Kindred Souls

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/1181278.

Rating: Explicit
Archive Warning: Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Underage
Category: M/M
Fandom: Queer as Folk (US)
Relationship: Brian Kinney/Justin Taylor
Character: Brian Kinney, Justin Taylor, Other Regular Series Characters.
Additional Tags: Hurt/Comfort, Drama, Graphic Description, Child Abuse, Romance, Alternate Universe, Underage Sex
Stats: Published: 2014-02-12 Completed: 2017-05-29 Chapters: 33/33 Words: 151358

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by Tagsit

Summary

Brian Kinney had a terrible childhood and a difficult, lonely life as an adult. Before the age of thirty he's already become so jaded that he doesn't believe in love or even in true happiness. After years of dealing with a dysfunctional family and an uncaring world, it seems like he's just about ready to give up completely. But, the guardian spirit that's been watching over him since Brian was a baby decides to save him, teaching him that true love does exist and that it can even transcend the laws of space and time.

*****STORY NOW COMPLETE!*****

Notes

Credit for the original plot device in the Prologue is attributed to Shard's Angel from the story "Angel" posted on Fanfiction.net. However, after the prologue, this story will be completely different than that fic. Thanks to the original author though for the prologue idea. Thanks for reading my stories! Enjoy! TAG

*** Warning - This story deals with child abuse and the descriptions will be pretty graphic. Please don't read if this topic causes you any distress *****

***NOT a Death Fic - Despite how this prologue starts, this really isn't a death fic. But, I can't explain why not without giving away plot. You'll just have to trust me on this!****

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See the end of the work for more notes.
He wasn't sure just how he knew it, but Justin was sure that something special was going to happen today. From the moment his eyes had opened this morning, he'd known. He'd come suddenly awake - no gradual awakening as he drifted softly out of the arms of his dark dream lover - not this morning. Instead he was jolted into full consciousness as if shot by a taser gun. His heart was pounding with a thundering and irregular beat, beads of sweat dropped from his clammy forehead and he felt like he couldn't get enough oxygen.

Justin looked at the radio alarm clock on the bedside table and noted that he didn't actually have to be up for school for a least a half hour. He tried to relax his body while lying back on his pillows, but his nerves were still sparking. His senses were all on hyper-alert. He could hear faint stirrings from the kitchen a floor below as his mother bustled about getting coffee ready and breakfast set out for the family. He could already smell the aroma of the French roast coffee that his father preferred drifting up the stairs. From outside he could hear the neighbor's wheezing old Volvo sputtering to life. The bright springtime sunlight felt like it was pelting down onto his skin, insistently demanding that Justin get out of bed and investigate the morning.

The high schooler sighed audibly but didn't try to fight it. He rolled out of his comfortable, warm blankets and shuffled to the window to look out on the burgeoning day. It was May 5th. He had less than a month to go before he finished his senior year of high school and then he could escape from the narrow-minded confines of Pittsburgh's St. James' Academy and the suburban hell where he'd grown up. Before he was so rudely awakened, his only plans for the day had been to survive another day of torture by the school bullies, do his homework and then retreat once again into his private fantasy world where he was able to be his true self.

You see, Justin had secrets.

His biggest secret was that he was a homosexual. He'd known since he was fourteen that he was attracted to men, not women. Unfortunately, he also knew that this was NOT acceptable to his family or his community. It had been less than a year since the famous Stonewall Riots in New York's Greenwich Village. He'd watched the news reports with his family and heard the disparaging remarks his father had made about the gay men trying to stand up for their rights against a corrupt police force. He didn't have to be told that he wouldn't be welcomed home with open arms if he admitted his sexual orientation to his parents, so he hid his true self from them.

Justin's other secret, while it may not have seemed as monumental, was even more closely guarded by the lonely boy because he knew it would set him apart from others just as surely as his sexuality.

His other secret was that he KNEW things; things that no one else knew, things that were going to happen, things about people who hadn't even been born yet. He'd always had this strange ability, even as a small child, but had been told early on, and often enough, by his mother and all the other adults around him that he shouldn't say THOSE things. His brothers had laughed at him and told him that it was 'weird' or 'creepy'. So Justin learned not to share what he knew for fear he'd be ostracized.

But regardless of how hard he tried to hide his otherness from those around him, Justin always felt like an outsider. He was always alone. He had no real friends. He didn't feel close to his parents or siblings. And, he never got along with the other kids his age. Somehow, everyone automatically
sensed how different he was, even when he didn't say a word.

If it weren't for his absolute knowledge that there was someone waiting out there for him - someone who needed him and would love him unconditionally - he was sure he never would have lasted till the age of seventeen. But luckily Justin did know just that. There was someone that was meant just for him, he simply had to wait, and bear with the stifling loneliness, until they could finally meet.

He'd seen glimpses of his future life in his dreams. Almost every night, he slept in the comforting arms of this lover who would cherish him and protect him, no matter what. The man he saw in his dreams was beautiful - tall, strong, dark-haired and he had the most astounding hazel eyes that seemed to penetrate to his very soul every time their gazes met. Justin knew this man was coming for him someday. Yes, it sounded like some hokey Grimms Brothers' fairy tale, but that didn't mean that Justin didn't believe in it with his whole heart. If he had to play the part of the wilting princess held captive in the tower, he would, so long as he knew he'd get the metaphorical prince in the end.

So Justin waited and guarded his secrets jealously.

And, as he stood at his window looking out at the brilliant May morning, Justin had the distinct feeling that today might be the day. The air around him tingled with electricity. It was the feeling he always experienced when he was about to have one of his 'episodes', as his mother called them.

He closed his eyes, feeling the warmth of the new day on his face. The strong sunlight penetrated through the thin membranes of his eyelids, creating a glowing backdrop upon which he saw the image of a dark-haired, rosy cheeked baby. He knew the baby was a newborn because of the pinched look about him. Justin didn't immediately know why this baby was important. He sensed a great deal of anxiety and tension circling around wherever the baby was. The environment seemed sterile and cold, but that's not what was generating the disquiet. It was more a feeling of unease and . . . anger?

Justin was momentarily confused about why he was seeing this particular infant. Usually his visions had more purpose to them. Then the most amazing thing happened - the baby opened it's eyes and Justin realized he was seeing the most perfect hazel green orbs he'd ever seen. The baby looked directly at him and smiled knowingly.

It was HIM!

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Justin managed to struggle through the school day. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to have learned because it felt like one big blur to him. He didn't actually remember even how he got to school that day, but he supposed his younger brother Four, who had earned enough money caddying at the country club last summer to buy a used '65 Mustang convertible, had driven them as usual. He barely registered when he was embarrassed in math class for not knowing some equation or when the school jocks knocked his lunch tray off the table, spilling his food everywhere with a laughing, sarcastic 'sorry, dude'. All Justin's concentration was focused instead on the baby he'd seen that morning.

As soon as school was out, he ran home, threw his school bag on the chair by the kitchen table and, yelling 'hello' to his mother in passing, he rushed up to his room. He needed to be alone in order to concentrate. He desperately needed to find this baby. He sat tailor fashion on the rug in the middle of the floor in his bedroom, closed his eyes tightly and tried to calm his breathing.
For the longest time he felt nothing but a sense of vague anticipation, but he didn't give up. Then, just as the sun set, Justin felt an excruciating pain shoot through his entire body. There was unbearable pressure, repetitive aching pain and finally a stabbing sensation causing him to gulp large lungfuls of air. His emotions, caught up with those at the scene, were chaotic and bewildering. As the pain gradually receded, his sight cleared and he could see a room encompassed by bleak, colorless walls.

Gradually the swirling, confusing sensations of Justin's vision coalesced and steadied until he felt a single, strong individual consciousness. The pull he felt from this small bundle of personality was relentlessly strong. He didn't really have any choice other than to get up and follow the connection. Justin snuck quietly down the back stairs, grabbed Four's car keys off the kitchen counter and carefully closed the back door behind him as he tiptoed out of the house.

Borrowing his brother's car, he drove steadily towards the southwest, following the source of the magnetic force drawing him. He crossed over the Allegheny River and eventually found himself pulling into the parking lot of Allegheny General Hospital. He was vaguely worried about how he was going to find the baby now that he was here - he was sure they didn't let just anyone into the nursery. But, as luck would have it, just as he came up to the large glass entry doors of the main lobby, an older couple carrying flowers and a balloon saying 'It's A Boy' entered in front of him. Justin followed the couple, trying to look like he belonged, as the duo got direction to the maternity ward from the nurse at the Information desk. After that it was easy for him to make his way unobserved to the correct floor where he immediately found the glass fronted nursery full of newborns.

It had apparently been a busy day in the maternity ward. There were at least twelve bassinets displayed behind the glass that allowed guests to view the new arrivals. Nurses were bustling around inside the room and there were several people standing by the glass pointing to one or another of the identically wrapped bundles. Justin knew HIS baby was here in this nursery - he could still feel that dogged pull - but from out here he couldn't determine which of the small mewling forms was the one he needed.

Justin waited in front of the viewing window with one hand against the glass for a long time, trying to figure out what he was supposed to do next. The cool glass touching his palm slowly began to warm - he could feel the surface vibrating with an undefined energy that grew out of the connection between himself and the kindred soul he was here to find. The atmosphere inside and around the little room felt heavy, like the air outside right before a thunderstorm. Nobody except Justin, though, seemed to notice anything different.

One by one, the other observers in front of the nursery began to leave until he was the only guest left. Justin heard a commotion down the hallway behind him and, almost immediately, several of the nurses rushed out of the nursery and trotted brusquely down the hall. After a few more minutes, another nurse left, following in the direction of the distant hubbub, and then there was only one attendant left in the creche area. Finally, there was a loud ringing from the wall-mounted phone at the back of the room and the last nurse moved to answer the call. A minute later, the remaining nurse strode officiously over to one bassinet, kicked off the brake mechanism and began to wheel the baby-filled contraption out of the room and around the corner. Justin smiled as he noted that the nursery door didn't close all the way behind the retreating nurse.

When the coast was clear, Justin slipped through the door into the nursery. As soon as he was across the threshold he could feel an attraction to one particular bassinet at the farthest end of the second row. He skipped over to the waiting infant and stared down at the sleeping baby.

The fragile form inside seemed altogether too small, but perfect nonetheless. A blue and white
striped knit cap was pulled down over the infant's small head, but wisps of soft chestnut brown hair escaped around the tiny shell-like ears. A lightweight white blanket had been tightly wrapped around the little body, with only one defiant little hand able to break out of the confines to rest curled against a pale pink cheek. Justin, who previously hadn't spent any more time than the average seventeen year old boy thinking about babies, nevertheless thought that HIS baby was absolutely beautiful.

The compulsion to reach into the bassinet and pick up the child was irresistible. Justin didn't want to fight the urge anyway. He gently scooped the small form into his arms and stood there holding onto the precious bundle, completely lost in the feelings of peace that overcame him at the mere touch of this little person. For the first time in his life, Justin felt complete, like he finally belonged, and was no longer alone.

The identification label at the foot of the bassinet caught his eye then. The name on the tag read, "Kinney, Brian. 5/5/70". It was followed by other identifying numbers and information including the names of the parents, "Mother: Joan Kinney. Father: Jack Kinney."

“Well, hello there, Brian,” Justin cooed into the baby’s perfect little ear. “I’ve been waiting for you for a long time. I’m so glad you’re here finally.”

At the sound of Justin’s voice, the baby opened it’s eyes and stared straight into those of the man holding him. The child’s eyes were already a kaleidoscope of swirling greens, browns and golds, rather than the usual undifferentiated grey-blues of most newborns. As the man’s crystal blue gaze met the hazel glance of the infant, there was an instant connection - a sense of recognition and knowing that both souls acknowledged immediately.

Justin wasn’t sure just how long he stood there holding the baby and silently communicating with the newborn. But, after a long period, he finally became aware of an increasing amount of noise coming from the hallway outside the creche area. He looked up and noted that there was a crowd of people coming down the hall, looking like they were headed directly for the nursery. Justin knew he didn’t have a legitimate reason for being in the room, let alone for holding this baby that he had no overt relationship to, so he hastily deposited the little bundle back into it’s bassinet, left a tender kiss on the infant’s precocious little nose and surreptitiously slid back out of the room.

Mere moments after he was clear of the doorway, Justin was surrounded by the boiling mass of people that had been struggling down the hallway together. Now that he was in the middle of the roil, he could make out more about what was causing the commotion. At the center of the hubbub was a tall, middle-aged man with greying brown hair and a slight beer belly, who was talking loudly and arguing with several of the hospital staff. The boisterous man was trying to free his arm from the grip of a burly looking young man dressed in white scrubs. Two nurses were tagging along beside the pair, apparently trying to reason with the angry man. Behind this group trailed a small child, who appeared to be about four or five, crying loudly and dragging a small blanket behind her as a tall woman dressed in a hospital gown and robe pulled at the little girl’s arm to get her to hurry along as she also dashed after the rest. Everyone was talking at the same time and the noise level was escalating rapidly.

“Get your goddamn hands off me,” ranted the tall man at the center of the melee, finally pulling his arm free of the grip of the burly man next to him. “If I’m going to have to pay through the fucking nose for the little bastard for the next twenty years of his life, then I want to see him at least. The ‘Warden’ over there tells me I’m its father so I have every right to see my little Sonny Boy, don’t I?”

“Sir, you are inebriated!” complained a stern looking older nurse who was ineffectually trying to
restrain the man. “Now is NOT the time to be meeting your son. You should go down to the cafeteria, get some coffee and then come back when you’re more able to control yourself. I will not let you at that baby in your current condition, Mr. Kinney. Now, if you don’t stop hollering and raising such a ruckus, I will call security and have you thrown out of the hospital altogether. There are patients here who need their peace and quiet, including your wife, and I won’t have you upsetting everyone with your outbursts.”

“I want to see my fucking SON!” the man yelled loudly, causing everyone around to cringe at the excessive noise and waking several of the slumbering infants in the nursery, all of whom began to wail.

“FINE,” conceded the charge nurse. “You can see your son if you promise to leave here immediately afterwards. I’ll get the baby for you and you can see him, but I’LL hold him because I don’t trust you not to drop the poor thing in your condition. Is that acceptable?”

The fuming man grumbled something not quite intelligible but it was apparently enough to satisfy the nurse. She immediately hustled up to the nursery door, unlocked it with a key from the bunch attached to her belt and entered the creche, followed by the second nurse who took it upon herself to quiet the still wailing infants. The older nurse walked directly over to the bassinet where Justin’s baby was waiting, lifted the child into her arms and then carried the infant over to the viewing window. As the indignant father stood next to the pane of glass, he stared at the child and seemingly deflated once he finally got to see his offspring.

“There you are, Sonny Boy,” mumbled the man with a frown on his face. “At least he looks like a ‘Kinney’, so maybe the bitch wasn’t lying after all, hmm? Shit. . . . .” Then the man turned around and confronted the woman dressed in the robe. “I guess you got your way after all, didn’t you Joanie? Well, I’ll tell you for the last time, this better be the LAST one. You hear me? I didn’t want that one,” the irate man said pointing to the sniffing little girl trying to hide behind her mother’s legs, “and, I definitely don’t want this one,” he said as he pointed through the glass to the infant still in the nurse’s arms. “So, whether your fucking religion agrees or not, there will NOT be any more kids - at least no more that Jack Kinney’s going to slave away to support. You fucking hear me, Joanie? Are you listening? I wasn’t meant to be a family man and I’m not raising any more of your goddamned brats.”

Then, without more, the man turned away from the viewing window, straightened his jacket which had been pulled askew by the orderly and walked off towards the bank of elevators at the far end of the hall. The older nurse just shook her head in disapproval and then put the Kinney infant back in it’s bed, tucking the baby in before she turned to see to another of her tiny charges. The orderly who had been trying to restrain Mr. Kinney wandered off by himself. The remaining nurse gathered up the still weeping Mrs. Kinney and began to escort her back down the hall, presumably back to her room, as the little girl shuffled behind, her thumb in her mouth, snot dribbling down her face mixed in with some remaining tears, and pulling her blanket behind her. Justin stood, still in shock at the drama that had just transpired in front of him, and tried to figure out what he was supposed to do next.

Justin knew that the baby, Brian, was the one he’d been waiting for all his life. He didn’t understand how it was going to happen, but he knew that they were somehow destined to be together. He’d seen the two of them together in his dreams. It didn’t matter that, on the surface at least, it looked like it would be impossible for them to ever be together, Justin knew it would happen somehow. If he had to wait for another seventeen years until Brian was finally his, he would just have to do it.

But, in the meantime, Justin was worried about that man, Jack Kinney. He sensed that Brian
wouldn’t have an easy life, forced to grow up with that man as his father. He needed to somehow
be there to protect his Brian, to shield him from that man. But that task was seemingly impossible -
how was he going to be able to protect Brian from the boy’s own father when Justin had no valid
connection to the family? Well, it didn’t matter. He would figure it out. He would forge a
connection to the Kinney family somehow and he would find a way to be there to take care of his
Brian, no matter what.

“Goodbye for now, Brian,” Justin whispered as he stood at the viewing glass trying to get one last
glimpse of the infant for the night. “I’ll be back for you, don’t worry. I’ll take good care of you,
Baby. I’ll always be there for you, no matter what. Just wait for me, okay?”

Justin saw the baby’s hazel eyes blink at him, the connection between them still strong. Then the
young man turned and made his way out of the hospital, his mind whirling with ideas about how
he would contact the Kinney family, offer his babysitting services or . . . something else . . .
anything to get an in with the family so he could be near to Brian as much as possible. He knew he
would find some way to make this happen.

He was still concentrating on his plans as he got back in Four’s car, started the motor and pulled
out of the hospital parking lot. Justin could still feel the pull from the infant lying in the hospital
behind him, and he was trying to figure out what time he could make it back tomorrow to see the
boy. He was so happy that he had finally found Brian! All the pain and loneliness of the past
seventeen years was erased by the one moment he’d spent holding the baby. He knew that he
would never be lonely again and the effervescent joy of that knowledge bubbled up in him making
him giddy.

Justin was so busy with all his plans for the happy future that was dancing in front of his vision,
that he wasn’t really paying much attention to what was going on around him. He didn’t see the
stop sign at the end of the block as he drove past the cross street leading to the hospital’s
emergency bay. The speeding ambulance, racing to get the cardiac patient they were transporting
to the hospital, was already in the intersection when Justin drove his brother’s borrowed car
through the stop sign. The ambulance slammed broadside into the small sports car going at least
fifty miles an hour. Justin was so happy and engaged with his plans to be with Brian that he never
even looked up.

~**~**~**~**~**~
Consolation.

Chapter Notes

Here's the first full chapter for you. Hope you enjoy. TAG

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 1 - Consolation.

Brian was trying very hard not to cry. At the tender age of four he already knew that crying usually just made things worse. His father said that only sissy boys cried. Brian didn't want to be a sissy boy. He also didn't want his father to find him where he was hiding in the closet behind the pile of old suitcases.

He could still hear his father yelling from the kitchen. The tiny tract house they were currently living in didn't offer many good hiding places. There were only three bedrooms - Brian's, Claire's and the big one his parents shared - plus the kitchen and living room. There was a basement, but it wasn't finished and Brian found its dank, cobwebby emptiness even more scary than his father, so there was no way he'd try hiding down there. His sister, Claire, had already snagged the best hiding spot in the house - behind the towels on the bottom shelf of the linen closet in the bathroom - the only spot he knew his father hadn't yet discovered. His only hope was that he was small enough to evade notice back here behind the piles of unused old cases.

The terrified preschooler had been hiding in this spot for quite a while now. He couldn't yet tell time but it felt like he'd been there a really long while. However, he knew not to leave his hiding spot until he either heard his father leave, the squeaky metal screen door clanking shut loudly as the man slammed out the door, or until father fell asleep with his loud, uneven snores reverberating off the walls and filling the small house with a noise that had come to signify that 'all was clear'.

Brian already knew that tonight was going to be one of the Bad Nights. Father had come home already smelling of beer before dinner was even finished. His mother had called father a 'No-Good-Drunken-Lout'. Brian didn't know what a lout was, but he knew that it was a bad thing to say to his father when he smelled like beer already. When mother and father were busy yelling at each other with their backs to the table, Claire had waved at him and they had both slunk away from the kitchen table as fast as they could.

Unfortunately, Brian soon found out that all his efforts at hiding were wasted. The yelling noises started to get louder as his father stomped down the short hall towards the bedrooms. He could also hear his mother crying loudly as she ran into her bedroom before father could get there, slamming the door and locking it behind her.

"Claire! Brian! Get the fuck out here you two freeloading, useless idiots!" Father was yelling as his voice came nearer. "Get out here and clean up this fucking mess in the kitchen you Goddamn leeches! I work and work, day in and day out, and all you lot do is eat. At the very least you can damn well learn to clean up after yourselves."

Brian knew he was lost the moment he heard his bedroom door crash open, the door slamming into the nearby wall with a crack as the drywall caved in upon impact with the doorknob. Before he knew it, the closet door was sliding open and his father had grabbed him by the wrist. Father
dragged him out of the darkness and down the hall as his feet desperately tried to catch up with his body.

"Get this fucking mess cleaned up, damn it," father yelled as he shoved Brian into the kitchen table which was still covered with the detritus from their interrupted dinner.

Brian scrambled to gather up the dishes and take them to the sink the way he'd seen his mother and sister do it before. He accidentally spilled some of the peas on the floor but he didn't stop to pick them up when he saw the way his father glared at him. However, when the slippery glass fell out of his hand and shattered against the edge of the sink, he completely froze.

"Useless, fucking piece of shit!" Father said with his face turning almost purple in anger. "Do you think I'm made of money, damn it? Get the hell out of here before you break something else!"

Before Brian could move though, his father had grabbed him by the shoulder and thrown him backwards out of the kitchen and into the wall by the stairs. The light-boned little boy sailed through the air like a rag doll. He ricocheted off the wall and tumbled headlong down the stairs to the basement, coming to rest in a heap at the bottom of the staircase.

"I knew from the moment your mother told me she was pregnant that you were going to be a useless waste of space. But Joanie was too good to get an abortion. Well, the Warden got her way and look what I got - you! Just a worthless drain on my bank account," Jack continued as he clomped down the stairs after Brian.

When the infuriated man reached the bottom landing, he took hold of the wailing boy by the collar of his shirt, pulled open the basement door and threw the child through into the darkness. Brian couldn't see anything in the dark, but he distinctly heard the latch on the door sliding shut, locking him into the frightening spider-filled cellar all alone. He crawled to to door and began to hammer on it with his left hand, his right arm hanging painful and useless at his side, obviously damaged in some way from the fall.

The frightened and hurt little boy eventually gave up pounding at the door when he realized nobody was going to come for him. He was too scared to move away from the door, though. So he just sat where he was, crying from the pain in his shoulder and petrified at the thought of being alone in the creepy, dark basement. After a long time he stopped crying, mainly from utter exhaustion.

As his crying petered out, slowly turning into random isolated sobs, Brian gradually became aware that he was no longer alone. By the tiny bit of moonlight leaking in through the dirty basement window, he saw that there was someone sitting on the floor next to him leaning back against the locked door. The only feature of his new companion that Brian could really make out was the figure's white blond hair which gleamed even in the faint moonlight. Rather than becoming more frightened by the appearance of the stranger in his basement, though, the child was comforted by the knowledge that he was no longer alone.

"Hello, Brian," the shadowy figure whispered to the boy. "I know you're scared and that your arm really hurts, but don't worry. I'll stay with you till your Mom comes to get you. You're going to be just fine."

"How do you know my name?" was the first thing that came to the child's mind.

"I've always known you. I was there the day you were born," came the simple answer.

"What's your name?" the child asked next.
"Justin."

"How'd you get in my basement?" Brian inquired.

"I don't know," the shadow replied. "All I know is that you needed me so I had to come."

"I don't like it down here. It's dark and it smells funny," Brian admitted to his new friend with a hint of a whimper in his voice at the end.

"It's not so bad. It's just a little musty," was Justin's more cheerful response as he scooted closer to the boy, gathering him into his arms to keep the child warm and safe. "It could be a lot worse, you know. We could be brave knights, captured by the Saracens on our way home from the Crusades and thrown into a dungeon until we raise our ransom of gold and jewels."

"What are Crusades?" the boy asked as he settled back into the welcoming arms of the storyteller.

"Crusades," the smooth, comforting voice explained. "They were these terrible wars fought hundreds of years ago in Europe. All the bravest knights went there to fight and prove how courageous they were. . . ."

And the rest of that long dark night was filled with wonderful, entertaining stories about knights and princes who rode beautiful horses and did all sorts of brave deeds. Brian fell asleep listening to the calming voice of his new friend, comforted by the feeling of strong arms wrapped around him and too caught up in the fantastic tales to remember to be scared. He woke up the next morning when his mother finally came looking for him after his father had left for work. His friend from the darkness was gone.

His mother took him to the hospital where the doctors reset his dislocated shoulder. On the way home, Brian started to tell his mother all about his friend, Justin, who had sat with him in the basement all night and told him about the knights in the Crusades. His mother told him that he shouldn't make up stories like that because lying was a sin. Brian didn't really know how to respond to that so he just sat quietly for the rest of the drive home.

~*~*~*~*~

Brian was laughing so hard at the antics of Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd on television that he didn't even hear when his father came home early one Saturday afternoon. His mother had taken Claire with her to church and they weren't back yet. The rambunctious six year old had managed to squeak out of joining them by acting up at breakfast, pretending that he was too hyper to sit in his chair and whining incessantly until his mother declared that his punishment was to be that he wouldn't be allowed to join them at church this morning. Brian wisely waited until Joan and Claire left to laugh out loud at Joan’s idea of ‘punishment’. Then, the independant kindergartner happily plopped down on the couch, not bothered in the least at being left unsupervised for the morning, free to watch cartoons by himself.

Father had been gone early that day, his favorite college football team was playing and he was meeting the guys down at the Union Hall to watch the game on television. It wasn’t even noon yet when Jack stumbled drunkenly back through the front door, already pissed off at having lost $50 to that asshole, Bob, when his team lost the game. “Goddamned refs were fucking blind!” Jack mumbled to himself as he fumbled with the zipper on his jacket, eventually managing to take off the coat and toss it unsuccessfully towards the back of one of the kitchen chairs.

Jack tripped down the one step from the kitchen to the family room, catching himself before he fell
to the floor, and noting through his inebriated haze that the kid was watching those fucking annoying cartoons again. The volume on the TV was ridiculously loud. His head was already throbbing and the noise really didn’t help. He trod over to the small cabinet in the corner where they kept the liquor bottles and pulled out a fifth of cheap whiskey. As he sloppily poured out a shot glass full of the pungent amber liquid, he yelled over his shoulder to the boy to shut off that god awful noise, then slammed back the first shot.

Bugs and Elmer were singing opera at the tops of their lungs and acting out wacky scenes from their version of the Barber of Seville. Brian was laughing at the pair so loudly that he didn’t hear his father’s command to turn off the television. He only noticed that Jack was home again when the older man neared the couch, his refilled shot glass clutched in his hand and a scowl on his lined face. But, as drunk as Jack was, he was still fast. By the time his father’s return had registered in the boy’s startled brain, Jack was already aiming a blow at the back of his son’s shaggy head.

The first slap to the back of his skull knocked him right off the couch and into the old wooden coffee table, which unfortunately splintered to pieces at the impact. The sight of the broken furniture infuriated Jack even more and he began to roar at the child, aiming random kicks at Brian’s huddled form as the boy tried to scuttle backwards away from the enraged man. The only thing that saved Brian this time was that Jack was so sloshed, he tripped over his own two feet as he tried to step through the remains of the table. The man fell leadenly, only barely missing landing on the frightened youngster. Jack was a bit stunned by the fall and, instead of getting right up and continuing on his rampage, he lay there muttering and complaining for long enough that Brian was able to get to his feet and escape through the nearby patio door.

Brian ran as fast as he could down the block, heading in the vague direction of the park but not really minding where he was going as long as it was away from Jack. He had no idea if his father was following him or not, but he wasn’t going to slow down long enough to check. Brian’s only thought, like any other frightened animal, was to find a place to hide. As soon as he glimpsed a stand of trees and bushes on his right, he dashed towards the site, diving between the branches of a hedge and squeezing through the railings of a rusty old iron fence. When he spied a dark hole in the greenery, he scrambled as fast as he could into the shadowy spot and then hunched up as small as he could between the brush and the cold stone of a building.

For the first several minutes, all he did was concentrate on quieting his breathing so as not to give away his hiding spot if his father was looking for him. He listened intently for any sounds of pursuit. After a long while, when he hadn’t heard anything, he finally relaxed a little and moved so he was sitting more comfortably with his back leaning against the wall behind him.

Brian had no idea where he was but it seemed like a good enough place to hide for the time being. He didn’t intend to go home anytime soon. But, it was late fall and the weather was cold and damp. Brian obviously hadn’t stopped long enough to grab a jacket on his way out of the house and the shady nook where he found himself rarely got any benefit from the weak autumn sun. Soon, his sweaty skin began to cool and he realized exactly how cold it was outside today. He rapidly started weighing the relative merits of returning home to a second round of beatings versus staying where he was and freezing all afternoon.

“Better cold than bloody,” a hushed voice said, startling the already terrified boy whose head torqued around to see who had spoken.

“Shit, Justin!” the boy huffed in relief as he watched a familiar form rounding the corner of the building behind him. “You scared me half to death.”

“Sorry about that, Buddy,” the young blond man whispered as he squeezed past a bush and
hunkered down close beside his small friend.

Neither of them said anything more for a while. Conversation between them wasn’t necessary. Brian snuggled against the older boy’s side and was instantly comforted by the warm arm that wrapped around him. Brian wasn’t sure how he managed it, but he knew that Justin would always turn up whenever he was scared and hurt. Justin had always been there for him ever since that first night that Brian was locked in the basement when he was only four. The lonely boy had never questioned how his friend managed to appear whenever and wherever he was needed. Brian just accepted it and relished any time he got to spend with the kind-hearted older boy who seemed to be the only person in his world that showed him any love at all.

“Have I told you before about Robin Hood and his band of merry men who had to live in a forest just like this after they were made outlaws by the evil Sheriff of Nottingham?” Justin spoke softly into the boy’s ear as soon as Brian had warmed enough to stop shivering.

“Yeah. But tell it again. I like that story,” Brian begged as he nestled even closer into the loving arms of his companion, looking up at the same time into the brilliant crystal blue eyes that always shown on him with so much love.

“Well, you see, Richard the Lionhearted was away at the Crusades at the time and his brother, John, was supposed to be minding England while the king was away. But, John was evil and instead of taking care of the citizens of England, he raised their taxes so high that many people were unable to pay. . . . “ Justin started his storytelling, which always helped while away the time so easily, filling Brian’s mind with so many happy images that the pain and fear his father had caused was always crowded out.

Several hours later, after the sun had started to set, Justin concluded his tales for the day and the two boys finally crawled out of their little nest. Brian looked around, completely disoriented and unsure where, exactly, he was. He didn’t recognize the woodsy area where he’d been hiding. He’d been fleeing in such terror earlier that he really hadn’t been paying any attention to where he was going and at this point he really had no idea how to get home.

The boy’s fears weren’t alleviated any when, after walking around for a bit, the child noticed the rows of stone markers stretching away into the distance. He turned around and noted that the small marble-sided structure they’d been sitting against had a name carved into the stone over an ornately carved wooden door located on the other side of building. With the leafless autumn trees, the gravestones and the mausoleum nearby, the scene reminded Brian, especially now that it was dusk, of a scary Halloween movie he’d seen a few days earlier. However, just as the boy seemed about to start panicking about the scene around him, Justin came up to him and laid a hand on the younger one’s shoulder in an amiable gesture.

“Don’t sweat it, Buddy,” Justin quietly commented, his voice alone reassuring to the boy he’d helped out of fearful jams so often. “This place isn’t so bad. It’s . . . kinda my home. . . at least for the moment.”

Justin had been gently guiding the small boy down one of the rows of markers as he spoke. About a third of the way down the row, the older boy finally stopped, looking down at a particular tombstone with what Brian thought was an odd look on his handsome pale face. Brian followed his friend’s gaze, which had focused on the words written on the stone:

‘Justin C. Taylor
1/6/53 - 5/5/70
Beloved Son
Taken From Us Too Soon’
“Justin? Is that... is that you?” the child asked his silent companion, not sure what to say or how to react to what he was seeing - it was clearly something beyond his mere six-year-old understanding.

“Not really, Buddy,” Justin said with a small frown as he shook his head, although he continued to stare at the stone. “It’s just who I used to be. I’m still Justin; I’m still me. I’m just not THAT Justin anymore. But, I’ll always be YOUR Justin, Brian. Don’t ever forget that. I’ll always be here for you, no matter what.”

Brian smiled up at his friend. Justin HAD always been there for him - he’d been a friend, a guardian, a comfort in the dark, a protector, a distraction from his fear and pain and so much more. The boy didn’t understand what the name on the marker meant or, for that matter, what Justin’s words meant, but it didn’t matter. What mattered was that he trusted Justin with his whole heart.

“Come on, Buddy. Let’s get you home. I’m sure your dad is already passed out so you should be okay now,” Justin finally said, hugging the smaller frame to his side as he turned them both around and started to walk towards the cemetery’s exit.

The two friends walked hand-in-hand for several blocks, Justin guiding Brian back along the forgotten path towards the child’s home as they chatted about inconsequential things. When they reached the block where the Kinney house stood, and Brian finally recognized his surroundings, he turned to smile brightly up at his guide, ready to express his thanks. But the young man who’d been tenderly holding his hand just seconds before was already gone by the time the boy turned his head to the side. Brian could still feel the residual warmth against his palm from the now missing hand of his companion.

The boy didn’t worry though; that’s how it always happened with Justin. One minute his friend was there and the next he was gone. But he always returned whenever Brian needed him. His confidence that Justin would always be there for him was the one thing that kept him feeling safe no matter what his father might do. So, with a small sigh and reluctant feet, Brian shambled towards his family’s house, his mind still swimming with the tales of Robin Hood.

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The Rabbit of Seville - seven and a half minutes of the most zany fun you can have to classical music. My favorite Bugs Bunny Cartoon of all time. After that sad chapter you should watch this to get your spirits back up. TAG.

Chapter End Notes

Originally posted 5/11/13 TAG
Chapter Notes

P.S. Remember that reviews inspire me and keep me motivated to write faster. So, please help out your fellow readers and keep me writing by leaving lots of reviews! ;)
TAG

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 2 - Friendship. by Tagsit

Author's Notes: One more chapter, and then I really do have to finish The Grudge, study for a midterm and maybe do some laundry. . . Enjoy! TAG
P.S. Remember that reviews inspire me and keep me motivated to write faster. So, please help out your fellow readers and keep me writing by leaving lots of reviews! ;)

Chapter 2 - Friendship.

At nine Brian had a growth spurt. He still had a ragged haircut, his clothes were old and often torn, and he was almost painfully skinny. But at least he was now taller than all the other kids in his class and he started to stand up for himself more when the others would pick on him. After the third playground scuffle, though, the Vice Principal called Brian's parents who were asked to come to school to talk about their son's disciplinary problems.

Ms. Tursi, the Vice Principal at Franklin Elementary, had been a school administrator in the Pittsburgh Public School system for more than fifteen years. She had seen too many children like Brian come through her office during those years. She'd seen the same signs before: Brian was often absent from or late to school, many times he had 'forgotten' his lunch or lunch money, usually he was dressed inadequately for the frigid cold Pittsburgh winter weather, and he frequently failed to turn in homework assignments even though his test scores proved he was extremely intelligent. There was also the telling problem with his overly aggressive attitude towards some of the other students and even a few staff members. Although she didn't have enough concrete proof to do anything about it, these were all warning signs of abuse.

Ms. Tursi was determined to confront Brian's parents about these issues so she specifically requested that both Jack and Joan Kinney be present at the meeting. She told Brian, who was still sitting in the school office as punishment after his last schoolyard tussle, about the meeting she had set up with his parents, and that he should stay after school until they got there to pick him up. Brian involuntarily groaned aloud at the announcement. He liked the Vice Principal and knew Ms. Tursi probably meant well, but he also knew that his real punishment would come after the meeting when his father took him home. Brian dreaded the 'talking to' his father would give him - mostly because his father usually talked with his fists.

Several hours later, after all the other students and even most of the teachers had left, Mr. and Mrs. Kinney finally showed up and were escorted by the school secretary into the Vice Principal's office. Brian didn't even look up at them as they strolled through the office. He stayed seated on the small plastic chair in the outer office where he'd been waiting all afternoon. He could hear the adults talking in the closed room nearby, but couldn't make out exactly what was being discussed.
After another twenty minutes, the door to the office reopened and the three adults shuffled out. Mother was looking down at her purse as she walked, avoiding all eye contact. Ms. Tursi was shifting her eyes between the departing parents and Brian, with a sad almost apologetic look in her eyes. Clearly she hadn’t gotten anywhere with the recalcitrant parents. Father was scowling at him with that ‘You’re-So-Gonna-Get-It-When-We-Get-Home-Boy’ look on his haggard old face. Brian just sat there - too terrified to move - trying to scramble for some way to get out of going home tonight.

"Thank you for coming down to talk with me about this," Ms. Tursi was now saying as she reluctantly shook hands goodbye with Jack and Joan. "If I don't see definite improvement regarding these concerns in the next few weeks, I will pursue matters further.

Two hours later, Brian was finally allowed to crawl away from his father’s ‘lecture’ about how he was stupid, useless and always causing trouble, and the boy managed to make his way back into his room. He knew it wouldn’t help anything to cry, but he couldn’t quite stop the silent tears leaking out from behind his tightly closed lids and dripping down his cheeks. He pulled the tattered old blanket off his bed and retreated with it to the back of his closet, sliding the door closed behind him to give himself the semblance of security.

“Hey, Buddy,” a kind tenor voice intoned and when Brian opened his eyes again, he found he was no longer alone in his hiding place.

Even though it was dark in the back of the small space with only a small crack of light filtering in from below the door, Brian could still somehow see his friend’s beautiful face. Justin gave off a radiance of some kind that you couldn’t really see but could sense nonetheless. It was enough to bring a certain amount of illumination to the scene.

“Let me take a look at that eye,” Justin said with evident concern, his gentle fingers reaching around Brian’s chin and trying to get him to tilt his face so that the older boy could look at the black eye that was rapidly swelling shut. “Brian, let me see.”

“Leave me alone!” the boy snapped in an insistent but hushed voice. “I’m fine.”

The compassionate blond simply shrugged at this surly response, caressed the soft cheek a moment more and then conceded. Instead, he wrapped his right arm around the small boy’s shoulders and pulled the smaller frame closer towards him. Brian flinched slightly at first when Justin’s motion pulled at a bruised rib but then he relaxed into the familiar and comforting embrace. Justin’s reassuring presence helped him get his tears under control and except for the occasional shuddering breath, Brian was now quiet.

“Do you want to talk about why you’re getting into all these fights at school,” Justin asked a few minutes later, his question undemanding but with a tone that clearly indicated he was open to listening if the boy needed to talk.

Brian didn’t say anything for a long, long time after that. He didn’t know if he wanted to tell Justin about this. His friend never pushed him to talk. After a bit, though, Brian couldn’t help voicing the matter that had been causing him so much concern.

“Sam and Chris said that I was a liar and that you don’t really exist,” Brian finally whispered, still a little hesitant. “They said I was just a stupid little kid with an imaginary friend and . . . they laughed at me. So I hit them.”

“Oh, Brian,” Justin sighed and huffed a little amused snort as he turned and left a tender kiss in the soft brunet mop of the boy in his arms. “Those unimaginative dolts aren’t worth getting into trouble
over. You and I know the truth. If they’re too stupid and closed minded to believe then who cares about them. You don’t have to tell them about me.”

“But, Justin . . . We were going to play ‘knights’ at recess and I told Sam I wanted to be a Saracen and he said there wasn’t any such thing and then I told him that, yes there were, and he said there weren’t and I told him that you had told me all sorts of stories about the Saracens and the Crusades and then Sam and Chris said I was a liar, but I told them that you knew lots of really cool stuff and wouldn’t lie to me and they said that I was just a stupid kid and I was making up you and all these stories and that if I didn’t play right I couldn’t play knights with them and they were just being so stupid so I had to hit them,” Brian tried to explain, his words coming out in a jumbled stream, seemingly without a breath in between, in the manner of all third grade boys.

“That just proves that those two aren’t very bright. Of course the Saracens were real. ‘Saracen’ is just what the Medieval story tellers called the Muslims back at the time of the Crusades. The Saracens were all very terrible fighters and they often took the Christian pilgrims hostage and tortured them just for fun. Did I ever tell you the story of Hakem the Mad Sultan of Jerusalem and how he threatened to kill all the Christian pilgrims in the holy city because of a dead dog found in one of their mosques… . . .” and Justin launched into another of his stories in order to distract Brian from all his troubles for a few more hours.

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Brian didn’t return to school for the rest of that week. When Brian did show up the next Monday, Ms. Tursi called him into the office and asked him why he hadn’t been in school. He told her he had been sick. When the kind-hearted woman mentioned that his left eye looked sore and swollen, Brian said he’d knocked his head against a door. No matter how many times Ms. Tursi asked or how she tried to pry, Brian refused to tell her anything about what had happened after last week’s meeting. Brian had already been told by his father that if he knew what was good for him he would keep his mouth shut and stay out of trouble in the future. Brian would do anything to avoid another ‘lecture’ so he did what his father told him.

Brian also stopped talking to people about his friend, Justin.

Brian started to become more and more withdrawn. Ms. Tursi was worried about the poor boy and tried repeatedly to talk to him but Brian would just sit in her office, completely silent, and refuse to answer any of her questions. Just about the time she’d had enough and was preparing to report the family to social services, Jack lost his job and they were evicted from the house they’d been renting. The family had to move to another home in another school district. Brian’s case fell through the cracks.

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By the time Brian Kinney started fourth grade, he’d become what his teachers described as a ‘loner’. His natural ebullience and outgoing nature were simply gone. Instead of playing with the other children at recess, he would sit off by himself and read. It was easier to not bother trying to make friends. He never got into trouble at school anymore - if any of the other boys tried to start anything he would just stand and stare at them until they backed down. Luckily he was big for his age and nobody was willing to test whether or not he was serious. The rest of the kids whispered about him behind his back, making up stories about how Brian was crazy and had been forced to leave his last school for beating up three kids. Brian didn’t bother to correct their misconceptions.

Things at the Kinney household were bad. Jack had finally found a new job after about four months of unemployment. He’d spent most of the summer drinking his cares away, trying to forget about his money problems and taking out his temper on his family, especially his bratty and
annoying son, Brian. When Jack finally got the call from the Union that he was needed on a new job site, Brian felt so relieved that he wanted to dance and jump around and sing. If nothing else it would mean that father wasn’t around the house quite so much.

Unfortunately, Brian hadn’t counted on the celebratory drinking binge father would go on that last weekend before he started his new job. Jack poured himself his first scotch as soon as he hung up the phone. By mid afternoon the man was sloshed and only barely managed to stumble out of the house on his own two feet, off to find more booze. Mother also decided to celebrate a bit and disappeared into her room with the gin bottle and her bible around four in the afternoon. Claire and Brian had to fend for themselves for dinner, although they were pretty used to that already. They made themselves a triple helping of macaroni and cheese and had their own mini-celebration.

Right after dinner, Claire left to go stay the night at a friend's house, leaving Brian on his own. Brian looked at the mess they'd made in the kitchen but decided to put off cleaning up until later and instead watched the Dukes of Hazzard on television. It had been a long stressful week and Brian really hadn't been sleeping much lately - always too keyed into father's volatile moods to ever really relax - and before the program he was watching was even half finished, the tired boy fell asleep on the couch with the TV still blaring away.

The old beat up clock on the mantle said it was just shy of two am when Brian awoke to the sounds of his father tripping into the house, slamming the door shut behind him with a solid kick to the back of the door and haphazardly tossing his car keys onto the kitchen counter.

Brian stayed where he was, curled up on the couch, hoping without hope that somehow he could evade his father's notice. As he came through the door between the garage and the kitchen, though, Jack’s first sight was the messy kitchen with dirty plates and utensils still strewn about on the table and the pot the kids had cooked in sitting on the counter with hardening globs of sticky Mac & Cheese congealing on the bottom and spilling out all over the countertop. The second thing Jack noticed was the cacophonous chatter of the television still playing in the adjacent living room. Neither of these discoveries were likely to pacify the angry drunk.

“Joanie! Get the fuck out here. The goddamned house is a pig sty. Can’t you at least keep the fucking house cleaned? Joanie!” Brian cringed at the bellowing that was coming from just a few paces away from where he was hiding, knowing that mother was likely too drunk to wake up even with all that noise, and that Jack would soon come looking for someone else to take out his disapproval on.

“Fucking useless bitch,” Jack mumbled on when he got no response from his wife. “Can’t she do anything other than drink away my money and pray for my fucking soul . . . “

Brian could smell the sour odor of stale beer and vomit wafting off father before the man even made it into the living room. Predictably, the sloshed man made his way first to the liquor cabinet in the corner. When he discovered that he’d already drank everything in there - which happened to be the reason he’d left the house earlier, although he didn’t remember that now - he slammed the cabinet door closed, cracking the glass panel in the door in the process. Then Jack turned around, wobbling dangerously but unfortunately not falling, and looked straight at the couch where Brian had been trying to lie low.

“Well, well, well . . . What the fuck are you doing still up, Sonny Boy? Thought you’d just stay up all night with every light in the goddamned house blazing away eating up electricity? Do you know how much I pay every fucking month for the damn electricity, Boy? No, you don’t. You don’t give a crap do you? You’re as useless as the rest of them, aren’t you? You just eat and crap and use up all the electricity and you can’t even clean the fuck up after yourself, can you? . . . ,” the slurred
abusive words poured out, seemingly without end, each one pummelling into the small boy, causing him to physically recoil until it looked like the child was trying to sink into the couch cushions in a futile attempt to escape.

"Quit sitting there and just staring at me with your mouth open like a fish, Boy. Get the fuck into the kitchen and get it cleaned up, damn it!" Jack thundered when he finally got bored with just enumerating his son’s failings.

The raging man managed the two steps over to the couch quite adroitly considering his drunken condition and his left hand locked onto Brian’s arm with a vice-like, bruising grip. He tugged the boy off the couch, not bothering to let him get his feet under him but just dragging the slight body along by the arm. In the doorway of the kitchen, Jack threw the small body towards the dirty table. Brian sailed through the air and landed hard against the small wooden table, knocking the whole thing over and causing the plates and glasses to clatter brokenly onto the stained linoleum floor.

The upturned table and broken plates seemed to cause the already angry older man to become completely enraged. Jack roared an indecipherable curse at the cowering youth who was still lying stunned amidst the rubble on the kitchen floor. Before Brian could react in any way, Jack was coming at him with his fists flying. All Brian could do was hold up his arms in an ineffective attempt to protect his face.

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Brian sensed someone playing with the shaggy hair at the nape of his neck. The touch was light but tickled just enough that it was waking him up. He blinked his eyes open and looked around him, a little surprised that he wasn't in his bedroom for some reason. Turning his head slightly, he smiled to see that the hand which had teased him awake belonged to Justin.

"Hey, Buddy," Justin said, intoning his standard greeting.

"Hey, Justin," Brian answered as he wriggled to try to sit up so that he could look around more. "Wh-what happened? Where am I?"

"Hospital," Justin answered while trying to still the squirming boy. "You need to stay still, Buddy," he explained as he pointed with his chin towards Brian's right arm, which the boy now noticed was encumbered with a heavy white plaster cast immobilized in a sling strapped around his chest and shoulders.

It seemed like, as soon as he saw the cast, he all of a sudden felt the pain radiating out from the site of the injury. Along with the pain also came the memories of the run in with his father last night. Brian screwed his face up in anguish - both physical and emotional - but he carefully blinked back the tears that were threatening to fall and clamped his lips shut tight to prevent any sobbing from escaping. Justin simply sat there on the edge of Brian's bed, his fingers continuing to play in the soft auburn hair as he petted the boy and tried to comfort him.

When the boy had eventually mastered his emotions, he tried to shrug off Justin's caresses. The older boy just squeezed Brian's shoulder a little more tightly. Brian turned his head away and tried to ignore the continued petting, but Justin simply moved closer and began to tenderly stroke the boy's bruised cheek.

"Stop!" Brian ordered, turning so he could back up his order with an angry look. "I'm fine. Just leave me alone, okay."

"Brian . . ." Justin started to protest, again reaching out to touch the distressed child.
"I SAID to stop, Justin," Brian yelled. "I'm not a baby anymore. I don't need you here pawing at me all the time. It never does any good, anyway..."

"I'm so sorry, Brian," Justin started to apologize, his voice hushed and cracking as if he too was having trouble holding back strong emotions.

Yeah, you're sorry. Fat lot of good that does," Brian exclaimed bitterly. "If you were really sorry, you wouldn't let him do this to me. You would stop him. Saying you're sorry afterwards and petting me and telling me pretty stories doesn't really help, you know!"

"If I could stop all this, Brian, I would," Justin murmured back - regret, sympathy and frustration all clearly evident in his tone. "I don't have that power. I'd do anything for you, Brian. I would. I don't know how to stop him, though. I don't know how to help you other than just being here when you need me. I wish it were enough."

"Well, it's NOT enough!" Brian yelled back, his voice now so loud that it attracted the attention of a nurse who immediately bustled into the room to find out what was the matter.

Justin moved away from the bed, watching as the nurse spoke to her patient, brought him some childrens' aspirin to dull the pain from his arm, and then left. Brian ignored the crushed and despondent look on his friend's pale face. He tried to pretend that Justin wasn't there. He grabbed the remote control for the television mounted in the corner, switched on the box and refused to even look in Justin's direction.

Justin was very troubled by Brian's reactions. He wanted to help his boy. He could sense how hurt and lonely Brian was right now, but instead of accepting help, the youth was using his anger at his father to hold his friend at bay. Brian couldn't take out his frustration and anger on the person who was really responsible for all his pain - Jack. Instead he lashed out at the only other person around, even though he innately knew that his actions would hurt Justin nearly as badly as he himself was hurting.

All Justin could do was to stay near, watching over Brian as best he could and hope that someday he would be able to do more.

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Chapter End Notes

Originally posted 5/13/13 - Pretty heavy angst here, folks. I'm afraid its gonna get even worse before it starts to get better. Better run out now and buy yourselves those extra large boxes of tissues with the lotion added so that you can avoid getting chapped noses from all the sniffling you'll be doing as you read this story. TAG
Perseverance

Chapter Summary

Justin learns a little about how to be a guardian spirit. Enjoy! TAG

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 3 - Perseverance.

In spite of the relatively serious nature of Brian's injuries this time, still nothing much came of it. As soon as what he'd done penetrated Jack's alcohol befuddled brain, he'd fled the scene and didn't return for two days. Joan didn't wake from her own drunken stupor until rather late the next morning. When she discovered the kitchen virtually destroyed and her son lying unconscious in the middle of the wreckage, she immediately called 911 and reported that her home had been broken into and her son injured by the unknown invaders.

If she did know for a fact that it was really Jack who'd been responsible, she refused to admit it, even to herself. When the police and ambulance arrived, she told them her husband was gone on a trip for the weekend with his buddies and that she and Brian had been alone in the house all night. She didn't, in actual fact, KNOW that it had been Jack. But, just to make sure she didn't have to worry about a guilty conscience, she planned to confess to the sin of lying the next time she went to church so that she could be absolved of even the vague possibility of telling an untruth. She knew God would understand and forgive her since all she was doing was trying to protect her family.

Brian was released from the hospital on Sunday afternoon. Justin stayed with him the entire time. Justin tried several times to talk to Brian, but in the end he gave up and simply sat in the corner watching his boy, frustrated that he couldn't do more to help.

Things were a little better around the Kinney place for a while after that. When Jack finally did come home, he found Brian ensconced in the corner of the living room couch, his arm propped up on a stack of pillows and a throw draped over him for warmth with a cool drink and snacks placed nearby, while he watched his favorite television shows.

Jack merely nodded at the boy, sat himself down in the armchair next to the couch and didn’t say anything. The next day Jack started his new job, which meant he was gone for most of every day. It also meant and that he was still on his best behavior as far as his drinking was concerned since he needed this job too much to risk it by being hung over or drunk on the job site.

For the entire time Brian had the cast on his arm, his father left him alone. Jack rarely spoke to his son over the next few weeks and even seemed to avoid looking at the boy. It was like the cast itself was a reminder of what had happened and the elder Kinney didn’t want to see it or acknowledge the ‘incident’ in any way. Brian didn’t care as long as it meant he wasn’t being smacked around on a regular basis.
It wasn’t long after the cast came off, though, before everything started to fall apart again.

The bill from Brian’s hospital stay arrived in the mail about a week later. Jack was really not happy when he saw the huge final balance. He tracked Joan down in the living room and immediately bellowed to Brian to come down from his room. When the boy came into the room, Jack was looming over a seated Joan waiving the despicable bill in her face and ranting at her about all the costs. Joan wisely didn’t say anything. She just sat with her most passive expression on her face and let the man rave, hoping he’d eventually get it out of his system. Brian, on the other hand, wasn’t able to stay quite so sanguine at the return of the menacing bully his father had turned into.

“What the fuck is all this?” Jack yelled at the two of them. “$500 for ‘Ambulance Services’? Why the fuck did you have to call an ambulance? All the kid had was a broken arm for Christ’s sakes. Couldn’t somebody have just driven him to the hospital? What do you think I am - made of money? I work fucking hard for every dollar I earn. I don’t need you useless freeloaders continually sucking me dry like this. . . .”

The tirade went on and on. Luckily for everyone, Jack had been sorting the mail on his way into the house after work and he hadn’t yet had his first drink of the night. Otherwise, the ranting would have quickly escalated to physical violence. But, just because he was sober didn’t mean that Jack wasn’t hurtful and cruel. His words seemed to flail at Brian as hard, if not harder, than his fists. The poisonous words were much more insidious, though. The physical wounds healed eventually and usually didn’t leave any permanent marks. Jack’s words, however, sank into the tortured boy’s psyche and festered, gnawing away at his self-esteem long after the outward wounds were forgotten. In fact, it seemed that Jack was even better at the emotional abuse when he was sober.

“What do you have to say about this, Sonny Boy?” Jack demanded when he finished berating everyone he thought had ever wronged him, especially his wife and son.

“I . . . I’m sorry, Pops. . . I didn’t know. . . .” Brian hesitatingly started, not really sure what the man wanted him to say - he hadn’t really had any say in the matter, since he’d been unconscious at the time and, being not quite ten yet, didn’t really know that much about hospital bills.

“Sorry is Bullshit, Sonny Boy. A real man doesn’t bother to apologize,” Jack lectured the cowering child. “A real man stands up for whatever he does no matter what the fucking consequences. If he screws up he admits it and fixes it, if he can, and if he can’t he lives with the goddamned consequences. God knows I’ve been living with the consequences of MY actions ever since I knocked up your bitch of a mother. But I’m still fucking here aren’t I? Don’t ever let me hear you saying you’re ‘sorry’ again, boy. It doesn’t fucking change anything and just makes me even more pissed. You got that?”

As punishment for having wasted all that money on unnecessary medical services, Brian was grounded and sent to his room without dinner for the rest of the week. Justin showed up in Brian’s room every afternoon that week, as soon as the student got home from school, wanting to keep the morose youngster company. Brian continued to ignore Justin’s presence and didn’t respond at all when the worried blond tried to talk to him.

Over the ensuing months Brian withdrew more and more from Justin. Justin understood what was happening - just as Jack misdirected his anger about his unhappy life at his son, Brian was taking out his own frustrations on the only person he could. Of course Justin understood what Brian was doing, but it still hurt. He loved Brian so much and wanted to comfort him even when the boy refused to be comforted. But, Justin had promised that little baby that he would always be there for him and he intended to keep his promise.

Besides, Justin really didn’t have any choice in the matter, because when he felt Brian’s need for
him he simply had to come. That was his sole purpose for existence, at least for the moment, wasn’t it? He had known from the time he was a little boy himself that he was meant to be with Brian. He had dreamed of the man this boy would become for years before he’d even been born. Justin wasn’t sure how it would all work out, but he was sure that they were meant for each other and that they would be together, somehow, one day. In the meantime, he had to do everything in his power - however little that was, currently - to protect and care for his soul mate.

So, even when Brian turned away from him, refused to speak with him or even look at him, Justin didn’t leave. Every time he felt the pull, he would be there for Brian, even if it meant that all he could do was stand somewhere nearby and hopefully show Brian how much he cared with his mere presence. He was constantly frustrated that he couldn’t do more, though. Every single time he had to watch Brian being hit or denigrated by his father, Justin racked his brain to figure out some way, any way, he could stop what was happening. Nothing had come to him so far, though, which meant that he just waited and kept watch and tried to reassure Brian that he was truly loved even though the boy often refused to listen.

As the months and then years dragged by, Brian became more and more inured to his horrid, hidden life. In order to keep the abuse a secret he really couldn’t have any close friends. He hardened his heart, refused to let anyone else in and told himself he didn’t need friends. He had always been independent and intelligent so he did well in school and after school he went on his lonely way, dealing with whatever he had to deal with alone.

Although Brian wasn’t really ever completely alone. His longtime guardian stayed by him the entire time, even though Brian refused to acknowledge Justin’s continued presence. In fact, Brian got quite good at avoiding having to deal with Justin at all. They had always had a connection and could almost sense each other’s presence as soon as they were near. So, Brian began to actively ‘feel out’ his environment and avoid Justin whenever he sensed the other boy was nearby. He got quite proficient in turning back in the hallways, crossing the street to walk on the other side or even just avoiding a particular room or location altogether if he felt Justin was there.

And, out of sight - out of mind, right?

Of course Brian didn’t consciously think of it like this - he had eventually managed to convince himself that Justin didn’t really exist. Justin was simply someone he’d made up as a small lonely child so he wouldn’t have to bear his life alone. Now that he was older, he thought that it wasn’t right to still be relying on an ‘imaginary friend’. And, as long as he managed to avoid Justin, he could keep telling himself it was all just his imagination. By the age of fourteen he was already very good at compartmentalizing his life - uncomfortable things were simply set aside and not dealt with. He forced himself to not think about even the possibility of Justin and therefore he was able to block out the existence of his onetime friend. If he sometimes couldn’t avoid a glimpse of a beautiful pale teen with a glorious mop of blond hair trailing along not far behind him, he just didn’t let himself think about it.

Justin didn’t let Brian’s behavior phase him. He was always there, regardless of whether or not Brian wanted to accept his presence. And, in fact, he began to subtly use Brian’s instinctive avoidance of him to guide the younger man’s path.

The first time it happened, it was an accident. Justin had been waiting for Brian after the youth had had a particularly difficult day. Brian had been trying to avoid the school bullies ever since he’d started freshman year of high school. The group of Junior and Senior boys had apparently made it their sacred duty to harass all freshmen boys until they were adequately humiliated for having
dared to make it to high school. In the past, Brian’s physical size and loner attitude had been enough to keep most bullies away from him. But, here in high school, he was no longer one of the bigger kids any more and being a loner just meant that he was an easier target for this group.

The final bell of the day had rung and all the students were rushing out of their classes ready to escape the school for the weekend. Brian wasn’t quite as enthusiastic about heading home for two full days as the rest, which meant he was at the tail end of the pack of teens heading towards the lockers. Justin had been waiting for Brian all afternoon - he’d appeared earlier when he first felt Brian’s anger and frustration when John Matthews and his buddies had ‘accidentally’ knocked over his lunch tray - and was just hanging out in the school hallways to try and get a glimpse of his elusive charge. He wanted to make sure his boy was alright.

Justin had positioned himself within sight of Brian’s locker but far enough away that the wary brunet wouldn’t feel his presence. While he watched, Justin saw the same group of bullies that had been harassing Brian at lunch loitering around the freshmen lockers - obviously looking for a potential target for the afternoon’s intimidation games. Justin reacted immediately. He couldn’t just stand there and let Brian walk into an ambush. He intended to warn him so his boy wouldn’t be taken unawares.

Brian was only halfway down the hall, dragging his feet literally, and trying to come up with some new excuse to delay going home. Then, all of a sudden, the vision of his childhood ‘imaginary’ friend appeared directly in his pathway. Brian was forced to come to a stop or run right into Justin and, since he was still going with the theory that Justin wasn’t real, physically running into this figment of his imagination wasn’t going to help. He didn’t know exactly what to do. But, after standing there for several seconds without saying anything, Brian set his shoulders, turned his back on the disturbing sight and marched away in the opposite direction. Fuck getting his books or jacket - he just had to get out of there now and would worry about all that other stuff later, he figured. He didn’t want to think about what he’d seen. He filed the experience away in his mind amongst all the other items he didn’t want to think about and headed straight out the door.

Justin had been ready to yell a warning at Brian about the danger ahead. He didn’t care that Brian was trying to ignore him. He was determined to yell, jump up and down or do whatever else was needed to make sure Brian didn’t walk into that ambush unwarned. However, he never got the chance to say anything since, as soon as Justin had appeared, Brian had simply turned away and walked back the way he’d come. Justin was confused for a split second and then he smiled. This was perfect! He’d hit on a solution to the one problem he’d had from the very start - he now had a way to protect Brian. With Brian so intent on avoiding him, all he had to do was show up and let his mere presence guide Brian away from trouble. Finally, Justin felt he had some control over his environment - or at least Brian’s environment - and he could take active steps to help the person he loved.

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After that, Justin started using his brilliant new technique relentlessly to guide Brian’s course. It meant more vigilance than before - instead of just showing up when he felt Brian was upset or needed him, he had to be there most all the time in order to deter future trouble. But, that wasn’t really any hardship since Justin wanted nothing more than to be with Brian always. It didn’t always work - sometimes Justin didn’t see exactly what kind of trouble was brewing far enough in advance to keep Brian away. Sometimes there was just no way to avoid it. Brian was still only fourteen and needed a place to live, which meant he was still at Jack’s mercy much of the time, but Justin was able to keep Brian at least a little safer than he’d been before.

And, after a while, Justin started to use this power to not only direct Brian away from trouble but also towards some good things. One afternoon, when Justin had spotted a twenty dollar bill fall out
of a businessman’s pocket, he actively herded Brian across the park until Brian found the windfall and became $20 richer. When Brian found himself being ‘pushed’ out his regular path home one day, he decided to go the long way and providentially came across a marketing group handing out free passes to the latest new release movie. It was all just small things, but little by little, Brian’s life became more bearable because of Justin’s guidance.

The biggest change in Brian’s life though, came about halfway through the school year. That morning, he’d been late to his algebra class and was hurrying around the corner when he suddenly felt that nagging little feeling that warned him to avoid that particular hall. Brian quickly backtracked and took another path that would get him there, although he’d be even later. When he was almost to the classroom again, he was startled by a loud banging noise coming from the series of lockers stationed against the nearby wall. When he listened carefully for a moment, he could hear what sounded like crying coming from one of these lockers along with more bumping and pounding noises. Brian easily deduced what had happened - someone had been shoved into a locker.

Brian knocked softly against the metal locker door, causing the noises inside to cease abruptly. “Um, excuse me,” Brian politely questioned the locker’s inhabitant. “Did you want to be shut up in this locker or would you like me to get you out?”

“Of course I don’t want to be locked in here!” came the muffled reply.

“So that’s a yes on me getting you out then?” Brian laughed at the outrage in the voice coming from within. “You really should ask me more nicely, you know.”

“Please, let me out!” was the grudgingly polite reply.

After a little more discussion, Brian discovered that the boy in the locker was it’s putative owner and knew the combination, which greatly simplified the process of getting the prisoner out. Brian followed directions, unlocked the locker and pulled to door open, just barely catching the smaller boy who fell out as soon as he door was no longer there to support him. Brian couldn’t help but snicker a little at the look of embarrassment on the other kids face as he stood him upright and helped steady him.

“So, who put you in the locker?” Brian asked as soon as his new friend was stable.

“John Matthews, who else?” replied the short, dark-haired kid as he dusted off his clothes. “Thanks for getting me out. I’m Michael Novotny,” he said as he bravely stuck out his hand to shake that of his rescuer.

“Brian Kinney,” the young hero returned.

“Yeah, I know. . . you’re in my algebra class. . . So, do you want to come with me after school to the diner where my Mom works? I’ll buy you a soda as a ‘Thank You’ for saving my ass,” Michael offered after a moment.

“Sure. Why not?” Brian answered and the then the two boys gathered their book and headed off to class together.

Justin, who’d been watching the whole thing and had purposely headed his charge down that particular hallway, smiled from the end of the corridor. He figured that Brian had been alone too long. It would be good for the boy to have a friend or two. Maybe this spunky little ‘Michael’ would suit his purposes.
Chapter End Notes

Originally posted 5/17/13
Chapter Notes

I'm feeling a bit down today, which is apparently reflected in my writing. This might be a tear-jerker chapter for many. Major 'Angst' alert, folks. Also, it's heavy on the child-abuse theme so please don't read if this will negatively affect you. If you do choose to read on, I hope you like what I've written - it expands on what may have happened in Brian's past to make him the adult he turns out to be. It isn't pretty. It IS inspired by real life stories, though. And, although the statistics are disputed, many professionals claim that Super Bowl Sunday is the biggest day for domestic abuse hospitalizations in the United States. I sincerely hope this isn't the fact for any of my readers. TAG

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 4 - Melancholy.

Super Bowl Sunday. Shit, Brian really hated Super Bowl Sunday. In his experience this always turned out to be one of the worst days of the year. See, Jack Kinney was an avid football fan, which meant that Super Bowl Sunday was like a holy day and the event was celebrated religiously every single January.

It also meant that father would be parked at home in front of the television all day long, that he would have laid in an extra large supply of alcohol in anticipation of the big game and that, more than likely, he'd be joined by at least a couple of his loser buddies who would all be just as loud and rude as Jack. Inevitably, before the game was over, Jack would have made at least one bet which he'd lose. Then his celebratory mood would turn more sullen. By the end of the evening, he'd be drunk, angry, mean and ready to take all his frustrations out on the most convenient target. Traditionally, the most convenient target had been Brian. Which explained why Brian hated this day above all others.

This year, Brian had planned to make himself scarce for the day. That kid he'd rescued from a locker last week, Michael, had invited him over for dinner this evening - he said his mom always cooked a big Italian feast every Sunday and she'd be more than happy if her son brought along a friend. Brian figured he'd leave the house early, before father was even up, hang around at the park or someplace else for most of the day and then head over to the Novotny's when it was time for dinner.

At least that was the plan before he got up and looked out the window this morning. Unfortunately it had snowed about six inches the night before and the temperature in Pittsburgh was expected to hover just below freezing all day. Fuck! No way could Brian manage to stay outdoors in a park all day in this weather. The dinner at Michael's house wasn't until six this evening and he had no place else he could go in the meantime. Which meant he was stuck at home with his father for Super Bowl Sunday again this year.

Trying to the make the best of a bad situation, Brian attempted to lay low. He managed to hide out in his room all morning, foregoing breakfast in favor of remaining unnoticed by Jack. Instead, he put a couple of his favorite tapes in the dual cassette player, put on his headphones and then curled
up in bed with a book, hoping against hope that he could fly under Jack’s radar for the day.

And, it worked until just after lunchtime. He was almost finished with his book - The Talisman, by Stephen King - and was right in the middle of the scariest part of the final chapter, when he was startled by the door to his room being slammed open and knocking against the bookcase in the corner. In the open doorway loomed his father, backlit by the light from the hallway so that Brian couldn’t see the man’s expression from where he sat in his dimly lit room. Brian could see his father’s mouth moving and guessed that the man wasn’t shouting compliments at him but because his music was playing so loudly, he couldn’t hear anything. Reluctantly, the worried boy pulled the headphones off. “I’ve been calling you for ten minutes, Sonny Boy. What the fuck are you’re doing up here? I wanted you to come down and join me and the guys watching the game, so get your ass up off that damn bed and get downstairs,” Jack yelled his invitation to his son.

“I was just reading,” Brian started to explain.

“Well, fuck that! Reading’s for schmucks and losers. I don’t want the guys thinking my son is some goddamned pansy who sits around reading books all day. Come on downstairs and watch the game with the rest of the guys like a real man, Sonny Boy!” his father demanded, already turning and heading down the stairs, assured that his son wouldn’t dare to disobey him.

Brian unwillingly put his book down, heaved a huge sigh and followed his father down to the family room. Jack and his cronies were all gathered around the small coffee table which was heaped with opened bags of chips, half-spilled bowls of salsa and ranch dip, and rows of empty beer bottles. The small TV was sitting on its stand in the center of the room and the guys were all intent on the images being broadcast. Brian pasted on his most convincing ‘I’m-so-glad-I-get-to-watch-the-game-with-Dad-and-the-guys’ face, and quietly sat down on the floor next to the couch as close to the door as he dared. Maybe he could sneak back out at some point when they weren’t watching him.

Brian really had no interest in American football at all and didn’t even know what teams were playing - all he could tell was that one team was wearing black jerseys with silver helmets and the other team was wearing red. It seemed that his Dad and the guys were all rooting for the red team, so he figured he’d better do the same. It didn’t look like the red team was doing very well, though, although it was hard to tell since every other play, the station would cut away to another commercial, which made it kind of hard to follow the game, Brian thought.

Apparently, only his physical presence was required this afternoon. Neither father nor any of the guys seemed to pay Brian much attention. They were too busy kidding each other, cursing at the ineptitude of ‘their’ team and telling raunchy jokes as they sloshed their beers around and tossed chips across the room for emphasis. Jack was being his jockular self. The legendary Kinney charm was fairly oozing out of his pores as he joked around with his guests. Brian just sat there and watched them with distaste and tried to remain invisible.

At halftime, the guys had ogled the cheerleaders for a bit and then made fun of the silly pansies putting on the “Disney” halftime show. Then it was time for Reg and Frank to make a liquor run while everyone else loitered around in the kitchen and took turns using the john. Jack ordered Brian to clean up the empties off the coffee table and toss the empty food containers. Brian thought that maybe he’d be able to make a break for it after he’d picked up a bit - it was still a few hours until he could politely show up at the Novotny’s but he’d really had enough bonding time with his father and would take his chances with the cold if he could manage an escape.

Rushing to get the room picked up, Brian grabbed a half-dozen beer bottles off the small table in one arm and carried a teetering stack of empty dip bowls in his other hand. He managed to
successfully dump the bowls in the kitchen sink and then was about to turn around to deposit the bottles in the trash near the back door, when he bumped into one of the guys who’d been standing in the kitchen. The guy he bumped was a big dude and he knocked into him pretty hard. Brian stumbled forward, reaching his arms out to catch himself before he fell into the countertop, and in the process dropping his armload of glass bottles. The bottles, of course, crashed to the floor, shattering into thousands of shards which flew everywhere with a resounding crash. The dregs of beer from the mostly emptied bottles splashed up off the scuffed linoleum and drenched those standing nearby, among whom, unluckily for Brian, was his father.

“What the FUCK!” the old man roared, grabbing Brian by the scruff of the neck and spinning the boy around. “Can’t you do ANYTHING right, boy? Fucking retard!”

Brian lost his footing as he twisted around and fell backwards, landing in the remains of the smashed glass and puddles of brown liquid. He hit the ground at an awkward angle, the brunt of the fall being absorbed by his left forearm and hand. Hundreds of the little splinters of glass pierced through the skin on his palm and arm, causing the injured boy to cry out in pain. The tears continued to run down the boy’s face as he sat in the pile of detritus and pools of beer, cradling his bleeding arm in shock, while the adults all stood around him staring down at the unexpected spectacle.

“Well? What the fuck are you doing just sitting there?” Jack finally said, breaking the uncomfortable silence. When the boy on the floor didn’t start moving right away, the irate older man aimed a good solid kick at the huddled form and then added, “Get the fucking broom and clean this goddamned mess up. You made this fucking mess, so you better damn well get it cleaned up!”

Just then Reg and Frank came back in with another four cases of beer. Jack grabbed one and led the rest of the pack out of the kitchen and back to the family room where the game was just starting up again. The guys were already joking and laughing again before they even got back to the other room. It was like nothing at all had happened.

Brian blinked back any further tears and climbed to his feet. He sniffled as he retrieved the dustpan and broom from behind the fridge and started to sweep up the yeasty smelling mess. His left arm was still bleeding, so he pulled a dishtowel from the drawer and wrapped it up as well as he was able - he didn’t want to get in trouble for getting blood on the floor on top of everything else - but he couldn’t hold the dustpan and the broom at the same time because of his arm. He managed to prop the pan awkwardly against his foot long enough to sweep up the glass and then dumped the mess into the trash. Then he unwound several sheets off the roll of paper towels, got back down onto his knees and mopped up the liquid as best he could.

As soon as the kitchen was clean enough that he thought he could escape without incurring further punishment, Brian pulled his jacket off the hook by the door and ran out into the cold and dark.

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Justin felt it the exact moment that Brian had fallen. He was already waiting, standing on the sidewalk across the street from the Kinney’s house, partly hidden by a large boxwood hedge, when Brian came running out the door and headed down the street. Justin could feel his boy’s pain as if it were his own arm that had been shredded by the glass. And even worse, Justin could feel the boy’s sense of betrayal and dejection that his father’s callous words had inflicted. As always, he felt his heart cracking just a little bit more at the fact that he had again failed to protect Brian and he could do nothing to help frightened boy right now.

Justin started to follow after the escapee who was still running down the block as if his life was in
jeopardy. It had started to snow lightly again and the walks were covered with a dusting of fresh new white. The snow made it easy to track Brian’s footsteps, which Justin quickly saw were headed off towards the local park. Halfway there, however, Justin noticed that the snow on the sidewalk next to the footprints was now dotted here and there with bright droplets of red. More and more red the farther the boy ran.

The worried guardian knew that he had to get Brian to help. The boy was probably in shock and didn’t know how badly he was really hurt. Or maybe he was just too scared of Jack to slow down long enough to figure out he was still bleeding. Either way, Justin knew that he had to help his boy. This thing about being an incorporeal soul was really annoying sometimes - he couldn’t do anything to help physically, so how was he going to save Brian?

By the time he was only a block away from the little park, Brian was finally starting to slow down. He dropped to a walk as he struggled to pull his jacket closer around him to ward off the ongoing snow. Justin easily caught up till he was walking beside Brian. Both boys continued to look directly ahead, neither overtly acknowledging the other.

"All I wanted was to finish my book and then go eat Italian food," Brian said, his voice barely above a whisper, as the pair stepped across the street and headed into the park grounds.

"You could still go to dinner," Justin suggested quietly, still not looking right at Brian for fear of driving the boy away.

"Like this?" Brian shook his head and briefly held up his injured left hand, the dish towel still wrapped around it now a soggy red-brown color.

Justin shrugged. "Debbie seems pretty cool," Justin replied nonchalantly. "She probably has Band-Aids or at least another towel. And I bet, if you asked her, she wouldn't say anything."

Brian stopped. He stood still for several long minutes, his eyes scrunched closed as he supported his injured left wrist in the palm of his right hand. Just then another rivulet of liquid red dripped down off the soaked dish towel and started to dribble into his open palm. Brian looked down at the mess, took a deep breath and nodded his head decisively. Then he turned on the spot and walked resolutely back out of the park in the direction of Michael Novotny’s house.

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It had taken Debbie more than an hour, using a pair of slightly bent old tweezers, to get all the splinters of glass out and properly bandage Brian's arm. When she’d asked him what happened, he only said he’d fallen in some glass. Something about the boy’s face as he said it made the kindhearted woman hesitate to ask anything more.

Michael had hovered just outside the door to the bathroom, watching over the proceedings and acting like a broody Mother Hen until Debbie had shooed him downstairs with orders to check on the Ziti. Brian hadn’t been this fussed over in his entire life and he didn’t really know how to handle all the attention. If he hadn’t been in so much pain, Brian would have laughed at the overly concerned and protective air the other boy exuded.

Eventually, though, Brian was cleaned up and given one of Debbie’s old t-shirts to wear while his was thrown in the wash. Then the three of them sat down at the large kitchen dinette and Debbie started loading the table with dish after dish of food. Brian was amazed at the sheer quantity of food displayed. There was salad with homemade croutons and crumbled blue cheese, ziti with a thick meat sauce, fresh hot italian bread, mounds of grated cheese that you could add to everything, and for dessert, homemade cannoli. There was more food for the three of them on a random
Sunday night than you’d see on the Kinney table at Thanksgiving. The tall, skinny and always hungry boy eagerly dug into the spread and gladly let his hostess dish up second and even third servings onto his plate. It had been so long since he’d felt really and truly full like this. It was heaven.

After dinner, Debbie ordered the boys out of the kitchen while she tidied up. They ended up sprawled out on the couch watching Knight Rider while drinking ginger ale straight out of the can. Brian tried to stay on guard, unnerved by the relaxed and homey atmosphere, but eventually he gave in and let himself enjoy the unfamiliar sense of ease.

Justin sat at the top of the stairs where he could peek through the stair rails and smile down at the sight of a happy, relaxed Brian. Finally the blond breathed a relieved sigh. This was exactly the type of haven his boy needed right now. And, if Brian occasionally glanced up at the elusive blond sitting unobtrusively on the staircase and let a ghost of a smile drift across his lips at the knowledge that he wasn’t here alone, he didn’t let on to anyone what was engendering his happiness.

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It was hard for Brian to get up and leave at eleven o’clock when the movie they’d been watching ended. He’d never wanted anything as much as he wanted to stay in this warm, seemingly happy household. Before tonight he didn’t even know such a place existed outside of the constructs of Hollywood sitcoms. Now he knew exactly what he’d been denied all these years and he resented it more than he was willing to acknowledge.

But, he had to go home sometime. These people didn’t know about his real life and he didn’t want them to. To Brian’s mind, the Novotny household was some kind of Xanadu that only existed outside of his reality. He might be allowed to visit, but he would never reside there. Brian had to return to the hell of real life.

He hadn’t been in the house more than sixty seconds before he was accosted by his mother demanding to know where he’d been.

She’d been hiding out in her bedroom but had heard the crash of the exploding beer bottles and the commotion afterwards. When she’d finally dared to venture out to investigate what had happened, all she found was Jack and the guys replanted in front of the television with a new supply of beer, a wet spot on the kitchen floor and Brian apparently gone. Joan was sufficiently cowed by her husband that she didn’t dare interrupt his game to find out what had happened, but she did wonder. Jack and the boys left the house right after the game to go drink away their disappointment over their team losing and then Joan felt free to start to worry.

“Brian! Where HAVE you been? I’ve been worried sick about you,” Joan immediately started in on him before he’d even got through the doorway. When she saw the layers of gauze bandages rolled around the hand that protruded from the sleeve of his jacket, she gasped. “What the hell happened to you?”

Brian sneered at her but didn’t bother to answer. He was still wrapped up in the euphoria from his evening out and didn’t want to let his mother bring him back down to reality. She wasn’t easily deterred though.

“Brian. Let me look at your arm,” she demanded, grabbing his sleeve as he tried to slide by her, her rarely displayed maternal instincts kicking in for a moment.

Brian didn’t say anything, though, and Joan really didn’t know how to respond to this situation either. She scanned the bandaged arm briefly, not really knowing what she was looking at, but
feeling that a mother SHOULD look at her injured son’s hand for some unknown reason. When it appeared to her to be adequately taken care of, she didn’t know what she was supposed to do next.

“You know that your father and I love you, Brian. We just . . . we . . . he’s just trying to teach you right from wrong, you know. Your father wants to you grow up with strong morals and . . .” her voice tapered off, unable to complete the utterly inane statement.

Brian didn’t bother to respond. He’d already had enough of THIS kind of love. He turned away from the woman who claimed to be his mother and headed up the stairs to his room. As soon as the door was closed, he pulled the comforter off his bed and retreated to the safe comforting confines of his closet. He didn’t care that this was completely infantile. All Brian knew was that he didn’t feel safe out in the open. He hunkered down in the furthest, darkest corner of the closet and slid the door closed, shutting out the cruel, hard world.

When the comforting presence of a friendly, older, blond boy sat down on the closet floor beside him, Brian didn’t question the feeling of safety that enveloped him. He leaned into the warmth beside him and let his head drop onto a sympathetic, soft shoulder. Several minutes later he let out the sobs that he’d been holding back all night. Justin put his arm around the slim boy’s shoulder and pulled him closer, holding back all the other boy’s fear with only the power of his heart.

“I don’t want to be loved,” Brian whispered into the black of the closet. “If that’s what it means to be loved, I don’t want it. I don’t want it ever.”

Chapter End Notes

Originally posted 5/23/13 - *Sigh* I'm feeling too melancholy tonight myself to be witty. You'll have to just read the chapter and go without my typical bon mot at the end. Sorry. TAG
Chapter 5 - Sentience.

Brian hadn’t really slept much the night before - the boy had spent the entire night huddled on the floor of his closet. At first he’d just fearfully waited for Jack’s return, not sure if his ‘punishment’ for the night was over yet and not wanting to be taken unawares. After his father had noisily stumbled in the door and straight upstairs, crashing loudly into his own bed, Brian had fallen into a fitful slumber, but he didn’t feel confident enough to leave the dubious protection of his closet. What little sleep the young man had managed was only possible because of Justin’s reassuring, if quiet, presence sitting there in the dark with him. The beautiful blond had sat with him all night, holding him, stroking the soft auburn locks of the boy and making him feel just a little safer. But, as soon as it was daylight, Brian had bolted from the house, preferring to wait in the cold and snow outside the front doors to the school rather than see what would happen at home.

By the time he’d reached school, Brian had conveniently boxed up all his fears and emotions from the previous night and hidden them away deep inside himself where he didn’t have to think about them. Along with the fear, he’d also stashed away, to the best of his ability, his innate need for reassurance from his ‘imaginary friend’. This meant that he was trying once again to avoid acknowledging Justin’s existence and had ignored the blond tagging along behind him all the way to school.

All the concerned guardian really wanted was to take Brian away from this nightmare but he didn’t know how. In the alternative, he wished he and Brian could have stayed hidden all morning so that he could continue to hold and comfort the young man. Every bruise or wound inflicted on his young ward echoed in his own body. Every emotional stab that Brian had to suffer caused his own heart to bleed a little. Justin would give everything he was or ever would be to protect Brian. He would never push himself on Brian, though, so he resigned himself that he would have to settle for providing a little remote TLC.

After Brian’s last class, Justin positioned himself in the middle of the hallway on the direct route between the classroom and the freshmen lockers. Brian immediately turned to go the opposite direction as soon as he sensed the unsolicited presence. The longer route around inevitably led Brian right past Michael Novotny’s locker and, of course, the short brunet immediately pounced on his new friend, whining until Brian agreed to follow his new best friend to the Diner for a snack before heading home.

Justin smiled down on the scene from his distant position, happy with the idea that Debbie would soon be looking after his boy for a bit, as scores of unseeing students streamed around him never noticing the ethereal blond beauty standing in the middle of the hall.

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This was Brian’s second visit to the Liberty Diner. When he’d visited the place the previous week with Michael, he’d picked up the flavor of the locale right away. His prior visit had been fairly short, though, as he’d had to race home to finish some chores before his father got home from work. This afternoon he didn’t have any desire to hurry home, so he sat at the counter with Michael watching Debbie work for quite some time, and simply soaked up the atmosphere.

The repressed youth had never even dreamed such a place existed before. It was a very eye-opening experience for the lad. He’d never in his life seen two men hugging like that or even holding hands, let alone kissing. And, despite having grown up with a father who regularly threw around derogatory terms like ‘fairy’ and ‘faggot’, Brian didn’t find what he saw to be all that objectionable. In fact, he discovered that he was a little bit . . . aroused by these sights.

Up till now, Brian hadn’t really thought much about either girls or boys. At least, not like that. He’d been such a loner for so long now that he hadn’t had much interaction with either gender. He’d hidden in books and school work whenever he could and, when he couldn’t, most of his time had been spent dealing with all the issues surrounding his fucked up family. His sexual orientation hadn’t really come up before - or at least he hadn’t had any leisure time to examine the issue very deeply.

The boner he popped as one particularly hot, slightly older, honey-blond haired youth walked by and winked at him, proved that the question was definitely coming up now.

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Both Brian and Michael hated gym class. Michael was completely uncoordinated and small for his age and was always picked last for every team. Brian was naturally athletic, so he didn’t have the same reason for hating the class as his friend, but he still hated it. Brian’s reason was primarily because of what always seemed to happen after gym class when the boys were all back in the locker room changing. That was when the school bullies liked to target the younger boys - they especially liked to wait until they were mostly undressed and completely vulnerable before they would strike. All the freshmen boys knew to get in and out of the gym locker room as quickly as possible - nobody ever bothered with showers since it was just too dangerous - but still, sometimes one of them would get caught with their pants down, literally.

The Tuesday following Brian’s super Super Bowl experience, he found himself in the locker room changing after gym class and quickly discovered that his bandaged left arm was slowing him down. He was having trouble getting his shirt on over the bandages without pulling them off along with the healing scabs. He was still bruised and achey and overall just moving a little more slowly than usual, which meant that everyone else was dressed and out of the locker room while Brian was still only halfway clothed.

Of course, this had to be the day that John Matthews just happened to be trolling for victims.

The bulky football jock came strolling into the changing room in a leisurely fashion, followed by his usual cronies. The menacing group rounded the corner of the lockers where Brian was struggling with his shirt, his pants on but still unfastened. The unaware freshman was in the very worst place at the absolute worst time and of course became the perfect target for the bullies. Matthews nodded to two of his friends, who flanked Brian in an almost choreographed move, each one grabbing one of Brian’s arms. As they pulled his arms backwards behind him, Brian’s shirt, which was still only halfway on, was pulled against his face tightly, acting like a blindfold. He couldn’t see his attackers. That didn’t stop him from struggling and he almost got free from one of the two assailants who wasn’t quite prepared for the skinny kid to be so strong.

“Well. well, well . . . What do we have here,” teased Matthews, causing Brian to freeze in the
midst of his struggles. “Looks like we have some Freshman trash that needs cleaning up, boys.”

From the sycophantic chuckles, Brian could tell he was surrounded and that it wouldn’t do any good to keep fighting. The two holding his arms had a good grip now and, even though he was fairly strong, he wasn’t going to be able to overpower these hulking brutes. Brian let his body go limp, conserving his energy for a time when it could do more good.

“Time to flush this shit, guys!” cackled Matthews as his two mates drug Brian backwards towards the toilets.

This particular boy was more than accustomed to being abused, and even though this time it wasn’t his prick of a father who was responsible for the attack, Brian knew the score. He knew there wasn’t any use in fighting back right now. He knew to pick his battles better. Therefore, the tall, skinny youth didn’t bother to struggle much. As humiliating and annoying as these bullies were, they couldn’t hold a candle to the torment and torture he’d already become inured to. This was nothing, really. Why even bother to resist when it would just lead to getting even more hurt? Brian Kinney knew better.

He managed to distance himself mentally from the scene. When the two thugs shoved his head into the toilet bowl, he simply held his breath, knowing that this wouldn’t last that long. Matthews himself flushed the toilet as the rest of the group stood around and laughed. When Brian came up spluttering afterwards, they roared with laughter, apparently never having seen anything quite so funny in their lives. The boy didn’t even respond to the rest of the taunts, though. He just sat on the dirty, tiled floor and shook the water out of his hair, ignoring the ruckus around him until the group filed out of the locker room in the steps of their leader.

Later that day, when the first period lunch crowd was slowly migrating back from the cafeteria towards their next classes, nobody noticed the tall, skinny Freshman lurking in the doorway of the English classroom across from the Senior’s lockers. Matthews was standing at his locker, surrounded by his buddies and regaling a pretty little blonde cheerleader with some asinine joke. The popular jock was standing with his right hand casually gripping the frame of his locker, the locker door wide open, while he told his little bon mot. They were the popular kids - high school royalty - the leaders of the school. They had no reason not to feel confident and in control of their environment.

Until about thirty seconds later, when a smirking Brian Kinney came striding up out of nowhere, slamming the door of Matthews’ locker closed and crushing all four metacarpal bones in his right hand.

No one ever tried to bully Brian Kinney again.

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Brian was free from the bullies after that day, but his antics didn’t do anything for his social standing in the school. If he hadn’t been a loner before, Brian was destined to be one now. He was able to claim it was an accident and therefore got out of being suspended from school, but too many of the students had already heard the real story behind the story and the rumors were rife. Now everyone was afraid of the volatile and unstable youth.

Except for Michael Novotny. Michael’s previous admiration for Brian now escalated to sheer idolatry. The slight, shy, easily cowed, comic-book nerd now had his very own, real-life, hero to worship. The entire rest of the week, Brian was followed everywhere by his personal groupie, who offered to get his books for him, gave him portions of his own lunch, and praised him incessantly. Apparently everything Brian did was now beyond ‘cool’ in Michael’s eyes.
For the kid who’d never experienced much recognition from his own family and who had few, if any friends, this was intoxicating. Michael’s adulation was a huge ego-boost. For the first time in his life, someone looked up to Brian and gave him heaping amounts of praise. Even the disgruntled looks and avoidance of Matthews’ gang gave him a mild little boost to his confidence. Brian liked these feelings - he liked them a lot - and therefore he put up with Michael’s over-the-top flattery and fawning even after it began to grate on him. By the end of the week, when Michael convinced Brian to stay over at his house on Friday night, Brian was even starting to believe the other boy’s PR about himself.

It was easy to drift into the habit of letting Michael wait on him and follow him around. Brian started to spend the majority of his weekends at the Novotny house where he was praised, petted and fed by Debbie and adored by Mikey. He liked having his very own booster squad and he definitely wasn’t getting any support at home, so of course he gravitated towards the only place he’d ever felt wanted. It also helped that he wasn’t around Jack as much and therefore he was less likely to incur his father’s by-blows.

Mikey liked to brag to everyone that he was Brian’s best friend. It went a long way towards keeping the small youth out of trouble himself - Brian’s notoriety was sufficient to protect his friend as well. Brian got the approval he craved and Michael was covered by the other boy’s umbrella of protection from all the school bullies. And, if they didn’t really share any common interests and had completely different life goals, did it really matter all that much as long as they both got something out of the relationship? Brian himself almost started to believe that he’d finally found a true friend.

Brian’s science class was going to the Carnegie Science Center the last day before Spring Break. They were going to spend the entire day at the science museum and were even going to see a special show in the planetarium. All the students were excited about the trip and about getting out of an entire day of school.

Brian had already got his mother to sign off on the field trip permission slip last week - he’d hit her up early in the morning when she hadn’t been completely recovered from her usual hangover, which meant she just signed the form he put in front of her without bothering to look at it at all. However, Brian still needed to come up with the $10 fee that each participant needed to pay towards the costs of the trip. If he couldn’t come up with the ten bucks, he’d end up spending the entire day all by himself at school, sitting in the office or going to empty classrooms by himself while all the other kids got to enjoy their day of hookey.

Brian had asked his mother for the money a couple of times already. She always told him that of course she would get him the money, and then told him to remind her again the next day. Now, the night before the trip, she’d put him off again, promising to get him the money in the morning. Brian’s experience with his parents’ promises told him that it was unlikely that the old drunk would even remember about the field trip when she woke up in the morning, if she even managed to pull herself out of bed before he had to leave for school. He had to come up with a ‘Plan B’.

Jack Kinney lumbered into the house about 9:30 after an extended visit to his favorite local pub. He wasn’t as drunk as Brian had seen him in the past but the man had had enough to ensure he wasn’t paying much attention when he got home. Jack hung his jacket on the hook by the kitchen door, tossed his keys onto the counter and emptied out his pockets before collapsing onto the couch in front of the television, not even acknowledging his son sitting in the armchair nearby.

It took less than ten minutes for Jack to drift off into sleep, his head tilted back onto a threadbare pillow, his mouth gaping open so that each cacophonous snore ricocheted off the ceiling and
rebounded into the room with twice the volume. Brian waited another five minutes before moving, just to make sure that his father was really sound asleep. When he thought it was safe, the boy rose to his feet and tiptoed as quietly as he could out of the family room and down the hall to the kitchen, heading for Jack’s wallet which was sitting on the counter next to his keys. Brian breathed a sigh of relief when he opened the wallet and found there was still a $20 bill left inside - easily enough to pay for the field trip plus a little extra for his lunch and maybe some spending money. He quickly liberated the twenty from the confines of the wallet and tucked it into his own jeans’ pocket.

How he managed to miss the cessation of the the noisy snoring coming from the other room, Brian never knew. He should have been listening for it. He should have been more alert, more wary. But, somehow, he’d missed the warning and was taken completely by surprise when he tossed the now empty wallet back onto the countertop and then turned around to see Jack standing in the kitchen doorway scowling at him.

“What the HELL do you think you’re doing, Sonny Boy?” Jack boomed, taking three steps towards Brian as the boy cowered back against the counter in the face of the fury approaching him. Jack dug into the boy’s pocket and pulled out the twenty, his face turning purple in rage. “You’re nothing but a fucking THIEF! Goddamn it. I don’t work hard all day to support you and your mother and sister just so you can go stealing my money on top of it. I’ll teach you to take what doesn’t belong to you, you fucking brat!”

The corner of the kitchen to which Brian had withdrawn happened to be right next to the stove. Jack reached out to grab onto his son at the same time Brian raised his right arm in a defensive pose. Only, this time, instead of hitting Brian, Jack seized the boy’s arm and pulled his hand downward towards the cooktop, twisting the knob on the front of the stove at the same time to turn on the electric burner on ‘high’. Using his larger, heavier body to pin the slighter boy to the counter, the older man held the thieving hand against the burner grinning maniacally as the heating element changed from its normal dull, leaden grey to a bright, hot orange. Brian’s shrieks of anguish as his flesh was burned didn’t seem to phase Jack at all. Brian passed out about the time that Joan pulled Jack away.

Brian woke a few moments later to a squalling row going on between Jack and Joanie. The argument seemed to have already progressed beyond any concerns over what Jack had done to his son and moved on to Joan’s many other grievances. The two angry adults were yelling and jabbering at each other so loudly that they didn’t seem to even notice when Brian escaped out the kitchen door, his injured hand cradled against his chest as he ran down the street.

Debbie Novotny was already on her way up to bed when she heard a soft, almost hesitant, knocking on the front door. She flipped the porch light on, peeked out the side window and saw a small heap huddled on the doormat, quietly rocking back and forth. Debbie rushed to pull open the door. There on her porch she found Brian, his face screwed up to stop any impending useless tears, his scorched hand held out to her with a silent plea for help.

The kind-hearted woman scooped the boy up into her arms and bustled him into the kitchen without another word. Pulling out the first aid kit she kept under the sink, Debbie slathered burn ointment on the boy’s hand and gingerly wound a gauze bandage around the singed hand. When her one comment about this needing to be looked at by a doctor was met by Brian’s adamant ‘NO!’, Debbie reluctantly backed off and didn’t press further. She didn’t bother asking the boy what had happened - in the few months since Michael had befriended the boy, this wasn’t the first time he’d shown up at her door with an injury.

She would have loved to report what she’d seen and hopefully stop what was going on, but the boy
had refused her offers of support. Brian’s terror at the mere thought of what would happen to him if anyone found out about Jack was a pretty effective deterrent. Debbie feared that if she did anything to bring attention to what was happening, Brian might simply disappear one day. And, she’d rather have Brian trust her when he was hurt - if he didn’t trust her, he would have nowhere to go and no one to help him. So, she held her tongue and just did her best to patch up whatever wound the boy showed up with, comforting him as much as he would let her. When she’d done all that she could this time, Debbie bundled Brian up with a pillow and blankets on the couch, and turned off the lights as she unhappily climbed the stairs to her own room.

In the dark, the mute sentinel that had been watching the proceedings from the corner of the room moved over to sit on the couch near the quaking boy’s head. Justin carefully scooted over so that Brian could rest his head on his quiet protector’s lap. The strong, reassuring, always-there fingers caressed the tortured boy’s skin and played in his soft chestnut brown hair. The consoling presence of his longtime, patient friend allowed Brian to finally let go of the silent tears he’d been holding back all night, and he sobbed without making a sound until he finally fell asleep sometime near dawn. Justin would have cried too, if he thought anyone would hear his cries.

Chapter End Notes

Originally posted 6/3/13 - I know this is getting a bit too depressing. I'm almost through with the sad, abusive childhood stuff though - Just one or two more chapters to show how Brian ends up with all his unhealthy and lonely 'rules' as an adult. Then, I'll be able to move the story forward to deal with all the repercussions of these 'lessons' he's been taught as a child. Bear with me, please, TAG

P.S. Thank you for all the enthusiastic reviews.
Distraction.

Chapter Notes

I've finally finished this new chapter. It took a while because I got a bit stuck in the middle. TAG

*** Warning - underage sex. ****

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 6 - Distraction.

“I can’t believe you made it onto the Soccer team, Brian,” Mikey was gushing as he trotted along behind his idol. “This is so cool. I bet you end up on Varsity too, even though you’re just a Freshman.”

“I haven’t actually made the team yet, Mikey,” Brian explained for the fifth time to his over-eager friend as he sauntered off towards the practice field. “The coach won’t pick the final team rosters until just before the season starts in the fall. Right now, everyone is practicing together. We have three afternoons a week of conditioning this Spring and then, in August, we start to have daily practices. And, I doubt I’ll be picked for Varsity - I’ve never really played on a team before and I’ll only be a Sophomore next year. Besides, Mikey, you know that the only reason I signed up for Soccer was to have an excuse to stay away from home. I could care less what team I’m on, as long as I’m not expected to hurry home every day so that I can be ordered around by Jack and Joanie. Shit, I also signed up for Chemistry Club and FBLA. I’d sign up for Chess Club too if it kept me at school, except that I don’t know how to play chess for shit.”

“Yeah, well, I bet you’ll be great, Brian,” Michael, his very own pep squad, reassured him.

Brian didn’t bother to comment as he left Michael at the edge of the field and jogged over to where the team was gathering around the new coach. Coach Ryan, the longtime English teacher who’d been coaching the team for the past ten years, was sitting out this spring due to a problem with gout. Mr. Stephens, the brand new, fresh-out-of-college, PE teacher was taking over the team in Ryan’s absence.

Which was definitely a nice change, in Brian’s opinion, since Ryan was at least fifty, had the biggest beer belly the boy had ever seen and probably wasn’t really much of a looker even when he had been younger and thinner. Coach Stephens, on the other hand, was rather hot. Brian thought that the new coach couldn’t be more than twenty-five or so and was well-built, thin, tall and had the most luxuriant, long, wavy dark hair that the boy had ever seen. He looked kinda like one of those rock and roll stars you’d see on the television. Regardless of how practices went, Brian thought that at least with Coach Stephens he’d have a lot more pleasant of a time while on the field, just from the fact that he’d get to spend time looking at the hunky older man.

This was the second week of Spring practice. Coach Stephens had already commented a couple of times that Brian was doing a good job and that he had pretty nice ball handling techniques. Brian had only fantasized a couple dozen times since then about what type of ball handling he’d like to show off to the sexy coach. Maybe he’d been hanging out with Mikey and Deb too much at the Liberty Diner, he thought. Brian had been listening to the stories some of the guys at the Diner
told, and figured that he’d like to try out some of the ideas he’d gotten in the very near future. Unfortunately, the opportunity hadn’t really come up yet, so he was forced to fall back on his fantasies and Coach Stephens was playing a starring role in those. A boy could dream, right?

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Justin had been hovering anxiously near Brian all day. He knew that something was going to happen today. He'd had this strange weighty tension coursing through his senses all day. All around him the air felt heavy. It was as if everything around him was just waiting for IT to happen. He had no idea what was coming, but whatever it was, he knew it would turn out to be important. Which was why the jumpy young blond hadn't let Brian out of his sight since the aspiring young soccer star had first left his house earlier this morning.

So far Brian's day had been pleasantly uneventful. There had been no sign of Jack or Joan this morning, Brian's classes had all gone by routinely and the boy was now eagerly trotting off to the athletic fields for soccer practice, just as planned. Justin was sitting on the top row of bleachers as he watched Michael and Brian say their goodbyes before the taller boy jogged over to the group of soccer players and coaches standing around at the near end of the track. It all seemed so normal that Justin was starting to let down his guard a bit, hopeful that he'd misread the warnings somehow.

As the soccer team started out on their first warm up lap around the track, Justin was startled alert by a sharp, tingling feeling stabbing into the top of his spine. The jolting sensation quickly turned into an insistent pulling that made him feel as if someone had snared him with a gigantic steel fish hook and was jerking him backwards off the stands. Justin scrabbled at the edge of the metal bench, trying to find some hold, but was unable to resist the force towing him backwards.

"Brian," he cried out, instinctively worried about being dragged away from his charge.

From the far side of the track an auburn head popped up above the rest of the pack of teens and looked in the direction of the stands. For a very brief moment, startled blue eyes locked onto questioning hazel. But, before either could do or say anything more, Justin simply disappeared.

The next instant, Justin found himself standing alone in a grey nothingness as little pinpricks of color sizzled around him, gradually coalescing into cognizable images. There were bright patches of color seemingly randomly placed all around him which slowly resolved into more solid forms, eventually showing themselves to be display racks full of colorful clothing. The walls and ceiling gradually settled into place. Then, as if a switch had been flicked, there was sound all around him, loud and repetitive and completely out of context since there wasn’t anything around to cause the noise. And then, Justin sensed motion as people came into focus, all moving with determination around him, looking at the clothing, talking to one another and going about their business. It took another moment or two before the soundtrack and the motion synchronized. Finally, it all came together and Justin found himself standing in the middle of a normal day at any suburban shopping mall.

The first thing Justin noticed when he managed to put together the sounds and motions around him properly, was that there was someone crying nearby. It was a small sound, almost lost amid the bustle of the mall, but he could hear it very distinctly. Kind-hearted as always, Justin’s first thought was to find the source of the sad sound and try to help whoever was hurting. Focusing in on the sound, he noted that it seemed to come from directly in front of him, from somewhere inside a large round rack of hideous red, yellow and blue striped sweaters. Justin pushed aside a swath of the ugly sweaters and looked inside.

At the center of the rack, there was a small, flat, round platform to which the metal support bars of
the clothing rack were attached. Seated in the center of the platform, hidden by the surrounding sweaters, was a small blond boy with tears streaming down his face. The little boy looked to be about two or three years old. He had white-blond hair that was cut neatly, rosy plump little cheeks and his lips were screwed up in a full-blown pout. He was wearing a pair of mini-overalls and had a sunny yellow t-shirt on underneath. The tiny figure cowered back from where Justin had just penetrated his little retreat, his sobbing coming even harder now that he’d been discovered.

If the boy hadn’t already been so obviously distraught, Justin would have laughed at the pretty little boy and his cunning hideaway. It was exactly the kind of place he would have sought out himself as a child. However, this little boy wasn’t just hiding out here for fun - he was scared and probably lost and Justin’s sudden appearance hadn’t really reassured him. Like any small child, he was afraid of any grownup towering over him, especially when he was in an unfamiliar environment. So, Justin did the smartest thing he could and dropped to his knees, putting himself on the boy’s level. The tears immediately started to taper off.

He held out his open hand, put on his biggest smile and said, “Hi. I’m Justin. Are you okay?”

Two immense grey-blue eyes stared up at him and then started filling anew with tears. The toddler’s lower lip trembled and pushed out into an even more pronounced pout. Just as the sobbing started to erupt into all-out wailing, Justin took action. He climbed onto the small platform with the child, letting the sweaters on the rack fall back around them recreating the feeling of a secure small haven, and he scooped the boy up into his arms.

“Shhhh. It’s okay, Buddy. It’s okay,” Justin crooned softly into the small shell-like ear of the child, whispering consoling little nothings to the child and rocking the slight body until the child’s crying petered out into nothing more than a few random sniffles.

“I’ve got you, Buddy. You’re going to be just fine,” he repeated again once the boy seemed calmer.

“Can you tell me your name?”

*sniff, sniff* The boy had buried his face into Justin’s warm, comforting chest and he didn’t know if the child would respond. Finally, a teeny little voice came out from the folds of his shirt.

“Jessie.”

“That’s a nice name,” Justin said in a calming voice. “Did you come to the store today with your Daddy or Mommy, Jessie?”

The boy nodded his head, wiping snot from his dripping nose onto the front of Justin’s shirt in the process.

“Do you want to come with me, Jessie, and we can find your Daddy or Mommy? I’m sure someone’s looking for you. I’ll help you find them, okay?” When the miniature blond head nodded again, Justin scooted off the small platform and stood up with the boy in his arms, ducking under the curtain of sweaters. “Alright. Now, where did your parents wander off to, hmmm? Let’s go find them.”

It only took about two minutes before Justin heard a loud voice coming from near the store’s main doors. He decided to head that direction, still carrying the child in his arms. The closer he got to the ruckus, the more certain Justin was that he’d found the lost parent.

“I just turned my back for a minute and when I looked around he was gone,” boomed a worried male voice. “He just turned three. He’s got blond hair and grey eyes and he’s wearing overalls and a yellow shirt. Please, can’t you help me look for him. Please!”
Rounding a last outpost of clothing racks near the checkstand, Justin stepped into the store’s main aisle and saw an average looking blond man standing with his back towards them, arguing with a store clerk. The little bundle of boy in his arms started to struggle as soon as he heard the man’s voice. Justin quickly set the writhing child down on his feet. The boy took off at full toddler speed, running towards the man and grabbing onto the backs of the man’s legs as soon as he was in reach.

“Jessie?” the man shrieked in relief as he looked down to see the small figure grappling onto his legs with all it’s strength.

The man gathered up the child in a huge hug and kissed the small blond head over and over. “Geez, Jessie! Where’d you go? You had me so worried, little man!” the relieved father exclaimed.

“I couldn’t see you Daddy, so I hid in the clothes and I was scared but this nice man found me and helped me look for you,” Jessie said grinning back over his shoulder at where Justin was still standing, watching the reunion with a sunshiney smile on his own face.

The happy father turned around, intending to thank whoever had helped recover his lost son, and looked in the direction that the little boy was pointing but didn’t see anyone. He scanned the whole area but there didn’t appear to be anybody nearby except for the clerk that he’d been talking to earlier. He was too flustered to worry about the missing rescuer, though. He was just happy to have his son back and he immediately turned back to the clerk to vent his relief.

Justin was still there, though. He hadn’t moved from the spot where he’d been standing when the man turned around. The man who was Jessie’s father was about thirty, of medium height, with reddish-blond hair and a thin well-trimmed reddish beard. He had grey-blue eyes, just like his son. And, he looked remarkably like an older version of Justin himself.

“Four,” Justin whispered to himself, frozen in place by the shock, as he stared into the face of his ‘little’ brother.

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After practice, the rest of the team always rushed to get showered and head home. Brian Kinney was the only one who didn’t seem as excited about the end of practice. He was more likely to take his time in the showers and dressing, usually being the last person out of the locker room. Tonight, being a Friday night and payday for his father, was one of Brian’s least favorite nights to be at the Kinney abode so he was seriously dawdling - If it was possible for him to go any slower in tying his shoes, he didn’t know how. All the other boys had left more than ten minutes ago. Eventually, though, he was completely dressed and couldn’t come up with anything else to use as a delay, so the boy started out of the room, his feet dragging as he walked.

He was already halfway out the door when he remembered that he’d left his english book on the top shelf of the locker so he turned back. Brian was surprised when he heard the showers come on again just as he got to the lockers, since he thought he was the only person left in the locker room. He curiously walked around the corner into the tiled shower area to see who else was still here. The room was steamy and he couldn’t see far through the humid air. By the time he was close enough to see the person standing under the furthest showerhead, he was only a few feet away.

There under the water was Coach Stephens, gloriously naked, soaping himself with his left hand while he played with his balls using his right. The older man looked up as Brian’s movement drew his attention. The man didn’t seem surprised or offended at the sight of the gawking teen standing fully clothed with his feet flanking the large floor drain and a big boner already tenting the front of Brian’s tan chinos. Tad Stephens just smiled at the youth, his eyes locked on the young man’s, reading the teen-aged lust and loving it.
“Sorry. . .” Brian mumbled in embarrassment as he started to back away, bumping into the half-wall surrounding the shower enclosure in his hasty retreat.

Coach Stephens didn’t seem embarrassed though. He laughed at the stumbling teen who was awkwardly trying to look anywhere but at the naked figure in the shower. “Come here, Brian,” he called in an amused tone to the flustered youth before Brian could make a full escape.

Brian felt himself drawn to the man in the shower. It was almost like he was being pulled without any independent will towards the erotic figure. He knew that this was his coach, his teacher, and he really shouldn’t be there alone with the man, but he couldn’t seem to resist the sight. As the man beckoned to him, Brian felt himself lured in towards the older man. The young man walked right into the range of the pelting water, not taking the time to bother removing his clothes. The naked man reached his arms out to the boy, luring him in closer and then sliding his soapy hands down the thin back until he had both hands on the tight firm ass of the hypnotized boy. As the man squeezed what he’d managed to grab, he also bent his head down to nibble along the kid’s long slender neck, causing Brian to gasp aloud at the dual contact.

“Coach Stephens, I . . . I . . . should go,” Brian muttered, not sure what exactly was happening or how he was supposed to react, but pretty sure he shouldn’t be where he was right at that moment in spite of his previous fantasies.

“You don’t want to go, do you, Brian?” the coach insisted softly as he continued to touch Brian through his soaking wet clothes. “You want this. You want me. Don’t you?”

“But. . .” Brian tried weakly to protest, at the same time enjoying the feel of the man’s lips on his neck, while Tad’s hands started to slip inside the back of his pants.

“No one has to know, Brian,” the words trickled into his consciousness as he half-heartedly tried to stop the wandering hands. “I’ll make it special for you. I promise that you’ll like it.” Brian didn’t say anything more.

That’s when time started to do some very curious things around the pair. To a certain extent, everything seemed to speed up - Brian wasn’t sure what happened, in what order, but between that first groping and the time it took him to blink, he found himself on his knees in the puddling water with Coach’s hands on the sides of his head guiding his face towards the man’s fully erect dick which was protruding proudly in front of him. Then time seemed to slow far too much so that, in his confusion about exactly what to do next, Brian felt that the next few moments dragged on interminably. Stephens exerted a small pressure to the back of Brian’s neck, moving his crotch forward at the same time, until finally Brian opened up and let the man guide his cock inside his mouth. Then everything seemed to zoom forward at breakneck speed again, leaving the boy unsure of exactly how he’d managed what he’d been fantasizing about doing without actually having a real memory of the deed itself. It wasn’t until his mouth was filling with an unfamiliar warm, salty goo, causing him to gag and sputter, that time snapped back into its proper place and speed.

“Thank you, Brian,” said the coach casually, as if he was merely being polite to a stranger, as he shut off the water and started walking away from the still kneeling boy. “That was very nice. You should probably get dressed and get out of here now. I have to lock up for the night.”

Brian fumbled to his feet, staring after the retreating figure with his mouth hanging open, not sure what to do or say next. He felt so unsure of himself. What the fuck had he just done? Was that all there really was to the whole sex thing? Wasn’t he supposed to feel something? Wasn’t his first sexual experience supposed to be more. . . . special?

“Shit,” was the only comment he could manage as he sloshed out of the showers, picked up his
backpack and the forgotten book as he passed his locker and dripped his way through the outer doors into the dying daylight.

Brian got as far as the bleachers before he stopped and looked around himself, at a loss about what to do next. He sat on the lowest bleacher bench and watched the sun set while his clothes slowly dripped dry. He wasn’t sure what he should be feeling right now. Should he be shouting out in elation or crying? Should he go home now or wait till his clothes were completely dry. Eventually he decided to go - he didn’t want anyone to see him there and start asking uncomfortable questions. He didn’t want anyone to find out what he’d done.

Justin didn’t know how long he’d stood there in that store, paralyzed with shock after seeing Four. His brother and nephew had left a long time ago and he was still standing in the same spot, unable to move. He knew there was some reason why he’d been forced to come here today - seeing Four was important somehow - but he didn’t understand what it all meant.

In the back of his mind there was this niggling little worry but he was too astounded by today’s events to think about anything clearly. As he tried to puzzle out what all this meant, the little worry started to grow. Justin tried to ignore it - he wanted to figure out why he’d been called to help little Jessie. The child hadn’t really been in any serious danger. Why had he been called away from watching Brian for this?

“Brian!” All of a sudden the little niggling, nagging worry he’d been ignoring sprang to the forefront of his consciousness.

Something was wrong. Brian needed him. He’d been distracted here with his little lost nephew and all the while Brian had needed him. Justin reached out with his senses and found Brian, walking all alone in the dark, halfway between school and his house. With no more than a thought he was there, beside his boy.

“Brian? What happened? Are you okay?” Justin asked in a hushed voice, unsettled by the closed off feeling he was getting from the young man shuffling along next to him. “Brian?”

Brian looked at the blond hovering worriedly next to him and gave a little huff with the threat of a smile. Then he turned back, focusing on the sidewalk in front of him. Brian ignored the person tagging along beside him for the rest of the walk home and didn’t say anything further the rest of the night.

Chapter End Notes

Originally posted 6/24/13 - I'm sorry for the ongoing sadness in Brian's life. I know many readers are getting fed up with it all. As the author I feel it's needed in this story to show exactly how the Brian we know in the current day was made. I promise that that's not going to be the whole of the story though - things will get better eventually. In order to break up the angst a little, I threw in a little foreshadowing with Four and little Jessie. Can you guess where that is leading? I hope not - at least not yet. Your speculation is always welcome, though! TAG
Evolution

Chapter 7

On the inside Brian was a nervous ball of seething insecurity all weekend long. However Brian didn't let any hint of that inner confusion show on the outside. People around him saw only that Brian was even quieter and more introspective than was usual even for him. Brian had long ago schooled himself not to let anyone see his true feelings. It was just easier that way.

Brian's ongoing silence about whatever had happened on Friday had Justin so worried he spent most of the weekend pacing around on the sidewalk in front of the Kinney house. What he really wanted was to be inside with his boy, but Brian's refusal to acknowledge Justin earlier had made the young guardian wary. He felt incredibly guilty that he'd been lured away just when Brian had apparently needed him the most. But all Justin was left with was a heart full of worry and no answers. Brian stayed in his room pretty much all weekend, laying low and only coming out when ordered to by his parents.

On Monday, after school, Brian's imperturbable facade finally cracked a little. Michael found his friend sitting on the bleachers watching as the other boys went into the locker room to get ready for soccer practice. Brian had let his guard down just enough that Michael could see there was something wrong and that his friend was hesitant to go inside. Brian was just sitting there, staring at the locker room door, chewing on his bottom lip, his right knee nervously jiggling and his hands picking sightlessly at a tiny fold in the fabric of his pants.

"Hey, Bri," Michael sat down next to his buddy, one hand on Brian's shoulder. "You okay? You look . . . freaked out about something."

"I'm fine," Brian said without looking up at all.

"You don't look fine," Michael insisted stubbornly. "You sure everything's okay? If you need to talk or anything . . ."

"I said I was fine," Brian maintained and then finally he couldn't take Michael's continued staring at him. "I'm fine! Everything's just peachy! My life is just a fucking bed of roses! Happy? Now, fuck off! I have to get to practice."

Michael just sat there, even after Brian was gone, unsure why his friend had just blown a gasket and then blown him off. Justin, who'd been hovering out of sight under the bleachers, listened with a growing sense of dread. Neither of Brian's friends could figure out what exactly was going on, but both of them were worried.

"Coach?" Brian said as he knocked softly at the door of Stephens' office after practice.

“What is it Kinney?” the coach replied casually, barely looking up from whatever paperwork he was looking at on his desk.

“I . . . I thought maybe we could . . . you might . . . want to get a coffee with me or . . . we could maybe talk . . .” Brian hated that he’d fumbled and stuttered his way though only one lame sentence before he just gave up.

Coach Stephens looked genuinely surprised by Brian’s very presence. He didn’t say anything right away, just got up from his desk chair, came over to the doorway and looked down the hallway to make sure there wasn’t anyone else around, before pulling Brian all the way into the office and
closing the door firmly. Brian wasn’t exactly happy with the brusque way that Coach was treating him, but he wasn’t sure what to do or say in this situation so he just let himself be tugged around until Coach Tad finally turned towards him.

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re thinking, Kinney. Why the fuck would I want to go out to coffee with you? You think that just because we got a little friendly one time in the shower that now we’re dating or something? You’re so fucking clueless. You're pathetic,” the Coach sneered at the boy as he leaned back in his chair and surveyed the nervous youth.

“But . . . I thought . . . after Friday . . . “ Brian tried to pull himself together enough to voice his hopes.

“I don’t give a flying fuck what YOU thought. You’re just a kid. What the hell do you know?” the jeering older man said, sitting up and pointing his finger accusingly in Brian’s direction. “Nothing happened ‘On Friday’! You hear? NOTHING! You wanted me, I wanted you, we screwed around a little and that’s it. It doesn’t make you my boyfriend or anything. And, even if you were old enough to go out with, I don’t DO boyfriends or dating or any of that crap. I fuck when I want to fuck. That’s all that happened. It doesn’t mean anything. Now, get the hell out of my office and DON’T bother me again with this shit.”

Brian grappled for the door handle and eventually managed to twist it enough to open the door. He stumbled out of the stuffy little office and made his way with unseeing eyes through the rest of the locker room, somehow finding himself back outside near the bleachers without really knowing how he got there. Brian slumped down on the lowest tier of seats as his protective emotion-proof walls crumbled into a million little pieces beneath the pressure of the tears that he couldn’t hold back any longer.

“Brian? Hey, what’s wrong?” Michael came up on him so quietly from behind that Brian didn’t have a chance to hide anything this time.

Brian angrily swiped at the couple of hot tears that had escaped and quickly pulled himself together before he turned to look at Michael. “Nothing’s wrong,” Brian said in a dead, uncaring voice.

“But . . . Brian, you were . . . “ Michael’s hero looked at him disdainfully, as if daring Mikey to do anything as stupid as state that Brian Kinney had been crying.

“Nothing’s wrong, Mikey, so just lay off. Okay?” Brian got up and, with pretend nonchalance, he slung his arm around the smaller boy’s shoulders, guiding him away from the athletic fields and the school. When it didn’t look like Michael was buying his act, Brian decided to go with the shock factor, which was guaranteed to shut that whiny little mouth. “So, did you know that Coach Stephens is gay?”

“Coach Stephens? No way! He’s like the original ‘Mr. Jock’,,” Michael protested, willingly letting himself be distracted by the big news and the cocky little smirk that Brian had put on his face by this point.

“Oh, he’s gay alright. I should know. I sucked him off in the showers Friday after practice,” Brian bragged, trying to look like it had been the most inconsequential thing in the world.


“Let me? He fucking loved it,” Brian boldly asserted.
“Shit! I can’t believe it . . . But, he’s like the gym teacher. You guys can’t see each other. What if you get caught,” Michael was already making assumptions and that pissed Brian off.

“We’re not going to be ‘seeing each other’, Mikey. Why the hell would I want to be with him? He’s old. He must be close to thirty. It was just a one-time thing.” Michael was even more in awe of his friend than ever at this point but, even to Michael’s idolizing ears, Brian sounded less than confident as he continued, “it was . . . It was just a fuck. That’s all it was. All it was meant to be.”

“Did he . . . did he hurt you,” Michael didn’t want to ask, but something in Brian’s voice made him think that Brian wasn’t as okay with this as he was making out.

“Fuck, no. I told you, I’m fine,” Brian insisted, his voice getting louder, trying to hide any residual insecurity with bravado. “He didn’t do anything to me. I’m the one who did the sucking and, really, it was no big deal.”

“God! I can’t believe it,” Mikey was still so amazed he could barely speak. “You had SEX, Brian. You had sex with the fucking gym teacher!”

“Calm yourself, Mikey. It’s not that big a deal. It was only a fuck. It didn’t mean anything,” Brian said, almost convincing himself this time.

And Brian might have believed what he was saying, if he hadn’t also seen the look of sorrow and disappointment on the face of the young blond man who had been walking along beside them all this time, unbeknownst to Michael.

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After that, Brian mostly avoided Coach Stephens until school was out for the summer. Several times, Brian had felt the older man's eyes following him in gym class or on the soccer field, but Brian never returned the looks. 'Once bitten, twice shy', as they say. No way was Brian going to leave himself open to that creep a second time.

In the meantime, Brian had talked Debbie into letting him work part-time busing tables and washing dishes at the Diner. It wasn't the most glamorous job in the world, but Brian liked having his own money to spend instead of having to rely on the vague whims of his parents, who might or might not deign to buy their son even bare necessities. Having his own money meant freedom to Brian. It was great. He felt so self-assured and independent. Who cared if the work sucked.

At least that's how Brian felt until just after he'd cashed his second paycheck. That was the night that Jack Kinney discovered the old tin can on the shelf of Brian's closet where he'd been hiding the paltry little sums he'd managed to save for himself out of his wages and tips. Jack was thrilled with his windfall and went on a weekend-long drinking spree with the money. When Brian got home from a Sunday afternoon shift at the diner to find his father passed out on the couch, he didn’t think anything of it - that was, after all, pretty much usual for a Sunday afternoon.

Of course, when Brian went to add his tips for the day to his stash and discovered the empty tin can, he immediately knew where the money had gone. Without thinking about the consequences, Brian rushed back out to where his father was snoozing away in a drunken stupor, rolled the drunkard off the couch onto the floor and commenced kicking the shit out of the man before he was even completely conscious. Unfortunately for Brian, that state didn’t last for long. Before the third kick, Jack started to rouse himself. He grabbed his son’s leg at the next kick and pulled the boy’s limb until he was overextended and unbalanced. Brian fell with a loud thud onto the floor next to his old man who promptly grabbed him in a wrestler’s head lock.
It didn’t stop Brian from continuing to complain, though. “Where’s my fucking money, you bastard? Did you fucking drink it all? Where the fuck is my money!” Brian yelled even as he struggled to get free from the choke-hold Jack now had on him.

“You think you’re a big man now, Sonnyboy? Huh? You think you don’t owe nobody nothing and you can do whatever the fuck you want? Well, think again, kiddo,” Jack crowed as he twisted his body around so that he was on top of Brian and had the boy’s arms pinned to the floor with his knees leaving his hands free - one of which maintained a tight grip on the youth’s throat while the other was free to hit, punch, whack and otherwise rain down blows on the trapped boy. “You fucking owe me for taking care of your scrawny ass for the past fifteen years. I’ve fucking paid through the nose to feed and clothe you and put a roof over your head. I fucking own you and everything else in this house. I worked for it. I paid for it. You’ve done nothing but piss away my money all these years and mouth off. So, I figure anything I find in MY house is mine too. That money was just as much mine as anything else around here. Who the fuck do you think you are anyway, you little bastard?”

“I worked hard for that money. I earned it. It was mine,” Brian insisted, unwilling to give in even though he knew it was going to cost him additional blows for stating his position.

“Bullshit. You wouldn’t know hard work if it kicked you in the ass, you fucking loser,” Jack insisted with a sharp backhand to Brian’s mouth to shut the boy up. “You’ll never amount to nothing. You’re just a pile of useless shit and you always have been. The second I heard that your mother was knocked up I knew you’d be nothing but trouble. If I’d had my way, you would have never been born and the world would have been a better place for all of us. Useless. Piece. Of. Fucking. Shit!” Jack punctuated each word with another punch even after Brian had ceased to fight back.

“You’re wrong! You’re wrong,” Brian continued to mutter, refusing to be silenced once again despite his father’s fists. “Someday you’ll see. I’m going to be the biggest fucking success in this whole fucking town. I’ll be able to buy and sell you. I’ll own your fucking ass and then you’ll see . . .”

Jack seemingly disagreed with this prediction though. In fact, Brian’s words infuriated the man even more. He laid off with the blows to Brian’s face and instead directed all his fury towards choking the kid’s puny neck while knocking Brian’s skull against the floor over and over again. “You fucking asswipe. I’ll show you. You won’t ever talk back to me like that again. I’ll fucking teach you . . .”

“Brian!” Justin’s anguished voice crying out his name was the last thing the young man heard as everything around him slowly faded to black.

Brian woke up just before dawn in the same place on the floor where he’d passed out. Jack was nowhere to be seen. Joanie had apparently not even bothered to get up and find out what all the noise was about. If Claire had noticed her brother lying in a bloody heap on the living room floor when she came in last night, she obviously hadn’t cared enough to do anything about it.

The only person who had cared at all was the blond youth sitting on the floor next to Brian’s body, sobbing as he carefully combed Brian’s hair back from his eyes. Somehow Brian’s head had been propped up to rest against Justin’s thigh. When the anguished young man finally noticed that Brian’s eyes were open, he tried to marshal a smile but didn’t completely succeed.

“Hey, Buddy,” Justin whispered. “I’m so glad to see those gorgeous hazel eyes again.”

“Where . . .” Brian’s voice cracked and he had to clear his throat before he could go on. “Where is
“Passed out in bed, I think,” Justin replied with as much reassurance as he could muster. “He won’t be up for a while. He drank another half a bottle of cheap scotch after . . .”

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” Brian insisted, rolling over and trying to get up to his feet. “I don’t want to still be here when the fucker wakes up and decides to finish what he started.”

Justin helped Brian up off the floor and then guided him towards the front door. Neither young man said anything further as Brian shuffled down the driveway and along the sidewalk heading towards the Novotny home a few blocks away. The sun was just barely above the horizon when they arrived at the older brick home. Brian quickly found the door key where it was hidden under the garish cement birdbath shaped like a little naked boy pissing into a pond and let himself into the house. Justin could do nothing except follow along behind Brian and provide whatever comfort his presence could offer. Brian didn’t bother waking any of the house’s inhabitants. He just pulled the old crocheted afghan off a chair and then curled up to sleep on Debbie’s tattered old couch.

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Brian stayed at the Novotny’s for more than a week that time. It took him two full days before he even felt up to leaving the house. Both Michael and Debbie bustled around and waited on him, smothering Brian with attention and care almost every second of the day. As soon as Brian felt a tiny bit better, though, Brian tried his best to ward off the excessive attention. He felt guilty that he was always relying on the kind woman and her son to take care of him. He didn’t have any money to give Debbie to pay her back for the food he ate or the medical supplies he used up. He felt like such a burden. But he had no where else to go. And, as much as he hated the way Debbie and Michael would smother him sometimes, Brian actually craved the attention even more.

After Brian returned to work, Debbie went with him to the bank, pretending to be his mother so he could open up a savings account. That should hopefully keep Jack away from Brian’s hard earned money. They used Debbie’s address so that not even the bank statements would end up at the Kinney house. Every single penny Brian made was - including most of his tips - was promptly deposited into that account. Brian made sure from then on that he never brought home more than $25 in cash, just in case Jack decided to take a proprietary interest in Brian’s money again.

Over the rest of the summer, Brian worked extra hard. He became the hardest working busboy ever seen at the Liberty Diner. Jack’s little speech about how his son would never be a success had only served to inspire Brian to work harder. He was going to prove Jack wrong someday.

Working at the Diner also came with some unexpected side benefits. Since he was almost always at the Diner these days, Brian found himself immersed in the life of Pittsburgh’s gay community. It was an exciting place to be if you were a young gay man.

Brian quickly learned how much bigger his tips were if he flirted with his customers. And, it wasn’t long before the flirting led to a bit more with one or two of the Diner’s more handsome patrons. Brian’s summer of hard work rapidly turned into one of sexual experimentation as well and the boy was thoroughly enjoying every minute of it. The pretty little brunet busboy was a quick learner, too. By the beginning of August, Brian had not only perfected his blow job skills and learned the joys of mutual masturbation, but had even tried out the wonders of rimming.

When Brian actually let a particularly nice looking stud pop his cherry in the alleyway behind the Diner, it was almost anticlimactic. The sex was okay at best and while his partner didn’t hurt him, he didn’t take any particular care with the novice boy either. So far, none of the emotionless sexual encounters Brian had engaged in had changed his opinion of sex at all - just like that first time
the Coach in the locker room shower, the sex didn’t really mean anything. It was just a means to get off. Brian couldn’t figure out why everyone seemed to make such a big deal about it. However, that didn’t stop him from flirting - or doing a little more - if it meant he’d get bigger tips.

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Brian followed the rest of the boys out of the locker room and joined the group huddled around the bulletin board mounted outside the Coach’s office. They’d all been practicing daily since the beginning of August and today was the day that the final fall team rosters were being posted. It was time to find out if all the long, sweaty, hot hours they’d spent on the field for the past month had been worth it.

At fifteen, Brian was going through another growth spurt and was almost, but not quite, tall enough to see over the heads of all those in front of him. Since he wasn’t in a hurry and he didn’t feel like trying to jostle his way through the pack, though, Brian tried to wait patiently until it was his turn to look over the lists. The team selections weren't going to change even if he was the last person in line.

He knew he was better than at least half of the other boys trying out for the team but since he was only a Sophomore it was unlikely that he would make the cut for the varsity team. He thought he at least had a shot at the JV team, though. In the last scrimmage game he'd even managed a hat trick - three goals in one game - and one of them was a beautiful header right over the defender's outstretched arms. If he got put on the lowly freshman/sophomore team after that he’d be pretty disappointed. There was no way that would happen though.

Finally, the crowd around the bulletin board started to thin. The happy boys who'd made the team they had aimed for whooping and boasting, accepting the accolades of friends as they hurried off to spread their good news. The disappointed boys moving off quietly to nurse their injured pride alone. By the time Brian got to a spot where he could actually read the lists, there was only a handful of other boys still waiting with him. He boldly moved forward and quickly scanned the names on the list. Then Brian frowned. He scanned the names a second time and his frown deepened. Then Brian carefully read through the individual names one at a time, making sure he didn't miss a single one. Even then he could hardly believe it.

Brian's name wasn't there at all - not even on the sophomore team - he'd been cut from the soccer program altogether.

Brian stood there staring at the list until everyone else had left. He stood there until even the last of the boys had left the locker rooms and the entire area around the athletic facilities was unoccupied, except for the quietly waiting blond youth who'd been hovering just behind Brian the entire time. Then Brian ripped the list down off the wall and turned towards the coach's office with the crumpled paper in his fist.

Brian stomped into the building, wrenched at the office door handle and pushed the door open so violently that it slammed into the wall behind and cracked the plaster. Coach Tad looked up from his desk in confusion. His look turned into gloating anger as soon as he identified his visitor.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, Kinney?"

Brian tossed the wadded up paper onto the Coach's desk. "It's wrong. You made a mistake. Fix it!"

"I didn't make any fucking mistake. My decisions about the soccer team rosters stand."

"You made a mistake. I was one of the best players out there," Brian replied, his voice low but
brimming with a cold rage that made the small hairs on the back of Stephens' neck stand up.

"You might have skills, but you've got a lousy attitude, Kinney, and I don't want you on my team."

"You think my attitude is bad now, hm? You ain't seen nothing yet," Brian smirked at the older man with such an ice cold hatred that Stephens involuntarily took two steps backwards away from the seething youth. "You see, Coach, if my name isn't on the varsity team roster in ten minutes, you're going to look back on my attitude right now and WISH for the good old days when my attitude was at least marginally under control. Because in another ten minutes my attitude is going to get really, really bad."

"So bad, in fact that I'm likely to walk right up to the Principal's office and confess how you've been forcing me to have sex with you over and over again since last spring. And believe me, when they take me to the hospital to be examined, there's enough evidence there to prove somebody has been a bit rough on my sweet little fifteen-year-old ass in the very recent past. It'll be more than enough to get you sent away for life as a pedophile."

"That's a lie. You . . . You wouldn't dare," Stephens growled at the boy who was daring to threaten him.

"Are you willing to bet your whole fucking life? I've got nothing to lose here. But you? Even if you don't end up in jail, your teaching career will be over for good. And, either way, I'll also have plenty of time to tell my homophobic, angry, drunk Irish father about the faggot that molested me - I'm sure you two will have bunches to talk about."

"So, Coach Stephens, do you want to rethink your statement that there wasn't any mistake on that first draft of the roster?" Brian's icy glare pelted hatred at the older man until Tad Stephens collapsed into his chair from the almost physical pressure of the heartless sneer.

The coach looked up at the serious determination on the countenance of the boy who was now towering over his desk and swallowed hard. This wasn’t the shy, easily intimidated neophyte he’d charmed into sucking him off just a few months earlier. This kid had some major cojones. And, even if the kid couldn't prove anything, Stephens knew that the scandal alone would ruin him. And he didn't doubt for a minute that the kid's Mick father would happily beat the crap out of him even if the allegations weren't true. He was so fucked.

Stephens didn't really have to think about it at all. He took the balled up roster that had been tossed on his desk and carefully placed it into the recycling bin next to the printer stand. Then he silently turned towards the computer set up on the left corner of the desk, clicked a few times with the mouse and typed something briefly. A sheet of paper almost instantly started to feed through the printer.

"Congratulations, Mr. Kinney," Coach Stephens said as he handed the newly printed roster to the boy waiting in front of the desk. "Welcome to the varsity soccer team."
Chapter 8 - Accumulation.

Brian got out of his newly purchased old beater car on the first day of Senior Year and took a deep breath before heading inside.

Brian was incredibly proud of his new wheels. The car was a real monster - a 1980 Chevy Monte Carlo. He’d bought it for $500 from a neighbor kid who was headed off to college. Vic had nicknamed the heap, ‘Big Bertha’. It wasn’t much to look at - the exterior was more dented than not and the ugly fake vinyl roof material was slowly peeling off. All the cabbies would get out of his way - even in cities like NYC & Beantown - afraid that he wouldn’t give a damn about ramming into them. One door didn’t open. There was a slight exhaust leak in floorboard, so on long trips you had to have windows open or you would be asphyxiated. It only got about five miles to a gallon of gas. But, it drove smooth and was his and he loved it.

Big Bertha’s interior was much nicer than the exterior. The vinyl covered bench seats were still in good condition. The big seats made it seem like you were driving around with two full couches. Lying lengthwise on the seat, even Brian could stretch out to almost full height. It could seat at least ten without undue crowding. It had come with fuzzy dice hanging from the rearview mirror and a steering wheel ball so you could drive it one-handed and not spill your beer. The heater was great - it cranked out heat like a boiler. However, in the summertime it was like driving in an oven even with the windows open. It had an eight track tape player - the guy he’d bought it from had thrown in 4 old 8-traks including ‘Supertramp’ - but Brian had purchased a cassette converter so he could play real music. The trunk was huge - he’d managed to stow three whole kegs of beer in there one time.

Basically, Brian had been living out of car all summer. He’d got a summer job working at a resort restaurant in the Poconos and had been allowed to park the car at night next to an old barn in exchange for occasionally mucking out the stalls. It had been THE party car for all the staff kids working the resort. There had been more than a few unplanned road trips. One night they’d taken off at 1:00 am to find a girl named Fiona who supposedly went to Bucknell University in Lewisburg, PA, because Brian’s friend Whitney decided (after the third bowlful of pot) that he loved her and couldn’t live without her. They never actually found Fiona but Brian had a nice day-long with fuckfest with five of the Bucknell soccer team players the next day before they headed home. They drove out to Williamstown, Massachusetts for the opening game of the football season - Williams College versus their longtime nemesis Amherst - and destroyed Big Bertha’s shocks when 40-50 people had enjoyed an awesome kegger while standing on the roof. They’d taken Brian’s car to every rock concert within a 100 mile radius that summer - including Bob Seger, Motley Crue, Madonna and Alice Cooper.

Big Bertha was going to be sorely missed by all of Brian’s summertime friends and Brian would truly miss a lot of them, too. He hadn’t left until the last shift at the resort locked up the main doors after dinner service on Memorial Day. He’d had to drive like a maniac to make it back to Pittsburgh in time for his first day of school on Tuesday. Bertha didn’t accelerate very quickly, but once you got her up to cruising speed, it would take a Sherman tank to stop her and her gas tank held about a million gallons. Except for occasional breaks to piss and grab something to eat, Brian had driven straight through the night. The only other time he’d stopped was when he’d been pulled over for speeding on the Penn-Lincoln Parkway - going at least 90 in a 65 mph zone. Luckily for
Brian, the Pennsylvania State Trooper only gave him a warming because, just as Brian went to roll down the window to speak with the policeman, one of the kittens that had been born that summer at the barn where he’d worked popped out from under the front seat and made himself comfortable in Brian’s lap. The hard-hearted cop was amazed at seeing a kid driving around with a cat - he said he’d never seen THAT before - and because Brian had amused him, he let the kid go. Brian looked down at his tiny savior, and named him Joselito on the spot because his eyes were the same color as the Jose Cuervo tequila he’d been favoring all summer.

But all the fun and adventures of the Summer were over now. Brian had to get his mind back into a Pittsburgh frame of reference. He was looking forward to seeing Mikey and Debbie - they’d come up to visit him one weekend over the summer but otherwise Brian had been on his own the whole time. He wasn’t looking forward to school, having to return to the drudgery of working at the Diner or, especially, having to go back home to Jack and Joan. It had been a glorious summer, full of fun, sex, little responsibility and loads of independence. Now Brian had to go back to the real world. He already knew it was going to suck, but that didn’t make it any less depressing.

“Hey, Bri,” rang out the not-so-dulcet tones of Mikey’s greeting from the far side of the parking lot, “When did you get home? I tried to call you, like, a million times over the weekend but your folks said you weren’t home and they didn’t know when you’d get here. Are you ready for Senior Year? Can you fucking believe it? We’re finally Seniors...”

Michael’s end of the conversation started while they were still at least ten meters apart and just kept going, uninterrupted by any response from Brian, as Michael ran up to his best friend and fell into step beside him as the two made their way up the front steps of the school. Brian strutted through the main doors as if he owned the place - which he felt was only his right now that he was at the top of the dogpile of students. Finally, the last of the crew of bullies that used to follow John Matthews had matriculated and moved on. Not that the school was completely free from prejudice. There were plenty of kids in Brian’s own grade who hated fags just as much, but for the most part he knew who they were, had already fought it out with all of them at one time or other, or at least knew how to handle them. It didn’t hurt that Brian was now over six feet tall with pretty decent muscles from all the time he spent at the gym or in soccer practices and knew from longtime experience how to throw a pretty mean right cross.

Both Brian and his ward, Michael, expected to have a relatively relaxed and bully-free senior year.

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As Brian and Michael sauntered inside for their first day of their last year of high school, a slim, small-statured, blond boy stood watching from behind the trunk of a tree that was part of a line of vegetation marking the edge of school property.

Justin had been keeping a very low profile all summer long. Brian had been enjoying his summer job and, for the most part, had been staying out of trouble. Just the mere fact that Brian was out of Jack’s reach for the entire time had made Justin’s job so much easier. Instead of having to dog Brian’s every step, Justin had allowed himself to melt back into the obscurity of hazy dimensionlessness except for when he felt that Brian needed him or when the yearning to look at his boy got too overwhelming.

It was probably a good thing that Brian hadn’t needed him too often lately. Justin had found himself being pulled towards his little nephew, Jessie, a lot more frequently. The little scamp was constantly getting into trouble - skinning his little knees, wandering off at the park and once even getting himself locked into a storage cupboard in his father’s garage causing the whole family to panic. Justin did his thing - sat with the boy and comforted him when he was hurt or scared and did
what he could to protect the child. Even then, Justin didn’t feel nearly the same connection to Jessie that he’d always had to Brian. He wondered if it was because Jessie didn’t need the same protection as Brian had always needed. Jessie didn’t need protecting from his own family.

But today, Justin had felt a growing uneasiness as soon as the sun rose this morning. He knew that something important was going to happen in Brian’s life today. So, here he was again, trying to remain inconspicuous so Brian wouldn’t know he was following him, but at the same time keeping Brian in his sights at all times. Exactly what the threat was, Justin didn’t know, but somehow he thought it might be bad.

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Third period, Brian had Honors Chemistry. That was one of the classes that Mikey definitely wouldn’t be in with him. In fact, not many of the people in Brian’s small circle of acquaintances at school were in that type of class. Even though he was more sociable these days than he had been when he was younger, Brian still had a tendency towards being a loner. The people he did hang out with were an eclectic bunch - most of whom he’d met through Michael - and tended to be the same type of geeky, comic-book nerds and misfits as his friend. Brian got on okay with the jock crowd as well, since he’d always been tall and athletic and had been on the varsity soccer team for three years now, but then again, not many in that clique had the brains to make it into any honors classes, let alone Chemistry. So, when Brian walked into class that morning, he didn’t know very many of the other students and none well enough to approach them. He made his way towards an empty lab bench in the back and sat down alone.

When the bell rang and the teacher stood up to begin speaking to the class, Brian was still sitting at his bench all alone. However, about halfway through roll call, the classroom door opened and in walked one of the most attractive boys Brian had ever seen. This guy was tall enough - probably just under six feet - with tousled reddish brown hair, a quirky little half grin and piercing icy grey-blue eyes. The new kid handed a slip of paper to the teacher, who directed him to take a seat, and then turned to scope out the class. His gaze landed on Brian almost right away and, with a small nod, he headed straight for the empty seat at the back.

The chemistry teacher resumed taking roll. Brian Kinney’s name was called and then a few moments later, the new boy answered to the name, Lars Nielsen. Brian sat quietly through the rest of the teacher’s first day lecture on what was expected in the class, reviewing the syllabus and then the instructions for the first day’s assignment. When the loquacious teacher finally shut up, Brian turned to his new lab partner and smiled. Lars smiled back and Brian’s gaydar instantly started pinging at full volume.

“Hey there. I’m Brian,” Brian introduced himself, pouring on his full Kinney charm. “I KNOW I haven’t seen you around school before, so where in the world did you come from, Mr. Lars Nielsen?”

“Helsingor, Denmark, actually,” Lars replied with an enigmatic, almost teasing glint in his eye. “By way of Milan, Italy, and before that Jakarta, Indonesia.”

“Wow! And here I am - the farthest I’ve ever been away from Pittsburgh is Boston. How did somebody like you end up in the Pitts?”

“My Dad’s family comes from here, actually,” Brian’s new lab partner answered. “My grandmother’s health is getting pretty bad so my Dad gave up his State Department job and moved us all here. I... well, I can’t say it’s actually an improvement over living just a couple train stops
away from Copenhagen, but, well, I didn’t really have much choice.”

“Mr. Kinney. Mr. Nielsen,” interrupted the teacher, who had snuck up on them from behind. “If you think you’re up for it, this is a Chemistry class not a social hour. I suggest you both get on with today’s assignment before you run out of time. Hmmm?”

The boys weren’t allowed to talk much after that. The class assignment kept them busy clear up until the bell rang signalling the end of the period. As they gathered together their books and put away their lab materials, Brian managed to catch Lars’ eye again for a moment.

“Since you’re new in town, I’d be happy to show you around sometime, if you’d like,” Brian offered as they walked together out of the classroom, hating that his voice sounded a bit shaky and unsure.

“That would be okay, I guess,” Lars answered, trying to make his response sound uncaring and only vaguely interested, not wanting to betray any hint of excitement that might make him seem less cool. “I’ll catch you around sometime. Later, Kinney.”

“Later, Lars,” Brian replied, his own expression betraying his interest a lot more than was generally acceptable for a cool high school senior.

“Hey, Bri,” Mikey, appearing out of nowhere like always, piped up before Brian could even take two steps away from the door of the Chemistry classroom. “Who was that? Must be some new kid - I didn’t recognize him at all.”

“Yeah, Brian. Who WAS that?” Brian heard a very familiar, hushed voice repeat from over his left shoulder.

Brian turned and saw his usual blond shadow leaning against a row of lockers just a couple of feet away from where he and Michael were standing. Justin had a disapproving look on his face that Brian didn’t think he’d ever seen directed at him before. Brian turned his back on the nosy and interfering blond who he didn’t want to acknowledge anyway and redirected his reply back at Michael.

“His name’s Lars. He’s in my Chemistry class. Said he moved here from Denmark,” Brian answered, trying to sound disinterested and casual, in spite of the fact that his heart was beating about a million miles a minute. “I offered to show him around town sometime.”

“Wow! That would be so cool. He’s, like, fucking gorgeous, Brian! I wonder if he’s . . . you know . . . “ Michael enthused as he hopped along behind Brian, who’d already started towards his locker.

“Oh, yeah. He’s definitely ‘You Know’. He gave me that look,” Brian said confidently, smiling down at his pet Mikey, but almost immediately losing his smug look as he caught another glimpse of a very displeased Justin popping into the space just in front of him and forcing Brian to have to quickstep to the left to avoid being tripped.

After not having seen much of Justin all summer long, Brian was a bit disconcerted to find his old ‘invisible friend’ dogging his steps so diligently now. He still didn’t want to think about what it meant for him to be able to see the young blond who nobody else could ever see, and he wasn’t going to acknowledge him if he could avoid it. Although, it did make Brian nervous to know that Justin was hovering like this. Brian had usually seen Justin’s presence as a warning of some possible danger. The fact that his long-time guardian was here again, now, didn’t bode well. But, looking around him, Brian couldn’t see anything out of the ordinary and didn’t think there was any threat nearby, so he was lost as to why Justin seemed so concerned. And, if he hadn’t been trying to
avoid looking like he was insane, Brian would have even yelled at Justin when his former protector popped into his path for a third time that morning. Instead, Brian just sneered at the apparition, turned and walked away without bothering to get his books for the next period out of the locker.

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Justin did NOT like that new boy, ‘Lars’. What kind of name was that, anyway? And the way the kid had bragged about all those places he used to live? Of course Brian, who’d never been anywhere, would eat that shit up. And yeah - he was okay looking, and all - but not THAT good looking. He might be kind of smart too, and easy to talk to and cool . . . But, Justin somehow knew that this Lars guy was no good - he could tell just by looking at the kid. Why did Brian not see it? Why would Brian be at all interested in this Lars?

Justin was sure that this new kid was the reason he’d been feeling so uneasy all day. There was something about him that just didn’t feel right. He wasn’t good for Brian. Justin knew that in his gut. But he didn’t know how to get that point across to Brian. It had been a long time since he and Brian had communicated freely. Justin didn’t think that Brian would even listen to him if he tried to warn him away from this Lars.

It was so frustrating to see what he saw, to know that he and Brian were meant to be together - somehow, sometime, maybe in the future, no matter how improbable that seemed - and not to be able to do physically do anything about it. Justin had watched as Brian grew up from a baby, to a child and now to a young man. Brian was the same age as he was now. Or, at least the same age he’d been when he died. But, Justin wasn’t dead, though, was he? He didn’t know what he was. Maybe a ghost or spirit or what-the-fuck-ever.

All Justin knew was that it was getting old. He was tired of never being able to do all he wanted to protect Brian. He was tired of feeling so ineffectual. He was tired of watching Brian’s life from the sidelines. The older Brian got, the more Justin longed to be more a part of Brian’s real life.

The last couple years had been especially hard for Justin. Brian had become a gorgeous young man. The precocious, yet sad and lonely child, was now all grow up. Brian wasn’t a child anymore - not by any stretch of the imagination. Brian was tall, muscular, had a gorgeous body, and the most soulful hazel eyes. His soft auburn hair was alway styled now in the trendiest cut. Brian earned enough money on his own to buy much better clothing. He wasn’t the lonely outcast anymore. He was borderline popular - the only thing holding him back from permanent membership in the popular kids clique was that Brian didn’t care enough about it to bother. But Justin was still just waiting on the periphery of Brian’s consciousness and all he could do was watch while Brian lived.

Brian was everything anybody could want - Gorgeous, strong, kind-hearted and even quite well-endowed. He’d become a hot commodity on Liberty Avenue. Before he even had a fake ID, Brian was getting into any club he wanted to visit just on the basis of his looks alone. And, when that failed, he wasn’t averse to giving the bouncer a blowjob if it meant he could get into a club without paying the cover charge. Brian was a favorite in every backroom on the Avenue. It was almost to the point where Brian could command whomever he wanted to follow him and not fear getting turned down.

And Justin hated every single minute of it.

Even though Justin worried constantly about Brian’s safety when he was trolling the bars and clubs on Liberty, he’d long since given up following his charge around there. Justin couldn’t bear watching Brian with all those anonymous men. Every time Justin saw him with someone who didn’t care about Brian or anything else except getting off, it killed a little piece of something
inside him. Justin thought that, perhaps, it was killing a little piece of Brian each time too, but the boy wouldn’t listen. He always came back for more - steeling himself, taking his pleasure at face value and not letting himself get attached to anyone. The longer Justin had watched, the more he felt that Brian was simply using sex as another means of distancing himself from everyone. It wasn’t right. It definitely wasn’t what Brian needed. But what the hell was Justin supposed to do about it when he didn’t really exist in this plane.

Justin wanted Brian to find something more sustaining. Something real with somebody who actually cared about Brian. Yes, it was true that Justin wanted Brian for himself - eventually - but until they could be together, he didn’t want Brian reduced to nothing but anonymous sex with a string of random, uncaring partners, either. What Brian needed, and had always needed from the day he was born, was pure unconditional love. Justin did his best to give his soul-mate what he needed, but he could tell he was failing miserably. Brian desperately needed to find someone who loved him for himself - not for his image or his looks or what Brian could do for them. What he needed was a boyfriend. And, no matter how much the very idea grated on Justin’s nerves, he loved Brian enough to want that for him.

However, that didn’t mean that Justin would sit back and let just anyone into Brian’s life. This Lars wasn’t the right one for Brian. Justin was sure of it. No matter how interested Brian was in the new boy, Justin simply knew it would end up badly. His only problem was convincing Brian of that.

Before it was too late.

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By Friday, Brian had talked Lars into joining him after school for a visit to the Liberty Diner. Friday was the only day of the week when Brian didn’t have soccer practice after school, so he was free to take off as soon as he tossed his history book into his locker. Lars was supposed to meet him on the sidewalk in front of the school after their last classes. Brian was practically running through the front doors, he was so excited about this ‘date’.

Okay, so it wasn’t really a date - neither of them had made any overt moves on the other and the premise for this little outing was just Brian showing the new guy around town. But, if Brian had any say in the matter, it was going to end up as something much more than just two buddies hanging out after school. Brian wanted this boy more than anyone he’d ever seen before and his plan was to get Lars to want him back just as much - preferably before the night was through.

Brian could see the sunlight glinting off Lars’ shock of bright auburn hair before he was even halfway down the steps to the parking lot. He plopped his jeans-clad ass on the metal handrail that ran up the middle of the steps and slid down, by-passing the rest of the steps in his rush to get to where Lars was waiting. If it hadn’t been just too fucking undignified, Brian would have skipped down the rest of the sidewalk, he was feeling so jubilant. If possible, his smile got even wider as he neared the spot, and Lars turned around and grinned as Brian neared.

“Hey Brian. Hey Lars. Where are you guys off to?” Mikey’s high-pitched tenor voice intruded as the other young man appeared from out of nowhere, insinuating himself between Brian and Lars just as Brian got near.

“Michael . . .” Brian’s greeting for his long-time friend wasn’t exactly enthusiastic.

“Hey, Mike,” Lars replied with a cheerful smile directed in the interloper’s direction. “Brian promised to show me the sights of your famous ‘Liberty Avenue’ this afternoon. It’ll have to be
something special if it wants to compare to the ‘Stroget’ - the gay district of Copenhagen.”

“Well, I doubt we can compare with the open-mindedness of Europe, but in Pittsburgh, Liberty Avenue is the best you can get,” Brian offered, pointedly ignoring Michael as he shouldered his way in between the two so that he was closer to Lars.

“Yeah, you’ll like Liberty, Lars. I’ve grown up in the neighborhood my whole life. It’s the only place a guy like us can really feel relaxed,” Michael added his opinion. “So, Brian, if you’re heading towards the Diner, can I grab a ride with you?”

Brian rolled his eyes, causing Lars to snicker. “Sure, Mikey. We’ll give you a ride but then you WILL be getting lost . . . right?” Brian suggested, nodding hopefully at his buddy, silently willing him to get the message.

Unfortunately, Michael either didn’t understand or didn’t want to understand. Instead, he ignored Brian’s hints and jumped into the front passenger seat of Brian’s beater car yelling ‘Shotgun’ before Brian could stop him. The tall eager brunet shook his head disdainfully at his clueless friend, pulled the driver’s side seat forward so that Lars could climb into the back and then sat down himself. While Brian’s back was turned, he missed the hatefilled glare that Lars sent Michael’s way from the back seat. Michael, who happened to be looking in the rearview mirror at that moment, didn’t miss the look, and was startled at seeing such unveiled hatred coming at him from this boy he hardly knew. Michael quickly sat back in his seat and looked over at Brian for reassurance. Brian wasn’t paying the least bit of attention as he started the car engine and backed out of his parking spot.

There was one other witness, though, who had seen the entire interaction. Justin had been standing just next to the car while the boys were talking and had clearly seen the hostile look that the new boy had shot at Michael. He also saw how the boy neatly wiped the nasty look off his face just before Brian turned his head and smiled at the back seat passenger. By the time Brian saw Lars, the spiteful, manipulative glare was gone - replaced by a look of easygoing cheerfulness that effectively hid any hint of the antagonism that had been there only a moment earlier.

Justin’s intuition that meeting this Lars wasn’t going to be a good thing in Brian’s life immediately got stronger.

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Disaffection.

Chapter Notes

Yay! Now this posting of the story is caught up with the postings on MW. I'm afraid that means you'll have to wait a bit for the next chapter, though. Enjoy! TAG

Chapter 9 - Disaffection.

Lars took to the gay community on Liberty Avenue like a fish to water. From the minute Brian ushered his new friend into his favorite booth at the Liberty Diner, Lars seemed perfectly at home. Outside the environs of the school, Lars was much more open. He immediately started flirting with Brian - as well as with pretty much any other male he saw. Brian hadn’t really had any experience with a relationship, per se, so he didn’t really know what to think about Lars’ behavior.

But, whether it was the greasy food or the greasy ambiance, by the end of their meal at the Diner, Lars was fawning all over Brian. The audience they had at the Diner seemed to egg Lars on rather than deter any of his very overt advances. Brian was flattered by all the attention he was getting from the attractive boy and gave back as good as he got. Their hands were wandering all over each other long before Debbie came and cleared away the dirty dishes. And, as an extra special thank you for treating him to the burger and fries, just before it was time to head home, Lars led Brian into the men’s room and gave him an enthusiastic blow job.

From that afternoon on, it seemed like Lars was almost always with Brian. They spent pretty much all their free time together. Brian was picking Lars up before school and taking him home afterwards. During the day they hung out together every spare minute they could: between classes, at lunch, while Brian was waiting for soccer practice to start and any other time in between. The only times they weren’t together were when Brian was forced to go home, since he simply refused to let Lars be exposed to the dubious pleasures of knowing Jack and Joan.

Without ever discussing it or making a conscious decision about it, Brian now seemed to have himself a boyfriend.

Neither Justin nor Michael were very happy with this development.

Lars usurped pretty much all of Brian’s time, which meant that little Mikey was left high and dry more often than not. The couple of times Michael had tried to join in with Brian and Lars’ plans, Brian’s new boyfriend had made it abundantly clear his presence wasn’t wanted. Even when they were just all standing around together in a group at school, Lars did his best to exclude Michael. When he spoke to Brian, Lars would position his body so his back was to Michael making it so that the shorter boy was effectively shut out of the conversation. But, since Brian was practically never alone, Michael hadn’t found a chance to talk to his friend about his concerns, not that Brian would have listened to him anyway. Brian seemed totally blind to any fault Lars might have.

Justin though had his eyes wide open. He’d seen every time Lars had snubbed Michael behind Brian’s back. He’d see the way the new boy was consciously trying to isolate Brian from all his other friends and acquaintances. Justin didn’t like the conniving look he’d seen more than a few times on the new kid’s face in his unguarded moments. And he certainly didn’t like the fact that, although Lars fawned all over Brian endlessly when they were together, when Brian wasn’t around...
Lars was a little over-attentive to pretty much any other male that came sniffing around.

“Hey, Big Guy. How soon do you think you can duck out of practice? I’m starving and I thought I’d let you take me out to get something to eat,” Lars delivered this pronouncement as soon as Brian came in sight of his locker, where Lars was camped out waiting for his boyfriend’s arrival.

Justin was waiting for Brian too, watching from the classroom doorway just across the hallway. The simpering, whiny tone in Lars’ voice made Justin’s stomach turn. Didn’t this guy ever eat at his own home? Why did he expect Brian to take him out to eat almost every day. Brian worked hard for his money and didn’t have doting parents to give him an allowance like Lars did. Justin knew for a fact that Lars had more money in his own wallet than Brian had in his - he’d seen Lars counting it earlier in the day, right before he’d finagled Brian into buying his lunch.

“Sorry, Lars. I can’t do it today. I’ve got soccer until 4:30 and then I’m working a shift at the Diner tonight,” Brian stated, squeezing Lars’ shoulder affectionately in a sort of apology.

“Well, that sucks. What am I going to do all night? Are you sure you can’t just call in sick to work, Baby?”

“No. I can’t just call in sick,” Brian said, irritated by Lars’ use of the nickname ‘Baby’, especially here at school. “First of all, I would never lie to Debbie like that. I fucking hate liars more than anything. And, secondly, if I don’t go to work how am I ever going to earn enough money to keep taking you out to eat. And, to the movies. And, to the mall. And, to the . . . “

“I get the picture,” Lars interrupted Brian’s spiel. "It's just that I'm gonna miss you, Baby. I'll have nobody to play with,” Lars added, batting his eyes at Brian flirtily, "and I have this BIG problem I was hoping you'd be able to help me with . . . " As the boy finished speaking, he turned and managed to brush his bulging package against Brian's thigh, causing the taller young man to groan quietly.

"You do NOT play fair, Lars," Brian bit his bottom lip to try and stifle any more inappropriate verbal clues as to how seriously he'd been affected by that brief teasing pressure.

"All's fair . . . See you later, Babe!"

Justin and Brian both watched the retreating back. Brian's face showed a sort of delirious lust. Justin's look was full of plain old distaste. But, knowing that boy was going to be trouble didn't hurt Justin nearly as much as seeing the small lovestruck smile on Brian's lips that was directed at someone other than him.

And everything in the Brian & Lars show was a beautiful rainbow-filled tunnel of love for almost a month.

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“Hey there, Babycakes,” Lars bounced up to Brian in the hallway next to Brian’s locker and energetically wrapped his arms around his man.

Brian flinched away from the contact, and not just because he was leery of public displays of affection while they were in school. Actually, Brian was getting kind of used to Lars’ overt affection. What caused him to flinch this time was the pain that was shooting through his body as Lars squeezed his bruised rib cage. Brian couldn’t help but grunt out a small yelp of pain.

“What’s the matter, Sweetness?” Lars asked as Brian pulled out of his grip and put up a hand to hold off any further painful advances.
“Nothing,” was Brian’s automatic reply.

“Come on, Honeybun,” Lars tried to put his arms back around Brian’s middle with another unwelcome squeeze. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Ow . . . Fuck, get off, Lars,” Brian finally had to shove the other boy away to protect himself.

“Brian? What . . .?” Lars was now too curious to back away from the mystery.

Lars put his arm up, braced against the next locker over, as a barrier to prevent Brian from escaping. Brian had already started leaning that direction, but when he bumped up against Lars’ arm, he cringed back again, his face giving away the pain he felt when his side collided with the restraining arm. Now Lars just had to know what, exactly, was going on.

Without asking, Lars lifted up the hem of Brian’s t-shirt and peeked underneath. Brian tried to move more quickly, tearing the cloth out of his boyfriend’s hands, but he wasn’t quick enough to prevent Lars from getting an eyeful of the nasty dark swirling black and green bruises that covered most of the left side of his torso. Lars gasped at the sight almost as loudly as Brian gasped at the pain his jerky movements caused.

“What the fuck happened to you, Brian,” Lars demanded, sounding outraged that anyone would do something like that to HIS Brian. “And, don’t you dare say it’s nothing,” he added as Brian opened his mouth, obviously about to say something dismissive.

“I . . . I don’t want to talk about it,” Brian tried one last time to get Lars to drop the subject, moving to duck under Lars’ arm at the same time.

“Well, I DO want to talk about it, Brian,” Lars insisted, following on Brian’s heels as the injured boy tried to flee from his overly-concerned beau. “Brian. Brian! I’m not going to just let this drop, Brian!” Lars yelled down the hallway, causing all the other students to abandon their own conversations and look up.

“Fine. But not here!” Brian caved, willing to do almost anything to stop Lars from yelling his private business throughout the entire school. “Meet me behind the bleachers at lunch . . . I’ll . . . I’ll explain then,” Brian hissed, trying to lead Lars by the elbow down the hall and away from all the other watching eyes. “Just, please, don’t say anything to anybody in the meantime.”

An hour later, Brian reluctantly made his way from English class outside to the bleachers set up alongside the athletic fields. Lars was already there waiting for him, of course. Brian sighed heavily but knew he wasn’t going to get away without a full confession to Lars. It was time to come clean, even though Brian hated the idea of letting anyone, especially Lars, in on his dirty family laundry. Not only was it embarrassing to have to admit to his problems, he worried that Lars would suddenly see him in a different light - he would pity Brian or feel sorry for him, think him somehow flawed now, or maybe just not want to get involved. Lars’ potential reaction scared Brian more than anything else. The look on Lars’ face was very determined though, and Brian knew he wouldn’t be able to get out of explaining this time.

“Hey,” Brian said in an almost shy little voice, betraying his insecurity.

“Hey, Baby,” Lars seemed sympathetic. “Now, come on over here and sit and tell me what the fuck is going on. Who the hell did this to you, Brian?”

“Jack,” Brian stated without fanfare or further explanation.

“Jack? You mean, as in, Jack Kinney, your father?”
Brian didn’t bother to respond other than to snort derisively at the use of the word ‘father’.

“Your dad? . . . “ it was taking Lars a few minutes to assimilate this new information. When he finally did seem to grasp the reality of the situation, the only thing Lars thought to ask was, “why?”

“The fucking cat. . . “ Brian laughed humorlessly to himself as if it was some private joke. Lars put his hand on Brian’s shoulder and squeezed gently, silently begging for more of an explanation.

“There was this stupid cat . . . well, it’s only a kitten really . . . it stowed away in my car when I came back from the place I worked over the summer. . . I knew that Joanie would never in a million fucking years let me bring it indoors. But . . . well, it’s so fucking little and all . . . what the fuck else was I supposed to do with it?”

Brian paused in his explanation and looked around to make sure there was no one else nearby listening in on his little confession. Luckily, the area was deserted - well, except for his ubiquitous blond ghost companion, Justin, who’d been annoyingly clingy ever since the melee last night with Jack - but Brian didn’t count him. Lars was still hanging on his every word, so Brian knew he’d have to continue with his story.

“So, I got this cat carrier, box-thing at a pet store and put a blanket in it and set it up in the yard under some bushes, and . . . well, I’ve been feeding the fucking cat . . . “ a light blush crept up Brian’s cheeks, surprising Lars, who’d never seen the other boy so flustered or bashful as he was at the admission that he’d taken pity on a kitten. “Jack caught me out there last night and gave me shit about wasting money on food for a fucking cat. Jack thought that if I had money to waste on a stupid barn cat, then I had more than I deserved and he sort of demanded - again - that I start paying him for my room and board and shit. It got . . . nasty. The fucking asshole ended up kicking me so hard in the ribs I couldn’t breathe and then he stole my damn wallet on top of everything else. Fucking dickhead!”

“The way you talk, you sound like this is a . . . normal occurrence,” Lars commented, a bit lost as to what he should say at this point.

Brian shrugged but didn’t look overly upset at the admission of Jack’s ongoing abuse. In fact, Brian had seemed far more upset while discussing his care of the little cat. Lars was taken aback by this insightful revelation. The only indication that Brian was at all even uncomfortable about this topic of conversation was his ongoing refusal to make eye contact - instead, Brian seemed to be focused on something Lars couldn’t see somewhere over behind him.

“So, um, how bad is it,” Lars couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Just bruised ribs. No biggie,” Brian didn’t want to acknowledge the pain or the shame so he was trying hard to put on his usual cocky, arrogant mask. “Anyways, just, please, don’t say anything to anyone, you know. . . “

“Who would I tell,” Lars said with a little chuckle, as if he was trying to ease the tense situation with a bit of levity. “But, does this mean that you’re too broke to take me out to the Diner this afternoon?”

Even though Lars said this with a teasing smile, the sheer audacity of the comment made Justin’s blood boil. With an angry roar, Justin jumped up from where he’d been leaning against a steel support beam just behind where Lars was sitting and lunged at the callous boy as if to strangle him. Lars, of course, was completely oblivious to what was happening behind his back. Brian was startled - he’d never seen Justin react that way in spite of the many, many times his guardian had witnessed far worse things happening to Brian. Brian himself jumped up and made as if to stop Justin’s assault on Lars. His concern turned to gales of laughter, though, when Justin’s hands went
right through Lars’ body and Justin stumbled to catch himself before falling.

“What?” Lars exclaimed when Brian started laughing uproariously at him. “Brian... Fine. Whatever.” Lars got up and huffed off in a pique, offended by Brian’s apparent response to his little joke.

Justin, more than glad to see Lars go, smiled his big beautiful sunshine-bright smile up at Brian. Brian was still chuckling as he stood up, shook his head at the smug happy look that Justin was sporting, and walked away to find his insulted boyfriend. Justin didn’t follow. He had to come up with some way to get Lars out of Brian’s life before the asshole really hurt him.

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It took Brian two days to get Lars to completely forgive him. Finally, on Friday, which just happened to be the day Brian got paid, Lars deigned to let Brian take him out for food after school. After he was sufficiently well fed, and he’d made Brian suck up to him for a sufficiently long period of time, Lars gave in. The reconciliation make out session that followed was hot and heavy. Even Deb eventually told them to take it outside before they started actually fucking on the tables.

The rest of the weekend, Lars was cloyingly sweet and doted on Brian even more than before. Brian was relieved to have made up from the fight with his boyfriend, but still didn’t feel comfortable with all the ooey-gooey pet names and overtly affectionate gestures that Lars kept up the entire time. Brian was definitely starting to get just a wee bit peeved at the other boy, especially when he simply refused to stop with the nicknames. By Sunday night, Brian had had way too many ‘Baby’, ‘Sweetie’, ‘Studmuffin’ and ‘Hons’ thrown at him. Claiming he had homework, Brian begged off their Sunday night plans - Brian was supposed to be taking Lars to the latest action-adventure movie at the mall - and instead went to the only place he knew he could be alone and hide out for a little while.

Parking the old Monte Carlo on a side street behind a huge Rhododendron bush that would more than hide it from anyone driving by on the main street, Brian walked the couple blocks towards his destination. He vaulted over the rusty wrought iron fence and quietly made his way through the overgrown bushes surrounding the crumbling old stone crypt at the far edge of the cemetery. Ever since that first time he’d stumbled on this place while fleeing from Jack’s wrath as a child, Brian had used it as a type of sanctuary. A hiding place where no part of the harsh cold world would intrude. Brian always felt safe here - which seemed odd even to him since most people would feel just the opposite spending endless hours and dark nights waiting around in a graveyard. But to Brian, the ambiance was more about the serenity of the place, than the oppression of death.

Moving slowly between the wall and the row of boxwood bushes that ran around the sides of the crypt, Brian made his way to the darkest corner. He was relieved to see that the old cat-carrier box that he’d rescued from the trash after Jack threw it away was still where he’d set it up. It was a bit the worse for wear - the metal grating over the sides was dented and the plastic shell was cracked in a couple places, but he figured it would still work as a shelter.

As Brian approached, he saw a furtive, shadowy form moving around in front of the box, and then heard a tiny little ‘mew’ of greeting. Brian hunkered down and let the kitten sidle up to him, rubbing it’s small body against the youth’s ankles. Brian smiled down at the purring ball of fur, somehow grateful that another creature, even just a cat, was so overjoyed to see him.

“I’m glad you managed to catch him even after Jack chased him away,,” the quiet tenor voice broke through the silence and Brian looked up to find the one person other than himself who knew about this hidden spot - Justin.

“Fucking, Jack,” Brian cursed the heartless man who claimed to be his father. “At least he was too
drunk to aim very well. Joselito here was too fast for him. I swear that if any of those rocks Jack threw had actually hit this little guy, I would have taken him out. What kind of degenerate asshole could actually hurt a fucking kitten?”

“The kind of asshole who beats his own son,” Justin offered, sitting down next to Brian while reaching one hand over to pet the soft fur at the nape of the kitten’s neck, thankful that animals didn’t seem to have the same inability to see and feel him as most people.

“Yeah,” Brian couldn’t disagree but didn’t really want to head towards that topic of conversation either.

Brian set the cat down on the leaf-strewn ground at his feet, reached into his pocket and pulled out the can of cat food he’d brought. Pulling off the aluminum top, he laid the whole can down next to the cat box and watched as the hungry little beast lapped up the disgusting smelling paste-like substance. Then, Brian relaxed back against the cold stone wall, and just stared out into the night, listening to the happy gobbling noises made by the small kitten and the quiet rustle of the leaves blowing in the wind. His companion sat next to him, the slightly shaggy blond head leaning comfortably against Brian’s shoulder, not saying anything but reassuring him with his presence nonetheless.

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“Hey there, Studly,” Lars gushed as he came around the back side of the bleachers and found Brian waiting for him in ‘their’ spot. “You are a sight for sore eyes, Sugar. God, if I’d had to sit through even ten more minutes of Ms. Cromley’s history lecture, I would have slit my wrists. She has got to have the dullest speaking voice of any teacher ever. I’m half asleep by the second word out of her mouth every class. You’re so lucky you have Bartok instead.”

Lars flung himself into Brian’s lap, almost knocking him off the tentative perch he had on the edge of the large concrete block that secured the corner beam of the bleachers in place. Brian grunted and then instinctively wrapped his arms around Lars. However, since his boyfriend was almost as tall as he was, it wasn’t exactly comfortable for Brian to have Lars using him as a lounge chair. He tried to shift Lars’ weight over so he wasn’t crushing Brian’s thigh or pressing against his only recently healed rib cage. Unfortunately, as Brian shifted the other boy, he lost his tenuous balance and the both of them ended up sprawling ungracefully on the ground.

“Shit, Brian. Ow! You fucking dropped me on my shoulder,” Lars protested, rubbing the spot where he’d knocked against the concrete base block.

“Fuck, Lars, you’re not exactly light,” Brian complained, more irritated by Lars’ petulant complaints than by getting knocked to his ass on the hard ground.

They both gave the other a peeved look before getting up, dusting themselves off and then finding new seats on one of the horizontal beams nearby. Lars seemed to have been offended, either by Brian’s comment on his weight or maybe just because Brian had failed to keep them from falling over. He sat sulking for several minutes, playing with a small hole in the cuff of his jeans and ignoring Brian completely.

Despite how uncomfortable Brian was with apologies in general, especially in situations like this where he didn’t really think he’d done anything worth apologizing for, he felt like he had to make some effort to pacify the seething redhead. It was much easier to say he was sorry than to try to suck his own dick, and Brian wasn’t ready to give up that particular amenity any time soon. So, swallowing his pride, Brian stretched out his arm and delicately rested it around Lars’ shoulders, then tugged until the other boy’s body was snug up against his side.
“Hey, I’m sorry, okay,” Brian offered, wincing at how lame the apology sounded in his own mind. Lars looked up at him with lots of doubt evident in his look but, after apparently determining that Brian was sincere, he let a small smile reach his lips. Brian leaned in and deposited a small apologetic peck on Lars’ cheek. Lars’ smile got a little bit bigger. Finally, when Brian squeezed his shoulders again with evident affection, Lars relented and beamed a full-fledged forgiving smile up at Brian.

The conversation started up again almost immediately, as if the little spat hadn’t even happened, as Lars continued to complain about almost every one of his teachers. Brian sat like an obedient, just recently forgiven boyfriend, and nodded at everything Lars said without voicing many comments. But, while Lars prattled on about everything and nothing, Brian was thinking about how annoying this part of a relationship was and silently debating if it was worth it. Face it, Brian had never had any trouble getting his sexual needs gratified, so what exactly was the benefit of having a regular boyfriend. Especially if it meant listening to him babble on and on endlessly like this. . .

“Brian? Brian, are you listening to me at all?” Lars’ touchy tone of voice eventually got Brian’s full attention again. “Jeeze, sometimes I don’t know why I bother with you, Kinney.”

“Sorry,” Brian apologized again, feeling disgusted with himself for again uttering that meaningless phrase.

“I was going to share something with you, but if you can’t even pay attention to me this afternoon, I don’t know why I’d bother.”

“Lars, you’re starting to piss me off today. I said I was fucking sorry - about dropping you and about not listening - now get the fuck over it already,” Brian spat back, getting fed up with kowtowing to Lars’ cranky mood.

“Fine. You’re in quite a mood today,” Lars gave in, sensing that maybe he’d pushed Brian far enough for the time being. “Maybe this will cheer you up at bit, though,” Lars said, reaching into the pocket of his jeans jacket and pulling out something that was concealed in the palm of his fist.

Turning his hand over and opening it up, Brian saw that his boyfriend had a nicer fat well-rolled joint. Lars beamed at his with a gloating smile and pulled a cheapie lighter out of his other pocket, offering both to Brian.

“Shit, Lars. You shouldn’t be bringing pot to school. What the fuck are you thinking. If you get caught with that you’re going to get in so much fucking trouble,” Brian complained, looking around him to make doubly sure that no one else was around to see Lars’ little treat.

“Calm down, Bri. It’s just one little fucking joint. Nobody’s gonna know. Here, try it. It’s really good shit,” Lars lit the joint and sucked in a large lungful of the pungent smoke, holding his breath and grinning at Brian, then holding it out in for the other boy to try.

Brian looked at his watch and noted there was still another ten minutes left to their lunch period, then looked around yet again to make sure they were alone. It seemed safe enough. Hardly anyone ever came out here to the bleachers during lunch anyway. Lars giggled at Brian’s hesitation and again shoved the still smoking joint towards him. Against his better judgement, Brian accepted and took a nice long toke. Lars was right - this was some great shit - and Brian felt the effect of the medical grade marijuana almost immediately.

The joint was almost gone in less than five minutes. The boys were already at that giggly-stoned stage and were probably being just a tad too loud. Brian was holding the stub of the joint and
trying not to laugh while he flicked at the lighter with fumbling fingers, just when the sound of footsteps clanging on the metal risers of the bleachers startled caused both boys to turn around at the same time. At the first sign of movement coming around the far end of the bleachers, Brian tossed the rest of the joint as far away from him as he could and started to brush away any lingering crumbs off the front of his shirt and jeans. While Brian was busy with that, Lars surreptitiously slipped something out of the pocket of his jacket, unzipped the top of Brian’s back pack which had been sitting on the ground next to him and slipped whatever was in his hand inside.

“Kinney. Nielson. Shouldn’t you two be somewhere other than lurking out back here?” The voice of Ms. Saluka, the Assistant Vice Principal, rang out with displeasure as soon as she saw the two boys.

“We’ve got Lunch Period right now, Ms. Saluka,” Brian answered politely, standing up to face the woman who had found their little hideout.

Saluka looked at her watch, paused for only a moment or two and then put her hand up to the back of her ear. Right on cue the bell signalling the end of the period rang out. The forbidding looking woman turned and looked at the boys with a malicious grin.

“Not anymore, you don’t. So, you better get going or you’ll be late for your next class and I WON’T be giving you two any late passes.”

Lars stood up and joined Brian, both boys shuffling around the rather large woman to reach the pathway back up to the school’s main building. As Lars passed by the administrator, she wrinkled up her bulbous meaty nose and then grabbed ahold of the boy’s shoulder, stopping him before he could walk away. Leaning in closer to the lad, the woman sniffed at him, inhaling twice with big, audible whiffs. Then Ms. Saluka grinned evilly at the boy who was standing immobilized both from the solid grip she had on him as well as from the fear that bloomed inside him the second that grin lit up.

“Seems like you boys have been busy doing something other than chewing the fat back here,” Saluka cackled at them unpleasantly. “Both of you - My office! NOW!”

The two boys groaned in unison, knowing they’d been caught. Saluka gave Lars’ shoulder a little shove in the direction of the school and then gestured with her head to Brian to follow. Lars started trudging grudgingly away. Brian hefted up his backpack onto his shoulder, prepared to follow Lars to whatever doom awaited.

Which was when the still unzipped top flap of Brian’s backpack fell open and two notebooks along with a plastic zip-top baggie full of something leafy and green fell out and landed on the ground right at Ms. Saluka’s feet.

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Both Brian and Lars had been sitting on the too-small hard plastic chairs outside Ms. Saluka’s office for more than two hours now. Brian’s ass had fallen asleep a long time ago, so he just sat there quietly slumped dejectedly in the chair. Lars, on the other hand, was still antsy and kept fidgeting around constantly. If Brian hadn’t felt so utterly hopeless, he would have screamed at Lars to stop the fucking squirming and sit still. As it was, he just didn’t have the heart.

Finally a bustle at the door to the school’s main office drew Brian’s attention and broke up the monotony of the afternoon. A very tall, square-shouldered man with a mane of flaming red hair burst noisily through the doors. Before the School Secretary could even get a word out to greet the stranger, the big man blustered over to where Lars was sitting and started shaking the boy by the
"Lars! What the hell have you gotten into this time? I should NOT be getting phone calls from your principal, young man. We’ve talked about this..." the gigantic man roared, continuing to shake the much smaller young man. "Where’s this Ms. Saluka, huh? I’ll find out what the hell’s going on and you better NOT be in trouble again or you’re heading off to boarding school in Siberia."

Without waiting for a response from the boy who was apparently his son, the enraged red giant stormed past the secretary’s desk, headed for the offices in the back, looking like a Viking Raider of old storming off to invade Northumbria. The boy next to Brian slumped back into his chair, hiding his face with his hands. Brian didn’t have time to try and console his accomplice, though. Not more than a minute later, the office door opened again and this time an equally inflamed Jack Kinney strode through the entrance, glaring at Brian but otherwise ignoring the boy as he went up to the desk to talk to the secretary.

The secretary picked up the phone, pushed a button and announced that Mr. Kinney was there and then hung up. With a sympathetic little smile, the woman escorted Jack to the rearmost office. Jack didn’t say a word to Brian as he walked past.

“Fuck!” Brian whispered under his breath, more afraid of Jack’s silent anger than when he yelled and raged.

After about ten minutes, the intercom at the secretary’s desk buzzed. She picked up the phone, said a couple of words and then came around the desk and told Lars to follow her. Lars disappeared into the office with the two angry fathers. Brian could hear shouting coming through the poorly-insulated walls, but couldn’t make out any words. It didn’t sound at all good, though. After a good twenty minutes or so of the semi-muted yelling, the office door slammed open and the big ginger behemoth exploded out of the small space, towing a shell-shocked Lars behind him. Neither the red giant nor the young man even looked at Brian where he was waiting for his turn at the chopping block.

As soon as the intercom buzzed again, Brian stood up, not bothering to wait to be told that he was next. He shuffled resignedly towards the still-open office door and, with a huge sigh, squared his shoulders before walking inside. Ms. Saluka gestured silently for him to take a seat in the one unoccupied chair in front of her desk. Brian seated himself and then looked sideways at his father, trying to gauge just how bad this was going to end. Jack was sitting stock still in the other visitor’s chair. His face was blotchy red and the big purple veins in his temples were pulsing visibly. His lips were pressed together into a thin white line. His gaze was locked on a random picture on the wall behind Saluka’s desk. Obviously, this situation was beyond the realm of even possibly ending in some way that didn’t involve Brian’s blood.

“Brian, I’ve informed your father of what happened today out behind the athletic bleachers. You were caught red handed with this," Saluka used her pen to poke at the very full baggie of pot that was sitting on her desk in evidence of his crime. “So, do you want to explain what exactly you were doing with more than an ounce of pot on school grounds? And, before you answer, keep in mind that this large a quantity is generally considered evidence of intent to deal, so your response better be good.”

Brian knew he was screwed and there was little chance of him talking his way out this time, but he had to try.

Putting on his best Kinney charm and smiling at the old bat, he gave it his best shot, “would you believe me if I said it wasn’t mine?”
“Frankly, no,” Saluka returned with a sorry shake of her jowly face. “Your friend Lars has already confessed to us that you offered to sell him some of this and that, just to seal the deal, you two were smoking a sample joint.”

“What?” Brian was temporarily stunned by this proclamation. “Lars told you what?”

“You heard me, Brian,” Ms. Saluka scoffed at what she perceived at his act of innocence. “Now, don’t waste my time denying it. Just tell me what you have to say for yourself and why I shouldn’t expel you.”

A thousand thoughts were rushing through Brian’s brain all at the same time creating a virtual cacophony of words and images in his mind. He heard over and over again that woman telling him that Lars had ratted him out. Majorly! And it wasn’t fucking true! Brian didn’t even know that baggie of pot existed before he saw it landing on the ground. All he’d done was take a few hits off a joint that Lars had brought with him. That baggie had to belong to Lars. Brian was still reeling over the weight of the lies that his BOYFRIEND must have told to this woman.

Lars fucking set him up!

Brian tried again, knowing all the time it was futile. “It’s not fucking mine. I swear.”

“Then how do you explain it turning up in YOUR backpack?”

“Somebody put it there to set me up,” Brian answered, truthfully, and then clamping his mouth closed before the words that would explain everything but betray his friend could escape.

“Sorry. That’s not good enough, Brian,” Ms. Saluka concluded, sitting forward in her chair, all ready to move on to the verdict portion of this kangaroo court. “And, since you’re not giving me any kind of reasonable alternate explanation, I have no option but to suspend you. However, since this is your first offence, I will not report this matter to the police. I’ve spoken with your father, here, and he assures me that you won’t be repeating this behavior. So, provided that I get a sincere letter of apology, admitting your mistakes and explaining how you intend to turn your life around, I will let you return to school in two weeks. But you will still have ongoing after-school detention for the rest of the semester. I’ll talk to Coach Stephens about whether or not you’ll be allowed to continue playing on the soccer team this fall.”

“But, Ms. Saluka . . .” Brian wanted to protest. He wanted to scream and yell and point the finger at Lars. He wanted life to be fair. All his expostulations died before they could be voiced, though. Brian Kinney already understood that life wasn’t even remotely fair. And, it didn’t really matter what he said. It wouldn’t help him out. Nobody would believe him anyway. He wasn’t going to rat Lars out when he knew it wouldn’t change anything. No matter how betrayed he felt by what Lars had done, he would never do anything to hurt the boy he’d come to care about so much.

Brian was nothing if not loyal. He simply refused to squeal on Lars no matter how much trouble he got into for holding his tongue. And, somewhere deep inside, Brian still harbored just a tiny spark of hope that maybe Lars hadn’t completely abandoned him. Maybe, somehow, Lars would find the balls to step up and tell the truth. Brian had actually confessed to Lars about Jack. Lars had to know what Jack would do to him because of this. Brian couldn’t believe that Lars would lie and then just sit back and let Brian take all the blame. Lars was his fucking boyfriend, after all. He wouldn’t back stab Brian like that. He wouldn’t leave Brian to Jack’s mercy.

Would he?

The rest of the meeting in the Vice Principal’s office went by in a blur. Brian was no longer
focusing on the terms of his sentence or his father’s assurances to Ms. Saluka that Brian would be ‘punished’ for his actions. It wasn’t worth wasting his breath trying to explain and he really didn’t want to think about what was going to happen to him next. Brian just retreated inside himself and mentally hunkered down.

Jack pushed his son out of the school office and roughly guided him towards the parking lot. He shoved Brian into the Monte Carlo, ordering the boy to drive straight home. Brian knew that Jack was following right behind him the whole way. He parked his car in its usual spot and calmly walked up the driveway, Jack following behind him, all the scenery drifting by in a dark haze. As soon as he got into the kitchen, Brian stopped and looked back at Jack, passively waiting for instructions as to where his punishment would take place.

“Basement!” Jack ordered, knocking Brian’s head to the side with a glancing blow from the back of his hand.

The older man turned to the refrigerator and pulled out a beer before following a mute Brian down the stairs into the damp blackness of the basement. Brian didn’t say a word. He didn’t even bother thinking about trying to escape. He knew that any resistance would only make things worse. He walked right past the sobbing blond youth waiting by the bottom step. Justin had never been able to stop the pain. Nothing mattered. Nothing could stop the inevitable.

Even that one last small spark of hope - the withering belief that Lars, his boyfriend, his companion and ally, would come clean and rescue him at the last minute - that dying trust he tried to believe in, gave out right before he passed out from the pain of Jack’s brutal assault.

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Chapter 10 - Aftermath.

Justin was frantic. This was by far the angriest he’d ever seen Jack Kinney. Brian had passed out several minutes ago but Jack’s wrath was still too intense to let him stop. The stupid brute was so blind with hatred, he probably didn’t even notice that Brian was unconscious and no longer trying to defend himself against the rain of kicks and fists. Which meant that there was nothing and no one left to stop Jack. Justin was convinced that this time the monster was finally going to go too far - unless, that is, Justin could do something to make him stop.

Unfortunately, yelling and screaming at the bastard was getting Justin nowhere, since Jack couldn’t see or hear him. If only Justin’s fists could connect when he tried to strike back at the cretin. Justin would give anything - any-fucking-thing - to be able to let Jack have even a small taste of the abuse he was so fond of dishing out to his son. However, every punch Justin threw just went straight through the man as if he was the one that was incorporeal.

Jack took the last swig off the bottle of beer he’d brought down with him and then let loose one more strong kick to Brian’s body. Justin swore that he heard the snapping of a bone. Fuck! He had to do something . . . but what? If only somebody other than Brian could see or hear him!

Jessie! Justin didn’t know how a six year old was going to help but it was the only hope he had at that point. Justin knelt down and caressed Brian’s temple then left a quick kiss on the unresponsive cheek before he focused his mind on his little nephew and popped off to get whatever help he could.

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"Jessie! Jessie, I need your help," Justin cried out as soon as he materialized in the little boy's room.

Jessie was completely startled by the sudden appearance of his guardian angel. Justin's shouting and panicky demeanor didn't help any. The blond-haired child started to back away from the noisy apparition. Justin didn't have time to worry about the kid's apprehensions, though. He knew Brian didn't have long. Justin had to get Jessie's help and it had to happen as fast as possible.

"I'm sorry if I startled you, Jessie. I really, really need your help and I need it right away. My friend, Brian, is hurt really badly. I need you to make a phone call for me to get help sent to his house immediately. Can you please do that for me, Jessie?"

"I'm not supposed to use the phone without Poppa's permission," Jessie said while shaking his head and taking another step back away from Justin.

"I know, Jessie, and normally I'd say that's a great rule but this is an emergency. If you don't help
me, Brian might not make it. I need you to call 911 and tell them to go to Brian's house. Please, Jessie?

"We talked about '911' in school," Jessie replied informatively. "My teacher, Ms. McDowell, said that you should only call 911 when it's a real 'mergency, like if there's a fire or you need the police to catch a bad guy or if your mommy gets sick and there's nobody else at home. Then the 911 people will send a policeman or a fireman to save you. Is this that kinda 'mergency?"

"Yes! It's that kind of an emergency. Brian needs a doctor right away. Please, Jessie, we have to call now or it might be too late."

"Kay," Jessie agreed then took Justin's hand and led him down the hall to his father's study where an extension phone was set up on a large desk. "What should I say?"

"Let's put the phone on speaker so I can hear too and then I'll be able to tell you what to say as we go. How's that sound, Buddy?"

Justin pointed out the right button for Jessie to push to open the phone line and use the speaker function. The dial tone rang out loudly. Justin patted Jessie on the shoulder to show his approval.

"Okay. Now, all you have to do is push the buttons: 9-1-1. When the operator answers, you just tell them there's a boy who's hurt and needs medical help okay. This piece of paper has Brian's home address on it," Justin pulled a discarded envelope that had the Kinney’s address printed on the front out of his pocket and handed it to the boy. "You tell them this address when they ask for it. Think you can do that for me?"

"Sure," Jessie answered but didn't sound very confident.

The small child hesitantly pushed the number buttons - 911- and then looked up at Justin for more reassurance.

"911 Emergency Services. What is the nature of your emergency," a clear woman's voice answered, the words amplified through the speakerphone.

"Go on, Jessie," Justin prompted when the boy looked like he was going to run away. "Just say what I told you."

"Um . . . Hello. There's a boy who's hurt and needs to get a doctor, please," the child stated, his voice shaky and barely above a whisper.

"I'm sorry, Sir. I can barely hear you. Could you please speak up?"

"There's a boy who's hurt real bad. You need to get him a doctor," this time Jessie yelled at double volume.

"You said that someone's hurt? Is this person there at the same location where you're calling from?" The operator questioned.

"No. He's at his own house."

"Do you know the address where the injured person is located?"

Justin nodded and pushed the piece of paper with the address on it closer to Jessie. "Yes, ma'am. The address is: 347 'S' 'E' . . . " the boy hesitated at the strange street name.
"Xanadu," Justin prompted.

"X-and-u Street," Jessie stumbled a little over the name but he'd done his best.

"Did you say 'Xanadu Street'?' The operator repeated, seeking clarification.

Jessie saw Justin nodding his head indicating he should say 'Yes'. "Yes, ma'am, that's the name."

"And the name of the injured person?"

"Tell her his name is Brian Kinney," Justin directed and Jessie parroted the name off to the operator.

"Do you know what type of injury this is?"

"Type of 'endergy?" Jessie questioned, unsure what the lady was asking.

"What happened to Brian? Do you know how badly he's hurt?" The kindly operator tried again.

"He's hurt real, real bad, I think," Jessie offered.

"Tell her that Brian is unconscious and may have a broken bone or two," Justin responded, trying to explain what he'd seen in a simple way that the child would understand.

"Brian's un . . . uncon . . . Unconscience," Jessie stuttered over the big word but plowed on anyway. "He's got broke bones, too. Please help him fast."

"We'll send help as quickly as we can, don't worry. Now, honey, can you tell me your name," the operator asked, her voice becoming slightly condescending now that she was pretty sure she was talking to a child.

"My name's Jessie Taylor."

"Okay, Jessie. How old are you, honey?"

"I'm five and three-quarters," the boy answered proudly. "My birthday is right after Christmas. I'll be six years old then."

"All right, Jessie. I'm going to send a message to our dispatcher so we can get help to your friend as fast as possible. Can you just stay on the phone until I'm done in case I need to ask you a few more questions?"

"Um . . . It's almost dinner time. I gotta go, lady. You just send Brian some help, okay? Bye bye!" Jessie pushed the speaker button again, effectively cutting the call short, and then turned to Justin. "Was that okay, Justin? Did I do good?"

"You were great, Jess," Justin felt the relief flooding through him, knowing that help was finally on its way to Brian. "Thank you, Jessie. You were very brave making that call and I'm so proud of how well you answered all those questions. You did wonderfully!"

Jessie's pale plump cheeks blushed a rosy pink at the praise from his friend. Justin bent over and hugged the child to show just how thankful he really was. Jessie hugged back with all the strength in his thin little arms. They might have stayed like that for a few more minutes, but their hug was interrupted by the loud ringing of the phone. They could hear Four, who had been putting around in the main part of the house, picking up the phone and saying 'Hello?'. Less than two minutes later, Four was jogging down the hallway, pushing open the door to the study and staring down at
his son with disapproval evident on his face.

“Yes, my son Jessie is here . . . Hold on a second.” Four said to whoever was on the phone before grabbing a hold of the little boy’s arm and leading him over to the sofa in the corner of the room. “Jessie, there’s a 911 operator on the phone. She said you called her about some boy that’s hurt? Why did you do that? Tell me what’s going on, son.”

“It was a ‘mergency, Poppa. Brian’s hurt real bad and needs a doctor. I called the 911 people so they would know to send help. That’s what our teacher said we should do if there was a ‘mergency,” Jessie explained to his father, proudly parading all the knowledge he’d gained about 911 in his kindergarten class.

“Who is this ‘Brian’? You don’t know anyone named Brian. And, how do you know he’s hurt,” Four was still confused by why his son was acting like this.

“His name is Brian Kinney. I don’t know him but my friend does and he asked me to call for him since the 911 people wouldn’t be able to hear him,” Jessie explained, looking over at Justin to see if his explanation was correct, and smiling back when Justin smiled and nodded at him.

“What friend? Who was it that asked you to call 911, son?”

“Justin,” the boy answered, unaware how odd his response would sound. “Justin said Brian is his friend and he needed to get him a doctor right away, but since nobody other than me can hear him, he needed my help.”

“J-J-Jus-Justin?” Four stuttered, the haunting name coming at him out of the blue.

“Yeah, Uncle Justin. He said you were his baby brother, so that makes him my uncle. Just like Uncle Gil and Uncle Raphe, right?” Jessie answered honestly, confused by his father’s strange reaction to hearing Justin’s name.

“But . . . but . . . Jessie, honey, your Uncle Justin died years before you were born,” Four tried to explain to his son why it was impossible that he’d spoken with that particular uncle just today. “You couldn’t have talked with Justin today, son. It’s just not possible.”

“I know that he’s ‘apposed to be dead - Justin told me all about it. He said he borrowed your car and got in an accident and that’s how he died. He said it wasn’t scary or anything. He just woke up the next day and knew he wasn’t alive. But, he still comes and sees me and talks to me and helps me when I get scared or lost or hurt. Justin’s real nice to me, Poppa.” Jessie replied, not understanding at all why his father was so upset about him talking to one of his Uncles.

Four, on the other hand, was completely floored by the concept of his five year old son apparently talking to his dead brother. He knew for a fact that nobody had ever told Jessie about the circumstances surrounding Justin’s death - it was still a painful subject in their family and because of that they rarely ever spoke about Justin. He didn’t think that Jessie had even heard Justin’s name before. So, how was it that the child not only knew about Justin but even had the facts about how he’d died? It didn’t seem possible.

“Jessie, honey, can you tell me what your friend, Justin, looks like,” Four asked, holding his breath to see what his son would say.

“He’s real pretty, Poppa. He has bright yellow hair, just like mine, and big really blue eyes. Justin always smiles a lot, too. His smile makes me feel warm inside.”

“Shit . . .” Four couldn’t help but swear at the answer his son provided - the boy’s description fit
his brother Justin to a ‘T’. “Jessie, how long have you been talking to Justin?”

“Like forever. Justin has always been there, even when I was just a baby. We talk all the time,” Jessie looked over at where Justin was waiting by the study door. “Justin, why can’t Poppa see you and talk to you?”

“I really don’t know why your Poppa can’t see me, sweetie,” Justin answered as truthfully as he could. “For some reason, you and Brian are the only people who can see me or hear me. That’s why I needed your help to make the 911 call for Brian.”

“Poppa, Justin says he doesn’t know why you can’t see him, but that’s why he needed my help. The 911 people wouldn’t have been able to hear him either and he needs to get help to Brian. The 911 people did help him, didn’t they?”

“Hold on a minute, son,” Four said, finally remembering that he was still holding the phone with the 911 operator waiting for him. “Hello, I’m sorry I kept you on hold . . . Yes, I spoke to my son. He says that this Brian is really hurt . . . No, I don’t think he’s making it up. Jessie’s a very responsible boy. I believe that he believes this is a real emergency and he’s convinced that the boy is badly hurt . . . Okay. Thank you and I appreciate you calling me back to tell me about this . . . Alright. Thanks.”

Four hit the button that would disconnect the call and set the phone down. He reached over and pulled his son into a hug, looking around the room as if to try to discern where the elusive Uncle Justin was hiding. Jessie hugged his father back with all the exuberance of a not-quite-six year old.

“The operator said they’d already sent out the police and an ambulance to help your friend, Brian,” Four announced to both his son and the room at large. “They might already be there. You did a good thing, Jessie, by calling 911 like that. And, you tell your Uncle Justin that . . . that I love him and miss him a lot.”

“Silly, Poppa,” Jessie laughed. “You just told him yourself already. Bye, Justin. I hope your friend Brian is okay. See ya!” Jessie waved goodbye to the apparition in the corner as Justin disappeared.

“Uncle Justin is off to go see that Brian’s okay, Poppa,” Jessie said as he cuddled closer to his father’s strong chest. “He said to tell you that he loves you too!”

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“Brian? Brian Kinney! Why didn’t you call and tell me you were here in the hospital, Honey,” Debbie Novotny insisted as she barged through the door of Brian’s hospital room with Michael traipsing along behind.

Brian, who’d been dozing until his room was invaded by the loud-mouthed Novotny clan, rubbed his eyes and turned to look in the direction of the bellowing. He managed to stifle the groan he felt rising out of his gut at the prospect of having to deal with his ‘guests’. However, since it was already too late to run and hide, Brian knew he’d just have to make the best of things and let himself be coddled a bit by his surrogate mom and his whiny best friend.

“Hey, Deb. Mikey. How did you two manage to find me?” Brian asked with full-on snarkiness.

“Well, it’s not because you took the time to call and tell us what happened, that’s for sure,” Deb replied, just as snarkily as Brian.

“I was worried when you hadn’t been at school all week, so I went over to your house this afternoon right after school,” Michael began explaining as he moved around to the far side of the
bed and Debbie usurped the spot on the other side. “Your mother told me you’d been suspended from school? What the hell is that all about, Brian?”

“Just another pile of shit heaped on my life, Mikey. Nothing new,” Brian groused without giving up any real information - he really didn’t want to talk about any of the incidents that had happened in the past week. All Brian wanted was to forget about everything.

“But, how would YOU get suspended, Brian? You mom said you got caught with drugs on school property? That’s not like you, Bri . . . I mean you’re the one who gave me the lecture about never bringing drugs to school. Why would you break your own rules like that? It’s just not like you Brian. I don’t believe it for a second.” Mikey wasn’t about to let his best friend off the hook for something he was sure was completely out of character for Brian.

“Mikey, I really don’t want to get into it. Just . . . “

“I agree with Michael, Brian. I want an explanation too. That just doesn’t sound like something you’d do - not that you’ wouldn’t take a toke now and then, but I thought you were way too smart to get caught with drugs on school grounds,” Debbie insisted, her fists planted firmly on her ample hips and her face displaying it’s usual stubborn demeanor.

“Unnnhh, Deb, can’t we just talk about something else. I don’t want to think about all that shit,” Brian tried to divert his guests onto any other line of inquiry, although he knew it was probably futile.

“Fine, if you don’t want to tell me about what happened at school, then how about you explain why you’re lying here in the hospital? I mean, look at you - you’re one big fucking bruise all over. And, if that cast means what I think it means you’ve got a fucking broken arm too? What the hell happened to you, Honey?” Debbie moved on to a topic she knew Brian would want to discuss even less than the school suspension.

“I’ll be alright. They’re letting me out of here in a day or two,” Brian answered evasively.

“Not good enough, Brian,” Debbie lamented, pointing a long, bright red fingernail at her pseudo-son.

“Brian, you do look really bad . . .” Michael looked like he was about to start crying over Brian’s obvious injuries and he didn’t even know the half of it.

“I’m fine, Mikey. I promise, so stop snivelling all over the clean hospital sheets,” Brian said, starting to lose his temper at all the mollycoddling and sympathetic looks from both Novotny’s. However, the sad big brown puppy-dog eyes that Michael leveled at his friend didn’t let up even for a moment and Brian realized he was going to have to give them something in order to shut up the Novotny’s. “Really, it’s not as bad as it looks.”

“Yeah, I’ll believe that just as soon as I buy Joan’s explanation that you just had another little ‘accident’,” Debbie added with enough sarcasm in her tone to make your hair curl. “Your choice, kiddo - you can start with the school suspension or the ‘accident’ but either way, I’m not leaving without a full account of how you ended up here.”

“Shit,” Brian mumbled, knowing that he was caught. “Fine. You want to know what happened? Lars and I got caught with a baggie full of pot - that’s what happened. That fucking bitch, Ms. Saluka, called our parents and, of course, Jack came down to school to find out how I fucked up this time. Let’s just say Jack was rather disappointed by my behavior and promised the Vice-Principal that he’d make sure I was punished for my actions. Saluka was kind enough not to report
us to the police but she did suspend me for two weeks and I have to do after school detention for the rest of the semester. I might also get kicked off the soccer team unless Coach Stephens takes pity on me. That’s what the fuck happened. Happy now?”

“Fuck, Brian,” Michael whined. “What the hell were you and your boyfriend doing with pot at school? You would never be stupid enough to bring that shit with you to school . . . Fucking Lars - this has to be his fault, isn’t it?”

“It doesn’t fucking matter who’s fault it was, Mikey. I’m not going to rat anybody out to Saluka. She thinks the drugs were mine and even though I told her they didn’t belong to me, she wouldn’t believe me, so what the fuck does it matter anyway,” Brian offered dejectedly, turning away so he didn’t have to look at Mikey’s angry countenance.

“Fuck! I knew it - Fucking Lars! It’s all that asshole’s fault. They were HIS drugs, weren’t they, Brian?” Brian sat mutely, unwilling to admit anything and yet also unwilling to lie to his friends. “Well, I don’t care if he is your boyfriend, Brian. I’m not going to let him get away with this.”

“There’s nothing you can do, Mikey, so just let it drop, okay,” Brian insisted, still not meeting either Michael or Debbie’s eyes. “Besides, he’s not my boyfriend. I don’t do boyfriends anymore, Mikey. You can’t fucking trust them. The only person you can rely on is yourself. Everyone else will just use you and then fuck you over. I don’t need that kind of shit.”

Brian refused to discuss the matter any further, sitting there staring into space, completely unresponsive to anything else Michael or Debbie said. He figured he’d already said too much. It didn’t make things any better. Rehashing everything just made you feel bad all over again. Brian preferred to just forget about everything and move on. He’d learn from his mistakes and wouldn’t fall for Lars’ type again. Enough said. Time to move on. Debbie eventually got the point and herded her son out of the hospital room, with promises to Brian to come by again the next day with some real food.

Brian finally let himself relax back into the comfort of his bed, trying without success to move without agitating his broken ribs or his broken wrist or aggravating any of the hundreds of bruised spots that swarmed over his body. From the shadows at the far end of the room, a familiar blond teen emerged and moved over towards the patient. Justin helped Brian get settled comfortably in bed, then climbed up next to his charge and wrapped his arms around the quietly sobbing Brian. The dispirited young man who refused to let anyone see his pain, finally let go and allowed himself to be consoled by the only person he knew he could always trust.

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“Get your ass out here, Lars!” Michael yelled in accompaniment to his fist pounding on the front door of Lars’ house.

“What the fuck bug got up your ass, Novotny?” Lars demanded as he pulled open the door and then quickly pulled it closed behind him. “You’re gonna get the whole neighborhood out here if you don’t shut the hell up.”

“I don’t give a shit who hears me, you little asswipe. What the hell did you do to Brian, huh? I want to hear exactly how you think you can get away with betraying him and letting everyone think that HE would be stupid enough to bring drugs onto school property,” Michael insisted, using his index finger to make his point by jabbing it into the other boy’s chest repeatedly.

“I didn’t do anything to Brian. We got caught smoking a joint behind the bleachers at school, is all. I didn’t force him to take a toke, so lay the fuck off me already,” Lars’ voice had lowered to a
furious hissing whisper so as to keep the argument as private as possible.

“And what about the fucking baggie full of pot, huh? How exactly did that turn up in Brian’s backpack?”

“Shhhhh!” Lars desperately tried to get Michael to lower his voice so that the whole house didn’t hear their topic of conversation. “Yeah, all right, the pot was mine, but I couldn’t get caught with it again. I’ve been in trouble ‘cause of drugs before, okay. My dad’s ready to fucking send me off to some military school. I didn’t want to fuck everything up. So, I sorta... I hid the stash in Brian’s bag. I didn’t think he’d get in trouble for it. But, the fucking bag wasn’t zipped up and the pot fell out right at Saluka’s feet. My father was fucking insane, man. He was yelling and screaming at me and throwing shit in Saluka’s office. I didn’t know what the hell else to do. I didn’t actually say it was Brian’s fault, I just sat there and let them think it was Brian’s. I didn’t mean for him to get suspended. It’s only for a couple of weeks though - No big deal, right?” Lars’ excuse sounded lame even to his own ears.

“No big deal for you!” Michael was so incensed he could barely get out the words. “Brian’s in the fucking hospital, you jerk. You knew about his dad, didn’t you? Well, because of your fucking betrayal, Jack Kinney beat the shit out of Brian. He’s been in the hospital all week because of you. He’s got a fucking broken arm and god knows what else is broken. All because you fucking didn’t stand up and take the blame for what YOU did.”

“Shit! I didn’t think...” Lars started trying to make more excuses, but Michael wasn’t about to let him off the hook no matter what he said.

“No, you didn’t think, you stupid fuck! Everyone knows how horrible Jack is to Brian. But, you didn’t care, did you. You threw Brian to the dogs to save your own skinny ass. Well, fine, if that’s how you want things. Don’t worry, Brian’s too loyal to ever rat on you even though he’s taking the brunt of the punishment. But, just hear this, I don’t EVER want to see you near Brian again. You hear me! You fucking leave him alone from now on. If I ever see you so much as talking to Brian again, I’ll get Spike and Victor, the two biggest fucking leather daddies on Liberty Avenue, to come and give you a bit of personal attention.”

“But, Michael... You can’t keep me away from Brian. You don’t have the right...”

“Yeah, I do have the right. You’re the one who doesn’t have the right to call Brian your friend anymore. So, just leave him the fuck alone or you’ll end up in the hospital too, asshole.” Michael spat out with enough assurance that even Lars wasn’t about to doubt him.

“Remember, you don’t come near Brian or me or the Liberty Diner - EVER!”

Michael turned and stomped off down the sidewalk, leaving Lars standing on his front porch with his mouth hanging open in amazement at the balls little Mikey Novotny had grown.
Chapter Notes

Oops - Somehow this chapter got posted out of order the first time around. I've moved it back to it's correct position, but if you thought the story didn't make sense the last time you read it this might be why. Sorry, folks. TAG

Chapter 11 - Celebration.

Justin was glad that he didn’t feel the cold. He didn’t know how Brian had managed to sit around on the frozen ground in the shadows of the old mausoleum for close to an hour now. At least the narrow space between the marble wall and the line of hedges was relatively free of snow. Still, Brian had to be just about frozen solid by this point - it was well below freezing out here. However, Brian seemed to be so captivated by the antics of little Joselito that he didn’t even notice the frigid temperatures.

Justin had been dogging Brian’s steps all day. Not only was it the day before Christmas - a time that, for the Kinney clan, was always stressful and sometimes dangerous - but Justin had also experienced one of his premonitions about Brian first thing this morning. He wasn’t about to leave Brian alone with all these ominous signs. So, when Brian had escaped earlier in the morning from the not-so-joyous holiday atmosphere of the Kinney house, Justin had been there right on his charge’s heels. Brian ignored his tail, just like he always did.

Brian obviously had nowhere in particular he needed to be, since he just wandered down to Liberty Avenue, walking around aimlessly and looking into the brightly lit shop windows all dressed in their holiday finery. Brian just wanted to be out of the house and as far away from his father’s usual pre-holiday rant about how Christmas was just a made-up holiday, invented by rich business owners, solely to bilk working men out of their hard-earned money by convincing them they had to buy tons of useless crap. Brian had heard it all a million times before. He wasn’t about to stick around until later in the day, after Jack had been sufficiently lubricated with alcohol, to start emphasizing his dislike of holidays with his fists.

Brian had eventually wandered into a little corner market, bought himself a cup of hot coffee to hold off the chill, and then been distracted by a counter-top display of Christmas-themed pet toys. Brian had never bought a Christmas present for anyone in his life - the practice having been forbidden by Jack before Brian had even been born. Even the little holiday crafts he’d made as a child in school had been summarily torn up and thrown away as soon as he brought them home. The closest he ever got to buying someone a present was when he timorously bought Debbie a bouquet of flowers every year on Mother’s Day. So, he had no idea why he was staring at a display of ridiculous green and red cat toys. He knew that it was only a silly waste of money.

Still, Brian hadn’t been by to check on Joselito for more than a week. Ever since he’d stashed the cat’s box in the old cemetery, he’d been trying to bring the little guy some food as often as possible. He figured he was due for another visit. So, he made a slight detour into the pet food section, picked out a small bag of crunchy food and two cans of that wet stinking gloop that the cat seemed to think was wonderful and then, on a whim, grabbed one of the stupid little cat toys that were stuffed with catnip.
Which explained why Justin had been leaning against the marble wall of the mausoleum for almost an hour in the middle of December and watching Brian play with a cat. The little kitten was simply thrilled with all his holiday gifts. He’d scarfed down the disgusting pasty canned food in less than five minutes. Then, the little scamp had crawled up into Brian’s warm lap and proceeded to use the boy as a bathing platform. As soon as all necessary ablutions were complete, the furry little guy had hopped down, and started nosing at the plastic shopping bag waiting by Brian’s feet. Clearly, something inside that bag had grabbed the kitten’s attention as soon as his belly was full. Grumbling about how he must have been crazy for wasting his money, Brian nonetheless dug out the stuffed mouse dressed in ludicrous green trousers and a red and white striped santa hat with a bell on the end. Joselito was instantly delighted by the silly little thing and he stretched out one thin long paw and batted it out of Brian’s hand before it was even all the way out of the packaging.

The kitty proceeded to spend the next half hour, chasing after the thrilling little toy, batting it around, rolling all over it, trying to chew the little bell off and sundry other tomfoolery that had both Brian and Justin giggling uncontrollably. In the end, Jose settled on a game that Brian dubbed ‘The Tabby Retriever Game’ - where Brian would throw the toy, Joselito would run after it and, after batting it around sufficiently to subdue the dangerous little mouse, would then bring it back to his person to have it thrown again. Brian was proud that his little furry buddy seemed to be so damned smart that he could out retrieve any dog. Justin was merely glad to see his boy laughing and having such innocent fun for once in his life. It was probably the first time in his life that Brian had had cause to laugh at anything holiday related.

Eventually, though, little Jose was worn out and decided it was time to curl up on Brian’s thigh for a nap. Brian sat there letting his fingers comb through the soft warm fur, listening to the cat’s happy purring and marvelling at the amount of warmth such a little body could produce. It was truly the most peaceful moment Brian had experienced in a long, long time. When the kitten finally got up, stretched and then daintily padded over to his travel box shelter, curling up into a tight little ball underneath a corner of the old blanket inside, Brian got up himself. He stamped his feet a couple times to get the blood flowing back into his cold stiff extremities, put a couple dollar bills under the big rock on top of the shelter - a small bribe to the elderly cemetery groundskeeper that ensured he wouldn’t move the cat’s home - and then headed out to find some other distraction.

By this time it was late enough in the morning that it wouldn’t be impolite to make an appearance at the Novotny home. Brian trotted over there, trying to warm himself up with a little exercise after sitting still on the cold ground for so long. He made it to the gaudily decorated and gayly lit up little house in less than fifteen minutes, a little out of breath but feeling toasty warm by that point. He couldn’t help scoffing a little bit as he passed by the miniature elves that were lined up along the sidewalk, each of whom bent over and pulled his little elf pants down, mooning all passers-by every five minutes or so. Leave it to Debbie to make even a solemn holiday like Christmas completely tacky.

Knocking lightly on the door but not waiting for permission to enter, Brian let himself in and hung up his coat on the rack in the entranceway. He caught a glimpse of red as Debbie leaned around the wall of the kitchen to see who’d come in, yelling ‘Merry Christmas, Honey’ in her most jovial yawp as soon as she saw Brian. This merry greeting was followed only seconds later by a thunderous cacophony as Michael came charging down the staircase to see who had arrived. Within only moments, Brian found himself enveloped by jolliness as both Deb and Mikey greeted him with repeated hugs, wet and lipsticky kisses and all sorts of mushy, holiday-inspired sentiments.

“Brian, Brian,” Michael clamored to wrest his friend’s sole attention away from his meddlesome mother, eventually dragging Brian off beyond where Debbie could hear. “Brian, guess what? Uncle Vic’s coming to spend the weekend here. Isn’t that great!” Michael spouted his news with
enthusiasm, knowing that his friend would be pleased by Vic’s visit since they’d hit it off whenever the older man had been able to stop by before. “I’ve got the whole weekend planned, Brian. I thought that maybe Vic could take us to that new club, Babylon, you know the one with all the hot guys lined up around the block every night? I know Vic will let us go with him. It’ll be so great. We can dance and watch guys and you can ‘get your needs met,’” Michael laughed as he tried to sound like his hero, Brian, using the phrase. “What do you say, Brian. Won’t it be great?”

“Yeah, whatever, Mikey,” Brian rolled his eyes, trying not to completely offend his friend by how lame the other boy sounded. The fact was, however, that Brian had already been to Babylon a number of times on his own and really didn’t need his little pal Mikey’s uncle to get him into any club.

“Michael. Brian. Come in here you two and help me get this feast in the oven so we can eat sometime before New Year’s,” Deb’s demand interrupted Michael’s overly-eager fawning and compulsive planning before it got to be too much for Brian.

As the two boys dawdled off to the kitchen, the aroma of roasting meat, nutmeg, fresh-baked bread and the warmth spreading out through the whole house from the busy kitchen reminded Brian once again why he’d rather be here dealing with Michael’s excessive enthusiasm any day as opposed to the dreary emptiness that awaited him at home. Granted, Jack had been on his best behavior lately and things at the Kinney house had been rather subdued since Brian’s last visit to the hospital, so the youth wasn’t quite as afraid of being there as he usually was at Christmas, but it still wasn’t a fun place. And, while Jack had been keeping his fists to himself, he hadn’t paused lashing out at Brian with his words for even a minute.

Jack’s last outburst had resulted in major repercussions. The fact that someone had called the cops this time meant that Jack wasn’t able to get off scott free and Joanie hadn’t been able to sweep this ‘incident’ under the rug like she normally would have. Brian himself hadn’t witnessed the melee, since he’d been unconscious until waking up in the hospital a day later, but apparently the police had stormed into the Kinney house, found Joan passed out upstairs and Jack starting into his second six-pack of beer while looming over Brian’s huddled and battered form lying on the basement floor.

Brian had been rushed to the hospital in an ambulance while Ma and Pa Kinney were escorted to the local lockup for the night. However, since Brian was seventeen - almost eighteen - and had refused to talk to the police or press assault charges, Joan was released as soon as she had sobered up and Jack was eventually let out as well. Social Services had sent some ineffectual fuck out to talk to the family a couple of times since then, but Brian knew nothing would really change. However, for the moment at least, Jack was scared enough that he limited himself to hitting Brian only with painful words.

So, on top of the fact that the house was dreary and undecorated, Brian felt even more unwelcome at home than usual. He was more than grateful that he could escape, even if for just a few hours, into the bright, happy camaraderie of the Novotny house. Debbie and Michael provided Brian with the emotional shelter he needed. Michael also supplied him with all the flattery and adulation Brian needed to prop up his sometimes almost non-existent self-esteem. All the attention they gave Brian made him feel important for the first time in his weary life and he so desperately needed that life-affirming recognition.

Of course, it meant that Brian had to play his part by allowing the duo to practically suffocate him with their caring and nurturing. Brian allowed Michael’s hero worship and even sometimes encouraged it. If Mikey needed someone to look up to, Brian was more than happy to fill that role, especially if it meant he got to share the safe haven of Debbie’s home. And, most of the time,
Brian didn’t mind subjecting himself to Debbie’s mother-hen attitude, either. He rather liked the image Deb had of him as the bad little boy that she was going to take care of and ‘save’. So, Brian acted out his role as the arrogant, worldly, Bad Boy, Michael poured on his adoration and got to live vicariously through his friend, and Debbie was in seventh heaven mothering them all. It was a fucked up dynamic, but it was far better than what awaited Brian at home.

Accordingly, Brian willingly did whatever chores Debbie gave him and nodded in pretend agreement with whatever drivel Michael came up with as they all bustled around to get the holiday dinner ready.

“Get your asses to the table, boys,” Debbie interrupted Michael’s one-sided conversation about the latest ‘Christmas Issue’ for his favorite superhero - Captain Astro - and shepherded them all to the table.

Michael immediately leapt into his chair, grabbed for the serving spoon and the bowl of roasted potatoes and commenced shoveling food onto his plate.

“Michael Charles Novotny,” Deb admonished her mannerless child. “You put that down right now. You can eat after we fucking say ‘Grace’.”

Brian tried to remain suitably solemn until after Debbie got through her ‘Fucking Grace’, although it wasn’t easy, since he’d never heard quite so much cursing during a prayer before and all that kept going through his mind the whole time was how outraged Joanie would be by the experience. After the meal was thoroughly cursed - or blessed, depending on how you looked at it - Debbie let Brian be the first to serve himself a nice big slice of the honey-baked ham and then the feast began in earnest.

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Several hours later Brian made his way back into the Kinney house, juggling his keys, an over-filled bag stuffed with tupperware containers of leftovers, and a huge pile of mail that Debbie had been saving up for him at her house. He was adorned with a brand new, hand-knitted scarf and matching hat, created lovingly by Debbie out of a particularly strange shade of faded lime-green polyester yarn. It was probably the ugliest item of clothing Brian had ever seen, but he absolutely loved it since it was one of the few real Christmas presents he’d ever received. It was even worse than the apricot colored scarf Debbie had given him the year before - and that was staying a lot. Nonetheless, Brian was still smiling as he made his way into the kitchen, depositing the food he’d been forced to bring home in the refrigerator before trying to sneak up the stairs undetected.

“Not so fast, Sonny Boy,” Jack yelled from his throne on the sofa in front of the television in the family room. “You’ve got twenty minutes before the Warden is going to roust all of our asses out of here for church. Get yourself cleaned up and try to find something to wear that doesn’t make you look like a fucking hippie.”

“Damn,” Brian mumbled, his lingering good mood evaporating instantly.

Brian had hoped that this year he wouldn’t be forced to participate in the only holiday tradition that the Kinney family still observed - Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve.

In spite of their long time debate over how useless the Catholic Church was, Jack had never succeeded in breaking Joan’s faith. The harder Jack fought her on this issue, the more tenaciously she clung. Even Jack had given up fighting her about it eventually. Jack rarely ever set foot in a church these days, and as the children had grown up, they’d mostly managed to avoid attending religious services as well. Unfortunately, Christmas was the one time each year when Joan
absolutely put her foot down and demanded that the entire family attend church services together.

This year, with Claire gone - hastily married off over the summer to some loser who’d had the misfortune to knock her up in the passenger seat of his new 1987 Chevy Camaro - Brian thought maybe they’d get a pass. Alas, it seemed it was not meant to be. Brian trudged the rest of the way up the stairs to his room in a very un-jolly frame of mind. He tossed all the shit Deb had sent home with him onto his bed, not bothering to change clothes or anything else, and just sat on his bed moping until it was time to leave.

When the family was ensconced in a pew near the front of the church a half hour later, Brian made a big show out of unwinding his Christmas scarf, reveling in the knowledge that his mother hated the gaudy thing - which was precisely the reason Brian had insisted on wearing it. The room was overheated, as usual on Christmas, with too many bodies squeezed into the pews and dressed for the snowy weather outside. Of course, they’d had to arrive extra early too - partly because Joan insisted they get there in plenty of time to get ‘good’ seats and also so that she could enjoy the traditional pre-service organ concert and caroling.

Secretly, Brian rather liked coming to church this one time each year. The church was always decorated with bright happy colors, everyone there was wearing smiles and appeared cheerful, and the music and the smell of the incense was calming and familiar. Brian rarely listened to the words of the service. He’d been indoctrinated into the church at a young age so he knew the mass by heart; but, something about the droning of the priest and the chanted responses of the congregation was soothing. Of course, Brian had known for a long time that it was all fake - a pretense of happiness that everybody put on this one time a year to make it seem like they were all good, god-fearing citizens - but, it was nice to sit back and join in the pretense for just a short while sometimes.

And, if they had any inkling of an idea what Brian was thinking about doing to that very cute youth minister who was helping out with the services this year, they’d fucking run him out of the church with torches and pitchforks.

“Brian!” Joanie elbowed her son in the ribs to get him to stop chuckling inappropriately in the middle of the sermon after he’d winked at the handsome young man and had received a shocked little smile in return.

They were all dripping with sweat and exhausted an hour and a half later when the final rituals were all completed and the priest finally told them they could, ‘Go in Peace with the Lord’. Brian followed obediently behind his parents as they slowly shuffled out of the church with all the others, nodding his head politely when his mother told him to, as she greeted friends and acquaintances. While Jack scurried away, ostensibly to warm up the car, but really just to get the fuck away from the crowds, Joan waited in line to thank the priest and wish him a Merry Christmas. Brian took that opportunity to shake hands with the hottie youth minister, holding his warm hand just a little bit too long and whispering something in his ear that made the man blush a brighter crimson than the priest’s cassock.

As he helped his mother walk over the rutted snow-covered parking lot back to their car, Brian was starting to think this would end up being one of the least unpleasant Christmases he’d ever experienced. What with all the holiday greetings and chatting and agreements that this year’s sermon had been one of the most inspiring ever, it took Brian and Joan a good half hour to finally make it to the car. Brian helped Joan into the front passenger seat and then got himself into the back.

That was when Brian noticed the prevailing smell of whiskey fumes inside the car. He looked up
just in time to see Jack screw back on the lid of the flask the old lush had brought along to keep himself company with. Well, so much for this Christmas ending well, Brian thought to himself as he buckled up his seat belt.

Luckily, even though the roads were icy and Jack was already half-way sloshed, the trip home from the church was short. Jack even managed to make the turn into the driveway without knocking over the trashcans waiting by the curb. Of course, in order to do that, he ended up angling the car too close to the fence that lined the driveway which meant he couldn’t get his car door open all the way when he tried to get out of the car. Cursing vociferously, Jack fought the door open as wide as he could, started stuffing his bloated body through the inadequate space and then promptly fell on his ass when his foot slipped on the icy ruts at the edge of the mostly shovelled drive.

“Fucking, goddamned ice and snow. I don’t know why we have to live in fucking Pittsburgh after all. And next time I tell you to shovel the walk, Brian, you stupid little shit, you better do a fucking better job,” Jack started, blaming his ungraceful moves on everything and everyone other than his own drunk ass.

“Shhhh! Jack . . . the neighbors . . .” Joanie warned, looking over her shoulder even as she spoke to make sure there was nobody spying on them from the nearby houses.

“I don’t give a crock of buffalo shit about the damned neighbors, you stupid bitch,” Jack intentionally yelled even louder after being told to hush like a child. “If it wasn’t for your fucking obsession with going to church in the middle of the fucking night every year like this, I wouldn’t have been out here falling on my ass in the snow.”

Brian was already halfway to the door, desperately trying to ignore the embarrassing annual Christmas Eve brouhaha. “Where the FUCK do you think you’re going, Sonny Boy?” Jack yelled just before Brian could get his key into the lock and escape.

“I’m going inside and go to sleep since it’s the middle of the fucking night, Jack,” Brian stated, in no mood to put up with more of his father’s usual shit when he’d almost had a tolerable Christmas for once.

“Like fuck you are, Sonny Boy,” Jack slurred, stomping towards Brian on slightly unsteady feet and just barely avoiding a second fall when he came to another patch of ice. “You’re going to get this fucking walkway and the driveway shovelled properly right this fucking instant for someone gets fucking hurt on it. Now get your ass out here and this time do the job right for once in your miserable life, you useless piece of shit.”

“No!”

Jack looked up at that totally unexpected response, staring at his son, the boy standing defiantly in front of the doorway with his feet spread wide and his arms crossed obstinately. “What the hell did you just say to me, Sonny Boy,” Jack hissed, his voice growing quieter and now dripping with menace.

“I said, No,” Brian insisted. “I’m not going to fucking shovel the walk at 1:30 in the fucking morning. The fact that you’re too pissed to walk in a straight line without falling over isn’t my fault and it has nothing to do with how I shovelled the fucking driveway this afternoon. Now, I’m going inside where it’s warm and go to bed and try to forget that even know a fucking loser like you, Jack. Merry Christmas!”

Brian began to turn towards the door, too angry in his own right to pay attention to the way his father’s face was turning a dark blood red. Luckily, Jack’s aim was a little off and he only lightly clipped Brian’s shoulder when he threw his first punch - he’d intended to knock the side of the
boy’s head a good one and if he wasn’t so drunk he’d probably have easily flattened the more slightly built young man.

Whatever Jack had expected, though, it hadn’t been for Brian to turn around and confront him to his face. Brian, however, was far too enraged at this point to care what he was getting himself into. Ever since the last beating, when Jack had put him in the hospital, Brian had been stewing. He was so tired of being Jack Kinney’s whipping boy. He was sick of always being afraid, of always tiptoeing around in his own home, of always being the ‘victim’. All Jack ever did was ruin everything he came near. Brian had almost, for the first time in his pathetic life, experienced a holiday that wasn’t completely horrible. But, now Jack was trying to ruin even that small accomplishment. It certainly wasn’t evocative of the whole Christmastime ‘Peace on Earth and Goodwill’ thing.

“Why you fucking little smartass!” Jack growled, his face twisted with a look of pure loathing as he regarded this undisciplined offspring that dared to stand up to him. “I’ll teach you not to talk back . . .”

From his position on the front porch, Brian was standing at least a step above his father and that, along with his last growth spurt, gave the younger man at least a good foot of height over the old man. Looking down at the wizened, washed up loser that was his father - the small man with small dreams and even more miniscule achievements - Brian suddenly realized that he didn’t need to be afraid of this ineffectual, pissant of a man. In the grand scheme of things, Jack Kinney was NOTHING! Brian couldn’t believe that he had, even for a moment, looked up to this man or wanted his approval or his love. This man was a total and irredeemable failure. A waste of skin and breath taking up space and using valuable resources on a planet that shouldn’t have to tolerate his uselessness.

This odd little epiphany hit Brian just as Jack cocked back his fist and went to strike again, this blow aimed directly at Brian’s face. With snort of derision, Brian put up his left hand and grabbed ahold of Jack’s clenched fist, stopping it cold about six inches short of making contact. Brian held the older man’s hand up where it had been stopped and looked down into the shocked eyes of the aged man.

The old man, still befuddled by liquor, hadn’t expected his easily daunted son to stand up to him. Being the bully that he was, much of Jack’s bravado was based solely on the veneer of power that he wielded rather than any actual physical or moral strength. He looked up at the boy that, in his mind, was still a cowering, snivelling little child. Only, Brian wasn’t that helpless little child any longer. The boy was strong. He wasn’t little - he towered over Jack. And what was even more amazing, the father could tell from looking into his son’s eyes that the boy wasn’t afraid of him any longer.

“Fuck you, Jack,” Brian sneered, noting the change in his father’s expression from aggression to fear. “Shovel your own shit from now on,” Brian declared, cocking back his own right fist and delivering a short but very effective jab directly to Jack’s openly gaping maw, then shaking his head and laughing at the pitiful old man lying sprawled and howling in pain at the foot of the porch steps.

“Oh yeah,” Brian added as he turned his back on the sorry sight. “Merry Fucking Christmas, Pops!”

“Really gives a whole new meaning to ‘Deck the Halls’, doesn’t it,” snickered the small blond who smiled at Brian as his charge strutted past and made his triumphant way into the house, locking the door behind him so that the pathetic loser that used to be his father could spend the rest of the night
lying in the snow alone.
"You ready to go, Bri?" Michael came barreling out of his last class of the day, yelling for his best friend before he was even halfway down the hall.

"Shit, Novotny," Brian shook his head disdainfully at the eager little puppy imitation his friend was performing as Mikey bounced around and around the much larger boy who was putting books away in his locker. "Would you calm the fuck down already? I'm going to get whiplash just watching you bounce all over like a damn superball."

"I can't calm down, Brian. Today's the day the next issue of Captain Astro comes out. The last one ended on the biggest cliffhanger ever and I've been waiting three months to find out what happens. I can't wait to get to Buzzy's. So let's go already, okay?"

"No can do, Mikey," Brian shook his head and tried to look even a tiny little bit disappointed for his friend's sake. "I'm afraid I've got Chemistry Club today. I guess you'll just have to go to Buzzy's on your own. I'm sure you'll give me a complete blow-by-blow recap of the entire issue tomorrow morning, though."

"Damn, Brian! Can't you blow off Chemistry Club? I have no idea why you still go to that lame ass club anyway. I mean, c'mon - Captain Astro is so much cooler than Chemistry Club," Michael whined, grabbing ahold of Brian's arm to physically pull him away from the very idea of Chemistry Club.

"Ah, but Chemistry Club is where I'm learning how to build the bomb I'm gonna use to blow up the school, Mikey. You'll thank me later when you get like the last three months off school," Brian teased, enjoying the look of shock displayed on his friend's face - silly little twat, thinking Brian could actually be serious.

"Brian, you . . . You can't . . . You won't really blow the school up, will you? Shit. What if you get caught? What if somebody gets hurt? And I doubt they'd let us have the whole rest of the year off anyway - we'd probably just get bussed to some other schools or something. It's not really a very good idea, Brian . . ." Michael's voice sounded nervous as he tried his best to dissuade his friend from doing anything so rash.

"Oh, fine," Brian 'allowed' himself to be talked out of his brilliant plan. "I guess you're right, Mikey. I probably shouldn't blow up the school. Well, I guess then I'll just concentrate on my next favorite area of research - I think I'm close to inventing synthetic cum."

"Gross, Brian!" Michael giggled at his best friend's crazy idea, more than relieved that the topic of
bombs was put to rest. "Whatever, though. I guess I’ll have to go to Buzzy's by myself then while you go play with yourself and your 'cum'. Have fun and stay out of trouble, Bri!"

Brian watched his overly enthusiastic little buddy bounce off down the hall towards the front door amid the crowd of other students. He really was tempted to blow off Chemistry Club today. It was one of those rare warm days that occasionally pop up in the middle of winter and the hint of spring in the air was almost enough to lure him outside in Mikey's wake. Besides, having Chemistry Club on his transcripts didn't really mean much to him now anyway. Since his father and Vice-Principal Saluka had combined efforts to end his Senior Year soccer season early, his hopes of getting an athletic scholarship to college were probably tanked. Would it really matter if he had impressive extracurriculars on his record if he couldn't find a way to pay for college?

As Brian stood there debating with himself about whether or not to skip Chem, he happened to catch a glimpse of one of the reasons behind his current sour mood. Ms. Saluka herself was standing just inside the front doors, watching suspiciously as her potential victims filed past, scanning each for any possible rule infractions that she could bust them on. The condescending look of superiority on her face as she loomed there made Brian's skin crawl. The cunt looked like she enjoyed her job far too much. The sow might have ruined his one chance for a college scholarship, not to mention having handed him gleefully over into the arms of his father for punishment - she didn't deserve to feel so good about herself.

Brian decided right then that Ms. Saluka needed to have that superior scowl wiped off her ugly face.

With newfound resolve, Brian slammed his locker shut and headed down the hall towards the chem lab. He'd been joking with Mikey earlier about having invented a type of synthetic cum. But he HAD accidentally stumbled on the chemical formula for a substance that looked a lot like cum but which turned out to be a pretty remarkable adhesive. Maybe now that he'd thought up the perfect application for his new discovery he'd whip up a nice big batch of the goop . . .

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Brian had a hard time getting a parking space the next morning as he pulled into the big lot next to the school. It seemed like there was a lot of activity going on around the front entrance. Brian parked Big Bertha in the grassy field the students used for overflow parking and then he followed the rest of the crowd of students and others up towards the building.

The paved courtyard area surrounding the main doors was packed full of people this morning. There seemed to be a lot of adults and people other than students standing around in groups talking in hushed tones. Right up in front there was what looked like a camera crew from one of the local television stations. The atmosphere seemed expectant with an undercurrent of humor just under the surface. Whatever was happening, it was quite the event for the usually dull high school.

"Brian. Brian! Over here," Michael hollered as soon as he caught sight of his best friend ambling unconcernedly up walk.

"Morning, Mikey," Brian drawled calmly in spite of the circus-like goings on around them. "Why are we all standing out here this morning? Did somebody set off another stink bomb in the school? You know it still stinks from the last time Tommy Richards did that. If he keeps this up we'll never get rid of the stench."

"It's NOT a stink bomb, Brian - it's better!" Michael almost crowed with delight at the news he was about to relate. "Apparently, somebody glued Ms. Saluka to the toilet in the school office last night! She's been stuck here all night. Nobody found her until the secretary came in this morning. I
hear the fire department rescue squad has been trying to get her free for two hours already, with no luck! Isn't that fucking hilarious! We're all waiting to see if they get her out. Somebody said they might have to take apart the whole fucking toilet in order to free her - can't you just see it? Hah!"

"Really?" Brian's comment was terse but his wicked grin gave away exactly how he felt. "So, do they have any idea who did it?"

"None at all!" Michael laughed. "Since she was the last one in the office last night, there weren't any other witnesses. Whoever did it must have snuck into the offices late yesterday afternoon after everyone else left. Serves the bitch right, anyway, she was probably here late, busy thinking up new ways to torture more students," Michael was even less of a fan of the Vice-Principal than Brian was.

Brian laughed at his friend's vindictiveness. It was nice to know that at least one other person out there understood how unfairly Brian had been treated. Michael's unquestioning attachment to Brian helped assuage his bruised self-respect just a bit. As the two boys stood milling around, waiting to see what would transpire and enjoying taking pot shots (all puns intended) at Ms. Saluka, they were joined by some fellow students, all of whom seemed to share in their dislike of the school's disciplinarian. Brian felt even more vindicated.

While they were all standing around, one of the teachers who'd been waiting in their own small huddle nearby, approached their little group.

"Morning, Brian. Hope you weren't held up too late last night in the lab. Did you get all that stuff cleaned up? You looked like you had quite a mess on your hands when I left," Mr. Jacobs, the chemistry teacher, asked his favorite student.

"Yeah, sorry about that, Mr. Jacobs," Brian replied politely. "I didn't mean to make such a mess. It's all cleaned up though."

"Glad to hear it. Before you try that particular experiment again, though, maybe I should have a look over your formulas? I really don't need my lab covered in sticky white gloop every week after Chemistry Club," the teacher teased jovially before he moved back over towards the rest of the waiting teachers.

"Hey! That's right. You were here late yesterday for Chemistry Club, Brian. You might have been here at the same time as whoever did this to Saluka," Michael commented unthinkingly. "Did you see anything, Bri?"

"Me? No, I didn't see a thing. I was too busy," Brian replied aloud, very matter-of-factly, but his tone of voice was off just enough that it caused Michael to look up at his friend more closely. "That synthetic cum I was trying to make kind of exploded all over the lab and it was a pain in the ass to clean up. It's really quite sticky, you know. You'd probably need a chemistry degree to dissolve it once it dried hard," Brian added quietly enough so that only Michael could hear the end of his statement.

"Brian?!!" Michael beamed up at his daring friend adoringly. "You didn't? Did you? No fucking way," Michael whispered violently and pulled Brian away from the rest of the crowd. Brian meanwhile was trying desperately to hide a mischievous grin by rolling his lips under. "Brian . . ."

Michael's attempt to wheedle a confession out of his friend was cut short at this point as the doors of the school banged open and a large congregation of rescue workers started backing out of the entrance. The waiting crowd pushed forward, everyone trying to get a better view of what was happening. A group of paramedics and firefighters pushed their way back, apparently carrying a
heavy, bulky something between them. A couple moments later, several policemen emerged and started moving the crowd back far enough to form a corridor so the rest of the rescue squad could move their burden down the front walk towards a waiting ambulance. The cleared space not only gave the group carrying the 'victim' room to move - it also allowed an unobstructed view for all those who'd been waiting by the doors.

With the news cameras rolling, Vice-Principal Saluka was finally carried out of the school by six burly firemen, apparently still attached to a partially dismantled toilet stool. The sight was met with stunned silence as the humiliated woman was carried past the openly staring eyes of the crowd comprised of her co-workers, students and sundry strangers. When a gust of wind accidentally blew by, taking with it the lightweight blanket which had been draped over the lap of the poor woman for the sake of modesty, she shrieked and doubled over to hide her nakedness. The silence of the onlookers was broken by one lone snicker after another until the entire moil of gaping, nosy, busybodies eventually joined in. The doors to the ambulance closed on the peals of riotous laughter from the crowd, but couldn't blot out all the sound, engendering even more hysterical sobbing from the patient who was hurried away forthwith.

"Serves the stupid cunt right." Brian was just a little shocked to hear such virulence come from the lips of his angelic invisible blond - he'd never heard the kind-hearted youth say anything quite so vicious ever before, even about Jack.

It didn't mean it wasn't true, though. Saluka was an uncaring cunt. Brian agreed wholeheartedly with Justin's statement and it made him smile. It made him smile even more to think that he'd won the approval of his longtime guardian and friend.

It looked like Brian's final semester of high school was going to turn out to be rather fun after all.

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"Shit! Did you see her face when that blanket blew away! Did she look FLUSHED to you?"
*hahahahaha*

Saluka's downfall was still the primary topic of conversation even hours later when Brian and Michael found seats at their usual lunch table. Everyone was talking about her, laughing at her and making jokes at the poor Vice-Principal's expense. Then again, she wasn't liked by anyone in the school and toilet jokes were so easy . . .

"Getting glued to a toilet - what a SHITTY way to start your day, right," Bridget MacDonald quipped, elbowing Brian who just happened to be sitting next to her at the moment.

"I bet it's the top story on the news tonight," Chris Spenser offered next. "And after that, her career will definitely go down the crapper!"

The jokes just kept on coming. Some people were laughing so hard, Brian thought it was a miracle they could still breathe. Michael was chortling so loudly right next to Brian's ear that it was almost painful. All Brian did though was sit quietly and smile. To be honest, he was getting a little bored with all the toilet humor and wished his friends would talk about something - anything - else already.

Unfortunately, nobody else seemed to think the same. Really, though, how many potty puns could there possibly be? All the horrid bad jokes were starting to cheapen Brian's sense of righteous retribution.

"I bet old Saluka's POOPED after being stuck on that shitter all night. Then again, nobody's more
full of CRAP than she is so maybe she feels right at home there.” Unfortunately, to add to Brian's annoyance, one of the most vocal of the punsters turned out to be none other than his ex, Lars.

Brian hadn't seen much of Lars Nielsen once he'd finally returned to school after his suspension last fall. By then the semester had already been more than half over anyways and, outside of the few classes they had together, they'd easily avoided each other. What with Brian serving umpteen hours of detention on top of everything else, it hadn't been too difficult to keep away from each other throughout the fall term.

Brian had also been relieved that he didn't have to actually confront the boy upon his return - it seemed their unannounced, undiscussed 'breakup' was already understood and universally accepted throughout the school. Brian was more than happy to let Lars learn of their breakup via the school grapevine rather than in person, no matter how impersonal or tacky it might seem. Brian knew that if he never spoke to the lying sack of shit again it would be just fine with him. Michael had very effectively spread the story about how Lars was responsible for Brian's suspension while Brian was still in the hospital, so most of their friends already knew the score and they were actively shunning Lars on Brian's behalf before the popular boy's suspension was even finished.

Lars quickly found himself not only without a boyfriend, but without any other friends and with a shattered reputation. He seemed happy to hide out in the shadows and lick his wounds for awhile. And so, the relationship that Brian had never planned on, seemed to end just as uneventfully as it had begun.

However, most teens have notoriously short memories. After everyone had returned from Christmas break, Lars seemed to resurface again. He still hadn't dared to approach Brian directly, but he HAD started to hang around with some of their mutual friends again. Mikey was openly and vocally hostile every time Lars dared come within sight, but most of the other students had heard it enough that they stopped paying any attention to Mikey's rants. Brian, meanwhile, remained cool and simply ignored the young man's presence as if Lars was beneath his notice.

By February, Lars had reinsinuated himself completely back into the various cliques Brian hung with - cliques that Brian had introduced Lars into in the first place. Brian continued to ignore him and had yet to speak a single word to his former boyfriend. Since there hadn't been any tangible repercussions, though, Lars seemed to regain some confidence and his social standing. He let himself be more outspoken and put himself out more. Brian's friends took their cue from him - since Brian hadn't seemed to care about Lars coming around again, they didn't bother fighting it either.

Which is why Brian wasn't surprised to see Lars sitting at his lunch table or hear him trying to out-joke the rest of the toilet bowl jokesters.

"I doubt they'll ever find out who did it, though," Lars seemed to be on a roll with his potty humor. "Since they had to take the toilet along with Saluka, investigators will have nothing to GO on!"

*Uuuuggggggh* That last joke was so bad even Brian couldn't hold back a loud groan. "I should have known you'd excel at crappy jokes, Lars," Brian commented with a sneer. "You're almost as full of crap as Saluka."

"What's the matter Brian? You should be glad to see the back end of old Saluka," Lars shot right back, apparently confident enough in his position again to dare confronting Brian directly. "I mean, even if she doesn't get CANNED for this, if she ever gives you shit again about being hooked on pot, you can just remind her of her past attachment to her own POT! Hah!"

Brian didn't join in the riotous laughter that Lars' ongoing puns aroused from the rest of the
cafeteria group. He sat there quietly glowering at the primary punster. Knowing Lars the way he did, Brian shouldn't have been surprised at the way the manipulative boy was using this event to further worm his way back into the group. Brian might have continued to ignore the slimy git even then. However, Lars just had to push it too far, hadn't he? Bringing up Brian's run in with Saluka and referencing the pot that had been Lars' to begin with was a huge mistake. Lars was now back on Brian's radar and not in a good way at all.

Only Michael recognized the silently seething rage Brian was hiding after Lars' last comment. When his best friend got up and dumped his tray after having hardly touched any food, a concerned Michael trotted after him. Neither of them said a word until they were both out of the cafeteria.

"Just ignore him, Bri. Lars is an ass but you don't want to do anything you'll regret later. You really don't need to draw attention to yourself right now with this whole Saluka thing, you know," Michael tried to warn his friend.

"You should know by now, Mikey, that I never do anything I don't want to do and I'll take whatever comes as a result. I'm not going to live my life being sucked down by a bunch of stupid regrets like Jack," Brian announced proudly. "No excuses. No apologies. No regrets. That's going to be how I live my life, Mikey . . . However, I'm not opposed to making shitheads like Lars have a few regrets . . ."

“Hey, Nielsen. Wait up a sec,” Brian called out just as the target of his latest scheme walked by them.

Lars halted and looked up, clearly surprised that Brian was speaking directly to him. Brian winked over his shoulder at Michael as he trotted off to catch up with his next unsuspecting victim. Micheal really didn’t like the nefarious grin Brian was sporting. If Lars knew what the hell was good for him he would start running right fucking now, Michael thought to himself.

“Just . . . be careful, Brian,” Michael pled under his breath as the tall brunet boy sauntered towards the waiting Lars and then casually draped his arm across the shorter youth’s shoulders.

It took only moments for the disbelieving look on Lars’ face to turn into obsequious fawning. Even from where he was standing, fifty meters or so down the hallway, Michael could see that the Kinney charm was already having its usual effect on the boy. Whatever Brian was saying to his ex, it was working. Lars was practically beaming up at Brian.

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Things had been going so well lately that Justin hadn't been spending much time dogging Brian. Now that Jack's threat had been effectively neutralized, there wasn't as much to worry about. Brian had been coasting easily through life ever since Christmas.

Therefore the insistent, almost painful, pang of worry that the guardian spirit felt this afternoon came as a big surprise.

A thought was all it took and Justin was hovering next to his charge. At first glance Brian seemed fine. The youth was exactly where he should be - in school. Justin scanned the hallways and didn't detect any physical threat. But why did he still feel so uneasy?

That was when Justin got a glimpse of Brian's face. He'd just turned away from a shorter boy he'd been talking to at the far end of the hallway. As he spun around and started walking back down the hall towards his own locker, Justin got his first real glimpse of Brian's face and was shocked by the
look of cold, hard hatred he saw there. This wasn't his Brian. His Brian could never be this angry or vindictive. Could he?

Initially, Justin hadn't been able to see who the other boy was since he'd been hidden by Brian's larger form. Looking back now, Justin saw that the boy Brian had been talking with was none other than his evil ex, Lars. That did explain, to some degree, Brian's expression of animosity. Justin knew that no matter how nonchalant or resigned Brian tried to appear, he still secretly seethed with anger at the betrayal he'd experienced at Lars' hands. Apparently, though, even Justin hadn't known the extent of Brian's bitterness.

"Brian. Brian, wait up," Michael chirped as Brian stalked past without bothering to stop at his locker or acknowledge his friend. "Brian, where the fuck are you going?"

"Shopping," Brian replied while shaking Michael's restraining hand off his arm. "I've got stuff to do, Mikey. Got to get ready for the big night I've got planned with Lars."

"Plans with Lars? You've got to fucking be kidding me, Brian. Why the hell would you make plans with that asswipe. Especially plans that involve you skipping class. You're gonna get in so much shit if your caught, Bri."

"I'm not going to get caught, Mikey. And even if I did, there's no Saluka here today anyway, remember. I'll be fine," Brian reassured his buddy with a disdainful grin.

"But what are you and Lars gonna do, Brian?"

"I'm gonna fuck him, Mikey," Brian responded with a return of his earlier cold, hard expression. "Why . . . I don't understand, Brian. Why the hell would you want anything to do with that ass, let alone have sex with him?"

"It's simple, Mikey," Brian started to explain as he lead Michael down the front walk towards the school parking lot. "I told Lars I wanted a chance at some Break Up sex - you know, so I could get 'closure'. The scumbag fucking jumped at the idea, of course - I'm sure he hasn't been fucked half as good by anyone since he screwed me over. Anyway, I'm meeting up with him tonight after school and then I'm gonna fuck him the way he deserves to be fucked. Well, fucked over, that is. Then we'll see if he still finds it amusing to make jokes about me."

"Shit, Brian. You can't . . ." Michael probably would have continued to try and talk his friend out of whatever he had planned if only Brian hadn't slammed the car door in his face.

Michael just stood there, alone in the parking lot, and watched his friend drive off. Justin stood unnoticed and silent right behind him. Neither of them could see anything good coming out of this scenario. Even if Brian actually got away with whatever he was planning, his revenge would never make him happy. All it would do was further injure his already wounded soul.

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For the second day in a row there was a huge chaotic crowd standing around in front of the school when Brian arrived the next morning. Small groups of students were huddled in various locations along the entrance walkway and all around the large courtyard area. Each group was talking loudly, laughing and pointing at something. Every so often one group would migrate over to another location, each move inevitably accompanied by another upwelling of hilarity.

When Brian got closer, he could clearly see what appeared to be Polaroid pictures mounted on the walls of the school, light posts, windows, the side of a trashcan, the front doors, and everywhere
else. It took a huge effort, but the oh-so-cool brunet managed not to even crack a smile at this well orchestrated tableau. With studied indifference he ambled over to join one group in order to get a closer look and hear what his fellow students were saying.

The Polaroid photo posted here on the wall next to a large boxwood shrub depicted a very sorry looking Lars Nielsen. The youth's eyes were heavy lidded and he wore a sloppy grin that hinted that the boy hadn't been entirely sober at the time the photo was taken. Unfortunately, that was all Lars was wearing other than a pair of handcuffs and a bright red thong shaped like an elephant’s head covering his private parts.

As Brian stood there admiring the photo and listening to the laughter of the crowd around him, all of whom were busy viewing similar photos - the same subject only in different provocative poses, but always wearing the lovely red elephant thong - he noticed that the courtyard suddenly became hushed. Along with all the others, he turned to see what was engendering this pause in the proceedings. Gradually, the mass of students blocking the main walkway parted, allowing one lone figure to proceed unimpeded up to the front of the school.

Lars didn't look his best this morning. His coppery brown hair wasn't styled in its usual carefully mussed strands - in fact, it looked like it hadn't even been combed. The boy's skin was a greenish color and he had huge bags under both eyes that weren't hidden even by the dark sunglasses he was wearing. His shirt was rumpled and buttoned up incorrectly so that it hung askew. On top of everything he was moving sluggishly, acting as if each step he took required a gargantuan effort. Basically, the boy looked about as hungover as a person could possibly be and still manage to walk upright.

Probably because of his sickly state, Lars didn't seem to notice the expectant hush that preceded his entrance. Nor did he look up at any of the killing students standing around the entrance to the school. He merely shuffled dejectedly up the walk and into the building without even realizing that everyone was staring at him.

With a quiet murmur, the entire student body followed behind as the boy shambled inside and slowly approached his locker.

From his place near the back of the crowd, Brian couldn't actually see what happened next. He and all the others waiting with him DID hear the short embarrassed scream when Lars noted the Polaroid that had been used to decorate the front of his school locker. After that, though, it was kind of hard to hear anything more over the bellows of laughter that broke out everywhere. There might have been a 'Fuck!' or two yelled by the boy who frantically tore the incriminating photo off his locker and then turned to glare at his guffawing fellow students. There was probably even more cursing when Lars noticed that there were dozens of more photos taped up all over the nearby walls, but it was impossible to hear anything by that time as the gales of shrieking laughter were simply too overwhelming.

Brian Kinney was laughing almost as hard as the rest when a distraught Lars ran by him, pulling down every embarrassing photo he passed. The look of hatred Lars flashed him didn't seem to phase Brian in the least, though. In fact, all it did was strengthen the steely cold glint in his former lover's eyes.

Justin could only shake his head at the sight as he felt Brian’s heart grow even colder and harder.
Chapter Notes

Guess what? Yep. More conflict and angst! Just what you wanted right? Well, here's how I perceived Brian's 18th birthday to have happened. Enjoy! TAG

P.S. It seems I originally posted some of the chapters of this story out of order - namely chapters 11 & 12. So, if you were reading this before and it didn't seem to make sense you might need to re-read those two chapters. Everything is now in it's correct order (I hope). Thanks for bearing with me! TAG

Chapter 13 - Maturation.

It was a miserable, grey, drizzly, late April day but that wasn't going to deter any of the players in the Spring Youth Rec Soccer League Championship Tournament. Especially not Brian Kinney. Brian was on fire today. The fact that his cleats were clogged with muddy sod, his uniform was plastered to his body with mud, sweat and rain and that his whole body was liberally splattered with mud - including even his face - didn't seem to phase him in the least. If anything, he played better in wet conditions - he'd always been what his teammates called a 'Mudder'.

Right then, Brian was screaming down the field as fast as his legs could carry him. His lungs ached from oxygen deprivation as he pushed himself past his normal limits. He tore past Jon - the school soccer team buddy who'd recommended that he join this co-ed rec league team since they desperately needed players - and easily outstripped the defending player who'd been assigned to cover him.

Out of the corner of his eye he spied his other teammate, Winnie, carefully working the ball up the left sideline using her mad ball handling skills. Winnie was truly an incredible soccer player. At first glance she looked like this petite, delicate, little girl who'd never in a million years be able to stand up against the seventeen year old boys who made up the majority of the league's players. But if you discounted her merely because of her size, like many of the players on the other teams often did, you'd be making a huge mistake. What Winnie lacked in size, she made up for in feistiness and agility. So, while their opponents were always underestimating her, Brian and the rest of the team took full advantage of their little secret weapon.

Right now, for example, Winnie was paired up against this hulking huge 6'2" meathead. The bigger boy had realized early on that he wasn't any match for the slight girl's skills, as she'd easily stolen the ball from him a half dozen times in this period alone. In desperation, he'd turned to trying to intimidate her using his physical strength. Accordingly he'd begun to crowd her a bit closer than was strictly necessary, hip checking and shoulder checking whenever the ref was looking elsewhere. However, the plucky little 5'5" girl hasn't giving in for a moment. When she couldn't evade his less-than-legal-moves by outpacing him or ducking under his looming frame, she'd take the blow like a pro and just keep on going. Needless to say, the big hulk was getting frustrated. His coach was yelling at him from the sidelines, asking why he couldn't keep up with 'a girl'. That, combined with the jeers of the crowd every time this little chickie outmaneuvered him, increased his anger with every minute of play.

Finally, Brian wove around the last defender standing in his way and took his position in center
field about fifteen meters back from the goal. Now that he was in place, perfectly positioned for an easy goal, all he had to do was wait for his more than capable team mates to bring the ball to him. They'd practiced this play a hundred times. It should be easy. If they could make this goal, they'd break the tie and win the game as well as the tournament. Of course, it was never just that easy.

Brian turned to look to the left in order to gauge where the ball was. Winnie and Jon were still dribbling the ball between them, working it inexorably up the field, around and through the legs of the defenders. The big hulk that had been covering Winnie all this half was still there, hovering ineffectually over the smaller girl every step of the way. When Jon all of a sudden got trapped by two players from the opposing team, he quickly cut the ball over to Winnie who, seeing a tiny gap in the defenders' line, took off at full tilt with the ball closely controlled between her skillful feet.

Winnie was running up the line. The hulking boy knew there was no way he'd be able to out run her. Instead he decided he'd be better off just plain knocking her over. With a short burst of speed, he came up diagonally from behind Winnie and threw the entire weight of his shoulder against her back, shoving her to the ground at his feet. Amazingly enough, the ref didn't call the obvious foul.

As the girl fell to the ground, the ruthless boy came to a halt, looking down at his work with a self-satisfied glare. His smug look quickly turned to one of confusion, though, as the falling girl tucked her shoulder under in a well executed Judo roll. By tucking and continuously transferring her weight, the momentum of the fall ended up rolling her entire body over till she was thrown back up onto her feet. Then, without even a pause, she sprinted away with the ball still under her control, leaving the big dumbass just standing there staring, wondering what the fuck had just happened.

Within moments, Winnie was all the way down the line clear to the corner. She paused briefly to look around for an open striker, saw Brian waiting and pivoted gracefully on her right foot. Looking calm and collected, she planted her left foot securely, wound back her leg and then scooped up the ball with her foot and booted it perfectly. The ball rebounded off the laces of her cleats with a satisfying *swack* that told everyone it was going to reach its intended destination.

Brian, the ball's intended recipient, tracked its progress through the air. With three long strides, he was in place. The ball crossed the field with textbook precision straight towards the spot where Brian was positioned. When it was perfectly aligned with the goal, he lunged head first into the flying ball, hitting it with the crown of his forehead. The ball angled towards the upper left corner, speeding through the goalie's outstretched hands. With a sibilant *swish* the ball hit the back of the net and then rolled down to rest at the pissed off goalie's feet. The ref's loud whistle signaled the goal and the end of the play.

Both teams and all the spectators watching from the sidelines sent up a giant whoop of admiration at the exquisitely executed play. Winnie barreled across the field and practically threw herself into Brian's arms. Jon was there two seconds later, high-fiving them both. The rest of their team mobbed them moments later in a spontaneous group celebration which only ended when the ref Threatened to issue a 'delay of game' infraction against them.

Ten minutes later, time ran out and the game was called. Brian's team had won, 3-2, with Brian having earned a hat trick after scoring all three of his team's goals during the championship game. As he walked off the field, tired and mud drenched but ecstatically happy, he proudly shook hands with his team and the associated supporters.

"Brian! Brian, over here!" Winnie called to him from the middle of a large group of well-wishers. Brian trotted over to meet her. He might have been the one to score today's goals, but he would never have managed it without the hard work Winnie, Jon and his other team mates had put in. If anything, the midfielders like Winnie probably worked harder than anyone else on the team. If
nothing else, Brian owed her a huge thank you for making him look so good.

"Hey, Dude! Excellent game! We totally rocked out there today!" Winnie greeted him with an enthusiastic fist bump as soon as he approached.

"That we did! And you were fabulous out there, Win. How the hell did you do that roll thing? That was the coolest shit I think I've ever seen!" Brian gave back the kudos to his best assistant ever.

"Well, besides being the best high school soccer player in the state," Winnie bragged, "I also just happen to be a brown belt in Judo. That little maneuver out there was nothing. You should see me throw my 200lb judo Sensei sometime!"

"Not to brag too much, or anything, but my Niece here WAS the State Judo Champion for her age group back when she was only eight. We're all pretty proud of her." This last comment was interjected into their conversation by an older man who had been part of the group standing around Winnie before Brian had arrived. "Great job out there, by the way, young man," the ginger-haired man added, directing his comments towards Brian. "Winnie's been going on and on about you all season. It's 'Brian did this' and 'Brian did that' after ever game or practice. And after watching your performance, I can see why she so appreciative of your skills."

"Thank you, Sir," Brian replied politely. "Of course it's Winnie's assists that really make the most difference. I wouldn't look half so good out there if it wasn't for her."

The man chuckled appreciatively and gave his Niece another doting look. "I can't argue with you about that! But, nevertheless, I was quite impressed with you as well. Tell me, did you play in the fall? I don't remember seeing you playing in any of the local school playoff games. I'm sure I would have remembered you."

"I've been on the varsity team at my high school for the past three years, but I ended up sitting out the second half of this year's season due to an injury," Brian explained, citing a half truth - he had been injured, but not while playing, and he wasn't about to mention his temporary suspension either.

"Well, that's too bad. It looks like you're all healed now though. And I'm really glad you decided to play again this spring, son. Otherwise I might have missed seeing you all together, which would have been a real loss for both you and my University." The man smiled indulgently at Brian and handed him a business card he'd pulled out of the inside pocket of his leather jacket.

Brian looked down at the card. At the top, it was emblazoned by a full color depiction of the University of Pittsburgh seal. Beneath the school logo was printed the name 'Gil Taylor' and the man's title, 'Associate Athletic Director, Development'.

"I think our soccer coach would love to meet you, Brian. Give me a call on Monday and I'm sure we can set up a try out for you. And if things go as I suspect they will, you could find yourself on the field as a Pitts Panther next fall, son," Mr. Taylor announced, patting Brian on the shoulder good naturedly before turning back around to talk to someone else in the big group of nearby people.

"Shit! Is this legit, Win?" Brian asked his friend, his heart hammering even faster now than it had while he was on the field playing.

"Yep. That's my Uncle Gil. He's a recruiter at Pitt. And he doesn't hand out his business cards to just anyone!" Winnie squealed gleefully as she hugged Brian. "Looks like you just made the grade, Brian! Way to go!"
"I-I-I can't believe it. I thought I was shit outta luck after missing most of the season my senior year. If this is legitimate . . . Wow! Pitt! That's . . . Wow!" Brian didn't know what to say.

His dream of making it to college and escaping from his family's blue collar life - a dream that he thought was lost to him forever - seemed to now be within his reach again and he was literally speechless.

"Hey, Mister. Why do you gots a big black circle on your forehead?" Brian's tongue tied reverie was interrupted by a tug on his shorts and a small voice coming from somewhere down around his knees.

"Um . . . Huh?" Brian responded cluelessly as he looked down and saw that the question came from a blond-haired boy.

"You gots a big round black circle on your face . . . Oh, wait. It's mud! Yuck! Boy, you sure are dirty, Mister. My momma would get real mad at me if I was as dirty as you," the little tyke declared, looking almost worried at the older boy's state of muddiness.

"That's not just any old mud, Jesse," Winnie replied on Brian's behalf. "That circle on Brian's face is from where he knocked in the winning goal with his head. That there is a badge of honor. If I were Brian, I'd never wash it off ever. I'd wear that mud proudly so that everyone would know what a hero I was," Winnie declared with a teasing wink in Brian's direction.

This silly statement earned a round of laughter from everyone, even the little boy, although he wasn't entirely sure what he was supposed to be laughing at. Brian reached up and wiped at the mark as he laughed along. Winnie playfully slapped his hand away, trying to force him to leave the drying muddy mark alone.

"You SHOULD leave it, Brian. It looks great. And Winnie's right, it's like a personal trophy from today's tourney," Justin, who'd just walked up after watching the game from a hidden spot beneath the nearby grandstands, couldn't help joining in on teasing Brian.

Brian shook his head at the joking comment from his longtime blond friend but smiled nonetheless. Even a visit from his invisible stalker, Justin, wasn't going to phase him today. Not only had his team won the championship, but he was going to get to try out for the soccer team at Pitt. If he measured up, it could mean a scholarship and freedom from the rest of the Kinney clan. He didn't think it was possible for anything to dampen the good mood he was in right now.

"Hey, are you my Uncle Justin's 'Brian'?" Little Jesse interrupted the laughter with a serious tone in his childish voice.

"Uh . . . W-W-What?" Brian was startled into seriousness himself at the name he heard the boy utter.

"You're Justin's friend, 'Brian'. He told me you and I are the only ones who can see him, so you gots to be Brian. I'm the one who called 911 for Justin when you was hurt. He looks all better now, though, right Justin," Jesse continued to prattle on in his six-year-old way even after Brian and Winnie fell silent.

"I have to go," Brian announced brusquely, turning and stomping off without further explanation.

"Brian, wait," Winnie hollered as she trotted to catch up to her departing friend. "Sorry about that. My cousin, Jesse, is just going through this 'imaginary friend' stage, you know. My Aunt and Uncle say they don't want to discourage his imagination and creativity so they won't do anything about it.
But I'm sorry if he freaked you out with it or anything."

"No. It's fine. I . . . I just really do have to go. Um, thanks again for a great assist, Win. And thank your Uncle for me, too. I'll call him Monday about a tryout." Brian's reply was short but polite enough, and Winnie didn't think anything more about it other than to regret that her delusional little cousin had chased off the handsome and personable boy - a boy she wouldn't have minded getting better acquainted with.

Oh well, there were always other tempting prospects. "Hey, Jon," Winnie called out as another of her handsome teammates walked by.

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"Thank you, Coach Swanson. Thank you. You have no idea how much this means to me!" Brian was so thrilled by the phone call he'd just received he could hardly catch his breath enough to form the words needed to reply.

"Yes . . . Yes, of course . . . When does practice start? August 1st? Yeah, that sounds great . . . No. Let me give you a different mailing address - I don't want anything coming to my home. I don't always get my mail here reliably . . ."

Brian scanned the kitchen quickly to make sure no one had come in while he was talking before he gave the caller Debbie Novotny's home address.

"Yeah, anything you send to me at that address will get to me right away. I promise I'll sign and return the commitment letter for the scholarship as soon as I receive it . . . I really can't thank you enough, Coach . . . Alright. See you in August! Bye!"

Brian hung up the phone with a huge smile plastered across his face. He almost couldn't believe it. He'd only had the tryout with the Pitts soccer coach three days ago and they were already calling him to offer him a full-ride scholarship. Apparently his athletic skills, along with his top notch academic scores, were enough to pave his way to success at one of the best colleges in western Pennsylvania. This was Brian's dream come true. He was going to college and after that he'd be free.

"Sounds to me like you're getting too big for your britches, Sonnyboy," a contemptuous Irish drawl from behind him broke into Brian's momentary sense of elation. "What the fuck was that all about? Hmm?"

"That was the Head Coach for the University of Pittsburgh men's soccer team. They're offering me a full-ride, four year scholarship," Brian couldn't help but brag a little, even though he suspected his father wouldn't be impressed. "I start practice in August."

*Hah!* "Well la-de-dah. Aren't you special now? Going off to some fairy boy college like fucking royalty," Jack sneered, the disdain he felt for his son clearly evident in his tone. "What the fuck do YOU need to go to college for, Sonnyboy? You think you're too good to go out and get a real job like the rest of us? I'll have you know this country was built on the backs of hard working men like me and the rest of the guys down at the plant. And none of us needed no fancy college degree to prove we were men. Only fags and losers waste their time at some boring ass college. So which are you, Sonnyboy? Are you a fag or a loser? Or both?"

"Fuck you, Jack," Brian replied, unable to think up a scathing retort when all he wanted was to get the hell out of the house as quickly as possible.
"Well, if that's the best brilliant come back you can manage, Sonnyboy, are you sure you're smart enough for college?" Jack cackled maniacally at his son's hate-filled glance, raised his beer to take another swig of the tepid liquid and then continued with his toxic spiel. "Wow those fancy college son's of bitches must be bigger idiots than you are if they think your worthless ass is worthy of a scholarship. It'll be a complete wage of their money since we both know you'll fuck it all up somehow. Don't they know you're just another worthless Mick from the wrong side of the tracks - and not too bright of one at that? You've always been a complete waste of space. You'll never amount to a pile of shit. Why the fuck would they want the likes of you staining their school?"

Brian pushed past the old drunk heading towards the television in the next room, trying futilely to ignore his father's spiteful lies and thinking that if he couldn't do that maybe he could drown them out with mindless TV drivel. Jack hadn't tried to hit him since Brian had stood up to him at Christmas, but that didn't mean his father had mellowed even a little bit. It seemed like Jack had merely sublimated all that rage into a steady stream of emotional abuse instead. And no matter how hard Brian tried to steel himself to the daily diatribes, his father's evil words always managed to trickle in somehow. Brian was beginning to suspect that the physical abuse had been easier to deal with than this.

"Oh and don't expect me to contribute one fucking dime to your so called 'higher education'," Jack followed Brian into the family room so he could continue pelting his son with his painful words. "When you fuck it up - and we both know you will eventually - don't come whining to me for help. I've wasted too much money supporting your useless ass already. If you think you're too good to work for a living like the rest of us, you can go to hell before I'll give you anything more. Fucking useless little asswipe. Probably gonna end up sitting around on welfare eating up my tax dollars with your worthless college education doing fuck all good . . ."

"Shut the FUCK up, you stupid old drunk," Brian screeched, turning to confront the sorryass complainer when he just couldn't take any more. "What the hell do you know about anything? If anyone around here is useless, it's you. You drink away all your money and then spend the rest of your life complaining about it. Well, that's NOT going to be me. I'm going to be the biggest fucking success you've ever seen. Then we'll see who's worthless."

Having said his piece, Brian threw open the front door so hard it clanged against the wall and then stomped out of the house. He almost ran to where his car was parked by the curb on the street and climbed inside. It wasn't until he was safe inside the steel and chrome which made up Big Bertha that he started to try and control his heaving breathing.

"Well, so much for getting to enjoy my good news for even a couple minutes," Brian complained to no one in particular as soon as he'd managed to curb his anger a bit. "I should have known today was cursed the minute I got out of bed. Happy fucking birthday to me! Way to go, Jack! You've managed to ruin another year for me without even trying! Fucker!"

"You know he's wrong, Brian," a soft, concerned tenor voice answered him from the passenger seat. "You're smart and talented and a harder worker than Jack ever was. You're going to do great in college. I know you're going to be a huge fucking success no matter what you do," Justin tried to reassure his boy, but he could tell that somehow his words weren't making as much impact as the nasty ones Brian's father tossed out so easily. "And one day when you're rich and famous we'll come back here and shove it all in Jack's face. You just have to hold out a little longer, Brian. A couple more months is all. Come August you'll move into the dorms at school and you never have to look back."

"What the fuck do you know?" Brian spat, his anger at his father finding a focus, albeit an innocent one. "You don't know crap. Just get the fuck out of my car and my life already. And take all your
spineless feel-good drivel with you. I don't need you and your empty words. I don't need anybody."

Justin knew that the pain Brian's words caused him was just a fraction of what his boy was feeling. He knew that Brian was only lashing out at him because there was no one else around. There was no other safe way for Brian to vent his pain and anger. He knew that Brian didn't mean to hurt him.

But it did hurt. It hurt so much that Justin didn't know how he could possibly bear it. He loved Brian so deeply that he'd do anything in his power to help him. Unfortunately, all he could do right now was quietly accept the pain and let himself fade away as Brian had asked.

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"Happy Birthday to you! Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday dear Brian, happy birthday to you!"

The discordant notes of the inane birthday song assaulted Brian's eardrums the moment he entered the Novotny kitchen. He greeted the song with a stoic groan and a grimace. He even submitted to the ensuing bear hugs he was subjected to from both Debbie and Michael. What choice did he have - he was here, after all, to ask Debbie for another favor.

"Yeah, um thanks . . ." Brian said without any enthusiasm at all as soon as he'd been released from the last hug. "Hey, Deb, I just wanted . . ."

"That's all we get? 'Um, thanks'. Geeze, honey, try and sound just a little excited. It's your eighteenth birthday. You're legal! You should be happy," Deb complained.

"Yeah, Brian. We're both eighteen now. It's gonna be great. We can get into clubs now and drink 3.2 beer and everything," Michael chimed in, excited enough for the both of them.

"Whatever, Mikey," Brian couldn't muster up even a smidgen of excitement after the confrontation he'd just had with his father. "It's just another day, you know. There's nothing special about it. Why the fuck would I bother to get all worked up over it. So I was born. So what? It's not like it's some amazing accomplishment or something. Millions of people get born every day and most of them will end up suffering through miserable lives, get old and die. What the fuck is there to celebrate about that?"

"Briiiiannn," Michael whined, unable to disputes his friend's logic but knowing in his gut there must be something wrong with that attitude.

"Can I have some cheese to go with that whine, Mikey," Brian relented enough to crack a joke so that his rant would seem a little less harsh. "Deb, I've got another favor to ask you," Brian went, changing the subject. "I gave your address out to the admissions office at Pitt. They're going to be sending me some stuff and I didn't want my folks intercepting it. I hope that's okay?"

"Pitt? Does that mean you got in, Brian? Did you get the soccer scholarship?" Michael asked, literally hanging on Brian's words as well as his arm where he'd grabbed a hold of his friend.

"Yep. Full-ride. Four years. Room and board included," Brian announced causing both Novotny's to squeak with happiness.

"Good for you, Brian!" Deb yelled at him even though he was standing only two feet away. "Good for you! Well, now. Even if you don't want to celebrate your birthday, we're going to celebrate THAT news. That's a real accomplishment, Brian. I'm so proud of you, honey! Just imagine. You're going to Pitt!"
The rest of the evening was spent with Michael and Debbie fussing over Brian. They had a big Italian pasta dinner, like they always did when Deb was cooking. Afterwards, they all shared the big double chocolate Devils food cake Debbie had baked, even though Brian refused to let them put any birthday candles on top. Both Novotny's did whatever they could to make sure Brian knew he was important and special and that they appreciated him even when his own family seemed like they could care less. And for once Brian let himself be pampered and fussed over. It felt good to have somebody acting like he wasn't a complete failure, a completely worthless piece of shit who'd never amount to anything in life. It felt almost like being loved. Brian needed that tonight of all nights.

After dinner Debbie spent time cleaning up the kitchen while Brian and Michael sprawled on the couch watching television. It felt so good to just relax. Brian relished every single moment in this house. It was his safe haven. It was the only place he had where he could let his guard down.

"You know, Brian," Michael piped up during a commercial break halfway through that night's episode of Cheers. "It's really great, you getting into Pitt and getting a scholarship and all. I mean, that's huge. Really."

"Thanks, Mikey," Brian replied with a genuine smile.

"I'm just so proud of you," Michael added, emphasizing his words with a pat on Brian's thigh. "I know you'll kick ass. You're so smart."

Brian felt a moment of pure pride at hearing such praise from his friend. It felt so good. And the way Michael was looking up at him with such fascination, really helped shore up Brian's injured self-esteem. It was exactly what he'd needed tonight.

As the last commercial ended and the show came back on, Brian's attention returned to the television. Michael's did not. Instead of returning to his end of the couch, the slim youth curled his body up close to Brian's, his head leaning against the taller lad's shoulder. Michael's hand, which was still resting where it had been after patting his friend's thigh amicably a few moments earlier, slid upwards and inwards by several inches. Michael's other hand curled affectionately around Brian's biceps.

And if all that wasn't enough of a tell about the way he was feeling, Michael made things even clearer when he added in a hushed voice, "this is nice, Brian."

Brian felt himself tense up. He didn't have a clue how to respond to Michael's unsubtle advances. He'd suspected for a while now that his friend wanted to be more than friends. To be honest, though, Brian didn't feel at all attracted to Michael. At least not in that way.

Debbie chose that moment to come bustling out of the kitchen. Brian breathed a short-lived sigh of relief. Brian figured that his mother's appearance would prompt Michael to sit up and put a little distance between them. Or maybe Debbie would step in with her usual joking manner and tease them enough that Michael would back off.

Brian was wrong though. When Deb saw her son and his longtime friend seemingly curled up together romantically on the couch, all she did was raise her hand to her chest, smile at the couple affectionately and the move to the wall switch in order to turn the lights down. With one last little huffed chuckle, the woman walked right past the pair and headed up the steps.

"Goodnight, boys!" was all Brian heard as Debbie disappeared.

"Sheesh. I thought she'd never leave," Michael said, adding a proprietary squeeze to Brian's arm
and then looking up with sheer adoration at the birthday boy.

It was too much for Brian. The look of longing in Michael's eyes, the way his one hand kept wandering closer and closer to Brian's crotch, the weight of the smaller man leaning against him - it was all far too intimate. Brian felt uncomfortable. Threatened. This was NOT how he wanted the evening to end. So much for his feeling relaxed and at home here in his safe haven.

"Uh, Mikey . . . I've gotta go," Brian stated, sliding his body towards the edge of the couch as he spoke. "Thanks for dinner and everything, but I better . . ."

"But it's still early Brian. Cheers isn't even over. You don't have to go yet, do you?"

"Yeah, I do . . ."

"Well, okay, I guess," Michael relented but got up nonetheless and followed Brian to the door. And just as the taller youth was about to open the door and slide outside, Michael boldly moved himself so he was blocking the entry. Reaching up and sliding his arms around Brian's neck, the shorter man pulled his friend's face down. Before Brian could even react, Michael had planted a firm wet kiss right on the unready boy's lips.

"Happy birthday, Brian," Michael whispered tentatively as if he was afraid Brian would get angry if he even mentioned the occasion. "And I just want you to know that, no matter what, I'll always be here for you. I always have been and I always will. I'd do anything for you, Brian. Anything. Okay?"

"Yeah, Mikey," Brian answered, too overwhelmed by the emotions he saw in his friend to respond more intelligently. "I . . . I'll see you tomorrow," he added with an innocuous smile.

Then, disentangling Michael's hands from around his neck, Brian sidled past him and out the door, passively resisting the overt demonstration of emotion that he just couldn't deal with by quietly running away.
Chapter 14 - Deconstruction.

Brian moved his right hand up onto the trick’s shoulder in order to steady the guy. In part because of Brian's expert fucking skills, and partly because the twenty-something gym bunny who he'd cajoled into joining him in the back room of Babylon was just a lightweight with no staying power, the guy had already shot his load and was now barely able to stand. Brian himself was only just getting into his groove. No way was he about to let the trick go before he'd gotten his own satisfaction. Hence the need to prop the guy up with one hand while Brian continued to grip his hips with the other as he plowed the fit gym bunny ass.

Pinning the big beefy bunny to the wall seemed to work. Once the guy was immobilized and not flailing around the way he had been before he came, Brian began enjoying himself more thoroughly. He really disliked a guy who didn't know when to keep his ass still - literally. Now though, Brian could concentrate on his own rhythm rather than on trying to check his trick's.

*Ahhhhhh* That was much better. Ten strong thrusts later and Brian felt the telltale signs of his own impending orgasm. Finally. His balls tightened up. His breath hitched for one moment. Then the familiar wave of pure pleasure rolled over him and blocked out, momentarily, his dissatisfaction with the trick, his life and anything else that had been bothering him.

It was only a short respite from the plague of worldly annoyances, though. Even before he'd totally caught his breath, Brian became aware that the gym bunny was squirming around again. He shook his head and rolled his eyes at the rude interruption of his fleeting moment of bliss. Brian quickly pulled out - not taking any care to do it slowly and not giving a damn that he caused the trick discomfort in the process. He tossed the tied off condom into the trash bin next to the door on his way out and headed back to the bar without even a glance at the disappointing trick.

"Gee whiz, Brian! That's, like, your third trip to the back room already and we haven't even been here two whole hours," Michael commented as his extremely popular friend sidled up to the bar, the negativity of his words belied by the adoring and almost reverent look in his eyes.

"Fourth, actually," Brian replied with a lascivious wink. "You know that skinny blond kid who seems to practically LIVE in the backroom - I think his name is 'Todd' or something - well, I let him blow me before you got here. Sort of like a warm up for the rest of the night and all," Brian added, playing to his audience just a bit.

"Fuck, Brian . . ." Michael was too awed to come up with the words needed to respond.

Brian smiled down at his longtime friend. Michael was still a shy little virgin himself, in spite of
the fact that Brian had been bringing him along to the clubs on Liberty Avenue since Brian's eighteenth birthday a few months ago. So far the kid hadn't even rustled up enough courage to dance with anyone, let alone actually fuck someone. Instead, Michael spent his time trotting along at Brian's heels like a lost little puppy, holding his friend's drinks when needed, acting as the permanently designated driver and living vicariously through the tales of his Idol's sexual exploits.

Brian, of course, didn't mind the ego boost he got from being so idolized. In fact, he often exaggerated his experiences just a tad - it had become almost a game to see how much he could shock poor Mikey. The way Michael bragged to others about Brian's exploits was about on par with the way he talked about those superheroes in his favorite comics. Even when Mikey's fawning got a little too obsequious, it was hard NOT to feed into those fantasies. Brian liked how important it made him feel.

Brian waved to Ike, his favorite bartender, and held up his empty beer bottle in a mute gesture that clearly indicated he was ready for another. Brian let Ike fuck him every couple months and Ike kindly ignored the fact that Brian was underage. It was a good system. Everyone's needs were met; Brian got to drink, Ike got to fuck a hot twink and everybody went home happy. As far as Brian was concerned, that was just another of the costs of living the life he'd chosen. Lucky for Brian, sex was a currency he understood and had an endless supply of.

As soon as Ike handed over his fresh beer and Brian had taken that first slow swallow, he tuned back into whatever it was Michael had been babbling about while he'd been distracted.

"I just can't believe you're leaving for college tomorrow. It's, like, the end of an era or something. I mean, it's really gonna suck around here without you, Bri," Michael was whining as he sipped at his own diet Pepsi.

"You make it sound like I'm going off to Timbuktu or something, Mikey. I'm just moving into the dorms on campus," Brian interrupted with a chuckle. "You DO know I'm only going to be at Pitt, right? I mean, it's less than five miles away from your Mom's house, Mikey. Plus, I'll still be picking up the occasional weekend shift at the Diner - at least till I find something on Campus."

"I know, but you won't exactly be around much anymore, Bri. I won't get to see you everyday like in high school. And I bet you're going to be too busy to hang out - you'll be studying shit all the time and playing soccer and going to college parties and all that crap . . . Meanwhile, I'll just be working my ass off as the lowliest stock boy at the Big Q and living at home with Ma. Fuck, this just SOOOO sucks." The whining went on.

"I'm not going to totally fucking disappear, Mikey," Brian tried to reassure his friend, even though he knew Michael had a point. "Besides, I thought you were going to take some classes at Allegheny Community College and maybe go on to university yourself in a year or two. Between working full-time and taking classes, it's not like you're gonna be bored or anything, Mikey."

"But it's not ever going to be the same, Bri," Michael insisted. "I'll miss you."

"Fuck, Mikey. You're so pathetic," Brian shook his head, uncomfortable with his friend's display of so much messy emotion. "You know I'll still love you right?" Brian said with a half-serious smirk, trying to ease the situation. "Always have . . ."

"Always will?" Michael replied, questioningly.

"Come here, Mikey," Brian wrapped one arm around his shorter friend's shoulders, pulling him in and leaving a big, sloppy, wet kiss on Michael's lips - anything to distract him from more overly sentimental discussions like that one. "Now, will you stop with all the whining so I can enjoy my
last night of freedom before I head off into the deepest darkest jungles of academia, Mikey?"

Michael playfully pushed Brian away, as if the kiss meant as little to him as Brian made it seem. Brian pretended not to notice the way Michael continued to gaze up at him with a strange, doting glint in his dark brown eyes, or the way the smaller man kept his arm wrapped possessively around Brian's waist even after several minutes. Brian thought to himself that it was a good thing he WAS off to college tomorrow, if only to give him a little space and time away from Michael. He owed Michael and Debbie so much - he didn't think he would have survived the past few years without them - but all the attention was sometimes suffocating. Right now being a perfect example.

Time for Brian to make a break for it.

Brian quickly turned around so his back was to the bar and, in the process, he dislodged Michael's arm from his waist. He quickly scanned the dance floor for a likely distraction. About twenty meters away he saw a tall, slender, dark-haired beauty, his shirt tucked into the back of his belt, with big muscular shoulders and a nicely rounded ass. As a distraction, he'd do nicely!

"Aha! My next victim," Brian announced before Michael could start into another emotional spiel. Brian drained the rest of his beer, set the empty on the bar and winked at his friend before sauntering off towards the boy waiting for him on the dance floor. "See you in a bit, Mikey!"

Michael watched Brian as he wended his way through the crowd with assured ease. The expression on Michael's face was hard to read. There was admiration mixed with disapproval. There was longing, lust and need. All of which were intermixed with more than a smattering of jealousy.

As soon as Brian reached the guy he'd been targeting, leaning in so he could mold his long lean body up against that of his prey, Michael turned back towards the bar. He'd seen Brian's act before - many, many times. The outcome was already a foregone conclusion. No need to watch it play out again.

Several other pairs of eyes, however, remained fixed on the tall, auburn-haired youth's movements.

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One pair - a bright crystal blue - was full of protective sadness. Justin had been keeping his distance from Brian ever since he'd been ordered away on his charge's disastrous birthday. He was trying to respect Brian's request that Justin butt out of his life. Sometimes it wasn't that easy, though.

Granted, Brian wasn't in constant physical danger anymore. The sad, sensitive, auburn-haired little boy that Justin had once kept company with after each of Jack's beatings was now a big, strapping, well-built man. Brian had proven he could hold his own against school bullies, cheating ex's, heartless teachers and even his abusive father. He was physically strong. To look at him, no one would ever consider Brian weak or defenseless. But no matter how strong his body was, Justin knew Brian was still deeply vulnerable on the inside.

What had Justin worrying more and more these days was the way Brian seemed to be closing himself off emotionally. Every day, the boy Justin loved grew colder and more cynical. Brian had never trusted easily, but now, with the exception of Michael and Debbie, he didn't seem to trust anyone. Brian's disdain for the rest of humanity was destroying his innate compassion and making him cruel.
What he'd done to his ex, Lars, was just one, albeit glaring, example of the unwanted changes Justin saw in Brian. It was the little things that Justin glimpsed every day that had the blond guardian even more worried. It was the indifference with which Brian treated the men he used for sex. It was the contempt in Brian's eyes when he looked at others. It was the way his boy seemed to want to isolate himself from anyone who offered him even a modicum of kindness. It was the sarcastic pessimism with which he looked at life in general these days.

This new, harder-hearted Brian, was what worried Justin more than anything. Brian's life was really just beginning. He was heading off to college. His education, his career, his future, were all there waiting for him. The youth should be optimistic, happy and looking forward to the next day.

So why was Brian acting even more depressed than usual? Why was the kid drinking and fucking around like this was his last night of freedom. To look at him you'd think he was dreading his bright and shining future.

This was NOT what Justin wanted for his Brian. But how did you protect someone's heart? How could he prove to someone who'd been hurt as often as Brian had that it was still possible to find love and happiness? How did you teach trust? Justin felt like he'd failed miserably in his promise to keep Brian safe. But what else could he do?

Unfortunately, all Justin could do was wait and watch and hope that the cruelty growing in Brian's soul wouldn't suffocate the goodness he knew was still there.

In the meantime though, Justin found he couldn't bear to watch any further, at least not tonight. As Brian threaded his index finger through the belt loop of the dark-haired muscular trick and proceeded to tug the man after him in the direction of the backroom, Justin decided he too had seen enough. It wasn't so much that Brian was off to fuck yet another trick, it was that not even Brian seemed to find any true pleasure in the prospect. Seeing the almost vacant look in his young friend's eyes as he led the trick away from the dance floor made Justin's heart ache. He couldn't watch. It was better to just let himself fade away again . . . At least until Brian truly needed him and he could hopefully do some real good.

And so, the kind, crystal blue eyes disappeared, leaving only two other sets of eyes focused on Brian’s continued progress to the back with his trick.

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"That him?" asked the lanky, thirty-something man sitting at a table hidden by the shadows of the overhead catwalk.

His companion nodded his head as Brian and his most recent trick sauntered by, the motion causing the boy's wavy coppery-brown hair to flop into his eyes for a second. “Yeah, that’s Brian Kinney. Unfortunately.”

“Shit, Nielsen! From the way you were talkin’ I figured the guy was the devil incarnate or something. But I don’t see no horns or tail on that little beauty.” the older man said, his appreciation for the subject of their conversation more than evident in his voice and on his long oval face.

“Oh, he’s plenty horny, believe me,” the young man scoffed and raised his beer in a mock salute to the sight of Brian’s retreating backside.

“Hmmm. And here I thought this little job you wanted me to do was going to be a hardship,” the man with the mousey brown hair commented, raising his own bottle to join in the toast.
“He might not be hard on the eyes, Gary, but he’s still the biggest asshold you’ll ever meet,” the boy replied as he settled his beer back on the tabletop. “So, you understand what you’re supposed to do, right?”

“Duh! It’s a piece of cake. I invite the kid back to the party at the hotel and get him there using whatever means necessary. No problem. I’ve got this covered,” the man said with what he probably thought was a reassuring wink to his co-conspirator.

“Right. Then we teach the fucker a lesson. After I’m done with him he’ll regret fucking with me and spreading those damn photos all over school.” Lars’ little tirade was interrupted at that point by a sniggering Gary, who just couldn’t stop himself from laughing at the memory of the photo of Nielsen with that stupid elephant thong on. “Shut the fuck up, Gary. It’s not fucking funny. Because of Kinney and all the shit he stirred up I spent the last four months of my senior year at a military academy in fucking Scranton! Then I get back here and find out that not only did he not take any shit for his little prank, but Golden-Boy Kinney’s got a full-ride scholarship to Pitt. Well, let’s just see how he like his little college send off party . . .”

“Remind me not to ever get on YOUR bad side, Nielsen,” Gary shook his head at the pure venom he heard in the boy’s voice.

“Just do what I asked and it won’t be a problem, Gary.”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s practically in the bag. I’ll get him to your little shin-dig, Nielsen, but you’re gonna owe me big time for this, kid.”

“I already paid you for tonight’s drugs, Gary. I don’t owe you nothing. If anything, you owe me for not squealing on you when I got caught with that pot at school that time. I could have gone to fucking jail, but I didn’t say a word, did I? No. So, don’t be giving me shit now, Gary.” Lars railed at the presumption of the older man.

“Whatever, kid. Only, I’m thinking that this here job is worth a little more to you than just the price of the drugs I got you. This is personal and I bet you’d be willing to pay just about anything to get your revenge,” the conniving older man said with an unscrupulous smile. “I’ll go easy on you though, Nielsen. Instead of cash, I’ll take my payment out in trade. Say, maybe, I get a piece of the young stud’s ass - after you’re done with it, of course - in partial payment for me getting him there for you. I’m thinking that sweet little ass of Kinney’s is tighter than it needs to be and could use a little extra attention . . .”

“Fine with me. After I’m done with him I don’t give a rat's ass what happens to the little shit. You’re welcome to my sloppy seconds anytime, Gary,” the young man rejoined with a spiteful laugh. “Just get Kinney to the hotel by one so my guests will have their entertainment before the night’s over.”

And, with a last nod to the other man, the young brunet chugged the dregs of his beer before moving off, leaving his partner in crime alone at the small, darkened table.

Twenty minutes later Brian was back at the bar with a fresh beer in hand regaling Mikey with anecdotes about his most recent backroom trip. Michael listened with awe to his friend’s story, his emotions waffling between extreme embarrassment and sheer adulation. Fuck, the things Brian did were mind boggling to the untried young virgin. If only Michael was half as daring as his idol, the fun he could have . . .

Just as Brian was getting to the best part of his story though, this older guy shouldered his way between Brian and Michael in order to get to the bar. In the process, the newcomer’s elbow
knocked over Brian's beer. The bottle rolled off the edge of the bar and crashed to the floor, dumping its contents all down the front of its former owner.

"Shit! Watch what the fuck you're doing, asswipe," the now beer drenched brunet complained as he shook drops of liquid off his shirt.

"Sorry, man. Wow, I really got you, didn't I? I'm really sorry," the klutzy new guy apologized as he grabbed a stack of paper napkins and dabbed ineffectually at Brian's wet shirt. "Shit! Let me get you another beer - it's the least I am do, man. What were you drinking?"

"Don't bother. Just get the fuck lost," Brian was too disgusted with his now ruined apparel to deal with the guy.

"No. I insist," the oldster maintained and turned to the bartender with an order for another of whatever his 'friend' had been drinking.

The barkeep promptly handed over two more beers to the klutz. Then, while Brian and Michael's attention was diverted over the brunet's wardrobe issues, the man slyly dropped a small white pill into the open neck of one bottle. Donning a jovial smile, he turned and offered the doctored drink to the tall good-looking young brunet that he'd been targeting all night.

"Here you go. I'm really sorry about knocking over your other drink, man. Don't hold it against me, huh? I'm sorry I'm such a fucking klutz sometimes."

Brian finally looked up at the man who was holding out a fresh beer to him. The guy was a bit older - probably in his thirties or so - with a long oval face and a high forehead. The guy's bloodshot eyes were too wide set and his nose was too big for him to ever be considered very attractive, but he wasn't a complete troll either. His nondescript brown eyes were surrounded by lashes that were a shade or two too light in color, which made it seem almost like they were missing, but which at least gave the face some character. The guy wore his thin mousey brown hair longish - the lank curls draped past his collar - but he didn't really have enough hair to make the style look good. His shirt was unbuttoned one button too far, allowing two thick gold chains adorning a sparsely haired, not-so-muscular chest to show. To Brian, the man appeared to been left too long in the 70's. The only really nice thing about the guy was the fact that he'd bought Brian a replacement beer.

"Whatever," Brian conceded, accepting the proffered beer and raising the bottle in a silent toast to the guy before taking a healthy swig.

"I wish there was something I could do about your shirt," the klutz continued on, taking advantage of any chance to prolong the conversation. "If you want, I could pay to have it cleaned for you. I don't think it's ruined or anything. It's just cotton, right. I'm sure that my dry cleaner would be able to take care of that for you, no problem."

"Forget about it. It's no big deal," Brian replied, turning away and, in essence, dismissing the man.

"No really. I insist! It's the least I can do," the intruder refused to take the hint and moved his own body so he was still in Brian's direct line of sight. "I'm Gary, by the way. I'm sure I've seen you around here but I don't think we've ever met," he said holding out his hand as he introduced himself.

Brian reluctantly shook the offered hand. "Brian."
"Well, nice to meet you, Brian. To new friends," Gary held up his own bottle in a toast in honor of making the boy's acquaintance. "Now, why don't you finish off that one," the man indicated the half drunk beer in Brian's hand, "and I'll buy you one more just to make sure there's no hard feelings. Okay? Hey, Ike, two more, please!"

Brian hesitated, not sure exactly what this guy thought he was up to buying him beers - if the dweeb thought Brian was going to fuck him just because he bought a couple rounds of drinks he was sadly mistaken. But, then again, who was he to turn down a free drink? Maybe someday, when he was rich and successful, he'd be pickier about who he let buy him drinks, but today . . . Well, what the fuck. Brian would take the drink and then deal with guy later if he thought it bought him more than a few minutes of Brian's time.

The younger man gulped down the rest of the opened beer and accepted the second bottle with a noncommittal smile. Neither Brian nor Michael noted the sinister smile Gary hid by moving his own beer to his lips as Brian drained the last of that first beer. The sly glint in the older man's eyes didn't register either as they all three turned towards the brightly lit up dance floor.

"Well, I hope the rest of your night goes better after this, Brian," Gary offered politely. "Have you got any after-hours plans?"

"Nothing special," Brian responded as he leaned back against the bar and scoped out the men waiting for him on the dance floor.

"I'm sure someone like you will find something to keep you busy," their new friend offered with a suggestive snigger. "But, if you don't have any other plans, I happen to know of this party over at the Hilton. The guy who invited me promised there'd be plenty of entertainment, if you get my meaning. The dude's fucking loaded, you know, and he always manages to attract the hottest guys to his little get togethers. If you wanted, you could always tag along with me. The more, the merrier, you know."

Brian stood up and was surprised at the momentary dizziness he experienced. He blinked and rubbed at his eyes briefly. Shit, he felt a lot more drunk than he'd expected to be this early in the evening. He tried to think back and count how many drinks he'd had, but soon got distracted.

". . . The last party I went to that this guy threw turned into a three day orgy, man," the klutzy new guy was still going on and on about the party he was off to. "And the guys . . . Well, the guys were . . . Just fucking amazing, that's all I can say. There was this one yoga instructor there who could suck his own dick. I barely made it home with my dick in one piece - it was almost rubbed raw after that weekend, you know . . ."

Listening to this Gary guy talk about the party he was heading to was making Brian even hornier than usual. "He could really shuck hissss own dick," Brian asked, noting in some far off corner of his mind that he was slurring his words pretty badly at this point and he should probably stop drinking soon. "I gotta shee that!"

"Well then, let's go. It's gonna be one hell of a party! I'm sure my buddy won't mind if I bring you along, Brian," Gary had already put his arm around Brian's shoulders and started leading him away from the bar.

"But, Brian? What about me? I thought we were gonna hang out tonight and all," Michael complained, pissed off that his friend was blowing off their last night together before Brian moved into the college dorms.

"Nother time, Mikey," Brian said with a dismissive wave to his friend. "Shomethin' came up. You
know how it is. Places to go, guys to fuck. Shee you round, Mikey," Brian added as he stumbled along next to his new pal, Gary, who's arm around Brian's waist was now pretty much the only holding the young man up on his feet. "Shoooo, less go shee the guy who can shuck, I mean suck, his own dick."

"Right this way, my sweet little fucked up friend," Gary whispered as he walked Brian out of the club.

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Brian woke up naked and alone in a strange hotel room. From the amount of light pouring in through the uncurtained window next to the bed it had to be fairly late in the day. He rolled to his side, facing away from the too-bright daylight, only to discover that even that small movement caused ripples of pain to jolt throughout his entire body. He thought it would be wise to lie still - maybe to never move again - but his resolve to become a statue was undermined by the foul stench of the section of bedding he'd rolled into. With a tremendous effort he worked to focus his blurry vision, only to discover that the pillow he was lying on was covered with drying vomit. Brian scuttled backwards in utter disgust, ignoring the pain his abrupt actions caused. Unfortunately, his movements were uncoordinated and in his breakneck attempt to get away from the foulness, he overshot the edge of the bed, landing in a heap on the dirty carpet.

That's when he really started to panic.

In his fall from the bed, Brian landed hard on his ass. And, while his body ached over pretty much every square centimeter, that fall brought to his attention exactly how much more sore his ass was than the rest. That pain was sharp and it wasn't just his muscles that ached, either. The pain continued up inside him. Gingerly reaching down with one hand, Brian felt a sticky wetness where there really shouldn't be. When he looked at his fingers, they were red.

He quickly looked away but not quickly enough to stem the nausea that the sight elicited. Slapping his other hand over his jaws to try and hold back the rising bile, Brian bolted towards to bathroom. He didn't exactly make it all the way to the toilet, but at least most of the puke landed on the tile floor instead of the bedroom carpeting. After that, though, he only managed dry heaves for several more minutes before he finally felt safe enough to move away from the porcelain throne.

Moving sluggishly, Brian crawled over to the shower/tub enclosure and hefted himself inside. He flipped on the water and huddled in the bottom of the tub while the lukewarm water sluiced over him. His mind was meanwhile likewise inundated with flashes of memory, unwanted images from the prior night, and pictures he didn't want to see but couldn't stop.

There were men, lots of strange, mostly faceless men. They'd given him more to drink, more drugs, then they'd started pawing at him. Brian remembered feeling as if he was paralyzed. He was aware of what was happening but felt helpless to stop it. He hadn't said 'No' to what was being done to him - he hadn't been capable of forming any coherent words. All he knew was that he was no longer in control. Not of his mind or his words or even of his body. And all those men had taken over, taken control, and he'd been unable to do anything about it while they'd used his body for their own pleasure.

Sitting there, now shaking uncontrollably, he tried to wipe his mind blank and just let the clean water wash everything away.

Sometime later - probably much later since the water was now ice cold - he realized that much of the moisture on his face was from his own tears. Brian didn't remember when he'd started to cry. He also didn't remember when the worried looking young blond who was sitting on the floor next
to the tub had appeared. All things considered, Brian figured it was probably a good thing that time seemed to be slipping by more rapidly than usual. The sooner this passed, the sooner he could forget.

"Brian? Brian, please, talk to me. Please," pleaded the frightened voice of his longtime blond companion finally broke through Brian's consciousness. "Tell me what happened, Brian. Please. What's wrong? How can I help you?"

The caring fingers caressing his face and sifting through his hair were almost enough to break Brian a second time. He really wanted to give into those sympathetic touches. He wanted to let Justin take care of him and make it all better. But he knew from long experience that nothing would help. He was alone. He was the only one he could rely on and he was the only one who could make it better for himself. He was once again in control and that was the way he intended things to remain from there on out.

With a supreme effort, Brian pulled himself to his feet and turned off the shower. He ignored Justin's beseeching presence. He dried himself with a threadbare hotel towel and then calmly proceeded out into the main room where he eventually found his clothing.

The one other thing he found in the hotel room was a pile of Polaroid pictures. Each one showed Brian being fucked by a different man. The one on top of the stack was the only one that contained a familiar face - his former 'boyfriend', Lars - sneering at the camera while he skewered an apparently unconscious Brian.

Written on the edge of the picture in Lars' familiar handwriting was the caption, 'Thanks for the memories, Brian!'

Brian crushed the photo in his hand. He dropped it back on top of the others and turned around. Without saying a word he left the dingy hotel room, refusing to look back. He knew he would eventually be able to put this too away into a separate compartment of his mind and mostly forget about it. That's just what Brian Kinney did. That was the only way he knew to deal with things. The only way he knew how to cope.

That was how he took control of his world and there was one thing he knew - he would NEVER relinquish control of himself or his world to anyone ever again.

Chapter End Notes

1/25/15 - The making of Brian Kinney is now complete. . . TAG
Chapter Notes

Ready for the impossible - a low-angst, Brian-torture-free chapter? Hope you find it refreshing instead of boring. I think we all needed a break after the last chapter. Enjoy! TAG

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 15 - Commendation.

"Hey, Kinney! Hold up a sec."

Brian turned at the sound of someone calling his name from the soccer practice field. When he saw that the person hollering for him was his old friend, Winnie, he waved and smiled. He slumped back against the high chain link fence that edged the field, waiting while the Women's Varsity Midfielder jogged over.

"Well, if it isn't the always lovely Winnie Taylor. How's tricks, Win," Brian joked as soon as the girl was within hearing distance.

"Shouldn't I be asking YOU that, Brian?" Winnie replied with an unrestrained laugh as she eyed the hot looking dirty blond boy that her favorite Junior Class stud had been talking with before she interrupted.

"Touché, my dear," Brian answered with his tongue planted in his cheek and a playful leer on his handsome face. Turning to the boy who was waiting impatiently to regain his attention, Brian commanded, 'Bailor Hall, room 420. Be there tonight at nine and I'll put you through my very own personal 'orientation program'. By the time I'm through coaching you, I'm sure you'll be UP for anything Pitt can throw at you."

The tempting blond boy just gave Brian one more coy smile and then ambled away without saying a word. Brian spent several moments admiring the plump backside clad only in a pair of rather skimpy soccer shorts before he turned his attention back to his female companion. He didn't seem to mind in the least the way Winnie was chuckling at his antics.

"Shit, Brian! Haven't you already fucked your way through the entire male population of the dorms yet?" she prodded him.

"That's the beauty of the college system, Win," Brian replied, draping his long arm over the shorter girl's shoulders and leading her towards the field house. "Every fall the Admissions Department provides me with a whole new batch of 'Fresh Men'. It's really very kind of them, don't you think. And I just love Fresh Men, don't you?"

"I don't think ANYONE likes freshmen as much as you, Brian," Winnie answered, still chuckling at her promiscuous friend.

"You're probably right," Brian agreed and laughed along.

"But I didn't call you over just to discuss your overactive sex life, Bri. I actually have some news

Commendation

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Chapter 15 - Commendation.

"Hey, Kinney! Hold up a sec."

Brian turned at the sound of someone calling his name from the soccer practice field. When he saw that the person hollering for him was his old friend, Winnie, he waved and smiled. He slumped back against the high chain link fence that edged the field, waiting while the Women's Varsity Midfielder jogged over.

"Well, if it isn't the always lovely Winnie Taylor. How's tricks, Win," Brian joked as soon as the girl was within hearing distance.

"Shouldn't I be asking YOU that, Brian?" Winnie replied with an unrestrained laugh as she eyed the hot looking dirty blond boy that her favorite Junior Class stud had been talking with before she interrupted.

"Touché, my dear," Brian answered with his tongue planted in his cheek and a playful leer on his handsome face. Turning to the boy who was waiting impatiently to regain his attention, Brian commanded, 'Bailor Hall, room 420. Be there tonight at nine and I'll put you through my very own personal 'orientation program'. By the time I'm through coaching you, I'm sure you'll be UP for anything Pitt can throw at you."

The tempting blond boy just gave Brian one more coy smile and then ambled away without saying a word. Brian spent several moments admiring the plump backside clad only in a pair of rather skimpy soccer shorts before he turned his attention back to his female companion. He didn't seem to mind in the least the way Winnie was chuckling at his antics.

"Shit, Brian! Haven't you already fucked your way through the entire male population of the dorms yet?" she prodded him.

"That's the beauty of the college system, Win," Brian replied, draping his long arm over the shorter girl's shoulders and leading her towards the field house. "Every fall the Admissions Department provides me with a whole new batch of 'Fresh Men'. It's really very kind of them, don't you think. And I just love Fresh Men, don't you?"

"I don't think ANYONE likes freshmen as much as you, Brian," Winnie answered, still chuckling at her promiscuous friend.

"You're probably right," Brian agreed and laughed along.

"But I didn't call you over just to discuss your overactive sex life, Bri. I actually have some news
for you that I think you'll like. My sorority sister, Lindsey, was telling me the other day that the Art Department is looking for models for their Life Drawing classes. As soon as I heard that I thought to myself, who do I know that's looking for a job and loves to hang around naked for long periods of time? Strangely enough, your name just popped into my mind."

"Ahhhh, Win! You don't know how good it makes me feel to know you think of ME naked," Brian teased as he held open the field house doors and then followed his friend inside heading towards the locker rooms.

"Stop it, you! A girl can dream, can't she?" Winnie punctuated her words with a quick jab to Brian's biceps. "Anyway, I hear it pays pretty good, and just think of all those hot young art students admiring your body all the time. It might even help you out with your problem of running through all the freshmen too quickly," Winnie teased right back. "If you're interested, just say the word and I'll give Lindsey your number."

"Sure. Why the hell not? It sounds like easy money," Brian confirmed. "Go ahead and give your friend my digits."

"Will do, Bri. See you later!" And with that they both disappeared into their respective locker rooms.

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Brian strutted into the large open studio space wearing only a ratty old robe but acting like he was draped in the most expensive and regal vestments ever made. He loved the feeling of all the art students' eyes following his every step. He threaded his way between the offset rows of easels set up in a semicircle around a central raised dais where a red velvet chaise lounge was waiting for him. Brian politely nodded his head at the grey-haired older woman who was teaching the class as she briefly introduced him to the class before proceeding to give some last minute instructions to the students.

This was the fifth time Brian had modeled for one of Professor Frazer's classes, so he already knew the drill and didn't bother to wait for directions. He quickly mounted the three steps up to the platform, casually untied the belt of the robe and the let the fabric slide off his shoulders. He allowed himself one ego-boosting moment of pause as he stood there completely nude and listened to the muffled, involuntary gasps of appreciation which a couple of the less disciplined art students couldn't hold back. Then, with the ghost of a smirk on his elegantly handsome lips, he lowered himself onto the waiting chair in the most comfortable position he could find.

After Brian's initial, dramatic entrance, the class settled right down. There was a bit of noisy commotion while sketchbooks were opened, paper was shuffled, pencils were sharpened and such like, but soon enough a blanket of silence descended over room. The only sounds after that were the scratching of twenty-some pencils over paper and the occasional hushed comments of the professor as she went from one easel to the next and critiqued the students' work.

All Brian had to do for the next two hours was lay there and try not to move too much - which wasn't really as easy as it sounded. It was difficult not to shift around as his muscles became cramped from holding the same pose for so long. It was also just plain boring after awhile. The warm, slightly dusty atmosphere of the art classroom combined with the oddly relaxing noises made by the various artists with the pencils and quiet chatting, and Brian found himself almost drifting off several times. In a valiant effort to try and stay awake, Brian tried to focus on the faces of the students he could see and amused himself by making up elaborate life stories for each.

Right in front of his couch he could see Winnie's friend Lindsey. Brian had liked the tall blonde
girl right from the start. The one word that came to mind every time he saw Lindsey was 'vivacious'. She was always throwing herself passionately into whatever she was doing at the time, whether it was her art classes, her sorority's philanthropy events, or her vehement support of various campus political endeavors. From what Brian could tell so far, Lindsey was smart, sophisticated and sassy. She also obviously came from money, but had somehow escaped becoming snobbish despite her background. And, no matter what she was involved with, she almost always seemed to have fun doing whatever she did. She was a refreshing contrast to the image-conscious, cynical, far-too-full-of-himself side of Brian Kinney.

Brian's boredom must have been obvious from his face right then, because just as he started to yawn, the model saw Lindsey wink at him and deliberately knock a tin pail full of charcoal sticks off the edge of her easel creating a loud clang. The resulting moment of chaos gave Brian a chance to stretch a bit before he carefully rearranged himself back into his former pose. After Lindsey finished apologizing profusely to her professor and fellow students, she swiftly picked up the fallen art supplies and the went back to her own sketch with only a quirky smile aimed in Brian's direction. He sent her back an appreciative wink and smile of his own then looked away before he was tempted to further mischief.

Brian scanned over the other faces within his direct line of vision - careful not to move his head even while he was looking around him. This class was pretty evenly divided between men and women. He liked it better when there were more male students, for obvious reasons, but didn't really mind being ogled by either sex. What he didn't care for was when the female students would flock up to introduce themselves and fawn over him immediately after the class was over. That had happened consistently after almost every class he'd modeled for so far.

He was determined that today would be different, though. He really wasn't in the mood to try and politely discourage a bunch of 'MRS' degree candidates. Today, he'd much prefer if that nice looking, dark-haired twink over in the back row with the artsy van dyke beard would come up and introduce himself instead. He wouldn't mind being fawned over by that guy in the least. To that end, Brian assiduously devoted himself to eye fucking the hot looking young man throughout the remainder of the class.

As focused as he was on the artistic bearded guy, time flew by and Brian didn't really take in much more of the rest of the class. He definitely didn't notice the quiet presence of a familiar young blond staring at him from the far corner of the classroom. Nobody else in the room seemed to notice the young man either - not even Professor Frazer who walked within centimeters of where Justin was standing when she went to grab a new gum eraser for a student from off the shelf next to the back sink.

Since Brian had left home and moved into the college dorms, Justin found that his charge hadn't needed his protection much. Brian was permanently free of Jack's influence - the young college student hadn't returned home even to visit his parents in the last two and a half years. The young man had also made a point of staying as far away from trouble as he possibly could while at school - always finding a way out of any threatening situation without a fight. Accordingly, there were no longer any overt threats to Brian's physical well being and no reason for Justin to hover protectively.

Brian had also closed himself off from almost all possible emotional threats as well. Generally speaking, Brian was easy to get along with, he loved a good party, and didn't easily take offence or judge anyone except in joking. This equated to him being just as superficially popular as ever - if not more so - accumulating numerous acquaintances and shallow friendships amongst his fellow
students, the people in his dorm and even in the athletic crowd. And, of course, he'd had more than his fair share of sexual encounters.

But in spite of his seeming notoriety on campus, Brian hadn't made more than one or two true friends in all that time. He would joke and clown around like everyone else, he'd flirt and fuck around wantonly, but rarely volunteered any personal information about himself. Letting anyone in - truly trusting someone - was just too difficult for him. Consequently, nobody opened up to him either, hence the lack of any deep friendships. Granted, he had kept himself safe from being hurt emotionally, but also isolated himself at the same time.

However, even though the manifest threats to Brian's safety were now gone, Justin still kept a distant eye on his boy. He'd long ago promised to watch over Brian and he wasn't going to stop now. For the most part, though, he tried to stay hidden - observing from the mists of whatever other dimension he occupied when he wasn't needed by Brian, or at the very least keeping his physical distance from the young man when he was here on the same plane. Brian continued to ignore the concerned young blond whenever he couldn't avoid seeing him. In his own highly compartmentalized mind he'd stashed Justin away where he barely even thought of his unusual childhood friend. Luckily, amid the busy world of a college campus it was exceedingly simple to avoid thinking about even the mere subject of Justin Taylor. And for Justin, it hurt too much to watch Brian from afar while being intentionally ignored, so his visits had become fewer and fewer.

That didn't mean that Justin had altogether given up on Brian, though. He hadn't forgotten those long ago dreams where he and Brian had been together, romantically involved, a couple. Somehow, someway, Justin knew they were destined to be. It might seem impossible now, but Justin had faith and all the time in the world. He would wait. It was all he could do for the moment. And, while he waited, it didn't hurt to occasionally take a stealthy peek every so often at the subject of his dreams.

Justin had put his hopes for a future with the MAN he would one day love on hold while Brian had still been a child - back then he'd concentrated solely on being a friend and protector. But Brian wasn't a child anymore. He was all grown up. He'd become a gorgeous, strong, exceedingly handsome man. He'd become the very man Justin had dreamed of all those years ago. If anything, he'd become even more beautiful than the dream lover Justin remembered from his teenaged fantasies.

So who could blame him if Justin peeped every so often?

Of course, trying to give Brian some space meant that Justin couldn't really justify popping uninvited into Brian's room. He knew that Brian would NOT appreciate such a blatant invasion of his privacy. And while he could always stalk Brian at one of the more public locales the wild youth frequented - nearby gay bars, clubs or even, when he was acting his seediest, the local bath house - Justin hated watching Brian when he was with other guys almost more than not seeing him at all.

But, thanks to Brian's new modeling job, Justin had finally found a good place to indulge in his obsession with Brian watching. Here, in the familiar and neutral environs of this college art studio, Justin could get an eyeful of Brian without any guilt and without constantly fighting down his own jealousy. Here, he was free to revel in the sight of the man he loved in all his unclothed glory.

And, FUCK, was it ever glorious!

Now, if only incorporeal spirits could jack off . . .
At ten till, Professor Frazer called out to the class to finish up and turn in their drawings as they left. Brian gingerly flexed his cold muscles a few times in order to start restoring his circulation before venturing to stand up. He barely had his robe back on before a crowd of fans began to assemble, waiting for him at the foot of the steps leading down from his perch.

Brian sighed as he scanned the group. Damn! More clueless straight chicks. Where the fuck did beard guy disappear to? He'd thought, after the looks they'd been exchanging for most of the last hour, the guy would have got the hint. Oh well.

"Excuse me. Excuse me," the WASPishly polite yet insistent voice of Lindsey Peterson, pierced through the rest of the chattering as the elegant young lady ruthlessly elbowed her way through the throngs waiting to pounce on Brian. "Hey, Brian. If you've got a minute, I'd like to go over our Econ project with you now before you head off."

Brian's expression must have betrayed his confusion - he wasn't actually taking Econ this term - even as he stepped down to meet Lindsey.

"You didn't already forget the paper we have due for Friday in Econ, did you?" Lindsay insisted with an obvious wink.

"Of course not. I'd be happy to discuss it with you as soon as I'm dressed, Lindsay," Brian played along, willing to wait and see what the girl had up her sleeve.

Completely disregarding all the other students who'd been waiting to bombard Brian, Lindsay took hold of her friend's elbow and hustled him off through the crowd. In spite of her willowy build and proper manners, the young lady apparently had no problem plowing several of the more insistent fangirls out of their way as she escorted Brian back to the small closet/changing room where his clothing was waiting. Brian was grinning the whole way, thoroughly impressed at the ease with which she was extracting him from the unwanted situation.

"Take your time changing, Bri. I'll get Professor Frazer to shoo this lot out of here for you. Fucking vultures!" Lindsay whispered as she officiously closed the door behind Brian, popping the lock on the knob as she did so that Brian was safe from outside attacks.

It only took two minutes for Brian to get his clothes back on, but he waited a full ten before cautiously peeking out to door to see if the coast was clear. By then, most of the hordes had left, thankfully, and Brian felt safe enough to come out of hiding. Lindsay and Professor Frazer were waiting a few meters away, both apparently wanting to talk to their favorite model.

"Brian, I'm so sorry about all that," Professor Frazer started immediately as soon as she saw her model emerge. "I didn't think college art students would be so unprofessional as to harass a model - even if he is a handsome a model as you, my dear. There must have been ten women waiting to pounce on you back there. I don't think any of my prior Life Drawing models have had quite so much of an impact," the woman chuckled, remembering the scene.

"It WAS a little bit like a feeding frenzy in a tank of sharks," Lindsay added, flickers of mirth lighting up her brown eyes. "If I hadn't pulled you out of there when I did, Brian, I think they might have staged a fight to the death amongst themselves until only one woman was left standing and then she would have claimed you as her prize. Melinda Jacobs even jabbed me, hard, in the side with her sketch pad as I tried to get past her. She was definitely out for blood - or semen - I'm not sure which."
"I really appreciate the way you took charge and handled the situation, Lindsay," the Professor commented even while she gasped back a loud chortle. "After all this, I hope you're not going to bail on us the next time we need you to model, Brian. You really are a wonderful subject. And don't worry - next time we have you pose, I'll dismiss you first and keep the class back until you have a chance to leave. I also intend to give them all a bit of a talk about professionalism . . . In fact, I think I'll add that as part of the criteria for grades on the next assignment."

"No problem, Professor," Brian reassured the teacher. "As long as I've got Lindz here to protect my virtue, I think I'll be alright."

"Oh, stop, you!" Lindsay replied, blushing slightly as she led Brian away from Professor Frazer. "I think your virtue is long past saving, Mr. Kinney. And speaking of which," Lindsay added in a hushed voice as she turned him to face the one easel that still had a straggler waiting beside it. "I think you have one remaining admirer - and this one, I think, is more your speed."

There, partly hidden behind the easel, was the hot guy with the van dyke beard that Brian had been hoping to meet.

"Brian Kinney, this is Peter Mallory. Peter is a Visual Arts major, he's a junior and he lives off campus, so you two probably haven't met yet." Lindz did the introductions then smiled wistfully as she noted neither man was paying her any further attention. "So . . . Yeah, I'll just leave you two to get better acquainted then, shall I? Talk to you later, Bri."

"Hey there," Brian opened in a deep, gravelly voice as he edged closer to the obviously interested art student. "How about we let your 'Peter' out to play with my 'Johnson' for the rest of the afternoon?"

No reply was necessary. The look of lustful longing on the artist's face gave everything away. Brian slid his arm around the shorter man's shoulders and artfully guided his new artist friend out the door of the studio without another word.

Lindsay shook her head at the sight as she gathered up her own possessions from the easel where she'd been working. Her friend Winnie had warned her right from the start about Brian Kinney. Lindz had no delusions about the man. That didn't mean that she couldn't admire him for his excellent physical attributes - I mean, even she couldn't really avoid thinking about THAT magnificent cock . . .

As the tall blonde woman followed the two men out of the classroom, another blond who'd been waiting in the farthest shadowy corner of the room also shook his head. The object of his personal interest was gone - leaving without so much as acknowledging Justin's existence. The young blond sighed and then his form dissipated. Justin would wait for Brian someplace where he didn't have to watch his man flirting with another. Biding his time . . .

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"So, this hot artist guy actually has the nerve to tell me he won't let me fuck him unless I at least take him out on one date. Can you believe that shit?" Brian relates as he passes a fresh bottle of beer across the small bar table to his best friend.

"Idiot. He obviously didn't know what he was missing," Michael replies in full support of Brian's studly reputation as is required of him by the 'Bro Code'.

"I know, right? But anyway, I'm looking at the guy and he's pretty hot in a bohemian, artist kinda way and all, and I figure what the hell. I didn't have anything better to do that night and I'd just got
paid for that modeling gig for the art department, so really, why not? I'd never BEEN on a real date before, right, so I think I'll give it a try." Brian explains then pauses for a sip of beer.

"You actually agreed to take the dweeb on a date?" Michael interrupts with the appropriate amount of shock in his voice.

"Yeah! I must have been temporarily insane or something, right? But anyway," Brian continues with his story. "So, I take the guy out to this little Italian place over by campus - it's pretty classy but cheap - and we sit and order a bottle of wine. I'm ready bored by this point, of course, and the guy is going on and on talking art shit that NOBODY gives a fuck about, right? I'm looking around trying to find a way to escape but the guy can't even take a fucking hint. It's like, if the pretentious fuck doesn't shut up soon, I'll be so bored my brain will turn to mush and leak out my ears or something - that's how bad it was. I'm NOT kidding you, Mikey!"

Both Brian and Mikey are laughing so hard at this point, both still a little high from the joint they'd smoked in the car earlier and buzzed from their fourth beer, that they can hardly get a breath. There's a small crowd of other bar goers standing around now listening in as well, and they're all laughing along too. Brian is playing to his audience with consummate ease, as usual.

"Then, thank fuck, the waiter comes up and stands right behind Beard Guy's chair - the ass doesn't even stop blabbing about his pretentious art shit even then so I doubt he even knew the waiter was there. Shit! I was SO fucking ready to be out of there! The waiter is smiling at me and he kinda tips his head to the side. I look over and see he's pointing towards the coat check room, right? I don't even say one word - well, it's not like I could get a word in edgewise anyway with Beard Guy going on like that, you know?"

By now most of Woody's is listening in on the story Brian was telling, so he raises his voice a little in order to be heard properly. "So, I just stand up, throw my napkin on the table and start walking toward the coat check room, right. I can STILL hear the guy at the table going on about some unknown artist that he fancies he'll be compared to one day - the pompous ass! The waiter, of course, is right the fuck behind me. The coat check room has those doors that have a top half and a bottom half, so I open the bottom up and let myself inside and like two seconds later the hot blond waiter follows me in and pulls the top door closed behind us with the whole ducking restaurant watching us. Beard Guy has FINALLy noticed that I'm gone and is calling out 'Brian?, 'Brian, where are you going?' and shit," Brian changes into a falsetto while he imitates his date, eliciting a round of chuckling from the audience.

"Brian! You didn't, did you?" Michael voices his shocked pride at his friend's callous and crazy actions. "Tell me you did NOT fuck that waiter in the coat check room in front of a whole restaurant full of people including your date? No fucking way!"

"Hell yes! I fucked that waiter so hard we actually knocked over one whole rack of coats. And he was fucking screamer, too! He kept hollering 'Harder! Harder! Yes! Yes! Harder!' for like the entire time I'm plowing his ass. You should have seen the looks on everybody's faces when we came out of there - It was fucking hilarious! They were all, like, frozen in place and staring at me. The fucking manager was even just standing there and didn't know what the hell to say. It was perfect!"

"Jeeze, Brian, I'd be so fucking embarrassed! What did you do?" Michael asked, the perfect foil for Brian's tale.

"I looked right at the manager," Brian paused to make sure everyone in the bar was quiet and could hear him, "and I said, 'What? Haven't you ever heard two guys fucking in a coat check room before?' with a completely straight face, of course." The entire bar erupted with laughter at the
punchline.

"Shit, Brian! What did the manager do then? Did he throw your ass out on the street after that or maybe even call the cops?" Michael moaned, for some reason worried for his friend even though the story had occurred in the past.

"Nah. The manager didn’t say a fucking word. He just handed me the check and courteously escorted me to the cash register. I paid for the wine and salads and left a big tip for the waiter who turned out to be a pretty decent fuck, all things considered - although I never tipped anyone for letting me fuck them before - and all the time nobody in the entire place said a fucking word. Then, as I’m putting away my wallet I all the sudden remember the eminently forgettable Beard Guy. And, when the manager sees me looking around for my date, he oh-so-tactfully says that my ‘companion’ had already left,” Brian explained and then took a break to finish the rest of his beer.

“Well, what did you do? Did you go after Beard Guy?” Michael asked, wanting a conclusion to the story.

“Fuck no! Why the hell would I do that? I was fucking glad to see the guy gone - he was boring as shit and no matter how fucking hot he looked with that little beard and his nice firm ass, not even the best fuck in the world would have been worth listening to even one more second of his boring artsy drivel,” Brian summed up his position, his tone more than assured that he’d done the right thing. “Besides, I never go after anyone, Mikey. I’ve never yet met anyone worth going after. If they want me then they can go after me. I’m NEVER going after anyone - EVER!”

Brian leaned back in his chair with a smug look before waving at a passing waiter in order to get another round of beers. Michael was still sitting on the edge of his seat, a devoted and reverent look on his face as he continued to beam a sycophantic smile at Brian. Michael’s admiring demeanor was echoed on several other faces throughout the bar as well.

As Brian lounged in his chair and sipped at the fresh beer, sopping up all the approval radiating his way, he felt vindicated in a way. Everything he’d gone through as a child, all the hardships, all the limitations he had from the start seemed to fall away. Not just Michael, but all the men here in this bar clearly looked at him now as if he mattered. He felt important. He felt admired and respected - even if the only accomplishment he was being applauded for was his outrageousness, it was still more approval than he’d ever felt as a child. It was good. He liked this feeling. He liked being THIS Brian Kinney. If it meant that he’d go on feeling the adoration of the masses, he was determined to keep his fans happy however he could.

And that was the start of the legend of Brian Kinney, Stud of Liberty Avenue.

Chapter End Notes

2/4/15 - Too low on the angst meter? I'd love to hear your input! TAG
Loneliness.

Chapter Notes

Brian gets an inkling of just how lonely this life he's making for himself really is. Despite the fact that his career is taking off, he has no one to share his triumphs with. Or, does he? Enjoy! TAG

Chapter 16 - Loneliness.

The 'Ballroom' on the second floor of the student union building looked quite festive, Brian thought, surveying the blue and gold balloons, streamers and banners. The rest of the student athletes and their families attending the Year End Athletic Awards Ceremony were sitting around the many linen-draped tables all dressed in their formal best. Even 'Roc the Panther' - the school's mascot - was wearing a fancy bow tie with his slightly moldy looking brownish-orange-furred costume. It was a sure sign that this was a serious celebration.

Just then the basketball coaches finished up their portion of the presentation and took their seats while the Dean introduced the members of the Men's Soccer Coaching Staff. Debbie, dressed in her gaudiest best, reached over and enthusiastically squeezed Brian's wrist in anticipation of what was coming. Brian smiled back at his pseudo-mom, soaking up the pride her face radiated even before they knew exactly what award Brian might be getting - all the student athletes who were to receive awards at the banquet had received special invitations but hadn't been told exactly what awards they'd be receiving. It really didn’t matter though, since Debbie and Mikey seemed excited just to have been invited to join Brian at this little event, regardless of whether or not he got any award. Brian had to admit - at least to himself - that it felt good to have someone there with him even if the thing was a bit hokey.

The Men’s Soccer coaches all got to say their piece and then they launched into handing out the awards. The first few were pissy little awards - nothing special really as far as Brian was concerned - but the athletes and their families cheered maniacally nonetheless. Finally, after the award for ‘Most Improved Varsity Player’, they finally moved on to the more interesting awards.
“We’re incredibly excited to announce that this year TWO members of the Pitts men’s soccer team have been singled out for recognition by the National Soccer Coaches Association of America - the governing body that oversees all collegiate soccer in the US,” Gil Taylor bragged as he beamed around the room at all the expectant faces. “It’s been far too long since we’ve had this honor, so I’m more than pleased to be the one allowed to present these awards,” he turned and picked up a rather impressive looking statue graced with a golden soccer ball atop a foot high plinth and then turned back to the audience.

"This first young man has been a mainstay in our program for the past four years. He's always shown tremendous dedication to the team, has demonstrated his leadership skills over and over and has basically worked his ass off. On top of all that, he'll be graduating this May with degrees in both Marketing and Business Administration and has managed to do it all while maintaining an impressive 3.89 GPA. Because of this, the NSCAA has selected this young man for the Collegiate Scholar All-American Team. Give it up for Pitts' star varsity forward, Brian Kinney!"

The assembled crowd whooped and clapped loudly at the mention of Brian's name. In spite of his sometimes acerbic wit and blatantly alternative lifestyle, Brian was quite popular with his team mates and most of them were proud of him and his accomplishments. The noise level was increased at least ten decibels though by the addition of Debbie and Michael's hooting and whistles. Brian actually blushed with a combination of self-pride, gratitude and embarrassment as he tried to fend off Debbie's bear hugs long enough to stand and accept his award.

With just a hint of bashfulness, Brian finally made it up to the speaker's podium, shook Coach Taylor's hand and happily raised the trophy over his head in a triumphant gesture.

"Congratulations, Brian," Coach Taylor enthused as he patted the young man familiarly on the back, his grin almost as big as Brian's own. "I knew you'd be an asset to our team from that first day I saw you playing on my niece's rec team."

Brian was too overwhelmed to say much. He was so unused to getting praise, let alone this much. He mumbled out some kind of thanks with a shy grin that was atypical for the usually brash Brian Kinney and then quickly made his way back to his table. Brian then spent the next several minutes fending off Debbie's renewed hugs and Michael's repetitive 'This is so COOL's as he proprietarily admired Brian's trophy. What with all the whispering and commotion - including all the dirty looks the little group was getting from the surrounding guests due to their disturbances - they all missed hearing most of the rest of the soccer team awards.

When Brian finally managed to quell his personal fan club's rather embarrassing adulation, he noted that the awards had already moved on to the Women's Soccer Team.
"... this year's MVP and recently named addition to this year's US Women's National Team, Winnie Taylor!" Brian's attention perked right up at the mention of his friend's name and he applauded along with everyone else over Winnie's huge achievement. The petite brunette winked at him joyfully as she skipped past on her way up to the podium.

The rest of the awards ceremony was pretty dull. Brian only stuck around because Debbie insisted and because there was free food. As soon as the official program was wrapped up though, Brian was one of the first to get to his feet with the intention of making a rapid retreat. Michael was, as always, right on his heels and appeared ready to follow Brian anywhere so long as he could bask in the reflected glow from his much cooler friend. Debbie however moved significantly slower, which meant they were still a dozen meters from the door when Brian heard someone calling his name.

"Brian! Brian, wait up!" When he turned around to see who was hollering for him, Brian saw Winnie sidestepping through the crowd of guests just as adroitly as she did the defenders on a soccer field. Behind her was a whole flock of people, some of whom looked familiar.

"You didn't think I was going to let you escape without even saying hello, did you, Brian?" Winnie chided him as soon as they were close enough to speak. "Congratulations, Brian. Scholar All-American is pretty impressive," she praised, emphasizing her words with a hug and even a peck on his cheek.

"Not nearly as impressive as being named to the Women's National Team. Way to go, Win!" Brian returned the compliment.

"We're so damn proud of our little soccer star!" chimed in the tall greying blond man who'd come up behind Winnie a moment before.

"Daaaaaad," the embarrassed girl complained as her doting father beamed down his extravagant approval on her, adding a fatherly kiss to the cheek as well. "Sorry, Brian. This annoyingly proud and nauseatingly vocal fan is my father, Gareth Taylor. Dad, this is Brian Kinney, the friend I was telling you about."

"Oh, of course," the older Taylor replied while appraising Brian critically. "Winnie raves about you all the time, young man. To listen to my daughter, you're not only a soccer star but a budding genius as well."
Brian tried to laugh off the compliment, flustered as always when receiving any type of praise. "Thank you, sir. I think she's probably being a little too effusive with all the flattery, though . . ."

"Like hell she is," Debbie interrupted, her pseudo-maternal pride over Brian blaring loudly. "Brian here's a god damned prodigy, is what he is! He's going to hit the Advertising world with such a bang it won't know what hit it. Right, honey? You'll be selling ice cubes to the Eskimos before you know it."

"Ma! Stop it! You're embarrassing Brian," Michael added, trying to protect his friend but only making it worse, of course.

"Hahaha! Well, it's clear that you have at least a few boosters other than my daughter," Winnie's father chuckled at Brian's obvious distress. "And since everyone agrees that you're going to take Madison Avenue by storm, who am I to say differently." Opening his wallet and thumbing through several business cards, Mr. Taylor finally pulled one out and handed it over to Brian. "Marty Ryder is an old college buddy of my own. I'm sure he'd love to have such a prodigy working for him. Give him a call and tell him I sent you and I can pretty much guarantee you an interview. Good luck, Brian."

"Thank you, Mr. Taylor. Thank you! I've heard great things about Ryder Advertising," Brian stared, awestruck, at the card in his hand and then quickly reached over to shake the man's hand.

"Don't mention it! Just do a good job for Ryder," the man said before turning away to greet someone else.

"Wow! This is . . . I don't know how to thank you, Winnie," Brian was completely lost for words.

"Don't sweat it, Brian. Dad gets off on playing the whole 'connected country club insider' thing. It makes him feel important to show off exactly who he knows. Although that card will only get you an interview - you'll have to really impress Uncle Marty to get the job. He's not as much of a pushover as my Dad is," Winnie warned but smiled reassuringly up at her tall, handsome friend nonetheless.

"Hey, Cuz! Quit your flirting already. I want to get out of here before I fall into a coma from total boredom and Aunt Peach said we can FINALLY leave if I could pry you away from your adoring fans," Winnie and Brian were cut off by the appearance of a blond-haired boy of about ten years old who was now impatiently tugging at his cousin's sleeve.
"Annoying much, Jesse?" Winnie snarked at the kid who, unfazed, just gave her back a facetious smile.

"It's not like I actually WANTED to come here tonight. I get enough of hearing everyone brag on you at every other family thing we do. So, can we get the hell out of here now?" the pestering little shit nagged, causing Winnie to sigh and Brian to smile down at the pushy but personable brat.

"Sheesh. You act like getting pulled away from your Sega Genesis for one night's going to kill you. But, whatever. Just let me go thank Coach Martha and I'll be right there. See you later, Brian," Winnie gave her cousin one last look of pure disgust before hurrying off towards another group on the far side of the ball room.

Brian had already started to look around to see where Deb and Mikey have gotten to when the short kid still standing in front of him piped up again.

"I know all about you," the blond brat announced with that odd rudeness that all cheeky ten year old boys have. "Justin talks about you all the fucking time. He's, like, completely obsessed with you, you know?"

"I-I-I don't . . . I don't know what you're talking about," Brian stuttered, thrown for a complete loop by the boy's offhand statement.

Taking a second look at the kid, he now remembered when he’d seen the boy before - it was four years earlier at that soccer game where he first met Winnie's Uncle Gil. It was also just a few months after the episode where his father had landed him in the hospital and probably would have killed him if it weren’t for Justin’s help. Brian still wasn’t sure exactly how this boy fit into the equation. It was disconcerting enough just listening to him talk about the taboo subject of Brian’s invisible friend. How the hell was Brian supposed to respond?

"Yeah, right . . . Whatever, dude," Jesse said when Brian still hadn’t responded further even after several moments. “If you ask me, though, you're a real shit for pretending you can't see him anymore. But hey, it's no skin off my ass. I'm not the one in love with you. Later, dude."

Brian still hadn't collected himself enough to respond before the annoying brat had vanished back into the crowd. Ten minutes later he’d found the Novotny's and the three of them were in the car on the way back to Deb's place. Brian decided not to think about little Jesse or his troubling little
speech. Instead he concentrated on planning exactly how he was going to spend the rest of the night celebrating in the back room of Babylon.

Big Bertha's motor rumbled and growled loudly as Brian pulled up in front of Deb's house two weeks later. Even after he turned the engine off there were several moments of ongoing knocking and clanking that didn't bode well for Bertha's future. The old girl hadn't been doing well lately but Brian was damned if he was going to sink another dime into repairing a car that couldn't even pass the state exhaust tests. Because of that failing, he'd been driving around with expired plates for more than a month already and he knew it was time to put Bertha out of her misery, but he was hoping to keep her going just long enough to get him through graduation. She'd been a good car and he'd miss her, although he WAS looking forward to finally buying a vehicle that wasn't a complete eyesore.

And, after the news he had received today, Brian knew he was one step closer to that shiny new jeep he'd had his eyes on.

Brian had to lean across the passenger seat and kick at the door handle twice before he managed to wrench open the driver's side door. He unfolded his long frame out of the car's low chassis and stretched to get the kinks out of his back before trotting across the street and up the steps to the Novotny residence. He was eager to tell his friends his big news and his steps were light. He didn't even bother knocking - he just burst through the unlocked front door and into the dingy little front room.

"Deb! Mikey! Where the fuck is everybody. I've got great news!" Brian shouted as soon as he was inside.

When his exuberant entrance didn't get any immediate response, Brian peeked into the kitchen - still no sign of anyone - and then turned and started for the stairs. Luckily he didn't have to go up since Michael finally appeared at the top landing just at Brian grabbed hold of the banister. Michael was dressed in a pair of bright yellow spandex tights, a t-shirt with a large capital letter ‘A’ sewed over the center and had a hokey looking red cape pinned crookedly to his shoulders. He
looked surprised to see Brian and his habitual look of adoration for his friend was tempered with more than a little embarrassment over his current ensemble.

*Hehehe* “What the fuck happened to you, Mikey?” Brian chortled at his geeky friend. “It’s not Halloween yet is it?”

“Ha, ha! Very funny, Brian,” Michael stomped down the stairs and edged his way past the larger man who was blocking the bottom of the staircase. “I’m going to ComicCon with my friend Troy. We’re both dressing up. I’m Captain Astro and he’s going as Galaxy Lad. We’ve even got all-access passes for the whole weekend.”

“Oh, Mikey. You’re twenty-three. When are you going to give up your little crush on Captain Astroturf?” Brian teased, tugging at the edge of his friend’s cape as he followed him into the kitchen.

“I don’t have a crush,” Michael insisted adamantly, working to extricate his cape from out of Brian’s fingers. “I’m just a fan. And everybody dresses up at these things . . .”

“Yeah, well, get out of that getup because we’re going out,” Brian demanded, refusing to let go of the edge of the play cape. “And, where’s your mom? I’ve got news I want to share.”

“Ma’s in New York with Uncle Vic this weekend, Brian. And I’m sorry, but I really can’t go out with you tonight,” Michael protested vehemently. “This is the last night of ComicCon and I already promised Troy. Plus, they’re supposed to have George Takei - you know, from Star Trek - there and he’s going to sign his latest manga. I heard they might even be giving away free copies. I’ve really GOT to go to this.”

“Shit, Mikey! Could you be more of a total geek?” Brian objected teasingly as his friend totally ignored him, puttering around in the kitchen and gathering bits and pieces of dross that he was shoving into what looked like an embarrassingly geeky hip sack.

“I’m not a geek, Brian. This stuff is timeless and totally collectible. Someday it’ll be worth real money.”

“Fuck that, Mikey. I want to hit Woody’s early. We’ve got some serious partying to attend to . . .” Brian started to explain his big news, all the while working to strip Mikey of his cape, but then saw the disapproving look on his friend’s face and decided it to back off. If Mikey didn’t want to share
his big night, Brian wasn’t going to push himself on the big nerd. “You know what, do whatever the fuck you want. Have fun at GeekCon, Mikey . . . I’m outta here.”

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Brian didn’t want to celebrate stag but it seemed as if he would be on his own tonight. He had already been to the back room twice, had downed three beers and was on his third shot of Beam when he finally acknowledged the slight pang of jealousy that flowed through him thinking about how his best friend had thrown him over in favor of the unknown ‘Troy’ and some damn IdiotCon. How could Michael, the Original Geek, have plans tonight - the one night that Brian wanted company? Brian had this absolutely life-altering news that he really wanted to share but had nobody to share it with. He briefly flipped through his mental rolodex, searching for the names of anyone else he might might want to share his big news with but came up empty. In high dudgeon, he signalled the bartender and told him to just leave the bottle of Beam this time as he poured himself another shot.

“So much for my fucking celebration . . .” Brian mumbled to himself disappointedly as he upended the bottle over the little shot glass, admiring the deep amber color of the liquid as it filled the concavity of the glass.

Glancing up a few minutes later to locate the bottle in order to pour himself another lonely shot, he noticed a familiar blond image, broken up by the shelves of liquor, sitting next to him and reflected in the mirror behind the bar.

“What the fuck are you doing here? Thought I told you to stay the fuck away from me?” Brian spat out, spraying a generous amount of whiskey as he voiced his complaint.

“It’s a free universe. I go where I need to go, Brian. And, right now, I think I need to be here regardless of whether you want me here or not,” the obstinate blond insisted with a quiet but firm resolve.

“Fuck you! I don’t need you. I don’t need anybody. I’m all I need. I’m all I’ve got. I don’t need anybody else to protect me. This isn’t some after school special where everybody is happy and helps out. This is real life. I’m the only person I can count on and I’ll be just fine as long as I remember that.” Brian punctuated his assertion by slamming the shot glass down onto the top of the bar and spilling most of the shot full of whiskey into the small puddle already collected there; expanding it further.
Justin sat impassively and simply watched the spectacle as Brian slammed back several more shots without further comment. Throughout the ensuing minutes, Brian proceeded to down more than half the bottle - one gulped shot at a time - while his ubiquitous companion maintained a quiet and passive vigil. All the while, a constant stream of interested tricks strolled by, each one retreating rapidly after being snarled at by a menacing Brian. Justin said nothing. He had known the moment he felt Brian’s presence calling him to the bar earlier that evening that his friend needed him. He just didn’t know how to help. Brian wasn’t the easiest of wards to care for.

“I got the job at Ryder, you know,” Brian finally spoke, verbalizing the underlying reason for his pathetic non-celebration. “They said they interviewed ten candidates and only two of us got hired. Ryder told me that Winnie’s dad got me the interview but I landed the job on my own merits. That’s pretty cool, right?”

“That’s exactly what I expected from you, Brian,” Justin whispered, his pride showing through in the tone of his voice. “You’re brilliant and talented. Of course you got the job.”

“I’m going to make it, you know. I’m not going to be trapped in mediocrity like my parents . . . like Mikey. I’m going to be rich and respected someday. I’ll never have to worry about money or anyone’s opinion of me ever again. I’ll be my own man.”

“You’ve always been your own man, Brian,” Justin confirmed, laying one hand lightly on Brian’s forearm and squeezing gently.

Brian glanced down at where Justin’s hand was resting on his arm. He tentatively placed his own hand atop Justin’s. A shy glance filled with longing and loneliness was aimed towards Justin’s angelic face. Brian looked around him and noted that nobody was paying him any attention at the moment - he’d long ago scared off all the tricks who’d dared to approach. It didn’t look like he’d be celebrating his big news in any other asses tonight. He was all alone except for his old buddy Jim Beam and his childhood imaginary friend. So much for company. Well, fuck them all. He’d just make do with what he had.

Glancing back at the half-filled bottle of Beam, he languidly pushed that crutch away and turned instead to look at the insubstantial blond still hovering next to him.

“Wanna go somewhere and help me celebrate my inevitable success,” Brian asked the reflection in the bar mirror with enough uncharacteristic coyness that Justin was momentarily speechless.

Brian eventually turned his head towards the invisible presence sitting on the seemingly empty
barstool to his left and smiled. It was one of Brian’s rarely seen but true smiles. Justin had long ago given up hoping to see more of those. It was enough to throw the usually cautious guardian spirit for a total loop. Brian wasn’t oblivious to the effect he was having on his longtime blond - he well knew his power over almost all men and many women too - and in his drunken haze he seized on it with a passion.

With one last glance around the room, Brian dismissed the entire contingent of Woody’s. Nobody here was worthy of him. There was no one here he wanted to share his little private celebration with. Except, perhaps, for the beautiful blond with the perfect ass who was still perched on the barstool next to him.

Brian shoved away the remaining shot of Beam sitting in front of him and rose with only a little wobble to his feet. Crooking his arm slightly, he slipped his hand into the front left pocket of his jeans. As unobtrusively as possible, he glanced at Justin, and with a bob of his head and a glance at his arm, offered Justin an escort out of the club.

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Unfortunately, by the time they made it back to Brian's dormitory, the alcohol he'd consumed back at the bar was starting to show its effects. Brian tripped as he got out of the cab but stumbled his way in through the main doors under his own steam - just barely. He waved as he passed the student manning the night security desk next to the door and loudly 'shushed' him with one finger held to his lips. Spinning around too fast for his inebriated sense of balance, the drunken lout knocked into the big trash can next to the elevators, knocking it to the floor with a loud clatter, 'shushed' the noisy trash can too and finally made it to the elevator call button. Luckily the elevator doors opened immediately. With a drunken giggle, Brian pushed the button for the eighth floor and then collapsed in the corner of the tiny elevator car. Justin quietly followed along behind his charge just before the doors slid shut.

By the time the elevator stopped, Brian was almost unconscious. Justin did manage to wrestle the larger youth to his feet and out of the elevator when it stopped on Brian's floor. He didn't know how he was going to get the much heavier man all the way down the long hallway though. Justin braced his shoulder against Brian’s chest, his weight leaning against Brian’s body to keep his unsteady friend upright. It was taking pretty much all his strength just to keep Brian propped up against the hallway wall. He didn’t think it was going to be easy to move the big lug.

Justin was still looking around blankly, trying to come up with a plan, when the door across from the elevators opened up and a tall, beefy, all-american type boy emerged. “Hey, Kinney!” the kid called out jovially. “It’s a bit early to be dragging in here shit-assed drunk, isn’t it? And all alone to boot? You must be losing your edge, Kinney!”

Justin was relieved when the muscle bound jock came up to them and roughly manhandled Brian until he had his arm around the drunken boy’s middle, lifting Brian half off his feet as he basically dragged him down the hall. Once at Brian’s room, the big chump rifled briefly through Brian’s
Justin glided in effortlessly behind the behemoth and Brian. He watched the RA pull off Brian’s jacket and shoes, then none-too-gently pull a blanket over the top of the already snoring heap. With a last chuckle at the shenanigans of his dorm-mate, the big jock switched off the overhead light, stepped back out into the hall and pulled the door closed behind him. As soon as they were alone, Justin sat on the edge of the small twin-sized bed and allowed himself to simply gaze down at the long-time object of his singular devotion.

Brian was lying on his back, his breathing heavy and the odor of whiskey permeating the air around him. In spite of that, Justin thought he looked like a little boy again as he lay there with a lock of chestnut hair falling haphazardly over his eyes. Justin gently reached out and feathered the hair back, letting his fingers run through the silky, baby-fine hair in the process. Brian looked so peaceful in his sleep - a condition that Justin hadn’t seen in Brian for far too long. These days, usually, Brian was generally far too busy and much, much too serious all the time to evidence any such quietude. All Justin knew was that Brian was truly beautiful when he was sleeping quietly like this. Justin could literally watch him sleep for hours.

As he watched, Brian’s sleep was disrupted slightly and the inebriated youth shifted his body. Rolling half onto his right side, Brian’s arms groped aimlessly for a moment and then, as soon as they encountered the warmth of Justin’s body sitting on the edge of the bed, wrapped themselves around Justin’s slight, unearthly frame with an audible sigh. Brian’s grip was tight, even in his mostly tanked state, and Justin soon found himself being toppled forward, until his own body was lying sprawled over the top of the prone form. He didn’t struggle though. Justin couldn’t possibly. He was too overwhelmed by the feeling of Brian’s sleepy warm skin pressed against his own, Brian’s nose pressed against the crease of his neck and the long length of Brian’s sinuous body wrapping itself around him. He didn’t want to move.

This was a wholly new sensation for Justin. Back when he’d still been Justin Taylor - living boy - he had fantasized about situations like this many, many times. But, because of circumstances, he’d never actually had the opportunity to act on those imaginary flights of fancy. And then, for so many years, Justin had seen himself more as a protector and guide for a young hurt child, causing the fantasies of his youth to be pushed to the very back of his mind. All Justin’s needs and desires
had been sublimated into helping Brian survive his rocky childhood for so long that he’d almost forgotten them.

However, the sight of Brian’s slightly parted raspberry lips and the steady beating of his troubled heart brought all those feelings rushing back to the forefront of his mind like water breaking through the dam of a river’s edge. Justin contemplated his next move carefully - after all opportunities like this didn’t present themselves very often. After only a few seconds hesitation, though, Justin leaned forward and placed a tender yet chaste kiss on the lips he’d wanted to taste for so long with a whispered “Sleep well my stubborn, beautiful, hot mess” as he settled in to keep watch over the one who truly had the key to his soul.

Too Tired Brian.gif
Chapter Notes

I'm BACCCCKKKKKK! Now that summer's over and the fall rains have started, I think it's about time to return to the angst and drama of our lonely Brian. What do you say? Hope you enjoy! TAG

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Chapter 17 - Solecism.

"Remind me again why the fuck we're doing this," Brian demanded of the blonde woman hanging on his arm wearing the fake social smile and nodding to yet another couple of doddering grey haired old coots.

"Because," Lindsey replied in a strained voice. "You know I'm not out to my parents yet, Brian. Although, from the way they acted when they told me they were going to be throwing me this huge Graduation Party at the Country Club, and made sure to emphasize that I was expected to bring an 'acceptable' date, I think they might just be starting to suspect something. I bet the housekeeper told my mother about the last time she caught Patty Lavelle and me in bed together.

"So what? You and your sorority sister were sleeping in the same bed. What's the big deal?" Brian was confused. "Don't you giggly girls always do shit like that?"

"Well, yes . . . But, then again, we giggly girls don't always get caught sucking on each other's breasts while we're in bed together," Lindsey replied with a slightly embarrassed and at the same time slightly proud gleam in her eye.

"Ah! That's a whole other kettle of fishiness, Ms. Peterson," Brian chuckled at his friend. "That explains the need for the beard for you. But, remind me why the fuck I agreed to be part of this?"

"Because, you wanted to hobnob with your new boss' rich, hoity-toity friends and suck up to him before you've even started your job. And Marty Ryder just happens to belong to the same Club as my parents." Lindsey parroted back to him what Brian had told her already several times that night.
"Yeah, well, so far Ryder hasn't shown up, your father has cornered me twice to press as to what my 'intentions' are towards you and, except when I've been busy fighting off smelly old dowagers who seem to think it's ok to pinch my cheeks, I've been pretty much bored to death all night," Brian commented as they finally made it to the bar and both accepted glasses of white wine. "I'm starting to regret that I agreed to this bogus arrangement. I can't believe ANYONE does this on a regular basis. I don't care how many contacts you can supposedly pick up in a place like this. I think I'll pass on the country club membership."

"Yeah, well, welcome to my world," Lindsay mumbled as they were approached by yet another set of her parents' friends coming to congratulate them.

Despite how uncomfortable he felt, Brian was still proud that he hadn't yet made a fool out of himself even in this alien environment. For a poor Mick from the wrong side of the tracks, Brian thought he was doing quite a good job of assimilating into country club society. It looked like Lindsey's frantic last minute etiquette lessons were going to pay off. And even though it truly was the dullest evening he'd experienced in years, Brian was convinced it was good experience for his future profession.

Well, all except for the pretending to be straight part. He really didn't want to get good at that. He was so tired of being accosted by stodgy old couples coming up and complimenting him on what a cute couple he and Lindsey made, or asking how long they'd been dating, or where they met. Brian felt like, if he didn't keep his guard up, these folks would have him married off to Lindz before the end of the night. He knew Lindsey came to these things all the time and he didn't know how she put up with it.

Yeah, Brian hadn't exactly come out to his own parents yet either, but that was because he couldn't care less about their opinions of his lifestyle. He'd barely spoken to them since he'd started college, and if he was lucky, he'd never have to see either Jack or Joan Kinney again. But Lindsey still saw her parents weekly. And for all their snobbish ways, he didn't think the Petersons would do anything to her once she did come out. The only repercussion would probably be them trying to hush it all up in order to avoid a loss of social standing. Lindsey seemed terrified though of what would happen.

So, here Brian was, wasting a whole night playing straight for Lindsey's 'rents, and he couldn't really even figure out why. But the falsity of the whole thing was really starting to grate on him. Brian just couldn't see himself living like this. Pretending the way Lindsey had been. What was the point? What was the benefit she got out of it? She had to put up with hours and hours of acting like someone she wasn't, either telling lies about her life or obfuscating her way around the truth. Just so that her parents wouldn't have to face a truth they might find embarrassing?
Fuck that! Brian couldn't see himself playing these types of games. It was degrading. And as he watched Lindsey simpering and smiling and telling yet another nosy old biddy that she and Brian had been friends at school for ages - implying with a wink and a coy tilt of her head that they'd been more than just friends that entire time - Brian vowed that this was the very last time he'd agree to participate in this kind of charade. He might not parade his sexuality in front of people that he knew would disapprove, but he certainly wasn't going to hide it either. And he was never again going to pretend to be straight, not even for a friend like Lindsey.

"...Our Lindsey here IS quite a catch, you know," Brian tuned back into the conversation just as the most recent know-it-all started in on her reasons why Brian and Lindsey should be married and begin breeding forthwith - provoking Brian to within a heartbeat of announcing that he really preferred cock himself.

"Oh, look. Marty Ryder and his wife just arrived," Lindsey - who must have noticed the defiance rising in Brian - redirected everyone's attention just in time. "Brian's starting at the Ryder Agency right after graduation, you know. You'll have to excuse us so we can go say hello." Lindz made a hasty apology and an even hastier retreat with Brian in tow.

"Nice save, Lindz," Brian commented wryly while his 'date' glared at him disapprovingly.

"Please, Brian. Just an hour or so more. That's all I ask. Can you please just make it through that long without embarrassing me?" Lindsey almost begged.

"I'll try, Lindz. But these stupid, closed-minded snobs don't make it fucking easy." Brian answered. "Oh, and can you please tell me why, if it's a graduation party for YOU, only your parents friends seem to have been invited? Where the fuck are YOUR friends? Isn't there anyone in this club who's under 25?" Brian looked around and then re-adjusted his assessment. "Make that under 50?"

Lindsay didn't bother to respond. There really wasn't any good answer to Brian's question. He just didn't understand the way things were done in the country club set. Of course her graduation party was really just an opportunity for her father and mother to impress their friends. Wasn't that just how things were done? The younger people would have their own celebration later, after the adults had retired for the night. But until then, Lindsay knew her duty was to play the part of the dutiful daughter, impress her parents friends and provide them with an object that they could show off. It was all part of the game that she had grown up playing, and Brian would never understand that he was just one more of the accessories in her costume for the evening. It was just easier, and less likely to cause problems, if she didn't have to explain it to him.

Which is why both Lindsey and Brian were glad for the distraction when they finally arrived at the table where Marty Ryder and the rest of his party had been seated. Brian greeted his new boss,
before the older man turned to begin introductions to the rest of his group. It quickly appeared, however, that not many introductions would be needed. It seemed that Brian was already familiar with many of the table's occupants.

"Brian! I didn't know you were coming with Lindsey," Winnie Taylor sprouted jubilantly from her place near the far end of the large table as soon as she saw her old friend. "Uncle Marty, you don't have to introduce Brian - we've known each other since high school. He's already met my dad. And of course, Uncle Gil has been his coach at Pitt for the past four years."

That left only the wives of Marty, Gareth, and Gil, who hadn't yet met this friend of Winnie's yet - as well as another couple who looked to be in their late 30s or early 40s, and who were eventually introduced as Winnie's other Uncle, Four, and his wife. Brian politely greeted everyone, while Lindsey and Winnie whispered quietly between themselves. It was obvious from the way the two girls kept looking in Brian's direction while they were talking, that he was the primary topic of their conversation. From the disapproving looks that Winnie was also shooting at Lindsey, Brian figured that she wasn't very happy with her sorority sister.

Brian spent a few moments chatting with his future employer, trying his best not to sound like a greedy, ass kissing, sycophant, while at the same time spreading on the Kinney charm as thick as he dared. He also spent a minute or two joking with Coach Gil, thanking Winnie's father for helping him get the interview with Marty Ryder, and then, thinking that he done his duty for the night, quickly excused himself. Brian headed directly back to the bar, more than ready to get some additional liquid fortification into his belly after this particularly long dull evening and hopefully have a minute or two to himself.

Brian ordered a double scotch on the rocks from the hispanic-looking bartender, who was quick to fill a tumbler with the pungent amber liquid but slow to release the drink into Brian’s grip when he handed the glass over and their fingers touched briefly with a spark of electricity. Ahhhhh! Now, THAT was more like it! Finally, he’d found something interesting in this dreary old mausoleum. Brian nodded at Ricky - the name supplied by the tag the young bartender was wearing - and made a mental note to keep an eye on his new find. If there was any way possible to work it, Brian would be ending his evening here at this bar with little Ricky for company rather than heading into the lounge for a nightcap with Ron Peterson.

“I don’t think he’s gay, you know,” a voice from the vicinity of Brian’s elbow interrupted further contemplation of Ricky and Ricky’s ass as the server bent over to pull another rack of clean glasses out from under the bar.

“Uh . . . Pardon?” Brian turned to find a familiar blond brat looking up at him from his perch on the next barstool over.
“Ricky . . . I don’t think he’s actually gay. He just flirts with EVERYONE here cause it gets him better tips. You should see the way he fawns over my mother sometimes. So, if you were thinking about trying to get in his pants, you’ll probably be disappointed.” The blond youngster explained further, before returning his attention to the soft drink he was sipping.

Brian hadn’t yet said anything in reply. Not because he was shocked by the revelation that Ricky wasn’t gay and was just schmoozing him for tips. And not because he was at all surprised to have been spoken to by the smart-assed, tow-headed, pre-teen. But because this slender, scraggly youth was pretty much the last person on the planet that Brian wanted to talk to. Well, the last except for the OTHER, slightly older, blond youth sitting beside young Jesse.

Justin.

It must be a conspiracy or something, the way this kid - Winnie’s cousin, Jesse - kept turning up in his life. Brian had long ago resigned himself to the fact that his spectral blond boy guardian was always going to be popping in and out of his awareness, but it was a completely different matter to now have this flesh and blood blond doing the same thing. And how the fuck was Brian supposed to keep Justin and everything Justin meant corralled safety away from his consciousness in the compartment Brian had constructed specifically for him, if Jesse - the only other person alive who apparently could also see and speak to Justin - kept dragging the matter to the forefront of Brian’s awareness.

Brian didn’t want to think about this right now. He didn’t want to think about it ever, really. Justin wasn’t real. He couldn’t be real. He was just something Brian’s fucked up mind had cooked up when he was a lonely little kid . . . Right? If Brian approached this anomaly like that, it was easy to explain and Brian didn’t have to think about it in any depth. And on the rare occasions when Brian slipped up and let himself acknowledge Justin’s presence because he was feeling depressed or scared or lonely - like last week when he’d had no one to celebrate his big job announcement with and had fallen back on the company of his old fantasy friend - he could still justify that and later shove the whole experience back down deep in his subconscious where it could hide with all the other shit Brian tried not to think about.

But every time Brian ran into Jesse, he was forced to think about it again, and Brian did not like that at all.

Brian was already looking around frantically, trying to come up with some good excuse to bolt, when Jesse’s laughter broke through his momentary panic. “Chill, Dude. I don’t bite or anything. You don’t have to run away screaming.” Then Jesse turned to his right and addressed Justin directly. “This guy’s way too uptight. Why the hell do you put up with him, Jus?”
Before Justin could reply, though, Brian hissed, “Don’t DO that! Someone will see you.”

Jesse and Justin both looked up at Brian with confusion. “Don’t do what?” Jesse asked.

“You can’t just talk to someone who’s not there like that. If someone saw you they’d think you were nuts. You can’t . . .” Brian was already looking around him to determine if anyone was watching them.

“Don’t sweat it, man. Everyone here already knows I’m the crazy kid who talks to himself. Luckily, my family has gobs of money so nobody gives me any shit about it.” Jesse smiled over at Brian with a conspiratorial look. “Of course, you might not want to be seen hanging out with me - crazy could be contagious, you know. Or at least that’s what most of these idiots think anyway. But, I don’t really care. At least my parents believe me and that’s all that really matters. And, anyway, you’ve already caught the crazy yourself, haven’t you? If seeing dead people means you’re insane, then you’ve been on your way to the looney bin for a lot longer than I have. Isn’t that right, Brian?”

“I’m NOT fucking crazy!” Brian hissed loudly at the boy, before self-consciously lowering his voice and continuing. “I’m not crazy. And, I don’t see . . .” Brian’s words sputtered out as he found himself staring into the caring, bright blue eyes that he’d known all his life - he couldn’t finish that sentence honestly. “I’m not crazy,” he repeated instead.

“It’s okay, Brian,” Justin stood up and moved around the back of Jesse’s chair so he could be near to Brian for at least one more second - touch his arm, breathe in Brian’s aftershave, and feel the warmth of his skin for just a moment longer. “I understand. I’ll go. I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable. I just wanted to see how you were doing . . .” Justin turned to Jesse, gave his eleven-year-old nephew a weak smile and then faded from sight.

“Way to go, Asshole!” Jesse shook his head at Brian. “You didn’t have to chase him away like that. Some friend you are! And NOW who the fuck am I going to talk to while I have to wait here for my folks to finish hobnobbing? Shit!”

“Jesse! Language! If your folks catch you talking like that you’ll be grounded for another two weeks,” Lindsey came up behind Brian and slipped her arm through his, catching just the very tail end of Jesse’s angry retort. “Sorry for abandoning you, Brian. Although I see you’ve made a new friend all on your own. Jesse is SUPPOSED to be downstairs in the Youth Lounge, though. Aren’t you, Jesse?”
“Yeah, right! And do what? Babysit my sister? Please. I’d rather be up here bored to tears listening to all these old codgers complain about how the country is going to hell than down there with all the babies.” Jesse smiled impishly at Lindsey and raised his coke to her in a mock toast, then turned his bratty smile back on the tall brunet man. “Besides, Brian and I were just getting better acquainted, weren’t we, Bud? Turns out we know a lot of the same people.”

“Don’t mind Jesse,” Lindsey turned all her fawning attention back to Brian, ignoring the boy who she disdained as just another annoying child, albeit, this annoying child was a little more annoying than most. “He . . . special. But he’s completely harmless.”

*Hahahaha* Jesse broke out into loud, not entirely pleasant laughter. “By ‘special’, she means crazy, of course. Only, rich people don’t have crazy relatives or friends. We’re ‘special’ or ‘different’ or ‘a little off’. But what she doesn’t know . . . Right, Brian?”

“Fuck you!” Brian spat, fed up with the boy’s antics, and desperately afraid that the kid was about to say something to Lindsey that Brian wouldn’t be able to just blow off.

Brian turned his back on the kid and waved to the flirty bartender for another scotch. And after slamming that glassful, he demanded another. Lindsey was looking at him with embarrassment, trying to make sure that she positioned her own body so as to shield him from the ever present eyes of the rest of the club, who would undoubtedly be watching her and her ‘date’.

“Brian! Brian, please. That’s enough for now,” Lindsey gave Ricky a meaningful look before he could fill Brian’s glass for a third time. “Just ignore Jesse. Everyone else does. Now, come back to the table - my mother wants to introduce us to Mr. and Mrs. Peabody.”

“You know what, Lindz? Fuck your mother and the Peabodys and everyone else at this pretentious, pompous, overblown confederation of conservative assholes.” Brian had had enough of the social niceties and pretending to be someone he wasn’t - he’d also had enough of Jesse and his innuendos. It was time for a strategic retreat. “This isn’t you, Lindz. And it’s definitely not ME! I don’t know how you can stand this? But I’ve had more than enough. I’m out of here. I’m going to go out and get totally shitfaced drunk and probably do something completely inappropriate that would shock your parents’ friends. And, if you know what’s good for you, you’ll come with me, because this ‘party’ sucks big, hairy, lumpy lesbian tits.”

“But, Brian . . . I . . . I can’t just leave . . .” Lindsey was looking around her at the mostly older and very conservative crowd that was milling through in the Country Club’s main dining room, and was hard pressed to deny anything Brian had just said.
“Yes, Lindsey, you can. It’s easy. Come on. I’ll show you how.” Brian took Lindsey by the elbow and - with one last smirk at Jesse, who was chuckling to himself on his barstool - towed her out of the room, past her gaping, shocked-looking parents and straight out the front doors of the club.

~***~***~***~

*Uhhhnnnnnn* The groaning coming from the warm body next to Brian was what eventually woke him up the next morning. It wasn't, by any means, the first time he'd woken up in a strange room and not immediately remembered where he was or how he got there. However, it WAS the first time he'd woken up in a bed covered by a hot pink comforter, matching hot pink sheets, with lacy pink curtains framing the window through which the too-bright sunshine was streaming into his eyes, and with a pair of what appeared to be very frilly, fuchsia women's panties lying on the pillow about three inches from his face. Brian grimaced, picked up the panties and threw them as far away from himself as possible.

Taking a deep breath and then blowing it out loudly, Brian cinched up his courage and rolled himself over to see what exactly he'd gotten himself into this time.

The body next to his was partially obscured by a sheet that was covering it’s lower half. The face, which was turned away from him to start with, was covered almost completely with a tangle of long blonde hair. The only part of what he could see that did tell Brian something significant was the naked breasts that were on display front and center right in front of his disbelieving eyes. There was also that used condom that was stuck by way of a patch of dried semen to the torso right below one of the naked breasts to further attest to what had obviously happened in the bed sometime the previous night.

Brian scrunched up his nose in disgust and bit his bottom lip to squelch the epitaph he wanted to shout. He really didn’t want to wake up the owner of the breasts, if at all possible. He wasn’t sure he could deal with that on top of the horrible pounding hangover headache he was already fighting. What he really wanted to do was to run away screaming as fast as he legs could carry him, but he knew that wouldn’t fix things. Sooner or later he would have to face the consequences of whatever had happened here - if Jack had taught him nothing else it was that a real man always dealt with the consequences of his actions no matter how bad the position he’d got himself into. And this was definitely looking pretty bad.

Brian let his head fall back against the atrociously pink pillow and tried his best to reconstruct the night before. The last thing he remembered clearly was when he and Lindsey left that ridiculously pretentious excuse for a Graduation Party. On the way back to campus, they had stopped off at a liquor store and picked up a bottle of Jim Beam for him and a bottle of Peppermint Schnapps for Lindsey. From the sickly, over-sweet, stale-mint taste in his mouth, Brian surmised that he must have helped out drinking the schnapps. But that was really all he remembered clearly. By the time
they’d made it back to the dorms, Brian’s earlier excesses at the Country Club had already started to catch up with him. The rest of the night was a blurry mess filled with swirling lights, long blonde hair and . . .

Brian looked over his right shoulder again and then, with very tentative fingers, reached out to lift up a hank of the blonde hair covering the face of his companion. The owner of the hair shifted right at that moment and the face rolled towards him. Brian could no longer deny that the owner of the hair - and the naked breasts - was Lindsey Peterson.

If he hadn’t felt like puking from his hangover before, he certainly did now.

Lindsey let out a very voluble snorting snore and then flopped over towards him, attempting to snuggle up to his side. Brian cringed away from the touch. Apparently he wasn’t above a little experimentation with the wrong sex when he was too drunk to see straight, but no fucking way was he going to let those naked breasts come near him when he was stone cold sober. Ick!

Trying to move carefully so that he wouldn’t wake up the snoring, still-half-drunk blonde, Brian inched his way out of the bed and hurriedly grabbed whatever clothing he could find. He pulled on his pants and shirt but didn’t bother trying to find his briefs or socks. He only saw one shoe but decided it wasn’t worth searching for the other - he’d get new shoes. Right after he burned all the clothing he’d been wearing, spent about an hour in the shower trying to wash away the very thought of touching a woman THAT way, and then consumed a gallon or two of mouthwash to try and get rid of the taste of the schnapps. And then he was going to get as stoned as possible before going back to sleep - in his own, female-free bed.

Hopefully, by the time he woke up sometime the next day, he would have forgotten everything about the last twenty four hours.

As Brian slunk out of Lindsey’s room and made his way over to the stairwell that led up to the men’s floor and his own room, he tried to ignore the other blond that was watching him from the end of the hallway with a very disapproving, sad expression. Fucking Justin! If it hadn’t been for him and his little buddy, Jesse, stalking him, Brian wouldn’t have been in this situation. He wouldn’t have felt so threatened. So worried about being exposed. And wouldn’t have started drinking so heavily. Right? It was all Justin’s fault . . .

Except that Brian knew it really wasn’t anyone’s fault but his own.

He paused at the doorway to the stairs and looked at the ephemeral blond beauty who was just
standing there, staring at him, but not saying a word. If he felt the echo of his own loneliness looking back at him from out of those penetrating blue eyes, he refused to acknowledge it. If he maybe even had the momentary, fleeting thought that he would have much preferred waking up in bed with THAT particular blond instead of Lindsey, he brushed the idea away. It didn’t matter how isolated or set apart Brian felt - he couldn’t let himself give in to that fantasy. He wouldn’t let himself be sucked into that morass. He knew it wasn’t real. That he wasn’t made to be loved or have whatever fantasy Justin’s presence might promise.

It wasn’t real. It wasn’t meant for Brian. And he wouldn’t let himself even think about it.

With a self-deprecatory snort and a shake of his head, Brian slammed open the metal fire door and disappeared up the stairs towards his own room without another glance back at the silent blond fantasy watching his retreating back.

Chapter End Notes

10/20/15 - Angst. Yeah! Lot's of it! And more to come, unfortunately, before the story gets any lighter. Yeah! So . . . TAG
Chapter 18 - Isolation.

Big Bertha rumbled up to the curb outside Brian’s parents’ house, sputtering and cutting out and belching smoke out her exhaust pipe, before coughing to a loud halt with the engine dying. Brian was actually amazed that the car had actually made it that far. Bertha had been been unwell for months now. Brian had asked a trick - who just happened to be a mechanic as well as a pretty good la - to peek under the hood a few weeks back. The prognosis had not been good. There were so MANY things wrong with Bertha that the mech-trick didn’t really know where to start. She was already down to only two working cylinders and the exhaust system was so blocked up and corroded that it was amazing Brian wasn’t asphyxiated every time he drove. But, since he’d only paid $500 for the car in the first place it didn’t make any sense to spend a couple thousand to keep her running - especially since he couldn’t get the tags renewed until he fixed the exhaust system. Brian figured he’d just keep driving her till she died, hoping she’d hold out until he could afford to go out and buy himself a really nice new car.

Brian sighed. The car dying here - in front of his parents’ house - wasn’t a very good omen. He didn’t want to be here at all, but to have to be here and not know if he’d have a reliable means of escape should the day turn ugly, was really bad. And, if Brian knew his family, it wasn’t so much a question of ‘if’ the day would turn ugly, but rather, ‘when’. But, he’d been summoned by the Ice Queen to attend Thanksgiving dinner with the family and he felt compelled to comply.

He didn’t know why he was bothering. Brian could count on one hand the number of times he’d seen his family since leaving for college. He had absolutely nothing in common with these people other than some biological markers. And he hated that he’d caved in once again when his mother had called him and virtually demanded his presence. Why he still felt any need to maintain the pretence that they were actually a family at all, was a complete mystery to him. If he was smart he’d cut all ties and never look back. But, for some stupid reason, Brian just couldn’t do that. He just couldn’t tell his mother to fuck off. It was probably that guilt-ridden Catholic upbringing - as reiterated over and over by his mother all through his childhood - telling him that a good son wouldn’t turn his back on his family. Whatever.
Brian leaned over so that he was lying across the big bench seat and kicked at the driver’s side door from the inside to get it to open. Then, with more than a little reluctance, he pulled himself out of the car, straightened his clothing and resolutely marched up to the front door. He rapped his knuckles against the door twice but didn’t wait for anyone to come greet him before he twisted the doorknob and opened the portal himself.

Inside, the house hadn’t changed at all. Brian looked around at the drab, dingy walls and the peeling wallpaper in the hall by the front door and shuddered. The whole place reeked of hopelessness and fear. Brian felt his skin crawl at the very idea of voluntarily coming back into this hell hole. The only thing that kept him going was that he wouldn’t let his family see him back down from anything - not even the weight of all the bad memories being here raised.

Brian warily made his way to the right and into the kitchen. He found his mother sitting at the ancient formica-topped table, dressed in a rumpled purple velour housecoat and sipping at a tea cup that was filled with some colorless liquid - knowing his mother, it was probably gin. The air was filled with the smell of something cooking, although the aroma was masked in part by the stink of something that had burned earlier. The fetor didn’t bode well for the fate of their Thanksgiving dinner.

“Afternoon, Mom.” Brian announced his presence, startling Joan who looked up from her teacup with a surprised look as if she’d forgotten Brian was coming over.

“Brian . . . Well, I didn’t know if you were going to show up or not. It’s nice of you to deign to join your family,” Joan said, making a bit of an effort to sit up straighter and pull her robe closer around her throat. “Help yourself to a beer from the fridge if you want. Dinner’s going to be a while yet. Damn turkey didn’t thaw right . . . Your father’s watching football in the other room if you want to join him.”

“Okay . . .” Brian faltered, not sure he was ready for the false father/son bonding moment, but definitely not comfortable remaining in the kitchen with his already half-soused mother either.

With no better alternatives, Brian picked up his beer and shuffled off in the direction of the sound of the television blaring from the living room. Peeking around the wall and into the small front room, Brian could see his father seated on the ratty old brown-and-gold floral patterned sofa, a beer in his hand and two empties standing in a line on the coffee table in front of him. The television, as expected, was set to some football game with the volume turned up too loud and Jack’s attention was rapt. Brian grimaced. What the fuck was he doing here, again? If Deb and Mikey hadn’t been off in New York visiting Vic this weekend, Brian would have had a good excuse to tell his mother ‘No’. But, even sitting in his almost-empty, hole-in-the-wall apartment alone all day would be preferable to being here, right?
“Hey! Sonny Boy! Come on in and pull up a piece of couch!” Jack’s falsely chummy voice hailed him as soon as the old man had caught sight of Brian standing in the doorway. “So far, it’s a pretty close game. Not like last year - that was a total rout and one of the worst games I’ve ever had the misfortune to watch. This one should be worth the $50 I’ve got riding on the Cowboys, though.”

"Hey, Pops," Brian mumbled, choosing to sit in the dilapidated La-z-boy recliner rather than on the couch with Jack.

Despite his usually glib tongue, Brian didn't know what else to say, so he just sat and sipped at his beer and watched the colorful figures cavorting around on the television screen.

"So, how’s that fancy-pants new job of yours going?" Jack finally piped up during the next long ad break, looking sidelong at his son. "You the president of the company yet, or what?"

"My fancy-pants job's going just great," Brian replied, trying to ignore the demeaning tone with which the question had been asked. "Right now I'm just a junior copywriter, but I'm learning a lot. I've even got a chance to work with one of the partners on a new campaign for a major statewide client. And if I don't completely screw this up, I stand to earn a pretty nice end of the year bonus. So it's all good."

"Bonus, huh?" Jack seemed to perk up and pay more attention after hearing that particular word. "So . . . They paying you a decent salary?"

Brian turned his attention back to the television so that Jack wouldn’t see the way he rolled his eyes. "Yeah. I'm doing alright. Especially considering I haven't even worked there a full six months."

"Huh . . . I guess that namby-pamby waste of time liberal arts college thing wasn't as useless as I thought," Jack stated, his tone of voice negating the words he said.

Brian saw the sly looks Jack was shooting his way and heard the avaricious edge to his father’s comment. He should have known that a Kinney invitation to come for a Thanksgiving Day dinner and visit had ulterior motives. The only thing that really did surprise him was the fact that he could still feel disappointed in his parents after everything they’d already put him through.

Brian set his beer bottle down on the coffee table, leaned forward so that his forearms were
propped on his knees and grinned mirthlessly at Jack. “You and Mom need money?” he asked baldly.

“. . . I am a little short this month,” Jack confessed, with a casual shrug of his shoulders, not meeting Brian’s eyes.

Brian pulled out his wallet and dug out the $50 bill that was hiding in the zippered section. He'd been saving that money to buy this beautiful teal blue, hand-folded, printed silk Hermes tie that he wanted to wear when his team did the presentation to the client for the campaign he’d been working on. But, whatever. He could always wear his same-old Macy’s off-the-rack red tie. It wasn’t anything special but it would do, he supposed.

And if that was the price of getting him out of spending the rest of the day with his parents, Brian figured that it was more than worth it.

“Here, Pops,” Brian handed over the big bill, then stood up and started to move out of the room.

“Thanks, Sonny Boy,” Jack eagerly pocketed the money and immediately turned his attention back to the football game. “I’ll pay you back the next time I see you!”

“Riiiiiight,” Brian mumbled without conviction and headed straight towards the front door without even bothering to stop in the kitchen and say goodbye to his mother.

The sooner he was out of that house again, the better.

Brian totted down the front walk to his car, almost desperate to get away before something even more degrading could happen. He kicked the driver’s side door at just the right spot to get the latch to release so he could climb in. He slid his key in and turned the ignition, but nothing happened. There was just a faint click as the starter engaged and failed. There wasn’t even the usual gurgle and coughing noises he’d become used to. There was just nothing . . .

Brian leaned back against the headrest and scrunched his eyes closed. He knew it was futile to even try again. Big Bertha was dead.

Brian sighed. He looked around him at the car that had gotten him through the past five years and found he was saddened more by the idea of parting with Bertha than he had been at the idea of
leaving behind his parents today. Oh well. There wasn’t much he could do about it. This had been coming for a while. Considering how he’d mistreated poor Bertha over the years, he was surprised she’d lasted this long.

Digging around under the seat, Brian located an old plastic bag. He unloaded the contents of the glove box into the bag, adding a few items from the back seat and the trunk. He left the pile of eight track tapes he’d accumulated over the years from various yard sales and flea markets - there was nowhere else to play them, so they might as well stay with Bertha. And then, without further drama, Brian got out of the car, slammed the door closed behind him and walked away.

It wasn’t that long of a walk from his parents’ house to the part of Liberty Avenue where Brian’s apartment was - and he didn’t have any other plans for the day or anywhere he needed to be - so he dawdled as he walked. For the end of November, it was remarkably warm out, with the sun shining brightly. They’d had a long dry fall so far and some of the trees still had their leaves even. It was quite pretty out and Brian was rather enjoying being outside on such a fresh fall day after escaping from the threat of an afternoon with his family.

When he found himself walking down a very familiar side street towards the local cemetery, Brian didn’t even think twice. He easily hopped over the rusty iron railing and headed towards the crumbling old vault that he'd taken refuge behind so many times throughout his childhood. It all seemed so familiar, even though he hadn't been back here more than a handful of times in the past five years. Nothing here ever really seemed to change. It was strangely comforting despite the fact that the place also had so many connotations with times that had involved much fear and pain. But there was also safety and peace here too.

The bushes that edged around the side of the stone and marble structure were overgrown and had become leggy. It was clear that the landscaping at the old cemetery wasn't being maintained quite as well as it had formerly been. Brian almost couldn't get through in one spot, but ended up snapping a couple of spindly branches off with his hands and eventually made it around to the hidden side of the building where he'd once made a spot for himself. Somehow he wasn't at all surprised to see that most of his stuff was still there.

The old plastic and metal cat box that he'd set up for a stray barn kitten was still tucked away under the bushes at the far back corner. The rickety old metal folding chair that he'd pulled out of a neighbor's trash was still there too, although it was now so covered in rust that Brian didn't know if it would hold his weight. The plastic storage bin where he used to keep a tattered old blanket and some random odds and ends was stashed under the legs of the chair right where it belonged as well, although it was practically covered by the weeds that had grown up around it and over the sides and top.

Brian pulled the bin out and unsnapped the lid, discovering that the inside was still dry and protected, and still contained his old slightly musty blanket. He pulled it out and laid it over the
rusty surface of the chair before gingerly seating himself. Luckily the chair was still sturdy enough to support his weight. Closing his eyes and leaning back against the cold stone wall behind him, Brian relaxed and just let the serenity if the place soak into him.

After several minutes, he was startled so badly that he almost fell off his perch on the old chair when he felt something softly brush up against his extended ankle. His eyes flew open as he quickly jerked his leg back away from whatever it was. There was a brown and gold streak of motion that he only barely caught out of the corner of his eye racing into the thickest part of the bushes. He'd had only a glimpse, but it was more than enough to put a smile on Brian's face.

"Joselito? Is that you?" Brian crooned, sitting forward and trying to peer into the darkness under the shrubbery. "Come on out, buddy. I didn't mean to scare you."

Ten minutes later, after a lot of patient whispering and coaxing, Brian had finally convinced the mostly feral cat out of hiding and into his lap. The funny little kitten that Brian had once loved and cuddled was now a fully mature, sleek tom. His striped brown, black and gold coat was a little ratty and he was skinny but otherwise the cat looked healthy. Brian wished he had some food to offer, but since this hadn't been a planned visit he had nothing. He made a mental note to come back with a big bag of cat food as soon as possible. Nevertheless, it was a treat to get to spend time with his furry little companion.

Everything felt so tranquil and secure as Brian sat there in his hidey hole petting the cat, and it didn't seem at all surprising that, before too long, he felt another familiar presence.

"You don't have to hide behind a fucking tree, you know," Brian said out loud without even looking in the direction of the presence - just knowing, in that way he'd always had, who it was that had been surreptitiously watching him.

"I'll . . . I'll go if you don't want me here . . ." Justin offered as he reluctantly stepped out from behind the massive ancient oak tree that abutted the rear wall of the burial vault.

Justin had been avoiding Brian ever since the confrontation at the Country Club last spring. He'd felt a bit guilty - like it had been his fault that Brian had overreacted, gotten drunk and ended up in bed with Lindsey. Justin knew that was irrational, but still . . . So, he'd been laying low, staying away from Brian, and trying to simply let the young man live his life. Keeping his distance might hurt like hell, but Justin hurt even more when Brian intentionally ran from him. And as long as Brian was safe, Justin couldn't justify causing Brian any additional stress.

But sometimes . . . Sometimes he just couldn't help himself. The compulsion would get to be too
much, and Justin simply HAD to peek into Brian's life and reassure himself that everything was okay. Mostly, Justin would only let himself succumb to these impulses late at night when he knew Brian was asleep. He'd pop into Brian's small apartment and watch over the beautiful man as he slept - just sitting there silently and letting himself absorb Brian's beauty but never daring to speak or touch him no matter how much he longed for that.

Today though, Justin had again felt that insistent pull and couldn't wait until nighttime. He didn't think Brian was in danger - the compulsion wasn't that alarming - but there was something about Brian's mood that was calling to him today. Melancholy? Pensive? Justin knew that Brian would hate those words being applied to him, even in a mere thought, but Justin couldn't come up with any better terms. But the bottom line was that Justin couldn't fight the impulse today. So he'd followed Brian, watched the sad scene with Jack, and then trailed him all the way here. Still, though, he'd hesitated to impose himself on Brian's moment of quietude.

Brian shrugged his broad shoulders, not looking away from the purring ball of fur in his lap. "It's your place as much as mine . . . Maybe even more yours . . ." Brian squelched the rest of that thought before he had to admit something about the blond sprite he always tried hard to ignore.

Trying to maintain a neutral expression in spite of the fact that inside he was overflowing with joy due to the simple fact that Brian wasn't trying to run from him for once, Justin scurried out from behind the tree and made his way over towards Brian and the ecstatically happy cat. The blond youth squatted down on his haunches next to Brian's chair and reached out a tentative hand to ruffle the coat of the brown furball. Joselito's purring ramped up yet another notch at the additional offer of attention. Justin grinned up at Brian and felt elated when the young brunet smiled back at him.

The two men and their cat were still sitting there peacefully when the early fall twilight started to set in and the temperature in the shadows of the dilapidated stone building began to drop. Brian had no idea how long he'd been just sitting there, although it must have been a long time considering how stiff his cold muscles felt. It had been such a nice, mellow, relaxing idyll that Brian hadn't wanted to keep track of time.

But, while Brian Kinney wasn't normally the quiet, contemplative type, he still didn't really want to leave. Even if it WAS probably time to get going. He was sure that, Thanksgiving or not, there would be the usual bevy of hot guys waiting for him at Woody’s or Babylon or the Baths. He could go to the bar, have a couple of shots of something alcoholic to start his night and then fuck away this strangely despondent mood. It would be so simple. Right? That’s precisely what he should be doing right now. Not sequestered in the dark with a ghost and a stray cat. How pathetic was he?

And yet, Brian couldn’t conjure up the willpower to get up and leave. To interrupt this brief intermission in his life. To step back into the usual Brian Kinney whirlwind personae.
“Have you ever noticed that sometimes you feel less lonely when you’re all alone than when
you’re in the middle of a huge crowd of people,” Brian voiced the odd, very un-Brian-like thought
that popped into his mind just then, speaking aloud for the first time in probably hours.

“You’re never alone, Brian,” the placid presence beside him spoke up boldly for the first time that
afternoon. “I’m always with you. I always will be. No matter what. No matter where you are. You
don’t have to ever be alone if you don’t want to be.”

Brian didn’t reply to that statement. He didn’t know how. ‘ . . . if you don’t want to be.’ That was
the seminal point, wasn’t it?

Chapter End Notes

10/24/15 - What can I say? I was feeling melancholy and pensive myself today. So, I
foisted it all off onto poor Brian. Poor Brian! TAG
Disengagement.

Chapter Notes

Otherwise known as: How to torture your story's main character by TAGSIT . . . It goes on. Enjoy! TAG

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Chapter 19 - Disengagement.

“Excellent presentation, Marty. Really excellent! It’s so nice to hear a truly fresh idea for a change,” CEO Howie Somethingorother raved and clapped Ryder on the back as the rest of the team was busy packing up the display materials from this last big presentation.

“Glad you liked it! And, not that I’m averse to stealing the occasional idea and passing it off as my own, but, just this once I think I’ll give credit where it’s due,” Marty Ryder admitted, smiling at the client and waving with his free hand to Brian. “The driving force behind the idea you loved so much happens to be this young man right here. Brian Kinney - my newest junior Ad Exec. He’s only been with the agency a little over two years, but he’s already moving up. Now THIS is the guy to keep your eye on.”

Brian trotted over obediently to be shown off by Marty Ryder. He shook the hand that Howie - or was it Harry, or maybe Hermie . . . oh who the fuck cared really - extended to him and made nice with the client for another ten minutes before the big back-slapping breeder from Altoona finally excused himself. Brian made sure to lay on the Kinney charm extra thick. Marty was beaming with pleasure at Brian the whole time.

“Superior effort, Brian,” Marty congratulated him as soon as the client was gone. “That presentation was word perfect. I knew I was making the right decision when I promoted you to the executive floor. And you’re not bad at the client relations thing either. You seem to always go above and beyond to make the client happy - that’s a skill that you just can’t teach, but you’re a natural, Brian. You keep this up and you’ll be making partner before you know it.”

“Thank you Mr. Ryder,” Brian replied respectfully, still too insecure in his new position to feel truly comfortable with so much praise. “The idea just came to me the other night . . . you know how inspiration can just hit you like that and you simply can’t fight it.” Brian didn’t feel it was
necessary to elaborate on the fact that when the ‘inspiration’ for this campaign hit him he had been in the backroom at Babylon balls deep into this luscious dark-skinned beauty with a really phenomenal ass. “I’m just happy that the client liked it.”

“Liked it? That’s a definite understatement. He loved it. I could tell by that avaricious glint in his eye. And, if we don’t have a signed commitment from him on my desk by five tonight, I’ll eat my desk blotter!” Marty seemed eminently confident, which was reassuring to Brian as well. “Which means, of course, that as the lead executive on this project you’ll be entitled to a substantial signing bonus, my boy. So, what have you got planned for all that glorious green?”

Brian allowed himself to relax a bit and gave Marty Ryder one of his rare uninhibited smiles. “Well, I was thinking of moving, maybe. I’ve outgrown the apartment I’m in now. So, maybe I’ll start looking around for something bigger.”

“Capital idea, Brian. Real estate is never a bad investment. In fact, I’ll have my secretary give you the number of the realtor I use. His name’s Skyler Knowlton. Great guy. I’m sure he’ll set you up with something perfect,” Marty stated as if it was already a done deal, patting Brian’s shoulder one more time with a congratulatory air as he made to move off towards his own large corner office.

“Real Estate?” Brian mumbled to Marty’s back as he stood there dumbstruck for a moment.

Brian hadn’t really been prepared for that particular suggestion. He was only twenty-five. He had been promoted to Junior Ad Exec less than two months ago. The idea of buying an apartment or a condo hadn’t even come up on his mental radar yet. But . . . the more he thought about it, the better the idea sounded. Brian liked the idea of owning his own place. The idea of his monthly housing payments going towards building up some equity in a place of his own rather than down some greedy landlord’s gullet was enticing. Maybe Marty wasn’t completely delusional after all?

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Less than two months later, with the five figure bonus Brian had received courtesy of Howie/Harry/Hermie/Whoever signing on the dotted line for the campaign Brian had devised safely deposited in his bank account, the newest Ad Exec at Ryder Advertising was standing in front of a slightly rundown building just off Liberty Avenue with Marty’s realtor next to him and was seriously thinking about investing his hard earned money in this little bit of nirvana.

"Now, I know it doesn't look like much from the outside," Skyler Knowlton commented as he unlocked the front door of the building and ushered Brian inside. "But trust me on this, this neighborhood is ultra hot right now. It's got a downtown address that yuppies everywhere would kill for. And the price on these Lofts is ridiculously low. It's probably the best investment anywhere in the entire city right now."
Brian was actually having a hard time paying any attention whatsoever to the building's amenities that Skyler was trying to point out to him as they entered the lobby. He was far too busy admiring the amenities of the realtor himself. Brian didn't know about the neighborhood, but he could certainly confirm that the realtor was ultra hot.

The hip young realtor that Marty Ryder had hooked Brian up with was truly a beautiful man. Standing about six foot tall with dark hair, grey-green eyes, and an olive skin tone, Mr. Knowlton had a swarthy Mediterranean look to him. The well trimmed goatee sort of made him look a little piratical, in Brian's opinion. But the elegant and well-fitted Brooks Brothers suit easily countered that roguishness with an confident professionalism. Basically, from his stylish haircut to his manicured hands, and all the way down to his well polished Prada shoes, Brian approved of every little inch of this man.

"You're gonna love the space, Brian. I just know it," Skyler said again, pulling up the gate of the quaintly retro elevator with one hand while he casually rested his other on Brian's lower back to guide him into the small space.

Brian's skin tingled where the heat of that one large hand radiated through the thin cotton of his shirt. The fact that Skyler allowed that guiding hand to remain in place even after they were both safely inside the elevator was telling. So was the fact that the man stood just a shade too close, despite the fact that the elevator car was plenty large enough to accommodate the both of them. So close, that when the elevator jostled them a bit, Skyler's shoulder brushed tantalizingly against Brian's own.

Oh yeah! Brian definitely approved of Marty's taste in realtors.

As soon as they made it to the top floor of the building, Skyler escorted Brian out of the elevator and through the big metal sliding door of the unit that took up this entire floor. There really wasn't much to see. The room they were in had been completely gutted clear to the rafters. But Skyler was enthusiastic about showing Brian the features that did exist, including the big industrial sized
windows, the high ceilings, the rustic metal beams and all the other trendy little details of the space. As he vividly painted a picture for Brian of what the loft would look like once it was fully remodeled, he was constantly accenting his words and gestures with a series of intimate little touches, smiles, and dark smoldering looks.

“The potential for this space is unlimited,” Skyler was saying as he paced off the area in front of the big floor to ceiling windows along the east wall. “Of course, if it were up to me, I’d leave it mostly open - no walls, except for maybe the bedroom and bathroom, and even then you could use sliding panels or something - but just keep it as unencumbered and airy as possible so you never have to feel like you’re being enclosed.” Then the handsome realtor made his way back to where Brian was standing, walking around his still body and, once he was behind Brian and not blocking the view of the apartment, moving closer and closer until he was standing well within the other man’s personal space. “So, what do you think? Can you see yourself living here . . . Playing here . . .” Skyler leaned forward so that his moist breath tickled against the taller man’s neck and whispered the last of his words into Brian’s ear, “. . . Fucking here?”

Oh, yeah! Brian could definitely see himself fucking here - in fact, unless he was very wrong, he would literally see himself fucking here in about thirty seconds . . .

“I don’t know. I think I’m having trouble visualizing all of that . . .” Brian replied as he spun around and trapped the sexy realtor in his arms. “Care to help me create an image of that last part at least, Mr. Knowlton?”

If the smile on that devilishly dark face could possibly get any more alluring, Brian didn’t know how. “I think I know just how to help you with that, Mr. Kinney,” the swarthy man smirked as he gracefully sank down to his knees right there in the middle of the wide open loft floor. His nimble fingers made quick work of Brian’s fly and, before Brian knew it, his slacks were puddling around his knees and the soft lips nestled within the short ticklish beard were nibbling at Brian’s already half-hard dick.

Without any hesitation at all, Skyler began to rub the shaft of Brian’s cock over his lips and chin. Brian reveled in the erotic sensation of a saliva slicked tongue as it flicked over his heated flesh, touching here and there and then concentrating on the little spot between the ridges of his head. Finally, with a happy little whimper, the kneeling man let the whole of Brian’s dick slide between his lips and into his welcoming mouth. The erotic moan of pleasure that followed surprisingly didn’t come from Brian but from Skyler, who seemed in ecstasy over the chance to get such a hearty helping of man meat into his mouth. No, Skyler didn’t just suck Brian’s cock, he was worshiping that cock. It was such a fucking turn on and so unexpected. With a grunt and a fist full of thick black hair, Brian found himself spilling down Skyler’s throat – succumbing to that worshipful petitioner and offering up a sacrament to the faithful.

“Yeah! *Whooooo* I think I can definitely see that now,” Brian offered, extending a hand down to
help his newest supplicant up from his knees. “But maybe you can help me do a little more visualization over here by the windows so I can see how that will work with the view?”

“I would be a pleasure, Mr. Kinney,” the devout and worshipful estate broker replied with an impish grin as he towed Brian closer to the big bank of windows.

Three weeks later, Brian found himself standing in the exact same spot in the middle of the loft’s floor, now the owner of this wonderful space. He had so many ideas about what he wanted to do with it, that he didn’t know where to start. Mostly, though, he was just still so amazed that he - Brian Kinney, the kid from the wrong side of the tracks, whose own parents constantly told him that he’d never amount to anything - owned his own home at the tender age of twenty-five. He felt like it was all a dream. It was just too incredible. Too unbelievable. Too perfect.

“Well, here you go, Mr. Kinney,” Skyler jogged up to Brian, dangling the keys to the loft in front of Brian’s eyes. “Escrow is officially closed, everything is signed off and these are now yours, Brian. Congratulations!”

Brian held his palm open below the keys and watched as they dropped through the air, landing in his grasp. It felt so wonderful. It was like everything in his life was finally falling into place. He had the perfect job that was challenging and lucrative and now the perfect home that he could remodel and decorate to suit HIS tastes and needs. And, maybe, he’d even found the perfect someone to share all this perfection with?

Skyler was smiling at him with his usual rascally grin and Brian let himself echo the look. The darkly handsome man had been extremely attentive during this whole realty experience. Brian felt that there was a genuine connection between them - something beyond what he’d had before with the tricks he picked up or the relatively immature group guys he and Mikey hung out with. Skyler was a real grown up - a professional with an intelligence that equaled Brian’s and interests that meshed well with those in Brian’s life. Brian was not only physically attracted to him but also intrigued, which was saying a lot.

They’d spent a lot of time together over the past few weeks. Starting with that first fuck the day Skyler had shown him the loft, they’d been hooking up repeatedly a couple times a week. They’d also met a few times for coffee or dinner when there was more paperwork to go over, ending up talking for hours, often without even getting around to fucking - a first for Brian. Skyler had really diverse interests; he could talk books, movies, cars, even art. Brian found himself intellectually challenged by the man and, strangely, that was one of the most attractive things about the realtor.

The bottom line was that Brian really enjoyed the man’s company and for once was looking
forward to spending a lot more time together with just one man. He wanted to actually get to know someone for a change. It was the first time he’d even thought about the possibility of having some kind of serious long-term relationship with anyone since his disastrous affair back in high school with Lars. Maybe this time he’d found someone worth the effort? Someone he could trust?

The brand new homeowner stepped forward so that he could wrap his arms around the stylish and sexy realtor. “I still can’t really believe it’s mine.”

“Believe it! Now you just have to figure out what you’re going to do with it,” Skyler chuckled, his own hands straying around Brian’s waist and then lower so that they were resting right above the swell of Brian’s ass. “Did you talk to that contractor I gave your number to? He’s good and fast. You could be moving in before the end of March if you got going on this right away.”

“Yeah, I talked to the guy. He sounds competent. Thanks for sending him my way,” Brian replied, turning them both so that they could survey the bulk of the space behind them. “And I’m thinking that we should go with your ideas about keeping the space mostly open. I like the idea of leaving it as one large room with lots of uncluttered space. We could put the bathroom over in the back corner there,” Brian pointed to the northwest corner and then swept his wide open hand across the rest of that wall. “And then we could have the bedroom built here - maybe raised up a couple of steps or something to help set it off from the main living space but still open to the room. Your idea of sliding partitions would work with that too. What do you think?”

“I think it sounds perfect! With your excellent taste, It’ll end up being a showplace, Brian!” Skyler was seemingly almost as enthusiastic as Brian about the renovations.

Then Skyler broke out of the hold of Brian’s arms, walked over to where his briefcase waited near the door and pulled out a large stack of binder clipped papers. “Here are your copies of everything including the deed and mortgage and everything else under the sun,” the broker laid the pile in Brian’s hands. “That makes it all official. The place is yours, Brian. Congratulations, again.”

Brian weighed the stack in his hand, somehow pleased by how much paper there was, as if that substantiated the concept of him being a homeowner. This was all so unreal. He was on such a high at the moment and he hadn’t even needed drugs or alcohol to get there for once. If it wouldn’t peg him as a total dweeb, he’d be dancing around and singing at the top of his lungs right now.

“So, where should we go to celebrate?” Brian asked, excited to share not only this huge milestone in his life, but also the feeling of elation that was so rare for him.

Skyler looked up at Brian and seemed oddly confused. “Sorry, Brian. I’m afraid I’ve got plans
already tonight,” he offered by way of explanation.

“Oh. Well, how about tomorrow then?” Brian proposed, still on such a natural high that he didn’t want to give up on his celebration even if it had to be a bit delayed. “That might be even better, you know. I’ll have talked to the contractor by then and we’ll have plans to go over. That should make the celebration even more celebratory.”

“I don’t know, Brian . . .” Skyler pulled his PDA out of the briefcase and started tapping at various icons as if he was checking his calendar, all without looking up or making any sort of eye contact with Brian.

Brian’s gut did a little flippy thing as bits of the happy elation he’d been feeling started evaporating away. Something just didn’t feel right anymore. Something about Skyler was suddenly different.

That’s when the buzzer from the main building entrance rang out a couple of times and finally distracted the realtor from his calendar. Brian was still standing there, frozen in place, and didn’t really relish the interruption. Without bothering to ask Brian’s okay, however, Skyler walked over to the intercom system, pressed the ‘talk’ button and asked who it was.

“Hey, honey. It’s me. Are you ready to go?” said a very perky female voice.

“Just finishing, Hon. Come on up,” Skyler replied, pushing the release button to open the front door and then finally turning to confront Brian.

“Sorry about that. My wife’s picking me up so we can head off to another appointment. But I think we were just about done here anyway. Right?”

Brian felt the instant freeze of Skyler’s now cold regard. It was like the entire happy ball of energy inside him had turned to a heavy weight of ice that enveloped his heart. The realtor was standing there, a meter or so away from Brian, arms crossed over his chest and his gaze pinned to Brian’s face.

“Your . . . WIFE?” was all that Brian could think to ask.

“Yeah. My wife. Her name’s Michelle. We’ve been married for five years.” Neither the tone nor the expression gave away anything as Skyler made this prodigious announcement.
Brian shook his head. He couldn’t believe that Skyler was still in the closet. The man seemed so confident and open. They’d fucked maybe a dozen times and the man had never given Brian the impression that he was at all reticent about the experience. He just couldn’t believe it.

“So, then, how exactly is this . . .” Brian waved his hand between the two of them, his gesture incorporating all that they’d been through together the past few weeks. “How is this supposed to work?”

“This? There is no THIS, Brian.” Skyler stated emphatically and without emotion. “Whatever happened between you and me over the past couple of weeks was just, you know, part of the deal. I figured you knew that. I mean, it was fine. We had an okay time and I don’t really mind a fuck or two now and then. But, I’m not a fag. I just . . . Well, I do what needs to be done to close a deal. I’m sure you understand. From what I hear, Marty says you do the same thing for him.”

Brian opened his mouth to respond but didn’t even get one word out before there was a knock on the large metal sliding door of the loft. Skyler walked quickly over and pulled it open. There, waiting on the landing outside Brian’s new loft was a pretty young brunette, nicely dressed with her hair perfectly coiffed and her makeup applied precisely - the perfect showcase wife for a busy, up-and-coming professional like Skyler Knowlton - rubbing her obviously pregnant belly.

“Hey, Honey! Perfect timing,” Skyler said with one of his bewitchingly alluring smiles as he bent over to kiss his wife in greeting. “We just finished up.”

“Wow! This place really is just as great as Sky said,” the woman exclaimed as she made her way into the space and spun around while she checked it all out. “I agree with my husband - you’ve got a wonderful deal here. Oh. Sorry to just barge in like that. I was just really excited to see this place. Sky has told me so much about it.” The personable young lady moved over toward Brian and extended her hand. “You must be Brian. I’m Michelle Knowlton, My husband has mentioned you quite a bit over the past few weeks. He was really excited to get this place sold and said you were the perfect person for this particular location. I’m really happy for you that you closed so quickly. Congratulations.”

“Um . . . Uh, yeah. Thanks,” Brian shook the proffered hand without any enthusiasm or warmth.

“Okay. Well, I think that’s all. You’ve got all the paperwork and the keys, Brian, so I’d say you’re all set,” Skyler stepped in before the ensuing silence got too awkward and took his wife by the arm, ready to guide her back towards the door. “It’s been a pleasure working with you, Brian. If you ever need anything more in the way of real estate, don’t hesitate to give me a call. You’ve got my card. Good luck with your renovations. See you around.”
“It was nice to meet you, Brian,” Michelle called over her shoulder as she was herded out of the apartment.

Brian just stood there mutely, too shocked after having been so totally blind-sided to manage to think of anything to say in reply. He didn’t even blink until Skyler and Michelle were out the door and down the stairs. How could things have gone from the heights to the dregs in such a miniscule period of time?

Who was that happy, elated man who’d been standing here making plans about his future including the gorgeous, successful professional who he’d been seeing for the past several weeks? It certainly wasn’t Brian Kinney. Brian Kinney would have known better than to open himself up to rejection and hurt like that. Brian Kinney wouldn’t let himself be duped. Used like a whore just so some wheeler-dealer could close a sale and make a few lousy bucks. Brian Kinney was too smart for that, right?

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“Brian? Brian what the fuck are you doing? It’s only . . . It’s not even six o’clock and you’re already totally wasted?” Michael Novotny pulled up the bar stool next to his best friend and waved to the bartender for a beer while he surveyed the damage Brian had already done to several empty beers and most of a fifth of Jim Beam.

“Issss a CELEBRATION Mikey! We’re celebrating! And you’re jussss in time to join the party!” Brian slurred enthusiastically as he held up his shot glass in a toast to the new arrival.

“Uh huh . . . And what exactly are we celebrating, Brian?” Michael asked, trying to move the rest of the bottle away from Brian before he could refill his glass.

“We’re celebrating Brian Kinney’s education! He finally learned his lesson, Mikey. He finally wised up, you know. Isssss ‘bout time, don ya think?” Brian crowed before slamming back the rest of the shot he’d been waving around in the air.

“What lesson is that, Brian? You’re making no sense. Which isn’t really surprising because you’re so drunk you’re about to fall off the bar stool. When did you get here, anyway. I didn’t think we were supposed to meet until after I got off work?” Michael had to set his own beer down on the bar in order to prop Brian back up on his stool at the correct angle.
“Two things . . . Two things we learned today, Mikey. Two verrrrrrrrrry important things . . .”
Brian swivelled so that he was facing Michael, teetering on the verge of falling over for a few seconds but then catching himself at the last moment. “Firssssst, we learned AGAIN that straight people can NOT be trusted. They can’t. They’re bad, Mikey. They’re mean. We has to remember that though. We can’t forget . . .” Brian flailed around, looking for his missing bottle of bourbon while his audience was supposedly absorbing this first important lesson.

“Oh, Brian. Don’t you think that’s a little harsh? I mean, not all heteros are that bad . . .” Michael placed a light beer in Brian’s hand, hoping that would be an acceptable substitute for hard liquor that his friend really didn’t need any more of.

“Not that bad, huh? Bullshit! Listen to me, Mikey. Are you lisssstening?” Brian focused on his friend’s face with an intent look.

“Yes, Brian. I’m listening.”

“Good, cause you need to learn this lesson too, Mikey. You need this. Or you’ll get fucked over jussssss like Brian Kinney . . . Cause it’s true, you know. There’s only two kinds of straight people in thisssss world. The ones that hate you to your face . . . and the ones that hate you behind your back. You need to know that, Mikey. You do!”

“Okay, Brian. Whatever you say,” Michael put his arm around Brian’s shoulders, partly to keep him vertical but also partly to provide whatever comfort he could.


“I got it, Brian. Never trust straight people,” Michael affirmed. Then, in the mistaken hope that he might be able to get Brian onto a different, and more cheerful track, Michael asked about the ‘second lesson’.

Thassss Right! Thank you, Mikey. Almosssss forgot . . . Lesson number two! Lesson number two is easy. Issssss way easy. Just gotta ‘member NO REPEATS! Ever. No repeats. One guy, one night and thassss all. No boyfriends. No fuck buddies. No do overs. Nobody! Got it? That’s the on’y way not to get hurt, Mikey. No repeats. Don’t care how fucking hot they are or how they bat their big pretty eyes at you. Nobody gets to go back for seconssss. Nobody. Hear me, Mikey? Nobody! Brian Kinney’s done with all of it. Done! Jussssss done.”
“I hear you, Brian. You’re done. And I think you’re also done drinking. Hopefully you won’t remember any of this tomorrow morning. Now, come on, big guy. Let’s get you home. You need to sleep this off and things will look a lot better afterwards.” Michael had already got Brian up onto his feet and was trying to edge the uncooperative drunk towards the door.


Of course Brian Kinney wasn’t the first drunk to be led out of Woody’s spouting nonsense at the top of his lungs. Nobody really paid him any attention. It was didn’t mean anything, right? Nobody noticed or even cared.

Except for the young blond man who’d been sitting on the stool next to Brian for the past few hours. The one who was now sobbing. The one who was devastated after watching yet another destructive emotional blow hit the man he cared about. The one who nobody saw and who didn’t have to power to do anything to stop the injustices he’d seen but nevertheless couldn’t stop caring. The one who loved Brian Kinney enough to defy even death in order to stay by Brian’s side and try to help him. And the one who couldn’t stop kicking himself for failing once again to protect the heart and mind of the man he loved more than anything else in the world.

Chapter End Notes

10/27/15 - I promise that the torture of Brian Kinney is almost over. Not that there won’t still be angst, but we’ve almost got him to the point we would have found him in at the start of the series. He’s totally jaded, trusts nobody and is too scared to open himself up to any possibility of a relationship. Now, just one more glimpse of his past before I carry him towards the hopefully better future. TAG
Routine.

Chapter Notes

The making of Brian Kinney is pretty much complete. By this point we see him at his most 'Brianish'. It's really not a pretty sight. But he's become what his circumstances and his environment made him, for better or worse . . . Enjoy! TAG

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 20 - Routine.

"Greetings boys and boys and Debbie," Brian sauntered into the Novotny family kitchen and seated himself in one of the empty chairs around the table.

"It's about time, you little asshole. What part of 'Dinner's at six and you better be there on time' did you not understand," an exasperated Debbie scolded as she passed plates and serving dishes to whoever had a free hand.

"Lay off, Ma," Michael intoned right on cue. "You know Brian likes to make a grand entrance. That's just how Brian is. Besides, I'm sure he's got better things to do than come to a family dinner. Right, Brian?"

Brian shrugged. Actually, he'd just been lying around watching television at the loft when he remembered at the last minute that he'd been ordered to show up at Deb's for dinner tonight. Brian didn't mean to show up late and why Mikey would think he'd need to grandstand or make an entrance for a simple family dinner was beyond him. He didn't have any real plans either. But, of course, Mikey would never believe that. In his friend's mind, apparently Brian at twenty-eight was still some perpetually sexy fuck machine who was always either in the process of finding a new, hot, fuckable guy or actually busy consummating the act. At least that's how Brian felt his friend regarded him. And who was he to disabuse the man of his favorite fantasies?

"You know me. Busy, busy. So many asses out there that need my attention and so little time," Brian prevaricated, letting Michael and the rest think what they wanted to think since that's what seemed to make them happy.

"Oh, come on, Brian. You can't seriously tell me you already snagged a trick before six p.m. on a
Sunday evening, Michael's new friend Ted questioned from his place at the other side of the table.

Brian didn't really know what to think about this relatively new addition to their little improvised family. Ted Schmidt was an unassuming, nondescript type, with a quick wit and lots of smarts but also with serious self-esteem issues. He'd latched on, almost desperately, to Michael as soon as they'd met. Brian didn't think Ted was all that bad looking - he actually had the most amazingly beautiful, soulful eyes you could ever imagine - but his lack of self-confidence was a big turn off. And he seemed to just assume Brian would look down on him, so why disappoint?

Brian donned his seediest smirk and just smiled at Ted without actually saying anything. He wasn't going to outright lie, but he'd happily let them believe whatever they wanted about him. Vic, who wasn't naive enough to believe half of the stories that circulated about Brian, snorted a little laugh at all of them and then went back to his dinner. Brian reached over and squeezed Vic's shoulder conspiratorially, happy to see that the sick man was feeling well enough to join them for a change.

Luckily, before anyone could pry further into Brian's sex life, the doorbell rang and the lesbian contingent of their little group bustled into the house without waiting to be asked in. Along with Brian and an assortment of Michael's other misfit friends, Debbie had adopted Lindsey Peterson into the clan after about the fifth or sixth time Brian had invited his old friend to the Diner for lunch. Deb claimed she was glad to finally have another female around to counter the overwhelming amount of testosterone she was usually subjected to. Along with Lindsey, though, came Melanie, the lover she'd been with since just after they'd graduated from college. Brian could have lived without Mel's caustic attitude and open hostility. But, even then, Brian played the role he'd been thrust into without much protest. Mel liked to think of him as the evil male influence that all good dykes should fight against, so Brian let her. It didn't make any difference to him.

Debbie finally finished setting the last of the heavy serving dishes full of pasta on the table right as the last of their number clambered down the stairs. Emmett, Michael's roommate, flounced his way through the living room and took the last vacant chair at the table just in time to accept the plate of garlic bread passed to him from Michael. Brian hid a smile over Emmett's latest outrageous costume in the beer bottle he was sipping from. Brian secretly got a huge kick out of the flamboyant queen's crazy taste in clothing. He respected that Emmett wasn't afraid to just be himself. He'd never admit that out loud, of course, because that wouldn't fit with the studly Brian Kinney image, but he could quietly appreciate the spectacle in his own mind.

Dinner at Deb's proceeded as usual. The gang was rowdy and the conversation was raunchy bordering on profane, just like always. Brian didn't contribute much, but that was normal too. He couldn't care less about Michael's latest comic book obsession, or Em's gossip about the botched cosmetic surgery some drag queen he knew had been subject to. He had little to no interest in Mel's rant over the latest news from the GLC or Ted's discussion of some recent news bite. Really, other than his longtime friendship with the Novotny's, Brian had nothing in common with any of them. Mostly he was content to just sit, eat and pretend to be part of the group, though, since that was what was expected of him.
“So, Brian, what’s your plan for tonight,” Michael asked, turning the conversation back on his best friend. “I have an early shift tomorrow at the Big Q but if you’re heading to Woody’s or the club I could probably go hang out with you for at least a little while.”

“Michael. You shouldn’t be out to all hours every night. Especially when you have to work in the morning,” Debbie enjoined in full mother hen mode.

“Ma! I’m a grown up. I can take care of myself. And if I want to go out at night, I will,” Michael asserted in a childishly whiney voice that made him sound far from grown up. “Besides, somebody’s got to look out for Brian. If anyone needs a designated driver it’s him.”

While Brian sat there saying nothing, the entire table full of people proceeded to have a rather long and heated conversation about what Brian should or should not do with his evening and whether or not Michael should tag along. Brian just kept picking at his food and sipping at his beer, passively listening to the debate. It sometimes amazed him the way Michael projected him into this role of playboy extraordinaire so that he could insinuate himself into the picture as Brian’s wingman and general minder. Meanwhile, Mel, Ted and Emmett contributed the occasional snarky comment. Brian didn’t bother to respond to any of them. He didn’t feel his input was wanted. If anyone HAD actually asked him, he probably would have said he wasn’t really in the mood to go out. But he really didn’t have any plans for the night other than returning to his stylish but empty loft, where he’d probably spend his time getting drunk. He could just as easily get drunk out at a bar with Michael and the rest of the crew. It didn’t matter much to Brian.

While his social plans were being decided for him, Brian looked around him at the group assembled in Debbie’s kitschy little kitchen. The Novotny home had in many ways been a shelter for the brunet all these years. He’d never forget all those times he’d come crawling in at whatever hour, dripping blood and sometimes barely able to walk, but confident that Debbie and Michael would do what they could to patch him up and heal him. He felt far more comfortable here that he had ever felt at his own parents’ house. At the same time, though, this place had never really felt like a home to him either. Probably because all the care and concern came with a price. It came with the constant pressure of Michael’s expectations and Debbie’s disappointments. It came with Michael’s unvoiced but always present desire to be more in Brian’s eyes than just a friend. It came with the assumption that Brian would be the person they needed to take care of.

Both Michael and Debbie were the type of people who needed to be needed. And in order to make that a reality, they had slowly changed Brian into what it was they envisioned him to be - someone who would need them. The process had been so slow and built up so gradually that no one even noticed it happening at the time. But, looking at himself through their eyes now, Brian saw that he’d become an almost completely different person. Not that he was complaining really - in a way he liked Michael’s adulation and Debbie’s mothering. He’d long known that he’d never been wanted in his own home, so it only seemed natural that he would do what was necessary to become what his surrogate family expected. If that’s what it took to be considered important and special in
their eyes, he would gladly play his assigned role. Even if that role was beginning to grate and seemed pointless these days.

But what else did he have?

At long last, dinner was finished and it had been decided that the whole group would head over to Woody’s for a couple drinks. Then, later, Deb, Vic and the girls would head home while the boys continued on to Babylon. Brian had no real objections to this plan. It was pretty much par for the course. And so the crew bubbled out of the house, divided up amongst the available vehicles and headed to their favorite watering hole.

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Even from his hidden spot behind a teetering stack of empty beer kegs at the far side of the bar, Justin still had a pretty good view of Brian and the gang. The large group was gathered, as usual, around one of the pool tables and the two small round-top tables nearby. They were all laughing and chatting and it looked very congenial. Even Brian seemed in a fairly decent mood so far this evening. For a change.

Despite the seemingly happy scene, Justin was very worried about his charge. The rest of them might not have noticed it, but the boy that had known Brian from birth had seen the way the lonely man was changing. Brian rarely laughed or even smiled these days. He'd smirk or sneer but a true, joyful, unselfconscious smile from the taciturn man was almost unheard of anymore. His temper was always short. He'd become hypercritical of everyone - not even his friends escaped his sarcastic put downs. Any natural empathy Brian had possessed as a boy had long since disappeared. He was cold and distant and no longer seemed to get any real satisfaction out of anything.

And the worst part was that there didn't seem to be anything Justin could do to help Brian.

At this point, Justin hadn’t actually talked to Brian in years. Luckily Brian was no longer at risk for any physical abuse and since he’d cut off almost all ties to his parents outside of the couple times a year he was summoned for a ‘family’ meal - which was always code for the fact that his father was going to hit him up for money - even their emotional abuse was limited in scope. The rest of the time, Brian just moved through his world maintaining the status quo, and didn’t need much day-to-day assistance from his spiritual guide. Plus, Justin’s presence always seemed to make Brian uncomfortable, which in turn made Justin feel guilty and even more worried. As a result, he’d just given up trying to maintain a visible presence in Brian’s life. Not that he wasn’t still watching - he couldn’t help himself - but these days he always stayed hidden.
It wasn’t like talking to Brian would have helped anyway. Brian had long ago given up listening to Justin, or anyone else for that matter, when it came to personal advice or emotional support. Brian had closed himself off from virtually everyone. Emotionally, that is. Physically, he was still there. He had a small but active circle of friends who thought of themselves as close but who in reality saw very little of the true Brian Kinney. Brian was more successful than ever at work and could still charm the birds out of the trees if he chose to. And as far as his sex life was concerned, he’d never been hotter or more desired. But when it came to anything other than superficial interactions, Brian simply refused to engage.

Tonight, while Justin watched, he saw it happening yet again. Brian’s attention slowly drifted away from the conversations around him as he withdrew into himself. Justin could see the restless shifting of the beautiful hazel eyes. It was as if Brian was searching for something to cure his dissatisfaction - something that was missing from the present company and maybe his life in general. His glance roamed around the room but Justin could tell that nothing Brian saw held his attention for long. Not the warmth of his friends’ conversation, not the camaraderie of the pool game, not even the bevy of beautiful men who wandered throughout the bar. Brian had that, ‘Been There, Done That’ expression on his face.

Justin could tell Brian was ready to bolt even before he stood up, drained the rest of his beer and grabbed his jacket from the back of the chair.

“Brian? What’s up? Where you goin’?” Michael immediately asked, as always acutely aware of his best friend’s every move. “I thought we were all heading to Babylon later?!”

“No tonight, Mikey. It’s a total troll-fest in here tonight. I doubt Babylon will be much better. I think I’ll try my luck at the baths instead,” Brian replied indifferently.

“But, Brian . . . we haven’t hung out in ages. I was really looking forward to hitting Babylon with you,” Michael tried his best to keep hold of his hero’s attentions.

“You can’t just blow us all off, Brian; you drove. How are we supposed to get home if you run off,” Ted asked, less concerned with where Brian went to pick up his next trick than the fact that he’d be stranded without transportation.

“You’re big boys. I’m sure you can find your way home without my help,” Brian explained as he pulled his jacket on. And then, with a brusque, “Night, ladies!” he was gone.
Why was it that the Orgy Room at the Liberty Baths was always packed on Sunday nights? It was probably some reaction to all the usual sanctimonious crap doled out in the churches, mosques and synagogues on Sunday mornings. But, whatever the reason, Brian had found a whole passel of willing men waiting for his attentions when he arrived there that evening. Being the organization freak that he was, Brian immediately took action to sort them out, discarding anything that wasn’t up to his standards, and then line them up so that he could deal with them in order.

Strangely enough, nobody seemed to mind this heavy-handed treatment. The guys were actually very accommodating. In fact, it was almost as if they all tacitly agreed that it was not only Brian’s right but his obligation to treat them in such a fashion. And nobody really fussed or complained, they just waited their turn.

The proceedings did slightly shock Justin, who’d followed Brian from Woody’s. Watching Brian plowing his way through the innumerable bodies at the baths wasn’t really what Justin wanted to do with his evening, but he couldn’t help himself. The incorporeal spirit felt he was becoming almost as pathetic as Brian himself, the way he was forced into this voyeuristic role. He just couldn’t abandon Brian, though. He couldn’t stop following and watching. Even though the watching served no purpose other than to make Justin himself feel increasingly hopeless. He was so frustrated and forlorn and all he really wanted to do was scream at the unfairness of the world, but all Justin could do was stand and watch while the man he loved wasted himself on these unworthy cretins.

Brian didn’t take any notice of the insubstantial specter that was hovering half-hidden in the far corner of the room - he never did anymore. Instead, he continued to look over the night’s offerings. After strolling nonchalantly down the line hopefuls, Brian stopped in front of one man and snorted, shaking his head disparagingly. “You’re kidding, right? This isn’t Troll Tuesday, buddy. I don’t think so.” Without even commenting, the man, head hanging low, stepped out of line and slunk off towards the private rooms up front. All the onlookers did was chortle a little, but none called Brian out on his rudeness.

Sometimes Justin wondered if Brian did that shit on purpose as a kind of dare, hoping that someone WOULD call him on it. Nobody ever did though, so Brian had no incentive to change.

Once he had them all sorted by whatever esoteric standards he was employing that night, Brian moved so that he was seated on the tiled bench next to the back wall. With a crook of his index finger, he summoned the first applicant and then used his hand on the man’s shoulder to force the guy to his knees. As this particular supplicant started to lap at Brian’s half-hard dick, the reclining man popped in a tab of Molly, leaned his head back and prepared himself to be serviced by his harem.
Brian’s first blow job of the night was merely adequate. The only reason he came was because he hadn’t gotten off since morning and was horny. The guy’s mouth was sloppy and his sucking was weak. Whatever. It was an orgasm and Brian never said no to that. The second and third guy were summoned as a pair. Brian had one working his cock and the other engaged in some chest play. Halfway through he had them switch places. When he got bored with them, he dismissed the duo and had the next two step forward. But those two weren’t any more inspiring than the last set. Brian was even losing his hard on by this point. When did getting your dick sucked become so tedious, he wondered?

Realizing that he wasn’t getting anywhere like this, Brian pushed the men away from him and stood up, grabbing hold of a new offering from out of the line of waiting hopefuls. However, right as Brian was about to spin the man around in order to fuck him, the guy’s face came into focus and struck a chord of remembrance. Brian quickly realized that he’d already had this loser a week or two earlier.

“Damn it! What the fuck do you think you’re trying to pull,” Brian shoved the trick away from him forcefully enough that the guy stumbled and almost fell. “You know the rules. You all know the rules,” Brian turned and addressed all the waiting masses. “No deposits. NO RETURNS! What part of that is too difficult for you to remember, buddy? I DON’T do repeats. No exceptions! Once I’ve had you, why the hell would I ever want to see or hear from you again? Now get lost you loser.”

“Fuck you, Kinney,” the slighted trick growled back, clearly not happy to have been so singled out in front of this crowd.

“Not while I’m living. And, not even once I’m dead. Not where you’re concerned, at least. Besides, your ass has more miles on it that the runway at Pittsburgh International Airport and your hole is as wide as a plane hanger. You weren’t worth the effort the first time I fucked you. No way am I going to waste my skills on you a second time.” Undaunted by the confrontation and now starting to feel the effects of the E he’d consumed, Brian dismissed the man completely from his mind. “Next!” he hollered to the assembly.

And Brian Kinney returned to his meaningless dance with the nameless, faceless partners, fucking them for no other reason than he was bored and had nothing better to do, while Justin watched and wondered how it had come to this.

Chapter End Notes
10/29/15 - If I've done my job right, you should see the canon Brian that was in place at the start of the series. He's cold, detached, lonely and has little or no empathy. This is Brian before Justin came along. Now that I've broken him, let's see what I can do to rebuild him . . . TAG
“Hey,” Justin said dejectedly as he appeared out of nowhere and immediately plopped down crossways over the foot of the bed next to Jesse.

“Hey, yourself,” Jesse replied as he pulled off the headphones plugged into his stereo so they could talk.

Although, it didn't look like Justin was in the mood for much talking tonight. The usually ebullient and vivacious blond boy seemed depressed and sedate. Even the sixteen year old who'd been lying around listening to the kind of angst-filled, moody music typical of teenaged boys, found Justin’s demeanor to be a real downer, which was saying a lot. And, unfortunately, this wasn't the first time Jesse had been forced to put up with Justin in this condition. In fact, ALL Justin's moods seemed to be equally dismal these days.

Looking at his long-time friend, chewing at his bottom lip with a worried frown, Jesse decided that he'd finally had enough.

"So, what did Brian do this time?” Jesse asked, rolling over onto his right side so he could look directly at Justin.

"Why do you think Brian did anything?” Justin replied, although his face signaled no end to the boy’s nervous worrying.

"Because you've got that ‘I've been watching Brian’ look to you.” When Justin tried to pretend he didn't understand what that meant, Jesse elaborated. “Lately, whenever you come here after visiting Brian, you act like the world’s coming to an end, someone ran over your puppy AND the
Grinch stole your last Christmas present, all combined in the same afternoon.” Justin turned his head away from Jesse, looking instead at the far corner of the room, but didn't deny the allegations leveled at him. "Come on, Justin. You've been totally bummed out for so long now, it's driving me crazy. Just tell me what's going on. Maybe I can help.”

"I don't think anyone CAN help,” Justin moaned and flapped his hands demonstratively. “It's fucking hopeless.”

"Wow. Melodramatic much?” Jesse snarked, slapping his friend and confidant’s stomach lightly with one hand. "I know you still look like a kid, but aren't you in reality like, fifty or something? Do you really have to sound like a whiny brat too? You're worse than me, and I'm actually - really - sixteen.” Justin shot him a LOOK, but all that did was earn him a chuckle. “So, fucking spill already, dude. What is it with this Brian Kinney guy anyway? I mean, yeah he's OK looking, but what is it about him that has you tied up in knots all the time?”

"It's just . . . Well . . . He's the one I'm supposed to be with. The man of my dreams. I know that sounds totally hokey but it's fucking true. I actually dreamed about him - saw his face, saw us together - back when I was still a kid. Brian is the man I was supposed to end up with. I'm not sure how I know that or why, I just know it's true. But then . . . Well, then this happened," Justin held his arms up, presenting himself as the prime exhibit in his own supernatural saga. "Now all I can do is watch Brian from afar and I feel so helpless because I can't do anything to help him. I can't be with him like this. And I'm worried. He's so alone and so sad all the time but there's nothing I can do . . .”

"Bullshit!” Jesse wasn't about to let his friend wallow in self-pity. "Why do you think there's nothing you can do? If he IS the guy you're supposed to be with - your soulmate - then go get him.”

"Yeah, right! In case you missed it - incorporeal being here. How the fuck do you think this will work? I can't be with Brian like THIS.” Justin gave up the pretense of lying totally dejected on the bed and got up to pace around the room instead. "Don't you think if I could figure out a way to work this I would? All I've ever wanted was to be with Brian. I just don't know how.”

"Again, dude, I call bullshit. So . . . I get it that you're dead and all. But, so what? You've never let that stop you before.”

"I'm not dead!” Justin exclaimed emphatically. "Well, I guess, yeah, I am technically, but not really. I don't know what I am. I don't feel dead. I'm not like a ghost or anything. I'm not haunting him or you. I just feel like I'm waiting, you know? Only, I don't know what I'm waiting for.”
"Fine. So you're not dead, but you're not alive. That's beside the point though. The point is, that you want to be with Brian and I still don't see what's stopping you." Jesse, in his typical teenage fashion, plowed right through all the seeming impossibilities, convinced somehow that the world should be fair. "Look . . . so what if nobody else in the world can see you or hear you. I can. And more importantly, Brian can. He's the only one that really matters, right? As long as Brian can see you and touch you, you're golden."

"But it's not that easy. Brian doesn't want to see me. He hasn't wanted to see me or acknowledge that I even exist since he was younger than you are now." Justin flopped back down on the bed again, seemingly defeated.

"Why, though? That has NEVER made sense to me. I mean, you've helped him his whole life. Why does he pretend that he can't see you?" Jesse sounded honestly stumped by Brian's behavior.

"I don't know. Maybe he's just afraid to seem different. Afraid people will think he's crazy if he says he sees someone who isn't there?" Justin smiled over at Jesse sympathetically.

"Yeah, well, on behalf of the admittedly crazy people of the world who do see things that aren't there, I get that," Jesse grinned back at his own purportedly 'imaginary friend'. "But then again, it's not like Brian needs to take out an ad in the Wall Street Journal announcing to the world that he sees dead people. He doesn't need to avoid you all the time. When you're alone, in private, what would be the harm in admitting the truth about what he sees and hears?"

"Well, whatever his reasons, I'm not going to force myself on him. If he doesn't want to be with me, I guess that's his choice."

"What about what YOU want, Justin?" Jesse asked, his eyes filling with concern. "You've been watching out for this guy for what, like, thirty years? Just waiting for a chance to be with him? So, when does what YOU want or need come into play? If you ask me, you should just go for it. Fuck what Brian Kinney wants. If you want this Brian, you should let him know that. Tell him what you want. If it were me, I'd just get in his face and refuse to let him ignore me anymore."

“What, like, stalk him or something?” Justin sat up, already seeming more energized. "Isn't that a little creepy?"

"Maybe. But, it's not like you can be arrested and thrown in jail or anything. Nobody except Brian will even know you're there," Jesse chuckled conspiratorially. "Bottom line, if you want this guy as bad as I think you do, go do your ghost thing and haunt him."

Brian staggered to his Jeep, fumbling with the keys a moment before he managed to get them in the lock and the door open, and then tiredly climbed into the driver’s seat. It was late. He'd taken his time fucking through the line up at the Baths earlier in the evening, then made his way to Babylon for some late-night drinking, drugging and more fucking. He squinted at the clock built into the dashboard and groaned a little when he saw that it was already 2:45 in the morning. Seven am, the time his alarm would go off so we could make it to work on time, would be arriving far too soon for his taste. Whatever. It wouldn't be the first time.

He shoved the keys into the ignition, twisted them until the engine roared to life, shifted into gear and then pulled out of the club parking lot. It was a dark night, and pouring rain out, which only reinforced the conviction that he probably shouldn't be driving in his condition. However, since Brian had blown off Mikey, his permanently designated driver, he didn't have much choice if he wanted to get both himself and his Jeep home before dawn. Luckily it was only a mile or two, and it wasn't the first time Brian had driven drunk, stoned or both - so far he'd always been lucky.

It wasn't until he pulled up to the first stoplight, that Brian turned his head to the right and noticed that the passenger seat contained a passenger. Luckily, the car was already stopped at the time. Otherwise, the surprise, on top of his inebriated state, probably would have resulted in a car accident. It didn't help matters much, either, that this particular passenger was more of a shock to him than anyone else on the planet would've been.

"W-W-What . . . What the fuck?" Brian stuttered, his hands fumbling at the seat belt buckle, trying to free himself in order to escape from the now haunted vehicle.

"I think you've had enough fucking for one night, don't you?" Justin replied with a grim grin. "By the way, the light's green."

"You . . . you . . . you can't be here. This is NOT real. You're not really here." Brian exclaimed loudly, ignoring both the traffic signal and the car honking behind him. “Shit! What the hell was in that Ecstasy Anita sold me?”

“Sorry, Brian, but you and I both know I AM here. You can pretend all you want that you don't hear me or see me, but that's not going to make me go away again.” Justin looked determined, which was not at all reassuring to poor spooked Brian. “You see, a friend of mine gave me some good advice earlier this evening - he told me that if I really want to be with you, I shouldn't let you push me away. And he was right. So, here I am. You need me, and I want to be here with you, so that's just the way it's going to be from now on. Get used to it, because I'm not going anywhere.”
“But . . . but . . . but . . . You're not real. You can't be. I made you up. I was just a sad, lonely, scared little boy and I needed a friend so I made you up. Lots of children have imaginary friends. But you're not really here now. You can't be.”

“Come on, Brian. Be honest with yourself. You know that's not true. I know you haven't forgotten all those nights we spent together when you were a boy. Me keeping you company, telling you stories, trying to keep you safe and keep away the fear. Maybe, as you got older, you tried to convince yourself that I wasn't real - and for the most part I let you - but you know the truth,” Justin reached out with his left hand, grabbing ahold of Brian's wrist, feeling the warmth of the bare skin under his fingertips. “Feel that? I know you can. That feels real to me.”

"No. No. This just can't be . . . It's the booze and the drugs . . . I'm delusional. I'm seeing things. Hearing things. Maybe I should go to the hospital?"

Justin let loose with golden peals of laughter. "You're fine, Brian. You don't need to go to the hospital. You'll probably feel like shit tomorrow morning and have one hell of a hangover, but you're not delusional.” Justin let go of Brian's hand and turned in his seat to face forward. "Why don't you just drive us home for now. You're in no condition tonight to talk about anything serious. Don't worry though, I'll still be around tomorrow morning. We can talk then.”

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Brian rolled over in bed, slapping blindly at the nightstand in order to shut off the blaring alarm clock. It took a few tries, but in the end he was successful. Then he rolled back onto his pillow and moaned. His head felt like there was a teeny tiny man inside his cranium operating a miniature jackhammer that was chipping away at the bones of his skull. The taste in his mouth brought to mind dirty gym socks, combined with used cat litter and the contents of a week-old ashtray. If he didn't have to piss so bad, he might have just rolled over and gone back to sleep.

With eyes only partially opened, he struggled out of bed and shuffled over to the bathroom. He didn’t bother to switch on the lights - that would just hurt his head even more and he was familiar enough with the room’s layout to accomplish his tasks without seeing. After pissing, he managed to swallow a handful of aspirin before stumbling back towards the bed. He climbed under the covers once more, planning on dozing for about fifteen minutes or until the pain relievers kicked in, whichever came first.
While he dozed, Brian tried to think back over the night before and remember exactly why he felt so shitty this morning. This was a regular routine for him on mornings after the nights before. It was a comforting process and helped to get his brain kick started before he moved on to thinking about what he needed to accomplish during the upcoming day. For some reason, though, this morning his brain didn’t really want to delve too closely into the night before. Brian knew he was forgetting something important, but it was too early and he was too hungover to put much effort into remembering quite yet. So, instead of expending more of his short stock energy, Brian decided to roll over and bury himself deeper into the pillows.

Only, when he rolled over onto his left side and reached up to secure another pillow, Brian encountered something wholly unexpected - a warm body.

“Damn it!” Brian cursed loudly enough to cause the pain in his head to throb again. “Okay, buddy, what part of ‘no overnight tricks’ was too difficult for you to understand?”

“Well, first of all, I’m not a trick. And secondly, I think we already covered the fact that I’m not leaving and I don’t care what you want anymore,” an all-too-recognizable voice answered calmly.

“What the hell?” The voice that wasn’t supposed to be there got Brian’s instant attention and he sat up in spite of his pounding headache.

“Morning!” said the blond boy vision that was occupying the far side of Brian’s bed.

“What the fuck are YOU doing here?” Brian moaned and collapsed back into the pile of pillows.

“Just waiting for you to wake up,” Justin answered cheerfully while sporting a huge smile and demonstrating far too much enthusiasm for this early in the morning as far as Brian was concerned. “I did get up and try to make you coffee, but unfortunately, it looks like coffee makers are among those mechanical items that we incorporeal beings are for some reason not allowed to operate. Which is just stupid if you ask me. I mean, in the grand scheme of the universe, how is it fair that I can’t even get a coffee maker to work? How is my making you coffee going to screw up the laws of physics? It’s just so frustrating sometimes . . .”

*uuuuhhhhhhhhh* Brian’s small whimper caused Justin to pause in his diatribe against the unfairness of his personal metaphysics. “Why? Why are you doing this to me?”

“I’m here because you need me, Brian,” Justin answered simply, wondering if there was any way
to actually avoid having the argument that he knew was coming.

“That’s such a load of crap!” Brian insisted staunchly. “I don’t need you. I don’t NEED anyone. I can take care of myself just fine, thank you very much. So, feel free to just scurry off back to outer space or the mists of time or wherever else it is that people . . . ghosts . . . spirits . . . whatever-it-is-you-are come from.”

“No.” Justin remained where he was, sitting up in the bed with his back leaning against the headboard and his arms crossed stubbornly across his chest.

“NO? You don’t get to just say ‘no’,” Brian was now thoroughly pissed off and he sat up too so that he was face to face with his overly persistent apparition. “This is my loft and my life. You can’t just say ‘no’. I don’t want you here. I don’t need you or anybody else to babysit me and I’m all grown up so I don’t need an imaginary friend anymore. Now get the fuck out!”

“No.” Justin maintained without raising his voice or getting even a tiny bit flustered by Brian’s impotent rage.

“Damn it, Justin! Get OUT!” Brian yelled, standing up from the bed, grabbing the blond boy by the arm and physically hauling him through the loft towards the front door.

Justin didn’t struggle or fight against Brian’s strong arm techniques. He passively trotted along and let Brian shove him out the door without saying a word. Brian waved facetiously as he slammed the door closed in Justin’s face and locked it tight. Then he turned around and . . .

Ran smack dab into Justin again.

“You can’t get rid of me that easily, Brian,” Justin announced, standing his ground with his legs spread wide and his arms still crossed.

“Fuck!” Brian spat, turning and slamming the side of his fist against the closed metal loft door.

Of course, that didn’t help at all and only served to cause his hand to throb painfully in time with his aching head. This was really NOT Brian’s day. With yet another defeated whimper, Brian sagged against the door, eventually turning around so that he could let his body slide down the cool metal surface until he was huddled on the floor with his back to the portal.
For a moment Justin watched the man he'd spent a lifetime caring for as Brian huddled on the floor and sulked. Knowing Brian as well as he did - knowing all the disappointments that had gone into making him the man he was today - it wasn't that hard for Justin to understand what was going through the beautiful brunet head. Brian had given up on finding happiness and relegated himself to some kind of halfway existence where not being actively hated was somehow good enough. He no longer believed he deserved happiness, let alone pure unselfish love, and anyone that came to him spouting unproven promises of such things was automatically suspect. Justin wasn't going to be deterred though. He wasn't going to simply sit back, continuing to do nothing while Brian sank further and further into an unhappy, unfulfilled existence.

If Brian wasn't ready to hear the words, Justin would show him through his actions.

Justin stepped over and let himself sink to the floor next to Brian.

“Brian, I know this isn’t easy for you. I know that you don’t want to see me or have anything to do with me. But, you have to understand - I just can’t stand seeing you like this anymore,” Brian started to protest, but Justin held up a hand, halting the interruption. “You know, I was there the day you were born. I used to know things, sometimes, before they would happen, so I knew about you even before then. But the day you were born, I stole my brother’s car, drove to the hospital and snuck into the nursery just so I could be with you. I could see right away that you were perfect and I knew that we were meant to be together. I didn’t know exactly how it was going to work - I still don’t - but I knew I could never again bear to be without you. And I promised you right then and there that I would never leave you and I would do whatever it took to keep you safe no matter what...”

Justin could feel more than hear Brian’s sigh at this unwanted confession and knew that his window of opportunity to explain things to his charge was shrinking, so he hurried on. “I know I’ve failed you in that regard. Not that I didn’t try, but being crushed in a car accident on the way home from the hospital that day kinda derailed all my plans. Even then, though, I didn’t give up on you. I’ve tried to be there for you - to do whatever was in my power to protect you. And maybe I wasn’t able to protect you from Jack or Joan or Lars or any of the others who have tried their best to break you, but I can and will be here to protect you from yourself.”

“So,” Justin rose to his feet and extended a hand down to help Brian up as well. “No matter how much you protest, I’m not going anywhere. I promised that I would always be there for you and nothing you say or do is going to make me break that promise.” Justin moved so that he was standing directly in front of Brian, slipping his arms around the taller man’s waist and looking up at him with all the adoration and love he had pouring out of every pore of his body. “And, really, Brian... If death can’t keep me away, do you really think you stand a chance?”
Slowly, Brian’s arms floated up until they were resting on Justin’s shoulders. Brian had been looking into those open, trusting and completely artless blue eyes the whole time the young man was talking. He didn’t want to trust what he was hearing. He’d been burned so many times in the past . . . But, then again, it wasn’t looking like he could anything to stop Justin either, so maybe . . .

Brian’s head dropped forward until his chin was resting lightly on top of the shorter youth’s blond head. As impossible as this whole situation seemed, it somehow felt right to Brian too. On one hand, he didn’t believe in any of that destiny crap the boy was spouting. But, at the same time, he couldn’t really deny his own senses any longer. If Justin wasn’t real, and all this was just a whacky drug-induced hallucination, it was a damn good one. He also remembered how stubborn and obstinate Justin had always been, and knew that there was no way he was going to dissuade him once he’d gotten ahold of an idea. So, it looked like Brian would simply have to put up with the kid sticking around.

And, really, what was so bad about that?

Chapter End Notes

10/30/15 - Next up - Justin's plan to bring Brian back to life . . . TAG
Furtherance.

Chapter Notes

Justin's plan to redeem Brian. (And no angst at all is involoved!) Enjoy! TAG

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Chapter 22 - Furtherance.

Brian wrestled the big, beefy, brute he’d brought home from the gym in through the Loft’s door and immediately pinned the guy to the wall. He loved when the big ones were easily dominated. It made him feel, for that moment at least, even more in control of his life and his world. And this guy might be big, but he was turning out to be a total marshmallow in Brian’s capable and experienced hands.

“Hmmm. Not bad,” a dismissive tenor voice pronounced judgment from over Brian’s right shoulder. “Doesn’t look too bright though. But, then again, that’s not what you tend to look for in a trick, is it, Brian?”

Brian groaned aloud, causing the beefy trick to look up at him in confusion. That confusion was probably echoed on his own face as he tried, unsuccessfully, to ignore the insane sprite who was leaning against the wall only two inches away from beefy boy, smiling inanely back at Brian. The annoyed Stud wished he could simply tell the annoying blond ghost who’d been haunting him for the past two weeks to fuck off, but then the trick would think HE was nuts. Although, maybe that wasn't too far from the truth. After two weeks of non-stop Justin, Brian's sanity was, at best, questionable these days.

Needless to say, it was very disconcerting to have Justin watching him day in and day out. The kid was indefatigable. No matter what time of the day or night Brian looked around him, Justin would be there. Nothing Brian did or said could persuade the guardian spirit to leave. Even for a short period of time.

And it wasn't only in the Loft. The kid was following him everywhere. To work. To the gym. To the bars and clubs Brian frequented. Even to the Baths. Brian couldn't get even ten minutes peace. Everywhere Brian went, that pesky kid would pop up and offer irritating comments and observations, ask nosy questions or make cutting jokes. And, while Brian could definitely appreciate the boy’s sharp wit and wicked sense of humor, he didn't need the constantly running
commentary on his lifestyle.

Not that Justin was at all judgmental - or at least not overtly so. He never once said that Brian shouldn’t do something. Even when Brian was doing something borderline destructive - which he had done a few times just to test Justin. Instead, the annoying little twat would simply demand that Brian be honest with himself and acknowledge WHY he was doing what he was doing. And the prat was insightful enough that he seemed to always see right through any lame excuse or half-assed, thoughtless explanation Brian tried to foist off on him. Which meant that Brian was forced to rethink his actions far more often than was comfortable for the man who’d prefer to carry on with his ‘No Apologies - No Regrets’ philosophy.

And, worst of all, it was seriously affecting Brian’s sex life.

Justin wisely said nothing at all about the numbers of men Brian fucked. No, that would have been too easy - Brian would have simply fucked even more guys just to spite the brat. Instead, the boy had settled on a course of action that made Brian have to actually THINK about the tricks.

Justin simply insisted that Brian know each and every trick’s name.

At first, Brian thought that wasn’t such a big deal. All he had to do was ask each guy his name before he fucked them. It was just one little question. And if he did that, then Justin would back away and let Brian do his thing without any further comments. It’s not like Brian intended to actually remember any of their names or anything. He planned to forget the name right along with the face and, except for those rare few exceptional fucks that he actually cared to remember, everything else about the fuck as soon as he came. Only, it never seemed to work out that way.

See, when you asked a guy his name, he thought you actually cared. He would think that Brian actually wanted to know something about him. Especially since everyone on Liberty Avenue knew that Brian Kinney never took an interest in his tricks. So, if he was actually asking about YOU, then you must be special, right? And that assumption would inevitably lead to an outpouring of more information than Brian wanted or needed.

So, even just that one innocuous question - What’s your name - would spawn a whole spate of data, like where the guy worked, what he did for a living or for fun, where the guy had first seen Brian or where he thought Brian had first seen him, how excited he was to hook up with Brian, how long he’d been trying to hook up with Brian, why he thought that he and Brian were meant for each other, the names and professions of every one of the trick’s friends who he had ever discussed Brian with, so on and so forth, devolving eventually into speculation about when they’d be getting together again.
It was fucking exhausting. It was also very distracting. And it usually caused a huge delay in the actual fucking. If Brian tried to cut the guy off, explaining that he honestly didn’t give a fuck about the man’s life story, the trick often got offended and would even, occasionally, leave. Sometimes Brian was so disgusted by the whole experience that he ended up just walking away from the trick altogether. Which was why that one little question was not at all good for Brian’s sex life.

Take Brian’s current trick, for instance. Just looking at the big marshmallow, Brian could tell he was the talkative kind. The kind who craved love and romance. The kind who would give his eyeteeth for even a scrap of attention from a Stud like Brian Kinney. Which was precisely why Brian didn’t want to go there. He just wanted to get laid. It was that simple. But one more sideways glance at the hovering blond boy and Brian knew he was lost. Justin was a stubborn little fucker and wasn’t about to back down on this. And if Brian didn’t ask the guy his name, the kid would just keep hovering and heckling the beefcake and making it practically impossible for Brian to concentrate on what he was doing to the point that Brian would scream and chase the trick out just to get the kid to finally shut up.

“You realize that I fucking HATE you right now,” Brian stated aloud, eliciting only a shrug and another annoying smile from the ubiquitous blond. Then, with a resigned sigh, Brian turned his attention back to the trick, who was looking more bemused than ever after Brian’s odd statement. “Fine. What’s your name?” He asked the trick in a voice that betrayed exactly how irked he was.

The enamored smile that bloomed on the trick’s face caused Brian to groan yet again. “It’s Thomas,” the trick disclosed. “But everyone always calls me ‘Taffy’. I know - it’s a horrible nickname, but I’ve had it since I was a kid and I just can’t seem to shake it. I could kill my cousin Matt - he’s the one who gave it to me. See, when we were ten, we were at this County Fair and I signed up for the taffy pull contest and, well, I got knocked down and got taffy everywhere, including in my hair, and the only way to get it all out was to shave my head, so . . .”

“Fuck me!” Brian mumbled, leaning over to pull the loft door open again and then promptly pushing the still babbling Taffy back out onto the landing.

The trick looked back at him in total disbelief. Brian waggled his fingers in a facetious little wave before slamming the door in Taffy’s face. When he turned around to scowl at his blond shadow, the boy was still leaning nonchalantly against the wall smiling back at him unconcernedly.

“You're fucking evil. You know that, right?” Brian announced with venom.

“I'm not evil. I'm sweet. You'll see. Someday you'll thank me for this,” Justin stated with undiluted conviction.
Brian didn’t waste time trying to argue with the interfering twat. He stalked right past the gloating apparition and headed straight into the bathroom, stripping off his clothing along the way. Thanks to Justin, he was now going to have to relieve his hard on himself instead of taking care of it in the trick’s nice fat ass.

Suffice it to say that Brian wasn’t feeling very fond of his incorporeal houseguest the rest of that afternoon.

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Brian was standing at the urinal next to the client’s VP of Marketing and trying to figure out which of his favorite lines he'd use as a lure for this latest victim. The way the guy had been nervously playing with his wedding ring all through the presentation, while at the same time giving Brian those secret lustfilled looks, told him that the guy was probably deeply closeted. Brian knew the type far too well. It meant he'd be easy pickings for the likes of Brian Kinney. No need to bring out the ‘A’ material this time. Brian could probably just grunt at the guy and he'd be falling all over himself at the mere prospect of getting fucked by a Stud like Brian.

Brian finished pissing and was just about to make his move when, out of nowhere, a mischievous blond teen appeared, leaning against the wall on the far side of Mr. VP.

“He's got a tragically tiny dick,” the blond sprite commented, staring down his nose at what Mr. VP was tucking away into his pants. “I really feel sorry for his wife if that’s all he’s got. Poor woman. Hope she's got a really good dildo as a backup.”

If Brian wasn’t afraid of looking like a crazy man talking to someone who wasn’t there, he would have told Justin off. He would have also advised the boy that, since he only had plans for his own dick, the size of Mr. VP’s endowment wouldn’t matter much. As it was, Justin’s appearance only served to egg Brian on.

“Wait a minute,” Brian barked with a hand on the VP’s wrist before the man could zip up. “I'm not done with my FULL presentation yet.” Mr. VP blinked up at Brian but didn't pull away or seem at all disinterested and he didn't zip his pants. “Yep. I'm never wrong,” Brian snorted a little laugh and then bodily pushed VP Man into the closest toilet stall. “Let me show you ALL the benefits I've got to offer.”

VP Dude smiled a bit bashfully but didn't put up even a token resistance. So much for the allegedly
married guy with kids. Brian seriously wondered if anybody was really straight these days. Then again, why would it matter? If this is what it took to seal a deal, it was definitely to Brian's advantage if every single one of his clients was secretly gay.

“You know that you don't really need to do this to win accounts, right?” Justin's annoyingly persistent voice interrupted Brian's thoughts just as he was shoving VP Guy's face into the metal divider between the stalls. Brian growled at the recurring annoyance, but it didn't shut the boy up. “You and I both know you already had that account in the bag BEFORE you followed this guy in here,” Justin stated, materializing from nowhere, his body now seemingly perched atop the metal divider over VP Guy's head. “It cheapens you as well as downplaying your marketing skills to tell yourself that this is what you have to do to win an account. So why don't you just admit the real reason you're doing this, Brian?”

Brian was trying desperately to ignore the prating paranormality but he did let himself give Justin one really good death-stare before he yanked VP Man’s pants down below his ass and proceeded to roll on a condom.

“Fine. So, if you won’t be honest with yourself about why you're really doing this, I'll tell you why. You're fucking this guy because you like to be in control. You're doing it to prove to the world that you control him and all he stands for. It's just another way for you to manipulate those who perceive themselves to be better than you. It's not about the account. It's certainly not about getting pleasure from the act itself. It’s about pure, cold-hearted, bottomless hostility. This is the way the hurt little boy inside you proves to the world he's got the power to control his world.” Brian vented his displeasure at being lectured in this manner by ramming into Mr. VP even harder right as Justin paused in his little speech. Of course, it didn't stop Justin even for an instant. “I'm not trying to judge you, Brian. I'm not saying what you're doing is wrong. I get why you're like this - I'm the last person you'd ever have to explain yourself to, you know - but I won't let you lie to yourself about your motives.”

“Fuck!” Brian screamed, beyond his endurance limit for nosy blond brats - although the trick he was plowing seemed to think that the exclamation was due to his superlative ass and moaned back encouragingly.

“I don’t want to see you demeaning yourself by rationalizing that THIS is about the account. You’re really great at what you do, Brian. You don’t need to fuck every client that comes through the door to prove your worth in the world of advertising. This is only to prove yourself to YOU. And as long as you’re okay with that, and understand it, then go for it,” Justin popped out of sight momentarily and then reappeared standing behind Brian’s right shoulder. “But the truth of the matter is that you don’t need to do this if you don’t want to.”

Thankfully, Justin’s psychology lesson was cut short right then when the trick blew his load all over the wall of the toilet cubicle. Brian smirked at the blond, shoved in once more and then came
himself with a grim little grunt. He did have to admit that the orgasm itself was pathetic and eminently forgettable. The only part of this particular fuck that Brian would likely remember was Justin’s speech.

“Yeah . . . Really, REALLY, tiny dick. Poor guy,” Justin shook his head sadly at the sight as the VP Dude turned around and tried to kiss Brian.

Brian shoved the loser’s face away from him. Justin was right about the size of the guy’s schlong. And now that he’d had his way with the guy, Brian didn’t want anything further to do with him outside of the marketing contract that he knew he’d be getting. Justin was probably right about that too - Brian knew that his presentation earlier in the conference room had wowed the rest of the client’s representatives more than enough to win him this account. Of course, now that he’d fucked the guy, there was just that much more incentive to give him the win. But it WAS probably overkill. And now he had the added problem of having to be at least nice to a rather below-par past-fuck. If this guy was anything other than a potential client, Brian probably wouldn’t have given him a second look and, once it was over, would surely have kicked him to the curb forthwith. Now, though, he had to be nice to the wee-willy-wonder.

Maybe Justin actually had a point about not fucking his clients anymore.

“I’ll see you at home later, Stud,” Justin left Brian with a kiss on his check before dematerializing, leaving Brian alone in the bathroom with the now too-friendly VP Guy.

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“Hey, Brian!”

Justin popped into Brian's office in that annoying way he had of just materializing out of thin air and gradually solidifying. It always scared the shit out of Brian. And being scared pissed him off, which inevitably resulted in Brian yelling at the boy. Luckily Justin had an apparently bottomless supply of patience and never once returned fire.

“Fuck, Justin!” This time Brian had been so startled that he'd jumped and spilled his coffee all over the Johnson Meyers file. “Could you please just use the door and knock for a change? Or at least make some noise before you fucking appear like that? Maybe ring a bell. Or politely cough. Or something!”
*Hehehehe* “Sorry, Brian,” Justin laughed then apologized and waited for Brian to grab some paper towels out of the cupboard in order to clean off the coffee-spattered files, before he climbed into Brian's lap. “I keep forgetting how jumpy you are these days. You probably should cut back on your caffeine intake, you know. You do know that excessive caffeine consumption increases your blood pressure, causes insomnia and other sleeping problems and can even affect your sexual performance. And considering how much coffee YOU drink, I'm surprised you can even get it up anymore.”

Brian pinched the bridge of his nose in exasperation, but really didn't want to get into this particular subject with the boy right now. "Justin, what exactly is it that you came here to talk to me about? I doubt it was about my caffeine consumption levels. You did have an actual purpose, other than annoying me, right? Especially after we agreed you were going to try and leave me alone while I was at work from now on.”

"Of course I have a reason, Brian,” Justin smiled that gorgeous, blindingly bright smile of his at Brian - the one that melted a little bit more of the cold ice around the man's heart each time it was directed at him. “I came to tell you to pick up a cat litter box and related supplies on your way home tonight.”

“Justinnnnnn . . .” Brian stopped himself just in time, right before the whining tone took over his voice completely. “Okay . . . Do I want to know why you think I need a cat litter box? I don't own a cat Justin.”

“Yes, you do, Brian. You haven't forgotten Josélito have you?”

"No, Justin, I have not forgotten about Josélito. But he’s not really MY cat. He's his own cat. We just hang out sometimes together. Besides Joselito lives outside at the cemetery. He doesn't need a litter box.” Brian was trying to keep his voice at a reasonable volume and not devolve into yelling at the infuriating little blond imp - it wasn't easy though.

"Well, he's an indoor cat now, which means he needs a litter box,” Justin sounded so matter-of-fact as he said this that, if you didn't know him better, you would think he was being perfectly reasonable.

Brian, of course, knew better. "Why is he an indoor cat now?”

"The new caretaker at the cemetery apparently got rid of Joselito's box. He had no shelter and nowhere else to go. And he’s getting a little old to be fending for himself outside. So I brought him home to the loft with me,” Justin stated unequivocally.
"Fuck, Justin! I don't WANT a cat at the loft. What the fuck do I need a pet cat for anyway? He'll just poop and pee all over and get hair on everything . . ." Brian ran an exasperated hand through his hair. "You have to get rid of him. Find him another home or take him to the SPCA or something. He can't stay at the loft, and that's final."

"No.” Justin looked up at Brian with guileless blue eyes and clearly wasn't about to back down. "He's your cat, Brian, even though you haven't been a very responsible pet owner in the past. You need to step up to the plate and take care of him the right way from now on. Besides, it'll be good for both you and Joselito. You both could use a friend."

"Has anyone ever told you how absolutely, unquestionably, and irredeemably annoying you are Justin?” Brian asked, seriously wondering if anyone had ever explained this fact to the little blond pixie.

Of course Justin merely smiled at him even more brightly.

"Would it do me any good to try and argue about this?” Brian asked, not really expecting to win this argument since he hadn't yet won any other dispute with Justin.

"Nope. Joselito is at the loft to stay. If you don't bring home a litter box, all it means is that he'll be peeing and pooping in the corner on your nicely finished hardwood floors. So, just be a good boy, do as I ask and pick up that litter box. Okay?"

"Fine. But YOU will be cleaning the fucking litter box - not me - do you understand? And no getting out of it by claiming that incorporeal beings can't touch cat litter. I'm not buying it.”

For about thirty seconds, Justin looked like he was going to argue even that small point. Brian just sat there and gave the boy a gimlet stare. Figuring that he'd won on all the important points, though, Justin decided to give in graciously.

"Deal. Now, you better get back to work and I'll see you at home later . . . with a cat box in hand.” Justin smiled, winked at Brian, then leaned forward and left a quick peck on a surprised Brian's cheek, before simply fading away right before Brian's eyes.

"Damn annoying, intransigent, bratty blond twat . . . I should kick his incorporeal ass . . . Taking over my loft, invading my life, and NOW I've apparently got a fucking cat . . .” Brian spent at least
the next ten minutes ranting, raving, and complaining about his new roommate as he paced around and around his office.

However, when Brian showed up that night at the loft, he not only had a brand-new cat litter pan and a large bag of litter, but also a set of spanking new designer label food and water bowls, several tins of gourmet cat food, a large bag of dry cat-kibble, three canisters of cat treats, and enough kitty toys to start his own pet supply store. Joselito immediately padded up to greet his human, sinuously weaving between Brian’s ankles and purring extra loudly. Justin tried not to smile too smugly as Brian bent over, laid his bags full of supplies on the ground, picked up the cat and proceeded to spend the next half hour petting and cuddling the furry little brown fuzzball.

Brian never made it to Babylon that night.

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Chapter End Notes

5/20/16 - I'm BAAACCCKKKKK! Again. Sorry to once again leave this story for so long. But, now that I've cleared away all my other WIPs, I really have no reason not to finish this story, right? Let's see if I can do it. Thanks for sticking with me on this one, readers. TAG
Chapter Notes

There are a lot of roadblocks to Justin's plan to help Brian, including the friends that are supposed to be helping him. So, how do you overcome the not-so-helpful helpers? Justin seeks out a little advice. Enjoy! TAG

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 23 - Abnegation.

Jessie hit the curb a little harder than expected and his longboard went flying out from under his feet. He quickly tucked his shoulder under before he hit the cement sidewalk, rolling through the momentum of the fall, until he came to a stop next to a newspaper box chained to a light post. When he looked up, there was a pair of crystal blue eyes staring down at him filled with worry.

“Hey, Uncle Justin!” Jessie waved up at the starter.

“Very graceful there, Jessie! What the hell do you do for an encore?” Justin reached out a hand to give his nephew some help up. “How bad are you hurt?”

“Enh . . . Not bad. I’ll live.” The teen bent to brush off the knees of his jeans and winced a little when he encountered a sore spot. “What are you doing down here, Unc? Did you have a premonition that I was going to wipe out on my board and come to save me? Or is this just a social visit?”

“If I had to come save you every time you fell off that thing I’d never be able to get any rest, kiddo.” Justin helped by dusting some dirt off the boy’s rear as he teased him. “Are you sure you don’t want to take up a less dangerous hobby - something that won’t give me a heart attack every time I see you falling on your ass? Maybe quilting? Or stamp collecting? Even video gaming would be preferable since at least then you’d be sitting down more of the time.”

“You always give me shit about gaming too much and tell me to go out and get some air. So now you’re going to tell me to go back to my room? Hah! Give it up, Justin. At least until my ’rents get me a car, this longboard is my primary means of transportation, so you’re just going to have to live with it, Dude.”
“Hmmmm. I’m not sure I want you driving either. That sounds almost as dangerous. How about we just lock you in a bubble for the next five years or so?” the older blond kidded as he followed his teenaged nephew to retrieve the wayward longboard from where it had rolled up onto a nearby patch of dirt.

“Don’t think so, Unc!” Jessie said with that signature ‘fuck you’ look that all teens seem to possess when they think the adults around them are being ridiculous.

Justin was still chuckling at the kid’s scornful face as Jessie bent over to pick up his board. The laughter died away pretty quickly though when the teen dropped the board, moaned and raised his hand to one temple as if he was suddenly dizzy. Justin was there with a steadying hand almost immediately.

“What’s wrong? Did you hit your head when you fell? Let me see,” Justin helped the boy to sit down on the curb, hovering worriedly over him until Jessie waved him away.

“I’m fine. It’s just a headache,” Jessie complained, swatting Justin’s hand away when he tried to tilt the youth’s head back. “Stop pawing at me.”

“Why would you have a headache? Are you sure you didn’t hit your head?”

“Shit, Justin! Don’t you have someone else to haunt this afternoon other than me?” Jessie swore, shaking his head gingerly and getting back up to his feet in order to show his friend that he was fine. “It’s nothing. I just stood up too fast, or something, and got dizzy. I’ll be fine.” He once again bent over to pick up the abandoned board, this time without any problems. “Now, did you just come see me to hover and be annoying? Or was there some actual purpose to your visit?”

“Shit! I hate when you guys go through the teen years. You’re always such cunts,” Justin snarked back, causing Jessie to break into a grin seeing as his guardian spirit was perpetually 17 himself.

“Whatever!” Jessie hiked his board over his right shoulder and started walking down the street with his invisible uncle following. “I’m afraid to actually ask this, but ‘how’s Brian’?”

“Brian’s a fucking handful. Worse than a teenager, by far,” Justin sounded and looked dejected, dragging his feet as the two boys walked along side by side. “Last night he got pissed off that HIS
cat coughed up a furball in his favorite pair of Prada shoes and he blamed it on ME. And just to be extra disagreeable about it, he went on this total bender. I finally had to drag his ass home at four am. It’s a good thing I don’t actually need sleep because I’m sure as hell not getting any since I decided to start stalking him.” Justin ran his hand through his hair - a nervous gesture left over from his life - and cringed. “Frankly, I’m not sure that my being there is doing any good. He’s still lonely and self-destructive. But I don’t know what else I can do.”

“Maybe there’s nothing you CAN do, dude. I mean, maybe this is just his life, you know. Maybe he’s not meant to be anything else.”

“No. I can’t accept that. I just can’t, Jessie. Brian is . . . He’s not meant to be like this. He’s got this huge fucking heart and he can be so sweet. But he’s just been hurt so often that he’s hidden it away,” Justin insisted, his conviction ringing out in his words. “I used to think that he’d get over it all by himself. That, once he got away from his horrible parents, he’d heal. You know? But it’s been years and he’s still so closed off. So lonely. So scared. And he fights everything that might make him better because he’s too frightened to let himself even try to be happy. I know that this isn’t all that’s in store for him. I just know it.”

“Yeah, well, you might think you know something that the rest of us don’t see, dude, but that’s cause you’ve got a little extra help from the universe. The rest of us poor schmuck’s can only go on what we see and hear with our puny human senses. So it’s not that big of a surprise that your Brian doesn’t believe there’s anything more out there for him than what he’s already experienced,” Jessie tried to explain his perspective. “I imagine that Brian feels a lot like I do sometimes - wondering if this is all my life’s ever going to be? Wondering if this is the best I can expect? And, if so, why I’m bothering?”

“Oh, Jessie,” Justin reached an arm around the young man’s shoulders to comfort him. “You can’t think that way. You’re still so young. You can’t expect to have an amazing, fulfilling life at only sixteen. Give it a bit of time, man.”

“I hear ya, and I know you’re probably right, but sometimes I still feel that way,” Jessie offered with a shrug. “It’s like everything in the world is just passing me by. Like I’m not really part of this life. I’m just a placeholder, taking up a spot in the world that will be filled in later, while the rest of the humans on the planet are busy living. And maybe that’s how Brian sees himself too. Like he’s just holding on and waiting for when his life will really start - if it ever does - which gets more and more doubtful as the years go by.”

“Shit, Jess!” Justin squeezed his shoulders even tighter, pulling the boy almost off his feet. “You’re not just a placeholder. You’re you. And someday you’re going to have everything you ever hoped for. You’ll find someone to love you and that will make you feel whole. I just know it.”
“Are you saying this because you’ve actually seen it? Do you have some special insight?” The teen looked over at his friend with pleading look.

“Well . . . no. I haven’t actually SEEN it,” Justin confessed. “But I’m still sure of it. You’re just being too harsh on yourself, kiddo.”

“Yeah, well, I hope you’re right, Unc,” the youth shrugged off the constricting arms trying to comfort him, threw his longboard down onto the cement sidewalk and rested one foot atop the conveyance. “But, in the meantime, I wouldn’t be surprised if Brian didn’t feel the same way. So what you need to do is find some way to prove to him that he does actually have a life. Find some way to tie him to the NOW or he’ll just keep looking around him feeling left out while he watches the rest of the world pass him by.”

And with that deeply philosophic statement still hanging in the air, the skater boy shook out his shaggy blond mop of hair, grinned boyishly at a still contemplative Justin and waved as he pushed off with his free leg before rolling off down the street and around the corner of the next building without saying any further goodbye.

Brian was seated at the old, chipped, Formica-topped table in the Novotny kitchen, sipping at a longneck, listening with half an ear while Mikey squawked on and on about some new comic book character or other and waiting while Debbie bustled around getting the food on the table. It felt like a hundred other ‘family dinners’ before, only this time, the family included Lindsey and her girlfriend Mel. It also included Michael’s roommate, Emmett, who was busy discussing decorating tips with the girls. Brian wasn't sure which conversation was more tedious.

Brian was still kicking himself for inviting Lindsey to meet him for lunch at the Liberty Diner a couple of months before. If he had thought about it beforehand, he would have known that Debbie was likely to latch onto the lesbian woman who was having problems with her family accepting her decision to buy a house with her longtime lady lover. Brian had been trying to be an understanding friend - letting her vent to him about how ridiculous her WASP parents were being - but he’d been having a tough time staying sympathetic. The trials and tribulations of the upper class were a little out of his range of experience. He didn’t have much to offer. Lindsey didn’t seem to think his advice to tell her parents to ‘fuck off’ was at all helpful. So Brian had, at the time, been grateful when Debbie stepped in to offer some maternal words of wisdom.

Unfortunately, from that time on, Lindsey had been adopted into the little make-shift family. The two lesbians had now become a regular part of the weekly family dinners. Which meant that Brian was being subjected to far more lesbian drama than he felt comfortable with. Not that he had any
way to escape from it though - family dinners were pretty much obligatory and Debbie wouldn’t let him get away with skipping out on them without some really good excuse. His standard, ‘something came up’ said with a sexy wink, definitely wouldn’t cut it. So he sat and listened to the blathering and tried to not fall asleep before the pasta was served.

For once, Brian was almost glad when his usual blond apparition popped into sight, perched on the edge of the kitchen counter right behind Michael’s chair. If nothing else, Justin was a good distraction. The boy seemed in a playful mood this evening too. He was acting like a total goof - making bunny ears behind Michael’s head, imitating his mannerisms as he talked, and pulling weird faces. At one point, the impish blond even blew into Michael’s ear, causing the irritated geek to brush at the side of his face as if to wave off some bug. Brian had the hardest time keeping a straight face. But at least the time flew by after the boy’s appearance.

Once the food had been served and Debbie had finally joined the crew at the table, the various conversations coalesced into one. Which really didn’t help much, since the topic that prevailed was Emmett’s continued search to find a man who was big enough and butch enough to satisfy him. It seemed that Pittsburgh’s tops just weren’t toppy enough for the big nelly queen. Apparently everyone wanted to be a bottom these days, according to Em, who was lamenting again, wondering ‘where had all the REAL men gone?’ Not really a problem that Brian faced.

Justin seemed to be amused by the flamboyant queen’s problems though. “Too bad Em can’t see ME,” the troublesome teen posited with a grin as he moved so he was standing right behind the man’s chair. “I could show him how a real man acts.” Justin laid his hands on Emmett’s shoulders and proceeded to thrust his hips forward and back as if fucking him from behind - complete with facial gestures mimicking a lustful top and even a cry of passion as he reached his climax. “Oh yeah, take it, baby. Take it! Just like that. You know you love it! Oh yeah! Oh. Yeah! Ahhhh!”

Brian burst out laughing, unable to control himself any longer.

Everyone else at the table looked over at him like he was crazy. Brian quickly tried to wipe the smirk off his face. Justin wasn’t helping though, as he mimed collapsing over Emmett’s shoulder with a depraved look on his face and his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth. Brian covered his mouth with one hand, trying to squelch the giggle that insisted on escaping.

“Well, I’m glad my troubles are so amusing to you, Brian,” Em commented, fanning himself like a southern belle in his pique. “I’m sure you don’t have that problem, but for us bottoms, it really is a struggle you know. Now that being gay is more or less accepted, more and more of the designated tops are fading away. It’s almost like it’s not fashionable to be a top-only these days.”

“Brian certainly doesn’t have that problem. He’s always been a top. As long as all the bottoms
don’t disappear, Brian will be just fine,” Michael announced proudly on his friend’s behalf. Knowing that he had a captive and attentive audience, Michael continued to brag on his friend. “In fact, if he wanted, he could probably keep all the bottoms in Babylon busy single-handedly. You should have seen him last weekend. Did you even leave the backroom at all on Friday night, Brian?”

Michael looked over at his best friend with a hero-worshiping look. Brian smirked back, enjoying the glow of adoration he felt. Justin meanwhile was scowling at the pair with disapproval.

Justin wasn’t sure why Michael was rhapsodizing about that particular night. As far as the guardian spirit was concerned, it hadn’t been anything to be proud of. In fact, it had been pretty horrendous from Justin’s point of view.

On the night in question, Brian had been on one of his worst benders. The junior ad exec had had a bad day at work - getting dressed down by his unimaginative and stodgy superior for spicing up a client’s campaign without direction. It didn’t seem to matter that the ads were ten times better the way Brian had designed them. It wasn’t to the boring specifications that the senior ad exec had given him, so it was wrong. Brian hadn’t taken the criticism well. As soon as he left work, he’d hit the closest bar and things had gone downhill from there.

By the time Brian had made it to Babylon and met up with his friends, he was so drunk he could barely stand on his own. Justin was actually amazed that, as wasted as Brian was, he could still fuck. That white powder he was snorting must have been just enough to keep the man on his feet though, and the destructive bender had gone on. Brian hadn’t actually made it out of the backroom for more than an hour and a half, but it wasn’t because of any prodigious feats of virility, it was because he wasn’t steady enough to get up off the couch where he’d collapsed while two twinks were sucking him off. When Michael finally decided it was time to haul Brian home, he basically had to carry the drunken, drugged-out heap to the jeep. Michael also didn’t stay for the real fun after he’d dropped Brian off at his loft - leaving Justin to help the man to the bathroom where he’d spent the better part of an hour puking before passing out on the floor. The adoring best friend had also missed out on the bitch-fest that had followed the next morning as Brian suffered through the ensuing hangover.

Justin couldn’t believe what he was hearing as Michael continued to relate more of Brian’s drunken antics. The rest of the group laughed along at the stories of how much Brian had drank, how many guys he’d drunkenly fucked and how wasted the man was on the way home. This was the type of behavior that Michael apparently found praiseworthy? Why was he encouraging this? Didn’t he see that it was just a veiled cry for help? And why was the rest of the group laughing along? Maybe it might have been funny if it was a one time thing - just a night of excess drinking for fun that had got a little out of hand - but that’s not what this was. This type of thing had become far too commonplace in Brian’s life. It wasn’t good or healthy and it really wasn’t funny anymore. Laughing at it and treating this behavior as somehow not only acceptable but lauded was just enabling Brian’s poor choices.
As he watched, Justin could see even Brian buying into this revisionist retelling of the evening’s events. It completely pissed Justin off. All his efforts to help Brian come to terms with why he did the things he did - to force Brian into being honest with himself - were being negated by the co-dependent version Michael was spouting. He was turning Brian into some vaunted idol instead of helping the desperately angry and hurt man to recognize what was truly motivating these destructive binges. And Brian was getting caught up in Michael’s fantasies and manipulated into actually becoming that fantasy image.

This was not what Justin wanted for Brian. Debbie and Michael had been an important part of Brian’s past. He’d encouraged the friendship with Michael when they were youths because his boy had needed someone to support him and help him. Someone to understand him. Somebody to provide Brian with a safe haven from Jack. Not someone who fed off and encouraged Brian’s neuroses. How was Brian ever going to grow up and turn into the person he was meant to be if someone like Michael was constantly forcing him into the role of drunken playboy? Justin could see that it was time to either wean Brian away from his dependence on these people or, at the very least, to get him some distance.

“Oh, Brian! You’re incorrigible!” Lindsey laughed along with the rest of the group, clearly believing the rosy picture that Michael was painting, just like everyone else.

“It’s a good thing you have Michael so well trained.” Mel at least didn’t sound quite as approving. “Without him as your permanently designated driver, you’d never make it home at night.”

“I’m Brian’s best friend. It’s my job,” Michael chortled with pride, as if being an enabler was a good thing. “We’ve always been a great team. Brian does his Stud thing and I make sure he makes it home safe and sound. That’s just how things work.”

“Well, it sounds to me like you’re more Brian’s babysitter, than a friend,” Mel replied derisively before turning to her partner. “I can’t believe that THIS is the guy you wanted to ask to help us have a baby, Lindz. He’s not grown up enough to be a father yet. I say we go with the fucking sperm bank. At least most of them appear to be adults.”

“What? A baby? What are you talking about?” Debbie sputtered, almost choking on the sip of wine she’d taken.

“Mel . . . I thought we agreed we were going to discuss this in private,” Lindsey reproached her loud-mouthed lover before turning to answer all the questioning looks being directed their way. “Mel and I have been talking about possibly having a baby. We’ve been together for five years and
I’m already twenty-eight. If we’re going to have a child, we don’t want to leave it too much later. But we hadn’t really decided on who to ask about helping us.” Lindsey looked over shyly at Brian. “I had only mentioned Brian’s name because we’ve been friends since college and I thought, because of that, he might be willing to make a little donation . . .”

“Who me?” Brian was incredulous. “Are you fucking nuts? I don’t want a kid.”

“The child would be Mel’s and mine, Brian. We’d be the parents. You wouldn’t have to do anything other than provide the sperm,” Lindsey pressed now that the cat was out of the bag.

“No fucking way, Lindz. You do know that just the thought of pussy makes me want to retch, right? That ship sailed a long, long time ago and I don’t want a second voyage,” Brian insisted, pushing his chair back from the table to physically put even more of a distance between himself and this abhorrent new development.

“Trust me, no one wants your dick getting anywhere near a pussy, especially not Lindsey’s, you pig,” Mel responded angrily. “What are you, a fucking moron? Haven’t you heard of artificial insemination?”

“Whatever. I’m definitely NOT interested. My little swimmers aren’t interested either. They’re not going skinny dipping in anybody’s cunt anytime soon,” Brian reiterated with conviction.

“You don’t have to decide right this minute,” Lindsey persisted, apparently unwilling to give up on the idea yet. “I’ve thought about this a lot, you know. We want our child to have the best possible start in life we can give it. Which means that whoever we pick as the father has to be someone who’s smart and healthy and maybe even physically attractive. Admit it, Brian - you’ve got great genes. You know we’d make beautiful babies. Just think about it, will you?”

“You know what - fuck this shit!” Brian shoved all the way away from the table and stood up so fast that his chair toppled over backwards. “You’re fucking insane if you think I’m the least bit interested in this crazy plan of yours, Lindz. I’m so out of here.”

“Brian! Brian, wait! I thought we were going to Woody’s together tonight? Wait up . . .” Michael was hollering after the retreating back, only to have his entreaty ignored and the door slammed on his final plea.

“Shit!” Justin cursed, as he started towards the door himself, following in the wake of the fleeing
man who was obviously trying to escape from the very idea of fatherhood. “Looks like it’s going to be another long night.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm thinking we need a little sex in this story, right? It's been way too long . . . I'll get right on that. TAG

PS - I'm also posting all my stories on my new website: www.kinnetikdreams.com. Please consider this an open invitation to all my readers out there to come over and check out the site. There's a lot of great stories on there, including some classics by authors that don't write much anymore, most of which you won't find here on AO3. We'd love to see you stop in and maybe stay for a bit!
Chapter Notes

Justin's plan to redeem Brian continues but the subject is fighting it all the way. Enjoy!
TAG

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 24 - Probity.

Brian was balls deep in a hot little Latino boy, halfway to Nirvana, when he was distracted by the untimely appearance of his least favorite apparition.

“Fuck! You don’t need to hover - I asked his name. It's Paco!” Brian tried to head off the objection that he suspected was coming.

“Pedro, actually.” the trick corrected, lifting his head up momentarily from where Brian had it smashed up against the wall.

“Pedro. Whatever! It’s not like I actually have to remember this shit. I only have to ask their names, right?” Brian asked the ether, as the trick looked around to try and figure out who he was talking to, but seeing no one. “You can leave now. I was a good little boy. I did what I’m supposed to.”

“You talking to me?” Pedro asked, completely confused.

“No. YOU stay. At least until I’m done fucking you,” Brian insisted, trying to get back into the rhythm of his thrusting.

Justin didn’t budge though. He remained where he was, leaning against the wall less than a foot away from the trick’s shoulder. And, from the disapproving look on the youth’s face, Brian assumed that he had something on his mind.

It was hard to concentrate on fucking with someone staring at you like that, though. Brian tried to just ignore the annoying little blond. He tried to pretend that he couldn’t see the boy or the looks
being shot his way. He tried to focus solely on the trick’s tight little brown ass, the aroma of sex that permeated the the backroom and the erotic sounds of the other men fucking and sucking around him. Normally that was a pretty heady combination and would be all Brian needed to get him in the mood for fucking. Especially after he’d had four or five shots and a hit of E, like he’d had tonight. But this time none of that seemed to be working. Not with Saint Peter standing over him, scowling and staring wordlessly.

When he just simply couldn’t stand it anymore, Brian pulled out of Pepito’s ass, turned to face the apparently blank stretch of wall and demanded, “WHAT?”

“I didn’t say a thing, Brian,” the unsmiling guardian spirit replied in a calm and even tone.

“Then why are you here? Leave me the fuck alone so I can fuck Pablo already.”

“It’s Pedro, you ass. And who the hell are you talking to, Kinney?” The trick seemed like he was getting a bit fed up with the Stud’s erratic behavior, not to mention the continual interruptions to his fuck.

“I’m not talking to anybody! *Hah!* That’s the really hilarious part of all this. There’s nobody there!” Brian laughed mirthlessly as he gestured to the empty wall space where he’d been aiming his comments. “You’re not even here. Are you, blond boy? So why are you still hanging around and giving me shit? Huh? Why? Just leave me the fuck alone already. I don’t need you or your fucking stupid advice! I just want to fuck Pancho and then go have a few more drinks and then fuck some other guy and then have some more drinks and . . . Well, you get the idea, right? What part of that do you NOT understand?”

“Fuck this! I’m outta here,” Pedro pulled his pants up and shouldered past Brian on his way to the exit. “You’ve got some serious mental health issues, man. Get help.”

“Shit! See what you’ve done now?” Brian yelled, loudly, at the wall. “Pepe’s ass was perfect too. Nice and tight. Now I’ve got to go find another trick, damn you!”

“Uh . . . You okay, Kinney?” Todd asked, coming over to him and laying a kind hand on the obviously disturbed man's shoulder while the top who’d been fucking Todd a moment earlier looked on with annoyance. “Maybe you’ve had a little too much to drink or something? You want me to get somebody to call you a cab?”
“No. I don’t need a cab. I need Pueblo to get his ass back over here so I can finish fucking him. And I need another Beam. And another hit of E,” Brian’s outburst was fading out as he looked around him and noticed just how many people were standing around staring at him by this point. Finally he ended his ranting, his voice dropping to a mere mumble, “And maybe an exorcist or something to get rid of the fucking evil spirit haunting me.” But he didn’t resist any longer as Todd gently led him out of the backroom towards the main bar.

“You don’t NEED any of that, Brian. And I’m not evil, so the exorcist wouldn’t help,” Justin commented dryly. “Besides, I’ve told you I’m not going anywhere, so you might as well give up on that wish. You definitely don’t need anything more to drink either. All you really need to do is stop for a minute and think about why you’re so upset that you feel getting drunk and high and fucking yourself into oblivion is such a good idea. If you do that, then I’ll leave you be.”

“I’m not upset about anything, so fuck off!” Brian insisted angrily, as he waved the bartender over and demanded another shot.

“I didn’t say you were, Kinney,” Todd responded, continuing to look at the man he’d known for several years, but who he’d never seen acting like this. “Did you take something? Acid, maybe? Cause I think you’re having a really bad trip, man. Should we get you to the hospital or something?”

*ARGH!!!!* Brian yelled, protesting the unfairness of the world, the annoying kindness of random acquaintances and, even more, the vagaries of fate that had unfairly saddled him with an exceptionally interfering guardian spirit that wouldn’t leave him the fuck alone. “I’m fine, Todd. Really. You should go back to your fuck already and leave me alone. I’ll be okay as soon as I’ve had a few more drinks.”

Todd reluctantly allowed himself to be towed back to the bowels of the backroom by the waiting top and Brian finally relaxed a little as he sipped at his drink. He couldn’t believe he’d let Justin get to him so bad that he’d been arguing with the invisible imp in front of the whole fucking club. Justin could get him so angry, though. He seemed to know just which buttons to push. Fucking guardian angels . . . were they all so fucking stubborn?

He knew that he wasn’t likely to get anywhere arguing with Justin. The boy just never quit when he thought he had a point that needed to be made. It was best to just let him get on with it, so Brian grabbed his drink and moved off the the far end of the bar. There usually weren’t many guys standing down at that end because it was too dark to see much and you couldn’t pick up guys if you couldn’t be seen. It was a perfect place to stand, though, if you wanted to spend a few minutes talking to your invisible childhood friend without exposing the fact that you were totally crazy. He didn’t have to turn around to know that Justin was following right on his tail.
“Fine. You obviously want to get something off your chest, so talk already,” Brian announced when he thought he was far enough away from any listening ears that he could have a conversation with his spirit guide and not be overheard.

“I’ve got nothing to say. It’s you that needs to talk, Brian,” Justin stated plainly. “You need to be honest about why you ran away from Deb’s house and came directly here to start on your latest, greatest drinking and fucking binge. That’s all I’m asking. If you can do that, then I’ll butt out.”

“I’m ALWAYS fucking honest, Sunshine!” Brian spat back angrily, cock sure about that statement. “I’ve never given a fuck what anyone thinks about me. I am who I am. If somebody doesn’t like that, it’s their problem. So don’t give me crap about ‘being honest’.”

“Oh, you’re honest alright. At least when it comes to other people’s lives and motives. And, to a certain extent, to yourself and who you are. You’re not ashamed of being gay or anything. But when it comes to your emotions - your feelings - you lie to yourself every single day.” Justin crossed his arms over his chest and stared Brian down, daring him to dispute the truth. “You constantly run away from your emotions and hide from anything that’s going to demand that you take a stand about your feelings. THAT’S why you ran away from Debbie’s tonight. Admit it! You got fucking scared by Lindsey asking you to help them have a child. You were so piss-in-your-pants scared that you literally ran away. That’s why you’re here right now drinking and fucking - so you can forget the fact that you got scared. Because you can’t admit to yourself that you actually have emotions like fear.”

As Justin was speaking, Brian’s anger had slowly sputtered out, leaving him feeling lost and vulnerable. His eyes dropped till he was staring at his shot glass, unable to meet the blond accuser’s gaze. He bit at his lower lip, worrying the tender flesh, as he unsuccessfully tried to think up some way to refute the allegations being lobbed at him.

“You know, it wouldn’t be so bad having a miniature copy of you around. Lindsey was right about you guys making beautiful babies. You were so fucking adorable when you were little. I wanted to steal you away from the hospital that first night I saw you,” Justin moved closer and his voice dropped to a hush that was only barely audible above the loud club music. “I’m sure any child of yours would be absolutely gorgeous.”

“I’m sure I’d be a terrible father, though,” Brian replied, still not looking anywhere except at his now empty shot glass.

“Why do you think that?”
“I don’t know shit about being a parent. Just look at the lousy fucking examples I learned from. I . . . I couldn’t do that to a kid. If I ended up being like Jack . . .” Brian’s voice broke and then he scrunched up his eyes, turned his back on Justin and slammed the shot glass down on the bar so hard it almost shattered.

“You’re not your father, Brian,” Justin insisted, grabbing ahold of Brian’s arm with a remarkably strong grip for someone who wasn’t really there. “You could never be like Jack. Ever! You’d be a good father, Brian. I know it. You have a good heart. It doesn’t matter what examples you grew up with. You would never be like that.”

“You don’t know that,” Brian answered, his voice carrying a note of pleading, as if begging the boy who’d been his guide all his life to tell him differently.

It took no thought at all for Justin to rush to affirm everything Brian wanted to hear. “I DO know it, Brian. I know you. I’ve watched you grow up and I KNOW you would never, ever, hurt a child.” Justin cupped Brian’s chin with one hand, causing the man to finally look up into blue eyes which, even in the low lights of the club, still somehow shone brightly. “Just think about it, okay? You’d be helping out Lindz and Mel - who’d be the primary parents - which is a good thing in and of itself. And I think it would be good for you, too, Brian. It would give you something to tie you to life. Something to tie you to now.”

Brian tried to look away again, but that tender yet firm hand curled around his jaw wouldn’t let him. Without saying more, Justin somehow still conveyed a wealth of words with his gaze and the caress of his thumb against Brian’s cheek. Before he knew it, Brian found himself leaning into that gentle touch, his eyelids lowering so he could better concentrate on the sensation. It was a touch that was so intimate, in ways that all the myriad of other men who touched his body could never be. The kind of touch that no one else in Brian’s life had ever given him, at least not as long as he could remember. A touch that radiated kindness and, dare he admit it even to himself, love. And despite his staunch avowals that Brian Kinney didn’t believe in love, it seemed that his body understood the sentiment and maybe even longed for it.

“Brian! There you are. What the hell are you doing hiding out over here in the dark?” Michael’s boisterous greeting burst through the bubble of peace that had momentarily enveloped Brian and Justin even in the club full of people.

Brian blinked, sighed, and then finally tore his eyes away from Justin so that he could acknowledge his very insistent friend. “Hey, Mikey. What took you so long?”

“Ma made me stay and help clean up after dinner. What a pain in the ass . . .” Michael proceeded to regale Brian with a recap of the part of the evening he’d missed after his precipitate exit, all the
details of the rest of the dinner conversation as well as tales of his post-dinner housekeeping woes at Debbie’s hands.

Brian let Michael tow him back down to the more populated end of the bar and sipped at the new drink that Michael ordered for him. He wasn’t really listening to Mikey’s diatribe though - he rarely actually listened to that sort of drivel. Instead, he let his mind wander over the prior conversation with Justin.

A baby? What the fuck? Were they all serious? Him, a father? What the hell did he know about being a father?

Justin, who was still there leaning against the bar just behind where Michael was standing, kept looking at him intently the entire time, seemingly able to hear Brian’s thoughts.

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“Fucking incompetent idiots! Get the hell out of my office until at least one of the two of you grows a brain sufficient to support human life!” Brian’s not-so-dulcet tones were echoing all the way from his office to the lobby area of Ryder Advertising when Winnie stepped off the elevator.

The elegant young photojournalist was still quietly laughing to herself as two shamefaced men rushed out of the Lion’s Den and blew past her - no doubt on their way to grow those brains Brian Kinney had ordered. Brian's assistant Cynthia was standing next to her desk and watching Bob and Brad’s retreat with a contemptuous sneer on her own countenance as Winnie walked up. Whatever ‘The Fuck Up Twins’ - Brian’s nickname for his least favorite copywriters - had done wrong this time, it must have been a doozy.

“Afternoon, Cynthia,” Winnie greeted the haughty young personal assistant whom she had come to know fairly well over the years. “Is it safe to go in and see His Highness, or would I be taking my life in my hands? After that little show, I’m not sure.”

“I think YOU’RE probably safe, Winnie,” Cynthia chuckled and winked at the petite brunette who had been Brian’s friend since high school. “Besides, seeing you would probably be good for him. He’s been on a tear around here lately. If somebody doesn’t do something soon, even I might tell him to go fuck himself. You’re probably the only one who’s not too scared of him to take him on - so, please, be my guest.”
“You make a visit with my old friend sound so appealing . . .” Winnie joked, “But, I’ll see what I can do. If I’m not out in fifteen minutes, though, send in the search and rescue team.”

“Will do!” Cynthia smiled and gestured towards the door as she resumed her seat at the big desk outside Brian’s office. “Good luck!”

“Just in case you want to rethink your entrance, I'm prepared to commit homicide if whatever you've come to talk to me about isn't a matter of life or death,” the irate voice inside the office announced when Winnie rapped her knuckles on the wood of the door frame.

When Brian's dire threat was met with nothing more than a chuckle, he actually looked up from the pile of paperwork he'd been trudging through.

“Brian Kinney - still as charming as ever, I see,” Winnie teased as she marched into the dragon's lair, completely disregarding all threats of bodily harm.

“I don't have to be charming with the help. Only with the clients. And THEY all love me,” Brian grinned as he stood up to greet his visitor with a kiss to her smooth cheek. “So, what brings Winnie Taylor all the way downtown today? Shouldn't you be out taking pictures of traffic accidents or the latest meth lab bust?”

“Yeah, you know, if you've seen one meth lab in a childcare center, you've seen ‘em all,” Winnie replied disdainfully. “But that's not why I'm here. I actually came by to have lunch with my Uncle Marty . . . and to drop off this.”

Brian accepted the heavy cream-colored vellum envelope she held out to him with hesitation and a distrustful look. “If this is another invitation to the Monongahela Men’s Club, ‘Fall Into Fun Orgy’, sorry, but I’ve already got my tickets.”

“Alas, no,” Winnie chortled gleefully at her irreverent friend. “Although, if you have an extra ticket, I probably wouldn’t mind coming to watch. It sounds very educational.”

“Oh, you’d be educated, alright. But I doubt your boyfriend would approve,” Brian chuckled as well, looking at his old friend with one gracefully raised eyebrow, before he turned his attention back to opening the large and scary envelope.
“He’s not my ‘boyfriend’ anymore,” Winnie replied, causing Brian to look up with a quizzical look - only to be directed with a smiling nod back to the missive in his hands. “He’s my fiancé.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Garett Fairchild Taylor, cordially request the honor of your gracious presence at the marriage of their daughter, Bronwyn . . .” Brian began to read the text of the card inside aloud, then paused to rapidly peruse the rest of the invitation to himself. “Why, Miss Taylor, am I to believe that you’re gettin’ yourself hitched? You mean you’ve finally gotten over your unrequited crush on little ole me? I’m devastated.”

“Sorry, Bri, but I just couldn’t wait any longer for you to come to your senses. I have to move on and try to find some kind of happiness without you. I hope you’ll understand,” the girl assumed a wistful, dreamy look, which subsequently dissolved into giggles that were echoed by Brian’s deeper laughter. “Well, that and Jon finally proposed and I can’t wait to marry the big lug.”

“Took him long enough. That guy’s been head over heels for you since we were all in high school,” Brian commented, as he laid aside the wedding invitation.

“Yeah, well, when it comes to love and commitment and other squishy emotional things, he’s a bit of a slow learner,” Winnie agreed, finally allowing herself to sag into the guest chair in front of Brian’s desk. “Not unlike someone else I know but will refrain from naming . . . Mr. 28-And-Never-Had-A-Real-Relationship Kinney.”

“I’ll thank you not to use such disgusting language in my presence, Ms. Taylor. You know I can’t stand to even hear the ‘R’ word,“

“Seriously, Brian! You are getting a bit old to still be playing the Club Boy, aren’t you? You’re only a little more than a year from hitting the big 3-0. I’d think even you would eventually start thinking about slowing down and finding someone special to spend your life with. I know you pretty much constantly surround yourself with fawning admirers, but don’t you ever feel lonely? I know I would if I were in the same situation.”

Winnie leaned back in the chair, falling silent as she surveyed the visage of the man she’d called her friend for more than a decade now. He was still as beautiful as the first day she’d met him on that soccer field their senior year. But he was even more closed off and solitary than he’d been then. Which was saying a lot since Brian had always been reserved and aloof. To those who really knew him or took the time to look closely enough, he radiated a blaring sense of loneliness that was staggering. Why was it always the most gregarious, outgoing and superficially happy people who seemed the saddest underneath?
Brian didn’t bother responding to his visitor’s concerned statements. For one thing he didn’t really know what to say. He wouldn’t lie to her - not when she’d asked him such a direct question. But he also wasn’t going to admit she was right. And, even if he had known what to say, why bother saying it. There wasn’t any point. His life was what it was. He didn’t think it was going to change, so why complain?

When the silence had stretched out long enough that it was dampening the atmosphere of the entire room, Winnie sighed, gathered her purse and stood back up. She should have known that Brian Kinney wasn’t going to bare his soul to her. It didn’t matter that she considered him a friend. Brian didn’t let anyone get in that far, friend or no.

“Well, whatever. Just know that if you ever need to talk - or need a friend who’d be fabulous at playing matchmaker - I’m always available.” Winnie managed to end the conversation with a joke that relieved at least some of the tension. “Oh, and before you try to find some lame excuse for why you won’t come to my wedding - get over it. Uncle Marty will expect to see you there so don’t even try it. And, just in case you change your mind, that invite is a ‘plus one’ if you DO happen to decide to bring a date.”

“Now, why would I do that?” Brian stood up to buss the check of the woman before she could leave. “If I brought a date, it would only interfere with my plans to fuck all your ushers during the reception.”

The usually prim and proper young lady snorted with laughter at that very Kinney-like pronouncement. It certainly didn’t look like Brian was likely to change any time soon. So much for good intentions, right?

“I’ll tell Jon to warn all his friends,” Winnie promised, kissing the strong cheek of her friend in goodbye. “See you, Brian. Be good!”

“Never!”

The blond apparition that had been lounging on the couch through this whole interview got up as soon as Winnie had marched through the door, repositioning himself so as to perch on the edge of Brian’s desk. Brian didn’t comment. He was getting used to the always present presence. Besides, he was still too busy perusing the elegant invitation and mulling over the words of wisdom his old friend had left him with. As Brian fingered the edge of the crisp creamy stationery with a look of deep introspection, Justin couldn’t help but reach out and caress the side of the older man’s face with a slow intimate gesture. Brian leaned into the touch - the way he was doing more and more often these days - and the tender moment caused a pang of sentiment in the guardian's tender heart.
“You wanna be my plus one, Sunshine?” Brian asked ingenuously, reaching out to pull the slight frame of the boy off the desk and into his lap.

Justin was stunned into silence by the unforeseen and intimate move.

“At least with you I don’t have to pretend. You don’t expect anything. You don’t have any illusions that I’m suddenly going to turn into some great big romantic fool who’ll actually know what the fuck to do on a date,” Brian proposed, smiling a self-deprecatory little grin. “And when I do go off and leave you to fuck the usher, you won’t give me shit . . . As long as I ask his name first, right?”

“Brian . . .” Justin sighed, unsure whether he could even try to talk to the man again or if he should just give it up as a lost cause.

“Ah, come on, Sunshine,” Brian teased, his saddened look morphing into something teasing and impish. “You know you love me, no matter how much I get you going.”

And then the infuriatingly intuitive man did the last thing that Justin had expected of him. He lifted Justin’s chin with one sure and steady hand, leaned in and expertly claimed the full, cotton-candy pink lips of the boy sitting in his lap with a long, slow, intense kiss that went on and on for longer than would have been possible if Justin actually needed to breathe.

Justin didn’t say anything. He didn’t resist. He didn’t know how. Despite his lengthy existence on this plane, this WAS his very first real kiss, and he didn’t have a clue how to respond. Well, other than to kiss back. Enthusiastically. And revel in the feelings that the man holding him engendered. And eagerly open up when Brian demanded entrance with his tongue. And keep on kissing and biting and licking at the mouth that was claiming him, without any thought of the consequences, for countless minutes.

Because this is what Justin was always meant to do. He was supposed to be with Brian. It was their fate.

Why would he of all people fight fate?

Especially when it felt so incredibly good.
6/4/16 - I'm working on moving this story along, but it's fighting me almost as much as Brian is fighting Justin. Sorry. I'll keep at it though. And hopefully I'll be able to get Brian and Justin a little closer too! Thank you to all who are still reading this story and who have left me comments. You'll never know how much I really appreciate it! TAG
Chapter Notes

The WIP that would not end returns . . . LOL.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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Chapter 25 - Frustration.

“Shit, Joselito . . .” Justin whined to his primary ally as he finally pulled the covers up over Brian's snoring form. “Why does it always feel like we're going two steps forward and then three steps back?”

The exhausted blond spirit guide bent to leave a kiss on his charge’s forehead but then crinkled up his nose at the less than pleasant aroma wafting up off the inebriated man and thought better of it. Instead, Justin went back into the bathroom, used the wet towel to mop up the mess on the floor, cleaned the splatters of puke off the seat of the toilet and then threw the towels along with Brian's booze drenched clothing into the washing machine. In his incorporealness, he couldn't actually start the damned washing machine, but he figured he'd done enough already. Brian could do his own fucking laundry as soon as he woke from his alcohol induced stupor in the morning. Assuming Brian’s head didn't explode first from the no doubt horrendous hangover he was going to have.

Justin made his way back to the bedroom, crawled up onto the bed next to Brian’s inert form and sat there, cross-legged, staring at the man. Jose jumped up to join him, curling up on Justin’s lap with a sorry ‘mew’. Neither the cat nor the boy knew what to do with their man. This self-destructive behavior was becoming seriously dangerous. And there seemed no way to stop it.

Justin figured he probably should have seen this coming. After Winnie had left Brian’s office the afternoon before, followed by the ensuing make out session they’d shared, Justin should have known that Brian would act out in reaction. It had been too good to be true, so Justin should have known it wasn’t going to last.

Brian always had to overthink things. He always had to second guess anything good that happened to him. He couldn’t just accept that Justin was truly there for him and loved him. Because Brian
knew he was unlovable. So, of course, if anyone showed him any affection, he had to fight it. He had to keep people out for fear he’d get hurt again if he let them in. Which meant it was inevitable that Brian would overreact to the happy, peaceful, loving interlude by going out after work, drinking himself into a stupor, fucking everything with a dick that stood still long enough to grab hold of, and doing a whole alphabet of drugs.

“Stupid, lonely, insecure, beautiful mess . . .” Justin proclaimed as he ran his fingers through the sweaty and matted auburn mop. “Don’t think you’re getting rid of me that easily, though. I’m onto you, Brian. I won’t let you sabotage yourself. I won’t. Not when I’m so close.”

Even in his sleep though, Brian fought against the comfort that Justin was offering. The drunken brunet shrugged away from the hand petting his head, grunting incoherently and rolling away from his bed mate. Justin stubbornly scooted closer, shifting the cat so that he could spoon up to Brian’s back, and cuddling the man who now seemed to be in the grip of an unpleasant dream.

“No . . . Don’t . . . Don’t touch me . . .” Brian mumbled in his sleep, his head shaking back and forth and his shoulders hunching to protect himself from whatever unseen force was after him. “Don’t, don’t, don’t . . .”

“Shhh, Brian. Shhh. It’s okay. I’m here, buddy. You’re okay.” Justin whispered, falling easily back into the nonsense comfort words he’d offered up so many times in Brian’s past whenever the boy needed consolation. “I’m here for you, Brian. Nothing will ever keep me away from you. Not even you,” Justin murmured directly into the shell of Brian’s ear and sealing the promise in with a kiss.

That seemed to be sufficient for the time being to reassure the man and pull him back from the edge of his nightmare. With one last shuddering breath, Brian settled down into a quieter sleep cycle. Justin held on even then, though. He was determined never to let go. He would somehow find a way to fix things for his Brian.

He had to.

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“I don’t know what the fuck good you think this is going to do, Justin,” Brian complained for the tenth time.

Justin looked from the pouting man standing on the porch steps to the antique glass front door of
Mel and Lindsey’s house. He was actually surprised he’d managed to get Brian this far. If he hadn’t been so fatigued after five successive days worth of massive hangovers, Justin probably wouldn’t have been able to guilt Brian into coming at all. Not that he was going to be even a tiny bit receptive in his current mood. But Justin was determined to keep pushing nonetheless.

“It can’t hurt to just listen to what the girls have to say, can it? Plus, you could use a good home cooked meal for a change instead of greasy takeout topped off by a liter of alcohol. Trust me, your liver will thank you for taking this one night off,” Justin insisted as he physically lifted up Brian’s hand and used the man’s fingertip to press the doorbell, laughing at himself and his creative solution to not being wholly solid.

“I don’t care what they say,” Brian insisted for what felt like the hundredth time. “I’m not interested in making their heteronormative baby dreams come true. I DON’T need that kind of shit in my life, Justin. Lindsey can talk all she wants but I’m not buying what she’s selling.”

Luckily, Justin was spared the duty to try and argue with Brian about the topic when Lindsey opened the door and greeted Brian with a glowing smile. Brian merely rolled his eyes at the over the top obsequiousness and let himself be led inside.

“I’m so happy that you agreed to come for dinner tonight, Brian,” Lindsey gushed, seating herself on the sofa next to her long time friend and then ordering Melanie to bring Brian a glass of the scotch they’d purchased especially for him. “We hardly ever have time to really talk anymore, you know? Not like when we were in college at any rate.”

“Lindsey, we’ve been out of college for more than six years. Isn’t it past time to give up the whole reminiscing over past glories thing? How pathetic can you be?” Brian groused even as he accepted the tumbler of scotch from Mel and then took a first swig.

“It’s not ‘pathetic’. I just think it’s fun to remember all the good times we had together. It’s a great way to make sure we don’t forget how we came to be such good friends in the first place,” Lindsey insisted, accepting a glass of white wine from her partner at the same time. “You can’t deny that we had a lot of fun together back in the day.” Lindsey laughed in her usual falsely-friendly way and leaned in to accentuate her statement with a kiss to Brian’s cheek.

“Fuck, Lindz! Can we at least eat dinner first before we start in with kissing his ass,” Mel commented acerbically, shaking her head as she stood there looking down at the cozy pair on the couch.

“Mel. You promised to try and be nice,” Lindsey warned.
“Well, there's nice and then there's ass licking, which is something I don't even want to contemplate where this asshole’s involved,” Mel mumbled into her own glass of Cabernet as she lowered herself into their big, comfy armchair.

“If it’s any consolation, Mel, I don’t want to ever think about you rimming me either,” Brian offered with his customary snark. “If I did, I might never get hard again. So, please, let’s move on from the unnecessary ass kissing and all discussions thereof and cut to the chase so I can get out of this inquisition that I was forced to come to against my will.” Brian directed a malevolent glare towards the unseen blond boy hovering in the corner of the room, in response to which, Justin merely smiled and winked at him. “So, you want my baby makers and think you can somehow convince me this isn’t the worst idea of the century, right? I’ll give you ten minutes. Hit me with your best argument, Lindz.”

“Brian . . . I don’t know why you’re already so set against the idea. And it would NOT be the biggest mistake of the century. It will be beautiful. Just think of it, a sweet, happy, cuddly baby. How could that ever be mistake,” Lindz insisted, her eyes already glazing over at the images of cherubic bundles of goo dancing through her baby-crazed brain.

“Besides, you can’t have a ‘mistake’ baby where two lesbians and a gay guy are concerned. By definition, that’s pretty close to impossible,” Mel, the always precise and rational one, pointed out.

“You're not helping, Mel,” Lindsey rolled her eyes and shook her head before turning back to Brian. “There are so many reasons why this is a really good idea, Brian. Mel and I have been thinking about this and discussing it for a long time. We really want this and now is the perfect time. Financially, we’re in a good place right now. Mel’s career is established enough that she’s bringing in pretty good money and I can easily take a few months off from my teaching job after the baby’s born. We don’t want to wait too long before starting a family - I’m already twenty-eight and that’s on the late side for having a first child, you know. So, from a timing standpoint, now is just the right time.”

“Great. Good for you. So go have all the babies you want. Just don’t involve me in your plans,” Brian shot back, determined not to be netted in their crazy schemes.

“But don’t you see, Brian? You’d make the perfect donor. You’ve got such great genes! You’re handsome and strong and healthy. Together, you and I would make such beautiful little babies,” Lindsey simpered, causing Mel to scoff into her wine glass. “Can’t you just see it - a beautiful little boy with your chestnut hair and big hazel eyes? Or a pretty little girl with your gorgeous long eyelashes and that amazing bone structure you have? Growing up so tall and graceful, just like you,” Lindsey continued, laying on the flattery and stroking Brian’s ego with expert precision. “Not to mention your brains - just think how smart our kids would be. With intelligence like that,
along with your natural charm, he or she will end up ruling the world,” she teased, but with enough sincerity to make her hyperbole almost believable, even for a skeptic like Brian.

Well, almost . . . Brian made the mistake of glancing over at Mel at the end of Lindsey’s acclamations and noted that the other potential parent of this imaginary prodigy was scowling into her wine glass, clearly not on board with all of her partner’s plans. When she caught Brian looking at her, Mel tilted her head, shrugged and stared back at him, but didn’t say anything. That gave him pause enough to realize that Lindsey’s flattery was just that, a well-calculated maneuver designed to woo him over. The Ad Man should have recognized when he was being sold a bill of goods.

Lindsey, though, had missed the silent exchange between her partner and her prospective Baby Daddy and was already moving on to her next point. “. . . I know you’re hesitant because you never planned on something like this, so I want to assure you that you wouldn’t have any responsibilities at all, if you didn’t want them. You can be as involved - or uninvolved - in the baby’s life as you want, Brian. We wouldn’t expect anything. You can go on with your carefree, studly life, without worrying, if that’s what you like. Mel and I will be the baby’s parents and you won’t have to lift a finger.”

“We would have you sign over your parental rights to me as soon as the baby is born,” Mel spoke up finally, adding her legal expertise to the discussion. “That way you couldn’t legally be required to provide support or anything else and I would have the same rights as a birth parent. That part is non-negotiable.”

“See? Like I said,” Lindsey cut in, trying to soften the harsh tone that Mel’s words had injected into the conversation, “you’d have absolutely no responsibilities. It wouldn’t impact your life at all. Not if you didn’t want it to. You could go on being the Stud of Liberty Avenue and no one would even have to know.”

“Frankly, the less involvement you have with the kid, the better, if you ask me,” Mel piped up, unable to hold back her opinion any longer. “Personally, I would prefer to go through an agency and use some anonymous sperm donor. That way there would be no possibility of entanglement. Lindsey, however is dead set against that idea and, since I want her to be happy, I’m willing to go along with this idea. But I just want you to know, Kinney, Lindz and I would be this child's parents for all intents and purposes. Considering your background and lifestyle, I’d rather your role in this be minimal. Good genes or not, you’re the last person I’d want helping to raise a kid.”

“Wait . . . What the hell?” Justin had drifted closer during Mel’s diatribe and was now standing right next to where Brian was sitting on the couch. “Don’t listen to her, Brian. You would make an amazing father. Mel doesn't know what the fuck she’s talking about . . .”

“Now, Mel, we’ve talked about this,” Lindsey intervened. “All the research on alternative families
says that children benefit from ongoing contact with their biological parents and that they need at least some exposure to both male and female influences to become well rounded adults. So, of course we’d want Brian to spend time with the baby.”

“Fine. Whatever. Like I said before, I’m willing to accommodate you on this Lindz, even though I’m not one hundred percent happy with your decision. But we keep his influence to a minimum and if he starts acting like a total asshole - which, for Brian, seems to be his usual MO - then that’s it. I won’t have MY children exposed to that kind of influence,” Mel stated adamantly, her vague references to Brian's past clear enough to all parties involved.

“Fuck this!” Brian stood up and shouldered his way past the blond spirit that was trying to block his flight path. “I do NOT need this shit. It was a bad idea from the get go.”

Lindsey jumped up and sprinted to the door. “Please, Brian. You have to do this for us. For me. Mel just doesn’t understand. You’re the only man I could even imagine trusting with this kind of responsibility, Peter,” Lindsey cooed, reaching up with one hand to caress Brian’s biceps as she spoke and using the pet name she’d given him back in college to try and calm him. “We’ve been friends for so long and you’ve always been there for me, Brian. I just know that this is meant to be. Please, Brian. Please, do it for your Wendy?” She looked up at him from under her long lashes, her big brown eyes suddenly watering with unshed tears as she silently implored him for his acquiescence.

Brian shook his head and sighed. He hated being put in this position. Pleading females were not his forte. He felt more comfortable with Mel’s open hostility than he did with this simpering, fawning supplication. But, despite all Lindsey’s flattery, at heart he agreed with Mel. He wasn’t meant to be a father. He wasn’t father material. Not by any stretch of the imagination. Why he’d even agreed to come here tonight was a total mystery. Fucking blond spirit guide . . . Why had Brian listened to the little twat? He needed to get the fuck out of there.

“I don’t think so, Lindsey,” Brian snapped, reaching past his friend to tug open the door so he could escape.

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Brian was working on his fourth Beam and his fifth cigarette when he saw the reflection of his oldest friend approaching via the mirror behind the bar. He sighed. He did not feel up to any of the Novotny brand of cheerleading tonight. He’d had enough advice thrown at him already. Fucking Lindsey.
Brian snuffed out the remains of his last smoke just as the invisible boy sitting on the stool next to him realized that they were about to get company. Justin scrambled to get off the seat before Michael could take what he assumed was an empty barstool. Not that Michael would have realized he was about to sit on the incorporeal boy’s lap. Justin didn’t seem at all keen on the idea though. Brian groggily mused about what that would feel like to Justin, or for that matter to Mikey. Would it feel strange for them to occupy the same space even though they couldn’t touch each other? Would they still somehow be able to sense the other person?

Justin managed to get away right before Michael sat on the chair, so Brian figured the questions percolating through his half-inebriated brain were probably mute. Although, if he still remembered tomorrow after the inevitable hangover wore off, he might ask Justin about it. If Justin could sort of slide inside another person’s body that might be pretty cool. Brian vaguely remembered some old movie about a ghost that did that to his still living lover with seriously erotic consequences. That could be hot. Maybe they should try it, he thought, causing himself to laugh out loud just as Michael was about to address him.

“Hey, Bri. I thought I’d find you here. What’s so funny?” Michael started in on him right away.

“Life . . . Life is funny, Mikey,” Brian answered ambiguously as he threw back the rest of his drink and immediately waved the bartender over for a refill.

“Shit, Brian. Haven’t you had enough already? You’re already half drunk and it’s not even nine yet,” Michael cautioned as he added a beer for himself to Brian’s order.

“Mikey, Mikey, Mikey . . . How many times do I have to tell you that there’s no such thing as enough.” Brian raised the glass the bartender sat in front of him right then and toasted his friend. “Here’s to there never being enough. Not enough beam, or drugs or men . . . Never enough!” Brian ignored the unhappy glare the unseen blond boy standing behind him gave his reflection. “So, what brings you out on this fine rainy Tuesday night in October, Mikey? Shouldn’t you be home with Honeycutt painting your toenails and trimming your pubes together?” Brian cracked himself up with that one and almost snorted out the sip of beam he was ingesting.

“Lindsey called me and asked that I come find you,” Michael answered, apparently not getting the joke, or at least not finding it funny. “She wants me to try and talk you into their crazy baby plan.”

Brian didn’t bother responding to that. Wasn’t that why he was here and already halfway through his fifth glass of beam - to forget all about the Munchers’ insane schemes? Maybe if he didn’t answer, Mikey would move on to another topic?
Nope. He wasn’t going to be that lucky.

“I’m glad you shut them down on that, Brian,” Michael forged on into the taboo subject. “What the fuck are they thinking? Brian Kinney a father? You don’t need that shit?”

Brian swirled the amber liquid around in his glass a moment before replying. “You don’t think I could do it?” He finally asked, keeping his inscrutable mask in place.

“What? Jerk off into a plastic cup?” Michael teased, bumping his shoulder against Brian’s jokingly and inadvertently causing some of the beam to spill from his glass all over his hand.

“Fuck you, Mikey,” Brian complained as he wiped his dripping fingers off on the leg of Michael’s jeans. “You know what I meant. Being a father. You don’t think I could do it?” Brian made sure NOT to make eye contact as he asked the question again.

“Of course you could do it. But why would you want to?” Michael replied instantaneously. “You don’t want to be a father, Brian. Why would you? You have the perfect life already. Why would you want to fuck that up?” Michael was rhapsodizing away at this point, obviating the need for Brian to respond. “I mean, you’re young, you’re beautiful and you can get any guy you want, any time you want. You’ve got a great job, so you’ve got no money worries. Your loft is practically an historic landmark here on Liberty Avenue. You fuck who you want, when you want and wherever you want. Why the hell would you want to fuck up the perfect life you have just to satisfy Lindsey’s baby craving?” Michael was now smiling over at his friend with such glowing pride in his eyes that it was almost as if he took personal credit for Brian’s wanton lifestyle and licentious ways.

Listening to Michael, Brian almost bought into the myth himself. It sounded great, right? Being the ultimate stud. Having the looks and all the money and freedom he’d ever dreamed of. Being able to pull any guy he wanted. That sounded great. Right?

“When did you decide that’s all you wanted out of life, Brian?” the persistent guardian spirit hovering over him asked, seemingly reading Brian’s mind now. “Did you actually make a conscious decision that you wanted to be THAT guy? Sure, you’re young and beautiful and can have your pick of guys right now but is that ALL you want? Do you truly think that will satisfy you for the rest of your life, Brian? What about five years from now? Ten years? Cause despite what Michael has been saying, you and I both know that you won’t be young and beautiful forever. And aren’t you the one who always makes fun of the aging club boys trying to hold on to their glory days long past their prime? Is that how you want to end up?”
Justin’s words were boring into Brian’s psyche with their relentless truth in spite of the five beams he’d ingested to try and keep them out. “Fuck you. That’s not all I am,” he retorted angrily, glaring at the image of the boy in the bar mirror.

“Exactly!” Michael answered, thinking that Brian had been talking to him. “You’re not the father type. Hell, how many times have I listened to you going on and on about how pathetic it is when fags try to play hetero families and shit like that? Brian Kinney would never give up his life to become a slave to that kind of heteronormative values.” Michael chugged the last of his beer and then plunked the bottle down on the bar as if using that to empathize his point. “If you ask me, you need to tell the Munchers to go to hell before they fuck up your perfect life.”

“Idiot . . .” Justin mumbled with another glare in Michael’s direction. “Please don’t listen to him, Brian. Michael doesn’t know what the fuck he’s talking about.”

Justin turned his attention back to Brian, drowning out the ongoing chatter from the man sitting next to him at the bar. “You still haven’t answered me, Brian. When, exactly, did you decide that your only goal in life was to be some kind of Supreme Stud who fucked his way through life without caring for anyone and who always ended up alone? I don’t remember you ever saying that’s what you wanted to be when you grew up, do you? Yeah, you always said you wanted to be successful and have the kind of money your deadbeat father never had. Fine. You’ve got that. But what part of that means that you can’t also have a real life with someone you care about? What part of that says you can’t be a father? Can’t connect with anyone in a substantial way? When did you decide that being forever alone and untouchable was your ideal way of life?”

Justin paused for several minutes, allowing what he’d said to sink in. “The answer, Brian, is that you didn’t. This ‘perfect’ life - the sexy, untamed stud who has money and freedom but who’s always alone - that’s Michael’s vision of how your life should be. It’s his fantasy. But since he can’t live it, he’s pushed you into the role. And you’ve let him make you over into that person. But that’s not YOU, Brian. Not really. Not deep down inside. You don’t have to be like this. You deserve so much more.”

Brian could feel the warmth of Justin hand, now resting on his shoulder, even though he was intentionally avoiding meeting the younger man’s gaze in the mirror. Was the spirit guide right? Had Michael pushed him into becoming the person he was today? Even if he hadn’t, did Brian really want to be this person anymore? The kid did have a point about how long he could keep up the act - he might not want to admit it, but nobody could stay young and beautiful forever and he would rather kill himself before he became one of those has-been, over-the-hill lotharios who looked so pathetic while they tried to pick up chicken at the clubs. Fuck that! But what was the alternative?

“Besides, what do you know about being a father anyway,” Michael’s ongoing chatter finally filtered through to Brian’s brain - it seemed he was STILL harping on in the same refrain. “It’s not
like you grew up with a good example of parenting, or anything. Don’t kids who grew up in homes like that always turn out to be abusive themselves? You don’t want to go there. No. It’s a good idea you already told Lindsey and Mel ‘no’. ” Michael concluded with a definitive note, completely clueless about how hurtful his statements were.

Brian, meanwhile, felt the words like a stab to the heart. It was true, though. Statistics said that he’d most likely turn out just like dear old Jack. Who was he to argue with cold hard stats?

Which meant it didn’t really matter what he wanted or who he thought he could be, did it? He might as well be some lonely old Stud, since there was no way in hell he’d ever intentionally expose another child to the type of nightmarish childhood he’d experienced. Brian would rather be alone his whole life than turn into a monster like his father. Mikey was probably right that he wasn’t ‘father’ material anyway.

“Brian, don’t listen to him!” Justin was pleading with him, His body now wedged between Brian’s stool and Michael’s, as if he could block out the other man’s words as easily as he could block out the sight of him sitting there. “You could never be like Jack. NEVER! I know you. I know your heart. You will be a wonderful father, Brian. Just give yourself a chance.”

Brian had had more than enough deep, philosophical soul searching for the night though. “Fuck the damn Munchers!” he declared as loudly as he could, pushing aside the judgmental blond sprite who was looking at him with that disapproving glare. “Fuck it all! Fuck Jack! Fuck everyone!” Michael giggled at Brian’s declaration, raising his new beer when Brian raised his own refilled glass. “Thanks, Mikey, for reminding me about what’s really important - and that’s NOTHING! Nothing is really important. It’s all just a huge pile of bullshit. Which is why I’m not going to worry about it. I’m just going to fuck and fuck and fuck as much as I can till I die.” Even if he hadn’t planned on being what he’d become, at least being the biggest Stud around was something he knew he could do, and do well.

“Excellent plan, Brian!” the little sycophant asserted, leaning into the embrace as Brian slipped an arm around his friend’s shoulders in a grip that was a little more than camaraderly. “We can celebrate your narrow escape from the girls’ nefarious plans.”

“Thass right, Mikey! We’ll celebrate,” Brian slurred, finally feeling the alcohol catching up to him. “We’ll salabrate being young and bootiful and hung . . . As long as it lasts . . . and then we can go out in a blaze of glory! Right?”

Brian leaned over and gave Mikey a great big enthusiastic smooch on his lips to signal the start of the official celebration. Michael kissed back with even more fervor, surprising Brian by slipping in a little tongue at the end. And, as if that wasn’t telling enough, Michael’s hand had inched up under the hem of Brian’s shirt in the middle of that unexpected kiss and was still resting there
against his warm skin even after Brian pulled away.

In his current mood, Brian was tempted to just add this to the things he said ‘fuck it’ to and finally give Mikey what he’d been hinting he wanted for years. What would it really matter? Brian no longer cared what happened to him. This night had already convinced him that he was doomed, so why not give in to the fullest extent of his debauchery? Apparently fucking was all Brian was good for, right?

Just when he’d started to lean back in toward Michael for another kiss, though, the annoying blond stopped him. Justin grabbed Brian’s chin, pulling the drunken man’s face to the side so that Brian couldn’t help but look straight into the worried blue eyes. Those sad eyes. Brian hated that sadness. He knew he was fucking up and hated it, but only because of the sorrow reflected there.

“Don’t do this, Brian. Please. You’ll hate yourself for it tomorrow. Just don’t,” the blond begged him.

“Damn it!” Brian growled, wrenching his face out of the boy’s hand and turning back to a confused looking Mikey. “Shit, Mikey. What the fuck am I doing? Sorry. I’m totally wasted,” he mumbled by way of excuse as he tried to push Michael’s body away.

Unfortunately Michael held on - if anything, wrapping his arms even tighter around Brian’s waist. “You don’t have to say ‘sorry’. I don’t mind, Brian.” Michael leaned forward and initiated another kiss, this one much hungrier and more insistent. “I don’t mind at all . . .”

“Yeah, well, you would tomorrow morning when I kicked you to the curb like any other trick,” Brian explained, trying to make the rejection sound like a joke, even as he pushed Michael away with a more determined shove.

“But, Brian, it doesn’t have to be like that. Not with us. We’ve been friends forever. Why couldn’t we just . . .”

“Which is exactly why you should know better than to listen to me when I’m fucking drunk, Mikey. You know I talk shit when I’m wasted,” Brian maintained, peeling off the octopus-like hands that his friend kept trying to clasp around various parts of his body. “Besides, you don’t fuck your friends, Michael. That’s the fastest way to end a friendship known to mankind. Especially not when one of them is too fucked up to realized what the hell he was about to do,” Brian added, trying to play down the moment even further. “Now, let me go so I can nail that hot muscle queen that’s been cruising me from the end of the bar all night. I’m going to pummel his ass so hard he won't be able to sit on the exercise bike at the gym tomorrow without a pillow.”
Michael, seeming to realize that he’d again missed his opportunity, finally let Brian out of his grasp. He tried to laugh nonchalantly at his friend’s words about the trick Brian was heading off towards, but Brian could see in his eyes how disappointed Michael really was. What the hell. Hadn’t this day been shitty enough without Michael glomming on him and getting all pissy when Brian turned him down? Why did it seem that everyone always wanted something from him that he couldn’t give them? And then they got disappointed anyway. Fuck them all. He didn’t need them. And that ‘live fast and die young’ thing was looking better every fucking second.

“You!” Brian shouted to the brunet gym bunny at the end of the bar. “Yes, you,” he confirmed when the guy looked around himself in confusion. “What’s your fucking name?”

“Uh . . . Jeremy?” the surprised gym bunny answered.

Brian grinned nastily at Justin who simply shook his head.

“Well, Jeremy, it’s your lucky day! Let’s go!” Brian ordered, struggling into his jacket and fishing his keys out of the pocket. “Later, Mikey.”

Justin watched in despair as Brian directed the trick du jour out of the bar and down the street towards where his car was waiting. So much for his plan to convince Brian to help Lindsey get pregnant. Or his plan to wean Brian away from the co-dependency of Michael's friendship. Or his other plan to make Brian see that he didn’t need to be the Stud of Liberty Avenue if he didn’t want to be. Let alone his plan to try and get Brian to dial back on the dangerous behavior like drinking too much, driving while under the influence and taking tricks he didn’t know home with him.

“Damn it all to fucking Hell!” Justin screamed out his frustration and fear.

Which wasn’t really a big deal since nobody at Woody’s heard him anyway.

Chapter End Notes

3/19/17 - I'm back! And this time I'm determined to finish this WIP come hell or highwater or vicious attack plot bunnies. Hold on to your hats folks. TAG
Chapter Notes

Yes! The first chapter in this story yet where no actual torture of any kind happens to Brian. It's a *MUST* read! LOL. Hope you enjoy! TAG

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Chapter 26 - Interlude.

Watching Brian sleep had always been one of Justin’s guilty pleasures. He could literally do it for hours. Which is precisely what he’d been doing pretty much every single night since Jesse had convinced him to basically move in with Brian. Of course, sometimes he would pop off into the nothingness of the ether for a few hours, feeling like there was something wrong with just lying there next to Brian in bed all night and watching the other man sleep. He had to admit it sounded a little creepy even to him. But he could never stay away for long.

Tonight had been a prime example. He’d been happily staring at his man for hours and hours. He loved all the adorable snuffy noises Brian made in his sleep. The cute little faces he’d make as he dreamed. Justin even loved the light, purr-like snore he’d drop into when he was deeply asleep. Not to mention the innocence the normally prickly, always self-controlled man exhibited when he was asleep. It reminded Justin of when Brian was a still-trusting child. He simply couldn’t get enough of just looking at him, filling his eyes with the inherent beauty that was Brian, and guarding him through the night from the occasional nightmare.

Justin knew that his time of stargazing was almost at an end, though, as soon as dawn broke and light started filtering through the loft. Except when Brian was hungover, the man was a notoriously early riser. And sometimes, even after a night of debauchery, he’d be up before seven, grousing and moaning but unable to sleep late. Justin assumed it came from a childhood of always having to be wary of being caught unawares by Jack, and those old habits died hard even after years of Brian living on his own.

Even as that thought was flitting through Justin’s brain, Brian began to fidget and squirm around restlessly under the sheets as he started to come to life. After stretching out his lusciously long frame to it’s full length for a couple of seconds, the man rolled over onto his side, scooting closer to Justin, and rooting under the sheets semi-consciously until he found the warm, young body he’d
been looking for. Brian wrapped Justin in his arms and crooked one of his legs over the top of the youth so as to pull him even closer. Justin melted into the embrace, his body just naturally molding itself to Brian’s, his own arms clasping the bigger body tightly.

“Mmmmm,” the not-yet-awake Brian moaned happily, burrowing his nose into Justin’s neck right behind his ear.

When Justin moaned back, Brian smiled and nibbled at the tender flesh he found there. As far as Justin was concerned, Brian could eat him whole if he wanted. Just as long as he kept kissing him between bites, stroking his chest with one lazy hand and playfully rutting against his hip.

“How the fuck is it possible that you smell so damn good?” Brian asked, as he inhaled another deep breath of the blond. “You’re not even really here and yet you smell like . . . like fresh mown grass on a summer day and sunshine beating down on the earth . . . it’s fucking crazy, you know. You smell good, you taste delicious,” Brian paused to take another lick at the tempting skin of Justin’s slender, alabaster neck, tickling the boy in the process and eliciting a quiet giggle. “You even fucking sound sweet as hell. But you’re not REAL - you’re my imaginary childhood friend. I made you up. I’m the only one who can see or hear you and half the time you’re not even solid. How the fuck is this possible?”

“Well, at least part of me is VERY solid right now,” Justin rejoined, taking Brian’s hand and placing it atop the sheet covering Justin’s now hard-as-granite cock.

Brian gave the bulge under his hand an affectionate little squeeze, left one last mini kiss on the boy’s neck and then wriggled around until he was lying all the way on top of the younger man with his lower body falling naturally into the vee of Justin’s accommodatingly spread legs. Their bodies were touching from cock to chest and Brian’s weight was only partially offset by propping himself up on his elbows. Justin didn’t care. He loved the feeling of Brian draped over him like a warm, living blanket. The bigger man’s weight felt comforting rather than suffocating. Hell, if they could stay like this for the rest of eternity, Justin would gladly never move.

“Mmmmm,” Brian repeated his earlier assessment before diving down to sip at the soft, coral-pink of Justin’s lips.

Justin’s heart soared as he returned Brian’s fervent kiss with all the pent up passion he had inside him. He eagerly reciprocated Brian’s kisses, lick for lick, nibble for nibble, moan for moan. THIS was Justin’s idea of heaven - fuck all the rest of the bullshit the religious types spouted. He’d been there, done that, and the only true paradise in his experience was this perfect moment right here, right now, lying in Brian’s arms.
“Shit, Justin,” Brian finally broke off from his kissing duties to voice his ongoing disbelief in the moment. “This feels so . . . so fucking good. But it’s not real. How can this not be real?”

Brian paused, looking down into the face of this man whom he’d known all life, shaking his head at the impossibility of it all. Justin simply looked back up at him, smiling at Brian with that trusting blue gaze of his. Brian was completely mesmerized by that look. He found that he simply could not look away. Those deep, crystal blue eyes were boring through him and he was swept up in the open, adoring, undoubting look.

Neither Brian nor Justin knew how long they’d laid there like that, unmoving, just staring into each other’s eyes. Justin was so happy he didn’t want to move or look away. And Brian didn’t know what to think. He was so confounded by the depth of the care, adoration and, yes, love, looking back at him, he felt almost paralyzed. He’d been looking in those same clear, blue eyes for a lifetime and yet he felt almost as if this was the first time he’d seen them.

When the quiet tension finally got to be too much, Brian sighed and blinked. “How is this even possible, Justin?” he asked, his voice quiet and so tentative that Justin could barely hear him from only centimeters away. “How . . . What are you? Why am I the only one who can see you and feel you? Why . . . ?”

“Oh, Brian . . .” Justin hated the uncertainty he heard in Brian’s tone. “I don’t KNOW why. Most of the time I’m as lost as you are. It’s not like, when I died, they gave me the play book and all the answers to Life, The Universe and Everything, you know. One minute I was this happy, carefree, seventeen year old boy, who was just leaving the hospital the day you were born, thrilled that I’d finally found you, and then next minute I found myself standing in a cold, damp, dark basement with a scared four year old. I was totally freaking out, but I didn’t have time to worry about it then - I had to take care of you. And ever since then, I’ve just floated along from day to day, trying to do my best to help you whenever I could. But I have no clue what happened to get me here or why.” Brian looked so disappointed in the unhelpful answer, even more so than Justin himself. “All I do know, Brian, is that we are meant to be together. I don’t know how or when, but I KNOW we will be.”

“That’s fucking bullshit,” Brian spit out, a frown marred the beauty of his previously open and trusting face. “I don’t buy into the whole ‘soul-mates’ crap. ‘Fate’ is just a concept some losers came up with to explain away the randomness of life. It’s all nonsense.”

“It’s NOT!” Justin insisted. “It’s not, Brian. I do know that we are destined to be together. I’ve seen it.” Brian continued to radiate his scepticism at Justin, prompting the spirit guide to smile at his doubtful charge. “I know you don’t believe me, Brian. But I believe it. See, back when I was . . . well, more thoroughly solid all the time . . . I used to see things, know things in advance, all the time. I told my mother the day my younger brother was born that I was going to have a baby brother that day - she wasn’t due for another month and I was only a year and a half old. It scared
her to the core. I knew the day my Grandfather came to see us at Thanksgiving that he would be dead by Christmas. And I knew the morning you were born that I would finally find the man I had been dreaming of all my life.”

Brian looked off to the side but Justin held onto him even tighter so that Brian couldn’t physically pull away.

“I swear to you, Brian, we will be together for real. I’ve seen it in my mind. I’ve dreamed about it. We are going to be together and we’ll have the most wonderful, long, happy life. Somehow.” Brian huffed a tiny, disbelieving noise, but Justin refused to relent. “How can you doubt this is right, Brian? There’s no other reason for me to still be here, like this, with you all these years, unless we are truly meant to be together. Because I simply refuse to not let it happen. Hell, if death couldn’t keep me away from you, nothing fucking can.”

Justin was so emphatic in his assertions, and looked up at Brian with such unshakable certainty glowing from every pore of his body, that even a doubter like him was momentarily swayed. The blond spirit seemed so positive. His eyes - those expressive blue eyes that never hid anything from Brian - shone with conviction. Even a natural skeptic like Brian found it impossible to dispute the assurances in those steadfast eyes.

“Stupid, romantic, fucking twat,” Brian complained without any real heat to the statement. “So . . . what the fuck are we supposed to do until this miracle of yours actually happens?”

“No idea,” Justin responded with a teasing smile. “But I’m all for more of this while we wait.”

The impish sprite tilted his head up so that he could capture Brian’s lips again. Brian didn’t fight it - why would he when it felt so perfect. He was more than happy to continue lying there, kissing the youth’s soft, warm lips, playing with the strands of silky blond hair, feeling the small, intimate movements of their bodies against each other. And he had to admit that, for someone who was more than likely a mere figment of his warped imagination, Justin felt quite solid. Solid and warm and real and . . . hard.

In fact, the way the ghost boy’s very hard prick was currently poking into Brian’s belly felt awfully real. And the way he was currently biting on Brian’s lower lip felt real too. Those hands caressing his back, moving inexorably lower and lower, downwards towards Brian’s ass, didn’t seem at all insubstantial. They felt amazing. And who the fuck really cared if Justin wasn’t, in fact, ‘real’ - especially when whatever he WAS turned Brian on so fucking much.

Oh, to hell with it! Real or not, Brian no longer cared. Judging by the state of his raging hard on,
his body obviously couldn’t tell the difference. Why was he overthinking things so much?

With only a slight shift of his weight, Brian’s cock was freed, dropping down between Justin’s legs so that it was dangling in just the right place. Justin didn’t even try to hold back the groan of longing that percolated out as soon as he felt the welcome throbbing of the full shaft pressing against his perineum. All it would take would be for him to raise his legs, bending his knees . . . just like that . . . tilting his hips upward so that the dripping tip was now nudging against his skin just above the spot that would lead to utter bliss.

Both of them froze. They were panting, staring at each other, each waiting for the other to take the initiative. Brian knew he was being uncharacteristically hesitant, but he really didn’t know if he was ready to move forward with this. It felt like a momentous step. It felt irreversible. He stayed still, poised where he was, his dick hovering only millimeters away from the place he wanted to be, and struggled to make up his mind. Meanwhile, Justin continued to smile up at him, completely trusting and open, willing to wait for Brian’s decision while the moment stretched out interminably.

The two men were so caught up in the gravity of the moment that it would have taken a tornado ravaging through the loft to get either one’s attention. So it really wasn’t surprising that neither of them noticed the vibrating cell phone sitting on the nightstand. Or heard the landline ringing in the outer room. Brian’s sole focus at that moment was the tiny electrical impulses zapping through him every time his dick twitched, causing it to tickle against the warmth of Justin’s delectable ass.

Which is probably why they were both so startled when the loft door slid noisily open and a too-friendly voice yelled out a cheery “Brian? Hello! You here?”

“What the fuck is Lindsey doing here?” Brian grumbled, his head dropping down so that his forehead rested on Justin’s chin. “Damn lesbians - they have the absolute worst timing.” Justin chuckled in agreement, trying to calm his own heartbeat. “Do you think Lindsey would have me committed if I just ignored her and carried on fucking the invisible twink in my bed?”

Justin didn’t have time to actually respond to that question, though, before the owner of the annoyingly peppy voice came galloping up the stairs, right into the bedroom, not pausing until she was almost on top of them.

“Oh, no! Only if you want me to.” Lindsey immediately cringed as soon as she got a glimpse of the bed, backing slowly down the stairs. “Sorry, Brian! I didn’t know you were . . . entertaining. I did try to call to tell you I was on my way over with breakfast, but you didn’t answer. How about I just wait in the kitchen? Don’t mind me. Just carry on with . . . whatever you were doing,” she offered with a sophomoric giggle. “Just pretend like I’m not even here.”
“What? You mean you can see . . .” Brian started to ask as he slid off Justin, only to be shushed when Justin laid a finger across his lips.

“No, Brian. She can’t see me. It was the sheets,” Justin pointed down towards the foot of the bed where the outline of his legs under the draping of the sheet was clearly visible to both of them. “She only saw you lying on the bed and my feet . . .”

“Hmm. So you are at least a little bit solid after all?” Brian mused even as he threw the covers off the both of them and sighed at the sight of the beautiful and willing blond boy lying in his bed, completely naked. “Some parts of you more than others.” Justin smiled coyly up at him until they were again interrupted by the clanking and clattering of the invader in Brian’s kitchen. “Fucking persistent lesbians . . .” he growled again and rolled all the way off the mattress. “. . . Fucking lousy timing.”

Brian grabbed the pair of sweatpants he’d shucked off the night before and pulled them on with reluctance. Although, now that he thought about it, maybe Lindsey’s arrival right at that moment wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. It meant Brian would have more time to figure out what he wanted. What he was going to do about this growing . . . whatever . . . between himself and Justin. He wasn’t entirely sure that he wanted to take this any further.

“It’s okay, Brian,” the blond whispered as he literally popped into sight right in front of Brian, now completely clothed. “There’s no rush. You don’t have to do anything you’re not ready for. I’ll still be here when you are ready,” Justin affirmed as if reading Brian’s mind - again.

Trying to cover up for the indecision and guilt he felt at his thoughts being caught out that easily, Brian seized on the first alternative topic that came to mind. “How the fuck did you get dressed so fast? I didn’t even see your clothing around?” Brian looked around him as if he’d discover Justin’s secret stash of clothing somewhere.

Justin’s carefree peal of laughter went a long way towards putting Brian at ease. “One of the few perks of being incorporeal. I just think ‘Clothes’ and they’re there.”

“Nice trick,” Brian chuckled. “Especially if it works in reverse. That would save serious time in the back room if all my tricks had that power.”

“Sorry, Stud. I’m the only one with Super Twink Powers. You’re on your own with the rest of the gay population of Pittsburgh.”
“Oh well. I’ll muddle through, just like I always have, I guess,” Brian replied as he got to his feet and turned unenthusiastically towards the stairs, hesitant to confront Lindsey yet again. “Your powers don’t, by any chance, include some way to teleport me out of here so I don’t have to deal with the baby-crazy lesbian, do they?”

“Sorry, no. But if you’d like, I could maybe pelt her with balled up pieces of paper or make things appear to fly magically through the air. That should get rid of her,” Justin teased with a smirk and an impish twitch of his nose.

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s the best idea. I don’t need to deal with an hysterical woman on top of the whole baby thing.”

“Well, if you change your mind, just say the word. It might be kinda fun, actually. I’ve never tried that kind of thing. Ooo, how about if I drape a sheet over my head and run around the room. That would be totally wild. Hahaha.”

Justin looked like he was seriously considering ‘haunting’ Lindsey, which caused Brian to hurry off towards the kitchen a little faster in order to prevent the little twat from carrying out his threat. That would be all he needed - rumors going around that his loft was inhabited by some crazy poltergeist. No, better head that insanity off before it got started. He’d rather deal with Lindsey than Sunshine run amok.

“Lindsey. What the fuck are you doing in MY loft this early on a Saturday morning . . . uninvited and barging in without my permission I might add?” Brian came in blasting.

“Sorry, Brian. I didn’t expect you’d have company - I mean, you never let your tricks stay the night - so I didn’t think it would be a problem to just drop in. I’m really sorry I interrupted,” Lindsey repeated, craning her neck as if to look around Brian to find his ‘trick’.

“What do you mean, ‘company’?” Brian asked, playing dumb, and trying not to smile at the blond brat standing right behind Lindsey and pulling silly faces at her back.

“Didn’t you have someone up there with you?” Lindsey asked, looking very confused, especially once Brian shrugged with a ‘what’ gesture. “I could have sworn I saw . . .” She moved around kitchen island in order to peer into the bedroom without obstruction. “Huh? I really thought I saw someone in bed with you. I guess . . . I guess it was just the way the covers were bunched up or something. That’s really weird.”
“Well, it’s a good thing I WASN’T in the middle of fucking someone when you barged in here, Lindsey, or I would have been even more pissed off than I already am,” Brian complained as he helped himself to the freshly brewed coffee, dumping in most of the sugar bowl and drinking right out of the carafe. “Now, say whatever the fuck you came to say and then get the hell out of here so I can enjoy the rest of my Saturday.”

Lindsey, who was still looking around the loft as if determined to find where the missing trick was hiding, finally pulled herself together and refocused on the task at hand. “I came over to apologize, Brian. I know we got off on the wrong foot last night and I’m sorry. I really didn’t mean to make you so uncomfortable. I’ve talked to Mel about how she acted and she’s sorry too.” Brian didn’t believe that for a single second, but didn’t want to waste his breath disputing the matter, so he merely sat on a kitchen stool and applied himself to his coffee.

Lindsey finally gave up looking for Brian’s bed mate and applied herself to the bagel she had just toasted. She smeared it with a thin layer of fat free cream cheese and then set it out on a plate which was dutifully presented to Brian. She poured out a glass of the guava juice she’d found in the fridge and added it to the place setting. She even went so far as to fold a paper napkin and set it next to Brian’s plate, then smiled approvingly at the pleasingly domestic setting she’d arranged. Brian rolled his eyes at her blatantly obvious manipulations but was hungry enough, for once, not to care. Instead of calling her out on it, he just quietly began to snarf down a half a bagel.

Evidently pleased by the seemingly positive reaction, Lindsey took up the narrative again. “Listen, Brian. I understand that you’re not yet ready to really, seriously, consider my request that you help Mel and I get pregnant. I wouldn’t expect you to be. We sort of sprang this on you suddenly,” she tittered as if she’d said something incredibly funny, although Brian wasn’t laughing or even, really, paying much attention to her at all. “I want you to take all the time you need to think about this. Just don’t say ‘no’ right off the bat, okay? Give the idea a chance. There’s no hurry. Just promise you’ll think about it a little longer. Please?”

Brian looked at the pleading face and just couldn't turn Lindsey down completely. Maybe it was the residual hangover talking. Or maybe it was the after effects of that pleasurable interlude in bed with Justin. But, for whatever reason, Brian was feeling a little more mellow than usual and unable to get his full ‘asshole’ mask in place this morning.

“Fine. I’ll think about it. But don't get your fucking hopes up,” Brian warned as gruffly as he could before he’d consumed more than a full cup-worth of coffee.

The radiant smiles on both the visible and invisible blonds’ faces as he said this made Brian scowl. Why were they all so annoyingly persistent? Fuck it. He didn’t really care. Brian decided to compartmentalize both Lindsey’s pleas and Justin’s ongoing presence for the time being and just
concentrate on his breakfast. They could all wait.

All he really had to do right then was to finish eating, get a shower, and then head to the gym where he hoped to be able to find a trick willing to relieve the hard on that he still hadn’t gotten rid of since abandoning the blond boy in his bed.

Maybe this time all his problems really would go away if he just ignored them?

Yeah, fat chance.

Chapter End Notes

3/24/17 - Guess my angst is running low - I couldn't even make Lindsey appear evil in this chapter. That must mean the story is about to come to a close, because it's springtime and you know I only write angst in the winter. Better hurry and finish this story then. Off to write. TAG
“Brian Kinney at a hetero wedding! I don’t believe it. Can somebody go look out the window and tell me if there are any pigs flying by?” Winnie’s disbelieving voice interrupted Brian’s contemplation of which of the hotties that made up his friends’ wedding party he was going to take home that night.

“Hey, if you’re going to give me a hard time, I can always leave, you know,” Brian shot back, grinning at the bride to soften his words.

“No. No. No. I just can’t believe I got you here. But now that I have, I’m not going to let you go,” Winnie grabbed hold of Brian’s arm and pulled him down so that the relatively diminutive woman could leave a kiss on his cheek. “I’m really happy you came, Brian. And not just because I won the bet with Jon, who swore you wouldn’t be caught dead within a mile of our wedding. I can’t wait to collect that twenty he owes me.” They both chuckled, thinking of the unassuming Jon whose dry wit was rare but always amusing. “So, are you going to shock me even more and tell me you brought a date as your plus one?”

“Fuck no!” Brian pretended to look scandalized, which elicited yet more giggling from Winnie. “I figured I’d just pick up one of your ushers and take him home as my very own special ‘Wedding Present’.”

“Good luck with that, Brian. I don’t think any of them are gay,” Winnie said, joining Brian in surveying the guys dressed in tuxes milling around at the other end of the hall.

When one of the wedding party actually turned and gave Brian a shy smile in return, Winnie gasped. She never would have guessed that Keith, of all people, would succumb to the Kinney wiles. Keith was the most masculine of Jon’s friends - a real bruiser of a football player. But there
was no denying the interest there when he and Brian ogled each other.

“You were saying?” Brian refocused on Winnie, after winking boldly at his potential prey to let the guy know he’d got the message and would be coming for him later.

“Damn you’re good, Brian,” Winnie punched him in the arm good-naturedly, displaying her tomboy nature despite the fact that she was adorned in a stunning Vera Wang strapless corset-style wedding gown. “I should know better than to doubt your powers by now. Just be nice to Keith, though, or Jon will waste half our Honeymoon bitching to me about you. And that’s not how I want to spend my time in Hawaii.”

“Oh, I’ll be very, very good. Trust me. I’ve never had any complaints about THAT. He’ll leave a happy man.”

While the two old friends were laughing over Brian’s assertions, they were interrupted by the advent of another familiar face. “Winnie. Your father is looking for you, Hon. He’s got yet another old business associate you apparently need to hobnob with. Sorry.”

“Thanks, Uncle Gil.” Winnie sighed and looked over towards the head table situated all the way across the breadth of the hotel’s largest reception hall. Brian followed her gaze, admiring the elegant red and gold Christmas decorations displayed throughout in honor of the December wedding. “Guess I have to go do my filial duty. Don’t run off with Keith before I get to say goodbye, Brian,” she ordered and then, straightening her shoulders, she gave a flippant wave before making her way off towards her parents’ table, weaving through the guests just like she would have if they’d been a horde of defenders on the soccer field.

Brian laughed at the sight. The man who’d brought the message to his niece chuckled along with him before turning to greet Brian. “Well, well, well. Brian Kinney. Long time no see, son. It looks like you're doing well.”

“I am, Sir. Thanks for noticing.” They shook hands cordially.

“You can lay off the ‘Sir’ bit. I’m not your coach any more,” Gil Taylor offered genially. “So how’s life been treating you, Brian? I hear good things about you from Marty Ryder.”

“I can’t complain,” Brian drawled with a smug smile. “Business is doing well. Marty says if I keep going the way I have been, I could make partner within a couple years.”
“That's excellent news, Brian,” Gil clapped the younger man on the back proudly. “And, since I know for a fact that Marty doesn't hand out praise like that willy nilly, you really must be doing great. I'm proud of you, son. You've come a long way.” Brian nodded his head, a sheepish smile on his face at the unaccustomed praise. “But what about outside of work? Have you finally found somebody to tame that wild streak of yours?”

“Wild? Me? You sure you're talking about the right guy, Coach? I’m a pussycat,” Brian responded with a mischievous smile and a glint in his eye.

*Hahaha* “Just because I turned an officially blind eye to your antics when you were a student, Brian, doesn’t mean I didn’t hear all the rumors about you and your exploits. From what I’ve heard over the years - not the least of which came from my own niece - you’re more of a tiger than a pussycat.”

They both laughed out loud at that assessment. Luckily, though, before Brian would have been forced to discuss his sex life any further with his former coach, they were joined by another man, and the flow of the conversation was disrupted.

This new arrival had the same greying blond hair, medium build and square-cut features as Gil. In fact, he looked like a younger copy of Coach Gil. It seemed like all the members of that family held to type. The only difference being that their eye color seemed to vary from individual to individual, spanning the range from a dark grey to a muted blue. The newcomer was of the grey-eyed variety.

“Four,” Gil greeted his younger brother. “Do you know Winnie’s friend, Brian? He was one of my best soccer players back in the day.”

“Nice to meet you,” the newcomer held out his hand and shook Brian’s, albeit with a distracted air and without actually even looking directly at the younger man. “Sorry to interrupt, Gil, but Gareth wants all of us to gather for more pictures.”

“Damn. I thought we were done with the pictures already. It’s not even MY kid that got married,” Gil returned good-humoredly. “Oh well, that’s my penance for not having kids of my own, I guess. Sorry, Brian, but I’ve got to go play Uncle.”

Brian nodded to indicate he was fine with it before the two older men walked off. Which left Brian all to his own devices again. Only, it looked like he’d temporarily lost track of the interested usher.
He looked around the teeming reception hall and didn’t see anyone else he knew or wanted to get to know. Great. Now he was trapped at a hetero wedding without anyone to talk to or any other way to amuse himself. Why did he come here again?

Without any other real options, it looked like Brian’s best shot to entertain himself was to visit the bar. If this yawner of a party didn’t perk up soon, Brian would be cutting out early. Either that, or he could always get shit-faced drunk, pop a couple tabs of E and dance on the tables to amuse everyone. At least that would liven things up. Although Winnie and Jon might not approve.

Brian fucking hated these kinds of affairs. If he hadn’t been worried that Marty Ryder would hear about and object to Brian blowing off his goddaughter’s wedding, he probably wouldn't have bothered to show. Even for good friends like Winnie and Jon. But just because he'd put in an appearance didn't mean he had to like it. Hopefully he wouldn't have to stay much longer. He figured he'd give it another half hour, drink as much of the free booze as he could in the meantime, then pick up his usher and get the hell out of Dodge.

The bar itself wasn't very crowded since most of the guests were letting the wait staff serve them at their tables. Only three bar stools were occupied right then: one propping up an old boozer who appeared to be well into the large tumbler of scotch sitting in front of him and the other two filled by nearly identical blond teenagers. Brian groaned quietly at the prospect of having to brave both grinning brats just to get his drink on. He wasn't going to let them keep him from his only solace amid the wastelands of this hetero farce, though, so he bravely bellied up to the bar next to the slightly younger of the pair.

“Well, well, well. If it isn't the Bobbsey Twins,” Brian drawled after ordering himself a double Beam. “You two doubling up on the stalking details now?”

“I'm not stalking your skinny ass,” the more belligerent of the twins retorted. “I was just sitting here, minding my own business, till you came up to me, Dude. If anything, I think it's YOU who are stalking ME.”

Brian snorted at the snotty reply but couldn't completely tamp down his amusement. He had always appreciated somebody who stood up for themselves, and this Jesse kid definitely did that. He was a stubborn little shit. Just like his look-a-like relative.

“I WAS stalking,” Justin readily admitted with his usual impish grin when Brian looked at him next. “Personally, I find your skinny ass adorable and plan to keep on following it around for the foreseeable future. But you already knew that, right? Deal with it.”
Brian let out a melodramatic sigh, which earned him only giggles from the blonds rather than the sympathy he'd been aiming for. Damn, they were both such unrepentant brats. Brian decided that the best course of action was to simply ignore them. He up-ended his drink, not bothering to savor the contents, and then immediately signaled the bartender for another. Maybe if he got drunk enough he'd forget they both existed.

While Brian applied himself to this new plan, Jesse and Justin spent the next few minutes whispering to each other. At first Brian was nervous merely because of the fact he was sitting next to them. He surreptitiously looked around him but it didn’t seem like anyone was paying any attention to Jesse, who to most would appear to be whispering to himself. The drunk at the end of the bar was focused completely on his drink. The bartender was restocking the bar with clean glasses, paying no attention whatsoever to the teen. People walking by didn’t even spare the boy a glance. Brian started to relax a little. Maybe Jesse was right and people here really didn’t care about his little peculiarity of talking to someone who wasn’t there. Not that Brian thought for even a moment that the immunity would extend to him if he were to try the same, but at least he didn’t have to worry about merely sitting next to the kid.

“...Seriously, Bro, you need to trust me,” Jesse hissed, finally speaking loudly enough that Brian could hear and understand his words.

“I don’t know, Jess,” Justin replied, looking past his nephew towards Brian with a concerned look.

“You two girls need to stop fighting over me,” Brian teased, trying not to look like he was fishing for information about what the pair was talking about, even though he was.

“Yeah, not gonna happen, Dude. Told you I have no designs on your flat ass,” Jesse snarked. “Besides, we weren’t fighting over you. Justin was trying to protect you from little old me telling you off.”

“I think I can take him, Sunshine. I don’t need you to defend my honor,” Brian bit back with a frown, even more curious now about whatever it was the kids were arguing about.

Justin was looking worriedly back and forth from one to the other, his mouth pursed up with concern and his cyanous eyes radiating with worry.

“You heard him. He’s a big boy. He can take it,” Jesse prompted with an elbow to Justin’s side to get him to move. “Go on, Jus. I promise not to hurt his fragile ego... too much.”
Brian just shook his head at the meddling teens. He had no idea what was up but still took offense at this snot-nosed kid talking about his ‘fragile ego’. What the fuck? Wasn’t it bad enough he had to put up with one blond boy stalker? Did he really need an additional pain in his ass?

“Jesse, I think you should stay out of it . . .” Justin hedged.

“Shit, Justin. I’m only going to talk to him. I don’t bite.”

Brian didn’t say anything, although he was more than interested now. Exactly what the hell were these two arguing about and how did it relate to him? He wasn’t going to do anything about his curiosity, though. He didn’t want to seem like he cared. But, when Justin finally got up off his barstool and started to hesitantly edge away, he didn’t stop him.

“Be nice, Jess,” Justin said, his tone heavy with apprehension as he looked at Brian. However, when his charge didn’t say or do anything to deter him from leaving, he relented. “I guess I’ll just go haunt my Dad for a bit. He hates it when he can’t find stuff that I’ve moved while he wasn’t looking. It’s pretty amusing, actually. Don’t let him bully you while I’m gone, though.”

“I won’t fucking bully the kid,” Brian responded, a little offended.

“I wasn’t talking about you, Brian. I was talking about Jesse. He can be kind of a bitch sometimes, but if he gets to be too much, just call me,” Justin warned, depositing a kiss to Brian’s cheek before walking away.

“Alone at last?” Brian winked at the kid that remained once Justin was gone.

Jesse raised his soda in a mock toast to Brian before he started in on the topic he’d apparently wanted to pursue. “So, why are you determined to be such an ass?”

“Huh?”

“You’re being an ass. Giving Justin shit all the time and never listening to him when all he’s trying to do is help you. It’s starting to get on my nerves, you know?” Jesse slammed him with both barrels right off the mark.
“What the hell business is it of yours?” Brian hit back.

“None. Except that every time you do something stupid and dangerous, I get the dubious pleasure of listening to Justin moan about it for hours.

“So don’t listen,” Brian offered with a warning glare.

“How about, instead, you don’t be an ass?” Jesse rejoined without batting an eyelash. When Brian refused to respond, the boy simply carried on unabated. “I just don’t get it, you know? Look at you? You’re not hard on the eyes. You’ve got a good job and are making bucks. You seem reasonably intelligent. So why the hell are you determined to fuck it all up?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“You and your ‘live dangerously and die young’ schtick,” Jesse responded immediately. Brian tried to look uninterested, but must have failed because the boy simply plowed on. “So I get that you didn’t have the best childhood. Boo hoo. But how exactly is your plan to drink, drug and fuck yourself into an early grave going to make that any better? Can’t you see that you’re just making your own life even more miserable? And you’re turning Justin into even more of a nervous wreck than he already was.”

Brian refused to even look at the kid at this point.

“All I’m saying is to give Justin a chance, man. He fucking loves you so much - it’s annoying as all hell. Of course, that’s the reason why he won’t just tell you to grow the fuck up already and get real. But I don’t have that problem, so I’m going to say it for him.” Jesse turned on his stool so he was facing Brian straight on. “Stop acting like a total idiot. Stop doing dangerous shit like drinking too much, taking drugs from just anyone and, even worse, driving when you’re fucked up. And, while we’re at it, why don’t you listen to Justin about the damned baby thing? It’ll be good for you to have that kind of tie to something real in your life. It’ll make you less lonely. And it may even make you seem like less of a fuckwad. I mean, come on, it’s a no-brainer. Just get off your ass, help your friend get the baby she wants, and stop giving Justin shit about the idea already.”

Brian continued to stare into the dregs of his glass as he was bombarded by these pronouncements. He figured he should be angry at the kid for sticking his little turned up nose into Brian’s business. But, for some reason, he wasn’t. He respected the fact that the kid had the gonads to take him on in the first place. He also couldn’t really argue with the kid’s reasoning - even Brian knew his behavior was sometimes borderline self-destructive. He didn’t have any real excuse for his actions either. It was just . . . if this was all he had to look forward to, what was the actual point? And because he couldn’t see the point himself, he tended to act out. He knew it wasn’t smart or mature, but oftentimes he just didn’t feel like acting like a reasonable adult. In that case, though, how could
he get pissed off at the kid for stating exactly what Brian himself knew to be the truth?

When Brian still hadn’t said word one after several minutes of heavy silence, Jesse chugged the rest of his soda and got up off the barstool. He clapped a hand on Brian’s shoulder in an almost paternal manner and then leaned in to whisper in the older man’s ear.

“Let Justin in. Let him love you. He fucking deserves it . . . and so do you,” the kid said, giving Brian’s shoulder a final squeeze, before walking off towards the tables where the rest of his family were sitting.

Brian continued to sit and commune with his drink for a long while after that. He wasn’t really actively thinking about anything during all that time. His mind felt almost blank. Meanwhile, however, Jesse’s words were slowly sinking into his psyche and being gradually absorbed. And he still hadn’t really come up with any valid arguments against their innate wisdom.

“Okay, everyone. It’s time for our Bride to throw the bouquet and our Groom to throw the garter,” Brian’s quiet musing was interrupted by the loud voice of some random relative making announcements. “Can I get all the eligible single folks up here, please?”

Brian would never join in with the herd of people trotting over to the designated area in order to participate in the traditional game, but he was amused enough by the sight to at least watch the bevy of bride-wannabes angling to get the best spots. Winnie was beaming happily from where she was standing, perched atop a chair, waiting till everyone was ready for her to toss the bundle of flowers she was holding. Brian was happy for her even though he didn’t really understand her need for something as restrictive as ‘marriage’. Jon was standing next to her, looking just as happy and almost as radiant. And, for half a minute, Brian admitted to himself the deep-seated, never to be admitted aloud, wish that he too might one day share some facsimile of the love and joy his two friends were displaying.

It was during that moment of weakness that Brian’s vision fell on Lindsey - who was there in the capacity of Bridesmaid - lining up with the other women and waiting for her chance to grab the bouquet along with the promise that she might be the next to wed. The tall, stately looking blonde was smiling at her own partner with such evident adoration Brian could almost feel it. The couple were laughing together and acting like what he imagined real couples would, regardless of whether they were straight or gay.

Looking around the rest of the hall, everywhere Brian's eyes roam he saw smiling families and happy couples. Even the unattached guests seemed to be enjoying themselves and joining in with the fun. While Brian sat all alone with only a glass of Beam and a drunken stranger for company.
“Shit!” He cursed himself and his empty life.

Brian downed the rest of his drink, slammed the glass down on the wooden bar top and got unsteadily to his feet. Gathering his resolve together, he began to force his way through the throng of wedding guests, trying to get to where Lindsey was standing on the far side of the fray. He’d almost made it to his target after shouldering his way past a buxom forty-something who gave him a very dirty look, when a blur of something red and gold and speeding his way entered his peripheral vision. Brian instinctively held his hand up in order to shield his face, grabbing hold of the flying object right before it made impact.

Which is how Brian Kinney ended up catching the bridal bouquet at a straight wedding.

Brian, who was as surprised as everyone else by his accomplishment, blinked back at the crowd now hooting and cheering at him. Not to be deterred, though, the unapologetic cad waved his catch in the air and then gave the assembly a mock curtsey. Then, without bothering to respond to any of the teasing comments being offered up, he proceeded the last few steps over to Lindsey and Mel, handed the bouquet over to Lindz, and with a show of machismo, grabbed the surprised woman, wrapped his arms around her, tilted her bodily backwards till she was dipped almost all the way to the floor and kissed her soundly and the lips. The crowd - minus an irate Melanie - roared with approval, clapping and cheering them on. Lindsey was blushing a deep crimson red by the time Brian let her up for air.

“What the fuck do you think you're doing, Kinney,” Mel hissed at him when the hubbub finally died down and the majority of the crowd moved off.

“I'll do it,” Brian answered her, only to be met with even more confusion. “I'll do the baby thing for you guys,” he clarified. “That is, if you still want my donation?”

“Are you serious?” Lindsey questioned, the glow of hope suffusing her face and turning it from blushing red to pale radiance in seconds.

“As a heart attack.”

“Oh, Brian! This is so, so wonderful! You don't know how happy you've made me. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you!” Lindsey burbled, bouncing up and down, clapping, and trying to kiss and hug both Brian and Mel at the same time.
“No biggie. Just let me know when you’re ready,” Brian replied, already stepping away while trying to peel Lindsey’s arms off him so he could escape.

“Oh, no, no, no. You’re not going anywhere Mr. Kinney. I’m not letting you out of my sight,” Lindsey warned, and grabbed hold of Brian’s wrist with a steely grip. “No. I don’t trust that you won’t change your mind. Luckily, it just happens to be the right time of the month, so we’re doing this right now. Tonight,” she demanded, looking very determined.

“Tonight?” Both Mel and Brian asked, looking equally shocked.

“Yes. Tonight!” Lindsey insisted. “Mel, I’m sure there’s an all night pharmacy around here somewhere. You need to go get whatever supplies we need as fast as you can. Brian and I will get a room upstairs and then I’ll call you with the room number.” When they both continued to just stand there, gape-jawed, staring at her, Lindsey stamped her foot and gave Melanie a little shove. “Go! Hurry!” Then, turning towards Brian, she added, “I’m going to go get my purse and say goodnight to Winnie. YOU will meet me at the hotel reception desk in five minutes or I’ll hunt you down and take what I need by force, if necessary. Do you understand me, Brian?”

Brian held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. He did NOT want to take on the baby-crazy blonde. Not with the mood she was in at that moment. Instead, he started to gradually back away in the direction of the door, trying not to do anything that would cause her to attack. With a nod of approval, Lindsey turned away, certain that her minions would be doing her bidding . . . or else.

“Brian? What’s going on?” Justin appeared at his elbow before he’d even made it to the door. “Are you okay? I saw you catch the bouquet and then kiss Lindsey. Are you sure you’re feeling alright? You don’t look THAT drunk . . .”

“I’m fine, Sunshine,” Brian replied, chuckling at himself and the spectacle he must have made. Oh well. He’d always said he didn’t give a fuck what people thought of him, right? Well, now was as good a time as any to put that motto to the test. “But I’m going to need your help. Come on,” he ordered and then reached for the spirit companion’s hand, completely disregarding whomever might be watching him hold hands with nothing but air.

Fifteen minutes later the two of them were standing in one room of the suite that Brian had reserved for the night. He’d left the other key and a note for Lindsey at the desk before dragging Justin upstairs with him. They’d made out the entirety of the elevator ride upstairs and then continued on in the same vein as soon as they’d made it through the door. Brian currently had his boy pinned to the wall and was busy nibbling and sucking on the youth’s lips like a starving man.
“Mmmmm . . . Not that I . . . mind, Brian . . . but you still . . . haven’t . . . told me . . . what's going . . . on,” Justin managed to say in between the times his tongue was occupied.

“Your Blond Wonder Twin used his powers and talked me into it,” Brian explained, sort of.

“Into what?” Justin moaned just as Brian unzipped the fly on his dress slacks and shoved the boy’s hand down the front of his briefs.

“Into helping Lindz make a fucking baby, that's what,” Brian announced, shocking the hell out of Justin and causing him to freeze mid-grope. Brian laughed aloud at the boy’s stunned expression before leaning in to kiss him back to alertness. “You ARE going to lend me a hand, right, Sunshine?” he asked as he tried to get Justin's hand moving again. “My dick isn't going to stroke itself, you know.”

“You're really going to do this? Now? Tonight?”

“Yes, we're really going to do it. Even though I'm probably insane to have agreed to this level of stupidity. Lindsey and Mel should be setting up in the other room even as we speak. Please don't remind me about that part, though, or I'll never be able to keep it up.” Brian smiled down at the burgeoning look of approval Justin was now beaming at him. “But I'm only doing this if you agree to help. I mean, after all, it was your idea, so you should have the honors, right?”

“I'm more than happy to give you a hand, Brian!” Justin demonstrated by sliding his grip up and down the solid hunk of man meat he was holding, to the vocal approval of the man in front of him. “I'm so happy you changed your mind. I know this is going to be a good thing. I can feel it. This is going to make you so happy,” Justin continued.

“I don't know whether it'll be a good idea in the long run or not, but it's certainly making me happy right now,” Brian purred, already lost in the pleasurable sensations.

“Wait,” Justin stopped abruptly and pulled his hand out of Brian's pants, eliciting a dismayed groan from his subject. “We need a cup or something to collect the sample.” He trotted off to the bathroom coming back with a plastic cup wrapped in cellophane. “And you might as well get comfortable on the bed.”

Justin started organizing things to his liking, starting by removing Brian's clothing and then pushing him down onto the large king-sized bed. Brian didn't bother to resist. He knew better than
to fight the blond when he got like this. As soon as Justin had the room and Brian arranged to his liking, he crawled up next to his patient and, with a hungry kiss, reapplied himself with happy abandon to the task at hand.

It didn't take long for Brian to get back to his prior level of arousal, what with the enthusiastic blond boy kissing him, stroking his dick and humping lustily against his hip. Justin's efforts were so skillful and his hands so soft that they didn't even need any lube beyond the pre-come already bubbling up out of the slit at the tip of Brian's steel-hard cock. And, as if he needed any more encouragement, Brian reached down to squeeze his companion’s bounteous bubble butt, finding, to his delight, that the sprite’s clothing had completely disappeared. With his left hand cupping a sumptuous blond boy ass cheek and his right hand carding through the thick shocks of wheaten gold hair, his lips engaged in kissing the perfect coral pink mouth, and his cock receiving Justin’s adroit attentions, Brian found himself in a tactile paradise overflowing with pleasure.

“Fuck, yes, Sunshine,” he groaned his approval, too busy to be ashamed at how fast he was losing control. “Yes. Oh, yes . . . I-I-I can't . . . Just . . . Shit, Justin . . . Oh, fuck, yeah!”

With one final tug from Justin, Brian arched his back and let himself shoot. His assistant was ready, though, plastic cup in hand as he pointed Brian's dick in the proper direction. There was a muted rattling as stream after stream shot into the receptacle. It felt a bit strange to Brian to end such a great hand job in such a coldly clinical way, but that had kinda been the point, right? Before he could get too freaked out by it though, Justin had set aside the cup and was again stretched out along Brian's side, dropping light little kisses along the older man’s shoulder and rubbing relaxing circles on his stomach. It felt nice. So he let himself completely relax and forget about everything except the tingling aftershocks of pleasure.

“Shit, Brian,” Justin exclaimed as he continued to pet his sated man. “You are so fucking beautiful like this. Lying there, completely relaxed, your eyes half closed, the rumpled sheets framing your long, lean body, your beautiful dick resting against your stomach as the last drops of come drip out. You look so wonderfully sated and debauched . . . I used to be an artist, you know. Back before . . . Damn, I wish I could draw you like this, Brian . . . Oh, well. I guess I'll just have to memorize this moment and draw it later.”

*Knock, knock knock*

The intrusive noise coming from the door to the adjoining room killed the tiny intimacy of the moment.

“Brian? I hope I'm not . . . interrupting, but Mel and I are all set up in here, so whenever you're ready . . .” Lindsey's voice came faintly through the door.
Wearing nothing but a smirk, Brian leapt to his feet, grabbed the cup full of jizz from the nightstand and jogged over to open the dividing door. Lindsey was too amazed by the eyeful she got when the door popped open to realize, at first, what Brian was holding out for her. Brian had to shake the offering in her face before she moved her focus off his body and onto the cup.

“You're done? Already? Damn, that was fast.”

“Fresh squeezed, just like the doctor ordered,” Brian teased, noting Mel scowling from her place a couple of steps behind Lindsey. “It's probably still warm, even”

“Gross.” Mel made a face as she reached around her partner to grab the cup out of Brian's hand.

“Oh, Mel,” Lindz gently chided her girlfriend. “Thank you again, Brian.”

“It was nothing. Really. Now, go do all the icky lesbian stuff you guys need to do to make it work. Because when I sober up, I'll probably remember what a stupid idea this was and refuse to repeat the effort. So you better make sure it works the first time,” Brian warned, although all of them could tell he was only joking.

“Okay. Wish us luck.” Lindsey smiled and started to close the door.

“Break an ovary - or whatever else you're supposed to say at a moment like this,” Brian replied jovially right before the door clicked shut.

Then, with a maniacal grin and a gigantic leap, Brian launched himself back onto the bed, landing close enough to the waiting blond boy to immediate envelope him in his long arms.

“Now, where were we?” he asked as he rolled on top of his still-naked, still-hard, companion.
4/7/17 - Next up, sex, sex, sex, sex, sex . . . finally, right? TAG
Chapter 28 - Conjunction.

“Now, where were we?” Brian asked as he rolled on top of his still-naked, still-hard, companion. “Oh, yeah. Right about here, I think.”

Brian marked his place with a long, slow, tongue-filled kiss on Justin’s already bee-stung lips. Which was just fine with Justin. He liked the kind of tactile punctuation Brian relied upon. He even gave Brian back some grammar lessons of his own by adding in a descriptive moan here and there. Both of them ended up enjoying the conversation tremendously.

Between the stimulating discussion and the adrenaline still coursing through Brian after the emotional high of his decision to assist the Munchers with their baby plan, the studly brunet was feeling almost giddy. The fact that he was still slightly tipsy didn't help matters much either. The combination was heady. He hadn't felt this reckless and carefree for as long as he could remember. He might be certifiably insane, but for that moment he just didn't care. For once in his life he felt like anything was possible.

Maybe even . . . Brian Kinney letting himself be loved.

The make out session was rapidly devolving into mere panting and rutting when Brian finally paused and looked down at the young man trapped beneath him. Justin smiled up at him with that huge, incandescent smile that seemed to brighten the entire room around them. Brian felt something in the vicinity of his chest give a little breathless flip flop, and for once he decided to just turn his automatic internal defense mechanisms off. What the hell, right? He would just let himself have what he really wanted and trust that, for the first time in his life, things would work out.

With only a tiny wiggle, Brian freed his hot, hard and heavy cock from where it had been trapped between their bodies, allowing it to drop down into the unguarded space below. With every breath,
Brian could feel his dick nudging against the tight folds of his companion’s tempting pucker. Each time their skin connected, a tiny jolt of electricity would zap through him. All he would have to do is press forward a few centimeters and it would be done. And he wanted this so badly.

“If you want me to stop, you better speak up now, Sunshine,” he whispered. “If I go any further, I don’t think I’d be able to stop even if I wanted to.”

“I don’t want you to stop,” Justin insisted, sounding just a breathless as Brian. “I want this, Brian. I’ve always wanted this. Wanted you.”

Brian could not only see but hear the sincerity of that statement. He knew what he was about to do was lunacy. He knew he shouldn’t. It would complicate something that was already problematic enough. But he wanted it too much to care. So, fine. He was going to do this. He was just, fucking, going to do it and nothing, not even the certainty that he was going crazy, was going to hold him back.

Brian nodded but then started to pull away. “Don’t go, Brian,” Justin pleaded, trying to hold him back.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he corrected Justin’s apparent misconception. “I’m just getting this,” he held up the small packet of lube and the condom he’d fished out of his pants pocket before plopping back down on the bed with a smile.

Justin blushed a deep crimson. Brian thought briefly how adorable the kid was. Then he reminded himself that this ‘kid’ was technically almost twenty years older than himself regardless of his youthful appearance. But it was interesting to note that ghosts could blush. It was also interesting that Justin had reacted in that manner. The shy, blushing smile told him volumes about Justin’s past sexual experience or lack thereof. It seemed the ‘kid’ might still be a bit inexperienced despite his longevity. Brian would have to take that into account, not that it really changed anything or would slow Brian down.

With his treasures in hand, Brian knelt between Justin’s thighs and started to tear open the condom wrapper. He was stopped almost immediately by Justin’s hand closing over his own. Thinking that maybe he’d changed his mind, Brian looked up with chagrin.

“You don’t need that, Brian,” was all Justin said.
“No glove, no love, Sunshine,” Brian reiterated his longstanding rule and tried to shake off the restraining hand.

“Brian, you don’t need it,” the youth insisted. “Even if I didn’t know you’d been tested just three days ago and come back clean, I could tell if you were sick. I’d see it. I always know when you’re not feeling well. I can assure you, you’re fine.” When Brian still looked as if he was going to object, Justin hurried on. “Besides, even if you were sick, you can’t infect me. I can’t get sick. And I can’t get you sick either. Incorporeal, remember?”

Brian really didn’t want to be reminded of that particular fact but once he did think about it he realized that Justin was right. I mean, if you’re going to fuck your imaginary friend, you really don’t need to worry about condoms, right? That was the one benefit of the imaginary part. Shit, he really must be insane that he was even contemplating this, but since he was, he might as well take advantage of the crazy. Since he’d already decided he WAS going to do this, he’d just have to ignore all the crazy incongruities and take it for what it was worth.

“Good point, Sunshine,” he relented, tossing the unopened condom over his shoulder.

He held up the lube before opening it, wondering if that was superfluous too, but Justin nodded approval of the idea, so he tore open the packet and slathered some of the slippery substance down his straining shaft. His erection had flagged a bit during the condom discussion, but once he was slicked up and took the time to look down at the luscious blond waiting for him, he was raring to go again. Brian pushed the young man’s thighs even wider, shifted forward till he was back in the vee of his crotch and then took a deep breath. Justin continued to look up at him with adoring expectation. Brian realized it was too late to turn back, even if he’d wanted to, which he didn’t. Not at all. So, holding Justin’s gaze with his own, Brian canted his hips backward, bringing his naked cock into position at the untried opening, and determinedly pressed forward.

It was heaven.

That was the only way to describe what Brian felt. Justin was tight and wet and the way he slid into the silky depths was just pure, unadulterated, instantaneous heaven. It was like Justin simply opened up for him. Like they were made for each other. Like they just simply fit. And Brian didn’t even try to hold back the groan of pleasure which percolated up from his soul as his eyes rolled back in his head.

When Brian had bottomed out and couldn’t get any deeper, he opened his eyes once more, only to find an equally blissed out Justin staring back up at him. Brian didn’t see a trace of pain or discomfort despite his suspicions that this was a first for his Sunshine. Instead, the crystal blue eyes were hooded but happy. And the smile he saw was so wide it almost cracked the blond’s face in two. The sense of love and trust emanating from every pore of the young body was palpable.
They really did seem perfect for each other.

“Ready for more?” Brian asked, relieving a joyful nod.

Without ever losing any of the awe he felt right from the start, Brian proceeded to fuck the living daylights out of the eager and responsive sprite. Every single thrust was utter bliss. Every time he pulled out, he felt the same thrill of anticipation. Every tingle caused by their skin touching, the friction of his dick sliding in and out of the tightest hole he’d ever experienced, each jolt of pleasure caused by a kiss, a moan, a grunt, caused Brian’s heart to soar. He loved the way Justin rocked along with him, meeting his thrusts with reciprocal parries every single time. He loved the way Justin’s hands seemed to hungrily roam over his back, his nails digging into Brian’s skin on occasion or his fingers tugging on a handful of Brian’s hair whenever he’d get a little out of control. He was aroused by the way Justin had wrapped his strong, stout legs around Brian’s waist, digging his heels into Brian’s ass whenever he wanted to signal for more. It was perfect. Every infinitesimal moment of their joining was sheer, never-heard-of, unparalleled perfection.

Brian didn’t even want to come. If there was some way of staying right in that moment, on the edge of ecstasy, forever, he would have done it. But sooner than he would have liked, he felt the tell-tale roiling in his gut, the fire building up in his balls, and the inescapable urge to increase his pace. Based on the writhing body tangled around his own and the rising volume of Justin’s mewling, Brian determined that his boy must be just as close.

Since there was no fighting it, Brian followed his instincts and let himself go. With one more powerful thrust aimed directly at the target of his lover’s prostate, Brian sank into the welcoming body as hard and deep as he could go. The slap of his balls against Justin’s ass met his ears only a fraction of a second before the sound of Justin’s ‘Oh, Brian!’ And then they were both transported to that nirvana that only a long, draw out orgasm can lead to.

“Fuck, Sunshine. Fuck, fuck, fuck . . .” Brian’s cries mingled with his partner’s as the electrical storm in his gut set both of them ablaze causing a dual explosion.

Brian felt his essence shooting out, deep inside his lover’s body, the warm wetness, uncontained by any latex sheath, drenching his cock. It felt so amazing. And then that heat that had coursed through every nerve in his body was instantly calmed by the wash of cool endorphins, flooding throughout his system and leaving him in a puddle of contentment. When the last spasm of pleasure had finally died away, he collapsed atop the languid body beneath him, his face comfortably nestled in the crook of Justin’s neck and the youth’s arms wrapped securely around him.

“Thank you, Brian,” the hushed words filtered through the languor of his post-coital bliss, adding to the contented peacefulness of the moment. “That was . . . everything . . .”
Brian didn’t say anything himself but, secretly, he agreed.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

The rest of that weekend disappeared in a hazy, sex-filled romp. It seemed like Justin was even more insatiable than Brian himself. After fucking the entire night away at the hotel, they rushed back to Brian’s loft and continued their pursuits there. They only stopped for the occasional nap and food break when Justin insisted that he would disappear on Brian if the man didn’t eat something and rest at least a little bit. But, whenever Brian was awake and not eating, they were fucking.

It wasn’t until deep in the night early on Monday morning that Brian paused long enough to actually think about what he was doing. He’d been lying with his head resting on Justin's chest after yet another round of explosive sex. His semi-hard dick was still happily buried in his lover’s ass although he could feel the cum dripping out and trickling over his balls as he softened. But thinking about the liters of cum that must be coating them by that point made him suddenly aware of the fact that the pool of Justin's cum which had been puddling between their torsos wasn’t there anymore.

Brian pushed himself up on his elbows and looked between them just to be certain. Nope. Not a drop of cum remained. Which was really strange, right? But, then again, if the kid’s clothing could appear and disappear at will, why was Brian surprised that Justin’s cum was subject to the same freaky rules of non-physics?

The disappearing cum really bothered him though. It accentuated and brought to the forefront of his consciousness the dilemma he'd been trying really hard to ignore for the past two nights. He couldn’t ignore it anymore though. Because the vanishing cum proved to him once more that the person he’d been fucking - joyfully, repeatedly and with unequalled pleasure - wasn't exactly human. At least not anymore. In fact, he wasn't even really there at all - at least not if you asked anyone other than Brian. So, basically, Brian had been fucking . . . his imagination . . . for the past, fuck-knew-how-many hours.

How could that be? It felt so real. The body lying under him felt solid. The ass he'd repeatedly stuck his dick in felt just like any other ass, only better. But none of that could possibly be real because Justin wasn’t real. So what did that make him? Crazy, obviously. But now he wasn't just seeing someone who wasn't there, he was fucking him? That was a whole other level of crazy. What did you call someone that crazy?

The scary word ‘schizophrenic’ popped into his mind.
Brian was now panting and his heart was racing wildly. He couldn't get enough air. He was well into the initial stages of a full blown panic attack.

“Stop, Brian,” the calm, quiet, tenor voice interrupted his hysteria and instantly grounded him. “Stop overthinking things. There's nothing wrong with you, Brian. There's nothing wrong with us. You're not crazy.”

“How did you know . . .”

“I know you, Brian. I've known you all your life. I can read you pretty fucking well by now,” Justin confessed with a snort of laughter. “And you were just about to go into total meltdown mode. But you're wrong, Brian. You're NOT crazy. THIS is real. Weird, but real. So don't start pulling away. Don't deny yourself - don't deny me. Please.”

Brian stared into the brilliant blue eyes. They were always so fucking expressive. He'd been staring into those beautiful blue eyes his entire life and he thought he could read them almost as well as Justin claimed to be able to read him. Justin’s eyes never hid anything from him. And right now they shone with the purest devotion and caring concern. Those eyes told Brian that he was safe, he was free to be whatever he needed to be, and he was loved. And they were also begging him not to retreat behind his usual defenses and shut out the boy that so obviously loved him.

Closing down WAS really tempting. Every time Brian had opened himself up and let someone in, he'd been hurt. It made perfect sense to protect himself this time too. But for some inexplicable reason, he just couldn't do it. Maybe it was those pleading eyes. Maybe it was because he was so exhausted. Maybe he'd fucked Justin so many times his brains were scrambled. Whatever it was, though, Brian decided that he'd give this thing - whatever the fuck it was and whatever the fuck Justin himself was - a try.

“Fine. Whatever,” Brian sighed and let his head drop back down into its favorite spot on Justin's solid-feeling chest. “But remind me tomorrow morning to check with HR and find out what mental health counseling services are included with my employee insurance benefits. Cause if this thing goes completely to hell and I end up not only fucking my imaginary childhood friend but also hearing his voice telling me to kill and eat my neighbors, I wanna know I'm covered.”

Justin chuckled and tilted his head forward so he could kiss the crown of Brian's head. “That'll never happen stud. You're too OCD to deal with all the blood and gore. Besides, you'd be too busy researching how many additional calories cannibalism would add to your diet and then spending hours on your treadmill to work it all off.”

“Sleep, Brian,” Justin directed, sifting his fingers through the baby-fine brunet hair as the Stud snuggled down further on top of his comfy blond mattress. “I’ll be here when you wake up. And I promise everything will be alright . . . Somehow.”

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Brian’s blissed out idyll lasted almost three weeks. He made a conscious decision NOT to think about what was happening between himself and Justin while still revelling in the experience every chance he got. Brian found himself rushing home from work every day, eager to dive into the boy’s ass as soon as he could get his clothing off. He simply could not get enough. And Justin was always there, ready for him, enthusiastic and just as horny. They’d fucked on every available surface in the loft in every imaginable position but Brian still hadn't tired of either the boy or the sex. Justin was better than viagra as far as he was concerned.

In fact, everything was going so great, and they’d fucked so much, that Brian only had one complaint . . . His dick was actually kinda sore.

Of course, as sexually related problems go, that was the kind of problem you wanted to have. Well, sorta. This had rarely been a problem for Brian in the past. No matter how many men he’d fucked during the course of his long, promiscuous sex life, he had only experienced this particular issue on one or two occasions - but those had all been caused by extended play at rather energetic and well attended orgies, and he couldn’t blame his current predicament on that. Hell, except for going to work each day, Brian hadn’t even left the damned loft since his fuck-a-thon with Justin had started.

Now, though, the unthinkable had happened - Justin had officially worn him out

However, when he came through the loft door that evening and was met by a hail of kisses from the ever-lusty ghost boy, Brian didn’t have the heart to tell him ‘no’. Even though the flesh was weak, the spirit was still willing. And Brian’s dick might not be functional at the moment but there were other ways to have fun, right? Not to mention, other urges that might be satisfied in the process.

Without comment, Brian led the ardent apparition up to the bedroom. He pushed the youth down onto the bed and laughed as Justin’s clothing instantly vanished - amused rather than alarmed at this point by his companion’s trick. Brian took his time removing his own clothing, hanging up the
suit and depositing his shirt in the dry cleaning bag. He didn’t want to be rushed this evening no matter how impatient his spirited companion might be.

Just as Brian had expected, as soon as he’d lain down on the bed, Justin was all over him. Brian let his lover take over for the moment, enjoying the fierce kisses and wandering hands. You really couldn’t fault the kid for his voracious sexual appetite. And to have all of it focused solely on him, was incredibly flattering. Who cared if the entire situation was crazy - Brian had never in his life had such a satisfying and attentive sex partner.

Which was the only reason he was even contemplating what he was about to do.

When things had heated up to the level where it was time to move on, Brian reached over, grabbed the tube of lube off the nightstand, and then took a deep breath. This wasn’t easy. He still wasn’t sure he could follow through, even though he’d been thinking about it all day. But if he could give this to anyone, it would be Justin - Justin was the ONLY person he could even think about trusting that much.

Justin sensed the hesitation and stopped his kissing in order to look more closely at Brian. They froze in the moment for half a dozen heartbeats, just staring in each other’s eyes again. It seemed to be the way they communicated best. Whatever Brian saw seemed to be enough. He nodded to himself, gave Justin an unsure half smile, handed the lube over and then started to shift onto his stomach.

It took Justin a half a second to realize what Brian was doing. When he finally did see the import, he tried to stop Brian, grabbing onto the big man’s shoulder.

“Are you sure, Brian? You haven’t . . . Not since Lars . . .”

Brian didn’t say a word. He merely gave Justin another shy semi-smile and then carried on, settling himself comfortably on his stomach with a pillow shoved down under his hips for support and another bunched up under his chin so he could at least partially hide his expression. Justin bit at his bottom lip, unsure now if he could do what was being asked of him. This was huge for Brian. Justin wanted to give Brian what he was asking for but didn’t want to hurt him in the process, and he wasn’t confident he was up to the job. However, he knew that Brian wouldn’t ever offer this to anyone else, so if this was something Brian needed, it was going to be up to Justin to provide it, regardless of whether he was prepared or not.

Gathering his courage, Justin snapped open the cap on the lube and almost flinched at the audible *snick* it made. Brian continued to just lie there, not looking up or responding in any fashion. But
the tension radiating off Brian’s back was a pretty sure sign that he was at least as nervous about this idea as Justin was.

Justin squeezed out a generous amount of lube into the palm of his right hand. Before he could chicken out, he snaked his hand down between the taut cheeks and started to gently prepare Brian’s entrance. Justin would have preferred to take his time a little, add a bit more foreplay, but he knew Brian’s temperament wouldn’t allow for it. Once the Stud had decided on something, it was best to just get on with it or risk pissing him off altogether. So that’s what Justin was going to do now.

One finger, two fingers, three, and then there was nothing more Justin could do. Brian was as ready as he was going to get and Justin would have to be ready too. Not that he wasn’t ready - his dick had never been so hard, not even back when he was still a solid teenage boy - but this WAS his first time topping. And now it was show time.

Placing a kiss on Brian’s shoulder blade, the teenage spirit moved around till he was kneeling as close to Brian’s raised posterior as possible. Brian didn’t budge at all. With one hand Justin held his dick in place and with the other he steadied Brian’s hips.

“I love you, Brian,” he whispered and then pressed forward using a steady but gentle motion.

A sharp hiss as Brian raised his head momentarily for a gulp of air was the only sound in the silent loft. The man’s muscles tensed even more than before and Justin immediately froze. He wished he could see Brian’s eyes and know he was really okay. That he wasn’t just doing this out of a misplaced sense of bravado. That he really wanted this.

“Breathe. Just breathe. You’re okay, Brian. I won’t do anything you don’t want me to do.” Justin tried to reassure the tense man with his words but also added a few more kisses to Brian’s back for good measure.

After a moment or two, Justin felt Brian’s hips lift up a fraction of an inch, pushing back against him ever so slightly. He took that as an indication his lover wanted him to proceed. Damn, this would be so much easier if Brian would talk to him. But, since that was unlikely, Justin would have to just press on as best he could and hope he was able to read Brian’s body language as well as he’d always bragged he could.

Advancing at a slow but steady pace, it took only a minute for Justin to sink all the way in till his balls were snugged up against Brian’s ass. He couldn’t believe how amazing it felt. Brian was so fucking tight. And the way the silky walls caressed his dick was indescribable. If he could die again, this is where he’d want to be when he went.
“Move.”

The brusque order startled Justin out of his reverie. He obeyed, pulling out until only the crown of his cock was still inside and then pushing back again. Brian was still lying there rigidly, which wasn’t a good sign. Justin tried it again. Still no appreciable response. Damn it. He wanted to make this good for Brian, but if the man refused to relax, it wouldn’t work at all.

Inching up his knees a bit higher, Justin tried a different angle with his next thrust. Bullseye! That time he’d got an almost inaudible gasping moan and Brian’s head arched up off the pillows. Better. Much better.

Doing his best to hit Brian’s sweet spot on every subsequent thrust, Justin increased his pace, all the time making sure he was touching, stroking, caressing Brian’s back, arms, thighs or hips. And it definitely seemed to be working. Brian didn’t really relax all the way, but at least his ass cheeks weren’t clenched together so tightly anymore. And the unending stream of happy noises that couldn’t be entirely muffled by the pillows told the neophyte boy he wasn’t doing too badly. When Brian started moving in counterpoint to Justin's thrusting, he knew he’d finally got it right.

“Feel you . . . Inside me . . . Want you . . . So good. Fuck. Oh . . . Oh . . . Oh!” The words Brian had been holding back finally broke through.

After that, Brian’s mumblings got louder and more disjointed until, with one last ‘Oh!’ he arched up, his ass convulsing so tightly around Justin’s prick it triggered the new top’s own tumultuous release, and then they both collapsed in a heap.

When Justin could move again - what felt like hours later - he carefully rolled them over without pulling out. He wanted to stay connected as long as physically possible. Brian let himself be pulled backwards, and didn’t fight the encircling arms pulling him into a tight embrace.

“Thank you, Brian. That was incredible. I can’t even begin to tell you how much it means to me . . .”

“Are you going to babble like this every time I let you top, Sunshine?” Brian interrupted.

“Maybe . . . Probably,” Justin answered with an amused tone.
“Just because my dick was sore and I let you take a turn in the driver’s seat doesn’t mean I won’t spank you if you keep acting like a twat, you know,” Brian warned, but his threat was belied by the fact that he simultaneously pulled Justin’s arms even closer.

“Promise?”

“Shut up, Brat.”

“You’re no fun, Brian.”

“I’m lots of fun. Now shut up or you’ll never get to see exactly how fun I am ever again.”

And there wasn’t another word out of Justin the rest of the evening.

Well, not until the next round started, at least.

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The next day was Christmas Eve and everyone, Brian included, had been ordered to Debbie’s house for the traditional feast and festivities. It would actually be the first time Brian had seen the rest of the gang since before Winnie & Jon’s wedding. Even so, Brian seemed reluctant to leave the loft in order to go to the celebration.

Justin had a bad feeling about this get together. He’d been rather glad that Brian had been too preoccupied for the past couple of weeks to spend time with Michael and the others. The spirit guide had long been trying to wean Brian away from his old friend and the now-suffocating relationship that they’d become embroiled in. The rampant co-dependency between Brian and the Novotny’s wasn’t good for any of them, if you asked Justin. And Brian really had seemed happier these past couple of weeks without the constant negative reinforcement from his friends. Now that he was being forced back into their company, though, Justin was worried about the inevitable backlash. Would Brian let them manipulate him back into the role of self-destructive party boy and, if so, would Brian pull away from him? Would he try to deny what they’d become?

Not that Brian would be announcing his relationship with Justin, of course. Brian wasn’t even sure
that what they had could be clerked a ‘relationship’ considering that one of the parties didn’t really exist. But he wasn’t about to come out as bat shit crazy in front of his family and friends. He didn’t relish a stay in a psychiatric hospital for New Years. However, there was bound to be at least some reaction to Brian’s recent MIA weeks, if nothing else.

So, it was understandable that Justin was hovering nervously as Brian climbed the steps up to Deb’s front door. Surprisingly, Brian hadn’t told him off like he usually would have. As he was reaching for the door handle, though, Brian looked over at his favorite blond as if for support. Justin gave him back his most encouraging smile and nodded to let Brian know he was there. What he wanted to do was pull the bigger man in for a long, hot, reassuring kiss, but he couldn’t do that here in public, so a smile would have to suffice.

For half a second it looked like Brian was going to turn around and make a run for it, but unfortunately that’s when the door swung open and a piercing, “Briannnnn!” greeted them.

“Finally!” Michael said as he literally towed Brian into the house. “It’s about time you showed up. Ma was just about to send out a search party to find you and drag you over here.”

“Hands off the Armani, Mikey,” Brian ordered as he struggled to pull away from Michael’s grip on his arm.

Michael didn’t release Brian until he’d dragged him all the way into the kitchen where the rest of the crew were already assembled.

“Always fashionably late, of course,” Lindsey teased him as he took the empty seat next to her.

“This isn’t a debutante ball, Asshole,” Debbie chided as she brought over a serving platter filled with honey glazed ham. “You don’t get points for being fashionable. And when I say dinner’s at six, I mean you will be here, with your ass in a chair by or before six. Got it?”

“Got it, Deb,” Brian replied with a shake of his head and a sideways look at Justin who was now shooting Debbie a nasty look.

“So, where the hell have you been lately, Brian?” Michael piped up insistently even as he loaded his plate with green beans and a roll and then passed the dishes on to Emmett. “Nobody’s seen you in, like, forever. I was starting to think you’d died and we just hadn’t found your body yet.”
“Shit, Mikey. I just talked to you on the phone three days ago. Over react much?” Brian served himself one meager slice of the proffered ham and then passed the platter on. “I’ve been busy, is all.”

“Yeah, usually you’re getting busy in the backroom of Babylon, only we haven’t seen you there much lately,” Emmett prodded.

“I’m sure the boys in the backroom are getting along just fine without me.” Brian added a healthy helping of salad to his plate but passed on the rolls.

“The more important question here is, how are you getting along without them, Brian?” Ted interjected. “By my estimates, you’ve been missing for at least twenty days now, which would equate to roughly forty-five tricks you’ve missed out on. I don’t think even you could pick up those numbers at work alone.”

“I’m surprised he hasn’t gone into withdrawal already,” Mel added with her coarse laughter encouraging the others to join in on the hilarity.

“I didn’t realize I was required to clear every fuck with you lot,” Brian answered with an affronted frown but then relented a bit when his angry tone seemed to take the jokesters aback. “Thank you for your concern, but I’m just fine and my sex life is as robust as ever, if not more so.” He managed a sly wink in Justin’s direction without anyone noticing and was rewarded with a melodious, unheard giggle from his blond. “Now, I realize my sex life IS fascinating - especially since none of you have one - but can we please move on to another topic already?”

“Darn, just when things were getting steamy,” Vic kidded from his spot on the far side of the table.

Brian looked over at the older man whom he hadn’t seen in awhile and was shocked at much Vic’s health had deteriorated since his last visit to Pittsburgh. Vic had tested HIV positive a couple of years earlier, but since he didn’t get to Pittsburgh very often, Brian hadn’t realized how far the illness had progressed. Judging by the gaunt look and excessive weight loss Vic was exhibiting, Brian had a very bad feeling that the older man’s condition had progressed to full blown AIDS. He noted the wary glances that Debbie was shooting Vic’s way as well, and made a mental note to talk to her about the situation and offer whatever support he could.

“I’ll fill you in on the juicier details later, Vic,” Brian promised, earning himself a rare smile from Michael’s uncle.
“Well, it’s not exactly steamy,” Lindsey spoke up next, drawing the attention away from Vic and Brian, “but Mel and I have some news.”

“I thought we were going to wait a while, Honey,” Mel cautioned with a frown.

“I know, but I’m just too excited to wait, Mel,” Lindsey insisted then turned her attention to the table as a whole. “Mel and I are pregnant! We just got the official confirmation from the doctor yesterday. The baby’s due sometime in September.”


“So, who did you guys get to donate? Or did you change your minds and go to a sperm bank instead?” Ted asked as soon as the chatter had died down a bit.

“Of course we didn’t go to a sperm bank. I told you I didn’t want to do that. No, Brian agreed to help us out after all.” Lindsey beamed happily at Brian.

“What? Brian, I thought you said you’d turned them down,” Michael complained, shoving back his chair from the table so he could turn and face his friend directly. “Why the hell would you change your mind all of a sudden? You said you didn’t want anything to do with being a father. You said you didn’t want to mess up your perfect life with that kind of shit.”

“Actually, Michael said all of that, not you, Brian,” Justin spoke up, shooting an evil look at the interfering man who claimed to be Brian’s friend. “He also said you didn’t know anything about being a father and insinuated that all you were good for was fucking your life away. Which is not only insulting but totally wrong, so it’s a good thing you didn’t listen to the poser.”

“Well, I’m glad he changed his mind,” Lindsey maintained directing unhappy looks at both Michael and Brian. “Frankly, I don’t agree with you, Brian. I think you’ll be a great father, in your own way. But regardless, Michael, Brian won’t have to change his life at all for this. Mel and I will be raising this child. In fact, we plan to have Brian sign over his parental rights to Melanie as soon as the baby’s born, so Brian won’t have to be any more involved than he wants to be.”

“It’s too late anyway,” Mel reasoned as she helped herself to a second serving of ham. “The deed is done and his bun,” she picked up a roll and tossed it at Brian’s head with a chuckle, “is in the oven. Brian’s going to be a father whether he likes it or not at this point. Knock on wood.”
“Well, I for one am thrilled for you girls,” Debbie exclaimed. “You two are going to make wonderful mothers. And I’m sure Brian will do the best he can. But even if he doesn’t want to step up, you guys will always have all of us to support you. We’re a family and we take care of each other, right guys?” She looked around pointedly at all the other men sitting around her table, as if to enlist them to fill the shoes that she was already sure Brian wouldn’t want to wear.

The response from the gang to Debbie’s assertions was lukewarm at best. Ted nodded awkwardly, Emmett smiled emptily and Michael looked down at his plate without saying anything at all. Brian huffed dismissively at his friends without responding or speaking up for himself.

Justin was fuming and wanted to kick them all in their respective asses for not believing in Brian. Even worse, they made Brian not believe in himself. If they could only hear him, Justin would be screaming at them all for constantly undermining someone they called their friend. But since that would be futile, he vented his anger instead on a water glass that had been left near the edge of the counter, knocking it off and causing it to crash into a million pieces on the floor.

“What the hell?” Everyone jumped and Debbie rushed to get up and clean the resulting mess.

“What sunshine,” Brian admonished under his breath while everyone else was freaking out over the glass that had apparently fallen on it’s own. “Be nice.”

“No. I don’t want to be nice. Tell THEM to be nice. And to stop treating you like they all know better than you what you should do with your life,” Justin yelled, so frustrated and angry that he would have taken out another glass if only Brian wasn’t glaring at him like that. “Please don’t listen to them, Brian. Please don’t let them make you doubt yourself just so they can feel superior. I know you’ll be a wonderful father. I know it.”

People were starting to return to the table by that point, so Brian didn’t respond aloud to his personal poltergeist. He just quietly glared at Justin, clearing his throat meaningfully when it looked like the vindictive spirit was going to kick the leg of Michael’s chair just as the man was about to sit. Justin stopped himself but glared right back at Brian.

“I guess that glass must have been sitting too close to the edge of the counter. But no matter. It wasn’t exactly a fucking antique,” Debbie offered as explanation before reseating herself and ordering everyone to have another serving of the ham.

Unfortunately, it didn’t seem like Justin’s distraction had derailed Michael from pursuing the prior
conversation. “Well, it’s too bad you changed your mind, Brian. I just don’t think you’ll be happy once you see what a mess a baby is going to make of your life. So much for always saying how you despised fags who were bent on chasing heteronormative fantasies. Before long you’ll be saying bye bye to your free and easy lifestyle too.”

“No, Michael. We shouldn’t judge,” Emmett tried to intervene and get his roommate to tone down his disapproval. “What we should do, is help make sure Brian gets a chance to live it up while he’s still able. So, I say we all head over to Babylon as soon as dessert is done and make sure our very own stud uses his limited time wisely. Right guys?”

“Let’s see, nine months at an average of about seventy ticks a month that’s . . . Six hundred and thirty tricks you need to get through before September,” Ted, the accountant, enumerated. “I think it’s doable, Brian, but you better get started right away,” he teased.

“How about I start by telling all of you to fuck off and then I just go home,” Brian countered, trying not to sound hurt by their less-than-pleasant joking.

“No. No. Em’s right, Brian. You need to enjoy your youth and freedom while you can,” Michael seconded the plan. “Plus, you have to make up for the past couple of weeks you missed as well. Add those lost forty-five to your total, Ted.” Everyone laughed along at the supposed joke. “So, it’s settled, we’re all going to Babylon tonight.”

“Oh, fuck me!” Justin growled at the back of Michael’s head and proceeded to kick his chair after all.

Michael looked around when his chair shook slightly under him, but when he didn’t see anything behind him, he forgot about it. He reapplied himself to his food and the conversation turned to topics other than criticism of Brian’s life. Brian, as usual, didn’t say much. It seemed to be a foregone conclusion that he would do as he was directed and follow the pack to Babylon for the night. Whenever he was confronted by the group he always seemed to buy into their projections of him and there really didn’t seem to be much Justin could do about it.

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Chapter End Notes

4/10/17 - This chapter may LOOK like PWP but there was some serious plot hidden in there somewhere. I promise. You have to look for it behind all the wagging dicks, but
it's there. Trust me. LOL. TAG

PS - for those asking, I've finished outlining the last few chapters and it looks like about four more after this one. Now, please don't hold me to that, because sometimes I get carried away and can't find the ending, but I'm relatively sure this one is close to being wrapped up.
“Wow. That’s pretty good,” Justin exclaimed as he looked over his nephew’s shoulder at the pencil drawing the teen was working on.

“Thanks,” Jesse responded, pausing to survey the drawing himself and then adding a touch of additional shading to the curve of his sister’s chin. “I wish you could convince my dad of that, though.”

“Is your dad still giving you a hard time? I thought your mom had talked him into backing off a bit,” Justin asked, concerned by how fast the apparent rift between the sixteen-year-old and his father had grown.

“Yeah, I thought so too, but then last night he went off on another tangent about how I need to get involved in more school activities or I’ll never get into the ‘right’ college,” Jesse complained, finishing off his drawing, tossing the sketchpad aside and then flopping down on his bed dejectedly. “So, I’m like, fine. But when we got into it more, it turns out the the only ‘acceptable’ extracurricular activities in his opinion are the Future Business Leaders of America club or sports - neither of which are of ANY interest to me. Not to mention that the stupid FBLA shit would interfere with Art Club. Then we got into a whole ‘nother argument about why I should quit Art Club.”

Justin joined his friend on the bed, lying the opposite direction cross-wise over the width of the small twin mattress so that his head was down near Jesse’s legs and vice versa. The two teens laid there for a couple of minutes, neither saying anything, contemplating the off-white ceiling above them. The familiarity of just being there together and hanging out was comforting to them both. They didn’t need to talk to share that sense of support.

“Give him a chance, Jes. He’s trying to make sure you have what he considers a good life. He just
doesn’t understand that your idea of what a good life would be isn’t the same as his,” Justin tried to excuse his younger brother’s actions.

“Whatever. I wish he’d just back the fuck off already. I’m never going to be the good son that follows in Daddy’s footsteps and takes over the family business like he did. I mean, seriously, can you see ME as a businessman?” Jesse snorted a huff of laughter at the mere thought.

Justin could empathise. He and his nephew shared a lot of common traits, including their affinity for art. He wouldn’t have been any happier than Jesse was at the thought of having to go into the family business. Luckily for Justin - or not so luckily, as the case was - he never had to have that particular argument with his father due to his untimely death. Other than to just bide his time and try to reason with his father as best he could, though, Justin didn’t have any advice for the frustrated youth.

“So what about you, Unc? Everything copacetic in the land of the unliving? You haven’t been around here moping about how difficult Brian is being for a while, so what gives?” Jesse asked as soon as they’d talked his parental problems into the ground. “Did Brian finally come around and admit he was madly, passionately, desperately in love with you?”

“Well, not exactly . . .” Justin answered hesitatingly, his face so red that Jesse immediately knew something was up.

“No way . . . you two finally did the nasty? Woooooo Hoooo!” Jesse jumped up off the bed and danced a victory circuit around the room, hooting and hollering up a storm.

“Shut up, Jes,” Justin complained, grabbing Jesse as he made yet another lap and pulling him back down to the bed. “Do you really want your Mom to come in here and give you the third degree about why you’re running around and yelling like a nutcase?”

“Hey, I’m just happy for you, Bro. You finally lost your cherry. That’s epic. And it only took you, what, fifty years?”

“Hahaha. You’re so funny I forgot to laugh.” Justin stuck his tongue out at the teasing imp that was giving him such a hard time, responding in an equally immature manner.

“Soooooo? Come on. Spill. How was it? Did he rock your world the way you always dreamed he would? How big is his dick?”
“Fuck you, Jesse. I’m not going to tell you shit. Not if you’re going to make fun of me,” Justin pouted like the teen he seemed when you looked at him.

“Fine. I promise I won’t make fun of you. Sheesh. Touchy much, Bro?” They both laughed for a couple seconds at how ridiculous they were being before quieting. “Seriously, dude. Tell. Me. Everything.”

Like the tiny teen gossip queens they were, Justin and Jesse spent the next half hour or so discussing every single moment of Justin’s brand new sex life. Jesse was having a great time embarrassing Justin with awkward questions. Justin was totally waxing poetic about every detail and the purple prose was flying in all directions.

“So, if everything is so amazing and wonderful and perfect, what the hell are you doing here wasting time with me?” Jesse asked when his uncle seemed to momentarily run out of praise for Brian Kinney. “Why aren’t you still holed up somewhere with Brian getting your ass fucked into the mattress by his prodigious member?”

“Well, unfortunately, Brian and his prodigious member are currently being held hostage by his annoying friend Michael,” Justin complained, slumping back on the bed dejectedly. “Ever since the girls told the family about Brian agreeing to help them with the baby thing, Michael’s been on this ‘Free Brian’ kick. It’s like he thinks Lindsey and Mel having a baby is going to instantly change Brian into Ward Cleaver or something. He’s been dragging Brian out to the bars every single night this week and almost force feeding him alcohol, trying to make sure he stays in Stud Mode as long as possible.”

“So why doesn’t Brian just tell him to fuck off? He’s a big boy, right? He doesn’t have to do everything his ‘bestest fwend’ tells him to, does he?” Jesse didn't seem at all impressed with either Michael’s possessiveness or Brian's lack of spine.

“Yeah, I don't think Brian would ever tell Michael off. They've been friends too long and Michael was there for him when he didn't have anyone else to turn to. Brian's nothing, if not loyal. And, even if I could get him to understand that he doesn't need to follow Mikey's every dictate, he'd see telling his friend off as some kind of betrayal,” Justin reasoned, his forehead knotting up as he tried to analyze the problem in a way that was simpler to explain. “When they're together like this, it's kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy or something. It's like, Michael sees Brian as some Fantasy Stud - somebody that he’ll never be himself, but has always idolized - and then Brian wants to make Mikey happy so he puts on a show, acting out the fantasy. But, after a while, Brian forgets it's only a fantasy and starts believing it’s real.”
“From what I’ve seen of him - and heard from both you and Winnie - Brian Kinney IS that guy, bro. He’s basically a slut. I don’t think it’s just a fantasy,” Jesse argued, worried that Justin was putting his new lover up on some ridiculous pedestal.

Justin wasn’t going allow that type of oversimplification though. “It’s true. Brian does have the potential to be that guy . . . He is, sort of, that guy . . . Only I don’t think he really wants to be that guy. At least not forever. I think he’s actually getting pretty tired of acting like the Stud all the time. I think, if he was left to himself for long enough, he’d get over it. But then his act gets reinforced by Mikey every time they go out together and the cycle starts all over.”

“That’s . . . twisted, bro,” Jesse voiced the same sentiment Justin had been feeling for a long time. “So, how do you break the cycle? You know, make Brian realize he’s more than just the operational attachment at the other end of his dick?”

Justin laughed at that characterization. “No idea, Jes. No idea.” Justin sat up and crossed his legs so that he appeared more determined. “I thought that the two of us getting together would help, but Brian still isn’t fully embracing the idea of a ‘relationship’, let alone a relationship with someone . . . like me.”

“Yeah, well, you can’t blame the guy for that one, dude. It’s not like he can actually introduce you to his family as his boyfriend or anything, seeing as how you’re mostly invisible. So, it makes sense that it’s not quite real to him, you know?”

“Yeah, I know. I get that, but still, it kinda hurts. It’s like I’m only real to him when we’re alone together at his loft and the minute he walks out the door I cease to exist for him. I know the whole idea of me - a relationship with me, in particular - scares the crap out of him, but I really thought that was changing. The more time he spends with Michael, though, the more I feel him pulling away so he can resume the mantle of King Kinney the Stud of Liberty Avenue. Which is exactly what Michael wants, cause in some strange way that makes him the Prince of Liberty. Fuck! It’s so screwed up!” Justin punched the pillow in front of him for lack of any other target to hit in his frustration. “If I was fully corporeal, I think I’d go kill Brian’s father. And his mother too, maybe. They really did a number on my guy’s head, you know?”

“Well, don’t give up on him. Maybe he’ll come around eventually,” Jesse said as he sat up and reached for his sketch pad again. “You already got further than I thought you ever would - getting him to do the baby thing AND hooking up with you. The man’s come a long way, Bro. I bet once the baby gets here it’ll be better, and in the meantime, you just need to keep him as busy as possible so that his little codependent enabler can’t fuck with his head.”

Justin wished it was that simple. He didn’t know how to consistently keep Michael away from Brian. Maybe Jesse could help him brainstorm a comprehensive strategy. A foolproof plan of some
Justin turned to his co-conspirator and was just about to open his mouth, when he noticed that Jesse had dropped his pencil and was rubbing his neck. He was also scrunching up his eyes as if the low lights in the bedroom where too bright.

“You okay, Jes?”

“Yeah. Just a headache. Probably all the stress of dealing with my Dad, you know,” Jesse offered, smiling gamely over at his friend as he set aside the drawing once more. “I should probably hit the sack and get some real rest for a change instead of staying up all night bullshitting with you on a school night,” he teased, trying to deflect Justin’s evident concern.

“That’s probably a good idea.” Justin stood up and then bent to ruffle Jesse’s hair and leave a kiss on his nephew’s crown. “I guess I’ll go haunt Babylon’s backroom and try to divert Brian’s attention from his tenth trick of the night. Wish me luck.”

“Luck,” Jesse waved at the already disappearing apparition and then took his own advice by getting ready for bed.

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Brian stumbled up to the bar after his latest trip to the backroom, already more than half soused. Michael was waiting for him with another drink ready. Brian gave him a sloppy, drunken kiss hello and grabbed the glass from his friend.

“Now, isn’t this better than staying home and spending the night working,” Michael asserted, parroting the excuse that Brian had unsuccessfully offered up as the reason he didn’t want to go out.

Brian didn’t answer. He only rolled his eyes at the man who was grinning adoringly up at him. Brian wasn’t about to explain the real reason he’d wanted to skip the club that night - which was that he’d rather spend his evening fooling around with a certain incorporeal blond - so he didn’t really have the ammunition to argue with Michael. He’d been out with the guys every single night that week, though, and, not to put too fine a point on it, he was sick and tired of the club scene.

It was the same thing every night. Mikey would either call him with some excuse why Brian simply HAD to join him that night or, if Brian tried to make an excuse, he’d barge into the loft and
physically tow Brian out the door. Once Brian had capitulated, they’d head to Woody’s for drinks and to meet up with either Ted or Emmett or both. As soon as everyone was sufficiently lubricated, the crew would migrate over to Babylon where the debauchery would continue at an even higher level. Meanwhile, Mikey - Brian’s self-appointed personal cruise director - would devote himself to making sure that Brian was sufficiently supplied with drinks, drugs and dick. And no amount of complaining, forestalling or even flat out telling the little pimp-wannabe to fuck off, seemed to do any good. Michael acted like his prime purpose in life these days was to get Brian as fucked up possible every night and then play mother hen to the wasted results. Not that Brian didn’t enjoy himself, but he didn’t need Michael encouraging him to get drunk every single night and he certainly didn’t need the man to help him pull tricks.

The way that Michael was constantly hanging on Brian all the time was a bit concerning too. If it weren’t for the fact that his longtime friend was constantly pressuring him to head off to the backroom with every hot-looking trick that walked by, Brian would have pegged his possessive, touchy-feely behavior as jealousy. Not that Mikey had any reason to be jealous, even if he had a right to be, since Michael couldn’t possibly know about the invisible Justin. But he’d become so demanding and covetous of Brian’s attention and it felt way too close to what Brian imagined a jealous boyfriend would be like.

Which just didn’t make any sense at all. Brian and Mikey had never been THAT to each other, even though Michael might not have objected if they’d reached that level. Brian had very assiduously avoided that pitfall though and he wasn’t about to move in that direction now. He had never felt any romantic attraction to Michael. Never. Mikey was, for all intents and purposes, his older but slightly less mature brother. His feelings for Michael weren’t anything at all like what he felt for Justin.

“Shit.” Brian voiced his annoyance with that unwelcome thought aloud, causing Michael to look up at him questioningly. “Nothing,” he mumbled, hoping to deflect Michael’s attention by reapplying himself to the bourbon he still held in his hand.

Brian wondered what the hell was up with him lately. He didn’t know why these unwelcome thoughts about the blond kept insinuating themselves into his subconscious dialog. It was ludicrous that he was thinking of the ghost boy as someone he was attracted to or that he’d want some kind of relationship with. Brian didn’t believe in relationships. As far as he was concerned, that was a dirty word that he planned never to utter aloud. Why that particular curse word seemed to be invading his thoughts all the time lately, he wasn’t going to speculate. Besides, even if he had wanted something more with the tempting little blond, it was a complete and total impossibility. His imaginary fling was just that - imaginary - and Brian needed to keep reminding himself of that fact before he went totally around the bend.

While he was trying to clear the ethereal blond out of his already drink-muddled head, Brian finished off the rest of his Beam. Michael noticed immediately and was already waving the bartender down to order him a refill.
“I don’ need ‘nother, Mikey,” Brian announced, realizing after the fact how very slurred his words sounded. “Gotta work ta’morra.”

“It’s early still, Brian. You’ll be fine by morning. You always are. I’ve never seen anybody that can drink like you. Besides, I’ll make sure you get home safe and sound,” Michael promised, slipping an arm around Brian’s waist and squeezing affectionately. “If you need me to, I could even stay with you tonight and make sure you get up on time for work,” he offered.

For a minute, Brian had an image of himself in bed with Justin and Michael at the same time, and it caused him to break out laughing almost hysterically. Michael looked at him as if he was offended. Brian tried to wave away the man’s affront, but he’d reached that stage of drunkenness where he wasn’t completely in control of his motor skills and ended up actually hitting Michael in the nose instead. Which caused Brian to laugh even harder.

“I’d say that La Kinney has had enough Beam for one evening,” Emmett pronounced, coming up from behind Michael and witnessing the tanked up display. “You better get him out of here before he embarrasses himself and then blames you for it tomorrow morning. Can’t have Liberty Avenue’s Number One Stud acting like a common drunk, now can we?”

“Nodda common drunk, Honeybutt. Nodda common anythin’,” Brian insisted, “cept mebbe a common nut!” *hehehe* Brian broke out laughing at what he perceived to be a hilarious joke.

“Wow! I don’t think I’ve ever seen Brian THIS wasted,” Ted stated, eyeing the giggled brunet with amusement. “How many drinks did you force on him, Michael?” He asked, having witnessed at least the last three rounds and the way Michael had cajoled Brian into drinking more than was obviously good for him.

“S’nothing. I’m fffffine,” Brian exclaimed.

Unfortunately, in the process of turning around so he could reassure Ted directly to his face, Brian spun a little too fast and ended up whirling into him like an off-balance, dizzy, tornado. Ted only just barely managed to catch Brian and keep them both from toppling to the floor. As it was, the two of them ended up in an embrace that made it seem like Ted was dipping Brian at the end of a particularly well-executed waltz. Brian found himself staring up into a surprised accountant’s eyes.

“Anybody ev’r tell you how pretty your eyes are, Teddydore?” Brian mumbled. “Pre’ hazel eyes. Jus, don’ bat ‘em at me, cause I all reddy got pre’ blue eyes battin’ at me all a time. Big, pre’, boo
eyes wid long, long, pre’ blond lashes . . . So pre’ . . . On’y when he bats ‘em at me I can’ts say no. You can’ts say no to boo eyes, right? Amirite? So I jus go on and fucks ‘im again and again an’ again, e’en tho I know I shoun’t,” Brian explained unintelligently. “S’okay tho. S’okay. He hadn't tol’ me to eats nobody yet, so s’okay. Right? Right, Teddydore? Right? ”

“Um . . . Uh . . . yeah. Whatever, Brian. Let's just get you home, okay? Any time you're complimenting my eyes, it's pretty much assured you've had WAY too much to drink,” Ted placated his drunk armload of brunet as he struggled to get Brian back up on his own two feet. “I'm sure you'll be back to your old self by the time you wake up tomorrow and then you can go back to insulting me like usual. And we’ll all agree to ignore whatever it was you were just babbling to us about blue eyes and eating people. Won't we guys?” Ted prodded his companions, getting Emmett’s laughing agreement easily but only a disgruntled and confused frown from Michael. “Come on, then. Time for bed, Brian.”

Ted draped Brian's arm over his shoulder and started to half-drag the stumbling man towards the door. Michael soon roused himself from his musings over Brian's inexplicable involuntary disclosures and trotted after the others. As soon as he'd caught them up, he took Brian's other arm over HIS shoulder.

“I've got him, Ted. You don't have to leave already if you don't want to. I'll get Brian home the way I always do,” Michael insisted and pulled Brian away from Ted’s hold.

“I don't mind, Michael. I'm ready to head home myself anyway. I've got to work tomorrow, after all,” Ted offered as if hesitant to let Michael take over.

“No, no. I've got this. I'll just plop him in the Jeep, drive to the loft and let myself in with my key. I'm used to it. Besides, I have the day off tomorrow, so it's really no big deal for me.” Michael asserted proprietorially, lugging Brian along and dismissing Ted without a backward glance.

“Hmmmm. Now, what do you think THAT’S all about?” Emmett asked as he came up from behind to stand next to Ted, watching as Michael hustled Brian off through the club’s exit.

Ted didn't answer for quite a while, staring after the two departing men with a contemplative look. “Well, I'd like to think it was just one friend helping another, who'd drunk a little too much, get home. But . . .”

“But it WAS Michael that was pouring all those drinks down Brian's throat all night AND he seemed just a little too eager to help his ‘friend’ home, don't you think?” Emmett questioned. Ted shrugged but couldn't deny what Em was intimating. “Damn! Do you think Michael would . . .”
Ted and Em looked at each other, their expressions both evidencing a complex mix of worry, doubt, denial and disapproval. “No. Michael wouldn't do that,” Emmett asserted finally. “Michael would never take advantage of a friend like that. He just wouldn't.”

Ted didn't say anything but, at the same time, he didn't seem as convinced as Emmett either. Without another word, the two of them left the club, noting as they exited, the Jeep zooming past them with Michael driving and Brian seemingly passed out in the passenger seat. It wasn't a completely unheard of sight, but at the same time, Michael HAD been acting a little odd. Neither of them felt great about what might possibly happen back at Brian's loft. Not that either would do anything about it though. Brian wouldn't want them to and Michael . . . Michael wouldn't . . .

Justin had been rambling around the empty loft for most of the night. It was already one, but that didn’t mean Brian would be home any time soon - not with the way he’d been carousing lately - but Justin couldn’t think of anything better to do with his time. He’d given up stalking his man through the backrooms because I only made Justin feel depressed. However, he was too unsettled to just pop off into the ether and wait there. So he’d been pacing around Brian’s home and trying again to think up some way to save Brian from his friends and himself.

Finally, after what seemed like ages of unproductive ambulation, Justin heard the elevator rumbling to a stop on Brian’s floor and then the loft door sliding open with a metallic rattle. He also heard . . . giggling? Very unmanly giggling.


Then Brian, who in his drunken state had apparently reverted to the intelligence level of a seven year old boy, began to laugh so hard he literally couldn't stand up any longer and collapsed in a snorting, giggling, sodden heap in the middle of the doorway. Even Mikey, whose normal comprehension level hovered around that of a pre-teen boy, seemed to be getting a little fed up with Brian's antics. When he bent to try and help Brian up, the humorously-impaired man actually pulled his helper totally off balance and then broke out in a new freshet of laughter when Michael fell on his ass. When Michael started cussing Brian out, struggling to get back up while Brian tried to ‘help’ by shoving at Michael’s derrière, and causing him to topple over yet again, Justin couldn't hold back his own laughter any longer.

“Yeah, you're hilarious, Brian.” Michael finally crawled far enough away from his friend so he could get to his feet without any more ‘help’. “Now, come on and let's get you into bed before you pass out on the fucking floor.”

*pffft* “Yer no fun, Mikey. Not like Someshine. Someshine is always fun,” Brian affirmed, smiling and winking at empty space.

Michael managed to lever Brian into a more or less upright position and ducked under the drunk’s arm so he could half-carry him across the loft and up to the bedroom. The spate of joking and laughter seemed to have been it for Brian, though, as his energy petered out. He barely managed to stumble along, lagging behind Michael, his head now drooping dangerously. When it looked like they were about fall again, Brian's weight dragging the pair sideways, Justin stepped up and surreptitiously gave the inebriated man a little additional support.

“Tanks, Someshine,” Brian mumbled and leaned his head against the invisible man’s shoulder.

“Brian. Stand up straight or you're going to fall,” Michael ordered as his friend started to list towards the far side. “And what the hell is ‘some shine’? Why do you keep saying that?”

Luckily for Brian and his little secret, he was too far gone by that point to answer. Michael, with an unacknowledged assist from Justin, maneuvered Brian the last few feet to the bed and let the potted mess fall on the mattress face first. Brian was already snoring. He didn't even come around when Michael rolled him over and yanked at his shoes and clothing until Brian was completely naked. The sot just lay there drunk as a lord.

“Damn it! I didn't mean for you to get THIS drunk,” Michael complained as he started to take off his own shirt. “Guess I shouldn't have given you that tab of E on top of the Beam. Oh well. At least now I have an even better excuse to stay, right? And who knows, maybe you’ll wake up . . .”

Michael shoved his pants and briefs down over his hips and bent to kiss Brian's unconscious lips before walking around the bed and then climbing under the covers himself. “. . . And I'll be here when you do, just in case.”

“No. Fucking. Way!” Justin railed loudly enough that the glass panels surrounding the bedroom rattled slightly, although Michael was too busy situating himself as close to the snoring Brian's side as he could get to notice the disturbance. “Brian! BRIAN! BRIAN, WAKE UP, DAMN IT!” Justin howled, grabbing Brian's face so he could focus his complaints more directly. “You need to wake the fuck up right now and tell Mikey to leave! Brian? Brian, wake up.” Justin slapped the snorer’s cheek, getting a snuffle and a weak grumble of complaint. “I swear, Brian. If you don't wake up and make this poser leave right now, I will fucking haunt him for the rest of his life.” Justin was
now shoving at Brian's shoulder while yelling at him full volume and it seemed to be working. “I'll make sure he never finds his keys and every single piece of paper in his house mysterious disappears. By the time I'm done with him, Michael will think he's so bat-shit crazy he’ll check himself into the nut house.”

“Dat’ud be funny, Someshine,” Brian chuckled, still only half awake at best. “You could make shit fly aroun’ his head and stuff too. He'd fuckin’ wet himself.” *Hehehe*

“I'm NOT joking, Brian. I'm NOT going to let THIS happen.” Justin pointed to the spot behind Brian where the smaller brunet was chivvying up even closer to his bed mate. Brian looked over his shoulder and blinked with confusion. “Mikey's gone too far this time. First he intentionally gets you sloshed and then he takes advantage of the situation to get his jollies off while you're passed out in bed next to him? No fucking way! This is so wrong.”

While they’d been talking, Michael, thinking his friend was still asleep, proceeded to make matters even worse for himself by beginning to slowly hump against Brian's hip.

Justin literally growled at the interloper - glaring down on Michael like he would gladly bite his head off if only he could.

Even though Brian wasn't all the way alert, he was cognizant enough to realize that something wasn't right. Justin, who SHOULD be the one in his bed, was standing there yelling at him. Meanwhile, Michael of all people was glomming all over him from behind and doing something that Brian did NOT want his friend to ever do against his hip. How he'd got there was hazy, but even in the deplorable state he was in, Brian knew this was wrong.

“Tell him to go, Brian!”

Whatcha doin’, Mikey?” Brian asked, rolling away from the invader of his bed and looking at Michael with a gotcha smirk. Michael looked back with the typical deer in the headlights expression but said nothing. “It's time for you to go home, Mikey.”

“I was just going to stay in case you needed anything . . .”

“I'm good, Mikey, and you need to go. Now. ‘Fore the evil spirits that inhabit my loft decide to go poltergeist on your ass.”
“Huh?” Michael asked.

“Don’ ask. Jus go. Now. While there's still time. I won’ be able to hold ‘im back much longer. So, bedder go,” Brian mumbled past a yawn that almost muffled the last words.

He did manage to stay awake long enough to scrunch his knees up and then shove with his feet hard enough to propel Michael off the far side of the bed. Michael tumbled to the floor in an inelegant, naked jumble. Justin huffed a disdainful laugh. Brian disregarded them both, but did reach up, latch onto Justin's wrist and then pull the boy down onto the bed with him. While a grumbling Michael gathered his clothing, Brian sighed and molded himself around the form of the man he DID want to be in bed with.

“You're sure you don't want me to stay, Brian? I really don't mind,” Michael tried one last time.

“Fuck off, Mikey. I'm tired. Now go ‘way.”

“Good riddance,” Justin snarled when he finally heard the door closing and Michael turning the lock behind him. “I can't believe he had the gall to do that when you were basically passed out. The little weasel . . .”

“Don’ get your panties all inna twist, Princess. Is s’no big deal. An’ noffin’ really happen’,” a still not completely lucid Brian tried to calm his feisty blond protector down. “‘Sides.” *Yawn* “Mikey's a’ways hadda teensy crush on me. Who kin blame him, right? He doe’n’t mean anythin' by it.” *Yawn* “Now, stop bein’ so angry squirmly and be a gud pillow, Someshine. I needta s’eeep.” *Snore*

“ Doesn't mean anything by it, my ass,” Justin quietly continued to fume. “I bet he planned this all along.”

Justin would have railed on Michael for a lot longer if his audience wasn’t once more dead to the world. Justin let himself relax finally, enjoying the feel of Brian’s head pillowed on his chest, the long, lanky, beautifully shaped body curled around his side, and one strong arm wrapped around his waist. The spirit guide let his fingers card through the baby-fine auburn hair while his other hand drew invisible runes along the skin of Brian’s forearm. The snuffly snoring provided a comforting background noise and served to put Justin even more at ease.

“Oh, Brian,” he murmured, leaning forward enough to kiss the top of the snoring head. “What the fuck am I going to do with you, huh? You’re such an adorable, annoying mess.” Brian’s only response was to nuzzle deeper into the succor of Justin’s chest. “If only I could figure this stupid
ghost thing out . . . I know that when we’re finally together, out in the real world, I’ll be able to save you, Brian. I know it. I just wish whoever or whatever was in charge of this fuck up would hurry up and fix it.”

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Chapter End Notes

4/14/17 - Happy Spring, everyone! So, who's as ready as I am to see this story finally wrapped up? If things go as planned, I think it'll be only three more chapters. Do I hear a 'Yay'? TAG
Chapter Notes

Brian contemplates the nature of being a father as he begins to dread the coming birth of his own child. Enjoy! TAG

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Chapter 30 - Progenitorship.

Brian walked into the ballroom at the University of Pittsburgh, already in a foul mood and not at all excited to spend his evening being polite to people he didn’t really give a flying fuck about. Damn Ryder for forcing him to come to this stupid alumni thing. Why didn’t Ryder come hobnob with his alumni buddies himself? Brian didn’t really want to be there and, even if he had, this kind of scene wasn’t really his forte. He was the guy who impressed the clients with brilliant campaigns once they were already in the door. Drumming up business at social events was definitely not his thing.

His mood wasn’t made any better by the fact that he’d just come from one of the thankfully infrequent visits with his parents. Brian had received a phone call from Joan the night before ‘inviting’ him over for dinner. Luckily Brian had the excuse of this work function to get him out of the proposed meal. But when his mother had persisted, he’d known what was up and grudgingly offered to drop by ‘for drinks’ on his way to the UP Mixer.

As expected, Joan had already been half a bottle ahead of him when Brian arrived. She had tried to stand and greet him in her usual, falsely genial way, but staggered and almost tripped in the process. Brian had shaken his head without commenting and left her to her tea cup full of gin in the kitchen. Jack had been, of course, parked in front of the television watching loud motor vehicles screaming around and around a track. Judging by the trail of empties sitting on the coffee table, he’d already worked his way through most of a six pack. In other words, the ‘rents had clearly already had their drinks without waiting on their son.

“Hey, Pop,” Brian had greeted the bleary-eyed old man his father had become, taking a seat in the nearby arm chair without waiting for any response. “So, what is it you needed this time.”

“What? I don't even rate five minutes of fucking small talk from you these days, Sonny Boy?” Jack had grumped, swigged the rest of the beer he was holding and then crushed the can in his fist
before letting it tumble onto the coffee table with the rest of the dead soldiers.

“Can we just get this over with so I can get the fuck outta here already?” Brian demanded with a scowl at the broken down, angry, drunken mess his father was.

“I guess you're too fucking good for your old man, huh? You with your high-falutin’ education and that fancy-pants job. Looking down your nose at the rest of us?” Jack had sneered over the rim of the new beer can he’d popped open. “Well, I'll tell you one thing, Sonny Boy - for all your froufrou ways, you're STILL nothing but a Mick from the wrong side of the tracks and you always will be. It's in your blood. You can't escape it no matter how much money you make. And you can look down your nose at me all you want, but someday you'll end up just the same. You can't avoid your fate, boy, and all of us Kinney men are the same.”

“Fine,” Brian slapped his hands down on his knees with finality and pushed himself back up to his feet. “If I’m no better than the rest of you losers, then I guess there’s no reason for me to be here. See ya, Pops.”

“Hang on there, Speedy Gonzalez,” Jack had grabbed hold of Brian’s wrist as he tried to sidle past the couch. Brian had literally looked down his nose at the pathetic, washed up old man who was now looking up at him beseechingly and felt nothing but contempt for his father. “The plant lost some huge fucking contract last month and had to lay off half of us. I . . . I’m having a bit of trouble getting by on just unemployment and the little the Union gives us . . .”

“Figures,” Brian had shaken his head at the admission and then reached into his inside jacket pocket to pull out the money envelope he’d come prepared with. “Seems like my fancy-pants job’s good for something at least, huh Pops?”

Brian had handed over the packet of cash, not expecting any thanks and therefore not upset when he didn’t hear it from his father. Then he quickly turned on his heel and marched away. He hadn’t even bothered going into the kitchen to say goodbye to the lush who claimed to be his mother. He’d just wanted out of that house as fast as was humanly possible. The less time he had to spend with his parents, the better.

Even though he'd managed to limit his time at his childhood home, he was still extremely unsettled by the short experience. His parents were such an embarrassment. They’d been bad enough while he was growing up, but lately it seemed they no longer cared about keeping up even minimal appearances. They’d become virtual pariahs in the old neighborhood with everyone except for his mother’s church friends. The house was even more of an eyesore than ever before. As far as he could tell, they both spent the majority of their time drunk. And yet they still found ways to put Brian down? Well, fuck them. Why couldn’t they both just drink themselves into those early graves they seemed headed for already? That seemed to be what they were going for, right, and Brian would be more than glad to be finally rid of the obligation to acknowledge he was related to
The experience had been distasteful enough that it actually put Brian off his own drink for the night. He wasn’t going to let his parents’ example control him - he was better than that, and he would prove it by NOT wasting his life as a perpetual lush. Which meant that, for once, he had no urge to head straight for the bar as soon as he arrived at the mixer. He was confident he could find some other way to get through the night. That left him completely at loose ends, however, because alcohol was usually the only thing that kept him going at these types of functions. And the directionless feeling he now had only exacerbated his bad mood.

Which is why he was still standing there just inside the entrance to the ballroom after more than five minutes and staring at the people around him with a sour expression that was doing a wonderful job of keeping any potential company at bay.

“I’m pretty sure that the point of a ‘mixer’ is that you’re supposed to talk to people,” a humor-tinged tenor voice spoke from behind Brian’s left shoulder. “If you keep glaring at everyone who passes by, you’re going to be standing here alone all night. Which is fine, if that’s what you planned on doing, but how will that get you any potential clients to take back to Ryder’s?”

Brian turned his glare in the direction of the visible-only-to-him blond sprite but didn’t respond verbally because he didn’t want to be seen talking to himself.

But even if he had been able to speak to his shadow, he wasn’t really sure what to say. Their relationship - and even Brian would be forced to use that word to describe whatever it was they had, at least in his own mind - had been so strained lately. Except for those few idyllic weeks right before Christmas when they’d been ridiculously happy, everything between them was so complicated.

Justin persisted in haunting his life, and his loft unrelentingly - sharing Brian’s bed nightly even when nothing much happened in that bed anymore - but somehow they’d lost that happy, unquestioning easiness around each other. Brian knew it hinged on the fact that he continued to spend the majority of his nights out with Michael at the bars and clubs on Liberty Avenue. Not that Brian really wanted to spend every night trolling for tricks at Babylon, but he also wasn’t willing to concede that Justin had the right to keep him away. So, even though, a lot of the time, he would have rather stayed home and played with his favorite blond boy, more often than not Brian allowed Mikey to talk him into going out. And each time Justin looked at him with one of those understanding sighs, he felt compelled to assert his independence even more.

Justin hadn’t been pressing his suit much outside the loft for a while now, though, so Brian was a little surprised to see him in this setting. If the spirit boy was now going to resume his campaign to dog Brian’s every step, they were going to have to have a serious talk. So it really wasn’t a surprise
that he redirected his bad mood towards the hovering blond.

“Before you skewer me with that look, Stud,” the boy chuckled at him, ignoring the glare, “no, I didn’t follow you here.” Brian rolled his eyes, obviously disbelieving. “I swear, Brian. I came for Jesse.”

Justin pointed across the room to a large clique of men all dressed in business suits, in the midst of which the blond teenager stood out like a sore thumb in his uncomfortable-looking, obviously brand-new, and slightly too-big suit.

“His father dragged him here tonight to meet some of the alumni,” Justin continued explaining. “Four has been trying to force him to agree to go to Dartmouth - which is where Dear Old Dad went - but Jesse’s pushing for art school. UP would be sort of a compromise since it’s at least a four year college with a business school, not to mention that Gil has an in here, but I don’t think Jesse’s going to cave. He really wants to try to get into the Pittsburgh Institute of Fine Arts. I think he’s good enough, too. But, since nobody else in the family is supporting that option, he asked me to come as invisible backup and see if I could figure out a way to help him escape.”

“Isn’t the kid a bit young for them to be pushing him to decide on a college already,” Brian asked as he tentatively took a few steps over towards the group with the intention of helping Justin’s friend out if he could.

“Not really. It’s the end of his Junior year of high school.”

“What did he do, skip like five years?” Brian asked, eying the very youthful looking adolescent with skepticism. “Shit, wasn’t it just last year that he was only a snot-nosed six year old that was hassling me after a soccer game?”

“Brian,” Justin swatted his disbelieving charge with a playful backhand to his stomach. “That was ten years ago, Stud - you apparently lost a few years, or are you just not counting anymore? *hehehe* Jesse’s seventeen now. His birthday was a couple months back.”

Brian might have responded to Justin’s amused heckling, but by that time he’d come up to the group and been almost immediately spotted by the youth himself. Jesse immediately excused himself from the conversation he was trapped in with three doddering octogenarians and turned towards the newcomer with a grateful smile. Over Jesse’s shoulder, Brian could see the boy’s father shooting his son an unhappy look before moving in to take up the slack in the discussion the kid had abandoned.
“Hey, Dude. Don't tell me you volunteered to come rescue me along with Uncle Jus?” Jesse greeted him with a big, relieved smile.

“So I look like someone who rescues damsels in distress or does other charitable deeds?” Brian teased.

“Well, from what I hear, you’ve made at least one charitable donation this year, Brian.” Their twosome was invaded by another familiar face as Winnie popped up from behind a taller gentleman who’d hidden her presence earlier.

“Hey, Win,” Brian greeted his friend, leaning down to accept her kiss on his cheek. “I didn’t realize this was another Taylor family function. Do you guys always travel in packs?”

“Of course. We’re like rich hyenas - very predatory,” she joked, eliciting a laugh from them all. “But getting back to your recent charity work - I had lunch with Lindsey a couple weeks ago and just heard the big news about your big donation. I can’t believe YOU’RE going to be a father. Congratulations! Although, that’s pretty much the last news I ever thought I’d hear about Brian Kinney. Lindsey’s over the moon, though, so good going. What in the world made you change your mind and agree?”

“Obviously, it was all Lindsey’s compliments about my excellent genes,” Brian deflected. “Either that or or I was drunk . . . Oh, wait, it did happen the night of your wedding, so I guess the drunk theory wins.”

“Right. Go with the ‘I was too drunk to know better’ defense, Bro. That’ll save you from having to admit you’re actually a nice guy who wanted to help out his friends or maybe, even, that you LIKE the idea of creating your own clone,” Jesse interjected with a knowing smirk. “You wouldn’t want to admit to being human, now, would you?”

“Jesse, stop,” Justin warned.

Before Brian could speak up for himself and insist on his cad-hood, their little group was interrupted by yet another Taylor. “Justin Elias Sanford Taylor, I didn’t bring you here tonight to waste time talking to your cousin,” Four Taylor insisted, his big hand gripping Jesse’s shoulder and already physically turning the young man away from his friends. “Now get your butt over here and socialize some more. Two of the members of the admissions board are here tonight and your Uncle Gil wants to introduce you.”
“Dad . . .” Jesse whined and dragged his feet. “I’ve already met about a thousand old geezers. Can’t we call it a night already? I’d rather be home doing my Calculus for fuck’s sake. Not to mention all the noise in here is giving me a killer headache.”

Four ignored his son’s complaints entirely and force marched the kid away towards another group of sixty-year-old men. Winnie and Brian - along with the unseen Justin - all grimaced in sympathy with the boy. The way Jesse’s shoulders slumped even further down as soon as they’d reached the group and his father began the introductions, made it clear how unenthused the kid was with the evening’s entertainment.

“Yikes! Poor Jes. He even got the full name treatment - there’s no getting out of it for him after that,” Winnie voiced what they were all thinking. “Although, from the way he was squinting, I doubt the headache excuse was altogether made up. He looked like he was already fading. If Aunt Jenn was here, she probably would have overruled Uncle Four.”

Even as Winnie mentioned it, they watched Jesse surreptitiously rubbing at the base of his skull and grimacing in pain. As soon as one of the men turned to him and asked a question, though, he put on a fake smile and pretended to be interested. Four stood there behind him the whole time like a sentinel, monitoring the situation and making sure the kid didn’t abscond again.

“At least his dad actually seems to care about the kid,” Brian offered by way of partial explanation. “I’m sure he just wants Jesse to get into a good college. It could be worse. He could have had my father.”

“True,” Winnie conceded grudgingly. “But Uncle Four’s been really coming down hard on Jes lately and I think the stress is getting to the kid.” Winnie moved closer to Brian, leaning in so that their conversation would remain private. “For about the last year or so, my uncle has been on this kick about trying to make Jes ‘man up’. It’s so stupid, really. I mean, who really cares if Jes wants to become an artist rather than a businessman like his dad? Just because Four was the son who stepped up and took on the family business from Grandpa, doesn’t mean Jes has to do the same, right? Jesse’s never been the type who’d do well in that environment. Don’t get me wrong - he’s smart as hell - but if you ask me he’s too good an artist to waste his time in business school.”

A loud burst of manly laughter echoed from the group where Jesse and his dad were standing, drawing Brian’s attention to the group again. The little blond kid really did look totally out of place in the bunch. Brian felt for him. He knew first hand what it was like to feel like the odd man out. He’d felt that way pretty much his whole life.

“Maybe his dad will come around?” Brian offered.
“I hope so, because it’s really been hard on Jesse lately. Not to mention that the rest of us are getting tired of listening to Four’s ranting too,” Winnie confessed with a wink as she linked her arm through Brian’s and headed the both of them away from the gaggle of Jesse’s group. “Every single family event I’ve been to for the past few months, it’s been nothing but ‘Jesse needs to get serious about his future’ and ‘We’ve coddled that boy long enough, it’s time he grew out of this nonsense’. I know I’m sick to death of hearing it all the time, so I bet Jesse’s ready to pull his hair out. No wonder his health hasn’t been great lately. If I was constantly being told I was a disappointment and that I needed to buckle down more, I’d probably have a constant headache too.”

“He’s also been giving Jesse shit lately about me,” Justin added, following along behind Brian and Winnie and commenting over Brian’s shoulder. “All of a sudden Four’s become convinced that Jesse’s ‘peculiarities’ are his mother’s fault for babying him too much. He’s also been saying that they shouldn’t have indulged Jes so much as a child, thinking he’d grow out of it, and that now they’ll have to ‘crack down’ or Jesse will end up a ‘sissy’.” Justin hissed out the last word venomously. “If I was still alive, I’d kick my little brother’s ass so hard he’d walk with a permanent limp, the little worm.”

“Fucker,” Brian replied, his answer conveniently responsive to both of his friends’ comments.

Brian could tell that Justin was seriously worried about his nephew by the way the spirit boy was biting nervously at his bottom lip as he looked back at the boy. Poor kid. Parents were really a curse for everyone, it seemed. Even rich kids who grew up indulged eventually had to stand up to them. Apparently. Life kinda sucked like that, you know?

Brian was just about to offer that they put their heads together and manufacture a plan to spring the kid, when his cell phone started vibrating in the pocket of his suit coat. He reached for it, intending to mute it and then return to his conversation, when he noted that the call was from ‘Uncle Vic’. Which was strange, since Vic had rarely called him before.

“Hmm. Maybe I should take this. Excuse me a sec,” Brian murmured, stepping away from Winnie as he accepted the call. “Vic?”

“It’s me, Brian,” Michael’s voice came through the phone’s small speaker. “Uncle Vic’s in the hospital. He collapsed right after dinner tonight. Ma’s going crazy. The doctors say it’s bad. I don’t know what to do.” Michael sounded panicked. “I need you, Brian.”
Brian arrived at Allegheny General to find Michael pacing the hall outside the ICU with Debbie slouched in a nearby chair in a sobbing heap. Brian squeezed Michael’s shoulder as he passed by and then sat next to his surrogate mother, putting a consoling arm around her heaving shoulders. Deb turned her face into his shoulder and let go with a wailing cry that hurt Brian’s heart. For a minute he wondered if he was already too late.

Brian turned worried eyes towards Michael, who could only shrug, indicating they didn’t yet know Vic’s condition. “The doctor hasn’t been out to talk to us yet. It’s been more than an hour.”

“Why?” Debbie demanded vociferously, sitting up straighter while she railed at fate. “Why Vic, huh? It’s not fair. He’s never had it fucking easy. Never. You boys think it’s tough being gay nowadays, just imagine how hard my kid brother had it growing up. Damn it! And if the bullies in school weren’t bad enough, he also had to put up with our fucking parents giving him shit all the time.” Debbie paused to blow her nose wetly into a tissue that she unwadded for the purpose. “Like as not, Vic would get a whupping from our Dad as ‘punishment’ for getting beat up at school. Unfortunately, our father was of the opinion that shit like that ‘built character’, and he seemed convinced Vic needed a lot more character. It was probably a good thing that Vic ran off to New York as soon as he turned eighteen, cause I don’t think he could have handled any more ‘character’ building. Although, even if he’d stuck around, he probably would have been kicked out the same way they kicked me out when I got pregnant. And, after all that, just when Vic was finally coming into his own, it’s not fair that he has to deal with fucking ‘AIDS’ too.”

The three of them fell silent. There really wasn't much you could say. HIV was the scourge of modern times. It had decimated a whole generation of gay men and Vic was just another of the statistics. Thankfully the new antivirals and other treatments were finally beginning to give those infected a fighting chance, but it was still far too frequent that the disease claimed the unlucky, especially those who'd been battling it since the early days of the epidemic.

“Uncle Vic is gonna be fine, Ma. He's a fighter,” Michael intoned, trying to be the supportive son, laying a consoling hand on his mother’s shoulder.

“Damn right he's a fighter,” Deb took the supportive statement and immediately amplified it. “Vic was always scrappy. He'd even argue with Dad. He never won, but he never gave up either . . .”

Deb rambled off into a string of reminiscences about when she and Vic were kids, most of which focused on the problems they had with their conservative and judgemental father. It didn't sound much different than what Brian’s experiences had been growing up with Jack. Or, for that matter, Jesse’s current situation with his father. Maybe all fathers were the same - authoritarian shithheads who threw their weight around, and sometimes their fists too, if they didn't get their way. Or was it just the fathers of gay sons that were bastards? Nah, Jack didn't actually know Brian was gay, so that couldn't be it, could it? Maybe it was just genetic - something about becoming a father set off some chromosomai change, activating a dormant ‘asshole gene’ that was there in virtually all men
but didn't emerge till they had a son? Yeah, whatever.

Apparently Brian wasn't the only one thinking along those same lines. “I always wished I'd known my dad,” Miley piped up when Deb seemed to run out of stories about Vic fighting with his old man, “but from the sounds of it, maybe it's a good thing that I didn't have one. If they all act the way you describe Grandpa Grassi, I guess I didn't miss much, right?” Michael asked, jokingly, trying to make light of the stories as well as of their current situation. “At least this way, if I ever lose my mind and decide to follow in Brian's footsteps and procreate, I won't have had such a bad example to follow after. The cycle has already been broken for me.”

“Now, Michael, not all fathers are like that. Especially not these days. You have to remember that was a different time. A different generation. Hopefully none of you boys will turn out that way. You all know better.” Debbie turned to the side so she could eyeball Brian where he was still sitting next to her. “You better NOT turn out that way, Mister. We don’t need another Jack Kinney in this world. You hear me, Brian?”

“Ma! Lay off Brian. I’m sure he’ll do the best he can. It’s not his fault who his father is,” Michael spoke up to defend his friend. “Besides, I’m sure Brian won’t be very involved with the baby. That’s not what Brian wants. He’s not exactly father material. The girls will be the ones doing all the parenting . . .”

Brian’s attention drifted away at that point while Michael and Debbie continued to discuss Brian’s future parenting possibilities. His arm, which had been draped over Debbie’s shoulders as he tried to comfort her, fell back to his side. His mouth was scrunched up in a thin line and his eyes fell to the scuffed tile floor, focusing on nothing as his thoughts took off in an unpleasant roil of spiralling negativity.

For about half a minute, Brian had contemplated arguing against the prevailing Novotny logic and insisting that he would never - could never - hurt his own child. But then that protest died on his lips. He thought back over his afternoon and evening, to all the disapproving fathers he’d encountered or heard about that day, and it no longer seemed like an impossibility.

Hadrn’t he just been thinking that all fathers were alike? That even the ‘good’ fathers, like Jesse’s dad, often became manipulative, controlling and emotionally abusive when their children didn’t tow the line. And that’s if they didn’t get outright physical in order to enforce their innate authoritarian natures, like Deb & Vic’s father had. Or, worse yet, you could have the overtly malicious and vicious fatherhood option a la Jack Kinney. Those were the only examples of fatherhood Brian had to draw from and they all seemed equally bad. So, if that’s what all fathers were like, how could he promise that he would be different?

In his mind’s eye, Brian could envision every single time Jack had slapped him, hit him, punched
him, kicked him... He could feel the same gut-wrenching terror welling up in him at the mere memories. He remembered the nights spent huddled in his closet or locked in the basement, crying, in pain, and the fear that never seemed to go away altogether his entire childhood. Even now, he still had the occasional nightmare about those times. He’d thought that he’d finally escaped from that world, but maybe not. Not if what everyone was saying was true.

Was he genetically programmed to turn out just like Jack? Was there something in his nature or upbringing that said he was doomed to revisit that horrifying experience on the next generation? Was the abuse he’d suffered an integral part of his very being that he was helpless to escape? Was that what he was destined to do to his own child? Was there a monster inside him just waiting to emerge that he’d have no way to control.

The way Michael and Debbie had been talking, it seemed inevitable. Inescapable. Predestined.

“Shit,” Brian murmured, trying to swallow the bile that had risen in the back of his throat.

No. No, he could never do that to another child. Never.

He silently cursed himself for listening to Justin and thereby allowing even the possibility of this happening. It might be too late to go back and stop himself from acquiescing to Lindsey’s requests, but he refused to become another Jack Kinney. He refused to plunge his own child into the same hell he’d barely survived. He wouldn’t let himself become that monster. He’d kill himself before he let that happen.

Never.

“Fuck it! Life’s too fucking short,” Debbie’s vociferous exclamation finally jarred Brian out of his morose thoughts. Apparently, while Brian had been occupied, the conversation had somehow come back around from Brian’s chances of becoming an abusive father to the man they were at the hospital to support. “I’m not going to let Vic spend the next fuck-knows-how-many months in a stuffy hospital. Not that I’m giving up on him, mind you, but either way, Vic deserves to get at least one good thing out of this life and I’m going to figure out a way to make it happen.”

“What are you talking about, Ma?”

“Italy,” Deb declared assertively.
“Italy? What the hell does Italy have to do with Uncle Vic being sick?” Michael seemed as confused as Brian was at that moment.

“It has everything to do with it, Michael,” Deb insisted, fired up with her new plan to the point she was no longer teary-eyed. “We’re all going to die sooner or later, so we might as well live it up while we’re still able. So, as soon as Vic’s stable enough to get the hell out of here, we’re going to Italy. He’s always dreamed of visiting the ‘Old Country’ and seeing where our family was from. And there’s no time like the present, right? Especially if, heaven forbid, the present is all we have.”

Right then a tall woman in a white lab coat with a stethoscope draped around her neck strode purposely down the hall towards them. Debbie vaulted to her feet to go meet the newcomer and Michael followed on his mother’s heels. Brian only listened with half an ear to the report about what had caused Vic’s collapse the subsequent reassurances that the patient was doing better. When they all started to follow the doctor towards the room where Vic was waiting, Brian held back.

“You coming, Brian?” Michael asked when he looked back over his shoulder and noticed his friend wasn’t with them.


Michael might have argued if he’d had the time, but already the doctor and Debbie were vanishing around the corner at the far end of the hall. He barely had time to wave goodbye to Brian and then trot off in their wake. Brian watched Michael disappear and then turned to go in the opposite direction towards the bank of elevators at the front of the hospital.

Brian thought Debbie’s assertion about living it up while you still could had been the best advice he’d heard in long fucking time. He couldn’t argue with her conclusion. Wasn’t he living proof that life sucked and then you died. So, if those were his only two options, he figured he would go live it up for at least a while longer. Fuck his early determination not to turn out like his drunken parents. With any luck, he wouldn’t live long enough for that inevitability. He might as well indulge - what else did he have to look forward to? And it wasn’t too early to hit the baths. Maybe a few willing mouths and asses would help him to forget the rest of this painfully insightful night.

Chapter End Notes

5/15/17 - So sorry for the long delay with this chapter, folks. I’m really struggling with writer's block at the moment. I blame it on the idiot in the US white house - the political stress is far too distracting. But I’m determined to get this story done for you. I only see 2 (maybe 3) more chapters. Then I can move on to the next project that I
have lined up - which will be much lighter and hopefully easier to write. Plus, I've got a working group together with ideas for another group-written summer fun story. So, keep your eyes open and be prepared for more soon. Thanks for reading. TAG
Chapter Notes

Everything is coming to a head here. Brian is nearing the breaking point. Will he be able to make it through this crisis of conscience with Justin's help? Read and see...

Enjoy! TAG

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 31 - Dissolution.

“Ssshhhh. It's okay, Brian. Sshhhh. You're okay. It was just a bad dream. I'm here. Sshhhh...”

The reassuring words gradually crept into Brian's consciousness, pulling him out of the nightmare. He was panting, beads of sweat dripping down his temples, and his heart was racing a mile a minute. He blinked his sleep-encrusted eyes, trying to focus, a task made more difficult by the hazy, pre-dawn light filtering through the loft’s windows.

After a moment or two, the dream images of an enraged Jack Kinney looming over him were replaced by the sight of a worried, young, blond man looming over him. Instead of slapping him, though, the blond was carding his fingers through Brian's hair and whispering comforting nonsense words. Brian swallowed hard, took a deep breath and then slowly exhaled. But the dregs of his dream were only partially dissipated by the effort. He couldn't completely shake the specter of his nightmare no matter how desperate he was to erase the image of himself physically turning into his father as he snarled down at a crib where a small boy cowered. It was the most horrific scene he could imagine, and one that had been haunting him more and more often as the end of Lindsey’s pregnancy neared.

“Stop it, Brian!” Justin ordered inexorably.

“Stop what? I'm just lying here,” Brian grumbled crankily.

“You're thinking, and that's always a dangerous thing. Especially considering the crappy mood you've been in lately,” the spirit guide warned. “Knowing you, you've probably already worked yourself up into believing that you're doomed to become an axe murderer just because you once saw it in a movie,” he added in an attempt to interject a tiny bit of humor.
“Fuck you, Sunshine,” Brian growled back, not in any mood for humor in any quantity.

“Seriously, Brian, you have to stop worrying about this shit. It’s gonna give you ulcers. Or worse - wrinkles,” Justin persisted with a sly smile.

The joking was, unfortunately, having the opposite of its intended effect on Brian, who was starting to seethe at his companion’s condescending attitude. “Yeah, well, screw you and screw your fucking wrinkles,” Brian ordered, rolling away from the concerned face looking down on him with its own wrinkled brow full of worry, which, in turn, only fueled Brian's anger more. “Get the hell out of my head and out of my business. I don’t need your fucking pity. Pity makes my dick go soft.”

“Well, we wouldn’t want that, now would we,” Justin teased, scooting up closer behind Brian and reaching around with one hand to rub at the substantial mass of throbbing morning wood that was waiting just under the Egyptian Cotton sheet.

Despite his determination to stay mad, Brian couldn't resist the pleasurable sensations Justin was evoking. He moaned and his hips tilted forwards involuntarily as he gave in to the caresses. At the very least, this was much more enjoyable than talking or thinking about his lingering fear of the future. Little by little his mind began to drift away from the bitter dream images of pain and fear, leaving only a wash of pleasure in their wake.

“Mmmm. You're so hard,” Justin purred as he fist Brian's substantial erection, which was now leaking so profusely that a large portion of the sheet was damp. “There, now isn't that better? I definitely prefer to have you dreaming about fucking me, rather than dreaming about fighting off your father. Don't you?”

Justin realized he'd said the wrong thing less than two seconds after the words left his lips. Brian's body instantly stiffened while his erection noticeably flagged. The aura of relaxed intimacy that had just started to blossom around them evaporated. The spirit boy bit his tongue hard enough to draw blood, trying to hold back the curses that would only make things worse. Why the fuck did he have to open his big, damn mouth and remind Brian of the very thing that was causing him to be stressed out in the first place? If it had been physically possible, Justin would have kicked himself in the ass.

Brian, meanwhile, had been thrown right back into that same negative headspace he'd started with. Unbidden, the dream image of himself standing over a baby’s crib and screaming down at a scared little boy popped back into the forefront of his mind. And that image drove out all other thoughts, especially thoughts of happiness or pleasure. It was that image that caused his gut to clench.
Because it wasn't Jack that Brian fought in his dreams these days - he fought himself and the monster he feared he'd become someday - which was far more horrific than anything Jack had ever done to him.

However, lying there with that image metaphorically staring him in the face was simply too much. Brian didn’t want to talk about it. He didn’t want to think about it. He wanted to escape.

The weeks of tension finally caught up with him and the stress overwhelmed him. He had to do something to release the pressure. Something. Anything. And the only thing he could think of to do right at that moment, lying there naked in bed, was to fall back on his usual method of pain management. Luckily he had a willing body to work out his feelings on right there.

Brian twisted around, grabbed Justin and rolled them both over, using his weight to pin the slighter body beneath him. The move freed his hands so that he could capture Justin’s wrists and yank them up over the boy’s head. Justin didn’t resist. He only blinked up at an aggressive Brian who proceeded to devour the younger man’s coral pink lips with an almost savage kiss. The kiss served the dual purpose of stifling any more discussion and distracting Brian from his morose thoughts. After several minutes of heated lip action, he wasn’t thinking about anything except how hard his dick had become.

When they finally broke apart so that Brian could catch his breath, he noticed that Justin’s clothing had conveniently disappeared again. That was the thing that finally got Brian to actually laugh. The impish blond just smiled up at him with a playful glint in his eye. The laughter was short-lived though. Brian felt too raw, too exposed by the lingering terror of his dream, to enjoy the moment. He needed action, not more empty words or pointless laughter, to stave off his demons.

Brian fell on the blond boy, his hands roaming urgently over the ivory skin and his mouth nipping along behind them. He felt the need to possess the younger man. To devour him. To wrest approval and love out of him. To prove something, even if he couldn’t articulate what it was he was trying to prove. And the feeling was so insistent, so compelling, that Brian didn’t have the ability to stop himself or even slow down long enough to question the impetus behind his actions.

Without pausing to think or reason, Brian hoisted Justin’s legs up so that the younger man’s ankles were resting on his shoulders. He spit into the palm of his hand, too frenzied to locate the lube even though the bottle was waiting just a meter or so away on the top of the nightstand. Taking only enough time to slick up his dick with the saliva, Brian plunged into his partner’s ass, thrusting home angrily again and again and again. He stabbed into the younger man as if he could thereby kill whatever demons had been hounding him. This wasn’t making love. This was raw and primal and demanding. It was an outward manifestation of the inward fury that never really seemed to leave no matter how much Brian fought against it. And it had been building up for months now, to the point that he simply had to let it out, no matter what the consequences.
This exorcism didn’t take very long. In less than five minutes Brian had worked himself up to an even greater frenzy as he hammered into Justin over and over, oblivious to everything else around him. The angry pace only increased as his fervor built to a climax. Finally, with one last, powerful thrust that was so violent it caused Justin to slide upwards far enough that his head bumped against the headboard of the bed, Brian exploded with a groan of repletion. The orgasm that rocked through him was so draining that his consciousness flickered and he literally collapsed on top of Justin, laying there, panting, not thinking or even moving, for several long minutes.

It was only when he heard a sniffle coming from the face buried under his shoulder that he reconnected to the reality around him. Leveraging himself up onto one elbow, he looked down and discovered a tear-washed blond face gazing back at him. Justin scrunched up his eyes, trying to blink away the tears since he was still unable to free his hands from Brian’s grip. His countenance was suffused with a wordless anguish that made Brian almost panic.

“Justin? What . . . Shit, are you okay? Did I . . . Fuck, I was too rough, wasn’t I? I . . . I hurt you. Fuck, fuck, fuck . . .” Brian recoiled from the crying man, scooting away from the distraught Justin in horror over his supposed crime.

Justin reacted just as fast though, wrapping his arms around Brian’s neck as soon as he was released and refusing to let him get away.

“Stop it, Brian! Stop! I’m fine. I’m not hurt. I’m just sad because you’re so hurt,” Justin insisted, trying to get Brian to look at him even as the older man continued to struggle to free himself. “Brian! STOP!” he yelled, his pleas finally seeming to reach their target even though Brian was still averting his gaze. “Listen to me, Brian. Are you listening?”

Brian gave the merest twitch of a nod.

“You did NOT hurt me, Brian. I’m fine. You needed that and I’m glad I could give it to you. I’m not hurt. Not by that. You could never hurt me,” Justin paused, holding his listener’s chin so he could force eye contact and hoping that his words were actually getting through. “I’m not upset over the sex, Brian. I swear. I’m upset because I feel so bad about what you’re going through. I wish I could somehow reassure you that it’s going to be okay. I wish I could take away all this fear. All this doubt you have . . .”

Brian pulled away and rolled to the edge of the mattress where he sat up with his back to the importuning blond. Justin sighed and shook his head. What would it take to get through that thick head? How could he make Brian see the reality that Justin saw? The truth that all his fears of becoming his father - or worse - were unfounded? It was just inconceivable that his Brian would
ever be other than the compassionate and kind-hearted, if flawed, man he’d always been.

Justin wiped away the residue of his prior tears and renewed his resolve. He wasn’t going to let Brian succumb to his fears. He would find a way to make this right. He had to.

Inching over so he could mold his body to Brian’s back and wrap his arms around the bigger man’s middle, Justin let his forehead rest against one prominent shoulder blade. “Everything is going to work out, Brian. I know it will. And I’ll be here to help you. I promise. Somehow we’ll get through this. Together.”

Brian huffed a scoffing snort of disbelief at that pronouncement.

“You doubt me?” Justin tried to tease a little, but once again that fell flat. Brian was far too stressed out to find anything funny. “Brian . . . I won’t let you fail. You’ve gotta trust that I’ll be here for you.” Still no answer from the brooding brunet, but Justin refused to relent on this point. “I promise, Brian, nothing will keep me from being there for you when you need me. I’ll always find a way to get to you. NOTHING can keep us apart for long. I know you don’t believe it, but we’re meant to be together. I know that as surely as I know anything. We’re kindred souls. We will always end up together. That’s just the way the universe works. Even if, for some inexplicable reason, something were to happen to one or the other of us, I would STILL find a way to get back to you. I promise. I don’t know how or what form I would be in, but somehow I would get to you.”

Justin squeezed Brian as hard as he could, trying to physically prove that he wouldn’t let go. Brian let out a deep, long, slow breath and seemed to calm. He let his head tilt backwards so that it was resting against the crown of Justin’s head. And then they just sat there together, silently communing, each drawing strength from the touch of the other, and both hoping that Justin’s words were true.

~**~**~**~**~

The Diner was packed by the time Brian arrived. It had taken him quite a while to pull himself together, even with Justin's quiet support. Luckily, he didn't have anything important on his agenda at work that day, so arriving early wasn't necessary.

It seemed like everyone else was moving slowly that morning as well. It was late August and hotter than hell outside, which encouraged a general sluggishness. On top of that, Debbie was dragging just a bit herself - still suffering from the jetlag left over from her trip to Italy with Vic. Because of this double-whammy, though, there was actually a line of folks waiting to get into the Diner. Luckily, Mikey and Em had already snagged a table and Brian was able to cut through the
throng and join his friends inside where it was air conditioned. Ted must have already left for work, since there was an empty plate shoved to the side that hadn't yet been cleared. Brian slid into the booth, sitting on the near side next to Emmett, ignoring the way Michael had automatically started to scoot over for him as well as the disappointed look when Brian didn't sit next to his ‘Best Friend’.

“Coffee!” Brian growled as a harried Deb scuttled past, ignoring the greetings of his friends.

Em and Michael gave each other the ‘Someone’s in a grumpy mood’ look and then tacitly agreed not to poke the Brian Bear until he'd been properly caffeinated. They went back to their prior conversation, chatting about this and that, while Brian doctored the cup of Joe that Debbie brought and then took his first life-saving sips.

“Yeah, Uncle Vic seems to be doing really good,” Michael intoned happily. “Considering how sick he was right before he and Ma left on their trip, I was actually scared he might not make it back. But those new protease inhibitors the doc has him on seem to have kicked in. He's up and around and says he's feeling great. I just hope it lasts.”

“That's wonderful news, Honey,” Emmett enthused. “We should have a party to welcome the world travellers home and celebrate Vic’s recovery. You know, sort of the opposite of a ‘Bon Voyage’ party . . .”

“A ‘Bienvenue Party’,,” Justin opined as he climbed up to perch on the back of the booth behind Michael.

Brian looked up at his shadow with a questioning look.

“The opposite of ‘bon voyage’ is ‘bienvenue’. So it would be a Bienvenue Party,” the knowledgeable sprite offered.

“Bienvenue,” Brian echoed, nodding and smiling at the smart little fucker.

“Bein’ what?” Michael asked with evident befuddlement over Brian’s comment.

Brian huffed a little laugh and shook his head. “Never mind.”
Justin snickered at the clueless Michael and enjoyed seeing that smile from Brian, who was trying to hide it so as not to encourage the invisible imp. Meanwhile, the other two occupants of the booth went back to their conversation, ignoring Brian’s seeming non sequitur. At least until Debbie arrived with food for all and the rest of the discussion was paused while the parties fed their faces.

Justin spent the rest of the meal making faces at Michael whenever he’d say something particularly uninformed and/or making rude gestures that only Brian could see. He even managed to prompt a few quiet chuckles out of the taciturn Brian, which was practically a miracle considering the way the morning had started out. Justin was glad that Brian’s mood seemed to have improved. It went a little way towards alleviating the nagging worry Justin had been fighting off for the past few days.

That morning, the heavy weight of anxiety had seemed to be especially onerous. He’d had a feeling for days now that something really bad was coming, but hadn’t been able to pin down just what his premonition was heralding. But it had been enough to make him dog Brian’s steps with more than his usual tenacity. Maybe the little emotional outburst of the morning had been it and, now that Brian had made it through that, all would be well. But, if so, why did Justin still feel the same lingering sense of dread? Like the Sword of Damocles was still hanging over both their heads. He really hoped that he was wrong, but he just couldn’t shake off the sense of apprehension. He didn’t know what else was likely to happen, but he knew it would involve Brian and it wasn’t going to be good. So he continued to hover and watch and wait.

“So, we’re on for Babylon tonight, right Brian?” Michael importuned just as they were all finishing up their breakfasts.

“Don’t know. I’m actually pretty bushed. I might just stay in tonight, get caught up on some work shit and take it easy,” Brian answered, causing all three of his listeners to look up.

Brian didn’t usually admit to any weakness, let alone say he was blowing off a club night just because he was tired. But when you looked at him, you could actually see the fatigue etched on his still-handsome face. There were bags under his eyes that not even his usual anti-wrinkle cream could hide.

“You do look a little tired, Brian,” Michael empathized, reaching out to rest his hand atop Brian’s on the tabletop. “If you want, I could come over to the loft tonight and we can just hang out.”

Brian immediately pulled his hand back out of Michael’s intimate grip. “I don’t need a babysitter, just a night off, Mikey,” he grumbled, his prickly mood popping up again with the least provocation.
There might have been more discussion, perhaps leading to an actual argument, if Brian’s phone hadn’t buzzed providentially at that very moment. Brian scowled at the screen, obviously not happy with who was listed on the caller ID, but he hit the ‘accept’ button nonetheless. While he mumbled ‘Yeah?’ into the phone, he stood up, threw down a few bills to cover the cost of his meal and then walked towards the exit so he could take his call outside. Michael and Emmett watched him leave, but didn’t budge. Justin, however, hopped up and trotted after Brian, sure that this call had something to do with his unsettled feelings.

Sure enough, Brian was already grumbling into the phone. “I don’t have time for this shit, Mom. I’ve got to get to work . . . Yeah, well, it wouldn’t be the first time Dad’s ended up in a jail cell - he should feel perfectly at home there by now. He can just cool his heels until the cops let him out, can’t he? . . . He did what? . . . Assault? Who’d he beat up this time and why the fuck should I feel sorry for him, again? . . .”

Justin couldn’t contain his curiosity any longer - he inched closer to Brian, leaning his head in towards the phone so he could listen in on the other end of the conversation.

“Brian, your father was only trying to protect your sister. That scumbag husband of hers was at it again. Your father was trying to stop him and, well, it all got a little out of hand,” Joan Kinney’s voice could be heard coming through the tiny phone speaker. “Now, you need to get down to the jail and bail him out. I can’t do it because I’m watching your nephews while Clare is at the urgent care center getting a few stitches.”

“Fuck! I don’t have time for this shit!” Brian reiterated.

“I don’t care what you have time for, young man!” Joan yelled through the line. “You get your rear down there and bail out your father like a good, Christian, son,” she demanded and then hung up.

“Fucking biggest bunch of losers ever seen . . .” Brian grumbled as he unlocked the driver’s side door of the Jeep and climbed in. Justin popped into the passenger side seat without bothering with the door. Brian quickly hit speed dial for Cynthia before starting the car and explained why he was going to be even later than before. Then he pulled out into traffic, took a quick, illegal u-turn, and drove off towards the main Allegheny County Jail without saying another word.

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More than an hour later, Brian and Jack were finally walking out of the detention center together,
with Jack limping a little and holding his bruised ribs. Clare’s husband was a big guy and it was clear that Jack had come off the loser of this battle. John senior was still in the lockup himself - he’d made the mistake of taking a swing at the cop called to break up the domestic dispute and was being held without bail. Brian thought that was probably good news for Clare and her demon spawn kids. Maybe she’d finally get the courage to divorce the abusive brute. Probably not, though. Not only would it offend their Catholic mother, but then Clare would have to figure out a way to support herself and both kids on her own, which she wasn’t prepared for at all. More likely than not, she’d take the loser back, hide her head in the sand, and pretend it wouldn’t happen again. Just like their mother had done, and probably Joan’s mother before her. Ad nauseum.

Brian wordlessly led his father down the block to the parking garage where he’d left the jeep. What did they really have to say to each other anyway? Besides, Jack was just then beginning to seriously sober up and wasn’t in the best of moods, so he wasn’t feeling particularly chatty. Brian was happy to oblige him in his silence and simply drove.

When they were within a few miles of the Kinney residence, Jack abruptly slapped at Brian’s shoulder and pointed to a mini-mart down the block.

“Pull into the Circle K for me, Sonny Boy,” Jack ordered.

“I don’t have time to drive you around on your errands, Pops. I have a job to get to.”

“Shut your fucking sassy mouth and pull the fuck over!”

“Just do it, Brian. It’s not worth fighting him about,” Justin advised from his spot in the back seat.

Brian pursed his lips angrily, shook his head, but followed directions and pulled into the market’s small parking lot.

“You’re gonna have to lend me a few bucks - I didn’t have time to grab my wallet this morning before I ran off to Clare’s,” Jack stated, holding out his hand and waiting for Brian to simply dole out the cash.

“Fuck no! I’m not supplying you with drinking money after I just shelled out a thou to bail your ass out of jail. Pay for your own fucking beer and buy it on your own fucking time,” Brian snarled, already shifting the Jeep into reverse.
“Listen, Sonny Boy. I’ve had a hell of a morning already and I NEED a fucking beer. So, get off your judgmental, high horse, give me some money already and keep your opinions to yourself,” Jack ordered, pointing insistently with one hand to the empty palm of his other.

Brian opened his mouth to once again object, but Justin leaned forward from the back seat, placed a restraining hand on the big guy’s shoulder and gave a little squeeze to caution him.

“Just give him the money, Brian,” Justin advised. “Don’t waste your breath. This is a fight you won’t win. Besides, sending Jack home to drink himself unconscious is probably the best outcome you can expect out of this. At least then he won’t be likely to hurt anyone.”

Brian sighed, took out his wallet and handed over his last twenty. Jack shot him a triumphant look before slouching out of the car and into the mini-mart. Brian just keep shaking his head, pointedly refusing to meet Justin’s eyes in the rear-view mirror, and silently fuming. After a minute or two like that, he must have finally had enough, because he pulled open his own door and started to get out. Justin was worried that Brian had changed his mind and was going to go confront Jack - never a good idea. Justin popped out of the car, reappearing directly in Brian’s path.

“Don’t do it, Brian. You can’t change him. Just let it be,” Justin warned, one hand on Brian’s chest to deter him.

“So I’m supposed to just go on enabling my alkie father by buying him beer, huh? That’s the brilliant plan? Fuck!” Brian yelled, his fists clenched at his sides and his face suffused with anger.

Jack, who’d come out of the store right then with a case of cheap beer under his arm, laughed at Brian’s outrage. “‘Enabling’ huh? *hahaha* You always did like showing off with all sorts of big, fancy words, didn’t ya, boyo?”

Jack tore open the end of the paperboard carton and extracted his first beer, popping open the top as he chuckled at his irate son.

“Well, you can go on spouting your Libtard psycho-babble all you want, but it won’t do you any fucking good.” Jack tipped back his head and chugged the beer in just a few rapid gulps. “For all your fucking education and swanky duds, you’re still just another Mick from the wrong side of the tracks and you always will be. So take a good look, Sonny Boy.” He gestured to himself with the hand holding the empty beer can, dribbling out a few dregs on the front of his wrinkled denim shirt in the process. “THIS is you in twenty years. *hahaha* Now isn’t that a real pisser!” Jack crushed the aluminum can in his hand and then tossed it at Brian’s face, breaking out in gales of unrestrained laughter when his son had to duck to avoid the missile.
“Fuck it! I don’t care anymore, Sunshine,” Brian snarled, pushing past his invisible guide on his way to take out his anger on his derisive father. “You might have always been a drunken loser, Pops, but I’m not going to be. And I’m also done putting up with you being one.”

Brian went to grab the case of beer away from Jack, who’d already fished out a second can for himself. If Jack’s hands hadn’t been full, he probably would have slugged Brian right then and there. As it was, he only twisted away from Brian and laughed even harder. Brian’s fist was already cocked and it looked like he was only seconds from landing a really good right hook on his father’s chin, when he was stopped by a blood-curdling scream coming from his ethereal companion.

“AAARRRRGGGGHHHH! No! No, no, no! Fuck!” Justin screeched, bent almost double and holding his head with both hands, his face a picture of pure agony.

“What . . .” Brian was distracted enough that he let his fist drop and turned to the side to see what the hell was causing his lover such pain.

“No, Jesse, no!” Justin crumpled to his knees on the hard concrete sidewalk. “Shit . . . Jesse,” Justin cried out, tears streaming down his face.

“That’s right. You don’t have it in you, do you, you fucking pussy,” Jack goaded, completely unaware of the reason behind Brian backing off. “All you can do is bitch and moan about shit you don’t like but you never do anything about it, do you? *hahaha* Shit, I can’t believe my son is such a fucking pansy . . .”

Brian looked back at his father, who was now guzzling his beer and openly laughing at what he perceived as Brian’s weakness. But he didn’t have time to take his father to task. He was too worried about Justin right at that moment. His loser father would have to wait.

“Oh fuck. Oh fuck. Oh fuck . . .” Justin was rocking back and forth, still moaning and crying, obviously devastated by something only he could sense.

Brian started to walk over to the boy who was huddled on the walkway to the left side of the market’s door, but only got two steps before he was stopped by a big meaty hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t you turn your fucking back on me, Sonny Boy!” Jack demanded, pulling Brian back around
to look at him. “You know what? I’m sick and tired of your fucking attitude, boy. You need to start showing me some fucking respect. I’m your damned father, after all, and I’m done letting you disrespect me like this,” Jack prattled on angrily as the three beers he’d just chugged in less than five minutes began to take effect and bolster his belligerence.

“Fuck off, Jack. I don’t have time for this, you stupid old drunk,” Brian shrugged off the older man’s grip and tried to turn back towards Justin.

Which is when the entire scene got completely out of control.

“You’re gonna fucking listen to me, damn it!” Jack roared and slung the entire case of beer that he was still holding at Brian’s back.

Brian staggered forward, caught completely off guard by the weight that hit him just as he was turning and already slightly off balance. He managed not to fall, but the impetus forced him to veer off to the side where his foot landed on the edge of the sidewalk, causing him to tilt dangerously and reel into the next parking spot over from the Jeep. A big red SUV that was just pulling into the store braked abruptly in order to avoid running Brian over, the driver laying on the car’s horn in the process and adding to the noise and confusion of the moment. And, in the midst of this chaos, Justin, who’d jumped to his feet intending to run to Brian’s aid, suddenly froze in place and began to scream at the top of his lungs yet again.

“NOOOOOO! Brian! No! No, not now! Not NOW! BRIAN!” Justin shrieked, holding out his arms as if pleading with Brian to help him somehow. “I can’t leave now! I don’t want . . . Briannnn . . .”

By this point Brian had managed to right himself and was attempting to push past the obstruction of Jack Kinney to get to Justin. Unfortunately, his bellicose father seemed intent on picking a fight and wasn’t getting out of the way. Brian, though, was beyond tired of dealing with the idiot and simply shoved him aside, pushing the old man so hard that Jack toppled over, slamming against the SUV and falling to the tarmac in a heap. Brian didn't spare his father a single glance as he vaulted across the pavement to try to reach his clearly distraught lover.

By then, however, it was too late.

With one last cry - voicing all his bottomless regret, pain, fear and love - Justin flung out his arms imploringly towards Brian, right before he started to fade from sight.
“I love you, Brian! I always will. I'm so, so sorry . . . Don't forget . . . Love . . .” The young man’s words faded with him, becoming muffled and indistinct, then evaporating altogether a second before Justin himself vanished into thin air.

Brian was left standing there, trying to hold onto only the wisps of an insubstantial image, as he felt bands of icy cold fear clamp firmly around his heart.

Which was followed ten seconds later by the arms of the SUV driver pinning him against the side of the Jeep and yelling for the mini-mart owner to call the cops. It seems he thought Brian’s seemingly unprovoked attack on the old man still lying in the parking lot needed to be reported. Brian was still too shocked at what had just happened with Justin to think clearly enough to protest his innocence. And Jack was too busy laughing his ass off at this latest development to help, if even he’d been so inclined.

Which is how Brian Kinney ended up having to bail a second person out of jail that day - himself.

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Chapter End Notes

5/26/17 - Don't you just LOVE a horrible cliffhanger? LOL. (Indulging my evil side tonight, folks. Sorry). The good news is you'll have a complete resolution in the next, and final chapter, very soon. Thanks for continuing to read this story. TAG
Resolution.

Chapter Notes

Here it is, folks, the final chapter of this story but the beginning of an even bigger and better story that was all love. Thank you to everyone who has stuck with me as I struggled to get this one completed. Hope you enjoy it. TAG

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Chapter 32 - Resolution.

It took Brian almost two weeks after Justin’s disappearance before he broke down and called Winnie.

Every day for those two weeks, he’d awakened expecting Justin to magically reappear with some reasonable explanation about how Jesse had needed him and why he couldn’t get back sooner. But day after day, nothing had happened. There was no cheerful blond kissing him good morning when he woke up. No supportive and interested partner waiting in his loft, eager to hear about his day when he came home from work. No PSA-spouting know-it-all to lecture him and then take care of him after a long night of drunken clubbing. No enthusiastic lover in his bed every night. There was no one there for him.

Not only had Justin been his protector since childhood, but for the past year or so the spirit guide had been pretty much a constant in Brian’s daily life. Brian had become accustomed to having him around. Even more, he’d developed a closeness with Justin that he’d never experienced with anyone else. He’d come to rely on Justin in so many ways. It was different than what they’d shared when Brian had been a child, though. This was an adult relationship. This was a pairing of two equals, not one taking care of the other, but each helping and supporting the other. The longer he was gone, the more Brian realized how much he had come to depend on that connection with Justin. And how much he really missed the other man now that he wasn’t around.

Which is probably why, after just two weeks of being without Justin, Brian felt like he was completely losing it. And, even worse, he had nobody he could talk to about what was happening, because . . . well, imaginary friend and all, right? But that just made it worse, because Brian had no way to work through all his feelings.
So finally, when he couldn’t take not knowing what had happened even one more day, Brian dug out Winnie’s phone number and made the call.

“Hey, Winnie,” Brian said when his friend finally answered her phone, trying to make his tone and words casual. “How’s tricks.”

“Aren’t I supposed to ask you that, Brian?” Winnie tossed back jokingly, although her voice lacked the usual verve Brian had come to expect.

Brian couldn’t think of any other small talk after that, so he just decided to hell with the usual niceties and dove right into the reason he was calling. “Um, Win . . . I know this may seem like a strange question, but is your cousin Jesse okay?”

“No, he’s not, actually,” Winnie replied with a sad note. “How’d you hear?” Brian didn’t know how to respond to that, so he was grateful when Win rushed on without waiting for an answer. “I still can’t believe what happened. It was so unexpected, you know? The whole family is still in shock.”

“What exactly happened? I didn’t get the whole story,” Brian prompted, trying to get more without tipping her off that he knew nothing at all.

“It was a brain aneurysm. Can you fucking believe it?” Winnie sobbed. “The doctors say it was congenital - it was probably always there, hiding in his head, just waiting to rupture. There’s nothing that could have been done about it, though, even if we’d known. But, still, it’s fucking horrible, you know?” She paused long enough to heave a sigh, presumably wiping away some tears. “Of course, that explains all the headaches he’d been having lately and the fatigue. My Uncle and Aunt are beating themselves up over it, but really, nobody knew and the doctors say that stress alone probably didn’t cause it to rupture when it did. They say these things just happen . . .”

“Shit. That’s fucked up,” Brian answered, not sure what else you could say to someone in those circumstances. “Is he . . .” He hesitated to ask the tough question.

“He’s still in Intensive Care. He hasn’t regained consciousness. They don’t know if he’ll make it or not,” Winnie volunteered without waiting for the questions she knew he wanted to ask. “His heart has stopped a couple times already. The doctors say it’s still too soon to tell - that sometimes patients in these cases pull through - although usually, when they do, there’s significant damage. Everyone’s trying to remain hopeful, but I’m not sure . . .”
“Shit, Win. That’s horrible. I don’t know what to say.”

“There isn’t much anyone CAN say,” Winnie agreed with him. “Or do, for that matter. We’re all just hanging on and waiting to see what will happen.” Then his friend’s tone changed to a more determined note. “It hasn’t been easy for anybody. Especially my Aunt Jen. She’s a wreck. Which is why I was just on my way down to the hospital to spell her. She’s barely left Jesse’s side since this happened, but Uncle Four has finally convinced her to go home and rest for a few hours as long as somebody sits with Jes. So, I guess I better get going.”

“Hey, if you want some company, I’d be happy to come down and sit with you for a while,” Brian rushed to add before she could hang up.

“That’s nice of you to offer, Brian, but you don’t have to. I’ll be fine. I wouldn’t want to put you to all that trouble.”

“It’s no trouble. I really don’t mind. I kinda always liked the kid, you know?”

“Yeah, he is a good kid. He’s annoying as hell and a total brat sometimes, but overall he’s pretty okay,” Winnie replied wistfully. “I guess, if you’re sure you don’t mind, Brian, I actually wouldn’t mind the company,” she relented finally.

The two of them quickly made arrangements for Brian to meet Winnie at the hospital and then hung up. Brian hustled off to the shower and then dressed quickly. He couldn’t wait to get to the hospital where, he hoped, he would find his missing blond boy.

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Brian strode down the hospital corridor, reminding himself that it would be completely undignified to break into a run, but feeling like he wanted to anyway. If Justin was anywhere, he’d be here with his nephew. Not that Jesse being in the hospital totally explained what had happened that day outside the mini-mart or why Justin hadn’t reappeared to Brian since. Brian knew there had to be more to the story. Hadn’t Justin professed his love and determination to always stay with Brian enough times? Brian may have outwardly scoffed at those ‘Lesbianic’ sentiments, but in his heart he still believed Justin’s promises. He knew that only something major would have kept Justin away this long without any explanation at all.

Brian checked in at the nurses’ station and was told that Winnie had left authorization for him to
have access to Jesse’s room. Following the charge nurse’s directions, he made his way to the small ICU cubicle. Through the big glass window that fronted the room, Brian could see the hospital bed with it’s still occupant and Winnie sitting with her back to the door. He tapped lightly at the door frame, causing the girl to lift up her head and nod at him, before he pushed the door open and slipped inside.

“Hey,” Brian greeted his old friend in a hushed voice.

“Hi, Brian. Thanks for coming down,” Winnie answered, getting up from her chair to give Brian a big hug.

Brian hugged back even as he scanned the entire room over Winnie’s shoulder. Unfortunately, there was no sign at all of his lost ghost boy. Except for himself and Winnie, the only other occupant of the room was the figure lying in the bed hooked up to the dozen or so beeping and wheezing machines. Brian’s sigh when the hug ended was almost as sad as Winnie's.

“Come on in and have a seat, Brian” Winnie offered, giving up her chair and moving around so she could perch on the foot of the large hospital bed. “You made it here fast. My aunt and uncle just left about five minutes ago.”

They chatted politely for a few minutes, saying nothing substantial, both uncomfortable in their surroundings and unwilling to discuss the real reason for their presences. But then, after the chit-chat petered out, Brian finally turned to the sleeping patient and really looked at him. Amid all the wires and tubes hooked up to the teen, Brian could barely see the young man and, although he wasn’t a doctor, even to him things didn’t look good.

The young man was lying there, so still it was hard to be sure he was still alive. The only movement came from the slight rise and fall of his chest as oxygen was pumped through the breathing tube attached to a mask around his face. The boy’s skin looked even paler than usual against the stark white sheets. His thin eyelids were a dark lavender, framed by the long blond lashes and the sweaty and matted hair that had been pushed back from his forehead. It looked like Jesse must have recently got a haircut - his formerly shaggy mop of thick blond was now trimmed in a short prep-school style that made him look even more like Brian’s own blond boy.

In fact, now that he really examined the boy, Brian saw how closely Jesse and Justin resembled each other. They could have been twins. They were about the same general build and height. Both had the same high cheekbones, upturned nose and full, wide lips. There were, of course, lots of little differences - Jesse had a small scar on his right cheek that looked like a little pock mark, whereas Justin had one on his left eyebrow where he said he’d once had to get stitches after being run over by a kid on a 10-speed bike - but you’d have to look close to see these small variations. The only really noticeable difference were the two men’s eyes, but with Jesse’s dark grey eyes
closed, Brian couldn’t see that particular distinguishing feature.

What he could see, though, was enough to tell him that this wasn’t the blond boy he was looking for. And if Justin wasn’t here with his other ward - the only other person on the planet who could actually see and hear and touch him - while Jesse was languishing in a hospital bed, Brian was pretty sure that he wasn’t anywhere. And he probably wasn’t coming back either.

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Since Brian's trip to the hospital, he’d been despondent.

Of course, nobody looking at him could tell that. Like any wounded or scared animal, he instinctively hid. Outwardly, he was still the same suave, cocky stud he’d always been. He went about his daily business without interruption. He continued to show his usual brilliance at work. He turned up for breakfast with the gang every morning and allowed himself to be talked into going to Woody’s or Babylon in the evenings. When he had nothing else to do, Brian would take himself off to the baths so he could at least have his physical needs seen to. But inside, he felt hollow and more lonely than ever before.

Around him, other people’s lives seemed to go on without a hitch. The boys were caught up in their own concerns over work, tricks, boyfriends and other interests. Debbie was occupied with taking care of Vic whenever she wasn’t working and was too distracted by her brother’s health woes to notice Brian much. Lindsey and Mel were preoccupied with the imminent birth of their first child and didn’t have time for Brian even if he’d wanted to confess to them what was bothering him. Nobody noticed that anything was wrong with Brian and, since he’d never been the kind to share anyway, there was no reason why anyone would have asked him even if they had noticed something. He had always been self-contained and standoffish when it came to his emotions, why would anyone notice a change now?

But, while everyone else was going on with their own lives, Brian felt more and more disconnected. Nothing really seemed to matter anymore. He was completely nonplussed by Mikey’s continued intimations about how much he’d like to become more than just a best friend to Brian. His tricking had become perfunctory and not all that satisfying. He couldn’t even get interested in the fact that Lindsey was due any day now and he would therefore soon be a father. It felt like that eventuality, and everything else going on around him, was happening to someone else. Not him. He was just drifting through life. Going through the motions without any real stake in the activities around him. And, since Justin was gone, nobody even noticed that Brian was essentially gone too.

After several days of walking around like this, the one thing that finally penetrated the icy shield of his numb indifference was the afternoon he had to show up in court to resolve the charges against
him for ‘assaulting’ his father. He’d already discussed the case with a sympathetic ADA. Everyone was agreed that the matter would be plead down to a simple misdemeanor which would be expunged off his record in six months provided he kept his nose clean. Of course, if Jack hadn’t been trying to teach Brian a lesson, and had just told the truth about what had happened, the whole matter would have been dropped outright. Brian could always trust Jack to be an ass, so that wasn’t surprising. But, because of his father’s perverse sense of humor, Brian had to show up in court at least long enough for the Judge to sign off on the plea agreement before it would all be behind him.

Unfortunately for everyone involved, Jack Kinney decided to show up to court that day too. His whole purpose in coming to the proceedings seemed to be his desire to rub Brian’s nose in the fact that he wasn’t any better than his father now that they both had ‘records’. His stunt backfired though, the judge overheard Jack’s caustic remarks in the corridor outside the courtroom and summarily dismissed all the charges against Brian on her own initiative. But even though Brin left the courtroom with a clean record, he still felt like he’d been once again gutted by his father’s malevolence. And the haunting words that he was no better - that he should take a good look at Jack because he was doomed to turn out the same way - continued to ring in his subconscious long after he’d left Jack standing on the sidewalk in front of the courthouse laughing his sad, tired old ass off.

Brian made it home, walked into the loft, and went straight up to the bedroom where he stood in front of the full-length mirror scrutinizing himself.

What he saw wasn’t the outwardly attractive and confident man that everyone else saw. Brian saw the scared and abused little boy that had always been an integral part of him. A part he now knew he could never escape from. That sad, frightened, beat up little boy inside him determined everything he was today. He could never escape it. He could never escape from his past. Maybe they were all right and he WOULD turn out just like his father. Shackled to his traumatic childhood and doomed to repeat it in the future.

And, if that were the case, why bother?

Because Justin was no longer there to counter Brian’s black mood or talk him out of his resolve, there was no answer to this question. Brian was left with the conclusion that he shouldn’t bother. Not anymore. It was time to end this charade of a pathetic life. Before everyone’s dire predictions actually came true.

Brian walked over to where his stash box rested on top of the dresser. He flipped open the top and pulled out the package of sleeping pills he’d gotten from Anita earlier in the week. He’d been hoping that these would help him stave off the nightmares. Now, though, he figured he could put them to another use - staving off the nightmare of his life. These beauties, along with the brand new bottle of scotch he’d picked up the day before, should do the trick nicely.
Brian was disappointed when the phone started ringing before he was halfway across the room on his way to grab the liquor. More likely than not, it was just Mikey calling to ensure Brian was going to join him at Woody’s. Brian briefly contemplated ignoring the call and just getting on with his plans. But then he’d risk Michael coming over to see where he was and interrupting him.

If Brian was going to do this, he did not want to be interrupted. He wanted to do it right. There would be no half-assed measures leaving him sick and damaged in a hospital somewhere with everyone crying over him and trying to get him to go to counseling. That was NOT Brian’s MO. He always succeeded at everything he tried, and he wanted to ensure he’d go out of life a success as well. So, he quickly decided to postpone his plan and answered the phone.

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The night had dragged by for Brian. The same old bar. The same old club. His same old friends. Even the same old guys, all of whom were falling over themselves to garner Brian’s attention. There was no challenge left to it at all. He had wanted to enjoy his last big hurrah, but nothing seemed to matter to him anymore.

Finally, as the night was winding down and he could tell that Mikey and the rest were getting to the point when they’d want to call it a day, Brian decided to take one last trip to the backroom for old time’s sake. He sauntered out onto the dance floor, selected a nice, young, dark-haired, twink who looked acceptable, and then, grabbing hold of the man’s belt, began to drag the guy towards the back. Of course the guy came without question - they always did. It was actually funny how easy this was sometimes. The thought made Brian smile for the first time that day as he strode through the chains to the backroom with his trick in tow.

Brian had only barely made it to his favorite stretch of wall before Mikey was there telling him the rest of the gang wanted to go. Brian wasn’t giving up his final trick that easily though. He told Mikey that he’d only be ten minutes, tops, and then pressed the trick’s face towards his waiting cock. It was all for nothing though. The trick gave decent head, but it wasn’t really enough to keep Brian interested. It was just one of ten thousand other blow jobs, not many of which stood out and none of which actually made a difference. Within less than five minutes, Brian gave up, pushed the trick away and, with a silent goodbye to the backroom and everything else, Brian followed his friends out of the club.

As usual, the gang was waiting for him right by the front door. Brian slung his arm around Mikey’s shoulders and they all started walking over towards the jeep which was parked right across the street. Brian blew off the guys’ teasing about how he could possibly have gotten bored in the middle of a blow job. They obviously didn’t get it. He was bored with life - one lousy blow job more or less wasn’t going to make a difference. It was really time to get this over with.
Brian had just thrown his jacket into the back seat of the jeep and was going to get in when it happened. When everything changed. When his plans for the night were knocked right out of his head.

When He came along.

Brian felt his presence before he even saw him. He felt a prescient tingling along his spine. He knew it was HIM.

He looked over his left shoulder and saw a young man walking through the swirling mist rising up from the street in the heat of the evening. From a distance, Brian wasn’t sure at first that he was really seeing what he thought he was seeing. But he could feel him more and more strongly as he neared.

When the svelte young blond stopped under a street light, leaning against the light pole and looking Brian’s way with a curious and intense gaze, though, Brian could finally see clearly enough and his heart started thumping in his chest so hard he could hardly breathe.

It was JUSTIN! Finally. Brian felt a true smile break out across his lips.

He started towards the waiting boy who was looking back at him with interest. Brian didn’t even care that he’d be making a fool out of himself by approaching his invisible friend while everyone he knew was watching. He was just too happy to see Justin again to care.

Only, as he got nearer, he realized something was off. There was no spark of recognition in the boy’s eyes. Interest. Desire. Lust. Maybe even a little fear. But no recognition. What the fuck?

“How’s it going? You had a busy night?” Brian asked, walking right up into the boy’s personal space but stopping himself at the last minute from wrapping the young man in his arms the way he wanted to.

That was the moment Brian realized that the boy standing in front of him wasn’t the one he had been missing. This wasn’t Justin. The scar on his left eyebrow was missing. The mouth was just a tad bit too wide. His hair was just one shade too blond. When the kid briefly turned his head to the left and the light fell on his right cheek, Brian saw the little round pock mark and realized that this was the wrong Taylor kid. But, if it was Jesse, why didn’t he recognize Brian either? What the fuck was going on here?
“Just, uh, checking out the bars, you know,” the kid answered him with an assumed nonchalance that Brian knew was totally fake. “Boy Toy, Meathook . . .” he listed with false bravado.

“Meathook?” Brian felt like laughing, the conversation was so ridiculous. “Really? So, you’re into leather?”

“Sure,” the kid tried to bluff his way through it, but the attempt was laughable.

There was no way Brian could let this neophyte loose on Liberty Avenue. Not if Jesse thought it was a good idea to try out Meathook his first night out. Regardless of what the fuck was going on, Brian knew he wasn’t letting the kid out of his sight. Especially not before he figured out what the hell was happening.

“Where you headed?” he asked.

“No place special,” the kid answered.

“I can change that,” Brian posited, reaching out with one hand to grab the lapel of the kid’s jacket and tow him back towards the jeep.

Of course the guys gave Brian shit about picking up what they thought was just another trick and leaving them without a ride home. Brian didn’t care. He had to get this kid off the street and figure out what was going on. Where was Justin? Why was Jesse, who, last he’d known was lying unconscious in a fucking hospital bed, out cruising Liberty Avenue? And why didn’t the kid know Brian when he saw him? He wouldn’t get any of the answers he needed though until he got him someplace private where he could ask the right questions.

As soon as they’d pulled away from the curb, Brian started the interrogation. “So, what’s your name kid?” he asked, playing dumb just to see what kind of answer he’d get.

“That’s a good question,” the boy laughed with an adorably nervous grin. “See, I was named after an uncle of mine that died when he was real young, but nobody calls me by my real name because they all claim it’s too painful to talk about my dead uncle. So, instead of my real name, Justin Elias Sanford Taylor, they all just call me by my initials, ‘JES’, so it’s always ‘Jes’ or ‘Jesse’. Except my mom, of course, she’s always called me ‘Justin’” the kid’s rambling chatter covered up Brian’s surprise at this announcement quite well. “Of course, nobody ever asked me what I WANTED to
be called. Personally, I think it’s cool to be named after a dead dude. That’s why I prefer Justin. Not that my family has ever listened to me when I told them not to call me by that annoying nickname, though. So, depending on who’s calling me, I guess I go by either name.” He concluded, somewhat noncommittally, and then looked over at Brian with a new flutter of nerves.

“Shit. I’m rambling, aren’t I?” He cringed and tittered a little half laugh. “Sorry. It’s just that I tend to talk a lot sometimes. And, since I just got out of the hospital, I suppose I’ve got a lot of talking to make up for, so it’s all spilling out at once.”

“Hospital? You’re okay though?” Brian asked.

“Oh, yeah. Of course,” Jesse, or Justin-part-two, rushed to reassure the man he obviously thought he was trying to seduce in his own, bumbling, virginal way. “I’m fine. Really. There was just this thing with my brain, and I was sorta in a coma for a couple weeks. It was really dramatic and all, but I think my family totally blew the whole thing out of proportion. Even if my heart did stop a few times. I mean, I’m totally fine now. Well, except for a bit of memory loss, but it’s not really that bad, you know - I just have these holes - it’s like having a piece of Swiss cheese for a memory. But other than that, I’m one hundred percent good to go. Or so my doctors tell me.” The kid held his arms out to the side as if presenting himself as evidence to back up his statement.

“When I woke up a couple days ago, I felt just fine and couldn't even figure out what I was doing in the fucking hospital. I guess I scared my cousin Winnie to death - everyone had been expecting me to die, you know. But I didn't, and the docs say it's a miracle or something, but I'm one hundred percent fine. Memory issues aside. So, that’s why I thought I’d celebrate by taking myself out for some fun for the night, you know?” The boy finally ran out of words and looked over at Brian who’d still said nothing. “Damn. I did it again. Too much?”

Brian only laughed, still trying to process the entire story. However, before he could pursue his next line of query, and before the kid had a chance to veer off on another rambling tangent, they pulled up at the curb in front of the loft. Brian stopped the car and turned off the engine. He still wasn’t sure what he was going to do with this amnesiac Justin Junior. He supposed he should call Winnie and let her know what her cousin was up to. He guessed that nobody in the boy’s family had a clue the kid was out trolling on Liberty Avenue, only days after getting out of the hospital after miraculously surviving a ruptured brain aneurysm. They were probably all freaking out big time. Jes seemed fine to Brian though.

Still undecided about his next course of action, Brian turned to look at his companion. The light from the street lamps on Fuller were shining down through windshield directly on the boy sitting in the passenger seat. The way the light hit the boy, it seemed to create a glow around him, creating a halo effect above the white blond of his hair. Brian thought how beautiful the kid was and was reminded almost immediately of how many times he’d thought the same thing about his Justin. He remembered all those times, lying in bed, looking down on the bewitching blond countenance and
reveling in his companion’s surreal, breathless, timeless beauty.

Fuck he missed Justin! He missed him so bad it was like a stabbing pain in Brian’s gut. He hadn’t realized it fully until just this moment, but that pain of loss was what was killing him. What had been driving him to want to kill himself. Brian wanted nothing more, right at that moment, than to get his Justin back for good.

Which is when some mystical shift in the light occurred that changed Brian’s entire life.

All of a sudden the street lights were illuminating his passenger’s face in a way that emphasized the young man’s eyes to the exclusion of the rest of the youth’s face. It was like a spotlight shining on that one feature. And Brian finally noticed THIS Justin’s eyes.

They weren’t the dull grey blue he’d come to associate with the boy he used to know as Jesse. These eyes were a brilliant, deep, crystal blue. These eyes contained a mischievous yet caring glint that Brian had known all his life. These were the eyes that had smiled at him countless times, when he was hurt, happy, scared, gleeful. Those weren’t Jesse’s eyes. Those were his Justin’s eyes!

“Justin?” Brian breathed out the name, questioning the truth he saw but didn’t trust.

“Yes?” the boy answered, smiling at him with that same, reassuring, loving smile that always melted Brian’s heart.

‘I promise, Brian, nothing will keep me from being there for you when you need me. I’ll always find a way to get to you. NOTHING can keep us apart for long. I know you don’t believe it, but we’re meant to be together. I know that as surely as I know anything. We’re kindred souls. We will always end up together. That’s just the way the universe works. Even if, for some inexplicable reason, something were to happen to one or the other of us, I would STILL find a way to get back to you. I promise. I don’t know how or what form I would be in, but somehow I would get to you.’

The prophetic words seemed to percolate out of the ether directly into Brian’s consciousness. Brian hadn’t believed them the first time he’d heard them, assuming they were mere romantic hyperbole, but now he couldn’t escape them. Now he believed. Justin had always maintained that they were destined to be together - for real - somehow, and now, maybe, that prediction looked like it might be coming true. Maybe HIS Justin truly had come back to him, like he’d always promised he would.
Maybe Brian was being given the gift of a real chance with the man he finally realized he did love more than anything in the world.

Without speaking - Brian didn’t think he could speak even if he was able to corral his whirling thoughts long enough to come up with the right words - Brian got out of the jeep, walked around to the passenger side of the car, waited for this new Justin to climb out and then led the boy upstairs to his loft. The boy followed quiescently. The elevator ride up was silent but filled with a pregnant expectation. Brian felt like he was vibrating with a strange combination of uncertainty and anticipation. He wasn’t sure he could trust his revelation or that, even if it was true, it would last. It would probably take him years to actually accept that he finally would be allowed his heart’s desire. He definitely didn’t want to jinx it by asking questions, though, so he stayed silent.

When he finally reached the door to the loft, Brian took a deep breath and then steeled himself. He wanted this so much, it was going to kill him if it didn’t happen. But even so, he wouldn’t pressure the boy for more than he was ready to give. Even if he was Brian’s Justin on the inside, it seemed that the kid didn’t know that yet.

Brian slid the loft door open and strode in as confidently as he could. He threw his jacket over towards the couch, not really caring if it landed on the floor or not.

“Coming in?” He asked the boy who was hesitating on the doorstep.

“Huh? . . . Oh, yeah,” the boy huffed another nervous laugh and took two baby steps inside.

“Shut the door,” Brian directed.

The kid turned back, grabbed the handle and, after taking a deep breath of his own, pulled the heavy metal door closed with a sharp clang. Brian, meanwhile, had decided that the only way to do this was to take action. He stripped off his shirt, picked up a bottle of water he’d pulled out of the fridge and took a sip. The kid was still mincing his way around the end of the kitchen island and looked like he was about to bolt. Brian wasn’t about to let that happen if he could do anything about it.

“This is a really nice place,” Justin Junior offered, with an unsure smile.

Brian didn’t answer. He just upended the bottle of water over his head, letting the liquid drip down his body to try and cool himself off and stay his rampaging ardor. The boy looked like he’d be
drooling if he hadn’t swallowed back hard. While the kid nervously chattered, Brian began to strip off the rest of his clothing. First his boots and socks, and then his jeans. Finally, when there was nothing else left to remove, Brian hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his thong and lowered even that to his ankles before standing up and offering himself to the younger man in all his naked glory.

“So, are you coming or going? Or coming and then going,” Brian asked, adding in the option he really wanted the youngster to chose last. “Or coming . . . And staying?”

Then he waited. Standing there with his arms outstretched, offering himself up, completely vulnerable and open, and scared as shit about what the answer would be. And, finally, after only a few seconds of indecision, the boy shrugged off his own jacket and came across the floor to him.

Brian took the body of the man he knew so well in his arms and finally let his lips do what they’d been longing to do since he’d found the kid under a street lamp. He devoured those lips like a starving man. They kissed and nibbled and tasted each other for what felt like ages. And it was good. And real.

And Brian finally, really, truly believed in the prophesy that Justin had had the day Brian was born.

They really WERE meant to be together. They WERE kindred souls. And as long as he had Justin, Brian’s life wasn’t a waste of time after all.

“What was your name again?” Brian asked, just testing one more time to make sure he wasn’t dreaming and this was real.

“Justin. My name is Justin.”

“Good,” Brian responded and turned to lead the boy to his bed, where he hoped Justin would always stay.

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~The Beginning~
5/29/17 - So, it took more than four years to complete this story - I can't believe that it was so hard to write. But it's finally done and I can now relax without the weight of an unfinished WIP hanging over my head. I apologize to all who have been waiting on this one for so long. Thank you to all who have stuck with me and with this story. Now, what should I write next? TAG

5/10/13 - So, like I said, this story idea's been bugging me for months. What do you think so far? Your comments are what helps drive me to write, so please give me whatever feedback you can. Thanks. TAG

P.S. Yes - this is another angsty story - definitely not a lighthearted sexy romp - but I couldn't stop this idea. And, yes, I know there's a cliffhanger ending even in the Prologue. But, if you've ever read any of my other stories, you should be used to that by now. Sorry. This one shouldn't be AS cliffy as my prior stories though. Really. I promise.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!