Without You I'm Nothing

by ghost [archived by bjfic_archivist]

Summary

Brian and Justin have grown so close, Michael's afraid he's lost his bestfriend forever, until an unlikely ally offers a tempting alternative to getting left behind. Set in my own mythical season four (Michael and Ben have custody of Hunter, Ted's in rehab but the whole Cody/Pink Posse thing never happened).

Notes

Note from IrishCaelan, the archivist: this story was originally archived at The Brian/Justin Fanfiction Archive. To preserve the archive, I began importing its works to the AO3 as an Open Doors-approved project in September 2017. I posted announcements, but may not have reached everyone. If you are (or know) this creator, please contact me using the e-mail address on The Brian/Justin Fanfiction Archive collection profile.
Chapter 1

Author's notes: I've written in other fandoms but this is my first foray into the Queer as Folk universe. It took a long time for me to hear the boys' voices but now that they're in my head, it seems they've taken up residence. I hope my first attempt shows some promise and gratefully welcome any and all comments and/or critiques.

The inside of Michael Novotny’s little comic book shop is quiet and dark. Outside fierce winds are blowing and the sky threatens snow but inside all is still. Michael hasn’t had a customer in three days. After a brief Christmas rush his business has slowed to near non-existence and that coupled with the recent departure of his lover and foster son for a “positive mens’ retreat” in Hawaii has Michael consumed with melancholy and loneliness. He glances at the clock. Closing time isn’t for another half an hour but he actually has somewhere to be tonight (for a change) and the warmth and silence inside the shop are making him feel claustrophobic. Closing up takes about a minute and then he grabs his heavy blue parka from the coat rack and sets off down the street, head bowed against the icy wind.

As he fights his way uptown he wonders for about the thousandth time why he doesn’t own a car. The answer comes to him quickly enough, “Because you always had Brian to drive you around.”

Brian.

His bestfriend. Supposed bestfriend was more like it. Michael could count how many times he’d seen Brian in the last three months on the fingers of one hand. Some bestfriend. There’d been that hour or so at Mel and Lindsay’s Christmas/Chanukah brunch and a fifteen minute appearance at Ben and Hunter’s going away party but other than that it was brief glimpses at the diner and unreturned phone calls.

Michael thought things might have been better if he had *Rage* to distract him but Justin was so busy working on his own projects, getting him to find a few hours to collaborate was like trying to secure an audience with the Pope.

Thinking about the pair of them, Brian and his “boy wonder” gets Michael good and pissed. Deep down he knows he doesn’t have any real reason to be but the anger heats his blood, so much so that he barely notices the cold and being mad seems a more noble occupation than indulging in self pity, so he gives himself up to it. Brian and Justin. Michael bets Justin’s phone calls never go unreturned. No way. And it occurs to him that the few times he has seen either of them, they’re together. Kissing, touching, arms around each other, laughing, talking, so goddamn infatuated with each other it’s like they’re living in a bubble with everyone else on the outside. Michael kicks at some random debris in his path and following its trajectory, suddenly notices that he’s arrived at his destination, The Gay and Lesbian Center’s new gallery, “Queer Space”.

The gallery is Lindsay’s pet project and tonight, ably assisted by Emmett, she is hosting the opening night gala, featuring work from six of Pittsburgh’s hottest, gay artists, including one Justin Taylor. As Michael steps inside he makes up his mind to do two things, one to despise Justin’s paintings and two, completely ignore Brian, assuming, of course, his former bestfriend deigns to acknowledge his existence. He’ll say hello to Mel, congratulate Lindsay and Emmett, turn up his nose at whatever Justin has hanging on the wall then go home and read the latest issue of “Ghostrider”. Fuck Brian and Justin.
Michael grins as he takes his parka off and hands it to the coatcheck girl. He pictures Brian’s face, hurt and bewildered, as Michael walks right by him without a word. Give him a taste of his own medicine. Show him what it feels like to be ignored. Michael looks around the large, open space, eager to let the payback begin.

“Hey Mikey!”

Michael looks over and sees Brian standing in line at the buffet holding a plate in one hand and waving to him with the other.

“Brian!” Michael shouts happily and hurries over, his anger evaporating so quickly it was as if it had never existed.

Brian slips his arm around Michael’s shoulders and pulls him close for a quick kiss on the lips. “Howya’ doin’ Mikey?” he asks.

“Good.” Michael says, inhaling Brian’s familiar scent, bourbon mixed with smoke and expensive aftershave. “How are you?”

“Never been better.” Brian says, turning his attention back to the buffet. “I picked up two new clients this week.”

“Good for you!” Michael says enthusiastically.

“Yeah.” Brian says. “King Dong Dildos and Torso. A couple more and I’ll be able to pay my mortgage and hang onto the ‘Vette for another month.”


“Yeah and in the meantime I get all the free dildos and mesh t-shirts I want.”

They laugh together and for a moment, all is right in Michael’s world. He glances down at the plate in Brian’s hand. “Jeez.”, he says. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Yeah. Why?”

Michael points to the plate onto which Brian has piled almost every dessert on the table. “I don’t think I’ve seen you eat so many carbs since junior high.”

Brian laughs. “This isn’t for me. It’s for Justin.”

And just like that Michael’s good mood vanishes.

“Why can’t Justin get his own food?” he asks, hating the petulant tone in his voice, hoping Brian won’t notice.

Brian doesn’t.

“Lindsay’s got him talking to every art fag in Pittsburgh. By the time he’s free all this shit’s going to be gone and I’ll have to listen to him bitching and moaning about it all night.” He uses a pair of tongs to pick up a tiny cream puff.

“Don’t forget the carrot cake.” Michael says sullenly.

“Justin hates carrot cake.” Brian tells him.
Done with the buffet Brian leads Michael to a lounge area surrounded by large black and white photos of Liberty Avenue suspended from the ceiling by wires. He sits down on a low sofa and sets Justin’s desserts on a squat, luminescent cube, which Michael assumes is an end table.

“So.” Brian says lighting a cigarette. “How’s life without Professor Ben and the littlest hustler? Enjoying your freedom?”

“No.” Michael answers honestly. “I miss them both like crazy. I even miss Ben’s tofu stir-fry and Hunter’s dirty socks on the living room floor.”


They keep talking and Michael, once again, finds his anger being soothed, washed away in the torrent of gratitude he feels at being the center of Brian’s universe, for however short a time. He tells Brian about how slow things have been at the store and how, even though he knows it’s stupid, he feels a little left out because Ben and Hunter went off to Hawaii without him. And it’s not like he can’t talk to other people about these things and it’s not like he hasn’t but it’s different telling Brian. Somehow Brian makes him feel like he’s being heard in a way no one else can, even though he doesn’t say much, just listens with an intent expression. But it doesn’t last. Just as Michael is telling him about some new ideas he has for Rage Justin appears.

He falls over the back of the couch into Brian’s arms and sighs dramatically. “If being a famous artist means having to talk to fawning, limp dick, Eurotrash, art fags all night I’d rather work at the diner for the rest of my life.”

Brian leans down and brushes his lips across Justin’s. “Poor Sunshine”, he croons in mock sympathy.

Justin hauls himself out of Brian’s lap and sits beside him. “And the worst part is there’s no dessert left. Fuckin’ vultures. There’s nothing left but carrot cake.” Justin wrinkles his nose in disgust and throws a hand over his eyes in true diva fashion.

Grinning, Brian winks at Michael and retrieves his surprise.

“Voila” he says proudly.

Justin opens his eyes. “Brian!” he exclaims. “Thank you!”

“Sweets for my sweet.” Brian says. “Everything but carrot cake.”

Michael fights the urge not to gag. “So, Justin.” he says. “I was just telling Brian about this great idea I have for the next issue of Rage.”

“Oh yeah?” Justin asks, letting Brian feed him a miniature slice of cheesecake.

“Yeah.” Michael says. “I was thinking that we could resurrect Razorback, you know? Only this time he has this mechanical army of queer hating Republi-bots!”

“Cool.” Justin says looking into Brian’s eyes and licking chocolate from his fingers. He takes a little piece of tiramisu from his plate. “Want some?” he asks Brian seductively.

Brian shakes his head. “I’ll have my dessert later.” he whispers.

Brian leans in and slips his tongue into Justin’s mouth. Michael watches, all at once angry and
aroused until it becomes apparent that he’s been forgotten. “I’m going to get something to drink.” he mutters and wanders away.
Michael gets a beer and sees his mom and Uncle Vic standing by a sculpture of a two nude men embracing.

“Hi Honey!” Deb shouts, waving him over with a bottle of Bud.

“Hey ma.” Michael says, coming over for his obligatory kiss and cheek pinch. “Enjoying the art?” he asks.

Deb gestures to the statues. “Well, if this is what they’re calling art nowadays I just might become an aficionado. Have you seen Sunshine’s stuff yet?”

“No. Not yet.”

“Well you have to see it.”, Deb says. “It's fuckin’ unbelievable.”

Vic nods in assent. “It’s really something. We’ll walk back over there with you if you want.”

Michael decides to give in, figuring he’ll have to see Justin’s work sooner or later. “Okay.” he says, resigned.

Deb and Vic lead him toward the center of the space where a large group of people are gathered in front of two free standing white walls. At the top of one, written in stark black letters are the words, “The Object of My Affection” and underneath that in lowercase, “paintings by justin taylor”. Michael works his way through the crowd with a little help from Deb’s bulk.

There are four paintings. The first three are arranged on one wall. They are all oils of varying sizes, framed in simple goldleaf frames. They are all of Brian.

The first is a night time scene. Brian is leaning against his jeep, his eyes narrowed, the expression on his face sensual and predatory. Bright, multi-colored lights are reflected in a puddle at his feet and in the jeep’s windows. A small placard underneath the painting reads, My First and Michael realizes this is what Brian must have looked like to Justin the first time he laid eyes on him under that streetlamp in front of Babylon. The painting is so realistic Michael can almost hear the faint pulse of muted techno music.

The second painting shows Brian reclining on his bed in a tangle of pale, blue sheets. He’s naked, his skin and hair shining with moisture as if from a recent shower, his cock half tumescent and rendered with such loving realism Michael can see the tiny veins just below the silken skin and droplets of water glistening in the curly, brown pubic hair surrounding it. Brian holds an apple in one hand as if in offering to some unseen Adam and a knife in the other. His posture and expression are pure carnality. Just looking at the painting makes Michael’s stomach flutter and his dick harden. The title is My Temptation.

The next painting shows Brian from the waist up wearing a simple blue shirt, a hint of bloodied, white silk visible under the collar. Brian’s brown eyes peer out from behind a black Rage mask, fierce and defiant. This one is called My Hero.

The fourth painting is much larger than the others, nearly seven feet tall and four across. It hangs alone on the second wall and shows Brian life size and naked. He’s standing with his back to the loft windows at night. Moonlight streams in the through the glass, swathing his body in silverblue shadows. His face is a study in darkness and light, his expression unfathomable, all at once open and
closed. Below his sovereign nose, Brian’s full lips are parted, turned down, almost pouting. His haunted eyes reflect a thousand things, longing, frustration, anger, hurt and a vulnerability Michael immediately recognizes. Up until now he thought he was the only one who had ever seen that quality in Brian and finding it here, captured by Justin’s hand, makes him ache inside.

The title placard beside the painting reads, *My Heartbreak.*

“So what do you think?”

The voice is his mother’s but when Michael turns he sees the whole gang has gathered around. Justin’s there with Brian at his side, of course. Emmett is a little ways away with his mom, Vic, Mel and Justin’s friend Daphne. Everyone’s watching him, waiting for him to gush compliments. Michael refuses to do it. “They’re really good.” he says, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible.

“Good!?” Debbie sounds outraged, as though Michael just suggested the earth was flat. “They’re goddamn masterpieces!” She leans over and kisses Justin on both cheeks. “Every one of them!”

“Thanks Deb.” Justin says, wiping lipstick from his face.

“Have you sold any yet?” Vic asks.

“Just one.” Justin points to a little red dot on the title card for *My Temptation.*

“Figures.” Emmett says. “Some rich old queen probably bought it to jerk off to.”

“Gross!” Daphne exclaims.

“I think it’s kind of hot.” Brian says, draping his arms around Justin’s shoulders.

“You think standing in line at the DMV is kind of hot.” Mel says.

“How much did you get for it?” Emmett asks.

“Two thousand dollars.” Justin replies. “I can hardly believe it. I didn’t think I’d sell any.”

“How much for the big one?” Emmett points to *My Heartbreak.*

“It’s not for sale.” Justin says, looking at Brian.

Just then Lindsay comes up, a huge smile on her face. With a flourish she sticks little red dots on the placards for *My First* and *My Hero.*

“Justin!” Daphne squeals excitedly. “You’re rich!”

“Seriously?” Justin asks Lindsay.

“Two different buyers.”, she tells him proudly, “One of them almost had a fit when I told him *My Heartbreak* wasn’t for sale. I had to tell him it was already part of a private collection.”

Everyone moves in to give Justin a congratulatory hug and kiss and Michael feels himself literally and figuratively pushed aside.

“I’m so proud of you honey!” Debbie tells Justin, “This is really something!”

“Christ.” Michael mutters, “It’s not like he discovered a cure for cancer.”
He didn’t mean for everyone to hear him, he didn’t even mean for his mother to hear him really but somehow everyone does and an uncomfortable silence descends.

Lindsay takes Justin’s hand. “Come meet the buyers.” she says brightly, trying to diffuse the situation. She leads Justin away and everyone but Brian drifts off in little knots of twos and threes throwing odd looks at Michael over their shoulders.

“Somethin’ the matter Mikey?” Brian asks.

“No.” Michael shakes his head. “I was just joking.”

“It didn’t sound like you were joking.”

“Well, I was.” Michael says hotly. “It’s not my fault everyone’s so damn sensitive.”

“C’mon.” Brian says, steering him toward the bar. “Let’s get a drink.”

Brian orders Beam on the rocks for himself and a Heineken for Michael.

“Did Justin do something to piss you off?” he asks, handing Michael his beer.

“No.”

“Did I?”

“No!” Michael says emphatically, “I told you, I was joking.”

“You’re not still sore about us getting back together?”

“I was never sore. All I want is for you to be happy. If Justin makes you happy then so am I.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.” Michael says. “Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“All this doesn’t bother you?”

“All what?”

“All this “my hero, my heartbreak” stuff.”

Brian shrugs. “Justin’s still a kid. He feels things… very passionately. It comes out in his art. We have an understanding though. He knows who I am.”

“I just never thought I’d see the day when you’d be okay with someone painting a naked picture of you, calling it My Heartbreak and hanging it up in public.”

Brian grins wickedly. “Who wouldn’t want a room full of strangers admiring his dick? I think it’s kind of hot.”

And of course Michael can’t help laughing.

“Come on.” Brian says. “Let’s check out the rest of the art, see if anyone’s cock is bigger than mine.”
Justin’s standing in front of his paintings, his arms folded across his chest, a check for six thousand dollars in his pocket. He is suffused with a sense of disbelief. It’s not just the money, though every ten minutes or so his hand steals into his pocket to confirm the reality of the check. It’s the paintings themselves, the fact that he made them with his own hands, irreparable brain damage and all. A little more than a year ago the doctors had told him he might not be able to draw again and now, here are four paintings that had started out as nothing more than blank canvas stretched onto a wood frame, transformed with oil paint, brushes and months of hard work into beautiful images of the man he loves. The paintings are proof, more than marching in the Pride parade, more than drawing Rage, more than anything else, that Chris Hobbs and his baseball bat didn’t win. And though his hand aches even now, he knows this is only the beginning. He has so much more inside him.

There’s something else too. Having lost his studio space at PIFA, Justin made these paintings at the loft. Brian had given him the area that had formally held the liquid TV and Barcelona chairs. They’d never talked about the paintings, not until a couple of days ago but there were nights when Justin looked up from his easel and found Brian watching him, taking in the work, taking in Justin... And it was okay. In fact, Brian said he thought the paintings were…

“Amazing”.

Justin knows the voice instantly but when he turns and sees Ethan Gold standing behind him it’s still a shock.

“Ethan.” he breathes.

He looks different. His hair is cropped short and one of his ears is pierced with a tiny, gold hoop. He’s wearing a black suit Justin immediately recognizes as Armani, exquisitely tailored.

“What are you doing here?” Justin asks.

Ethan smiles. “I saw your name in the paper. I wanted to see your work.”

“I thought you’d moved to San Francisco.”

“I did. I’m back though, guest soloist for the Pittsburgh Phil.”

Justin looks around nervously. The last time he saw Brian he was in the lounge with Michael and Daphne. Having taken full advantage of the open bar, the three of them are sprawled out sharing sex stories, Michael and Brian competing to see who can shock Daphne the most. He can’t begin to guess what Brian’s reaction to Ethan’s presence might be and he doesn’t want to find out.

Ethan turns his attention back to the paintings, his eyes appraising, his expression conveying obvious appreciation.

“You like them?” Justin asks.

“Well, I can’t say I care much for the subject matter but the work itself is, as I said, amazing.” He rests a hand on Justin’s shoulder. “You should be very proud of yourself.”

Justin shrugs Ethan’s hand away and instantly regrets the hurt look he receives in return. “I’m sorry.” he says. “But...”
“You and Brian are back together.” Ethan finishes. He gestures at the paintings. “I pretty much had that one figured out.”

“Are you seeing anyone?”

“Yeah. Grant. He’s a cellist. We have a place together in the Castro. You and Brian should come visit sometime.”

Justin laughs. “Sure, why not?”

Ethan smiles, “So tell me, my old muse, how are things?”

- It’s been a long time since Michael got drunk and he’s having a good time. His little jibe from earlier has been forgotten and he’s back in everyone’s good graces, including Brian’s, especially Brian’s… They’re laughing and talking and making Daphne blush and giggle with sex stories from their “fresh from the closet era”.

- Michael’s telling the one about getting it on with the Dungeon Master from his D & D days back in junior college. “We were up in my room and he wanted to pretend we were Frodo and Sam from Lord of the Rings. He kept yelling, “Do you like that Mr. Frodo? Are you going to cum Mr. Frodo? Come on, tell Sam how you like it!” And then my mom knocks on the door and asks how many people I’ve got in there and if I need more condoms.”

- Daphne laughs so hard she spits out what’s left of her beer all over Brian, who’s too drunk to care.

- Emmett sashays in and with a brisk clap of his hands announces, “Last call for alcohol!”

- “One more round for everybody?” Michael asks, rising unsteadily to his feet.

- Brian and Daphne raise their glasses in assent.

- Michael follows Emmett back to the bar and orders a double Beam for Brian and beers for Daphne and himself.

- “You think you can find your way back, sweetie?” Emmett asks.

- “Sure.” Michael says, tucking the beer bottles into his jacket pockets but somehow he makes a wrong turn and finds himself staring at someone he’d never thought he’d see again.

- It’s Ethan. Ethan Gold aka “The Fiddler” and Michael’s first thought upon seeing him is, “Maybe he and Justin will get back together and I can have Brian to myself again.”

- He’s disgusted at himself for thinking such a thing but the thought enchants him nonetheless. In the space of ten seconds he envisions Brian broken hearted, as once again, Justin abandons him in favor of Ethan and of course, Michael is there, the loyal friend to comfort and console… He sees himself wiping away Brian’s tears, bending down to wrap his arms around his bestfriend who will just happen to be shirtless. And finally, at last, Brian will say…

- “Hey Novotny, what happened to my drink?”
Michael blinks and looks around. Brian is standing behind him, grinning, a cigarette tucked behind one ear.

“I, uh…” Michael stammers looking back over his shoulder then back at Brian. He sees Brian grin fade so rapidly it’s like someone’s thrown a switch.

Brian takes the glass of Beam from Michael’s hand, downs it in a single gulp then walks over to where Justin and Ethan are standing.

Talking to Ethan is easier than Justin thought it would be. He’s arrogant as always but he’s also charming and witty. He talks about San Francisco and traveling around the country playing with various orchestras and the new CD he has coming out. In turn, he listens intently as Justin tells him about getting kicked out of school, defeating Stockwell and working in a traditional medium after using the computer for so long. Still, in the back of his mind, a little voice gets louder and louder, “Wrap it up Taylor. Brian’s going to come looking for you anytime now.”

And then it’s too late.

Ethan sees him before Justin does. “Hey Brian”, he says, smiling.

And with a sinking feeling Justin looks over and sees Brian strolling up from the side, taking a cigarette from behind his ear and lighting it with a quick flick of his platinum Cartier.

Justin turns to Brian, takes his hand. “Hey.”, he says. “You remember Ethan?”

“Course I do.” Brian says, slinging an arm around Justin’s shoulders. “How’s it going?”

“Good.” Ethan says.

Justin can sense Brian sizing Ethan up, taking in the suit, the new haircut, the Prada boots, even the scent of expensive cologne. He tries to think of some way, any way, he can get them all out of this awkward bitch of a situation but before anything comes to mind Lindsay appears.

“Ethan!” she says in surprise, stopping short when she recognizes him.

“Hello again Lindsay.” Ethan says, extending a hand. “How are you?”

“I’m fine.” She clasps Ethan’s hand briefly. “How are you?”

“Excellent.” Ethan replies. “Awestruck, actually. Justin’s new work is incredible.”

“I think so too.” Lindsay says smiling. She turns to Justin, “One of your buyers wanted a quick word, do you mind?”

“Uh, no.” Justin says, looking at Brian. “I, um, I’ll be right back.” He gives Brian a quick kiss on the cheek and follows Lindsay toward the front of the gallery.

Brian and Ethan watch Justin walk away and then, unknowingly, shift their stances, unconsciously flexing their fingers, planting their feet as if preparing for a fist fight.
Brian throws the first punch. “What are you doing here, Gold?”

“I was just telling Justin, the Pittsburgh Phil invited me to be the guest soloist in their Winter Series. They’re really into featuring homegrown talent lately and the money’s great so…”

Brian cuts him off, “I mean what are you doing here.” He points to the floor in front of his feet.

“I saw an announcement in the Arts & Culture section of the paper.” Ethan says nonchalantly. “I wanted to see Justin’s new work.”

“That all?” Brian asks.

Ethan puts his hands up in mock surrender.

“And I wanted to see Justin. In spite of the way things ended between us, I still care about him and…” He takes a step closer to Brian, as though about to share some intimacy, ”I know he still cares about me.”

He notes the way Brian flinches when he says this and decides to push a little harder.

“You don’t mind do you Brian? Me coming here, I mean. It doesn’t make you uncomfortable does it?” Ethan’s tone is patronizing and saccharine sweet. “I wouldn’t want to do anything to make you feel insecure. Justin told me about your recent financial hardship and I would hate to make you feel any worse about yourself.”

Brian bites his tongue to keep from laughing in the kid’s face. The nerve of this little fucker! Brian almost admires him for it.

“I don’t give a shit what you do. Just remember…” he says, inclining his head toward the paintings, “As far as Justin’s concerned, you’re out of the picture.”

He turns and walks away, leaving Ethan alone, a tiny, thoughtful smile playing on his lips.
Justin lays on Brian’s bed, staring up at the check he holds in his hands. In the kitchen Brian takes a bottle of ’99 Cristal from the fridge and brings it into the bedroom, two delicate, champagne flutes held between his fingers.

“Six thousand dollars.” Justin says elatedly. “Six thousand, fucking dollars! Can you believe it?”

Brian places one knee on the bed and hands Justin a glass.

“And what will you do with these newfound riches, Mr. Taylor?”

Justin sits up, runs a hand through his tousled blonde hair. “Guess.”

Brian pops the cork on the champagne, careful not to let any spill on the Ralph Lauren duvet. He fills Justin’s glass. “I don’t know. Go to the Louvre? Grovel at the feet of the old masters?”

Justin shakes his head, “Nope.”

“Buy yourself a decent wardrobe?”

“Very funny. Guess again.”

“I give up.” Brian says, sitting down and pouring champagne for himself.

“I’m going to pay your mortgage for the next three months.”

Brian turns away to put the bottle on the floor. When he looks back, his eyes are cold. “Not necessary.” he says flatly.

Justin leans forward so he’s right in Brian’s face. “Like hell it isn’t.”

Brian opens his mouth to argue and Justin quickly seals it with a kiss. When their lips part he whispers softly, “You’ve put clothes on my back, food in my mouth and a roof over my head, not to mention paid for my schooling and taught me the fine art of rimming. That alone has to be worth a lot more than six thousand dollars.”

Brian quirks an eyebrow, “You have a point…”

Justin presses another kiss to Brian’s warm, full lips. “You can pay me back if you want…” He reaches around, lets his fingers brush over Brian’s ass, “In trade.”

Brian laughs and Justin, knowing he has him where he wants him, presses a little further. “We’re partners now.” he says. “You think I’m just going to keep this money for myself and watch you struggle to keep the home we’ve shared for almost three years?”

Brian frowns a little, looks down. “I share it with a lot of people.”

“Maybe you ought to start charging admission.” Justin suggests, refusing to be thrown.

Brian laughs, brushes Justin’s bangs out of his face with one hand, raises his glass with the other.

Justin follows suit. “To the future.”
Brian smiles, “To partnership.”

Justin feels tears pressing against the backs of his eyes and wills them away. He knows Brian’s on a precipice; he doesn’t want to push him over the edge.

“To partnership.” Justin says.

They touch glasses and drink deep.

•

•

• It starts slow. Trading kisses back and forth. Justin’s mouth is warm and sweet, the taste of sugar lingering in its depths, mingled with the slight acidity of the wine. Brian remembers when he and Justin first made their arrangement, no names, no numbers, home by three and no kissing on the mouth. He remembers how it made him long for Justin, because he loved to kiss and now there was only one place he could get his fix. He remembers getting lost for long minutes in Justin’s mouth before the inevitable overtook them both. He remembers that first kiss after they argued in his office, the one he goaded Justin into and how it took every bit of will he had not to grab him and hold on tight, to never let him go.

• Brian Kinney isn’t the sort to believe in fate. To him the world is what we choose to make of it but Justin’s the exception to his every rule. He never wanted him, never wanted to feel the things he feels when they’re together. He never wanted to know the person Justin makes him want to be. He never wanted to fall…

• He takes a mouthful of champagne from the bottle and drips it into Justin’s mouth, the liquid pale and golden like Justin himself.

• “More.” Justin whispers.

• Brian takes another mouthful of Cristal, lets Justin suck it from his lips, one hand running through hair like yellow silk, the other unbuttoning Justin’s shirt. Justin lifts up to slip out of the sleeves then goes to work on his belt, while Brian strips. They never break eye contact until they fall back onto the bed, completely bare. Brian loves feeling Justin underneath him, his flawless skin heated, moist with sweat, his heart beating so fast. He twines his fingers in Justin’s hair and kisses him so deeply they both gasp.

• Brian flattens his hands to press himself up, runs his tongue down Justin’s body, tracing muscle, tasting salt. He stops when he reaches his cock, slick and hard, dripping pre-cum, so much larger than anyone would expect, eight inches of pink, gold perfection. He swallows the head, licks the shaft. Justin’s back arches, his hands fist the sheets.

• “Brian.” Justin moans, “Brian…”

• Brian gets onto his knees, Justin’s cock slipping from his mouth. With one hand he jerks him off with excruciating slowness, with other he reaches for a condom.

• Without having to be told, Justin rolls over, gets onto all fours, always ready, always eager. The perfect match for Brian’s near insatiable drive.

• At first, Brian’s fingers can only fumble at the condom, they’re clumsy with lust and slick with pre-cum and lube. He looks down, sees his cock poised at Justin’s opening, the head dark red and blood swollen and he’s so hard and so ready and he wants to be inside Justin so fucking bad, for just a second, two at the most, he imagines himself just sliding in, bareback, nothing between them, just
skin on skin. He imagine unloading inside the tight, wet, heat of Justin’s ass, imagines seeing his cum dripping from Justin’s hole…

- “Brian?”

- He looks down and sees Justin staring at him over his shoulder, the expression on his face mingled hope and desire and suddenly Brian realizes that he’s holding his naked cock in his hand, has it pressed hard against Justin’s anus.

- “Shit.” Brian mutters under his breath. He grabs a new condom from the bowl, tears the wrapper open with his teeth. Justin turns away, his body wanting to be fucked so badly, his brain is unable to process what had almost happened.

- For his part, Brian slams in hard, determined to fuck the memory out of both their minds. His thrusts are brutal, almost savage. With one hand he grabs hold of Justin’s hair, pulls his head back, with the other he holds his hips in place, forcing him to take every inch, making him stay still while Brian shifts position, angling his cock to hit Justin’s prostate on every stroke.

- Moaning, Justin reaches for his dick, struggling to touch himself and stay upright but Brian unexpectedly yanks his head back and suddenly Justin finds himself kneeling, his own weight driving Brian’s length so deep inside him, he actually screams.

- Brian reaches around to stroke Justin’s cock in time to his own thrusts, faster and faster. Justin has one hand on Brian’s hip to steady himself, he curves the other around Brian’s neck, pulls him down for a kiss.

- “Oh fuck…” Justin’s whisper is moist and hot against Brian’s lips. “You feel so fucking good…”

- “Yeah?” Brian asks, he pulls Justin’s trembling body closer, holds him tight.

- “Yeah.” Justin says. “Yeah, oh Brian, oh fuck…”

- Brian slips his hand down to Justin’s balls, strokes the velvet flesh beneath, glides his fingers up Justin’s shaft, fists the head, snapping his wrist hard and fast, “You like that?” he asks.

- Justin can only moan in response.

- Brian licks his ear, breathes into its shell, “Tell me you like it…”

- “Oh fuck Brian… I love it, love you…”

- And then Justin cums, shooting all over the sheets, his body jerking helplessly in Brian’s arms.

- Brian tries to last, tries to ride out the waves of Justin’s pleasure but there’s something about the way Justin cums that gets to him everytime. It’s a total lack of self awareness, the complete absence of artifice or guile. Justin never repeats lines he’s picked up in porn movies, he doesn’t have any “moves” like 99% of the guys Brian fucks, he just lets himself go, gives himself up to his orgasm in way that always leaves Brian wondering how anyone or anything could be so sweet and pure and incredibly hot all at once?

- Brian’s hips pick up speed, his heart races and then his body’s awash with ecstasy, cock pulsing, shooting his seed into the condom, the thin, latex sheath almost the only thing between him and Justin now.
Chapter 5

Author's notes: Many thanks to my first readers in this fandom! I hope you enjoy this next installment.

It’s the day before the show. Brian and Justin are at the gallery. The paintings aren’t up yet, they rest against the freshly painted, white walls, each with a yellow post-it affixed to the frame bearing its name. Justin’s come to hang his work, Brian’s offered to help; now they’re just waiting for Lindsay to show up with a level.

“Why’d you call it My Heartbreak?” Brian asks, staring at the work in question. He didn’t know the paintings had names until now.

“Do I break your heart?” he asks, his tone comically maudlin.

Justin’s looking at the other three pieces, trying to decide which order to hang them in.

“Sometimes.”, he says.

For a moment they’re both silent.

“Why?” Brian asks again.

“I don’t know exactly.” Justin bends down to switch the positions of two paintings. “I see you sometimes, looking like that late at night. I see things in your face and I don’t know what they are or why they’re there and it makes me feel distant from you, like I don’t really know you… and I guess that breaks my heart because I want us to be closer.”

“You mean monogamous.”

“I mean closer.”

“Why are you with me then? If I hurt you so much?”

“I never said you hurt me.”

“I dunno Sunshine… “Heartbreak”, that sounds pretty painful to me.”

“It’s a figure of speech. Besides, not being with you hurts a lot more.”

Brian replays the conversation perched on the edge of his bed, his eyes are soft and unfocused, his vision turned inward. Every few minutes he takes a generous hit of organically grown cannabis sativa from a little, blue, glass pipe. The fat joints he used to roll are yet another casualty of his altruistic streak, he can’t afford to waste his pot anymore.

Behind him, Justin sleeps soundly on his belly, his hair, silver in this light, has fallen across his face like a swath of starshine. The clock reads 3:00am, an hour Brian’s well acquainted with. He likes this time of day, this inverted twilight, night’s cusp. He remembers when Justin lived here… Remembers gunning the jeep through deserted intersections, racing to beat the clock, not knowing
what shames him more, his adherence to the curfew or the way his heart beats subtly faster every second that brings him closer to home and to Justin.

- Brian gets up, puts the pipe on the nightstand and goes to the bathroom. Humming a little under his breath, he takes a leisurely piss, admiring his cock in the dim light. At the mirror above the vanity, he contemplates his reflection thoughtfully, turning his face this way and that, his eyes coolly appraising. On the outside he looks the same as always (fucking hot) but on the inside he knows he’s changing. He’s not the Brian Kinney of a year ago, or six months ago or even six days ago. He’s changing, every second of every minute he’s becoming someone else, a Brian Kinney who risked everything he owned for an ideal, a Brian Kinney who hasn’t fucked a trick in over two weeks, a Brian Kinney who spent fifteen fucking minutes plucking miniature desserts off a buffet table with tongs the size of tweezers to make his boyfriend happy.

- His boyfriend, his partner, Justin.

- If he stops to let himself think about any of this for too long, he gets a feeling in his belly, like looking over the edge of a cliff, a sudden sense of vertigo so dizzying it makes his knees weak. But if he only just walks up to the edge, if he doesn’t let himself examine the circumstances of his metamorphosis too closely, the result is a warm, pleasant sensation, a well being, a fullness that seems to center itself in his heart. It’s from here that he regards the new Brian Kinney and likes what he sees.

- He goes into the bedroom, finds that Justin has rolled over onto his back and kicked the covers to the foot of the bed. Brian slips in beside him, pulls the blankets and sheets over them both and then gathers Justin into his arms. He breathes deep, taking in the contradictory scents of innocence and sex. That unexamined fullness comes to him in waves, their gentle ebb and flow lulling him to sleep.

- Justin wakes to faint early morning sunshine and the shrill sound of the alarm. Squinting against the light he reaches over and smacks the clock repeatedly until it goes silent. It’s five’o’clock in the morning, his shift at the diner starts at six.

- Justin allows himself five minutes to stare at the ceiling and silently curse himself for agreeing to work the Sunday morning breakfast rush then slides out from under the arm Brian’s thrown across his chest. Reluctantly he abandons the warmth of his lover’s body and the softness of designer linens and staggers into the bathroom.

- He emerges ten minutes later, with fresh breath and a clean face to find Brian fully dressed, sitting on the edge of the bed tying the laces on his workboots.

- “Hey...” Justin says in surprise. “What are you doing up?”

- “I want to hit the gym early today.” Brian says, “Figured I’d drop you off on my way.”

- “You don’t have to. I don’t mind walking.”

- “It’s twenty degrees out.” Brian reaches into the closet for his heavy, brown, leather jacket. “ Wouldn’t want you to catch a cold.”

- “Thanks.” Justin says. “I’m touched.”

- “Yeah well, it’s for my benefit as much as yours.”
“How’s that?”

“You can’t suck cock with a stuffed up nose.”

Justin laughs and goes to the duffel bag full of clothes he keeps beside the closet.

“Shit.” he says, rummaging around for something clean to wear, “I’ve got to go home and do laundry.”

Brian wraps a scarf around his neck and goes into the kitchen. He calls back over his shoulder, “You want some juice?”

Justin puts on the least olfactory offensive garments he can find and shrugs into his Navy pea coat. “No thanks.” He looks around, finds his Adidas in a corner and sits on the steps to put them on.

“You know…” Brian says, walking around the kitchen counter with a glass of guava juice, “You could bring the rest of your stuff over. I wouldn’t mind… If you’re a good boy I might even let you have a drawer and a couple of hangers.”

Justin ties his laces. He’s not sure, it might be that he’s still half asleep (even though he feels wide awake) or maybe his head’s still muddled from all the champagne he drank last night but he thinks that Brian just asked him to move back in.

He pulls his gloves and scarf from his coat pockets and slowly puts them on. He can feel Brian watching him, waiting for him to say something.

Justin crosses the living room to where Brian stands. “You’re asking me to live with you?”

Brian shrugs a little, finishes his juice. “Yeah… If you want to.”

“Let me think about it a little?”” Justin asks.

Brian raises his eyebrows, for a moment he’s too taken aback to say anything and then he regains his composure.

“Sure, whatever…” he says.

Scowling he grabs his black, leather gloves from the kitchen counter and heads for the door, calling back over his shoulder, “You ready?

They sit side by side, silently waiting with frosted breath and chattering teeth for the Corvette’s motor to warm up and the heater to kick in.

Brian listens to the engine idle, his head cocked and then suddenly slams the car into gear and peels out into the street.

Justin looks over at him uneasily. He knows he hurt Brian's feelings by asking for time to think about moving in. He wishes he could explain, that just like the ride Brian offered him, it’s for both their benefit.

Months ago when they first got back together, Justin promised himself that this time around, he would do things right. He would forget his preconceived, juvenile notions about romance and
relationships and take Brian on his own terms. It’s a promise he’s kept but it hasn’t always been easy. There have been nights, not a lot but more than a few, he’s left the loft with a smile plastered on his face and heartsickness twisting his insides into knots… Nights spent alone, trying to force thoughts of Brian and his trick du jour from his mind, trying not to hurt, trying to remember that he is, indeed, loved.

- And if he moved back in, would anything be different? Would it hurt less knowing that whatever else or whoever else Brian did, he chose to share his home with him? Would date night be re-instituted? Would Brian want them to pick up anonymous thirds (or fourths) for meaningless, single serving trysts? Could Justin go along with it if he did? It wasn’t that he was necessarily adverse to the idea, he was after all, nineteen and spent most of his days in a perpetual state of horniness… But unlike Brian, he was finding himself less and less able to disconnect, to shut off his heart and head and just give his body over to the physical act.

- On the one hand, Justin thought, if we’re together more Brian may want to trick less. Case in point, these last two weeks they’d spent in constant company, Brian hadn’t strayed at all. But when he did wander and Justin knew it was a matter of “when” and not “if”, would he feel betrayed? What if he did and couldn’t hide it? What if he fucked everything up again?

- They continue to ride along in awkward silence, Justin mired in thought, Brian still a little stung and bewildered, both wishing the other would say something to ease the tension.

- At last Brian speaks, “So that was weird last night, seeing Paganini Junior again.”

- By some unspoken mutual agreement they’ve held their tongues on the subject of Ethan until now, neither wanting to tarnish the polish on Justin’s special night but he’s only too grateful to talk about him now.

- “Yeah, it was strange. I haven’t thought about him in months.”

- “I was glad to see that he’s finally developed a fashion sense. He actually looks like a real homosexual now.”

- “Yeah… But that earring was so lame.”

- Brian laughs and after a beat Justin joins in. The collective mood in the car lightens considerably.

- “What were you two talking about when I walked in?”

- “Him mostly. He’s still a pompous asshole.”

- “You’re still mad then?” Brian asks, careful to keep his tone neutral.

- “Mad at Ethan? What for?”

- “Shattering your youthful illusions about love…”

- “He didn’t shatter my illusions.” Justin says, a little irritated. “He opened my eyes. He showed me that words don’t mean anything, actions are what matter.”

- “So that’s it then?” Brian asks.

- “What do you mean?”

- “You and Ian. You’re done, right? Nothing left to say to each other?”
“We were done months ago.” Justin says, a little nonplussed.

A pause.

“Good.”, Brian says shortly, bringing the ‘Vette to a skidding halt in front of the diner.

“What time do you get off?”

“Two.”

“You want me to pick you up?”

“You don’t have to.”

“Yes, we’ve established that. I am in no way beholden to drop you off or pick you up. You want a goddamn ride or not?”

“Yes.” Justin says, chastened.

“See you at two then.”

Justin unfastens his seatbelt, puts his hand on the doorhandle then suddenly stops, turns, “Brian…”

“You’re gonna be late for work.” Brian says quickly, trying to avert another blow to his bruised ego.

“I want to move in with you.” The words come as a surprise but once they’ve been said Justin knows they’re right.

Brian turns in his seat, looks Justin square in his baby blues. “Don’t do me any favors Sunshine.”

“It’s not a favor.” Justin says. “I want to, I really do. I’m just scared, that’s why I asked for some time to think.”

“Scared of what?”

“Repeating past failures, making the biggest mistake of my life, *again*.”

“Don’t be so fucking melodramatic.” Brian says, shaking his head.

“But I hurt you…”

“We hurt each other.” Brian interrupts. He takes Justin’s chin in his gloved hand. “Don’t make this out to be more than it is. I want you around more and seeing as you’re paying the mortgage for the next three months I figure the least I can do is offer you some closet space. That’s the deal. You can take it or leave it, just stop fucking *thinking* about it already.”

“I’ll take it.” Justin says.

Smiling, Brian leans in and kisses him, fingers squeezing a little too hard, punishment for making him anxious.

Justin recognizes the gesture for what it is and welcomes it, he has no problem with a little pain (or a lot, under the right circumstances). Brian’s hand holds him still while they trade breath, tongues entwined, pulses quickening. Brian slips his free hand under Justin’s sweater, finds a nipple and pinches it roughly with leather clad fingers, making Justin gasp, his mouth a perfect “o”. He drags his
fingers across Justin’s chest, seeking out the other nipple and twisting it hard between thumb and forefinger. He watches Justin’s face, sees the pain and pleasure mingled there, feels his cock go from burgeoning interest to raging hard-on in the space of five seconds. His hand steals into Justin’s lap, traces the outline of his erection over and over, while capturing his lips with hot, lingering kisses.

- “Brian.” Justin moans. “Stop. I’m gonna cum in my pants.”

- Brian grins. “I’ve got a better idea.” Deftly he unzips Justin’s jeans and frees his cock, wrapping his fingers around it, admiring the image of black leather on pale pink skin. Careful not to impale himself on the gearshift, he maneuvers himself into position and bends down to take Justin’s erection into his mouth, enclosing the crown in moist heat. Justin throws his head back, closes his eyes, one hand grips the edge of his seat, the other rests lightly on Brian’s back, moving in small circles.

- “That feels amazing…” he says.

- They’ve always been able to do this, find absolution in desire, mete out blame and forgiveness in the giving and receiving of pleasure…

- Brian sucks harder, gently raking his teeth along sensitive skin, his fingers sliding up and down the shaft, purposefully rough.

- Justin feels his balls drawing up, his dick growing impossibly harder, any second now, any second…

- Suddenly there’s a sharp rapping sound from Brian’s side of the car.

- Justin opens his eyes in surprise. Brian pops his head up and looks around. Their breath has steamed the ‘Vette’s windows up so much they can’t see out.

- The sound comes again.

- Frowning Brian rolls his window down and sees Debbie standing on the curb wearing her bright purple coat over a t-shirt that reads, “I’m not gay but my boyfriend is”. She bends down to peer inside the car. Justin hastily pulls the hem of his sweater over his crotch.

- “What are you two doing out here?” she asks half disapproving, half amused.

- “What does it look like?” Brian snaps.

- “Oh for fuck’s sake, you two are insatiable.” She shakes her head. “Come on now Sunshine, your shift started ten minutes ago, you can get your dick sucked on your own time.”

- “Sorry Deb.” Justin says embarrassed. “I’ll be right in.” He reaches for the door handle but Brian leans over and stops him.

- “Give us another minute.” Brian says to Debbie.

- “Thirty seconds.” she says shortly, turning to go back inside.

- Justin carefully zips up. “I’m gonna have blue balls for hours.”

- Brian kisses him. “Poor baby. After you get off we’ll go home and fuck.”

- Home, Justin thinks returning the kiss, taking care to keep it brief in deference to his aching cock.

- For a few seconds they just take each other in and then Justin gets out of the car and walks around
to the curb. He leans in Brian’s window. “See you later.” he says.

- “See you,” Brian says grinning. He turns on the defroster and their condensed breath evaporates almost instantly. Justin raises a hand in farewell and backs away, watching Brian speed off.

-
Soon after Brian got fired from Vanguard Justin asked Debbie for a promotion from busboy to waiter and took as many shifts as she could spare. He uses the money to buy all the things Brian used to buy for him, food, clothes, art supplies... He doesn’t want Brian to notice him wanting for anything. In addition to the extra shifts Justin tries to maximize his take home by providing service with what he refers to as “the patented Justin Taylor you-know-you-want-a-piece-of-this style”, which is basically harmless flirtation combined with a judicious showing off of his spectacular ass.

The trick with “the style” is not to be overt about it.

He goes to table seven to take orders.

“Can I tell you about our specials?” he asks.

“Sure.” says one of the five guys crammed into the booth.

Justin turns to read from the chalkboard next to the cash register, turning back after he recites each dish to offer commentary. A little ass then a smile, a little ass then a smile…

“First we have blueberry blintzes… They’re really good with whipped cream… And then we have a Greek omelet with feta cheese and kalamata olives… So good… And we also have chicken fried steak…”

By the time he’s finished all five guys are practically drooling and the blueberry blintzes have nothing to do with it.

“So what can I get for you?” Justin asks, smiling sweetly.

“Uh… Could you read those specials off one more time?”

•

•

• Grinning Justin goes back behind the counter to put in his orders. It’s been a crazy day. He wouldn’t be surprised if every fag in Pittsburgh hadn’t come through the diner this morning. It’s always like this when it’s cold, the diner is a warm spot physically and psychologically. Everyone feels welcome.

• Finding himself with a spare five minutes he signals to Deb with two fingers pressed to his lips that he’s taking a smoke break and ducks out back.

• The cold air feels good after the stifling heat of the diner. Justin shakes a cigarette from a pack he cadged from Brian and lights it with a book of matches he picked up at Woody’s. Justin rarely smokes a whole cigarette during his breaks. He doesn’t even like smoking that much but it’s an excuse to slip away for a few minutes and it calms him down when he’s nervous or excited. Right now, he’s both.
“I want you around more.” Justin repeats Brian’s words to himself. The great, untouchable, beautiful, Brian Kinney, who never fucked the same trick twice and couldn’t even say “relationship” without turning pale, wants him around more. Not only that, he wants him to move in, to share his home and his life, just like a real couple.

Justin knows this is a dangerous train of thought but despite his earlier trepidation and Brian’s admonition “not to make more out of it than it is”, he’s ecstatic. He can’t help it. Their answering machine will say, “You’ve reached the home of Brian Kinney and Justin Taylor…” There’ll be a little slip of paper, with “J.Taylor” typed on it, stuck below the one that reads “B.Kinney” on the loft’s mailbox. They’re going to be partners, for real this time, no bullshit, eyes wide open.

Justin inhales a little, blows the smoke out, watches it dissipate in the frigid air, smiling, thinking about what kind of font to use for the mailbox label when Deb sticks her head out the backdoor.

“Fer Christsake Sunshine!” she calls. “What are you doing out here? You’ve got orders up!”

“Sorry Deb.” Justin says, dropping his cigarette butt into the coffee can the diner employees use as an ashtray.

“What’s with you today?” Debbie asks. “You’ve had your head in the clouds all morning.”

“Nothing…” Justin begins but then remembers who he’s talking to. Evasiveness never works with Deb, she just wears you down with her “Are you sure you’re okays?” and concerned looks, until you feel so guilty you spill your guts. Justin starts again, “Actually, Brian…”

“Brian!” Deb exclaims. “Don’t tell me you two got into a fight. You looked about as cozy as could be this morning.”

Justin laughs, “No, we didn’t get into a fight. Brian asked me to move in with him.”

“He did?”

“Yeah, he said he wanted me around more.” Justin grins helplessly.

“Oh Sunshine.” Debbie says. “That’s wonderful!” She leans in and gives him a big hug and a kiss. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks Deb.”

She reaches around and swats him on the seat of his jeans with her order pad, “Now get your ass back to work.”

Justin gets his orders out and then takes both pots of coffee, marked “regular” and “unleaded” in Deb’s bold hand and starts making the refill rounds. He’s halfway done when someone calls from the counter, “Excuse me garcon! Coffee please!”

Justin hates being called garcon. This ain’t the fuckin’ Left Bank he thinks, heading over.

“Who wanted coffee?” he calls out.

“That would be me.”
Justin blinks. It’s Ethan, he’s perched on a stool, wedged between a heavy set leather man and a skinny drag queen in a beaded tube top poring over an issue of Cosmopolitan.

“Regular please.” Ethan says brightly. He’s wearing a heavy, dark blue, cableknit sweater over a white t-shirt and jeans. His hair has that purposefully tousled look and his eyes are shining with alertness.

“Ethan Gold.”, Justin says, filling his cup. “Long time, no see. What’s it been… ten, eleven hours?”

“What?” Ethan asks innocently. “I’m just here for the food like everyone else.”

“Okay.” Justin says, setting the coffee down. He takes his pad from his apron pocket and a pen from behind his ear. “What can I get for you?”

“Belgian waffles, side of scrambled eggs?”

Justin writes the order down, “Coming right up.” he says briskly and walks away, turning just in time to catch Ethan checking out his ass.

Ethan’s appearance heralds the arrival of what Deb calls “the brunch crunch”, a large crowd comprised of an unlikely mix of hardcore party boys coming down from all nighters and those energetic homos who get up at the ass crack of dawn to go to church or weed their gardens before coming in for egg white omelets and oatmeal. Over an hour goes by before Justin notices Ethan still at the counter, picking over the remains of his waffles and taking shallow sips of cold coffee.

“You want a refill?” Justin asks.

“Please.”

Justin gets the pot from the warmer, fills Ethan’s cup and leans back against the shake machine, arms crossed over his chest.

“I’ve never seen anyone take an hour to eat two waffles before.”

“I’m savoring them.” Ethan says.

“They’re not that good.” Justin says flatly. “You want to tell me what you’re really doing here?”

“Actually…” Ethan says, pushing his plate away. “I did want to ask you something.”

“What?” Justin asks warily.

“It’s kind of a favor but you’d be getting something out of it too.” Ethan says. “See, the Pittsburgh Fine Arts Council is looking for someone to help design a poster for the orchestra’s Winter Series. Those are the concerts I’ll be soloing in…”

“Go on.” Justin says.

“And I was hoping you might be interested in taking the job.”

Justin frowns. “And how is this a favor to you?”
“Well, they want the poster to feature me, of course…” Ethan says. “And they want it to look like a painted portrait, you know? At first they just wanted to throw something together in Photoshop but I talked them into hiring a real artist.”

“So you want me to paint your portrait?” Justin asks incredulously.

“‘You’re the only artist in Pittsburgh I trust to do a good likeness.”

“No way.” Justin says.

“Why not?”

“Because painting someone’s portrait is intimate. I wouldn’t feel right about it, not with our past. Besides it might bother Brian.”

“Why would Brian have to know? You could work at home, Daphne wouldn’t say anything.”

“Actually, I’m not going to be living with Daphne anymore.”

“You’re not?”

“No. As of today I live with Brian.”

“You’ve only just gotten back together.” Ethan says, sounding concerned. “Do you really think that’s wise?”

“I really think it’s none of your business.”

Ethan nods, holds up his hands. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I just really wish you’d reconsider the portrait. I can’t imagine anyone else doing it and I know you could use the money.”

“How much money?” Justin asks, pauses, “Just out of curiosity?”

“A couple thousand?” Ethan suggests. “I could probably talk them into more. The Schickel Foundation gives the council millions. They don’t know what to do with it all. I could probably get them up to three, maybe even four.”

At the mention of George’s name Justin feels a pang on Emmett’s behalf.

“I don’t know.” he says uncertainly. It’s a lot of money to pass up, especially now with it being so cold. Heating the loft costs a small fortune, he knows from peeking at the gas bill when Brian was in the shower one afternoon.

Frowning, he plays a familiar, little game with himself called, “What would Brian do?” The answer comes quickly enough. Brian would take the money. Business is business, he would say.

But what about all that in the car this morning? The way Brian had said, “good” when Justin told him he and Ethan didn’t have anything left to say to each other? If Justin didn’t know better he would have said Brian actually sounded insecure, jealous even. Of course, that was ridiculous, Brian Kinney didn’t do jealousy but whatever his reasons, it was clear he didn’t want him to see Ethan anymore. So what would he think of him spending hours a day painting Ethan’s portrait?

They were just starting out in this new life together and the last thing Justin wanted to do was piss Brian off but he couldn’t forget how strapped they were for cash. Justin’s gallery money would pay the mortgage. His tips and what little Brian had would pay the bills but what about everything else? Brian’s sybaritic lifestyle didn’t come cheap. What about Babylon? And the ‘Vette? What about the...
expensive food, liquor and narcotics Brian consumed in such staggering quantities? What about the
two dozen or so condoms they went through every week? If Brian’s access to prophylactics and
yellowtail sashimi was in anyway impeded things were bound to get tense… And how great would
Justin feel being the one to save the day with a fat check he’d earned all on his own? How good
would it feel to take care of Brian for a change?

- He becomes aware of Ethan looking at him, waiting for him to say something.
- “Five thousand.” Justin says at last. “If you can get that much I’ll do it.”
- Ethan smiles. “That’s more like it.” he says admiringly.
- “What are you talking about?” Justin asks.
- “I’m talking about you standing up for yourself.” Ethan says, getting up and reaching for his
wallet. He puts a ten beside his plate. “Once upon a time you would have taken my first offer and
been grateful to get it.” He leans in close, whispers, “Once upon a time you might have even done it
for free.”
- Justin recoils a little, “Maybe once. Not anymore.”
- Ethan nods. “Good for you.” He drains the last of his coffee. “I’ve got to get going. I have practice
at noon. Do you want to give me your cellphone number? I’ll need to reach you as soon as I talk to
the Council, they’ll want you to sign something and all that.”
- “You sure you can get them up to five thousand?”
- “I’m sure.” Ethan says. “You know how temperamental we artists can get when we’re denied our
slightest whims. I had my lawyer put enough loopholes into my contract to keep the council on their
Toes. The last thing they want is to piss me off.”
- Justin’s surprised, “You sound so… shrewd.”
- “You have to be in this business.” Ethan says. “One thing I’ve learned in the last year, anything
you want in this world can be yours, if you’re only willing to do what it takes to get it.” He gives
Justin a long piercing look. “So.” he says. “How about it?”
- “How about what?” Justin asks nervously.
- “Your cellphone number?” Ethan says, grinning.
- “Oh.” Justin says, “Right.” Ethan’s developed a singular talent for unnerving him it seems.
- Justin recites his number, watching Ethan store it in his sleek, black cellphone under the heading
“J”, the same way Brian does.
- He snaps the phone shut with a flourish. “So I’ll talk to you tomorrow?”
- “Yeah.” Justin says.
- Ethan turns to go but before he can take a step, Justin puts a hand on his arm, exerts a gentle
pressure.
- “Look…” he says. “I want you to understand something. I’m only doing this because I need… we
need the money. I’m grateful to you for thinking of me for the job and I’ll do the best I can but
outside of that, I…” He looks down, steels himself, “I don’t want anything to do with you…”
Ethan bows his head a moment and when he looks up, his eyes are soft and sad, “I’m sorry to hear you say that. I was hoping we might be able to be friends.”

“We have too much history to be friends.”

“You’re probably right.” Ethan says, dejected. “I just hope you know how grateful I am. That you’re willing to do this for me, considering the way things ended between us… It really says a lot about the kind of person you are.”

Justin frowns, “I’m not doing it for you. Like I said, I’m doing it for Brian and me.”

“Understood.”

Somewhere off to their left a belligerent voice loudly asks if its owner can get a “goddamn cup of coffee”.

“Duty calls.” Justin says, allowing himself to smile a little.

Ethan grins, “I’ll leave you to it.”

He heads for the door, pausing briefly before stepping out into the cold to look back at Justin, his face a study in desire, his dark brown eyes full of undisguised longing.
Chapter 7

Brian comes straight home from the gym and collapses into one of the two chairs he didn’t sell to pay off his credit card debt. He’s going on less than an hour’s sleep and is near exhaustion. Truth be told, the last thing he’d wanted to do this morning was go work out but a couple weeks ago at one of Deb’s Sunday night carb fests he overheard Jennifer telling Lindsay that Justin has “pneumonia prone” lungs. Ever since he’s been coming up with creative ways to make sure the kid stays out of the cold. It’s mid-January now, he figures he’ll only have to keep this up another three or four months...

Brian undoes the laces on his boots and toes them off before hauling himself out of the chair and into bed where he falls into a deep, dreamless sleep.

He wakes three hours later, gets up, brushes his teeth and wanders into the kitchen for a glass of juice and a cigarette. He walks aimlessly around the loft, missing his furniture, his Mies van der Rohe Barcelona chairs and coffee table, his chaise longue, his liquid crystal TV...

He wanders over to Justin’s makeshift studio. There are two easels set up by the windows beside a battered, work table covered with little tubes of oil paint, spaghetti sauce jars full of brushes and the chipped china plates Justin picks up at thrift stores and uses as palettes. Brian runs his hand over the tops of the brushes, the bristles, some silky, some coarse, tickle his palm. He takes a tube of cobalt blue paint, squeezes a tiny bit out onto the tip of his index finger and smears it with his thumb. He looks at the easels, one is empty, the other holds a medium sized canvas. On it Justin has sketched out the rudiments of a face. It’s a familiar visage. Brian reaches out, traces the curve of his own full lips, the arc of his sardonic brows.

Brian used to regard Justin’s talent with a kind of bemused resignation. Drawing was Justin’s little “hobby” and if he wanted to spend his free time making worshipful, reproductions of Brian’s dick, well who could blame him? After Justin got hurt, however, Brian realized that he had it wrong. When he was recovering, Brian watched him struggle to draw with his injured hand and thought of a fish out of water, terrified, hopelessly flailing, desperately willing the world to make sense again. It was then that Brian understood making art was like breathing to Justin, it wasn’t something he did, it was who he was, the way he expressed himself to the world, wrapping his politics up in a poster, capturing his heart in canvas and oils.

Brian takes a cloth from Justin’s table, wipes the paint from his fingers, smiling, thinking that while he’d rather have it all... if it came down to a choice between his minimalist furniture and fancy TV or Justin’s studio, he’d choose the studio everytime.

Unbidden, another thought comes on the heels of this one, fragile and ephemeral, "I’d choose Justin everytime."

And just like that the wisp of understanding drifts away, leaving a hint of sweetness in its wake to linger in Brian’s mind, the aftertaste of a gentle cognizance.

- 

- 

- Brian goes to his closet, removes his summer wardrobe and zips it into garment bags he slides to one side, leaving ample room for his winter wear and the few articles of Justin’s clothing that actually require hanging up. Next he goes through his drawers, makes the painful but necessary decision to
consolidate dress and athletic socks and black underwear with white, resulting in two empty drawers.

- That much done, he decides to go to the diner for lunch. It’s too early to pick up Justin but chances are he’ll run into someone he knows to pass the time with or if not, he’s got new issues of *L’Uomo Vogue* and *GQ* to peruse.

- He puts on his coat and scarf but before he leaves he goes to his desk and takes a sheet of paper from his printer, upon which he scrawls “Welcome home Justin” with a red Sharpie. He drops the paper into one of the drawers he just emptied and heads for the door, moving his body quickly in the hopes that by the time his brain catches up it’ll have more important things to think about than why he left the note.

- Brian guides the ‘Vette into the alley that runs alongside the diner and slips into a spot behind a Porsche 911 Carerra. Brian is not in the habit of admiring other peoples’ things but he can’t help stopping by the Porsche on his way in. The car’s a work of art with its pure, clean lines and high gloss, obsidian paint. The windows are tinted so dark they’re all but opaque and the car rests on fat, nineteen inch racing tires. Pretending to tie his shoe, Brian bends down for a closer look at the Porsche’s exhaust system and suddenly hears a familiar voice.

- “Like the car, Brian?”

- He straightens immediately. It’s Ethan. Fucking Ethan, of all people. God, Brian hopes he didn’t see him looking at the car. He’s rather be accused of selling crack to kindergartners than envy.

- Ethan approaches, a big, shit eating grin on his face. He takes a keyring from his pocket, hits a button on an elaborate looking fob. The Porsche’s doors unlock and the headlights come on.

- “It’s yours?” Brian says, trying hard to hide his incredulity.

- Ethan gestures to the license, a California vanity plate that reads, “GOLDEN”.

- “All mine.” Ethan says, grinning smugly,

- Brian can scarce believe it, a car like that had to cost at least eighty thousand dollars. Still, he refuses to disassemble. “It’s really something, Ian.” he says with mock admiration, “You must have a lot of people to impress back in California.”

- “And I guess you drive that antique for the gas mileage.” Ethan retorts, gesturing at the ‘Vette.

- “Well, as long you’re not trying to overcompensate for anything…” Brian says, letting his gaze rest briefly on Ethan’s crotch. “Guys get pissed when your car makes a promise your dick can’t deliver.”

- Ethan raises his brows. “Oh, I don’t need to compensate for anything, Brian.” he says sweetly. “Ask Justin.”

- Brian suddenly decides he’s finished playing around. “What are you doing here?” he asks flatly.

- “What do you mean?” Ethan asks.

- “You know what I mean.” Brian says. “Last night you’re at Justin’s show, today you’re at his
work. What do you want?"

- Ethan gets into his car, "I thought that'd be obvious by now." he says.

- The Porsche’s engine starts with a roar. Brian watches it peel out and speed away, reminding himself that he doesn’t do jealousy, envy or fear.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!