or one of his other employees. It was the first time in his adult life that he was working under fifty hours a week. The extra time only served to remind Brian that Justin wasn’t there.

“Brian?”

“Hmm?”

“Is it always going to be like this?”

Brian knew what Justin was asking. We’re they always going to be living apart, coming together only for weekend getaways or family gatherings. He hated feeling like this. He hated that Justin
wasn’t here and he hated that he couldn’t say anything that would help Justin. He wanted to tell him that it’d all work out in the end, but this wasn’t a story book. This was really life, “I don’t have a crystal ball.”

Justin sighed in response. They remained on the line for a few more minutes, but they didn’t talk. They just listen to each other breathe.

Finally, Justin said, “I guess, I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Uh huh.” Brian replied then he heard Justin hang up the phone. Brian looked at the clock. It was nearly four thirty. He pulled himself out of bed and went to take a shower. He figured he may as well start his day because there was no point in trying to get any sleep, now.

Pittsburgh

Ted’s Condo

Michael sat with Ted at his dining room table as he looked over the non-profit status approval forms, paperwork outlining various grants, and the MAX Comic’s offer letter.

“The thing you’ve got to realize is that it’s easier to make money when you already have money. If you sell the comic outright it’d show the foundations that you have a sound business plan and a substantial amount of capital. That way, you’ll have a better chance of receiving more funding. It’s not just regular caretaking expenses you need to consider, you’ll also be responsible for the boys’ medical bills.”

“Oh Ben’s insurance will take care of that, Carnegie Mellon offers terrific dependent benefits. I’m also covered as a domestic partner.”

“Sure, but experimental treatments or any anti-retrovirals that haven’t been approved by the FDA won’t be covered. You’re going to want to have the funding to provide the best possible healthcare options, aren’t you?”

“Absolutely. So, you’re saying Justin and I should take the million dollar option?” Michael asked, his head was swimming and he was relying on Ted’s business sense to help him get grounded.
Ted shook his head, “Not necessarily. If Rage really takes off under the MAX imprint then who knows what you’re the cash flow from your royalties will look like. There’s a reason why they gave you these two options. The million dollar option is sexy. It sounds like a golden ticket, but that would be it. No matter what happens to Rage, or any of the associated properties, you’d be out of it. You wouldn’t see a dime after the initial payoff.”

“I didn’t think this would be so difficult,” Michael replied sullenly.

“You know, I’ll probably lose my place in ‘financial advisor heaven’ for saying this, but I don’t think you should let the money be the deciding factor. I think you and Justin need to really think hard about whether or not you’re ready to say goodbye to Rage for good.”

Michael propped his elbows on the table and rested his head in hands as he replied with disdain, “That’s a lot easier said than done.”

Ted rested a hand on Michael shoulder and said, “Uh…I take it we’re not talking about Rage anymore?”

Michael turned to Ted and asked, “Can you fucking believe what Brian said to me? How could he be so, goddamn heartless?”

“Michael, I wouldn’t dare presume to know Brian as well as you do, but I do spend quite a bit of time with him at Kinnetik. Sometimes his remarks that come of as cruel actually hide his well meaning intentions.”

Michael thought for a second and sighed, “Why do his well meaning intentions hurt so much.”

“Because he loves you enough to say the really tough things, the things the rest of us don’t have the guts to say.”

Toronto
Mel and Lindsay’s House

Lindsay sat, naked, at the edge of the bed as Melanie knelt in front of her. She gently took hold of Lindsay’s thighs and coaxed her legs open. Melanie smiled at Lindsay and lightly pushed on her belly so she’d lie back on the bed.

When Melanie situated herself on the floor between her wife’s legs, she sighed, “God, Lindz. You’re pussy is so beautiful. I’m getting all wet just looking at you.”

Lindsay blushed at Melanie’s words, but spread her legs wider to signal that she was ready. Melanie started kissing along Lindsay’s inner thighs, working her way up in till she was at Lindsay’s opening. When she started licking her, Lindsay let out a soft moan. As she let the sensations wash over her she reveled in the stolen moments like these when JR was napping and Gus was away on a play date. Melanie could be so sweet and attentive to her needs and she truly did know how to respond to her. Even after all these years together, Lindsay could still be a little shy when it came to expressing what she wanted in bed and she was grateful that Melanie was so good at reading her body.

Melanie used her nose to make little circles on Lindsay’s clit as she slowly fucked her with her tongue. She wasn’t interested in getting off, herself. She just wanted to show Lindsay how much she loved her and how happy and blessed she felt to have her in her life. When Lindsay’s moans started growing louder Melanie started fingering her as she sucked at and teased her clit. Lindsay new she was getting close and as she felt her orgasm approaching she took hold off her own breasts and pulled on then pinched her nipples. When she cried out in release Melanie licked up over her vagina, navel, chest and finally her neck before kissing Lindsay and letting her taste herself on her lips.

After a moment Lindsay sighed, “Ahhh. What did I do to deserve that?”

“Oh just little things, like being the best wife a woman could ask for.”

“That’s all?” Lindsay said with a sleepy smile on her face.

Melanie rolled off of Lindsay and nestled up beside her, “I don’t want you to feel like you’re not appreciated, that I take you for granted. You’re a bright, strong, amazing woman and nothing makes me happier than when you’re happy.”

Lindsay rolled over on top of Melanie and replied, “Then you must be deliriously happy, right now.”
New York

ARA Agency

Sandra McGill’s Office

Justin sat in a plush leather chair across from Sandra McGill’s desk. According to Adrienne, Sandra McGill was one of the top billers at the ARA Agency and it wasn’t from taking a boat load of artists and working them all to the point of exhaustion. She had built her career by carefully selecting the artists she represented and making shrewd win-win business decisions for both herself and her clients. The fads of the art world annoyed her. She prided herself on cultivating the careers of artists with real staying power. She didn’t have any real “super-stars” on her client list, but all of her clients were well known, and had excellent reputations.

Justin liked her. Her appearance wasn’t what he’d expected from a New York power broker. She was in her late fifties and had a full head of flowing grey hair that rested neatly, just below her ears. She wore oversized, hand crafted jewelry and belts with loose fitting dresses that often skimmed her ankles.

When Sandra walked into her office she started speaking to Justin as if they were already in the middle of a conversation, “What we need to focus on is longevity. I don’t want to overexpose you in trendy emerging artists’ exhibitions. I’m thinking more along the lines of smaller ‘invitation only’ engagements for discerning collectors who are looking to help cultivate the careers of truly talented young people.”

“But, I thought getting started was about putting your work in front of as many people as possible.”

Sandra leaned back in her chair, “It’s one avenue to take, and I have no doubt you have the drive to work that way. But like I said, it’s longevity that we need to focus on.”

Justin nodded, but he didn’t saying anything.

“It’s important though, that you’re honest with me about what your limits are. I’ll get you work, as much of it as you want. I can’t promise you all of it will be high profile, but it’ll give you the chance to pace yourself and work on making a name for yourself. I need to know though, that you won’t commit to anything your hand will prevent you from finishing.”
Justin appreciated that Sandra was being up front with him, she didn’t sugar coat things and for the first time since coming to New York he felt like he was talking to a ‘real’ person. “My hand can be unpredictable, but I’m managing. Even though it still hurts sometimes, it’s worth it. I won’t do anything to jeopardize my ability to have a future as an artist.”

Pittsburgh

Pittsburgh Renaissance Hotel

Grand Ball Room

Ted and Cynthia sat with Brian as they waited for the final award of the evening to be presented. So far, it had truly been Kinnetik’s night. They’d already received recognition for Regional Ad of the Year for Liberty Air’s Get High campaign. They were also presented with industry awards for the work they’d done with Old Pitt Beer and Eyeconics. This last award was the only one that Brian really had interest in, though. As a CEO/owner he’d didn’t qualify for Ad Person of the Year, because only execs who weren’t agency shareholders qualified for that recognition. It wasn’t the top award anyway. Agency of the Year was the highest honor and it was the first year Kinnetik had been nominated.

As nominees were announced Cynthia took Brian’s hand in hers in anticipation. “We’ve got it in the bag, I know it,” She said with a wink.

The tuxedo clad presenter took the podium and began, “The winner of this year’s Agency of the Year is no stranger to receiving recognition. They’ve consistently put out innovative, top-notch work that makes them one of the most sought after agencies in the industry. Headquartered right here in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the 2006 Agency of the Year Award goes to The Vangard Agency. Accepting the award on their behalf is CEO, Gardner Vance.”

“Son-of-a-bitch,” Cynthia sighed as Ted leaned over to Brian and said, “You’ll get ‘em next year Bri.”

Brian let out a short, somewhat, stunned single laugh as he replied, “Thanks Theodore.” Then he reached over and took Cynthia’s glass of wine and finished as Gardner took the stage. Brian would have left, but the after-parties at these functions were where industry heavy-hitters had an opportunity to size each other up. There was also no better place to do the necessary talent poaching that was rampant in the ad game. He, Ted and Cynthia were going to have to do some hardcore recruiting in order to procure the best available staff to ensure that they could service the Pfister account.

The applause died down as Gardner walked up to the podium, “First, I’d like all of my colleagues in the American Advertising Association for this truly, wonderful recognition. It is an affirmation that
we have entered a new era in advertising. The days of the tawdry, sophomoric advertisements are coming to an end. Our clients and their customers, do not want the airwaves filled with 30 second spots filled with cheap innuendo. The people want family-friendly commercials that can be aired any time of the day or night. And The Vangard Agency is proud to give that to them. Thank you very much.”

Once again the audience began to applaud. Brian ran his hand over his face. When emcee started giving the final remarks of the evening Brian said to Ted,” Thirty minutes then we’re out of here.”

The crowd started to get up from their tables and Cynthia and Ted started in on their mission. Brian went to the bar. As he was waiting for his drink someone behind him tapped him on the shoulder. Brian turned, “Grant Nickalls, It’s been a while,” Brian said as he remembered a flash of the balcony fuck they’d shared years ago at the 2000 Awards Ceremony.

“Tough break on that last award there Kinney, at least you’re not going home empty handed.”

Brian took as sip of his scotch and replied, “I rarely go home empty handed.”

Grant laughed, “I’ll tell you though, if they took an agency’s financials into consideration Vangard would have been out of the running. Word has it, he over extended himself when he opened the satellite office in Manhattan.”

“Oh?” Brian replied, only showing the mildest of interest.

“Yeah, I heard the bank’s been breathing down his neck to turn a profit. He’s got sixty days before they freeze Vangard’s credit line.

“You don’t say,” Brian said as he raised an eyebrow.

Grant leaned in closer to Brian, “Between you and me, if there was a way I could scrape seventy or eighty million together. I’d go buy the place out from under the bastard.”

“Uh huh,” Brian replied as he took hold of his chin and stretched his jaw.
Justin was toweling his hair dry when he heard the phone. It was Brian’s ring tone.

“Hey.” Justin answered cautiously. They hadn’t spoken since their conversation the other night.

“Hey,” Brian replied, “Did I catch you in the middle of something?”

“Just getting out of the shower.”

“Are you alone?” Brian asked nonchalantly.

Justin smiled. Brian never asked if he was tricking. Justin supposed he’d called because he actually wanted to talk, “No. I’ve got Lance Armstrong and Matthew McConaughey on the bed waiting for me.”

“Sounds hot,” Brian answered with an easier tone.

Justin didn’t feel like making Brian start the conversation he figured he’d called to have, “Listen, I’m sorry for being weird on the phone the other night. You’re right, I just need to get focused on my work and I’ll be fine.”

“Actually, that’s why I was calling. It turns out I do have a crystal ball.”

Justin laughed,” You do?”

“Mm Hm.”

Justin was happy to play along. “So, what did you see?”
“Well, it was kind of fuzzy, but I could definitely see that we aren’t going to have to deal with this long distance bullshit for a whole lot longer.”
"I'm coming." Brian considered the irony of his statement as he padded across the room in his bare feet.

As the heavy metal door slid across the track, Carl turned from the elevator and waited for Brian to welcome him in.

"Carl." Brian said before it occurred to him why the man was visiting, "Ah. Let me guess, Debbie sent you here to give me my obligatory, post-fuckup lecture."

Carl responded with a sympathetic, and somewhat sheepish, grin as he held up a casserole dish, "She also wanted me to bring this by."

Brian put his tongue in his cheek as he stood aside and motioned Carl inside, "The tuna and macaroni?"

Carl set the dish on the counter as Brian got out two forks.

Brian offered the utensil to Carl, "Oh thanks, but this isn't one of my favorite recipes of Deb's."

Brian laughed as he placed the fork down in front of Carl, "It's an acquired taste. Give it about twenty years." Brian was fairly certain that Debbie didn't send Carl along with a joint for them to share, but there was no way he was going to sit through this sober. "You want a beer?"

Carl took a bite of the noodles then asked, "You got anything stronger?"
"What's your poison?" Brian asked as he walked over to the wet bar.

"I've always been a vodka man." Carl replied.

"Ice?"

"Whatever is fine."

Brian cracked the seal on the bottle of Kettle One and poured them each a stiff drink. He returned and handed Carl the glass. Carl took a swig and smiled, "The good stuff."

Brian nodded as leaned against the counter and started picking at the casserole.

"You know, when we got home from vacation this afternoon I thought we'd be spending the evening talking to Ben and Michael about our trip. Instead all we discussed was what you said to him at the bar the other night."

Brian felt a surge of anxiety build within him, but he was able to mask it as he asked, "You really think what he's up to is a good idea?"

"The way I see it, Michael's an adult. He can make his own decisions. It shouldn't matter whether or not I think it's a good idea."

Brian downed his vodka and went to pour himself another glass, "Yeah well, the way I see it, he's in for a world of trouble."

"I never took you for the sort of man who believed in taking the easy road in life."

Brian set his glass down and turned to face Carl, "You're a cop, Carl. You should know how fucking, lucky Michael and the Professor had it with Hunter. They took him in, and gave him a goddamn key to their house. He could've just robbed them blind and disappeared. Christ, he could've," Brian shook the thought of anything worse from his mind, "Michael and Ben have this annoying habit of seeing the best in people. That's the quickest way to get themselves hurt."
Carl crossed the room and sat down on the couch, "You know, before I worked homicide, I was on the vice squad. A vast majority of my collars were teenagers just trying to survive out there on the street. What always got me, was how living the way they did was preferable to how they'd had it at home. As tough and hardened as they were, most of them just needed one person in their life to let them know they gave a damn. Cause, they certainly never got it from their parents. I'm not saying they can all be rehabilitated; some just don't have the ability to trust. But there are kids out there, a lot of them, who could have a real chance at a normal life if someone showed them an ounce of care and compassion."

"So Michael can give them a normal life just in time for them to start getting sick?" Brian countered.

Carl sighed as he rose to join Brian at the wet bar who was now on his fourth shot, "He's giving them a chance. That's a lot more than anyone else is offering those kids."

**Pittsburgh**

**Shickle Hall**

Blake thumbed through his program as they walked out of the main hall, "Finally, an opera with a happy ending. I was beginning to think they didn't exist."

"Happy endings are hard to come by," Ted agreed, "But they are out there."

"I've never understood why composers would work so hard to create these passionate stories, with characters audiences are bound to fall in love with only to have the heroes meet a tragic end."

Ted took Blake's hand in his as they walked out to the parking lot, "Maybe the composer felt the story would be more credible if it the characters didn't all live happily ever after"

"I don't need them to all live happily ever after. I just want to know they'll be all right. Like with tonight's performance, *Bastien and Bastienne* will certainly have their share of rough times ahead, but at least they're together and they both know, without, a doubt that they love each other.

Ted kissed Blake on the temple before opening the car door for him, "My little romantic. I'm glad you had a good time tonight. I'll be sure and let Brian know you enjoyed it."
Once Ted was inside the vehicle Blake asked, "Are you sure I shouldn't at least send him a thank you card or something? The seats for these season tickets are amazing. It's the first time I could actually see the expressions on the performers’ faces."

"Thanking Brian would only acknowledge that he did something nice for us. In his mind, that's tantamount to throwing the gift back in his face."

"Yeah but, with the bonus you got for landing the Pfister account these tickets really were going above and beyond."

"Trust me Blake, it's taken me years, but I think I've finally got the hang of actually communicating with Brian in a way where he doesn't feel compelled to rip my head off and hand it back to me. I don't want to mess with a good thing."

New York

EVACO

Justin's Room

Justin rolled over in his sleep while in the midst of a fitful dream...

...In the dark of night -- Rage and his trusty sidekick, Zephyr, fly above the roof tops. They use their super-vision to canvas the streets below. Our heroes know they are the only ones who can protect the citizens from the crime and injustice that pollutes their city.

Suddenly, a cry rings in Rage's ears! Someone is in trouble! Rage and Zephyr swoop down to the alley below. As Zephyr takes on a hoard of goons who are up to no good, Rage cradles the injured, yet beautiful blond in his arms. "Don't worry, you're safe now." Rages whispers. The victim's blue eyes open as SHE says, "Oh, Rage how can I ever repay you?"

"No!" Justin woke himself up with his own scream. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness of his room he made his way to the edge of his bed and reached for the crumpled pair of jeans on his floor. He fished through his pockets, found his cell phone and dialed. While the phone rang he anxiously chanted to himself, "Pick up, pick up, pick up."
Ben smiled at Michael as he tightened the soft, silk cords around Michael’s wrists, “Do you trust me?”

Michael was nearly breathless as he answered, “Completely.” He loved it when Ben wanted to take charge like this. It didn’t happen very often, but when it did Michael knew he was in store for something special. Ben started sucking gently on Michael’s nipple, it would go on for a while. When Ben was in the mood to play, he could take hours.

Over the past few months they hadn’t really taken the time to make each other a priority. And now with plans for the home getting underway, they both knew their time would be limited. Tonight was for them. Michael’s breath quickened and just as Ben began to reach down and start stroking him the phone rang.

Michael opened his eyes and forgetting his restraints he tried to sit up. Ben tried to coax him back down, “We’ll let the machine get it,” he said between kisses.

“But, no one would call at this hour unless it was an emergency, can you just see who it is?”

Ben sighed, but knowing Michael he figured the best way to get back to what they started was to put his fears to rest. He reached for the phone and looked at the caller ID. “It’s Justin,” Ben said with obvious irritation.

“Can you put the phone up to my ear?” Michael asked between the rings.

“Michael, I’m sure there’s nothing…”

“Please?” Michael pleaded.

Ben pushed the answer button, “Hey Justin, it’s kind of late. Is everything okay?”

“I know. I’m sorry, I wouldn’t call if it wasn’t important. Is Michael up?”
Ben looked down at Michael’s leaking erection before saying, “Hold on.”

Ben held the phone up to Michael, “What’s the matter?”

“I had the worst nightmare that MAX turned JT into a girl! We can’t give up all our rights. I couldn’t live with myself if they made Rage straight.”

“No no, I agree, but neither option involved maintaining creative control and I’m really kind of counting on the money, what can we do?”

“Would you mind if I had Sandra do some negotiating for us? I would have waited to call, but I have a meeting with her the first thing in the morning.”

“Um. Hold on.” He motioned to Ben to take the phone away from his mouth. Once he did he said, Justin wants his agent to go back to the table with MAX Comics so we can maintain creative control.”

Ben thought for a second, “Ted said we needed a minimum of seventy-five thousand dollars of start up money to qualify for those grants he found for us.”

Michael nodded, “Justin, we get final word before she makes the deal?”

“Absolutely, we’d have to sign any contracts.”

“All right. Then talk to Sandra. Rage would get pretty upset if he didn’t get to play with JT’s dick anymore.”

Justin laughed and sighed with relief, “Thanks Michael. I’ll let you know how it goes.”

When Michael said goodbye Ben put the phone back on the receiver and said, “Now where were we?”
Michael grinned, “Um my right nipple, you’ve got a least another seven minutes on it till you move to the left one.”

**Pittsburgh**

**Liberty Diner**

Emmett walked through the door and took a seat next to Carl and playfully asked, “Hey there Detective. Come here often?”

Debbie grumbled, “Too often,” inaudibly as she passed behind them.

Carl moved his newspaper over to clear the space in front of Emmett, “It’s just plain old Carl now, and I thought I’d finish up the crossword and then have some lunch.”

Emmett pulled the strap of his bag up over his head and set it down on the floor, “I thought you were coming here for breakfast.”

“He did. He’s still here,” Debbie huffed as she made her way back into the kitchen.

“Eh, I like the hustle and bustle in here. It’s too quiet at the house.” Carl replied as he took a sip of his coffee.

“Oh, well. Drewsie’s gonna be here in a minute to pick me up or I’d say we’d join you.” Emmett offered sympathetically.

Carl shook his head, “I’m fine you two go have a good time, hey isn’t that Drew’s Hummer pulling up now?”

Emmett put his hand to the side of his mouth and whispered, “It’s not my favorite Hummer of his if you know what I mean.”

Carl shut his eyes tight, held up his hands and sighed with exasperation, “Emmett.”
“Oh! Sorry sorry. I promised I’d get cut back on providing you with mental images.”

“It’s..okay,” Carl laughed, “I’ll see you later.”

Emmett grabbed his bag and in a near skip he headed out of the diner and hopped into Drew’s car, “Hey baby, what’s the big news?”

Drew turned in his seat to face Emmett and took his hands in his own. “My agent called. I got an offer. Three years, twenty-two million and you’re not going to believe this, as a goodwill gesture they said they’d even make a donation in my name to the upcoming Gay Games.”

“Drew that’s unbelievable! But, which team is it?”

Drew took a deep breath, “The Sabers.”

Emmett tried to remember where they were located, “Seattle?”

Drew nodded, “I know it’s far away from all your friends and your catering business, so if you want to think about it…I’m not going to go without you.”

Emmett leaned forward and kissed Drew before whispering, “Seattle, here we come.”

**Pittsburgh**

**The Red Cape**

The store was busy for a week day, but with summer in full swing kids were free to hangout, shop or do whatever to their hearts content.

A boy walked up to the counter and quietly handed Michael the issue he’d selected.
"That'll be $2.75."

As the boy started to count out his change Michael asked, "The Authority: Revolution issue #7, you like Apollo and Midnighter?"

"Huh? Oh um... yeah they're awesome. And I have all the issues that feature Jenny Quantum except this one. It rocks that you had it in stock."

Michael could see that his customer was a kindred spirit, "Come on, no collection is complete without number seven. It's where Jenny's powers are defined and she helps free Bendix so they can take on Doctor Hassan."

The boy smiled and handed Michael his money, "Do you know if they're going to bring her back after what happened in Armageddon # 9?"

Michael leaned over the counter as if to divulge top secret information, "You didn't hear it from me, but word on the street is she's coming back as Jenny Quarx and she's going to have advance teleportation abilities."

"You'll let me know when?" The boy asked excitedly.

Michael handed the boy a pen and order form "I can put your name on the waiting list if you want?"

"Awesome!" As the started filling out his contact information he moved to the edge of the counter so the next customer could make his purchase.

Michael started to speak before he looked up, "Can I help y- oh. What do you want?"

Brian leaned against the counter, "Now Mikey, that's no way to talk to customers."

The boy handed Michael his info then waved goodbye. Michael waved back the scowled at Brian, "This store reserves the right not to serve assholes."
Brian followed Michael to the other side of the store and watched as he started reorganizing the end-caps. After a few seconds Brian asked, "Come on, don't you want to hear what I've been thinking about?"

"I've got a store full of kids, Brian. I'm sure their parents wouldn't want them hearing anything you've been thinking about."

Brian sighed, but persisted, "I don't know, Jack's Oldsmobile was pretty G rated. At least till we got our hands on it."

Michael smiled in spite of himself. He was still hurt by what Brian had said, but he knew that Ted was right about Brian having had good intentions. Besides, he hadn’t thought about that car in ages. He'd received his first blowjob in the back seat of it. Of course, Brian had paid the guy to give it to him, but he didn't know it at the time. "That was a great car."

Brian put his tongue in his cheek. "You remember that weekend we had the grand idea to boost it in the middle of the night?"

Michael put down the comics and turned to Brian and nodded excitedly, "Between freshmen and sophomore year. We didn't even have our licenses yet."

"Still, we figured that was no reason not to take it on a little joy ride, to Akron of all places." Brian answered as he swung his arm over Michael's shoulder.

"Hey, it was across the state line and that's all that mattered." Michael reminded Brian.

"We couldn't have been on the road for more than half an hour before we noticed the tank was less than quarter full, but when we stopped for gas I couldn't find my wallet."

"So we had to turn around," Michael shrugged, "I never have been to Akron."

Brian started flipping through the comics in the bins, "Trust me, you're not missing anything."

"I guess. What got you thinking about that anyway?"
"It was actually that summer I was trying to remember. It's because of our little trip that I had to wear long sleeves and pants through the entire month of July."

The smile left Michael's face. He remembered, now, the beating Brian got from Jack when he found Brian's wallet on the floor of the driver's seat. It was the worst one he could remember him ever taking. Brian had cuts and bruises from head to toe. "When you showed up on our door step that next day, I...I couldn't believe what Jack had done to you. I was so scared."

Brian put his hand around the back of Michael's neck and gave him a reassuring little shake, "But you didn't show it. You just put me in the bath, cleaned me up and you sat with me till I started feeling safe again. That's when I knew that no matter what Jack ever did to me, as long as I had you, I'd be okay."

"And you were." Michael affirmed.

"So I guess you owe it all to me." Brian smiled.

Michael was confused, "What do you mean?"

"Well. I figure it's because of me that you learned how to take care of wayward youth who don't have anyone else to give a damn about them."

Michael knew he'd just received Brian's apology for his harsh words from the night before. He looked into Brian's eyes and silently forgiven him.

"Those kids will be lucky to have you and the Professor. And...and if you ever need anything. Help with funding or whatever, just let me know."

"You mean it? You'd be willing to help out?"

Brian shrugged, "Yeah, apparently philanthropy and altruism get Justin hot."
Michael rolled his eyes, "He really is kinky."

Trenton, New Jersey

Pfister Corporate Headquarters

Brian and Ted spent the most of the morning being led through Pfister’s enormous Corporate Headquarters by the Director of Vendor Relations, Stacey Matthews. She was slim, blond and had a captivating smile. Her college co-ed appearance belied the fact that she had a strong head for business and she’d impressed Brian by being able to articulately address all of his questions during the tour. Pfister was Brian’s first global account and he’d never even interned at a corporation of this size before. Seeing the inner workings of a Fortune 1000 company first hand excited him and he made sure to keep his eyes and ears open for any ideas that could help Kinnetik’s growth.

When they reached the line for one of the many coffee bars that were peppered throughout the office campus Brian said, “So Stacey, tell me more about your supplier diversity program.”

She smiled and bobbed her head slightly before answering, “Well Brian, as a company owner yourself, I’m sure you know that one of any organization’s biggest challenges is recruiting and retaining the top talent.”

Brian nodded and Stacey continued, “In research it’s particularly difficult. Most of our scientists come from an academic setting and many of them aren’t easily influenced by compensation packages alone. They’re looking for a work environment that is a second home, or in the case of some, a first home. It’s extremely important for our employees to understand that Pfister believes in treating everyone with fairness, dignity and respect. We try to express those beliefs by being particular about the companies we choose to work with.

It didn’t take Ted long to realize why Brian was asking about this. He usually could give a crap about the touchy feely stuff like fairness, dignity and respect, but if there was a business case for it, then that was a different story entirely. “So by entering into preferred vendor agreements with say a woman-owned business you’re showing your female employees that Pfister cares about them?”

“Exactly!” Stacey replied.

Brian was certain the last thing this woman needed was another cup of coffee as she ordered her double half-caf latte with no whip. After they’d each been served, He asked his next question, though he’d already done enough research to know the answer, “So, are all minority groups currently represented on your preferred vendor list?”
“Oh, we’re working on it. Currently, we have exclusivity agreements with a woman-owned business, veteran owned, also Latino, African-American and last month we signed a contract with an office supplies company which is owned by a Pacific-Islander.

Brian exchanged a quick glance with Ted indicating for him to ask, "You wouldn't happen to have a gay owned business on your preferred vendor list, would you?"

“Actually, that's one of my team's action items for this fiscal year. It's difficult though, since gays and lesbians aren't a federally protected class the sexual orientation of business owners isn't normally listed on official documents. The only way to know is to ask and my staff is still wary of doing that. You know, with sexual orientation still being such a hot button issue for most people."

Brian nodded slowly, "I see."

Stacey tilted her head to the side and gave Brian a little once over, "Say Brian, if you don't mind my asking, do you happen to be gay?"

**Trenton, New Jersey**

**Parking Lot of Pfister Corporate Headquarters**

**Later that day...**

As Brian started the engine of the rental car Ted sat next to him while completely dumbfounded, "Did that really just happen?"

Brian glanced over at Ted, "Apparently, getting to suck cock isn’t only benefit of being a fag."

Ted shook his head in disbelief, "You just procured all of Pfister's advertising business, not just for their prescription drugs, but their OTC medications, even their veterinary medicines."

Brian pulled out of the parking lot, "I was there, Theodore."

"It's, it's, it's. Astonishing! Unbelievable!"
"It's also a shit load of work," Brian's lips curled into a smile, "Not to mention an indescribable amount of money."

Ted's accountant mind immediately went into planning mode, "We're going to need at least a dozen new media planners, and the art department is going to have to be completely revamped, we're also going to need to hire more people for operations and admin. And with this kind of expansion, we're absolutely going to need more space."

"Actually, I already have a place in mind. But, don't worry about it now. We'll discuss it when I get back to Pittsburgh in the morning."

"You're not flying back with me, today?"

"No. I need to make another stop."

Ted's smile turned into a smirk, "Oh say…About sixty miles south? Somewhere in New York's East Village?"

Brian just raised an eyebrow.

"Tell Justin I said hello."

**Pittsburgh**

**The Red Cape**

Michael sat on his bean bag in the back of the store and listened as Justin explained the new terms Sandra had negotiated for them.

"If we're willing to give up 1 1/2% of our in royalties and merchandising revenue then they'll do a re-publishing of our first issue to establish Rage's canon under the MAX imprint and we'll get to maintain story approval for any of their publications," Justin explained.
"And we each still get the initial 100 thousand dollar payment?"

"Yes, but only 2% percent residuals instead of 3 1/2%. It sounds fair to me considering we essentially get to keep creative control."

Michael thought about it then said, "So all that's left is signing the contract then?"

Justin's voice became low and he took on a serious tone, "Yeah, But Michael there's something I want to tell you first."

Michael could tell Justin had something important on his mind, "Sure Justin, what is it?"

"Even though we're not doing the comic together anymore, it doesn't change how important you are to me. Not just because you're Brian's best friend, but because all the things you've done for me over the years."

Michael smiled, "Yeah well, it wasn't easy considering what a brat you were in your younger days."

Justin laughed, "I guess it's a good thing your mother whipped me into shape and taught me how to respect my elders."

"Something, for which, I'm sure Brian is eternally grateful."

"Don't let him hear you say that. Seriously though, even in the very beginning when Brian didn't want anything to do with me, and my mere existence annoyed the shit out of you, you still looked out for me. If you hadn't, who knows what could've happened."

"Well you can return the favor by promising to always look out for Brian. He needs you more than I think he'll ever be willing to admit."

Pittsburgh

Pappagano’s Restaurant
Emmett took a sip of his wine as he waited for Ted to respond to his news.

“Seattle?”

Emmett nodded, “Yes. Drew and I are going to make an announcement to everyone before they send out the press releases, but I wanted you to be the first to know.”

“And you’re okay with it? Moving across country, I mean?”

“It’s a great opportunity for Drew, he’ll get to finish out his career there. And the owners promised him that he has the complete support of the team. They just want Drew to come and help them win games. They don’t care about his personal life. It’s not everyday that an expansion team can sign a Super-Bowl winning quarterback.”

Ted reached across the table and took Emmett’s hand in his, “But what about you, Em? Are you going to be happy?”

“I am happy,” Emmett replied despite the fact he was tearing up,” I’m happier than I’ve been in a long time.”

“Then I’m happy for you,” Ted fought to hold back his emotions, “But, I expect a regular report from you on what like is life out on the Pacific Northwest.”

Emmett gave a little salute,” Yes sir! And you and Blake are welcome to come visit anytime. We can go whale watching, and have dinner at the top of the Space Needle, and I hear Seattle has a fabulous gay district.”

“I’m told it rivals Liberty Avenue. I just hope you don’t have so much fun out here that you forget about all of us here in the Pitts.”

Emmett covered his hand with his mouth as he started to cry, “I could never forget about you. You’re my best friend, you’re my Teddy.”
Ted waved Emmett to him as he tried to keep from crying, himself, “Come here.”

The stood and hugged each other as if they were the only ones in the restaurant.

New York

The Historic Dakota Apartment Building

Home of Sandra McGill

Justin had grown up amongst the country club set, but he had never been surrounded by this kind of wealth. Sandra’s Upper West Side apartment had been in her family for three generations. It was decorated with fine antiques and original works by Matisse, Goya, and she even had copper plated etchings that her father had received as a gift from Picasso himself. Her family made their fortune in the import/export business and she’d spent her entire life surrounded by high end, luxury items. Becoming an artist’s representative was a natural choice when she decided she didn’t have an interest in being a lady of leisure. Her apartment building, The Dakota, was a work of art in itself. Justin had passed by it before when he went on the New York gay historic-site walking tour Emmett prepared for him as a going away gift. Among the numerous other celebrities, the fabulous Judy Garland once owned an apartment in this very building.

Tonight’s cocktail party was being thrown in Justin’s honor. Sandra had invited several of her personal friends who were discerning and very competitive art collectors. And in what Justin considered an enormous stroke of luck, Brian showed up at EVACO just as he was about to head up town. Justin was thrilled to see Brian, it was the first surprise visit he’d made, but Brian shrugged off the significance by simply explaining, “I was in the neighborhood.”

“Justin, with minimalism being so en vogue these days, what made you gravitate towards abstract expressionism?” A short plump, woman with a thick German accent asked. Brian noticed that she seemed genuinely interested in what Justin had to say and he was content to quietly stand by Justin’s side as he talked with her and a few of the other guests about his early influences, his current work and how he was considering exploring sculpting. Justin appeared relaxed and happy. He was talking about his work. It wasn’t at all like the trite small talk he’d had to make at his opening months before. When Justin finished his wine Brian took his glass and went to get him a refill. When he drove down to the city his plan had been to pick up Justin and spend the night at The Plaza fucking. But just as Brian pulled up to the front of the Co-Op Justin was walking out the front door wearing a suit, the suit Brian bought for their wedding. Brian surprised himself by not minding that he was going to have to tag along at Justin’s work function. He was glad to do it actually. He supposed it be the sort of thing they’d do for each other if they lived together. And that thought made him realize it was something he wanted, something he really wanted.

As the server filled Brian’s glass Sandra walked up, “You know, Justin came to the City at the
perfect time. The market for emerging artists is hotter than it’s been in decades.”

Brian took a drink of the wine, “He made the right decision to come when he did.”

Sandra smiled, “Most of the people here tonight have been on a waiting list for Justin’s new work. Owning the next Picasso before it’s a Picasso is what it’s all about these days. It’s like the futures market of the art world.”

“So everyone wants to be Gertrude Stein?” Brian asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Bravissimo! Well said, Brian,” Sandra took notice of Brian’s perfectly tailored suit, and beautifully crafted shoes,” You appear to be a man of discerning taste. Do you collect?”

Brian shrugged, “Aside from some of Justin’s work, I own a LuKacs.”

“Impressive. His pieces are hard to come by in the US. Is it something from his Military Series?”

Brian shook his head, “No. his Eternal Teahouse Series.”

Sandra tossed her hair and laughed, “One of the mural sized nudes? If you’re ever interested in selling, I know some people who’d love to get their hands on a LuKacs.”

“Thanks, but I almost lost it once,” Brian took a quick look in Justin’s direction, he was still in engrossed in conversation, “I don’t intend to let go of it again.”

New York

The Plaza Hotel

Brian opened a bottle of water as he sat down at the desk chair next to the bed. Justin was sound asleep. His arms were tucked under the pillow as he laid naked on his stomach. Brian couldn’t remember ever seeing Justin sleep so peacefully. Even after he stopped having the nightmares he still tended to talk in his sleep and he never kept still in bed.
They’d already fucked three times that night, but Brian was still horny. It was in that moment that Brian realized, he hadn’t had, or even been blown by, anyone except Justin for months. This thought caused a quick surge of panic to course through Brian, but just as quickly as it began, it stopped and it occurred to him that he didn’t care. None of the tricks he’d ever had could compare to Justin and even though he couldn’t quite believe it was possible, for the first time in Brian’s life the thought of being with one person, just one person, didn’t terrify him.

Justin turned on his side and he stretched a little as he opened his eyes, “You couldn’t sleep?”

Brian tilted his head to the side, “I’m not tired.” The sleepy smile on Justin’s face was almost too much for him. When Justin lifted the covers Brian rose and joined him in bed. Justin nuzzled against Brian’s shoulder and started kissing his neck.

Justin was close to purring when he asked, “Brian?”

“Hmm?”

A devilish grin appeared on Justin’s face, “Do you like to rim?”

Brian stifled a short laugh as he wrapped his arms around Justin, “Yeah. I love it.” He said enthusiastically.

Justin made a sorry attempt at raising an eye brow, “Then go to it.”

**Pittsburgh**

**Liberty Diner** “Ma! Ma!” Michael called out as he rushed through the door.

Debbie set down her tray and hurried over to him, “Christ, what is it, they can hear you on the other side of the river.”

“It’s a done deal. MAX Comics wired the money this morning. Now everything’s set, Ben and I can get started on really making the group home happen.”
“Oh Baby! That’s terrific news. You and Ben are doing a wonderful thing. I mean it.” She kissed Michael on the cheek and wrapped her arms around him.

“Thanks Ma. It means a lot to hear you say it.”

He tried to step away from her hug but Debbie held on tighter to him and whispered, "You’ve got to do something about Carl," She whispered into Michael’s ear, “For the past week all he’s done is sit at the counter and watch me work. It’s really starting to freak me, the fuck, out.”

Michael managed to pry Debbie’s arms off of him and he glanced over at Carl who, like Debbie had said, just sat there on the stool at the far end of the counter and looked in her direction. When their eyes met Michael gave Carl and awkward little wave.

“I thought it would get better after we got back from vacation, but he still hasn’t found anything to keep him occupied now that he’s retired. Please Michael, don’t you have some projects or something around your house you can ask him to do for you? Anything? If I don’t get him out of my fucking hair, I’m gonna lose it!”

“You know Ma, there actually is something Carl could help me with.”
Episode 611

Toronto

Lindsay and Melanie’s Home

Lindsay cradled the phone to her ear as she wrapped the tea bag string around the spoon, “But Brian, why on earth wouldn’t you want to tell Justin that you’re being monogamous?”

“Because not coming across anyone who’s fuck-worthy is far from being monogamous. Christ, I hate that fucking word. Monogamy,” Brian scoffed, “It sounds entirely too much like menectomy, as in, did you hear? I’ve had my men removed.”

“Brian, you’re being ridiculous.”

Brian considered pointing out that he’d had his share of “etcomys” but he decided against it,

”I have no intention of suggesting to Justin that he stop fucking whoever he wants just bec ause I find the thought of bringing home another mediocre trick to fuck to be completely tedious.”

“You have to know that all Justin has ever wanted is you.”

“Yeah and he decided that when he was seventeen fucking years old, don’t you think he’s at least entitled to a basis of comparison?”

Lindsay nearly choked on her tea, “Uh Brian, I’m pretty sure you’ve both have plenty of opportunities to compare whatever it is you think you need to.”

“He’s twenty two. I’ve got twelve years of fucking on him. He’s too young to even consider settling down.” Brian pinched the bridge of his nose and wondered how this conversation even started.

“As young as you started, I think it’s more like fifteen years. “

“Fine. Fifteen years, all the more reason.”
“Brian.” Lindsay chided in her motherly tone.

“Tell me this, would you still want to be with the person you wanted to spend your life with when you were twenty-two?”

Lindsay took a sip of her tea then reminded Brian, “When I was twenty two, I wanted you.”

“My point, exactly.”

Lindsay shook her head, “All right, all right, I just think you should consider the fact that the only time you two have had problems is when he wanted to settle down and you didn’t.”

“I know Justin has this white picket fence fantasy, but you, of all people, should know that for better or worse is a lot easier said than done.”

Lindsay felt a twinge of guilt as the thought of Sam flashed through her mind, “I’m not saying it’s easy, Brian, but you two are a couple. You’re partners. Don’t you think this is the type of decision you should make together?”

Brian was done talking and by the silence on the end of the line Lindsay could tell, “I know you love him and I think it’s wonderful that you’ve realized it yourself,” she heard Brian make a small snort, “But, part of being in an adult relationship, is letting the person you love, love you back.”

Lindsay’s words stung so Brian batted them away, “I didn’t realize they ran Dear Abby in Canada.”

Lindsay sighed, “Despite what you might think, you do deserve to be loved.”

Pittsburgh

Carter’s Bridal

The sales woman zipped the back of Jennifer’s gown. She looked at herself in the mirror for a
moment then turned and asked, “Well, what do you think?”

Debbie put her hands up to her cheeks, “You look like a fucking angel, doesn’t she Emmett?”

Emmett went up to the dress and inspected the beadwork along the hem where they’d had the dress taken up.” They did an excellent job,” he took hold of Jennifer’s hands and gave them a little squeeze, “You are an absolute vision.”

Jennifer blushed and turned to look at herself in the mirror again. The eggshell colored dress was intricately beaded. The sleeves were off the shoulder and the delicate, form-fitting cut perfectly accentuated Jennifer’s curves. “It really is a beautiful dress.” Debbie stepped up behind Jennifer as Emmett’s phone rang, “And you’re a beautiful lady,” Debbie sweetly replied, “You’d have to be to snag a hot number like that Tucker. Christ, he can fill a pair of jeans.”

“What?” Emmett shrieked into the phone, “That’s completely unacceptable!...No..no..we specifically requested the Emerald room, because the Ruby room will not suit our needs. No, we aren’t interested in reserving another date, the wedding is in three days and I have the bride standing here right next to me in her gown...well I should certainly hope you’ll be sending the deposit back. And you can tell the Events Director that I will not be recommending your venue to any of my future clients.”

Jennifer stepped down off the fitting pedestal and tried to calmly ask, “What happened to our reservation at the club?”

“Oakmont Country Club was supposed to host a celebrity golf tournament this weekend, but a water main burst and flooded their course. So, all those weird men with their ugly shoes and crazy pants are bringing all their clubs and balls over to your club. Oh, oh! and they’re using the Emerald Ball Room as the press area.”

Jennifer did her best to remain calm as she asked, “How are we supposed to find another place in less than seventy two hours?”

Emmett took a deep breath, “Don’t you worry about it, that’s what you hired me for. Your only job is to stay as beautiful as you are at this very moment. I have tons of contacts in town it’s not a problem.”

Jennifer smiled, “Okay, well I’m going to go get changed. Thank you Emmett, I don’t know what I’d do without you.”
When she walked out of the room Emmett looked at Debbie, “We’re completely screwed.”

**Pittsburgh**

**Loading Docks**

Carl and Michael walked along the damp alleyway between two abandoned warehouses. There were a couple dock workers sitting on an ice chest smoking cigarettes who nodded at Carl as they walked by. Michael was nervous. This is exactly the sort of place his mother had always told him to avoid. “Are you sure this lady can help us?”

“Sister Carmen knows more about the streets than anyone I’ve ever met. She’s single handedly been able to do more for the homeless in Pittsburgh than any committee or initiative the city has come up with.”

Michael took a large side step to avoid an oily puddle of muck, “Why aren’t we meeting her at a church?”

“Because the church doesn’t take to kindly to her handing out condoms and clean needles. She and the Diocese parted ways a few years ago. Now, she only has the man upstairs to report to.”

“Not the priests and bishops who only believe in the rhythm method?”

“Exactly,” Carl said as he opened a dirty metal door. They stepped into a poorly lit room that had a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling. There were a few cots and sleepy bags lined up against a wall along with a deep freeze and a mini fridge. In the corner of the room there was an ancient looking desk and a few dented file cabinets. “Sister? Sister it’s Carl Horvath? Are you here?”

After a few seconds a short, forty-something, Latina woman wearing an oversized denim shirt, jeans, and a pair of work boots came from around a corner and stepped into the light, “Carl! Oh it’s so good to see you!”

She held out her arms and Carl stepped into her embrace, “Sister, this is my son Michael. The one I told you about.”
Sister Carmen put her hands on her hips and inspected Michael, “So, you’re the one opening a home for some of my lost boys?”

“Uh yeah, “He looked up at Carl who nodded, “My husband and I are. We can only take in three boys to start, but if things go well then maybe we’ll have room for more someday.”

She pointed her finger at Michael, “It’s the Lord’s work you’re doing. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. Now, let’s see what I can do to help you get started.”

She walked over to one of the file cabinets, unlocked it, and pulled out a few manila folders, “Carl told me the profile you’re looking for, boys, 15-17 years old, HIV Positive is okay, but no IV drug users, and those who’ve exhibited a desire to finish school…”

Michael nodded. He and Ben had decided that they didn’t have the background to take care of addicts and they wanted to help boys who had an interest in helping themselves. They figured helping them get a high school diploma was the right place to start.

Carmen handed the files to Michael, “These boys here have the best chance of making it off the street. They all come from the system and they’ve had their share of hard knocks, but they don’t have records. And they’re just about as smart as they come.”

Michael flipped through a one of the folders and saw a drawing of a boy that was detailed enough to be an artist’s rendering, “Did you draw this?”

“Yes, most of my kids are skittish about having their picture taken, but they’ll let me sketch them. It helps, when one goes missing, God forbid.” She explained as she crossed herself.

Michael opened the next folder and when he looked at the sketch he immediately recognized the boy. He felt a lump in his throat when he said, “Hey Carl,” Carl leaned over so he could see, “This is one of the boys…one of Hunter’s friends, from the funeral.”

New York
EVACO
Studio
Justin set out his new Kolinsky Sable flat brushes on the work table as he went over the plans for the weekend with his mother on the phone, “Well, my flight gets in at 5:40. I was going to take a cab to the loft, but if you want me to wait at the airport for Cousin Joanne’s flight to arrive I can make sure she and the kids get checked into the hotel.”

“That would be a huge help, honey. I just can’t believe this is happening. Emmett had every detail set and now everything is up in the air. Why did that Pro-Am have to be at the club this weekend?”

“Treesdale is huge, they didn’t have any other spaces for the ceremony and reception?” Justin asked as he began prepping his canvas.

“Emmett said none of the other available spaces are suitable. Besides, even if we did have it at the club it’d be a media circus. All Tuck and I wanted was a nice, simple affair with no fuss.”

Justin could hear the stress in his mother’s voice and he wanted to help. She deserved to have a perfect day especially after the year she’d had. “Mom, if you want, you can have the wedding out at Britin. I’m sure Emmett could do wonders with the place.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, but Emmett will need to wait till I get to town so I can give him my key. Brian said he’s going to be in meetings all day and he won’t be reachable till late tonight.”

Jennifer was utterly relieved, “Oh honey, thank you. I didn’t know how we were going to find a place at the last minute during the middle of the wedding season.”

“It’s no problem. I glad the place is getting put to use. I hate that it’s just sitting out there empty.”

Jennifer knew Britin was where Justin accepted Brian’s proposal. She could only imagine what the house meant to him, “Justin, you’re sure it won’t be…I don’t know, uncomfortable, for you to have my wedding there, in your home?”

Justin smiled to himself, “As long as you don’t consummate your marriage there it won’t bother me at all.”
Pittsburgh

Vangard Agency

Lobby

Brian stepped off the elevator with Ted and Cynthia at his side. They were followed by Kinnetik’s Human Resources Manager, Brian's attorney, two maintenance men and three security guards.

The startled front receptionist stood up behind her desk, "Excuse me, do you have an appointment?"

Brian paid no regard to the woman as he instructed his team. "Let's start with getting that sign down. I've always hated the name Vangard." The two maintenance men went to work as Brian continued, "Cynthia, you and Phil have your lists?"

Cynthia and the HR Manager each held up folders as she responded," We've got the offer letters and the pink slips right here."

"Go ahead and get started."

Cynthia indicated to the HR manager to follow her then she smiled at Brian from ear to ear, "God, I'm gonna love this."

Brian bit back a smile, but then quickly put his down-to-business scowl back on, "Ted?"

Ted stepped up next to Brian, "Right here boss."

"Take one of the guards with you down to records and make sure nobody shreds anything while we're getting this done."

"Consider it done," Ted gave a little salute and hurried down the hall.

Brian pointed to the two other guards, "You two. Stay by the elevator and make sure no one leaves with anything except their coffee mugs and pictures of their kids." The large, overbearing men both
nodded and took their positions.

When Brian finally acknowledged the presence of the receptionist she had turned a ghostly shade of white. Brian stepped forward and rested his hand on her desk, "I'm your new boss. I need you to get Gardner on the phone and tell him that Brian Kinney is waiting for him in the conference room."

**Vangard Agency**

**Conference Room**

Gardner looked through the documents in front of him and asked with a defiant tone, "What, the hell, is this?"

"This," Brian began with a smile that indicated he was thoroughly enjoying himself, "is what they call a hostile take over, it’s the sort of thing that happens to companies that over extend themselves and pander to clients who don’t know shit about the services they’re paying for."

“Brian, let’s be reasonable, I’m sure we can come to a mutually beneficial agreement.” Gardner stood up, crossed the room, and sat on the edge of the conference table right next to Brian’s chair, “Think about it, with your creative talent, and newly developed business acumen and my extensive list of industry contacts, Vangard and Kinnetik could join forces to become an advertising powerhouse.”

Brian leaned back in his chair and made it appear as if he was giving Gardner’s suggestion some serious thought, “It’s an interesting suggestion, there’s only one small, problem with it,” Brian turned to his attorney, “why don’t you explain it to him?”

The attorney pushed his eye glasses up the bridge of his nose, "Mr. Vance, Mr. Kinney here has relieved you of the debt you owe to your investors and Kinnetik Inc. now holds majority interest in the Vangard Agency."

Brian gave Gardner a look of mock sympathy, “So you see Vance, since I own Vangard that means I already own your extensive list of industry contacts. I really don’t see what further use you’d be to me."

Gardner stood and threw the papers across the room, "You think you can come in here and buy my company out from under me, Kinney?"
Brian rose and looked Gardner square in the eye, "I don't think I can, I did."

Gardner turned beet red, "You're a scheming, conniving, faggot!"

Brian leaned forward in a deliberate attempt to invade Gardner’s space, "And you're fired. Now get, the fuck, out of my building."

Pittsburgh

Kinnetik

Later that night...

Ted sat with Brian on his couch as he smoked a cigarette, "I don't believe I've ever had that much fun with my clothes on," Brian mused.

Ted chuckled, "It was quite a day, Bri. One thing's for sure, working for you is never dull."

Brian pushed himself up off the couch and crossed the room to his desk, "Speaking of work, I had Gordon draw these up. I want you to take a look at them before I sign."

Brian perched himself on the edge of his desk and held a contract out to Ted. He rose and started looking through it, with a tone of surprise he asked, "You're taking on a partner?"

"MmmHmm."

"Who?"

Brian tilted his head to the side, "Keep reading."

Ted scanned the document when he got to the explanatory paragraph he started to read aloud, "forty percent of Kinnetik Inc.’s assets, properties, and holdings shall hence forth fall under the ownership of Theodore Schmidt." Ted was shocked. He couldn't believe what he'd just read.
"Well," Brian prodded, "Aren't you going to say something?"

Ted shook his head, "I don't think there are words in the English language to describe what I'm feeling right now. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think that you, of all people, would want me, of all people, to be your partner."

"Dreams are overrated. The fact is, till you came on board I was barely able to get Kinnetik off the ground. It's not a gift. You've earned it. Besides, I need someone to take care of things around here since I'll be working out of the New York office." Brian explained matter-of-factly.

"New York? Does Justin know?"

"No. And if you breathe a word of it —"

"I know, I know they'll have to drag my bloated corpse out of the bottom of the Allegheny" Ted looked back down at the contract, "Wow, 40-60 partners. I can't believe it."

Brian pointed to one of the paragraphs at the bottom of the page, "Actually, if you keep reading you'll see that our shares are 40-55 percent."

"Where's the other five percent going?"

Just as Brian was about to answer, Cynthia walked into the room. She grabbed Brian by his tie, pulled him to her and kissed him hard on the mouth. She definitely took Brian by surprised, but he figured what-the-hell. So, he wrapped his arms around her and passionately returned the kiss as he dipped her nearly to the floor. When he pulled her back upright and released her, Cynthia's knees buckled. Brian caught her as she breathlessly said, "I've been wanting to do that for almost a decade."

Ted stood there speechless as Brian laughed, "So I take it, that's a yes to my offer letter?"

"Five percent of the business and an apartment? There's no way I'd turn that down. Although, I hope you intend on including a clothing allowance, if I'm going to be a Manhattan business woman I'm going to need an entirely new wardrobe."
Gus busied himself by running around the row of picnic tables as Melanie opened the ice chest and started getting lunch ready. Lindsay wearily reappeared from the rest room with Jenny Recucu.

"Did she go?"

"No," Lindsay sighed, "I even threatened to put her training pants back on but she wouldn't even try.

"Potty yucky!" JR complained. Lindsay handed JR to Melanie and she took over the sandwich making. Just as she was setting lunch out on the table Gus ran up to her, "Mommy, I gotta make."

"Okay, let's go Gus."

When they started walking towards the Women's restroom Gus stopped and crossed his arms. "I don't want to go in the girls' room."

Lindsay held out her hand to him, "Come on Gus, you know I can't go in the boys' room."

"I'm a big boy. I can go by myself. I don't need help."

"We already talked about this, it's not safe for you to go into a public bathroom by yourself. Now let's go make a quick tinkle and then we can have our picnic lunch."

Gus stomped his foot, "No! I'm not girl and I'm not going in the girls' room!"

Lindsay could feel a headache coming on, "Then you're going to have to hold it till we get to your Uncle Michael's house."
Gus sucked in his top lip and started to pout before announcing, "If Daddy was here, he could take me to the boys’ room!"

Since Brian’s visit a few weeks before Gus had begun using the ‘if Daddy was here’ argument on a regular basis to get what he wanted. Lindsay’s motherly powers were useless against it. "Fine, fine.” She took Gus with one hand and obstructed her own view with the other as she rushed into the men’s room, past the urinals and scooted Gus into the stall. It didn't have a door so she stood facing him.

"Turn around Mommy. I can do it by myself."

Lindsay turned around to give her five year old his privacy, just as a man walked up to one of the urinals. "I'm sorry," she said, "We'll just be a minute."

The man gave her a sympathetic smile as he waited for them to finish, "It's no problem, I'm a single parent too. When I took my daughter to the mall last weekend I had to use my necktie to blindfold her before I brought her into the mens’ room."

Lindsay gave a half-hearted laugh choosing not to clarify her own family situation.

"I'm done Mommy."

"OK Gus, now let's wash your hands and we'll go eat." They finished up in the restroom and walked back out to the picnic table to find JR sitting on her blanket screaming while Melanie threw the luggage out of the back of the SUV.

"What happened?"

"She wet her pants and I can't find her baby bag." Melanie groaned.

"It's in the front seat. Remember, we put it up there so it'd be easy to find?" Lindsay covered her mouth trying to hide her grin.

Melanie shook her head and laughed despite herself, "Remind me why taking a road trip was such a good idea?"
Lindsay was just about to respond when the lid of Gus's cup came off and he spilled orange juice all over himself, "I will, if you can remind me why getting out of bed this morning was a good idea."

Pittsburgh

Britin

Upstairs Guest room

Emmett had truly outdone himself. In just a day he and Darren had transformed an empty manor into a dream wedding location. The main den at the front of the house was set up for the ceremony and the pool had been transformed into a wonderland for the reception. Through some of his hospitality industry contacts Emmett procured a plexi-glass dance floor that fit perfectly over the swimming pool. Dozens of tea-light candles floated on the water giving the entire area a magical feel. Unbeknownst to Jennifer, Justin used some of his Rage money to pad her wedding budget so Emmett used top-of-the-line place settings and floral arrangements.

Since the vast majority of the house was still unfurnished, Emmett not only rented tables and chairs for the ceremony and reception but he also supplied a few of the rooms with mirrors, vanities and other necessary furnishing for the bridal party to get ready, though Brian and Justin chose to get dressed in their room.

Brian grimaced at his reflection in the mirror as he tugged on the sleeves of his ill fitting, rented tuxedo. "Remind me again why I can’t wear my Armani?"

Justin, wearing an identical tuxedo, walked up behind him and stood on his tip-toes so he could rest his chin on Brian's shoulder. Their eyes met in the mirror, "Because it’d be gauche for an usher to show up the groom. Besides, wearing this rented monkey suit is the only thing that could possibly prevent everyone from looking at you instead of Mom and Tucker."

"Hmpf. I must have been high when I agreed to this."

Justin smiled, "No. You’re just an unbelievably generous person who’d do anything for his friends and family."

Brian let out a dramatic sigh, "How I long for the days when everyone thought I was a selfish, narcissistic, asshole. So much for secret identities," Brian turned and took Justin in his arms,
"Promise me one thing."

"What?"

"That you will never, under any circumstances, even under the penalty of certain death...refer to me as 'nice.'"

Justin smiled, but then fixed a serious gaze as he said, "Brian Kinney? Nice? I'm pretty certain that's one of the signs of the apocalypse. But come to think of it, maybe it's not because you're so unbelievably generous that you're wearing this sorry rented tux. It could be that other thing."

Brian furrowed his brow and jutted his chin out, "What other thing?"

"That you've had a huge boner for my mother for years." Justin managed to explain through his laughter.

Brian smirked and in soft, but seductive tone he replied, "It can't be helped. Blonds have always been my biggest weakness."

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**Britin**

**Bride's Dressing Room**

Molly took the wrapping off her very first make up kit and inspected the various colors of lip gloss and blush. Earlier, she had expressed her disappointment when Jennifer told her she would have to wait another year before she could start wearing any eye shadow by going into a full-on, pre-teen pout mode. But, Jennifer quickly put an end to it by suggesting that perhaps she was too young for any make up at all.

When Jennifer, Molly and Debbie were all just about just about ready, there was a knock at the door.

Justin opened the door just a crack, "Is everyone decent in there?"

"Come on in Justin, is it time?" Jennifer asked as she felt a little surge nerves wash over her.
Justin walked in, "Yeah, Emmett said they're ready for us."

When Jennifer turned from the mirror Justin smiled, "Oh Mom, you look amazing."

Jennifer just blushed in response. Debbie motioned to Molly, "Come on honey, let's give your brother a minute with your mom."

When Justin and Jennifer were alone in the room he awkwardly began, "Mom, I want to apologize to you for being so, childish about you and Tucker. You deserve to be happy and he's a good man."

Jennifer smiled, "He is. I've been thinking a lot lately about what it is about him and -"

"Please mom. No sex stuff."

Jennifer rolled her eyes and put her hand on her hip, "I wasn't going to say anything about that. I still believe there are some limitations to what parents and children should share with each other. What I realized is, it's not just that I love Tucker, it's that I love who I am when I'm him. Does that make any sense?"

In that moment Justin felt an unspoken connection with his mother because he knew exactly what she was trying to say, "You feel alive. And you feel like there's nothing you can't accomplish as long as you have him by your side."

Jennifer nodded as tears started to well in her eyes.

Justin hugged her, "Mom, don't cry. Emmett will be furious with me if I got things off schedule because you had to redo your makeup."

Britin

Down Stairs
Brian finished performing the last of his usher's duties as he led Tucker’s great-aunt to her seat. She was the only female relative on Tucker's side of the aisle. Apparently, most of the women in his family didn't tend to live very long. Tucker's father, uncle and a few cousins were in attendance in addition to what Brian assumed were several of Tucker's teacher friends. Tucker stood at the front of the room with the best man, his identical twin brother Tag.

The left side of the aisle was filled with several PFLAG parents as well as a number of Jennifer's out of town relatives. And of course, the whole gang was there. After Justin walked Jennifer down the aisle Brian took his seat next to him and Justin held his hand throughout the ceremony. The wedding was simple, but beautiful. And Brian couldn’t keep himself from looking at Justin as Jennifer and Tucker exchanged their vows.

Later at the reception, Brian sat with Gus to share a piece of cake. "Gus, don't you want some?" Brian asked when he saw that Gus was paying more attention to the people on the dance floor than to the sugary dessert in front of him.

"He must have a rule about carbs too." Justin's comment earned smirk from Brian as Gus whispered something in his father's ear.

Brian gave his son a serious look, "Well Gus, if you want to, just ask her."

"What do I say, Daddy?" Brian whispered the answer to Gus's question back to him then the boy got down off his father's lap and started walking toward Jennifer.

"What did you tell him to go do?" Lindsay asked with a clear sense of dread.

Brian smiled, "Just watch."

Jennifer was standing at the edge of the pool-top dance floor talking to her cousin when Gus walked up to her. He looked back to Brian for reassurance who gave him a little nod so Gus tugged on the side of Jennifer's dress. "Hi Gus, are you having a good time?"

Mel, Lindsay, Brian and Justin were all sitting within earshot so they could easily hear Gus respond with a frighteningly, Kinneysque tone, "Uh. Huh. You're hot. You wanna dance?"

Jennifer appeared genuinely charmed when she replied, "I'd love to," and led her little admirer out
Lindsay burst out laughing but, Melanie shook her head, "I cannot believe you told our son to say that."

Justin laughed, "Hey it could've been worse. You should hear what Brian says when he wants to dance with someone."

Brian ignored everyone's comments. He just shot back the last of his scotch before standing and grabbing Justin by the lapel, "Come on. We're dancing."

As Justin rose he looked over his shoulder at Melanie and Lindsay, "See, he doesn't even bother asking. And that's the G rated version of what he usually says."

Justin felt something ethereal about dancing with Brian above the candle lit swimming pool. That, in combination with the night-time summer breeze, the music, and being in the presence of everyone he loved, truly made the night magical.

Justin was lost in thought when Brian gave him a little squeeze and said, "You were right...when you said that we don't need rings or vows to prove that we love each other."

Justin nodded, "I know." He figured Brian was looking for an affirmation that they'd made the right choice in canceling their own wedding.

But Brian surprised him when he continued, "Although, It doesn't mean we can't have those things if we want them. It doesn't mean we shouldn't get married."

Justin stopped swaying to the music and looked into Brian's eyes, "It doesn't?"

"But we're not a couple of straight people. We're not your Mom and Tucker. We don't need the church or the county court house to tell us we're married. We're queers. We don't need a license. We're married when we say we are."

Justin's heart was pounding in his chest. This wasn't like before. Brian wasn't making this proposal in
a desperate effort to win him back. "So, you're saying you really want to get married?"

Brian had never been more certain of anything, "Yes. But I want to make one thing clear. I have absolutely no interest in having a wife. So don't think that I want you packing my lunch, or darning my socks. We're partners. And I want you to be my husband."

Justin gave Brian a little, crooked smile, "Okay. But, there are some things I want too."

Brian raised an eyebrow, "Oh?"

Justin's voice was strong and clear when he said, "I don't want a seating chart or golden gardenias, but I do want to know that when you need it, you'll let me help you. The same goes for me. I know we're both perfectly capable of taking care of ourselves, but I don't want to ever have a replay of the chicken soup argument. I just can't live like that."

Brian knew what Justin was telling him. For Justin, having a marriage meant Brian would have to tear down the last of his walls. It would be the most difficult thing he'd ever have to do in his life. But for Justin, he'd take a sledge hammer that part of himself that separated him from true happiness. So, Brian nodded in agreement to Justin's conditions.

Justin smiled, "There's one more thing. No matter where you are, no matter what you're doing, you'll always come home so we can sit down at a table and have dinner together...at least four nights a week."

Brian tilted his head as his lips curled into a smile, "Two nights," he countered.

The sunshine smile appeared on Justin's face when he replied, "Three."

Brian cupped his hand behind Justin's neck and sealed their pact with a kiss. Justin's lips were as soft as warm as they always were. And as he felt their tongues gently play with each other, Brian knew his life would never be the same. "So if we're going to make official, name the time and the place."

Justin took a deep breath as he thought for a moment. "I'm done waiting. Tonight, at the loft, just you and me."
Pittsburgh

Brian’s Loft

Justin sat on the edge of the bed and waited as Brian turned out the lights and set the alarm. The loft was dark with the exception of the soft white glow that blanketed the bedroom. Justin willed the butterflies in his stomach away as Brian walked up the stairs carrying a small black velvet box.

He sat down next to Justin and whispered, “Hey.”

“Hey.” Justin smiled.

Brian brushed the back of his hand along Justin’s cheek. “You ready?”

Justin nodded, “Uh huh. I’ll go first.”

Brian bit in his lip and handed Justin the box.

“Brian, I can’t remember a time in my life when I’ve wanted anything more than I want you. You’re a strong, confident, amazingly brilliant man. But more than all of that, when we’re together I know that I can face anything. With you by my side, there’s nothing I can’t do. You taught me how to be the man I am today, “Justin opened the box, took out one of the rings and slipped it on Brian’s finger, “That’s why I choose you, to be my husband.”

Brian took a deep breath as he looked down at the ring on his left hand. He let the light shine on it for a second before saying, “Justin, I’ve never been one for making plans. You changed all that. When I close my eyes I see you, us…five, ten, twenty years from now. I don’t have any illusions about happily ever after, but because of you, I’ve learned to believe in love.” Brian took the other ring from the box and slipped it on Justin’s finger. He fought back the lump in his throat when he said, “That’s why I choose you, to be my husband.”

Brian cradled Justin’s face in his hands and whispered, “I want to make love to you.” He’d never said those words before. And later as he entered Justin, Brian realized that this was something new for him. He’d touched Justin like this a thousand times before, but he’d never let himself really be in the moment and savor all that Justin meant to him.
They moved together, keeping a slow easy rhythm. And as Justin looked into his husband’s eyes, he knew that for the very first time, Brian wasn’t holding anything back. He wasn’t going to some other place. He was completely with Justin, in him, loving him.

Their honeymoon lovemaking continued throughout the night, and when they were finally, happily sated Brian said, “We should get some sleep. We’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

Justin yawned, “We do?”

“Yeah, you’re helping me pack.” Brian said as he moved his arm so Justin could lie back against him.

Justin furrowed his brow, “Pack? For what?”

“Oh that’s right. I haven’t told you. I’m moving to New York.”
Episode 612

New York

Greenwich Village

Pearl Oyster Bar

Justin stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Daphne in the overcrowded bar as he sipped on a frosted mug of beer, "So, Brian's commuting while he and Ted are getting their new employees from Vangard transitioned."

Daphne worked a peanut from its shell, "He's flying back and forth between here and Pittsburgh?"

"Yeah, Friday through Monday we stay together at the Carlyle Hotel and he works out of the Manhattan office and Tuesday through Thursday he works out of the Pittsburgh office."

Daphne cooed, "Awww he's doing all that just to be with you."

"And to become an advertising mogul. We're both gonna be in Pittsburgh this weekend though, Mom's coming back from her honeymoon and I wanted to wait and tell her about Brian and me in person." Justin added.

Daphne gave Justin a little nudge with her elbow, "I'll bet she'll be as mad at you as I was for getting married on the sly like that. I would have paid a million bucks to hear Brian say all those romantic things to you."

"He was romantic, but he was still Brian, you know?"

Daphne gave Justin a knowing look, "No talk of gardening or cuddling?"

"No, thank God. It was more like he just put all of himself out there for me," Justin thought back to
the night for a moment. He remembered the completely sincere look in Brian's eyes and he could hear the honest, yet vulnerable tone of Brian's voice, "I can't even begin to describe how overwhelming it was to see him be so raw with his emotions."

A mischievous grin crossed Daphne's face, "Speaking of raw, does it feel totally amazing to have nothing between you when he's fucking you, now?"

Justin furrowed his brow, "Just because we're married doesn't mean we're not using condoms anymore."

"Why not? You're both negative and it's not like he can get you pregnant." Daphne questioned with a smirk.

"This is Brian we're talking about, he goes through his tricks as fast as he goes through his non-fat soy lattes."

“So,” Daphne scoffed, "He married you but he reserved the right to fuck around?"

Justin shrugged, "We never talked about that, I just assumed we'd keep doing whatever or whoever we wanted to do."

"Wait, so you're still fucking other guys too?"

Justin laughed, "It's been almost a year since I've been with anyone besides Brian, not that I'd ever tell him that."

As the waitress walked up and set down their order of oysters on the half shell Daphne said, "I'll never understand you two."

Justin shook his head, "The only thing to understand is that these oysters are the only thing I'll be having raw, at least for the foreseeable future."

Pittsburgh
Michael and Ben’s House

As Ben climbed the ladder so he could start painting the trim over the garage, Carl and Michael worked on painting the shutters, “That’s looking really good, Michael.”

“Thanks Carl, I used to help Ma with freshen up the trim when I was a teenager. It’s a heck of a lot easier than the dry walling you showed me how to do when we finished the basement.”

“Oh you did a great job with that too. You’re a natural at making home improvements.”

“I think it’s more the fact that I got hooked on watching the Home and Garden Channel when I was staying at Mel and Lindsay’s.”

Carl dipped his paint brush in the pan, “What ever it is, you’d make a damn fine handy man.”

Michael smiled to himself. He always knew he was missing out on so many things by not having a father. When he was a kid, he imagined that the great part about having a dad would be going on fishing trips or building tree houses or any of the other things he saw the boys on his street doing with their fathers. It didn’t matter, though, that he and Carl never did these things. Michael finally knew what it was really like to have a dad, and he couldn’t be more grateful.

Just as Michael was putting the finishing touches on the shutter he heard Monty call out from the sidewalk. “Your place is looking wonderful!”

Michael set his brush in the pan and walked over to Eli and Monty who were taking their daughter for a walk in her stroller. “Hey thanks, Wait till you see the basement. It turned out great.”

Eli nodded, “I’m sure you’ll have buyers beating down your door in no time. We’re going to miss having you and Ben as neighbors though.”

Michael shook his head, “We’re not putting the place on the market, we’re just trying to make sure everything is perfect for when we open the group home.”

“Oh you’re not intending to house those street children here, are you?” Monty asked incredulously.
Michael furrowed his brow, “Well of course. The boys are with Sister Carmen now, but as soon as we finish with the renovations she’s bringing them here to live with us.”

“When you told us about your little project we naturally assumed that you’d be moving someplace more suitable.”

Ben had over heard the exchange and as he walked up he asked, “What place could be more suitable than our home?”

“Yeah,” Michael added, “The whole point of a group home is providing normal, stable, family setting so the boys can get their lives back on track.”

Eli gave Monty a look, “What you’re doing for these boys is commendable. But I’m sorry Michael, there is absolutely no way the Home Owners Association is going to allow to open your little half way house in our neighborhood. We simply cannot let it happen.”

**Pittsburgh**

**Kinnetik HQ**

Brian passed through the sea of cubicles he’d acquired to accommodate his new team of former Vangard Ad Execs. Kinnetik didn’t offer the flashy offices they were accustomed to, however Brian appeased his new staff by saying, “I can spend money on increased overhead or on your signing bonuses, it’s your choice.” After putting it so plainly he didn’t receive any complaints about the open air work spaces.

Brian spent most of his days while at headquarters helping Ted get ramped up on his significant number of new duties. They worked together to put a three month plan in place were Brian would completely transition out of the daily operations of Kinnetik so he could focus on business development, building the Kinnetik brand on Madison Avenue, and most importantly increasing the cache of the agency in preparation for servicing a global market.

So far the Pennsylvania / New York commute was going well. And as Brian finished up the last of his emails for the day, he let his thoughts drift back over the past few weeks. Everyone’s reactions to
his marriage were pretty much as Brian had expected. Upon hearing the news Debbie replied, "It's about fucking time." Emmett found it necessary to hug Brian while Ted had the good sense just to say, "Way to go, Bri."

Michael took the news surprisingly well, though as one would guess, he was taken aback by Brian's announcement that he'd be moving to New York.

They were standing in Michael's living room when he said, "You used to say never run after them."

Brian fumbled with his lighter, "I used to say a lot of things."

Michael crossed his arms, "So you're leaving? Just like that?"

"I want him, Michael." Brian answered louder than he intended.

Michael sighed, "I get that."

Brian gave up on lighting the cigarette and shoved the Zippo back into his pocket, "No you don't. I wake up sick to my stomach every morning he's not there, I check my email fifty times day like some teenaged twat just to see if he's sent a message. Christ, I can't even enjoy a decent fuck without wishing I was with him instead. So there, are you happy? I've turned into a big fat lesbian!"

Michael gave Brian one of his signature puppy-dog looks as he walked up to Brian and placed his hand gently on his shoulder, "You may have turned into a lesbian, but you are definitely not fat."

Brian stifled a laugh before kissing Michael and saying, "Asshole."

Brian’s thoughts drifted from Michael when his desk photo of Gus caught his eye. It had been almost a year since he and the girls had moved to Canada and Brian couldn’t believe how much Gus had grown in such a short time. When Gus left, Brian really still thought of him as a baby, but over the last several months Gus had matured into a remarkably intelligent, sensitive little boy.

It was the morning after his unconventional wedding when Brian had been summoned to Michael and Ben's house by a nearly frantic Lindsay.
"Where is he?" Brian asked as soon as Ben opened the door.

Ben stepped aside to let Brian in, "In the guest bathroom. We've been trying to get him out for over an hour."

Brian followed Ben down the hall where he found Michael, Melanie and Lindsay all standing by the bathroom door.

"What the matter with him?" Brian asked in an effort to get a handle on the situation.

"He won't say," Lindsay began with a worried tone, "But Michael says they keep the cleaning supplies in there."

Brian's head was pounding. He and Justin had just barely fallen asleep when Lindsay had called saying Gus had locked himself in the bathroom and they couldn't get him out. "I would think you'd have taught him to have the good sense to get a drink from the faucet rather than a bottle of Drano if he's thirsty."

"Will you just do something?" Melanie asked in an exasperated tone, "He won't even talk to us."

Brian sighed, "Fine. I could use a cup of coffee."

"I'll get it." Michael said before heading to the kitchen.

Brian leaned his shoulder against the door and gently knocked, "Gus, it's your dad."

"Daddy?" Gus's voice was small and Brian could tell he'd been crying.

"Yeah. Now why don't you open the door for your old man so we can talk?"

Gus was suddenly defiant, "I'm not coming out and you can't make me!"
Michael handed Brian a cup off coffee he blew on it then took a sip, "I'm not going to make you do anything you don't want to. How about you let me in and we'll talk together in there?"

"If I open the door you'll just grab me and pull me out."

Brian bit back a laugh before whispering to Lindsay, "He's a smart little fucker, isn't he?"

Melanie and Lindsay wearily nodded in unison.

"How about this, you unlock the door then get in the bathtub so I can't reach you. I'll count to five and then come in."

Gus paused for a moment then asked, "You promise you won't grab me?"

"I promise."

Brian heard the door unlock and so he started counting. Right as he got to 'five' he turned back to Mel and Lindz with a smug look on his face, "And you've been trying to get him to open the door for over an hour?"

Melanie, who was just about at her wits end, started to lunge at Brian, but Lindsay held her back and whispered in Mel's ear, "Let him take care of it, he's going to have to learn to do more than read bed time stories eventually."

Brian walked in the bathroom to find Gus standing in the tub, when he saw his father he pulled the shower curtain closed.

Brian tried to ignore the fact that his knee popped as he sat down on the floor next to the tub, "You want to tell me why you've been camping out in Uncle Michael's bathroom all morning?"

Gus sniffed a little, "Mommy, said it's time to go back to Canada but I want to stay in Pissburgh."
Despite Brian's agreeing that leaving the letter T out of the word Pittsburgh was descriptively accurate he corrected his son nonetheless, "It's Pittsburgh, Gus, with a T sound then an S sound."

"That's what I said, Pissburgh, and I'm not leaving."

In a cajoling tone that Brian usually reserved for Michael when he was in a mood Brian answered, "Your moms and sister will be awfully lonely without you."

Gus pulled open the curtain and furrowed his brow, "Nuh uh. Mommy and Mama live together. But, you live all by yourself that's why I wanna stay with you."

Brian looked into the worried, pleading eyes of his son. He knew he'd done nothing to deserve such compassion and love. But in that moment, Brian resolved to earn it and be worthy of receiving the look Gus was giving him. He set down his cup of coffee and said, "Gus, come sit on my lap."

Without hesitating, Gus stepped out of the tub and into Brian's arms. "I want to show you something," Brian held out his left hand in and pointed to the wedding band he was wearing, "Do you know what this is?"

Gus touched the shiny platinum, "It's a ring like the ones Mommy and Mama wear."

"That's right, and do you know who gave this to me?"

Gus's eyes lit up as he turned in Brian's arms and excitedly asked, "Justin?"

Brian nodded, "I gave him one too. And I'm going to go live with him in New York."

Gus tilted his head to the side, "So he can take care of you?"

Brian slowly blinked his eyes and made the necessary clarification, "So we can take care of each other."

"That means you and Justin have the special grown-up love that makes you want to live in the same
Brian nodded, "So, you don't need to worry about my being lonely. Just focus on being the man of the house up in Canada. Your Mommy and Mama need you."

"Okay," Gus was quiet for a moment before continuing, "I'm glad you're going to live with Justin, you don't make your grumpy face whenever he's around."

Gus's words resonated with Brian. As he packed up his attaché case, and drove back to the loft, Brian thought about why things had worked out. When he proposed this time, it wasn't about proving to Justin how much he loved him, it wasn't about trying to make him happy. Brian did it because he wanted to marry Justin. And just as he had resolved to be worthy of his son's love, Brian made himself a promise that he would work his damnedest to be worthy of having Justin as his husband.

**Pittsburgh**

**Debbie, Carl and Emmett’s House**

Debbie grabbed Emmett before he had a chance to set down his suit cases. "Emmett! Come sit down. You've got to tell me everything about Seattle."

Though Drew had left to train with the Sabers nearly six weeks ago this had been the first weekend Emmett didn't have an event on his calendar. At the begging and pleading of Darren, Emmett had agreed to stay in Pittsburgh till the end of wedding season so they wouldn't have a hoard of angry brides coming after them.

Emmett nestled on the couch and tucked one leg underneath himself so he and Deb could share some delicious girl talk, "Oh Debbie, it was absolutely divine! We went on a ferry boat ride, and we had dinner at the top of the Space Needle. Oh and I went with him on a photo op to Pike Place Fish Market so he could have a game of catch with one of the hot young fish mongers."

Deb shook her head in confusion, "He played catch with a fish?"

"No, no, he played catch using a fish, a Salmon to be exact. At Pike Place they don't hand you your order they throw it to you over the counter. It's a Seattle thing." Emmett rose and got his messenger bag, "Here's the article. I couldn't believe it when the Sabers PR person asked me to get in the photo
Debbie looked at the newspaper photo of Drew and Emmett standing together holding an eleven pound King Salmon. The caption stated, *Seattle’s landmark Pike Place Fish Market welcomes new Sabers star Quarterback Drew Boyd and his partner Emmett Honeycutt*

"Look at you, Em. You and Drew look so handsome together."

Emmett leaned over to look at the picture, "We do make an adorable couple, don't we? Oh and everyone has been so nice to Drew. He's getting along great with his new coach and Mrs. Hughes, the coach's wife, even took me a little shopping spree while Drew was at practice Saturday morning. I got this for you." Emmett pulled out a T-Shirt from his bag.

Debbie held it up and read it, "Someone in Seattle thinks I'm Fabulous. Oh honey, I love it" She hugged Emmett, "I'm glad to hear Drew's new team isn't giving him any trouble just because he happens to like a little man sex."

Emmett patted Debbie on the knee "Trust me, he likes more than just a little sex."

“I know, we have thin walls, remember?”

Emmett smirked, "Well, apparently, the owner of the Sabers was a big proponent of getting Washington State’s new gay civil rights law passed so the team knows better than to give Drew a hard time. Drew says his getting hired was at least partly political, but as long as he has a safe place to play and a team that's behind him he's happy."

Debbie gave Emmett's chin a little pinch, "And I'm happy for both of you. But you two better get your butts back to Pittsburgh during the off season if you know what's good for you."

“Son-of-a-bitch!” Michael yelled as he pounded through the front door.

Emmett jumped with a start as Debbie asked, “Jesus Michael, what’s got your panties in a twist?”

“Eli and Monty, the illustrious co-presidents of our Home Owners Association said we can’t open
the group home in our neighborhood!”

Emmett turned on the couch to face Michael, “I thought you checked your bylaws before you got everything else started?”

Michael crossed his arms as he slumped in the chair, “We did, it only said that point-of-sale businesses were disallowed. It didn’t have anything about home based businesses or not-profit endeavors. “

Debbie put her hand on her hip, “Then fuck Eli and Monty. They can’t do anything.”

“Yes they can, they have complete authority to disallow anything that they consider to be a blight on the community. And they actually said to our faces that three teenaged boys could hurt property values and could put the whole neighborhood at risk.” Michael fumed.

“How, the fuck can three boys put an entire neighborhood at risk?”

“Oh didn’t you know Ma?” Michael affected Eli’s pompous tone, ”Those who’ve been victimized are far more likely to become victimizers themselves.”

Emmett stood up, “Well you know what I always say, Fuck em all! You’ll find somewhere else to open the home.”

Michael sighed, “You don’t get it, Ben and I barely have any equity in the house. Even if we sell the place we’d have to use too much of our capital on a down payment for anyplace else.”

Debbie stood up next to Emmett, “Then we’ll help you. We’ll get PFLAG together, and the GLC and we’ll raise the funds for you and Ben.”

“You’d really do that?” Michael asked.

Debbie walked up to her son and gently patted him on the cheek, “Hunter wouldn’t stand for anything less.”

Toronto
Lindsay sat in the kitchen preparing her notes for tomorrow’s Women’s Art History lecture. She had several texts open as well as a number of high quality prints strewn across the table. She held up a print of a dark haired Victorian mother bathing her young daughter in a small wash basin. Melanie walked up behind Lindsay and rested her hands on her shoulders, “Is that a Degas?”

Lindsay smiled, “Good guess, the artist studied under Degas. It’s Mary Cassatt.”

Melanie sat in the chair next to Lindsay, “The name is familiar, but I don’t remember an artist named Cassatt.”

“You probably recognize her from her women’s rights work.”

Melanie nodded, “That’s right, my tenth grade State History is coming back to me. Mary Cassatt was Allegheny County’s favorite Suffragette.”

Lindsay pulled her hair back into a ponytail, “That wasn’t till she was in her eighties, in her younger days she studied under the masters, much to the dismay of her family. You know, she grew up in a house in the same neighborhood I grew up in?”

“So she was a spoiled little rich girl too?” Melanie teased.

“Only until decided she decided to seek out her own path in life, not even her success in the Paris Salon’s impressed her family though. In their minds, an unmarried woman had no business leaving her parents.”

Melanie caressed Lindsay’s cheek, “Women have come a long way.”

“But we still have a long way ahead of us too,” Lindsay added, “I love that you have such a passion for fighting for people, Mel.”

“It’s you and JR and Gus that I want to fight for. I want to help make a world where nobody disapproves of someone else following their dreams. And if Canada is where we decide to stay, I’ll
just start at the beginning. After all, if Mary Cassatt could fight for civil rights in her eighties then so can I.”

Lindsay grimaced, “You’d really have to start at the beginning?”

Melanie shrugged, “The cases I’ve won in the US don’t really have any clout here. As it is, I’ll be clerking another year. After that it could take another ten years before I make partner. That’s when you get your pick of the really juicy cases. It’ll be worth it though if the college offers you that tenured track position.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Melanie figured Lindsay was worrying that she wouldn’t get the teaching job, “Hey Lindz, it’ll all work out. And if your job doesn’t come through and we do end up moving to New York I’m sure you won’t think it’s so bad now that Brian’s living there.”

Lindsay nodded, with a lump in her throat she said, “That would be great for Gus.”

Melanie smiled, “Oh, you won’t believe what asked me when I was tucking him in tonight.”

“What?”

“He wanted to know if Justin is his Daddy now too.”

**Pittsburgh**

**Brian’s Loft**

Justin slid the loft door open as quietly as he could. He knew that Brian enjoyed sleeping in on Saturdays and he didn’t want to wake him. He stood in the entry way and toed off his shoes then let the rest of his clothes drop in a path from the door to the bed. Justin could tell by the gentle rattle of Brian’s snore that he was still sound asleep so he carefully lifted the duvet at the foot of the bed, crawled under the covers and up the length of Brian’s body.

He nuzzled against Brian’s crotch, taking in the scent of him before slowly licking along the
underside of Brian’s cock. It was already semi hard and with in seconds Brian was fully erect. Justin
began gently sucking the tip before taking hold of the shaft and working Brian’s dick deep into his
mouth. It wasn’t until Justin started to swallow around Brian’s cock that he began to stir. Brian
pulled the covers back and watched Justin suck him then he reached down to lace his fingers through
Justin’s hair in an effort to urge him on.

Brian moaned when Justin slicked his hand with spit and began massaging his balls. When Justin
stopped and looked up, Brian licked his lips and in a throaty, morning voice he said, “Come up
here.” Justin let Brian’s cock slip from between his lips. He inched his way up Brian’s side, planting
kisses on his chest along the way. Justin needed to feel Brian inside him. So he teased Brian’s lips
with his tongue before rolling over on his stomach.

The sight of Justin’s bare ass made Brian’s cock leak and he hurried to put on the condom so he
could feel Justin’s tight hole pulsate around him. Once inside, he thrust himself deep into Justin. He
pace was quick and deliberate and as he rolled his hips to draw his cock back and forth along Justin’s
prostate he could feel the beads of sweat fall from his forehead onto Justin’s back. It wasn’t long
before Justin was shuddering beneath him. And after Brian came himself, he rolled on to his side and
smiled, “You can wake me up like that everyday for the rest of our lives if you’d like.”

Justin patted Brian’s shoulder, “Daily wake-up blow jobs? I think that can be arranged, assuming of
course you continue to ram my ass that way every morning.”

Brian smirked, “And people say having to compromise is the downside of marriage.”

Justin nuzzled into Brian and started kissing his neck, “What do they know?”

Brian wrapped his arms around Justin, “They certainly don’t know how to fuck like we do.”

Justin leaned back so he could look into Brian’s eyes, “We are pretty incredible together.”

Brian blinked slowly as he nodded in agreement, “Considering I taught you everything you know I’d
expect nothing less,” Brian reached for his cigarette, “Christ, I should have charged you for the
lessons.”

Justin shook his head, “I’m a natural and you know it, from the very beginning you could never get
enough of me, “ Justin sat up and started to get out of bed, “But speaking of lessons, I do have
something for you.”
Justin padded over to the jeans that were lying in the middle of the loft. He dug something out of his pocket and then came back to the bedroom and handed Brian an envelope.

Brian took the envelope, “Do I want to even know what this is?”

“Just open it.”

Inside the envelope Brian found a personal check made out to him. He looked up at Justin, “Did I win a bet?”

“No, it’s the loan you gave me for school, plus interest, just like we agreed.”

Brian looked down at the check. He sure as hell didn’t need the money, not with the windfall Kinnetik had received in the last few months. Still, he knew what how important being independent was to Justin, even if they were married now. So he looked at Justin and simply said, “Thank you.”

Justin kissed Brian then smiled, “I thought you were going to give me a hard time about taking the money.”

Brian shook his head, “I knew you were good for it. I wouldn’t have leant it to you otherwise.”

After they showered, fucked again and ate breakfast Brian and Justin enjoyed a lazy weekend afternoon together. Brian sat on the couch and looked over the financial section of the paper as Justin stretched his legs over Brian’s lap and thumbed through a magazine, “Daphne’s right.”

“Dare I ask about what?”

Justin held up the People Magazine and said, “You do look like Ashton Kutcher.”

Brian grabbed the magazine and looked down at the photo of Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher standing with her ex-husband Bruce Willis and their three daughters, “I do not look like Ashton Kutcher, he may look a little like me though. What are you reading this trash for anyway?”
Justin took back the magazine, “It’s a special issue on alternative families. This is an article about how after Bruce and Demi divorced they bought houses next door to each other so they could each keep full custody and raise the kids together. Bruce says it was a little awkward at times, but it was worth it so they could both see their daughters everyday.”

“Instead of talking about the inner workings of celebrity living arrangements why don’t you get online and start looking for a place for us to live in New York. I’m getting sick of that hotel.”

Justin sat up and straddled Brian’s lap, “Before I do, there’s been something I’ve been wanting to talk to you about.”

“I’m all ears.”

“It’s about Britin.”

Brian nodded, “You want to keep it.”

“It really is the house of my dreams, it’s everything I’ve every imagined.”

Brian smiled, “I know. I do listen to your prattle on occasion.”

“But, it’s not what I’ve imagined for us. That house, despite what it’ll always mean to me, just isn’t you. I want to find a place that fits both of us. I want to find a home our dreams, not just mine.”

It was one of the few times that Justin had surprised Brian. There was no point in saying anything. He just pressed his lips to Justin as a simple show of thanks.

**Pittsburgh**

**Ted and Blake’s Loft**
Blake placed orange halves into the juicer while Ted used a linen napkin to rub the already spotless silverware clean, “Current events are safe subjects, steering clear of the obvious exceptions, politics and religion. And she likes to talk about her vegetable garden so be sure and ask about her cucumbers oh and she collects those creepy little German figurines, what are they called?”

“Hummels?”

Ted pointed to Blake, “Yes, Hummels so if you can work those into the conversation that should keep her going for a few minutes at least.”

Blake walk from behind the kitchen bar and rubbed Ted’s shoulders, “You’re acting like you’ve never introduced your mother to one of your boyfriends before.”

Ted turned to face Blake, “I haven’t.”

“Then why now?”

“I want her to –“ Ted was interrupted by a knock at the door, “There she is,” Ted smoothed Blake’s collar before opening the door. “Mother, it’s good to see you.”

Mrs. Schmidt walked in the condo and surveyed the room, “I like the changes you’ve made with the place. It’s more homey.”

”They’re Blake’s touches. Mom, this is my partner, Blake Wyzecki.”

Mrs. Schmidt made as small nod and put out her hand, “It’s good to finally meet you, Blake.”

Blake shook Ted’s mom’s hand, “It’s good to meet you too.”

Mrs. Schmidt smiled, “Is that French toast I smell?”
“Along with turkey bacon, sliced melon and freshly squeezed orange juice.” Ted proudly announced.

“Just like I used to make for you when you were a boy.”

Blake and Mrs. Schmidt sat at the table as Ted prepared everyone’s plate. The three enjoyed pleasant conversation during brunch. There were no awkward pauses. Blake and Mrs. Schmidt got along quite well and for the first time since Ted could remember he actually felt relaxed while being in the same room with his mother.

When it was time for her to go she said, “Blake, you take care of my boy.”

Blake hugged her and said, “I will Mrs. Schmidt.”

“And Ted?”

“Yes Mother?”

“I can’t tell you how relieved I am to see you so happy after everything you’ve been through.”

Ted smiled and looked at Blake as he repeated his AA mantra, “I’m taking it one day at a time.”

“I’ve just been so worried about you. After that run in you had with the law and your drug problem. I didn’t know how to help. I guess all you needed was a nice man, like Blake here, to love you.”

“Knowing I have people like you and Blake behind me definitely makes things easier. And the way things have been going, this is turning out to be one terrific year for me,” Ted chuckled and tapped on the table, “Knock on wood.”

Pittsburgh
Gay and Lesbian Center
In less than four days Emmett and Debbie had put together an amazing fundraiser for Michael and Ben’s group home. In an effort to spend as little as possible they decided to go with a simple spaghetti dinner with entertainment provided by the fabulous Shanda Leer. Debbie had strong armed most of her customers into showing up and, of course, all of PFLAG was there. Brian and Justin sat at a table with Jennifer and Tucker.

She took notes as her sons explained what they were looking for in the perfect home, “I’ll send your preferences over to the Manhattan office and I’ll make sure they assign their best agent to you. Now, let me make sure I’ve got everything. You want something modern yet with a touch of old world charm. An urban setting with a neighborhood feel, a place that’s gay friendly, but also kid friendly. Is there anything else?” Jennifer sighed.

Brian and Justin looked at each other then Brian said, “Someplace close to the bars.”

“But also close a park and a grocer.”

“Well Boys, if there’s a place like this on Earth, I’m sure it’s in New York. Just don’t expect your agent to knock any percentage points off his commission.”

At the other end of the room Ben walked up to Debbie who was slicing a tray of brownies, “Deb. Thank you. I can’t believe what you and Emmett pulled of in just a few days.”

“This community takes care of each other,” She held up the knife and pointed, “And I have half a mind to go to Eli and Monty’s house and remind those little weasels of that.”

“Uh, let’s stick to more productive endeavors like passing out dessert.”

Deb wiped her hands on her apron, “You’re right, you’re right. But let me ask you how are the donations coming?”

Except for a sizeable contribution for Brian most of the donations were modest at best. Ben didn’t want Debbie to think her efforts weren’t paying off so he gave her an encouraging smile and said “Slow but sure, we should have enough to at least come up with a plan B. I haven’t seen Emmett, I wanted to be sure and thank him too.”
“He said he had a quick errand to run, oh look he’s coming in now. And Drew is with him!”

Debbie set down the brownies and ran over and hugged Drew, “Baby welcome home! We’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you all too, when Emmett told me about what happened with Michael and Ben’s group home I wanted to come and help out.”

“I’ll go get them for you!” Debbie scurried away and grabbed Michael who was in the middle of a conversation with Ted. Then she waved over Ben.

Ben walked up and shook Drew’s hand, “You came all this way to help us, thank you.”

“What you guys are doing is awesome. But, I’m also came here for Emmett.”

Michael grinned, “Well sure. The long distance romance thing can’t be very fun.”

Drew shook his head, “No, I mean Emmett here told me that he used to have a dream of opening a youth home himself, but his plans fell through. And since I’ve decided that I’m going to do everything possible to make sure all of Emmett’s dreams come true I figured I could start by giving you guys this.”

He handed Michael a check, “Oh my god. With this kind of money we could buy a palace!”

Debbie grabbed the check, “Holy Shit! Drew! I’ve never seen so many fucking zeros before.”

Ben looked over and saw the dollar amount, “Drew, thank you but this is way too much. We couldn’t possibly accept this.”

He tried to hand to check back, but Drew stopped him, “Take it for the boys. Everybody deserves a second chance.”

Pittsburgh
After the spaghetti dinner Brian suggested everyone go over to Babylon and work off the carbs on the dance floor. The place was packed with hot guys, most of whom were eyeing Brian and Justin. One particular, milky-skinned blond kept giving Brian a slow over, but Brian hadn’t taken the bait. Seeing this, Justin said, “He’s been cruising you all night.”

Brian smirked. “Who hasn’t?”

“I can go get him for you, we can take him back to the loft if you want.”

Brian shook his head and tightened his grasp on Justin, “I don’t need a cheap imitation when I’ve got the real thing right here.”

Justin started to kiss Brian when the music stopped and all the house lights came on, “What the fuck!” Brian shouted.

A team of uniformed men walked in the club. One held out a badge and announced, “This establishment is being shut down by the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board. Are the owners, of the holding company Kinnetik Incorporated Brian Kinney and Theodore Schmidt here?”

Ted ran up, “Right here, right here. I’m sure there’s some kind of mix up here. All of our paper work is in order and we have a very strict policy against allowing minors into the establishment.”

Brian walked up. He was angry, but he managed to calmly ask, “I’m Brian Kinney. What’s the problem?”

“Did you recently transfer partial ownership of all your holdings over to Mr. Schmidt, here?”

“Yes, and I had my attorney update all the necessary documents. So, why are you here?”

A detective walked up to Ted, “The terms of your probation and plea agreement after your 2003 arrest clearly stated that you may never pursue any adult business endeavors again.”
Brian scoffed, “This is a night club, not an adult business.”

The detective stepped over to face Brian, “Really, so if I were to take a look in that back room over there, I wouldn’t find any adult activities going on?”

When Brian didn’t say anything the detective said, “Mr. Schmidt, you’re under arrest for violation of your probation. Please put your hands behind your back.”
A few things. My beta questioned whether Driver's Licenses could be read with a magnetic strip to check for authenticity. Yes. They can. My favorite bar cards this way. Next, in the course of the dialogue Drew mentions a star quarterback from the 1970's named Joe Namath. He did a famous commercial for beautymist pantyhose.

Toronto International Airport Ground Transportation

Melanie stood in line at the taxi stand. Despite the fact that it was early August there was a chill in the air and she shivered as she waited for her cab. The last week in Pittsburgh had been exhausting, but it felt so damned good to get back to really practicing law.

When she’d first arrived in Pittsburgh Ted had already spent the night in jail. Blake, Emmett and Brian were all waiting for her when she got to the station.

“You guys have been here all night?”

“We wanted to be here when he got arraigned, but they’ve pushed it back three times.” Blake explained.

They all looked haggard and there was really nothing they could do for Ted so Melanie suggested, “Why don’t you three go have breakfast and I’ll try to get some answers for you by the time you get back.”

Brian nodded, “Here are Kinnetik’s licenses and contracts in case you need them.” He handed the files to Melanie before leading the guys out the door.

Melanie went over to the precinct captain’s desk, “I’m Theodore Schmidt’s attorney. I’d like to see him.” She handed the police officer her credentials. Luckily they hadn’t expired.

“They’re taking him across the street now. You can talk to him in the holding cell. We’re pretty
backed up. It’ll be at least another hour before his docket number comes up.”

Melanie walked across the street to the county court house. She had to go through three security checks and a twenty-five minute wait. She used the time to call the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board and the District Attorney’s office to see what she could find out.

When she was finally led down to the holding cell Ted ran up to the bars, “Melanie. God, I’m glad you’re here. I was afraid you wouldn’t make it in time and I’d be stuck with some pimply faced public defender.”

Melanie gave Ted a reassuring smile, “I’m going to do my best to take care of everything, but I’ve got a couple of questions.”

Ted was clearly in an agitated state, but he did his best to control himself, “Sure, sure sure…what do you need to know?”

“Tell me about the security at Babylon. Do you just have a bouncer who check’s IDs?”

“No, when we reopened I had a metal detector installed and we have a magnetic card reader that checks to make sure the driver’s licenses are authentic. Brian also did away with the membership cards because they were so easy to fake. We make people bring photo ID and their social security cards on their first visit and we verify that they’re over twenty one on the Social Security Administration website right at the door. No one gets in unless they’re at least twenty-one.”

“Brian is following age restrictions? That’s a new one.”

“I think he figured if he kept the teenagers out it wouldn’t be so noticeable that he’s in his mid-thirties.”

Melanie shook her head and smirked, “Well it looks like Brian’s vanity may have saved your ass. The cops didn’t find anyone under-age on the premises and they couldn’t get a single witness to verify that any lewd acts may have been performed.”

Ted had been damn lucky. As Melanie’s cab turned into the entrance of her neighborhood she thought about how surprised she’d been by Brian’s reaction to the whole ordeal. She remembered standing in his office as she tried to give Brian an update of the situation.
He practically barked an order at her, “I don’t need to know the details, just make this go away for Ted.”

Melanie sighed and held up a copy of the liquor license amendment, “That’s what I’m trying to do. Will you just tell me who this Gordon person is?”

“He’s our corporate counsel. He’s been on staff for about six months. Why?”

Melanie dropped the document on Brian’s desk, “Well your counselor neglected to notify the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board of Ted’s conviction. Amendments are approved automatically, but they do any necessary verifications on the back end. That’s how they found out about Ted’s record. If Gordon had included it in his initial submission the amendment would have been denied and none of this mess would have ever happened.”

Brian sat quietly for a moment then stood up, “Are you telling me this was a fuck-up on our end?”

Melanie nodded, “It looks that way.”

At this news Brian picked up his coffee mug and threw it across the room. It hit the glass door which immediately spidered with cracks, “God Damn it!”

Melanie jumped at Brian’s out burst, “Jesus Brian, you don’t need to wreck your office. Just fire Gordon.”

Brian’s chest was heaving. He took a few deep breaths as he calmed himself, “You can be sure as shit I’m going to do that. But first tell me what I need to do to make sure Ted doesn’t go to prison.”

“Relax Brian, the DA doesn’t have anything on Ted that’ll stick, he won’t have to serve any more jail time. As soon as they get the new terms of his probation worked out, they’ll let him out. The reason I came here today was to talk to you about Babylon. There is no way the PLCB is going to reissue you a liquor license the way things are. You’re going to have to either drop Ted as your business partner or sell Babylon.”

Melanie could barely believe this was the same Brian she’d always loved to hate. He truly had grown a heart, Melanie thought to herself as she got out of the cab and paid the driver. If Brian could learn to genuinely care for his fellow man, then she supposed anything was possible.

Pittsburgh
Debbie, Carl and Emmett's House
Emmett’s Room

Emmett slid the packing tape over his box of CD’s as Drew tried to untangle himself from a pink feather boa he’d managed to get wrapped around his arm, "Uh Em? Can you give me a hand here? I'm having a little trouble getting this folded."

Emmett looked up to find Drew virtually being attacked by pink feathers. He tried to contain his laughter as he said, "Well that answers my question about whether or not you could have a successful career as drag queen."

"Hey, if Joe Namath can wear pantyhose then so can I," Drew teased.

Emmett untangled Drew from the boa, "Why don't we stick with letting me be the fem in this relationship."

Drew wrapped his arms around Emmett's waist, "You do look pretty hot when you put on that eye make up with the glitter stuff in it."

"You think so?" Emmett asked as he kissed Drew's neck, "Then maybe I'll wear some to our going away party this weekend." Emmett felt Drew tense at his words so he pulled back and asked, "Baby, what is it?"

Drew looked down and shrugged, "I feel like a jerk for taking you away from all your friends."

Emmett lifted Drew's face by gently nudging his chin, "Honey, it's the 21st century. We've got cell phones, email, web-cams. You're not taking me away from anyone."

Drew gave Emmett a weak smile, "There's also your party planning business. I know how hard
you've worked to build it."

"I'm sure Pittsburgh society will get along just fine without me. Besides, when we get to Seattle I'll be working to make a good home for us. Unless of course I decide to just relax and be a gentleman of leisure," Emmett replied with a devilish grin.

"You can do whatever you want, Emmett. I just want you to be happy."

Pittsburgh

Ted & Blakes Condo

Ted fluffed his pillow and turned on his side in an effort to get comfortable. Blake was sleeping soundly, but Ted couldn't keep his mind from racing. Weeks ago, when the police officer put the hand cuffs on Ted, he really believed that all the work he'd done in the past few years to get his life back on track had been all for nothing. It was supposed to have been a night of celebration for Michael and Ben, but instead it had turned into one of the most embarrassing experiences of Ted's life. The worst part was the look on Blake's face when he saw the cops put Ted in the back of the police car. The very last thing Blake deserved was to have to watch his convict lover being carted off to jail.

It was now past midnight and as Ted lay in bed, he grew more and more restless. Finally, he decided to get up and go for a drive. It wasn't long before he found himself on Liberty Avenue. Ted pulled into a parking space across from Babylon and got out of the car. The club was dark and empty. So naturally, Ted's accountant mind immediately started calculating the thousands of dollars they were loosing on every night the club was closed. He decided he needed a distraction so he began walking up the street in search of something that'd help give his head a rest.

Woody's was loud and crowded. Plus, they seemed to be having some sort of benefit and Ted didn't feel like dealing with that. Boy Toy didn't appeal to him because he was likely to be old enough to be most of the other patrons' father. Ted hadn't been to the baths since he and Blake got together so that wasn't an option. And there was no way in hell he wanted to sit around with a bunch of stuck up assholes, so Pistol was out of the question. As he past by the Diner Ted noticed that Debbie was working the night shift and he really wasn't in the mood to for one of her cheeky pep talks. So, he kept walking till he found himself at the front entrance of Meat Hook.

Ted had only really dabbled in the leather community, but he knew enough to be certain that whatever was going on in that club tonight would be enough to put his worries on hold. As Ted pulled out his wallet and handed the bouncer the cover charge he said, "Hey Dungeon Master Don. What are they scene-ing tonight?"
"We had a collaring ceremony earlier tonight so we had to make room for the guests, but we do have a St. Andrew’s Cross up and a wickedly sadistic Daddy who'll whip your ass so hard you wont be able to sit for a month."


When he started to walk in the door DM Don placed his hand on Ted’s shoulder and held out a black leather vest, "Aren’t you forgetting something?"

"Thanks," Ted slid on the vest as he replied, "I'll be sure to return it when I leave."

As Ted walked in the club it became obvious that there weren’t many people there who were only casually into leather. Usually, Meat Hook was filled with guys who enjoyed a little light bondage and the occasional spanking. But tonight’s crowd was the real deal. They were 24/7 dominate/submissive lifestylers. There were several leather-clad Doms leading their nearly naked slaves around on leashes. Ted tried to keep his composure as he sat at the bar and ordered a cranberry juice. Just as he was about to take a sip when a hot, very young twink wearing only a leather G-string was cuffed to two large boards shaped like an X.

At first the sight of the twink getting flogged on his bare ass titillated Ted, but after a few minutes his worries crept back up on him and all he could think about was how upset Brian must be that they were going to have to sell Babylon. After everything Brian had done for him, this mess was how Ted was repaying him. He stood up from the bar and began to head toward the exit when a large bear wearing only tight leather pants and a pair of combat boots came up to Ted, “Leaving so soon?”

Ted looked up at the man who was towering over him, “Uh yeah, I’m not feeling very good and it’s getting late.”

“Oh well, in that case maybe all you need is a little pick me up.”

Ted furrowed his brow and tentatively asked, “A pick me up?”

The man stepped closer to Ted and discreetly showed him the small bag of meth he was holding in his hand, “It’s good shit. It’ll make all those bad feelings disappear.”
Ted shook his head, “I don’t think so. Thanks anyway.”

The man took hold of Ted’s shoulder and leaned down to whisper in his ear, “Ask yourself, when’s the last time you’ve felt beautiful.”

**Pittsburgh**

**Brian’s Loft**

Justin was happily lingering somewhere between asleep and awake as he gently ground his erection against Brian’s. He’d surprised Brian that evening by showing up in Pittsburgh a day early for Emmett’s party. Brian kissed the top of Justin’s head before sliding his hand down Justin’s back and into his crack. He was still slick with lube from earlier that night so Brian’s fingers slid easily into Justin’s hole. The feel of it made Justin moan and it wasn’t long before he was fucking himself on Brian’s fingers.

The morning sun was just coming through the window and Brian’s breath hitched at the sight of the soft light on Justin’s blond hair. He rolled Justin onto his back and took hold of his thighs to spread his legs. Justin bent his knees and planted his feet on the mattress, but when Brian reached for the condom Justin said, “Wait.”

Brian raised an eyebrow in reply.

“Brian, I want to watch you touch yourself. “

Brian curled his lips into a wry smile, “Did all those months of fucking over the web-cams give you a voyeurism kink?”

“Maybe.” Justin drawled.

“You want to see me stroke my cock?” Brian asked as he let his hands linger in front of his crotch.

“Yes,” Justin breathlessly replied, “Jerk yourself off then shoot your come all over me.”
When Brian began pumping his dick into his fist Justin reached into the nightstand drawer for his dildo. He sucked it for a couple minutes then let the head roll over his lips, before reaching down between his legs sliding it into himself.

“That’s right,” Brian grunted, “Shove it in your ass.”

The lusty, dirtiness of Brian’s words made Justin whimper. He drew the dildo deeply in and out of himself and focused his gaze on Brian’s now hard, dark purple cock.

Justin drew his thighs up against his abdomen so Brian could have a clear view of his ass, “Come for me, Brian. Come on my ass. Do it.”

That’s all it took and almost immediately Brian was shooting on to Justin. The sight of it made Justin come too. He pulled out the dildo and started rolling it in Brian’s come, “God, Brian. I want it so bad. I want to feel your hot wet come inside me.”

But when he started to move the soaked dildo back towards his hole Brian reached down and grabbed Justin’s wrist. “What kind of game do you think you’re playing?”

Justin leaned forward and propped himself up on his elbows, “I’m not playing. You’re telling me you never think about it?”

Brian shook his head and in a cold tone he replied, “I’ll tell you what I think about if you quit being a pussy and admit that you’re not really talking about fucking without condoms.”

“Huh?” Justin innocently asked.

Brian got up and stood at the foot of the bed, “You know damn well that doing it raw would mean we’d have to stop fucking other guys.”

Justin moved forward and knelt at the edge of the bed. He placed his hand on Brian’s shoulder, “I would never ask you to do anything you’re not ready for; I promised you that a long time ago. It doesn’t mean we can’t at least discuss how we both feel about it.”
“You know how I feel about it,” Brian replied through gritted teeth as he walked toward the bathroom and shut the door.

**Pittsburgh**

**Jennifer’s Car**

“Now I know you two said you wanted to stick to looking at residential properties for the group home, but I want you to bear with me and see the place I found. I really think you’ll love it.” Jennifer said as she pulled up the curved driveway of The Apple Tree Inn.

Michael looked out the side rear window of the vehicle, “It’s a hotel.”

“Technically, it’s a Bed & Breakfast,” Jennifer corrected, “And the owners just retired and moved to Boca Raton so they’ve priced it to sell. It’s a steal, really.” As Jennifer Ben and Michael got out of the car and walked up to the entryway she continued, “I did some checking and since it’s zoned as commercial space and since you’re a non-profit business you’ll have a full tax abatement.”

“How far are we from Carnegie Mellon?” Ben asked as he followed Jennifer into the B&B.

“Within walking distance, and Michael it’s just about a five minute bike ride to The Red Cape. Oh and ShadysideHigh School right down the street and it’s ranked among the best in the state. So your boys will get a top notch education.”

They walked through the house, and Ben and Michael were both impressed by the five bedrooms, living room, dining room and eat-in kitchen. But they were really taken with the back yard, “Look Ben, it’s a vegetable garden.” Michael excitedly pointed out.

“I know, we could grow our own organic foods. This really is a great place, are there going to be any problems with the neighbors objecting to the group home?”

Jennifer smiled, “I’ve already checked. There is no formal Home Owners Association in the neighborhood and this entire area has mixed zoning so you shouldn’t have any problems at all.”

Ben and Michael looked at each other, “What do you think, Michael?”
Michael smiled, “I love it, what about you?”

Ben put his arm around Michael’s shoulder and turned to Jennifer, “We’ll take it.”

**Michael and Ben’s House**

**Driveway**

**Later that afternoon…**

Jennifer dropped Michael and Ben off at home and waved to them as she pulled out of the driveway. When they walked in the house Michael said, “I’ll call Sister Carmen and let her know we found a place. I’m sure she’ll be as thrilled as we are.”

Ben took Michael’s hand, “Before you do, there’s something I want to show you.”

Michael gave Ben a seductive look and made an attempt at imitating a 1940’s movie starlet, “Why Professor Bruckner, are you making a pass at me?”

Ben laughed and picked up a box that was sitting on the bookshelf, “Let’s hold that thought. First, we should open this package.”

“What is it?”

“Open it and find out,” Ben smiled.

Michael took the package and sat on the couch. When he read the return address label he said, “Green Point Press, what did they send you?”

Ben could barely contain himself, “Open it, you’ll see!”

Michael opened the box, sifted through the packing foam, and found a hardcover book, “A Boy’s
Life, by Ben Bruckner.”

“It’s the novel I wrote after we lost Hunter.”

Michael was stunned, “I didn’t even know you submitted it.”

“I wanted to wait and see what kind of response I got before I said anything. I sent it to Green Point first and they absolutely loved it.”

Michael rose and hugged Ben, “This is fantastic! When’s it going to be in stores?”

“At the beginning of next year and they’re really going to get behind it. They’ve got a huge marketing campaign planned.”

Michael pressed his lips to Ben’s, “I always knew you could do it. I am so proud of you.”

Ben wrapped his arms around Michael, “And with Rage going international I suppose this means we’re both successful writers now.”

Pittsburgh

Kinnetik

Brian surveyed the huge mess of papers that covered his desk. Now that Cynthia was working out of the New York office full-time he was really beginning to realize how much he truly relied on her. He’d had no idea that he wasn’t organized, but it turned out that Cynthia had been the one who always made sure all of Brian’s contracts and client files were in the proper place. Now that he thought about it, he couldn’t remember the last time he got something out of the filing cabinet or put something away himself. He considered calling in Carol, the new administrative assistant, to get things in order, but every time he talked to her she looked like she would start crying at any minute. When he complained about her to Cynthia she responded by informing Brian that he needed to work on his “people skills.”

Brian stood behind his desk trying to decide what to tend to first when Ted walked in, “You’re late.”
Ted furrowed his brow, “I called in and said I’d be in at ten, didn’t you get the message?”

Brian waved his hand over his desk, “I could have, but at this rate I’ll probably find it sometime next century.”

“Well, I’ve got the Obdural ROIs ready for the conference call with Pfister. Do you want to check them over first?”

Brian was still surveying his desk, “No. I’m sure you did fine with it, but it’s a good thing you’re not meeting with them in person. You look like shit.”

“I had a late night.” Ted quietly responded.

“Hmm. Are you going to be up for the call this afternoon?” Brian asked as he sat down and started typing something on his PC.

“Of course, I’m fine. I just had trouble going to sleep. I haven’t checked my calendar yet this morning. What do we have on the schedule?”

“I need to run an errand. Come with me.” Brian slid on his jacket and Ted followed him out the door.

Once they were in Brian’s corvette, he and Ted discussed a few of the campaigns that were in process as well as different logistical aspects of Ted’s new responsibilities. When Brian remembered he hadn’t told Ted about the early morning meeting he’d had he said, “Oh, I found a buyer for Babylon.”

“You did? Who?” Just the thought of Brian having to sell Babylon made Ted’s headache come back.

“Todd.”

“Todd? Todd who?”
Brian grimaced, “You know, Todd. Everyone knows Todd.”

“Wait, you don’t mean backroom bottom boy Todd?”

“That’s the one,” Brian replied as he turned onto Sixth Street.

Ted was astonished, “How, on Earth, could he afford to by a club?”

“He just turned twenty-five and finally got his hands on his trust fund. Apparently he comes from old Pennsylvania Railroad money.”

“Huh, I guess you never know when you’re fucking a millionaire.”

“Unless you’re Emmett.” Brian replied.

Ted gave a weak chuckle then in a serious, contrite tone he said, “Brian, I just want to let you know that I hate that you have to sell the club because of me.”

Brian pulled over to the curb and put the car in park. “It was time to sell it. I can’t live in Never Never Land forever.”

Ted looked out the window and saw the sign that read Reconciliation Presbyterian Church. “What are we doing here?”

Brian checked his hair in the rearview mirror, “It said online that they have one of those Twelve Step Pity Parties starting in about five minutes.”

“You mean an AA meeting?”

Brian looked at Ted as if he’d just asked the most ridiculous question he’d ever heard, “Am I not speaking English?”
“But I thought you said you wanted me to come with you on your errand?”

“This is my errand. Now go in there, reconnect with your higher power and be back at the office by lunchtime.”

“But I usually go to my meetings after work.”

“You’re telling me you don’t need one now?” Brian asked. He tone wasn’t harsh, just direct.

Ted was touched, “How did you know?”

Brian slowly blinked his eyes, “We’re partners. We should know what each other needs without having to ask.”

**Pittsburgh**

**Liberty Diner**

The lunch rush was finally coming to an end and Debbie sat down in one of the booths to rest her feet. Kiki was sick so Debbie had ended up working a double. She’d been at the diner since eleven o’clock the night before. To make matters worse the latest bus boy had quit so Debbie still had to clear all the tables.

“Hey Deb,” Justin said as he walked through the front door.

“Sunshine! What are you doing in town?”

“I’m here to see Emmett off,” Justin said as he looked around the diner, “It looks like you could use a hand here.”

When Justin started picking up dishes Deb scolded, “Hey, a big shot New York artist like you has no business busing tables.”

“After all the laundry you’ve done and meals you’ve cooked for me I think it’s more than fair that I
pick up a few plates.” Justin took the dishes behind the counter and put them in the sink.

As he started clearing the tables near the back of the restaurant Debbie stood up and put her hand on her hip, “What gives?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m a mother, I know when something is bothering one of my boys.”

Justin sighed, but he didn’t say anything.

“Spill it, kid.”

Reluctantly Justin gave in, “Oh, I said something stupid and Brian got all pissed. He left for work without even saying good-bye to me.”

“So, Brian gets pissy all the time. Go talk to him.”

“Yeah, I really think talking to me is the last thing he wants to do right now.” Justin rubbed his forehead, “I don’t know what I was thinking. Pushing him the way I did after he’s been so great with our marriage and everything.”

Debbie didn’t need to know the details of the argument to give her advice, “Justin, you gotta understand, Brian’s in uncharted territory here. He may be an expert at plenty of things but he’s got no fuckin’ clue how to be a good husband.”

“That’s just it. He is being a good husband, a great one. I’m the one who fucked up.”

“So, you’ll be the one to fix it. I know things went sour with your folks near the end but I’m sure they never behaved the way Brian’s parents did the entire time he was growing up. He’s got absolutely no frame of reference for what it takes to make a marriage work.” Debbie walked up to Justin and patted him on the cheek, “Teaching him that is gonna be up to you, Sunshine.”
Justin walked in the building to find a young, slightly plump brunette woman sitting at Cynthia’s old
desk, “Uh, Hi. Is Brian available? I’m his-“

Carol smiled and interrupted, “You’re Justin. I recognize you from the photo he keeps on his desk. It
must be an old picture though. You look so young in it.”

Justin blushed. He knew that the picture was only about a year old. He’d sent it to Brian as a joke
shortly after he left for New York. Justin was truly touched when he found out that Brian actually
brought the framed photo to the office and placed it prominently on his desk next to a photo of Gus,
“I look a lot younger in pictures, I guess.”

“I’ll tell him you’re here,” Carol said as she picked up the phone.

“Actually, I’d prefer to just go on in if you don’t mind.”

Carol didn’t appear to like the idea so Justin gave her a cheeky grin and said, “You know, as a
surprise?”

Now Carol was the one who was blushing as she nodded and waved Justin toward Brian’s office.

When Justin walked around the glass partition he saw Brian sitting at his desk, “Hey.” Justin
tentatively began.

Brian looked up, “Hey.” His expression was somewhat blank so Justin couldn’t get a good read on
Brian’s mood.

Justin held up a paper sack, “I stopped by the diner on the way here. Debbie made me bring you
lunch.”
“Oh?” Brian replied as he stood and walked from behind the desk.

Justin handed Brian the bag, “Yeah um, it’s turkey and lettuce on wheat with no mayo. And a lemon bar.”

Brian walked over to his sofa and sat down. He opened the bag, unwrapped the sandwich and held up half, “You want some?”

Justin could tell this was a peace offering so he sat down next Brian and took the sandwich, “Thanks.”

They sat together in silence as they each took a few bites. Finally Justin said, “About this morning—”

Brian smiled, “We had our first marital spat. It was bound to happen sooner or later.”

Justin was relieved that Brian wasn’t still mad. “I guess we both knew married life wouldn’t be all rainbows and fairy tales.”

Brian planted his tongue in his cheek, “It’s a good thing too.”

Justin shook his head, “Why’s that?”

“Well, if we never had a disagreement, there’d be no reason for make up sex. And you’re so hot when I fuck you after we argue.”

“Ah I see. I suppose it’s good that you can see the positive side of things.”

Brian wrapped his fingers behind Justin’s neck and pulled him close for a kiss. As far as he was concerned the matter was over, but when Brian looked into Justin’s eyes he could tell Justin still wanted to talk about it. Brian knew he’d acted like a shit and at the very least he owed it to Justin to acknowledge that. He let a couple seconds pass before saying, “I was closed off, and non-communicative.”
“And I sprang the whole no condoms thing on you without any fair warning,” Justin rested his hand on Brian’s thigh, “But wanting you to be monogamous was the last thing on my mind, really. I only brought up the idea of doing it raw for two reasons.”

Brian tilted his head to the side, “And what would they be?”

“Well, first there’s the obvious. You know, not wanting there to be anything between us physically or emotionally.”

Brian nodded, “And the second reason?”

“It’s stupid now that I think about it.”

“It wasn’t stupid to you this morning. Tell me.”

Justin shifted on the couch so he could face Brian directly, “Since the moment I met you, it’s been all about my experiencing something for the very first time. I just thought, if we did it without a condom, we could share a first time together.”

Brian ran his hand over his mouth before replying, “At the risk of loosing the last vestiges of my manhood and sounding like a complete and total woman I’ll say this…every day I spend with you is a first time for me.”

“Really? What do you mean?”

Brian sighed, “From the minute I wake up each morning I’m overcome by how much I love you. That kind of thing sure as shit didn’t happen to me before you came along.”

Justin gave Brian a sympathetic smile, “I’ll never get tired of hearing you say that.”

Brian reached around Justin and pulled him onto his lap, “That’s the other thing. The fact that I want to say it, that I want to tell you I love you. I suppose you know as well as anyone what a fucking miracle that is.”
Justin draped his arms over Brian’s shoulders, “There’s something else I think I need to tell you.”

Brian could see the look of apprehension on Justin’s face so he urged him on, “Go ahead, tell me.”

“I wasn’t going to mention it, but now it kind of feels like I’m keeping something from you so I guess you should know. I didn’t mean for it to happen.”

Brian felt a rush of nervousness and his stomach tightened, “You didn’t mean for what to happen?”

Justin bit his lip before replying, “There hasn’t been anyone else in a while. In a long while, actually.”

Brian was suddenly relieved though he tried not to show it. “You’re not tricking?”

“Not for like, ten months. It just got, I don’t know, boring I guess,” Justin playfully poked Brian’s chest, “It’s your fault. Nobody can fuck like you. You’ve set the bar too damn high for it to be good with anyone else.”

Brian laughed, “I think I taught you too well. It turns out you’ve set the bar pretty high yourself.”

Justin was shocked, “Wait, you mean–“

“Not since before your show. Christ, it’s been months I suppose.”

A huge smile crossed Justin’s face, “So we’ve both spoiled each other?”

Brian gave a dramatic sigh, “It looks that way.”

Pittsburgh

Ted and Blake’s Condo
“Hey. You’re home early.”

Ted put his briefcase in the closet, “I only had one conference call this afternoon so I figured I’d call it a day and get some rest before Emmett and Drew’s party tonight.”

Blake got up from the couch and put his arms around Ted, “You’re not feeling well?”

Although going to the AA meeting this morning had helped, Ted knew he needed to come clean with Blake too. “I went out last night.”

“Wait, when? We went to bed before ten.”

“I couldn’t sleep so I went for a drive. I ended up at a bar…and someone offered me crystal.”

Blake swallowed hard and used his training to calmly ask, “Did you slip?”

“I let him give me some. I brought it home and flushed it down the toilet.” Ted shook his head and his eyes welled with tears, “I wanted to use it so bad, Blake. I don’t even have words to describe how hard it was to get rid of it. I ended up just sitting on the bathroom floor the rest of the night till I had to go to work.”

“So you faced it. And you made the healthy choice. That’s all you can ask yourself to do.”

“Why though? I’ve been in hell these last few weeks and then I almost did the one thing that could really make me lose it all.”

Blake hugged Ted then let go of him and said, “Because you’re an addict, Ted. That’s the reality. We just have to deal with each moment as it comes.”

“I know I know. Take it-“
“One day at a time,” Blake and Ted finished in unison.

“There’s something else to remember, Ted.”

“What?”

“I’m in this for the long haul, through think or thin. You’re never going to lose me.”

T or onto

Melanie and Lindsay’s House

“Something smells delicious,” Melanie said as she walked in through the kitchen door with Gus and JR in tow.

“It’s grilled salmon, rice pilaf and Caesar salad.” Lindsay answered as she squeezed some lemon juice over the fish.

Melanie walked up behind Lindsay and wrapped her arms around her waist, “Sounds great. I’ll go get the kids washed up.”

As soon as Melanie left the room Lindsay pulled the offer letter from the college out of her pocket. When the Dean had first told Lindsay she got the professorship she was thrilled, but almost immediately she was overcome by a sense of guilt. She could teach anywhere and it wasn’t like New York didn’t have a number of outstanding art departments at the various colleges throughout the city. But Melanie really had no career to speak of in Canada and so much of Melanie’s own self worth was wrapped up in the work she did.

Then there was Gus. There was no part of Lindsay that felt right about keeping Gus so far away from Brian, especially now that they had bonded and had finally started building a real relationship. She also had to admit to herself how much she missed Brian. If Melanie took the job in Manhattan it would mean Lindsay would have Brian back in her life too. In that moment, she decided what she had to do. She went over to the waste basket, tore up the offer letter and threw it in the trash.

Melanie and the kids were all seated at the table when Lindsay walked into the dining room carrying the serving platter. She had set out candles and fresh flowers and she even got out the good china for
herself and Melanie to use.

“You really went all out, Lindz. Everything looks wonderful.”

Lindsay set down the food and started filling their plates, “That’s because we’re celebrating.”

Melanie smiled, “What’s the occasion?”

Lindsay stopped and took a deep breath, “We’re moving to New York.”

Melanie was ecstatic. This meant she could quit her tedious clerking job and get back to really practicing law. But, she also knew what moving to New York meant for Lindsay so she covered by saying, “Oh hon, you didn’t get the professorship? I’m so sorry.”

Lindsay shrugged, “It wasn’t in the cards. But this dinner is about you. When we’re finished you need to call Judge Harper and tell him you’re taking the job at Lambda Legal. You’ve kept him waiting for an answer to his offer long enough.”
Pittsburgh

Debbie and Carl’s House

In honor of Emmett and Drew’s move out west Debbie decorated the entire living room and kitchen with Seattle Sabers memorabilia. Instead of serving her normal Italian fare she prepared several football party favorites including chips and dip, spicy hot wings, pigs in a blanket and Carl cooked hamburgers on his brand new barbeque grill.

The night was winding down. And as Emmett looked around the room he asked, “Michael?”

“Yeah, Em?”

“Am I imagining things or did our little motley crew actually manage to get through an entire party without anyone breaking up, getting punched, or dropping some kind of earth shattering bombshell?”

Michael thought for a second, “You know, I think we did.”

Emmett clapped his hands together, “Well then, it’s official. My work is done here. And just think, if Godiva’s apartment hadn’t caught on fire all those years ago, who knows where we’d all be today.”

Michael grinned, “I know. If you told me back then that you’d be living with your openly gay, pro football player, boyfriend I would have thought that Anita had slipped you something she cooked up in a bath tub.”

“And if someone said that Brian Kinney would give up his title as the hottest stud on Liberty Avenue to become a happily married man I’d have thought they’d gone completely round the bend.”

Michael sighed, “Tell me about it.”

Emmett gave Michael a sympathetic look, “Are you doing okay with Brian moving to New York?”

Michael shrugged, “He’s been trying to get out of Pittsburgh for years. I’ve always known it was a matter of time. And Justin,” Michael looked over to see Justin helping Debbie clean up the kitchen, “Well, he’s good for Brian. As long as they’re together I know I don’t need to worry about him.”

“Sunshine!” Debbie swatted Justin on the behind with a dish towel, “What do I have to do to get you to quit busing?”

“Oh, okay! Old habits die hard I guess.”

“Well it’s good to know some things don’t change,” Debbie sighed.

“You’re gonna miss Em, huh?”

“Just as much as I miss you. But it’s like I tell all you boys. You gotta follow your dream.”
Justin nodded toward the fireplace where Drew was standing, “Emmett definitely got his dream. He finally found his prince charming.”

“Fairy tales do come true I suppose,” Debbie popped her chewing gum, “Course it’s easier when you actually are a fairy. Ha!”

“Ah ha!” Justin sarcastically echoed.

Ted straightened one of the figurines on the Debbie’s over crowded fireplace mantle, “I just want you to know, Drew, that I’m glad you could give Emmett what I couldn’t. He really does deserve the best.”

Drew gave Ted’s shoulder a light squeeze, “I know. That’s why he has you for a best friend.”

In the back yard, Brian lit his cigarette as Carl pointed out the features of his latest purchase, “It’s got a double stainless steel fabricated hood, porcelain cast iron grates and forty-five thousand BTUs.”

“Oh sure,” Carl replied, “And this Char Broil here is the Prada of barbeques.”

Brian smiled, “Prada?”

“Hey, you live with Emmett. You pick up a few things.”

“Then it’s a good thing he’s moving,” Brian raised an eyebrow, “Debbie would be pissed as hell if you started liking dick. Straight men only make it to the diner about once a decade.”

Carl started coughing as Justin opened the back door, “Hey, they’re getting ready to leave.”

They all walked back in the house as Debbie was squeezing the breath out of Emmett, “Yes, Debbie I promise to call you during the Doris Day marathon and we’ll watch over the phone together.”

“You better! Carl just doesn’t understand classic cinema.”

In an effort to help Emmett escape Debbie’s grasp Justin said, “You have a safe flight. I know those red-eyes aren’t fun.”

When Debbie finally released Emmett he hugged Justin, “Sweetie, you just went and grew up right in front of our eyes. And you managed to tame the wild beast too. You’re not only artist, you’re a magician.”

Justin laughed, “I think tame is a bit of a stretch, but I don’t have to do a pole dance to get him to notice me anymore.”

Brian walked up and added, “But, I still expect you to dress up like a hot little cowboy for me every once in a while.”

Justin playfully jabbed Brian in the ribs. As he rubbed his side Brian said to Emmett, “Seattle, huh?”

“That’s right, Puget Sound awaits.” Emmett melodically answered.

Brian handed Emmett a slip of paper, “Here. 1520 Summit Avenue. It’s the address for one of the hottest bath houses on the West Coast.”

Emmett’s sighed, “Brian. I don’t know what to say. This is just…just the most inappropriate going
away gift you could give me.”

Brian raised an eyebrow, “No, it’s not the most inappropriate.”

Michael gave Brian a look of mock concern, “Should you really be hitting on Emmett with your husband standing right there?”

Brian ignored Michael and stoically said, “I’ll see ya’ Honeycutt,” before heading back outside with Justin to have another cigarette.

“So, “Emmett began, “I guess this is it.”

Michael started to tear up, “Yep. This is it.”

Emmett handed Michael a handkerchief and said, “Oh don’t cry, Michael, you don’t want to be all red and splotchy with your boys moving in tomorrow.”

As Michael hugged Emmett, Ted and Drew walked up, “Emmett, we need to get going if we’re going to make it to the airport on time.”

Emmett nodded as Ted said, “You keep that flame burning bright Emmett.”

Emmett wrapped his arms around Ted, “And you take the ad world by storm. Oh Teddy, I think I’m going to miss you most of all.”

**Pittsburgh**

**The Hunter Novotny-Bruckner Home for Boys**

Ben stood with Michael in the front yard as Sister Carmen’s van pulled into the driveway.

“Okay boys, we’re here,” she said as she turned off the engine.

As the boys got out the vehicle, Michael immediately noticed that they’d put on some weight since he’d last seen them at Hunter’s funeral. He took a deep breath, “Hi guys. We’re glad you’re finally here.”

“Uh, thanks I guess.” A sandy haired boy replied. Then he asked, “It’s Michael right?”

“Yeah,” Michael replied, “And this is Ben, Ben this is Collin.”

Collin slung his back pack over his shoulder and gave Ben a little wave, “Hi.”

Michael smiled as he walked over to the other two boys. One was a tall red head, and the other was a Hispanic boy about Michael’s height, “You’re Toby and you’re Louis, right?”

They both nodded and Louis looked back at Sister Carmen, “So we live here now?”

“As long as you keep your noses and asses out of trouble you do.” She warned in a motherly tone that was eerily reminiscent of Debbie’s. She handed Ben a large pharmacy bag. “I had their prescriptions filled over at the clinic. And they each have digital watches with timers to remind them when they need a dose. And here’s the doctor’s number if you’ve got anymore questions.”

Ben took the card and slipped it in his pocket, “Thanks for everything Sister. We couldn’t have done this without you.” Then Ben asked the boys, “So guys, you ready to take a look inside?”
Collin looked over at the two other boys who shrugged, “Yeah.”

The boys said their goodbyes to Sister Carmen then followed Ben and Michael up on to the porch. When they reached the front door, Louis noticed the small placard above the door bell. The obvious tension in the air seemed to dissipate as Louis said with a smile, “The Hunter Novotny-Bruckner Home for Boys. He would’ve liked that.”

“Yeah,” Collin added with enthusiasm, “He always wanted to be famous.”

Michael swallowed hard. In that moment he felt like Hunter was with him, welcoming his friends to their new home, “Come on, let’s show you guys around.”

Michael and Ben led the boys on a tour of the house and showed them each of their rooms then went over the house rules. After everyone got settled in they all sat down to dinner.

Ben took a bite of the lemon-baked chicken then said, “We got the results of your placement tests today and you’re all going to get to start school as Juniors.”

Toby took a couple large gulps of his milk and asked, “So, we’ll get to graduate on time then?”

“I don’t see why not.” Michael answered as he spooned some more spinach onto his plate.

“And with the kind of scores each of you got,” Ben added, “You’re going to have your pick of colleges to go to.”

“College?” Collin asked incredulously, “How are we supposed to come up with that kind of money?”

Michael looked at Ben then answered, “We have some friends who own an Ad Agency. They set up a memorial scholarship fund in Hunter’s name.”

**Pittsburgh**

**Debbie and Carl’s House**

Debbie stood at the foot of the stairs and yelled, “Carl, get your ass in gear or you’re gonna miss it!”

Carl made his way down the stairs,” I don’t know why you’re rushing me. I know full well you’ve got the VCR set to record it.”

Carl smiled at Debbie and kissed her on the cheek then they both took a seat on the couch. When the news cast came on Debbie slapped Carl on the knee. ”Oh! Here it is.”

On the television, A young African-American reporter stood next to Carl out in front of the group home, “Life just got a little easier for a few of Pittsburgh’s homeless youth. Today, Ben Bruckner and Michael Novotny-Bruckner opened a group home in the name of their late son, Hunter. I’m here with Carl Horvath, spokesman for the Hunter Novotny-Bruckner Home for Boys. Mr. Horvath-”

“Look at you!” Debbie explained, “You look just like Claude Rains.”

“Shhh. You’ll miss my part.”

Debbie turned up the volume in time to here Carl respond to the reporter. ”Because Ben and my son, Michael believe in the importance giving everyone a second chance.”

When the interview was finished Carl turned to Debbie, “So what’d you think? I make a pretty good
official spokesman wouldn’t you say?”

Debbie sniffled in reply.

“Deb? What it is it?”

She shook her head, “When Michael was a boy, we barely had two pennies to rub together, but I
tried my hardest to make sure he always had everything he needed.”

Carl wrapped an arm over Deb’s shoulder as he wiped a tear from her cheek, “I know you’re a
fantastic mother. All your boys are lucky to have you.”

“No. That’s just it. We’re lucky to have you, Carl. You’re the one thing I could never really give
him. You’re a father to him.”

Pittsburgh

Kinnetik

Brian packed up his wet bar as Ted helped out by wrapping up his picture frames and putting them
in a card board box, "I sent the staff your schedule so they’d know when you’d be in town each
month."

"What, no surprise inspections?" Brian asked.

"I thought we agreed on taking a kinder, gentler approach to managing?"

Brian put the last of his liquor bottles into the box, "You take the fun out of everything, Theodore."

Ted made a face at Brian before looking around the office, "Well, I think that's the last of it. Do you
want us to ship these with the rest of your things?"

Brian shook his head, "No. I'll take these boxes with me. The office is all yours Ted. Just don't spill
anything on my couch, or else-"

"You'll hang me on the rafters by my toenails. I know."

Brian let out a short, quick laugh, "I'm glad we have an understanding. There's one more thing
before I go."
"Yeah boss?"

"Partner, remember?" Brian corrected.

"Right, right. What is it, partner?"

"Since you'll be the point person for most of our clients, we can't have you telling them you're the company accountant. So, I had Cynthia order these."

Brian handed Ted a box of business cards. Ted pulled one out and read it, "Theodore Schmidt, President, Kinnetik Inc. I don't know what to say Brian."

"Don't let it go to your head. I'm still the Chief Executive Officer and the majority share holder. You take care of the clients and I'll go make the big boys on Madison Avenue wish they were playing in our sand-box."

Ted held out his hand to Brian. "I have every confidence that you'll make them green with envy."

Brian shook Ted's hand and replied with a dirty smirk, "It's the other thing I'm the best at."

New York

East Village

St. Marks Comics

Justin stood outside of the comic book store with his cell phone to his ear, "It's the third store I've been to, Michael, and Rage is sold out all over town. The guy over at Cosmic Comics said they had a line waiting for the store to open this morning and all the copies were gone in under an hour. Oh and you should see the window display they have up at Midtown Comics it's indescribable!"

"It's the same here," Michael excitedly replied, "I called Copasetic Comics over on Asbury Place and they said that they've already got a backorder list a mile long!"
Justin sighed with relief. "I'm so glad we held on to creative control. Even if we're not directly involved with every issue, Rage is still our vision."

"Yeah," Michael agreed, "And if it keeps selling at this rate, Max Comics is going to have to hire a whole team of writers and artists just to keep up with the demand for new issues."

Justin switched the phone to his other ear, "I bet Brett and those suits out in Hollywood are kicking themselves for shutting down the film, especially after how this year's Academy Awards turned out."

Michael laughed, "That's right. If America is ready for a gay cowboy love story, they're definitely ready for a gay super-hero movie."

**Pittsburgh**

**Brian's Loft**

Jennifer set a small stack of papers on the bar, "Everything is finalized. Kinnetik, Inc now officially owns the loft. It was a brilliant idea on Ted's part. Now you can deduct the mortgage as a corporate housing expense. So, all you have left to do is sign these last few documents and Britin’s sale will be final too. It is a gorgeous house but I never took you to be the *country manor* type."

Brian thumbed through the document till he got to the last page. When he finished signing and initialing the document he said, "I’m going to be the homeless type soon if I don’t get your son away from the hotel’s twenty-four hour room service. He spends just about as much on food as I do on shoes."

"Then I’m sure you can imagine how drastically my grocery bill decreased back when he first moved in here," Jennifer replied as she looked around the room.

Brian had decided to keep the place furnished as it was for whenever he and Justin were in town. Though he’d never admit to being sentimental, the loft held as many memories for him as it did for Justin. Besides, this way he could purchase all new pieces when they finally found a place to live in New York.

As Brian filled two glasses, he saw the look on Jennifer’s face. It was the same expression Justin got whenever he wanted to say something, but he was debating whether or not he should. "What?"
Brian asked.

“I was just thinking about the first time I came here.”

Brian handed her the glass, “Ah the happy days of yesteryear. Why do you want to drudge all that up?”

As Brian took a drink of his scotch Jennifer replied, “I used to lie in bed at night, sick with worry that I’d done the wrong thing by asking you to take him.”

Brian stretched his neck, “It was definitely a gamble.”

Jennifer walked up to Brian and brushed the stray hairs off his forehead, “But it turned out to be a great bet. You’re a good man, Brian. And I know you and Justin are going to have a wonderful life together.”

Brian couldn’t bring himself to say anything. He just gently pulled Jennifer to him hugged her.

New York

Club Wilde

Justin stood next to Brian at the reception desk and filled out his registration form, “Brian, why am I not surprised that you’d want to get a sex club membership before you got your New York drivers license?”

Brian handed the form over to the attendant and replied, “Because you know how much more preferable being in a room filled with hot guys fucking is to standing in line at the Department of Motor Vehicles.” Brian slung his arm over Justin’s shoulder and led him to the main room. “Besides, this is not just a sex club. It’s the sex club. You’re not going to find any hairy, old trolls here, though if you keep your eyes open, you may spot an oh-so-hetero celebrity or two.”

Almost immediately after Brian made the comment, a dark-haired man with brilliant, blue eyes gave Justin a toothy grin that rivaled his own.
Justin whispered to Brian, “Is that who I think it is?”

“I suppose he didn’t get enough action up on Bareback Mountain. He’s cruising you hard. If you want him, we can put off our big night for a few months.” Brian offered.

Justin shook his head as he followed Brian down the hall, “I’ve had my fill of movie stars and I’m just fine with our new look-but-don’t-touch policy.”

Brian kissed Justin’s temple in reply as they walked through a draped play room entrance to find a full size subway car, complete with sliding doors, flickering fluorescent lights and some sort of hydraulic system that made the car shake and rock as if it were really moving down a track. “This looks hot. It reminds me of that scene from Risky Business.”

“Is that the movie where Tom Cruise danced around his house in his underwear?”

“Christ, you’re telling me you haven’t seen it?” Brian complained.

“Uh Brian, I was like, one year old when it came out.”

Brian gave Justin a little shove toward the subway car. “Just get in there and get your pants off,” Brian replied in disgust.

The car was filled with men in various stages of undress. Some were holding on to metal poles to brace themselves as they were fucked while others sat on plastic seats and received blow jobs.

Brian and Justin stepped onto the car and walked toward the back so they could get a full view. Brian sat down on the bench, pulled Justin down onto his lap and started licking the back of his neck. Justin was facing outward. He unzipped his jeans and pulled them down to his thighs as Brian released his own cock from his pants. After he rolled on a condom and slid his lubed fingers beneath Justin to ready him, Brian snaked his arm around Justin and guided him down on to his cock.

The natural rocking of the car helped Justin find his own pace as he began to ride Brian. The sights and sounds around him heightened his senses as he worked himself up and down on Brian’s dick. Brian let Justin take full control over their fuck, though he did run his arms up underneath the front of Justin’s shirt to caress his chest and increasingly well defined abs. With the exception of his baby-
face there was nothing about Justin that was boyish anymore. As Brian felt Justin’s ass tighten around his cock he remembered Justin’s sinewy high-school aged frame. Now at age twenty-two, Justin’s body was strong and completely masculine. He had matured physically as much as Brian had matured emotionally.

Justin leaned against Brian’s chest and reached back to tug on his hips. Brian knew what Justin was asking for so he began bucking himself up into Justin as he rested his head back on Brian’s shoulder.

Brian looked down the car and noticed that all eyes were on them. New York was a veritable ocean compared to the small pond that Pittsburgh was, but that had no bearing on their ability to turn heads.

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**Pittsburgh**

**The Hunter Novotny-Bruckner Home for Boys**

**Driveway**

Ben stood underneath the basketball hoop and passed the ball to Collin, “Why don’t you show Michael how it’s done?”

Collin caught the ball and started dribbling. “See Mike, you just use one hand, like this. Then just toss it up into the basket.” The ball flew up and swished easily through the net. Though he’d never been on any sports teams before, Collin was a natural athlete. “It’s easy, you give it a try.” He let it bounce and then caught the ball before tossing it over to Michael.

The ball hit Michael square in the chest. And as he struggled to keep hold of it he winked at Ben and said, “I’ll try, although there used to be a time when Ben here thought my double-dribbling was an endearing quality.”

Ben laughed, “It wasn’t your dribbling that I was attracted to, it was your singing voice, remember?”

Michael bent over the ball slapping it repeatedly to the ground. ”Yeah, well karaoke doesn’t require nearly as much hand-eye coordination,” Michael replied as the ball started to get away from him.

“Move with the ball, Mike.” Collin instructed.
“There you go. You’re getting it!” Ben encouraged.

Toby and Louis sat on the lawn and ogled the inaugural issue of Rage. They whispered to each other and smiled as they pointed out various parts of Rage and JT’s anatomy. “You really wrote this, Michael?” Louis asked.

Michael was relieved to get a break from his lesson. He awkwardly tossed the ball back to Collin and went to sit next to the other two boys. ”Yeah my friend Justin and I did, but be careful with that. It’s an original issue. Not one of the Max reprints. It could very well be worth thousands of dollars some day.”

“I’ll bet. I’m sure there are tons of pervy queers who love this sort of stuff.” Toby replied. He was a quiet kid, but when he did talk he usually tended to make the sort of sarcastic comments that Michael was sure Brian would appreciate.

Louis took the comic from Toby and asked, “And the guy you based Rage on is really as gorgeous in real life as he is in these drawings?”

“Well,” Michael replied, “The artist did take some liberties, but yeah.”

“What, you mean you don’t really look this hot in tights?”

“Very funny, Toby” Michael playfully scolded, “With remarks like that maybe Ben and me should rethink taking all of you on that trip to New York next month.”

**New York**

**Central Park**

Brian handed the remote control to Gus then set the model sail boat in the pond, “Pull the lever back towards you to make the boat sail forward.”

Gus followed his father’s instructions. “Like this, Daddy?”
“That’s right Sonny Boy. You’re doing it. Just make sure you don’t hit any of the other boats.”

“Okay.” Gus replied. He furrowed his brow with concentration as he directed his new toy out into the center of the pond.

Brian patted him on the head before heading to a nearby park bench where Lindsay was sitting. JR was sound asleep in her stroller. When Brian walked up, he noticed that one of JR’s shoes had fallen off so he knelt down and carefully slid it on her foot.

Lindsay was touched by Brian’s gentleness. There was something peaceful about him that she’d never seen before, as if some fight he’d been having deep within himself for years had finally come to an end. When he sat down next to her she asked, “Did you have to get him the most expensive boat they had?”

“You and Mel can teach Gus all about frugality if you want. I intend to teach him to have an appreciation for the finer things in life.”

Lindsay shook her head in reply while Brian lit a cigarette, “So are you having any luck finding a teaching position?”

“I’ve got an interview at the Institute of Fine Arts down at NYU. Dean Ketelsen from OCAD actually arranged it for me.”

Brian passed her the cigarette. She looked up to make sure Gus wasn’t watching before putting it to her lips.

“Hmm. It’s strange don’t you think?”

“What’s that,” Lindsay asked.

“That the Dean would turn you down for a permanent position at his school, but he’s all up for helping you find a job down here?”

Lindsay shrugged though she’d known Brian long enough to have a sneaking suspicion that he
knew more than he was letting on, “A professional courtesy I suppose.”

“Could be, though after the way he raved about you when I talked to him on the phone, I’m still surprised you didn’t get the job in Toronto. Especially since he said calling me for a reference was just a formality.” Brian raised his eyebrow at Lindsay, silently daring her to come clean.

“Fine, you got me, don’t tell Mel though. She wouldn’t understand.”

Brian rested an arm behind Lindsay on the back of the bench, “She wouldn’t understand that you gave up your dream job so she could have hers?”

Lindsay placed her hand on Brian’s cheek and looked into his eyes, “I didn’t give it up for her, but you already know that, don’t you?”

Brian looked over at Gus who was still focused intently on piloting the boat, “It’s not going to be like before. I want to be a real father, not some drop-in dad.”

Lindsay was thrilled, “As soon as Melanie and I close on the house in Bayside we can make up a schedule if you want?”

Brian’s expression soured, “Wait, you’re buying a house in Queens?”

“Manhattan real estate is a little out of our price range, Brian.”

“Christ, with New York traffic it’ll take me just about as long to get out there as it did to get from Pittsburgh to Toronto.” Brian scoffed as he tried to keep his temper at bay.

“Brian, you’re being ridiculous. It’s like a thirty minute subway ride.”

“What about me says that I would ever use public transportation?”

Now Lindsay was starting to get irritated, “I would think you’d lower yourself to travel among the peons to come see your son.”
“Oh like living in Queens is even a good idea? I suppose the Bayside Public Library keeps its copies of *Heather Has Two Mommies* right next to the George W Bush biographies.”

**New York**

**Lambda Legal**

Melanie pushed the elevator for the fifteenth floor of the Wall Street high rise. She’d waited her entire adult life to have the opportunity to work on the types of ground-breaking cases that attorneys from Lambda Legal oversaw on a daily basis. As the Legal Director of Lambda Legal’s National Headquarters she’d have her pick of cases and she’d even have a hand in helping draft important legislation that would extend the civil rights of the GLBT community.

When the elevator doors opened she stepped out and said, “Judge Harper, I mean Tim, I’m so excited to finally be here.”

“And we’re excited to have you,” Tim Harper replied, “Let’s leave your things with the receptionist and I’ll show you around.”

Melanie handed her purse and briefcase to a young transgender man behind the reception desk then followed Tim down the hall. He showed her the library, introduced her to several of the associates who’d report to her and finally he took her to her corner office. The view would have been amazing had it not been for the, still eerie, absence of the World Trade Center. When Tim noticed that Melanie was staring down at Ground Zero he said, “It’s not easy to look at, I know. We’ve got the blinds on order.”

Melanie turned around and shook her head, “That’s okay, it’ll just remind me not to take life for granted.”

“It’s a good attitude to have. The work here isn’t easy. Sometimes our test cases feel like exercises in futility, but the truth is every step we make, is a step forward.

As Melanie sat down behind her new desk she said, “We still have a long road ahead of us though. What are some of our open cases?”
“Well, we’re helping advocates out in California try to get same-sex marriage legalized, and we have a few different cases dealing with fertility clinics refusing to work with gay couples. And then there’s the big fish.”

Melanie’s eye’s brightened, “Really?”

Tim nodded, “We’re representing twelve US Servicemen who are challenging the Department of Defense’s ‘Don’t Ask Don’t Tell policy’.”

“So it’s a federal case?” Melanie could barely contain herself. A case of this magnitude could only mean one thing.

Tim confirmed Melanie’s thought when he answered. “Yes, and the way it’s going, this one could make its way to the Supreme Court before it’s all said and done.”

New York

Caryle Hotel

Brian sat with Justin in the elegant bar at the Carlyle Hotel. He’d spent the majority of the afternoon at his new attorney’s office discussing some changes he wanted to make.

“So what do you think?” Brian asked. He wanted to make sure he had Justin’s support before he talked to Lindsay and Melanie.

Justin scratched the back of his head and replied, “Uh...I think Melanie’s going to be pissed.”

“Why, I’m not asking for anything that’s not rightfully mine. Anyway, Gus is my son. I would have never had to give up my rights if we’d lived in New York to begin with. The custody laws here aren’t fucked up like they are in Pennsylvania,” Brian took Justin’s hand in his. The expression on his face was deadly serious, “And it’s not just for me. You have just as much right to be a parent to Gus as Melanie does.”

Justin hadn’t expected this at all, Brian’s sudden desire to get his parental rights back had come
completely out of the blue. “Look you know how much I love Gus, but I really think this should just be between the three of you. I don’t want to get in the middle of it.”

“You just don’t want Melanie to be mad at you. How come you’re scared of her and not scared of me?” Brian playfully questioned in an effort to lighten Justin’s mood.

“Because I’ve seen her when she’s pissed off; there’s no appeasing her. With you, all I have to do is drop to my knees and I’ve got you wrapped around my little finger,” Justin coyly teased.

Brian pulled his lips in between his teeth then said, “That may be true. But, it’s also true that you’ve been in Gus’ life since the day he was born. And as you always like to remind me, you were the one who named him.”

Seattle

Drew and Emmett’s Lake House

Drew pulled the sliding glass door closed as he joined Emmett out on the deck. He had lined the railing with flower boxes and was in the process of packing the soil around the rainbow assortment of pansies he’d planted.

Drew handed Emmett a bottle of Raspberry Pool Boy, “It looks like you’ve been busy.”

Emmett turned and wrapped an arm around Drew’s waist as he admired his handiwork, “I felt like adding a little color out here even if it is a little late in the season to garden. Do you like them?”

Drew took a swig of his of his beer then said with a smile, “It’s as colorful out here as you are.”

Emmett kissed Drew in response. And after he rinsed off his hands in the wash basin he said, “Why don’t you stretch out on the deck chair and I’ll give you a nice long shoulder rub.”

“Ah, that’d be great. But you’re sure you’re not too tired after all your gardening?” Drew asked as he sat down.
“I’m never too tired to pamper my man.” Emmett replied as he stood behind the chair and started working his thumbs and fingers deep into Drew’s shoulders and neck.

Emmett continued the massage till Drew finished his beer and asked, “You mind getting me another cold one, Babe?”

“Coming right up!” Emmett happily replied. When he walked into the kitchen he found a large garment box sitting on the counter. Emmett called out, “Drew, what’s in this box?”

Drew smiled to himself then called back into the house, “Why don’t you bring it out here and open it so you can find out!”

Emmett excitedly skipped back out on the deck and hopped onto Drew’s lap with the box, “Oh my gosh, I forgot your beer.”

Drew laughed, “That’s okay. Just open your present.”

Emmett slid off the ribbon and opened the lid to find a silvery, leather jacket. Emmett held it up and asked in an astonished tone, “Is this a vintage Versace?”

“Not just any vintage Versace. Read the card that came with it.”

Emmett pulled the little card out of the bottom of the box and read aloud, “From the estate of the late Lana Turner.”

Emmett made a squeal that sounded somewhat like, “Thank you,” as he threw his arms around Drew’s neck.

“Easy there, Emmett or I’m going to end up on the injured list.”

Emmett stood up and put on the perfectly fitting jacket. He held out his arms and spun around as he asked, “How do I look?”
Drew smiled. He loved seeing Emmett so obviously happy, “Like a movie star, naturally. Look in
the pocket, there’s something else.”

Emmett pulled out an antique cigarette case, “Is this Lana’s too?”

Drew nodded. ”Yeah and it’s inscribed by the guy who gave it to her.”

Emmett opened the case and read, “To LT All my love, Ty.”

“The dealer said an actor she dated gave it to her. His name was Tyrone something.”

Emmett put his hand on his hip, “Uh, hello, that would be Mr. Tyrone Power. They only had one of
the most notorious love affairs in the history of Hollywood.”

Drew stood up and took Emmett in his arms, “Well since you’ve worked so hard to learn all the finer
points of football, I’m going to do my best to learn all I can about classic Hollywood divas, deal?”

Emmett rested his head on Drew’s shoulder, “I have no idea what I did to deserve a man as
wonderful as you.”

Drew rubbed Emmett’s back and replied, “I wonder the same thing about myself.”

New York

Manhattan Extended Stay Lodge

Brian pulled the covers up over Gus as he settled into bed. The boy was exhausted. They’d all spent
the entire afternoon at Coney Island Amusement Park. Gus’ favorite ride had been the Ferris wheel.
They must have ridden it five times before they left for day.

They’d come back to the hotel that Lambda Legal had put Mel and Lindsay up in while they were
looking for a place to live. The place was nice enough. It had two bedrooms, a living area and a
kitchenette, though it was nowhere Brian would want to stay. “Did you have fun today, son?”
“Uh huh,” Gus sleepily replied, “Daddy?”

“Hmm?”

“Am I going to get to see you every day now?”

“I’m working on it.” Brian replied. He kissed Gus on the forehead, “Go to sleep now.”

Gus rolled onto his side and yawned, “‘Night Daddy.”

“Good Night, Gus.”

Brian turned off the light, shut the door, and walked back into the living room.

Melanie was sitting on the couch reading over the papers he’d given her before he went to tuck Gus in. When she saw Brian she looked up from the documents and incredulously asked, “What’s this supposed to be?”

“It’s exactly what it looks like. I want my parental rights back.”

Lindsay was shocked, “Brian, what are talking about? We settled all this years ago.”

Justin took a deep breath, “That was when we were in Pittsburgh. The laws there are different. They allow second parent adoptions in New York so there’s no reason Brian and Melanie can’t both have rights.”

“And Justin.” Brian added.

“We didn’t have Gus so you and Justin could play house,” Melanie barked, “He’s our son! Lindsay’s and mine.”
Lindsay rubbed her forehead and tried to get a handle on what was happening, “Let’s just calm down and discuss this like adults. What, exactly are you asking for, Brian?”

“I want Justin and I to both have legal guardianship just like you both have.”

“You’re not asking for physical custody and formalized visitation?”

Brian shook his head.

Lindsay turned to Mel, “If we’re not giving anything up. It wouldn’t be a bad idea. If Gus were to get sick or hurt when he’s visiting Brian and Justin in Manhattan it’d be a lot easier on all of us if they were legal guardians too. It can be difficult to get into the city sometimes.”

“Good point, but you won’t need to worry about that.” Brian replied.

“We found an amazing rent controlled brownstone that even has a small back yard, right in West Chelsea.” Justin explained.

Melanie rolled her eyes, “Do you know how hard it is to get in to a rent controlled apartment in New York?”

Brian shrugged, “It’s not that hard when you know the owners.”

“Who owns it?” Lindsay asked in a hopeful tone. She loved West Chelsea. Not only was it a predominately gay neighborhood, it also had several renowned art galleries, adorable shops and an increasing number of families with young children.

Brian put his arm around Justin, “We do, as well as the brownstone next door. If Bruce and Demi could do it so can we.”

“And it’s just a few blocks from the City & Country School on West 13th Street,” Justin added, “Gus and JR would love it there.”
“Mel, that’s one of the top, private day schools in the country. I read an article about it in Gay Parenting Magazine just the other day.”

Melanie sighed. Living in Chelsea would make her commute to work a hell of a lot easier. And if they all lived on the same street she figured she’d never have to worry about Brian seeking physical custody of Gus. Plus, as much as she hated to admit it, she knew how important Brian was to her son.

Lindsay did her best to tread lightly as she asked, “What do you say, Mel?”

Melanie could list hundreds of reasons why taking Brian up on his offer would only lead to trouble, but that was the Brian she used to know. It wasn’t the Brian who stood by Michael when Hunter was dying. It wasn’t the Brian who declared his love and commitment to Justin in a court of law, and it wasn’t the Brian who saved Ted.

Maybe, Melanie thought, this was the Brian that Lindsay had always known and adored. So, despite her better judgement, Melanie took a deep breathe and said, “I suppose this makes us all one big, happy family.”

Pittsburgh

Kinnetik

“That’s right, Mr. Brown. I was able to procure two full pages of ad space in the dead center of Sports Illustrated, and they’re knocking twenty percent off their regular rate.”

“Call me Leo. And you did a terrific job. I look forward to working with you again when we release our Spring line.”

“It was my pleasure, Mr. Brown, uh I mean Leo. I’ll email the contract to you right now.”

“Excellent. And tell Brian hello for me.”

“Will do, Leo. I’ll talk to you later.” Ted hung up the phone and forwarded the contract to Brown Athletics.
“Boss?” Carol called through the speaker phone.

“Yes Carol?”

“Blake is here to see you. Should I send him in?”

“Yeah, yeah. Send him in.”

“Right away, Boss.”

When Blake walked around the glass partition he had a huge grin on his face.

Ted laughed. "What are you smiling about?"

“I’ve never heard anyone call you ‘Boss’ before. It suits you.”

Ted got up and walked over to Blake, “You think so?”

Blake pressed his lips to Ted’s and replied, “Absolutely.”

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New York

West Chelsea

Brian and Justin’s Brownstone

Justin rested on his side in their new bed on their first night at the brownstone. Any soreness that he might have felt from spending the day moving in and rearranging the furniture until Brian was satisfied was gone. He was too excited. Tonight, Justin would know what it would be like to have Brian, only Brian, inside him.
Brian lay behind Justin and rested his hand on his hip as he entered him. Justin could feel an immediate difference as soon as Brian slid in his dick, “It’s so hot. Did you know it’d be this hot?”

Brian drew his hips back and pushed deep into Justin’s hole, “That’s part of it. All you feel is my cock. There’s no latex in the way.” Brian pumped a couple more times. “Now relax, I want you to always remember that no matter what, I’ll always be there.”

Justin moaned and turned his head to kiss Brian. They tongued each others mouths as Brian continued to slowly fuck Justin. When they finished Brian rolled onto his back and Justin slung an arm and leg over him. After he started sucking on Brian’s earlobe Brian said, “If I wasn’t one-hundred percent certain that your little move was just a cheap ploy to get inside my ass, I’d think you were trying to cuddle with me.”

“Perish the thought.” Justin replied with mock horror before beginning to lick and nip at Brian’s neck.

“Fine, fine,” Brian sighed dramatically, “My ass is all yours, Sunshine.”

Justin immediately sat up on his knees. When they’d agreed to stop using condoms he had wondered how long it’d take before Brian would let him top. He was ecstatic. He’d hoped Brian would agree to it on their first night doing it raw, but he figured his chances were slim to none.

Brian didn’t move so Justin asked, “Aren’t you going to roll over?”

Brian shook his head, “I want to see your face when you come inside me.”

Brian’s words made Justin dizzy with desire. And when he saw Brian spread his legs and draw his knees up to give better access to his hole, it was all Justin could do to keep from fainting.

He positioned himself in front of Brian and lubed his dick. Brian winced as Justin pushed into him, but he opened his eyes when Justin leaned forward to kiss him. Brian wrapped his arms around Justin and sucked his lips in between his own. They kissed for a while taking turns fucking each other’s mouths with their tongues. Then they stopped and simply looked into each other’s eyes.

When Brian felt his orgasm approach, he took a deep breath and said, “I love you Justin,” right as he came. Justin thrust into Brian a couple more times before coming, “I love you too Brian.”
Gus stood at the living room window in his Superman costume and cheered, “They’re here, they’re here,” as he saw his Pittsburgh relatives arrive. Debbie and Carl were the first in the house after Justin opened the door.

”Nice new digs, Sunshine. I see you added an artist’s touch to Brian’s taste.”

Justin looked around the front room at the new furniture they’d purchased. Debbie was right. While the décor was obviously modern, Justin had convinced Brian to add some color to his otherwise monochromatic pallet.

Brian came into the living room just as Jennifer and her family walked in. He shook Tucker’s hand, gave Jennifer a hug, and leaned down to give his sister-in-law a kiss on the cheek, “Hello, Molly, you’re looking lovely as ever.”

She immediately blushed, but did her best to remain composed, “Daphne says you like to give lots of compliments. Is she here?”

“She’s out back, helping get set up for Gus’ birthday party.” Justin replied as Michael, Ben and the boys got out of their taxi and headed up the sidewalk.

“Uncle Michael!” Gus yelled as he ran outside with his arms outstretched in perfect super-hero flying form.

“Hey Gus,” Michael replied as the boy jumped up into his arms. “I see you opened your birthday present early.”

“Mama let me open one this morning when I woke up ‘cause yesterday I helped move our stuff in like a big boy.”
Michael carried Gus into the brownstone, “Then you really must be a man of steel.”

As Brian led everyone through the house to the yard he sighed, “Michael, must you encourage the boy?”

Out back, Melanie had spent the morning taking down the fence that separated their backyard from Brian’s and Justin’s. Not only did it give the kids more space to play, but it also would enable Gus to pass safely between his mothers’ and fathers’ houses whenever he wanted.

Justin and Daphne helped decorate the backyard with blue and red streamers and balloons to match the Superman theme of the party. To make things complete, Lindsay decorated the cake with a large yellow “S” inside an upside-down, yellow triangle.

Brian was in charge of lunch. As he used the tongs to turn over the burgers and hotdogs Carl said, “Hey you got a grill just like mine.”

“You said it was the Prada of barbecues. How could I resist?”

After everyone ate and Gus unwrapped an endless number of presents the gang settled into an easy afternoon together, laughing and talking.

Justin did silly sketches of everyone wearing various, outlandish super-hero uniforms. Gus busied himself with his favorite gift of the day; an easel, with real canvas and paints. Brian walked up and inspected his work, “Looks like you got your artistic talent from Mommy.”

Gus nodded and matter-of-factly replied, “Uh huh, and she says I get my good looks from you.”

Michael was pushing JR on the swing when Brian walked up and tugged on his sleeve, “Come inside with me for a minute.”

“Mel, can you take over here?” Michael asked.

Melanie got up from the picnic table, “Do I want to know what you two are up to?”
Brian gave her a devilish grin in reply as he turned and walked toward the house.

When they got inside Michael asked, “Was it getting too Stepfordy out there for you?”

Brian shook his head, “I just felt like a break, besides I want to show you something,” he replied as he headed upstairs. When they got to the attic Brian opened the window and started to climb out onto the roof.

“Brian, what the hell do you think you’re doing? You’re gonna break your neck.”

“Come on, Mikey,” Brian whined, “Don’t be such a kill joy.”

Michael sighed and climbed out the window. When he sat down on the roof next to Brian he asked, “Are you ever going to stop being a bad influence on me?”

Brian pulled a joint out of his pocket. “Nope.”

“Lindsay’s going to kick your ass if she smells pot around the kids.”

Brian took a hit and held in the smoke, “Why do you think we’re up here?”

Michael took the joint from Brian and took a long drag “I was just thinking. The last time I was up on a roof with you was the night Gus was born.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll let him keep the role of Superman.”

“That’s a relief,” Michael smiled as he passed the joint back to Brian. “You know, this year, with everything that’s happened I realized something.”

“What’s that?”
“It’s all about family.”

Brian looked down and saw Justin playing tag with Molly and Gus, “I don’t know, you could be on to something.”

“You’ve certainly taken on the role of a full-time family man.”

“There are worse fates, I suppose.” Brian replied as he took another hit off the joint.

“So, no regrets?”

“Not a one,” Brian replied. And for the first time in his life, he actually meant it. “Oh I talked to the girls. I’m going to borrow the SUV when I drive back to Pittsburgh for business. They didn’t want me driving JR in the corvette.”

“You’ll be coming to town twice a month?”

Brian nodded.

“Thank you.”

“It’s not a problem. I only agreed to it because she’s out of diapers. I don’t do diapers.”

“No. I mean thank you for everything, for always being there for me.”

"Don’t talk like that. You make it sound like this is the end of the ‘Brian and Mikey Show.’ Don’t you know?”

Michael furrowed his brow, “Know what?”
Brian pulled Michael to him and pressed their lips together. “It’s only the beginning.”

Fade to Black. Roll Credits.

THANK YOU ALL SO MUCH FOR READING!

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