THE GREAT DIVIDE Chapter 1

by Nightvision

Notes

THE GREAT DIVIDE
Chapter 1

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*Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it – George Santayana*

Prologue

Sitting on the grass in Central Park, the blond young man squinted his eyes against the sun as he glanced up at his subject. The tramp was fast asleep, stretched out on a bench, his head pillowed on a filthy backpack which probably held everything he owned; mouth gaping, ragged, nicotine-stained teeth clearly visible. His long, straggly grey hair stirred in the wind and the newspaper he'd draped over himself flapped forlornly. The soles of his cracked shoes were held on with a turn of Duck Tape.

People hurried past, their coats and scarves pulled tight against the raw November air, as unheeding of the old man as they were of the pigeons that scavenged around them. Less so; at least the birds got thrown the odd crust of bread or cracker from their lunch bags.

The artist frowned in concentration, using his right thumb to smudge charcoal into gaunt shadows around the hollows of the old tramp's eyes and cheeks, grey with stubble and cold. He found himself wondering if the old man should die there on the bench of starvation or hypothermia, how long it would be before anyone actually noticed; or if there'd ever be a Debbie to find out the name to put on his grave.

He felt a sudden deeply empathic connection with his subject; he might have a roof over his head and food in his belly, but he felt every bit as disregarded, as apart. As alien.

He rubbed at his eyes wearily with his charcoal darkened fingers, unknowingly replicating on his own face the shadows he'd just drawn on paper, and then glanced down at his watch.

He'd got an hour before his shift started; he'd have to get a move on. He stuffed his sketchpad and charcoal into his backpack and rose awkwardly, his muscles stiff and cramped from the cold grass. He stamped some feeling back into his feet, slung his pack onto his shoulder and hesitantly approached the bench. He pulled out his wallet, took out a couple of bills and carefully tucked them into the tramp's coat pocket. He hoped the old man would spend it on hot food and not a bottle of gin.

He began to walk away, pulling on his gloves as he did so. Christ, he'd thought Pittsburgh was cold, and it wasn't even winter yet. But then, even at its worst, Pittsburgh had so many things to warm it.

When he'd arrived two months ago he'd been excited despite his misgivings. Who wouldn't be? New York wasn't a monster – it was bold, brash, vibrant, filled with a thrillingly dangerous energy: it was noise and colour and smell: and it *never* slept.

But the city was also utterly impersonal, incurious and unfeeling. It crushed his soul with its height and its depths and its *fucking* weight; it cared no more for the millions swarming through its concrete intestines than the pigeons did for the crumbs they picked up. It just swallowed them, took the sustenance it needed and then shat them back out.

The young man hurried on. He reminded himself that this part of his life wouldn't last long; it was just another experience. He could endure it, as he'd endured so much before; he could learn from it, he could take away something worthwhile even from this deadly place.
It was, after all, only time.

This was how he comforted himself, and so he believed in his warm, hopeful, loving heart.

But of course, that wasn't how it turned out.

CHAPTER ONE

_In the canyons of the Great Divide,_

_Familiar places we can run and hide,_

_And filled with strangers, walking our houses alone._

_In the Great Divide,_

_Nothing to decide,_

_No-one else to care for or love –_  

_In the Great Divide_  

_You don't fit in too well._

- _The Great Divide - Neil Young_

BRIAN

- _Keeping us here isn't going to make up for lost opportunities._

- _I want a second chance … I want him to know who I am._

- _He will._

- _I don't want him to forget me._

Of course, Gus was the one we were talking about. Mel and Linds were fleeing the country and taking the kids with them, and I didn't have an answer. Because, much as I might love my son – and the possibility of losing him had finally brought home how much I did – I knew I could never commit to being a full-time parent. Yeah, I spoiled him rotten whenever I had the chance – I enjoyed pissing Mell off almost as much as I liked to please Gus - and fuck knows I was proud of the little tyke. But the kid was as headstrong as his old man, and a handful when he couldn't get his own way, and I have to admit that I was more often than not relieved to hand him back to his Mommies. I accommodated him as much as I could, but I was (and still am!) way too selfish to be able to make the changes in my life-style that I'd have to if he were ever to become a more permanent fixture. Even Justin saw that. It was far too late in the day – not to mention hypocritical - to suddenly start putting on the devoted father act. Better to let him go with two parents who were able to give him the time and attention he deserved, and know that when he _did_ come to visit his old man he'd have a fucking great time at Britin. Yeah, I'd miss him – fuck, I'd miss them both – but I knew that in this, as in so many other things, Linds was right.

She'd just shown me the article in Art Forum, her face alight with pride and eagerness. At the time I'd felt only a warm rush of surprise and pleasure, although I'd kept my expression carefully neutral and had given Justin's review only a cursory glance. But you can bet that I pulled up at three newstands on the way home before I managed to get a copy, and I read it twice before I even drove away.
And while I was so fucking happy at the complementary tone of the whole piece, so proud that Justin was beginning to get the recognition he deserved, I couldn't help but feel the first chill premonition that this was really the beginning of the end. Because … New York was waiting to be conquered. And suddenly my earlier conversation with Linds seemed to apply equally well to Sunshine as to my son.

Waiting for him, that evening, I did a lot of thinking. I knew I had two choices. I could say nothing and let the fairytale continue. Or I could front Justin and deal with the consequences.

He hadn't shown me the article, although Linds had obviously known he'd read it; they'd probably discussed it, and its implications for Justin's career. Linds had put it down to modesty, but I knew better. He hadn't wanted me to see it because he understood, too, how it would work out. How did Shakespeare put it? *There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries.*

And this was Justin's tide, wasn't it? Hadn't Linds always told him that New York was the place to be recognised, where the galleries were, the agents, the publicity? The shows? The one thing he'd wanted longer than he'd wanted me … to be an artist. And Christ, how he'd suffered for his opportunity.

But he wouldn't take it. He'd made a commitment to me, and I knew the stubborn little shit intended to honour it. That was another lesson I'd taught him. He would put on his Sunshine face, persuade himself and everyone else how happy he was … and he'd never know. He'd never know whether he could have been the second Andy fucking Warhol.

That was the way the kid was. So fucking loyal. If the fiddler hadn't shown his true colours so early, Justin wouldn't have walked on out on him. He'd have settled for a semi-out relationship, done his supportive partner bit, tried the best he could to make it work until either his heart broke or he finally couldn't stand it any more. Which was what had happened when he was living with me after he was bashed, and why he'd left me for the fucker in the first place.

After all, I'd finally given him what he wanted. After four years of fighting him, denying him, throwing him out of every metaphorical window I could think of, I'd admitted it. I loved the little twat, and I wanted to marry him. Sure, at first he hadn't believed me; he thought I was suffering from PTSD or some fucking thing, and he'd even laughed at my first fumbling proposal. But he'd been wrong: the bombing was only the catalyst. I suddenly realised that I could have lost him that night, lost him forever, and I'd never be able to tell him just how fucking important he was to me. I'd persuaded him at last by the simplest of methods; *I fucking meant it.* He knew I hadn't been bullshitting him when I'd proposed for the second time at Britn, when I'd finally come clean and bared my bleeding heart for him. I'd bought him a mansion, for fuck's sake. Was he really likely to throw that back in my face for his own chance at fame and fortune? Was he fuck.

So he hadn't told me. And now I was up Shit Creek without a paddle.

I always knew it would happen, which was why I'd never allowed it to. The Prime Rule of the fucked-up universe is that once you find the thing you've been looking for all your life, someone will take it away from you. For the first time, I understood what it meant to be happy. To be blissfully, deliriously, hopelessly in love. To walk around with a sappy, goofy smile on my face, feeling my heart racing just at the thought of seeing him again. I realised that I hadn't fucked anyone else since the bombing – I'd been too busy fucking Justin into every available surface. And I loved it. And him.

And now I was going to stand in the way of his talent … the talent I'd always recognised, always encouraged; the talent I had fought for when he wasn't capable of fighting for it himself. How the fuck could I do that? And the kid was only twenty years old, for Chrissakes. He might be an
amazingly mature twenty-year old, but still, he'd never really done anything or been anywhere. He still had a whole life to live – and now the world had opened up for him, and I couldn't deny him the opportunity to experience it. How would I be able to live with it?

The simple fact was, I couldn't. Couldn't allow him to just settle for being a country hausfrau, be he ever so willing. As Mel had pointed out, he was sacrificing so much for me. And letting him do so for my own selfish reasons wasn't love. Somehow I had to make sure he took the bright, shining jewel that Life was offering him, because it wouldn't be offered again. Because love was … caring enough to let him go.

Alone: because I was always the weak link, not him. I couldn't stand a long-distance relationship – I'd proved that when he went to LA, and that had only been for a few months; but I'd had no trouble at all in convincing myself that he was gone for good. And fuck, if the movie had gone ahead he probably would have been. It would take much longer for him to establish himself in New York, probably years. What was he going to do, keep running home to the Pitts every weekend or month or whatever; fretting about what or who I was up to when he was supposed to be concentrating on his art, not wasting his time and money? I'd have to let him go again and again, the blow falling harder each time; sharing less and less of his life until at last the inevitable happened. The visits would become fewer and fewer, as would the phone calls. Because he's never been able to separate sex and emotion the way I do; tricking would never be a long-term option for Justin. He'd eventually find someone more accessible, less complicated – someone who could follow his footsteps the way he'd always followed mine. I didn't doubt his love. Not for a second. I knew nobody would ever take my place in his heart; but I also knew he'd never be alone, because he wasn't built that way. He would always love and be loved, even if the person he was with wasn't me; he'd live with that, because he was strong. And then I would die.

Even if I went to him, what then? I'd still be distracting him, and I'd still have to come back because I had Kinnetik to run, and Babylon. And while I'd only too willingly give up both for my boy, where would that leave me? No matter how much I loved him, I couldn't see myself as some kind of … hanger on. I was as driven, as ambitious as he was. Even if I sold everything and moved to New York, I'd still have to do something. For the first time in my life I was my own boss, and I loved it … I wasn't about to go back to working for someone else, assuming, of course, I could fucking find a job at my age. They thought I was too old the last time I tried, and that was four years ago.

If only the timing had been different. A couple more years, and Kinnetik might have been big enough to branch out, to maybe open a New York office. Then we could have gone together, as equals. But then we always had shit timing.

When Justin came home, I casually started reading the article aloud, watching his face carefully as I did. And it was exactly as I thought; he wasn't buying it. He'd said he'd already made up his mind; I was what he wanted, not the Big Apple. And I could see that he meant every fucking word of it.

So it would come down to me after all.
right words, doing the right things but always with a little sigh or eye roll to let him know that my heart wasn't in it. Implying that yes, I'd go through with it because I'd promised him I would, that I was prepared to even sacrifice the Great God Kinney on the altar of Christian matrimony and monogamy rather than break my word. I think it was my stag night that really got him, my turning down that hot trick to go home with my fiancé instead. I thought Justin's head was going to explode. It would have been hysterical if I hadn't been feeling so fucking sick.

He was beginning to realise that if an attentive, romantic, devoted husband was what he wanted, then that was precisely what he was going to get. Permanently.

But of course, Justin had never wanted that. The Great God Kinney was the one he'd fallen in love with, not a rich adoring sugar-daddy. And he balked, just like I knew he would; dug his toes in and refused and took off to New York like he was supposed to. His very lack of protest only confirmed to me how much he'd truly wanted to go, and I knew I'd made the right decision.

He only wobbled a little that last night, when he couldn't hide his tears or his emotion; but of course, he thought he was coming back. I was the only one who knew that this love-making was our final act, that the curtain was finally coming down on our little drama. Because it had to be a clean break; I'd never have the strength to do this fucking twice. I had no defences against Sunshine any more, so all I could do was reassure him and smile for him, and hope he couldn't hear my heart shattering.

He hadn't been suspicious when I told him I wouldn't visit for a while so that he could focus on getting work and a place to paint and an agent. Hell, I hadn't gone to see him when he was in LA either, for the same reasons as far as he was concerned. I made it seem no big deal. It's only time, I said. I even managed to smile.

We'd agreed that I wouldn't go the airport with him … No fucking tearful goodbyes, I'd told him. I'd even pretended to still be asleep when he crept out to get his flight, and held back my own tears until I heard the elevator start.

I thought I knew what pain was. I'd felt it enough through the years. But Christ, I had no fucking idea. Not until I could finally sit up, and look around, and realise what I'd done. When I understood how silent, and cold, and lonely my home had suddenly become … although, if home was really where the heart was, then mine had just walked out the door. Do you know the two saddest words in the world? The two which carry the most grief, the most regret? Justin said them a long time ago. Now I've said them.

Never again.

The only truly good thing I'd ever found in my shit-filled life; the only person that really belonged to me

Gone.

And the time is coming for the final break. I've kept in regular touch for a while; I didn't have much choice. Fuck, I'm not a total idiot; I knew it was going to be hard on the boy leaving his friends and family and planting himself in the middle of New York City with nothing but his talent and a rave review going for him. Financially hard, too. I wasn't going to just cut him off until I knew he was working and could stand on his own feet. One of his major problems is still the fact that he never graduated, which rules out most of the better employment opportunities.

But Justin has never been work-shy, and he's landed a job waiting tables at a French Restaurant near his rooms. He seems quite happy there, and I'm sure it's a step up from the diner, and the wages are lot better. He's looking for a small studio so he can start painting again. And although he hasn't got
anyone to show his stuff yet, he's had a lot of really good interest.

Like I told him, if anyone can make it, he can. All he has to do is keep trying and be patient, and he'll get there.

Sometimes when I hear his voice or read his mails I can almost forget that we don't exist any longer. That there is now only him and me.

And me? As far as the rest of the world knows, I'm doing fine. I spend my days (and a lot of nights) at Kinnetic or the gym; or at Babylon, overseeing the re-construction. I'm glad Mikey persuaded me to re-open it, because it gives me something else to do to fill the hours.

The fucking endless hours.

I guess I'm kind of numb, nowadays. Except for when something I see or hear or smell or taste reminds me … which is just about all the time.

I honestly didn't know (although I may have suspected) that I couldn't go back to the way I used to be … the tricking, the drinking, the drugs. In all honesty, I've never had the same enthusiasm for tricking since the cancer – there's always been this lurking fear that someone will realise that the Stud of Liberty Avenue is now a one-ball wonder – which is why I'd chosen Mardi Gras in fucking Australia for my great Cum-back! Okay, I know it's pathetic. So shoot me. But all of that shit … I just don't seem to have the same taste for it now; I can't help the feeling that I'd be somehow disrespectful. To Justin … to those few happy weeks we had together.

And now … now he's gone … well, I can't help comparing everyone else to him. And they all fall horribly short. And whether or not I want to admit it, despite what Mikey says, I'm getting older. I'm even beginning to feel it. I'm becoming more aware of how my back aches sometimes when I wake up, or my knees get stiff if I sit for too long. I've even found a couple of grey hairs.

So here I am. And now I can't even lie to myself anymore. I'm tired and lonely and fucking cold, because the Sunshine's gone away. All I have left are those fragments stored away in the safe where I never see them: his sketch of me asleep; our rings; a couple of photos; the deeds to an empty house. The house I can't bring myself to sell, even though I can't really afford to keep it. Things I can't let go because I invested too much of myself into them.

But still, I have to stop being a fucking pussy by postponing the inevitable and end it soon, because Babylon's opening is next month and there's no way he'll miss it. And I can't see him. Because if I do, I'll never let him go again.

No, I always knew cutting Justin out would hurt. I just hadn't realised that the pain would go on and on, like the phantom ache of an amputated limb. Or an excised ball.

TBC
"So, everything's fine there?" Brian's voice is carefully neutral.

"Yeah. Yeah, of course," I reply as enthusiastically as I can. I don't want him worrying.

"And you're okay at September's until you can find a studio?"

"Yeah. When I get my next cheque from Michael I should be able to come up with a deposit."

"If you need anything at all, just say so."

Only you, you idiot. "I miss you, Brian."

There's a pause; then he says softly, "Me too, Sunshine." There's an unmistakable catch as he says my name.

"Well, next Friday you'll be able to give me a personal demonstration. Except for the opening, I'm not planning to let you out of bed for the whole weekend!"

He doesn't react at all. No laugh, no joke, no comment.

I try again. "I'm so looking forward to seeing everyone … and Babylon! I can't believe we can dance there again!"

Silence. I feel a cold finger press against my spine. "Brian?"

I hear him take a shaky breath. Then he starts talking, quickly, so I have no chance to interrupt. "Okay, I'm just gonna say this. It's not a good idea for you to come up for the opening. In fact, it's not a good idea for you to come back, period. I'm sorry, Justin, but that's the way it is."

My stomach gives a little uneasy lurch. "Brian … what, do you have to go away or something? Have you postponed the party?"

"No. No, Babylon's opening on schedule."

"Then why don't you want me to come?"

He's quiet again. Then he says simply, "Because there's no point. We're not going anywhere."

I feel like he's slapped me, the shock is that great. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Justin. Please listen to me." I can picture him pinching his nose, eyes squeezed shut. "We always
knew there was a good chance this thing wouldn't work out. You've got your own life now, and I've got mine. Just let it go."

"This thing?" I repeat, my voice climbing several octaves. "This thing? This thing where we were going to get married? We always knew there was a chance it wouldn't fucking work out?" My heart is beating so hard now, I think he can probably hear it.

"But we didn't get married, did we. You went to New York. And it was probably for the best, Justin. Better we find out now than after we've fucked each other up."

"But … you said it," I insist. The anger's fading quickly, being replaced by pure terror. "You said you fucking loved me!"

"And I meant it. I still do."

"Then what the fuck are you talking about? If you still love me, and I love you, then what…"

"Justin." He cuts me off. "Loving you and being able to change for you are not the same thing. You were the one who told me you didn't want me to change … well, I've found I haven't. We've been apart a few months now, and it's given me chance to think. To see things clearly … you were right, I guess it was just the shock of the bombing … Mikey nearly dying … yeah, I over-reacted to everything. Now I'm back to normal, just like you said."

"What, fucking?" I spit at him. I can hardly get the words out, my breath hitching as I fight back the tears.

"All of that. And I'm enjoying it. I can't give you what you need, Sunshine. I never could, I never can. Better you accept it now, and go on."

"Brian …" This can't be happening. It fucking can't. "Brian, please … I'll come back tomorrow, we'll talk, don't just end it like this …"

"No!" he yells. "You are not coming back here." He takes a harsh breath. When he speaks again, his voice is gentler. "I don't want you to. That's all there is to it. Please, Justin, don't make this harder than it is. I'm trying to do the right thing, here."

"The right thing for who! Brian, you've done this too many times before, trying to shove me away because you think it's right for me! Well, it's not happening. You're not being a fucking coward and doing this over the phone! I'm getting a Greyhound tomorrow…"

"Then you'd better arrange somewhere to stay. I've had the locks changed, and I won't be answering the buzzer. Stay where you are, Justin. You'll be happier, I promise. Take care of yourself." And he fucking hangs up on me.

I'm crying so hard now I can hardly see my fucking cell, but I punch speed-dial and it goes straight to voice-mail. I try another seven times before I figure he's not going to pick up.

It's a while before I can get my breathing under control and start to think clearly again. I head for the bathroom and splash my face with cold water, relieved that September wasn't here to witness my melt-down. She's a great girl but she's as big a fag-hag as Daph; September would have had my best friend cutting short her back-packing trip to Europe and had her scampering back to pick up the pieces.

I gaze at myself in the mirror, at my red, puffy eyes. Deep breaths, Justin. Calm down. Think. What a fucking fool I am, not to realise that Brian would eventually work himself into a funk about my
living in New York. He's so predictable, I should have expected it. But he'd seemed so happy those weeks after Britin, so relaxed ... I really thought all this shit was finally behind us. But if I think about it, his calls have been getting a little strange recently ... kind of formal. I figured it was just that he was working too hard ... but I should have picked up on it. I probably would have if I hadn't been so fucking tired all the time. Well, I'll just have to what I always do, and show him he can't push me away no matter what he does. I've seen the worst he can do, after all, and I'm still here, still fighting. I'll go home and tell him he's right; this isn't working out, but not for the reasons he thinks. It's not working out because it never will work out. I don't have what it takes to succeed here – not the determination, not the ruthlessness, not the talent. Fuck, there are guys with more ability than me doing street-paintings for a living!

They never understood, Brian, Linds, Deb ... even my Mom. I'm an unknown kid from Pittsburgh who's never even had his own show; who got thrown out of PIFA, who never graduated, who got sacked from his internship for gross misconduct. Impressive CV, huh? Guaranteed to have any employer champing at the bit to sign me up.

But they expected me to turn up here with nothing but one complementary review from that ass-licking critic and I'm supposed to take the art world by storm.

If only Linds had kept her mouth shut about that damn article, none of this would have happened. I told her that Brian was my big opportunity, not New York; but would she listen? No, she had to go running to Brian and get him all worked up about my sacrificing my career for him, and acting like an idiot. Because nobody believes in me more than Brian does.

As if I couldn't see through him! When will he learn that I'm on to him? I saw how happy he was when we were planning the wedding, everybody could ... and then Linds sticks her nose in and suddenly Brian's all sarky and reluctant again.

And he wouldn't have stopped. He'd have gone on acting all martyred and ridiculous, and it would have spoiled everything ... and our wedding was too important to be clouded by any misunderstanding between us. I know better than to argue when Brian gets an idea in his head, particularly when it involves the welfare of someone he cares about. Never mind if it's all bullshit! I figured it was much easier just to postpone things, come out here and do what he wanted, and get it over with. A few months and we could get back to the way we were supposed to be.

And it's not like I haven't tried, because Brian would have expected me to give New York my best shot. And I have... lugging my portfolio to every gallery and agent I could find, always getting the same response. Yes, it's good; yes, it shows promise: it's also a little angry. Angry isn't really the thing at the moment. It's too dark; too depressing. Take my card and give me a ring when you have some more pieces. Fuck, I can't even afford a place to paint. And agents don't come free, either.

I remember how in LA, every busboy and shopgirl was a wannabe actor just waiting to be discovered. Here, there are artists and poets, models and rock-stars; all jostling and hustling and climbing over each other to be recognised. Only the very best, or the very worst, survive to make it to the top.

And I just don't have that kind of mind-set; not the drive nor the ambition. Hello, I refused to go to Dartmouth because I knew I could never make it as a businessman! I want my art to be my pleasure, my passion, my comfort – I never want to use it as a leg-up to the world of celebrity and wealth, to pimp it to gain things I don't even want in the first place. If people like my work enough to buy a piece now and then, to keep a roof over my head and food in my belly – well, I'm more than happy with that.

I was going to tell Brian at the re-launch of Babylon that I'd had enough; that I'd rather work as a
busboy in the Pitts surrounded by my friends and family than work as a waiter in New York surrounded by strangers. That I'd rather have my grungy studio at home than sleep on the couch of Daph's old room mate. That I'd rather be with him than be cold and lonely and scared. That it wasn't even a question of whether my art was good enough for New York; it was a question of New York not being good enough for me.

But he's taken the ground from under me, as usual. So I'd better ring the restaurant and tell them I've got a family crisis and I won't be in for a few days. I've got a Greyhound to catch.

I don't intend to be coming back.

BRIAN

I turn off my cell, knowing he'll be trying to call.

I pour myself a large Beam and down half of it in one go. Not so long ago I would have had to get wasted before I called, hoping there'd be large chunks of the conversation I wouldn't remember in the morning.

But I'd wanted to do him the justice of being sober … plus, I wanted to be absolutely sure how I spoke to him. Because … fuck, I didn't want to hurt him. Not more than I had to. And when I heard him tearing up, getting so panicky … Christ, I don't know how I held it together. I hadn't meant to, but now I'm glad I told him I still love him. I could say the stuff about getting my old life back, but even over the phone I couldn't lie to him about that. Funny how after all the years I spent denying it, now I'm completely unable to.

And although he's hurting now, he'll be fine, I know he will; like I told him after the bombing, if anyone can come through disaster unscathed, it's him. I have total faith in him. Once he thinks about it, he'll see this is really the only way. And when he's fabulously wealthy and famous, he'll laugh.

But at the moment, I don't think he'll let go so easily. In fact, I know he won't, because he's always been such a fucking pit-bull where I'm concerned. And if Plan A fails, and he comes back home, then I'll have to resort to Plan B. And Christ, there's no way I ever want him to find about Plan B.

TBC
CHAPTER THREE

JUSTIN

I punch the security code to the front door of Brian's building and run up the stairs. I'm way too freaked to wait for the elevator. I know he must be in because the lights are on. I stand outside the Loft door, trying to calm my breathing, then I bang hard on the metal with the flat of my hand. "Brian!" I yell. "Brian!"

I have a sudden flashback to the last time I stood here yelling for entrance; that horrible time after I'd been bashed and my Mom had told Brian to stay away from me. How scared I'd been that it wouldn't be Brian who opened the door, but Chris Hobbs, my nightmare come to life.

And when the door finally slides back, my heart leaps straight into my throat and for a second I think that that's exactly what's happened, because it's not Brian standing there. This guy is a little shorter, a little younger, with light brown hair and eyes. I can also see that he's pretty hot, because all he's wearing is one of Brian's fluffy towels wrapped round his waist.

"Yeah?" he asks.

I'm so rattled that I gape at him like an idiot for a moment. "Where's Brian?" I finally manage to get out. "And who the fuck are you?" My voice comes out as a squeak.

He frowns at me. "I'm Dan, if that's any of your business. Brian's not home yet. So if he's arranged to meet you, you're early. Come back later. Or leave a message." His gaze runs appreciatively down my body. "Or you can come in and we'll start without him."

For a moment I'm as uncomprehending as if he were talking Russian. This guy thinks I'm a trick? And he said home? Brian's not home? I must look as devastated as I feel, because his expression changes to one of concern and he reaches for my arm. "Hey, man, you okay?"

That's when the elevator starts up behind me. I turn and watch as it creeps up to the top floor, and I see him. Brian. He sees me even before he pulls back the gate and steps out. He's obviously come from work, Armani clad and briefcase in hand. His eyes seem to flicker just for a second as he looks at me, then they go carefully blank. He stands quite still, surveying me calmly.

"I told you not to come," he says.

The guy in the doorway is sort of looking from one of us to the other. "What's going on, Bri?" he asks.

"Forgive my manners," Brian says in the same quiet voice. "Dan, this is Justin. Justin, this is Dan."

The guy holds his hand out uncertainly. I stare at it, then at Brian. "He's living here?" I whisper.
"Looks that way," Brian replies.

There's silence while my world falls apart and crashes all round me; I have to lean against the wall for support because I don't think my legs will hold me up. Dan suddenly looks uncomfortable; he lays his hand briefly on Brian's arm and turns back into the Loft, leaving us alone.

I'm clenching my hands so tightly I can feel the nails digging into my palms. It's the only way to stop myself from screaming, from crying, from falling on my knees and never getting back up.

"Justin…" Brian says, and his voice is kind. He puts his hand on my shoulder. "I told you to let it go. I didn't want you to find out like this. But you always have to push too hard, don't you?"

I slap his hand away and back off. There's nothing left to say, nothing to do. It's over; after all the struggles, the love, the laughter. The fighting, the tears. It's finally over. I back away from him and turn, rushing down the stairs before he can stop me, hearing him calling my name. Too late. Too fucking late.

BRIAN

"So that was the famous Justin," Dan calls from the bedroom. "I didn't realise he was that much of a kid."

"Don't let his looks fool you. He's older than you could ever know." I drop my briefcase and head for the drinks cart. Fuck knows I need one. I reach for a glass, then realise how badly my hand is shaking and pick up the bottle instead. I twist off the cap and take a long chug.

"You coming to Woody's with me?" Dan comes down the steps, buttoning his shirt. "A night out will make everything much better."

"No, not tonight," I answer shortly. "I don't think I'll be very good company. Besides, I've got a shitload of work to do." I keep my back to him. At the moment I can't stand to look at him.

"Okay." I know he's shrugging. "Do you want me to come back later?"

"Do what the fuck you like," I tell him.

JUSTIN

"Alright, already!" Michael yells. I hear him fumbling with the catch and then the door begins to swing open. "Hunter, if you've lost your fucking keys again…" He sees me standing there, and his mouth falls open. "Justin! I didn't know you were coming in …"

I barge past him. "Why the fuck didn't you tell me?" I yell at him.

My face probably tells him all he needs to know. "Shit, you've been to the Loft," he says.

Ben, who's sitting at the dining table, puts down his fork and stands up. "Justin," he says, "come and sit down. Let me get you something to drink."

"I don't want anything to fucking drink!" I yell. "I want to know why nobody told me … why you let me walk in on that!" I can feel my eyes beginning to water, and I refuse, refuse to cry in front of them. I desperately hold on to my anger.

"I didn't know if there was anything to tell you," Michael says placatingly. "I didn't want to upset you … I don't think there's really anything in it, Justin."
"How long has it been going on?" I demand.

"He's been living with Brian for a month?" I repeat numbly. How could no-one have told me? How could I not have known?

"Nobody is taking it seriously," Michael protests. "It's not like it's a relationship or anything."
I don't know whether to laugh or cry. "You said that about me, too, remember?"

"Yeah, but this is different." He tries to take my arm, but I jerk away.

"So who is he?" I demand.

Mikey rubs his face wearily. "Dan someone or other. He's a partner in some company that Kinnetic's representing … that's how he and Brian hooked up. They've been seen out and about a few times … then, a month or so ago, he started staying at the Loft. I don't honestly think it's anything for you to worry about, Justin … Brian's still tricking, and so is Dan. I think they're just fuck-buddies or something."

"Michael, he's finished with me! When I rang him yesterday … he told me that he's got his old life back … he told me not to come home!"

Michael looks shocked. "No, I don't believe that!" he protests. "Fuck knows I was sceptical when I heard he'd proposed to you, but he was happy, Justin! I know he was!"

"He told me it was just shock about the bombing and you nearly dying. He said that now he's had a few months to clear his head, he realises what a mistake marrying me would have been!"

Michael shakes his head vehemently. "You're wrong, Justin. Brian Kinney doesn't do anything he doesn't want to do … you know that better than anybody. And he wanted to marry you. And he's been miserable without you, even though he always tries to hide it! Even when I've seen him with Dan, it's not like the way it was with you … I mean, I've never seen them kissing or even touching much, or anything … I think Brian just needs some company. He's been so lonely since you left him …"

"Oh, so it's my fault again!" I yell. I'm so strung out I could fucking hit him. Like I haven't been lonely and miserable! "I never wanted to go to New York in the fucking first place, you moron! It was all Brian's idea! He wanted to get rid of me, and he did. And now he's tucked up all cosy with someone else … someone who's older than me, who's got more in common with him, who doesn't expect anything of him… and nobody had the fucking decency to tell me what was going on! Especially you… you were quick enough to blab to Brian about me and Ethan!"

Michael shuffles his feet sheepishly "Well, I guess I learned my lesson on that one."

"You mean it was Brian who was getting cheated on! Whereas this time it's me, so it doesn't fucking count!"

"Justin," Ben says. "You've had a bad shock, come and sit down a moment."

"No." I say, suddenly hating both of them … hating their sympathy, their pity, their comfortable life together. Michael and Ben have everything … but I've just lost the only thing I had: the only thing that ever made me different from the thousands of Brian's tricks – the fact that I was the only one who stayed – the only one he came back to. "There's nothing here for me anymore, just like Brian
told me. And now I'm going back where I belong. You can tell him that, the next time you see him."

TBC
I turn my collar up against the sleety rain as I hurry towards the light streaming from the doorway of Tramps. All I want is to bury myself in the music and the heat and the hot guys. Because I don't want to think anymore, I don't want to feel. This is what I have now; all that I have, and I may as well start getting used to it. Like Brian has, I find myself reflecting bitterly, and I push that thought down where it belongs. I won't think about him. All those years of kidding myself, torturing myself … fuck, even during the six months I spent in LA he hadn't betrayed me like this. Because that's what he's done; betrayed me. Just when I let myself actually believe that the fucker loved me. Well, no more.

I see Boot's huge figure silhouetted in the doorway, turning away a couple of under-age twinks, and I feel a huge swell of relief. "Hey, Boot," I greet him.

He turns to look down at me, and his face splits into a welcoming grin. "Sunshine! If you aren't a sight for bloody sore eyes!" He grabs me in a bone-crushing hug.

I was amazed when I first met him and he called me by that familiar name – like finding a piece of Pittsburgh in the heart of Chelsea. That was before he informed me that in London they call everyone Sunshine. But it still makes me feel good.

He pulls back and looks at me, and then I see the smile fade. "What's the matter, my son? Someone been upsetting you?"

I bury my face in the wide expanse of his stomach and fight back the tears. Boot may look like a six-foot-eight, two hundred pound pit bull, but if he likes you then he's the gentlest, kindest person you could wish to meet. And he's liked me from the first time he met me. Even though he's straight.

He clumsily pats my back. "Hey, come on, come on. It's alright. Tell me who the bleeder is and I'll knock him into next week." He would, too. I've seen him do it. He might be in his fifties, but he was a heavy-weight boxer in England and he's got fists like hammers. No-one cuts up rough when Boot's watching the door.

"It's okay." I mumble. "It's just been a long day. I've been to Pittsburgh and back, and I haven't slept yet."

Boot snorts. "Don't tell me, it's the dick-head boyfriend. What's he done now?"

"Nothing. Really." I pull away and put on a smile. "It doesn't matter now, anyway. I just want to have a few drinks and relax."

He studies me with his sharp grey eyes. "Look, kid, I'm working till two. But if you need to talk …
you know where to find me, Justin."

He uses my given-name in the same way Brian does; rarely, and only when he's being really serious. But I can't afford to lose it now, or think about Brian anymore, so I just give a tight smile and nod and join the stream of guys pushing their way through the entrance.

Inside the club it's very like Babylon, which was one of the things about the place that first attracted me. Same lights, same half-naked guys, same thumpa-thumpa, although the backroom activities are a little more low-key and discreet. I force my way to the bar and order a double Grey Goose on the rocks. Normally I don't waste my money on shorts, but tonight I don't give a fuck.

I knock it back and order another. Then a voice says behind me, "Hi, J.T! What are you doing out on a week night?"

I turn round. It's Dylan Fogarty, one of September's friends. He's an aspiring Goth poet, and cute in a sort of dark gypsy way. And he's made it quite clear that he'd like to hook up. I've never taken him up on it because he reminds me too much of Ethan - that, plus the fact that he's got a serious coke habit going on, which means he's usually euphoric or crashing. Either state is fucking hard work.

And I can see that he's already buzzing; his eyes, heavily lined with kohl, are over-bright and dilated, his black T shirt's dripping with sweat and he's bopping restlessly from foot to foot even as he's talking. But for once I'm glad to see him.

"I've had a shit day," I tell him. "A shit life, come to think of it."

"Oh, come on, things can't be that bad!" Dylan laughs, waggling his head from side to side and grinning widely. "Not with that hot sexy Sugar Daddy waiting for you back home! And you're a published artist! You nearly had a film made! You worked in Hollywood! Don't you know you're my fucking hero?" He drapes his arms heavily on my shoulders, still bopping.

"Yeah, well, I guess that's yesterday's news," I reply bitterly, pulling away from him and turning back to the bar so I can get another drink. "Seems my Sugar Daddy has found himself a new plaything. And his best friend and my erstwhile publishing partner can stick his next issue of Rage up his own asshole."

"Oh, wow!" Dylan says, his face falling comically. "I mean, like, bummer, man! So what are you going to do now?"

I raise my re-filled glass. "Just this. Then I guess I'll go back to my lumpy couch at September's, and my shit job at Gino's. Or maybe I'll just slit my fucking wrists and be done with it."

He stares at me blankly, obviously unsure whether I'm joking or not. Then his face lights up again. "Or you could come stay with me!" he cries eagerly. "You know there's room for both of us at my apartment. There's even a room you could set up as a studio if you want! My old man won't care! He's always on at me to get a friend to share with, for safety, you know?" He giggles. "He thinks I'm still his little boy who needs looking after in the Big Bad World! Little does he know, J.T., huh?" He nudges me conspiratorially in the ribs.

I study him. I know his father is seriously rich; he's a widower who owns a company that designs computer games, a company he built from the bottom up, and Dylan is his only son. Unlike my father, he indulges Dylan in everything - in other words, he's spoiled rotten. Daddy set him up in a nice penthouse apartment and gives him a huge allowance so he can play at being a student while he dreams of becoming the Edgar Allen Poe of the New Millennium. Whether Daddy also knows how much of his money goes straight up his son and heir's nose is a moot point.
Dylan's watching my face with the rapt attention of a puppy waiting for a treat. "Come on, J.T.!'" he exclaims. "We're both artists, we can inspire each other! My allowance will easily stretch to cover two! In fact, I can probably get the old man to cough up more! You can give up Gino's and concentrate on what you really want! It'll be fucking awesome!"

Dylan. Is he really so bad? A little over-exuberant maybe, but we've always got on well enough. So he likes me … well, that's hardly an issue anymore, is it? I'm a free agent again, just like Brian. And if I'm never going back to the Pitts, which I'm not, then this is it. This is where I have to make my life … and if it's not the life I thought it was going to be, well, whoever said you had the right to get the one you wanted? Suck it up, Taylor.

It seems pretty easy, actually. Either I go on living the way I am, on a pittance of income, sharing September's flat until she gets sick of me and kicks my ass out on the street, or I try something new. A new direction. And now, there's only me. So why the fuck not? Why the fucking hell not?"

TBC
CHAPTER FIVE

I wanna live, I wanna give, I've been a miner for a heart of gold;

It's these expressions I never give, that keep me searching for a heart of gold –

And I'm getting old.

-Heart of Gold - Neil Young

BRIAN

The atmosphere at Deb's is frosty to say the least. I'd managed to dodge the last couple of family dinners, but Christmas lunch is a sacred cow as far as she's concerned; she'd cornered me at the Diner and ordered me on pain of permanent injury to attend. I knew if I didn't show she'd simply turn up at the Loft and hammer on the door until I let her in, so I figured it was better to bite the bullet and get it over with.

Strangely enough, it was Mikey who seemed most off with me. He'd managed to grunt a greeting and then stuck closely to Ben and Hunter, studiously ignoring me. Not that anyone else was exactly friendly; only Carl and Deb seemed their usual selves. In fact, Deb was overly solicitous even by her standards, an event that I found more than a little unsettling.

It wasn't until we'd all settled down round the table that anything was really said. And it was Mikey who barged straight in. "Christmas isn't the same without Mel and Linds," he complained, spearing a slice of turkey and regarding it moodily. "It's too quiet without the kids! I can't believe they had to cancel!"

"You know Mel hasn't been able to get a full-time job yet." Deb says soothingly, passing Carl the gravy. "They haven't got the money to fly backwards and forwards all the time. You know they would have been here if they could."

"I can't believe Mel didn't realise she'd have to re-qualify before she could practice law in Canada," Ben observes, shaking his head. "They really should have considered their options better before just taking off like that."

"Well, that's Munchers for you." I poke my two of slices of dry turkey and try to summon up the enthusiasm to eat it. "They get an idea in their little Lezzie heads and there's no shifting it. Like when they thought they could renovate their loft themselves – Christ, what a disaster that turned out to be!"

"And this is the first time Teddy hasn't come for Christmas lunch," Emmett sighs sadly. "But he said he and Blake had a pressing engagement."

"Yeah, pressing between the sheets," Deb cackles.
"And fuck knows how Justin's celebrating." Michael glowers at me. "I don't expect we'll ever see him again."

There's silence. Everyone keeps their eyes on their plates.

Mikey lays his fork down. "In fact, I'm really surprised you haven't brought the new boyfriend along. There's plenty of room. And after dinner, we could all play fucking charades!"

"Michael …" Ben says warningly.

"No," Mikey snaps. "I want to know why he hasn't brought Dan along to introduce us? You ashamed of us, Bri? Aren't we good enough for your new executive boyfriend? Or are you ashamed of him?"

His fists are clenched on the table, his eyes blazing. I meet them as calmly as I can. "No, I'm not ashamed. I couldn't think of any reason you'd want to meet him … or him you, for that matter."

"Michael," Deb says severely, "this is neither the time nor the place for this discussion. This is supposed to be a nice, festive family dinner between those of us still left, not a fucking war-zone!"

"I can't believe you, Ma!" Mikey yells, throwing his napkin on the table. "You were always the one who stood up for Justin, and now suddenly you're on Brian's side! You didn't have the kid turn up on your doorstep looking like someone had just gutted him with a blunt knife! You didn't have to listen to him! And now he's gone, and he won't even work on Rage anymore because he blames me for not telling him what this asshole was up to! That he hadn't even been gone three months and he'd already been fucking replaced by a brand new model!"


Hunter sniggers. "Like we haven't heard that before."

And suddenly I've had enough. Mikey's earned the right to speak his mind, whether I want to hear it or not. But this little twerp laughing? No way.

I lunge forward quickly enough for Ben to put up a protective hand. "Don't you dare … don't any of you fucking dare … compare Justin. Not to Dan … not to anyone. There is nothing in common. Not one single thing. You understand?"

I throw my napkin on my half-eaten dinner and head for the back door. I need a smoke before I kill someone.

I thumb my Zippo alight, cupping my hand around it to shield the flame. I light my joint and inhale deeply, leaning my head back against the cold concrete of the wall behind me.

I close my eyes. Fuck them. Fuck all of them.

How am I supposed to explain when I can't even explain to myself? For the first time in my life I'd been looking forward to a Christmas. I'd envisioned curling up with Justin in front of the fire at Britin, watching the snow fall outside. I'd imagined letting him drag me out to choose a tree, grumbling but compliant, and helping him decorate it. And fuck, I'd meant to spoil him; to make up for all the Christmas's, all the birthdays, I'd neglected and ignored. I'd wanted to watch his face as he opened presents on Christmas morning. God help me, I'd even had visions of inviting our friends over for New Year like some fucking feudal seigneur, sharing our home and our good fortune.
Instead I have Dan.

I'd like to say that he'd been simply a cold-blooded scheme to fulfil my plan of setting Justin off on his new life, but it hadn't really been like that. The truth is that I'd hooked up with him a month or so after Justin had left, because he was funny and smart and hot and the sex was pretty good. And suddenly I couldn't stand the lonely nights and mornings: Linds had gone and taken Gus with her, and Mikey was all tucked up in Suburban Utopia with the Professor and Hunter. And I was sick inside; I pined for someone to talk to, to laugh with, to go out and have a few drinks with. I didn't want faceless, nameless tricks anymore. Justin had spoiled all that for me.

So when I decided that the best way of shutting out Justin was to have someone else do it for me, well, I was only taking things one step further; because I'd already broken the rule about never going back for seconds.

Not that there was ever any intention of making things permanent. Dan has his own place still, his own career, his own friends. Neither of us have any illusions of being anything other than what we admit to our being … fuck buddies. No commitment, no attachment. And if he has no real understanding of me or my life, well, you don't need to have much in common in order to be friends … fuck, twenty-eight years with Mikey is proof enough of that.

And yet … it feels so fucking wrong. Because while Dan's presence takes the edge off the loneliness, in other ways it's made things worse. Once, a non-relationship like this would have been my ideal … after all, I spent four years trying to persuade myself, and everyone else, that the position of fuck-buddy was the only one Justin held in my life. It's only now, having sampled the real thing, that I realise how hollow such an arrangement is, how ultimately pointless. And at times like this, when all my thoughts are with Justin, wondering where he is, what he's doing, who he's doing it with … well, at times like this I fucking hate it.

The door behind me opens, bringing a waft of roast turkey and cheap perfume. It's Deb.

"You okay, kiddo?"

I exhale blue smoke into the frozen air. "I'm fabulous, Deb. As always."

"Somehow I doubt that." She reaches out, takes the joint from my fingers; takes a toke. "Hunter's just a kid. He doesn't understand."

"I know that."

She passes me the joint back. "And I've had a word with Michael."

I shrug. "He's entitled to his opinion. It's just strange, I guess; having Mikey stand up for Justin like that. I'm used to his always taking my side."

"Well, now that he's in a real relationship … now he understands what loving someone is really about … maybe he can be a little more objective about you."

"And you? You've always been the first to ream my ass."

She smiles. "I guess I can be a little more objective, too."

We stand in silence for a while, trading the joint back and forth. Then she says; "Brian. I have to say this. I understand what you're trying to do here. You're trying to make sure that Justin takes all the opportunities open to him … that he makes as much of himself he can. But I've got to say, kiddo, I think you're making one hell of a mistake."
I take a last toke, drop the roach and crush it out with the toe of my boot. "He deserves more than me, Deb. Way, way more. He always has."

She puts her hand on my arm. "Brian, you can't fool me. You're not the same selfish asshole you were before the bombing; you've changed, and nothing proves it more than the fact that you can't face being alone any more. I know you love that fucking kid, enough to rip your own heart out rather than see him suffer. I know this Dan guy means nothing to you. But I thought all this drama between the two of you was over. That finally you were going to accept that you were together, the way everyone knew you were meant to be, and I thanked God for it. Seems I was wrong. Well, let me tell you what I learnt from losing Vic; time goes by quicker than you think. And opportunities lost can't ever be regained. That goes for relationships as well as careers; and Sunshine had the right to choose for himself which one he thought was more important. You shouldn't have taken that decision away from him. No matter how justified you thought you were."

I shake my head. "Justin's stronger than you can possibly believe, Deb. He might want me, but he doesn't need me. After the bombing, I was the one who freaked, not him. I went begging him to marry me, not the other way round. And it's been the same every time we split up: when he left with Ethan, when he went to LA. He only ever came back because things didn't work out for him … never because he wanted to. He managed just fine without me. And he will do now. You'll see."

"Did I say you'd changed?" she demands, planting her fists on her hips. "No, you haven't. You're still the same stubborn, short-sighted, pig-headed…"

"I get the picture, Mom," I tell her, leaning in to give her cheek a peck. "But you love me any way. And because you love me, you'll do me a favour."

Deb glares at me suspiciously. "What?"

"Keep me up to date, Deb. You're friends with Jennifer, she'll keep you posted on how Justin's doing. You know, if he has any shows or reviews or anything. Or if he needs any money. Make sure he's well … that everything's okay."

She cocks an eyebrow at me. "You think you have to tell me to keep tabs on Sunshine? You think I haven't already spoken to Jen?" She sighs. "I gotta tell you, you're not her flavour of the month any more. Can't say as I blame her. But she says Justin's fine. He's moved out of September's place, and he's living with a friend who's got a rich father and a nice apartment in Chelsea. Justin's set up a small studio there. According to Jen, he's working, and well, and happy. That what you wanted to hear?"

Yeah. Of course it is. That's why I let him go in the first place. And I can bear anything as long as I know his life's working out the way it was supposed to.

So why do I feel such a fucking empty black hole inside?

TBC
CHAPTER SIX

On the horses of the carousel she rides along with you and me,
She rides like she knows wherever she goes we'll be there.
On the carousel things are going well,
Everyone can tell we're in love.
On the carousel you're gonna like the way you feel.

- The Great Divide - Neil Young

BRIAN

"So we're flying in on Friday."

I find myself smiling. It'll be wonderful to see Gus again. It'll be wonderful to see Linds.

"Where are you staying?"

"At my parents."

I snort. "I bet Mel's really looking forward to that."

There's a silence. Then Linds says brightly, "Oh, it's just Gus and me. Mel and J.R. are staying in Toronto."

Ah. So there is trouble in Magical Muncher Land. I thought she'd sounded a little tense the last couple of times I'd spoken to her, but being Linds, she'd laughed it off.

"How's Justin?" she asks, with an obvious attempt to change the subject.

"Last time I heard he was doing okay," I reply. "I haven't spoken to him for a while."

"Oh." She sounds sad, but not really surprised. "Well, it was always going to be difficult at first, Bri. He has to concentrate on getting established. And I expect he's really busy … I bet his feet haven't touched the ground yet!"

I take a deep breath. I'm surprised the family grapevine hasn't already filled her in. "Truth is, Linds, we're finished. It would never have worked in the long-term. I guess we both knew that."

"Oh Brian, I'm so sorry." The sympathy in her voice cracks me up a little, and I'm glad she can't see my expression. "I know how difficult it was for you to let him go, even though it was the right thing
to do. Still, think how much worse it would've been if you'd got married before the review came out … then he'd have really felt he had no choice other than to stay in Pittsburgh. At least it's better that you both saved yourselves that grief."

"Yes," I agree. "Much better."

"And sometimes, these things just don't work out," she says, and there's a little catch in her voice. "No matter how much you want them to."

"Wendy, is everything alright?" I ask sharply.

"Of course, Peter!" She laughs, that high brittle laugh which means things are everything but. "I'm just upset for you, that's all! Well, Gus will take your mind off things for a few days. He's so excited! He's been missing his Daddy so much, especially since Christmas."

"I've missed him too," I tell her truthfully. "And his Momma."

When I open the Loft door I'm expecting to be pounced on by an exuberant five-year old, but there's only Linds, looking nervous and clutching her purse.

"Hey you," I say, pulling her into a hug. "Where's Sonny Boy?"

"I left him with my Mom," Linds replies, trying to smile and not doing a very good job of it. "I'm sorry, Bri … I know you can't wait to see him, but I need to talk to you. And I don't want to do it in front of Gus."

She looks thinner, more drawn. There are shadows under her eyes that I haven't seen since the bad old Sam Auerbach days. She's fidgeting nervously with her hands, her purse.

I lead her to the couch and sit down beside her, taking her hand. "Linds … what the fuck's going on?"

She looks at me with over-bright eyes. "I've left Melanie."

"Oh." I thought it was serious. "What's she done this time, invited Leda to stay again?"

She smacks my arm, hard. "God I hate you! You always have to trivialise everything!"

"That's because you two have split up more times than Prince Harry and Chelsea."

She looks at me miserably. "This time I think it's for good, Brian. I thought I understood her … I guess I don't know her at all." She pulls a tissue from her purse and wipes her eyes with it. "I always knew she had a temper … that she was a little volatile. I just never thought …"

She takes a sudden, hitching breath and then she's sobbing helplessly, her shoulders shaking with the violence of her tears. Really worried now, I move closer and put my arm around her. "Hey, come on, it can't be so bad …"

"I didn't think so either, at first," she weeps. "When she started getting so snappy with me and the kids I put it down to the fact that she was studying so hard, and trying to hold down that stupid office job as well. And she kept bitching at me about the bills, and I tried really hard but the kids always needed stuff, and there was never enough money! And so when I managed to get a job at the Art College as an assistant teacher I thought she'd be so pleased, even though it was only part time! But she just got insanely jealous of one of the professors and accused me of having an affair with him!
Even though he was married!"

"So was Sam," I can't help but point out.

"Happily married!" she snaps, glaring at me. "But even then, I tried to believe it was just stress … I kept trying to smooth things over … but then … then …" She dissolves into more tears.

"Linds …" I realise belatedly that isn't just Lesbian histrionics; something is very wrong. "What the fuck did she do?"

She looks up at me with streaming eyes. "We had a huge fight. She hit me," she whispers. "Only a slap. I could have lived with that. It wasn't the first time. But then …" she hesitates, biting her lip.

I'm starting to get a very bad feeling here. Because it's frightening enough that Mel has resorted to physical violence with Linds, never mind that Linds is trying to justify it … and the only thing that could be worse …

"She hit Gus, didn't she?"

Her face says it all.

"Fuck! Fuck! That fucking bitch! I'll fucking kill her!" I'm on my feet, pacing furiously. No-one hits my kid. No-one. Especially not his fucked-up Lesbian surrogate mother. I spin round to face her. "What about Michael? Have you told him? He needs to know."

Lindsay stares at me in confusion. "Michael … no, of course not. Why would I?"

"Because he's J.R.'s father, that's why!" I yell. "It might interest him to know that she's being raised by a child-beater!"

"J.R.?" Linds repeats. "Mel would never hit her, she adores her!"

"She claimed to adore Gus too, but it didn't stop her!" Christ, to think I signed over my parental rights to that bitch!

"J.R.'s still a baby," Linds says. "Gus is at the age where he can be … difficult. He's very like you, Brian. Strong-willed, stubborn. I don't think Mel wanted him to turn out … well, like you. She said he needed more discipline."

Discipline! Yeah, I know all about that, thank you very fucking much. And nobody's going to inflict it on my son!

"You're not going back," I tell her. "No way. I'll withdraw my consent if you try to take him out of the country again. That cunt isn't coming anywhere near him!"

"Of course I'm not going back!" Linds declares. "Do you think I'd ever put our son in danger? But Bri … I can't stay with my parents permanently. You know how they never wanted me to be with Mel in the first place … they're trying to be supportive, but they can't stop saying we told you so. As if I don't feel bad enough without that! And Mel will expect me to be there … I don't want her harassing them."

"We'll see Carl and slap a restraining order on the bitch," I tell her angrily. "And if she comes anywhere near either of you, I'll have her fucking arrested!"

"It won't come to that, Brian," Linds protests. "I'm sure she won't do anything stupid. I just need
somewhere Gus and I can stay until I can work out what I'm going to do … until I can find a job and a flat or something. In fact …" she hesitates a moment. "I was wondering if we could stay here."

That pulls me up short. Fuck.

"Linds, that's not a good idea. Not unless we don't have any other option. I mean, look at it … the Loft's not exactly kiddy friendly, is it? And besides … um … I'm not actually on my own at the moment."

She seems to slump a little. "Justin," she sighs. "I should have known you wouldn't be able to stay away from him …"

I swallow hard. "No. No, it's not Justin … it's someone else."

Her mouth falls open. She looks utterly stunned. "Some … someone else?" she stammers. "You mean … after Justin … you've let someone else move in?"

I sit back down beside her and take her hand. "I know how it sounds. I know how it looks. But Linds …"

That's when she slaps me. "How could you?" she rages. "You bastard! Justin was different to all the others … he was a one off! Don't you dare tell me that you've taken up with some other trick already! Don't you dare!"

I'm not surprised she's pissed at me. She's been Justin's champion from the first time she met him; she was the first to realise how special he was, and I'm touched that she's so outraged on his behalf.

"Linds, it's not really like that. He's just a guy I hooked up with, and he stays over sometimes. That's all. But you can see it might be a little awkward…"

"Well, of course I can see that!" She's grabbing her purse, standing up. "Of course I can see how awkward it would be for me and our son to stay here … how inconvenient we would be for your guest. Well, I'm sorry I dumped my problem in your lap; it was extremely thoughtless and selfish. So if you'll excuse me I'd better be getting back to my parents … to start trying to make some sense out of this fucking mess!"

I catch her arm and pull her back down. "For Chrissakes, Linds, shut up a moment. Of course I'll help you … I'll put you both up in a fucking hotel if I have to. But I've got a much better idea. A place that's quiet and out of town, where nobody's going to bother you and there's plenty of room for you and Gus to relax and take as much time as you need to work out what you want to do."

She stares at me wide-eyed. "Where, Brian?"

I smile back at her. "Britin, of course. It's perfect."

TBC
"Oh my God!" Lindsey gasps, helping Gus from the child seat in the back of the rental, staring up at the house. "Brian, it's absolutely beautiful!"

She'll get no arguments from me on that score. I'd fallen in love with the place on first sight even though it was the antithesis of every architectural inclination I had. The Loft – that's my style. Clean, modern, functional, minimal, designer. That's me – no frills, no fuss. Britin, on the other hand, is old, sprawling and impractical. I'd only viewed it in the first place because of Justin's comment about waiting for the country manor of his dreams with stables and a tennis court. But the moment I'd stepped through the door and seen the mellow, gleaming wood panelling and flooring; the graceful, balustraded sweep of the staircase; the diamond paned glass of the mullion windows… somehow it had seemed like coming home. It was gracious without being pretentious, spacious but not ostentatiously so, masculine yet still welcoming. And I'd seen Justin everywhere: I'd pictured him stretched supine by the fireside, had caressed his flame-warmed skin in my imagination long before I'd ever touched it in reality. When I'd stood at the gable window of the master bedroom, gazing out over the sweep of frost-spangled lawn to the eldritch copse of naked winter trees beyond, it had been his eyes I'd been looking through. I saw him in the studio I'd ear-marked for him, the loft above the stables: raptly capturing those trees in all their seasons – the first growth of tender spring leaves, the deep shade of summer, the blaze of fall colour. I could see both of us living there, growing old there, safe beyond the casual reach of nosy friends and family.

But then, was it really so strange that Justin's ideal had appealed to me so strongly? After all, wasn't he himself the exact opposite to my usual taste in men … my slight, blond, blue-eyed boy who had bewitched and bedazzled me, who'd made me break every damn rule I'd ever had for his sake?

I've hated the thought of the house standing empty simply because I couldn't endure the prospect of facing my pathetic, failed hopes alone. I've had cleaners go in once a month to make sure everything's swept and dusted, but it's still a constant guilty presence in my mind: shrouded in sheets, silent and deserted, it's a little too much like fucking Sleeping Beauty's castle. Waiting for its Prince to come and bring it back to life … except the Prince in question was in permanent exile, because happy endings don't often happen in the real world.

I take the keys out of my coat pocket and look down at Gus; he's standing close to Linds, holding her hand tightly and eyeing the house doubtfully. "Who lives here, Dadda?" he asks.

"This is Britin, Sonny Boy," I tell him, unlocking the door. "It's my house … mine and Justin's."

"Juss!" His face lights up like a candle. "Where? Is he hiding?" And before Linds can grab him he's barrelling down the hall yelling "Juss! Juss!"
I go after him and pick him up. "He's not here, Gus. He's in New York."

"Where's that? Can we go see him?"

"Not today, Sonny Boy. It's a long way away."

"But I miss Juss," he says, his lip beginning to wobble. "If it's his house, why isn't he here? Why is he in Noo Yuck?"

Why, indeed? I bury my face in his hair, hiding my expression. "It's your house, too," I say, hoping to distract him. "And you can choose your own room and we'll decorate it however you want."

Linds is gazing around wonderingly. "Brian, I can't believe you kept this place. It must have cost a fortune."

"I was going to sell after we cancelled the wedding." I set Gus down and he begins to cautiously explore, lifting up dustsheets to peer underneath. I wonder if he's still hoping to find Justin hiding. "But then Babylon started to pick up, and the market wasn't good for selling, and besides, I had to have somewhere for Gus to stay when he visits."

She looks at me with a radiant smile.

"Of course, I haven't got round to furnishing it yet. But the kitchen's fully equipped, and there's basic furniture … a sofa and table and chairs and stuff. We'll have to get a TV … pots and pans and plates and cutlery. Towels and shit. And of course we'll have to fit out a couple of bedrooms. Do you think you can handle it at your parents for a week or so, until we can make the place habitable?"

"I think I can bite my tongue for a little longer. As long as you're sure, Brian … I mean, this house was for you and Justin."

"It was for Gus too. I always planned for him to stay here with us every summer. You promised, remember?"

She nods, her eyes shining. "I remember, Peter."

Gus has given up peeking under sheets and is now tugging at the leg of my pants. "Where's Mommie and J.R.?"

Linds lays her hand on his head. "I told you, Sweetie, Mommie's staying at home in Canada. We've come to visit your Daddy for a while."

He gazes up at me solemnly. "I don't like it here, Dadda. It's scary."

"That's only because everything's covered up and you're not used to it. It'll look much better the next time you see it, I promise."

"You didn't like our house in Canada when we first moved in, did you?" Linds says. "But once you made friends and got to know your way around, you loved it!"

"I haven't met the neighbours yet," I tell her. "But I'm sure there must be some kids around … if not, we can find out if there are any play groups. This is WASP homeland, after all … you'll fit right in. And you'll need to hang on to the rental car … I don't want you being stuck out here with no transport."

"Don't worry, Brian, Gus and I will find plenty to do. And anyway, you'll be coming down all the
time, right?” Linds says happily. "I mean, weekends at least. You and Gus will be able to get to know each other properly!"

I look into her soft brown eyes and remind myself that she's going through a traumatic time right now – both she and Gus. I can't just dump her in the middle of nowhere with no friends or support and expect her to get on with it. I can handle that much responsibility, can't I? I smile back at her. "Sure. At least until you're settled."

"Oh, of course," she agrees quickly. "I know you're a busy man. I don't want to disrupt your life. Or upset your friend."

"Linds." I put my hands on her shoulders and kiss her forehead. "Gus is my son. I love you both. Of course I'll be here for you. It's not a problem." It isn't. And if Dan wants to make it one, he can suck it up and live with it. Or not.

She leans against me and hugs me, and I hug her back. Then I turn and hold my hand out to Gus. "Come on. Sonny Boy. Let's go and pick your room."

"This one, Dadda!" Gus yells, throwing himself onto the vast four poster and scrambling into the middle of it. I wanna sleep in this!"

"No, Gus," I say, going over to him. "You can have any other bedroom you want, but not this one."

His lip sticks out defiantly. "But I wanna sleep here. I want this bed! It's got curtains!" He demonstrates by grabbing the wine-red hangings and tugging them.

"Gus, listen." I put my arm round him. "This is my room … mine and Justin's. I bought this bed as a special present for him."

"Juss wouldn't mind!" Gus protests, tears beginning to flow. "Juss loves me!"

"Yes, he does," I tell him gently. "And maybe he wouldn't mind; only Justin isn't here and I am. And I'm not letting you have this room."

He sticks his lip out even further, his brows come down and he's about to throw a screaming fit.

"Gus, you be a good boy and choose another room, and I promise we'll get a bed like this for you. A special one, made just for little boys."

Gus looks at me doubtfully. "Will it have those post things at the ends? And curtains?"

"Yes, even the same colour, if you want."

"Kay!" he shouts. "I'm gonna go choose my room! Come on, Momma!"

Once Gus has settled on a room he feels comfortable in, with Lindsey installed in the adjoining one, we leave her writing lists of essentials she needs, and I take Gus out to the stables. I lift him up so he can see over the stable doors into the empty stalls.

"When you're older, you can have a pony if you want."

Gus' eyes bug out of his head. "Wow, Dadda! A real pony? For my own?"

"Yep. And you'll have to take care of it … learn to groom it and feed it."
"Will you and Juss have ponies, too?"

I manage to smile down at him. "I think I'd be a little tall for a pony. And I'd have to learn to ride first."

"We can all learn together! Momma too! And Mommie and J.R. But J.R will have to get bigger first."

I'm pleased he's given me an opening. "Do you wish they were here, Gus?"

He shrugs. "J.R.'s just a baby. And she's a girl, and girls are stupid. All they do is play with dolls."

I hide my smile. "Who do you like to play with?"

"Ryan and Jason. They're my best friends. They live down the street from us. They're lots older than me ... Ryan's nearly seven!" His voice becomes accusing. "But Mommie doesn't really like me playing with them. She says they play rough games."

"And do they?"

"Nah. They take care of me. They're cool." He bounces suddenly with excitement. "Guess what! Ryan got a Star Wars Laser Blaster for Christmas! You can press a button and it makes six different Blaster noises!" But Mommie made me promise I wouldn't play with it," he adds wistfully. "She got really cross when he brought it to our house."

I'm sure she did. "Does she get cross with you often, Gus?" I ask casually.

"She didn't used to. Now she does a lot. She shouts at Momma, too." He looks down, wiggling his toes in the dirt. "And when I was bad, she smacked me. I cried. Then Momma shouted at her. Momma said Mommie wasn't allowed to hit me."

"She isn't, Gus," I say softly.

He looks at me with sad brown eyes. Lindsey's eyes. "It was my fault, Dadda," he says. "I was bad."

I grab him in my arms and hold him close. I can hear my mother's voice slurring, It was your fault, Brian. If you weren't so bad, your father wouldn't have to punish you. "No, Gus," I tell him. "You could never be that bad. It is not your fault." It's the fault of that fucking, fucking bitch Mel. And I'll never forgive her.

TBC
"So what the fuck's going on, Brian?" Mikey's voice is strident enough to make me wince and hold the phone away from my ear.

"I suggest you ask J.R.'s mother about that," I tell him.

"I'm fucking asking you!" he shouts. "Mel said Lindsey was going to stay with her parents for a couple of weeks, but now they're saying she and Gus have left without a forwarding address, and you won't take any of Mel's calls! She's frantic!"

"Yeah, I bet." I take a mouthful of beer and watch James Dean moodily strutting his stuff on the muted T.V. "I'd say she's got good fucking reason."

He huffs. "Whatever problems they have are between them."

"That's rich coming from you, Mikey. And I'm sure you'd feel a little different if Linds were the one slapping your precious daughter around."

"Jesus, Brian, that was a misunderstanding! Gus was out of order and Mel spanked him, that's all … you don't really think she'd hurt him, do you? She'd die for that kid!"

"You call it what you want, Mikey. The way Linds tells it, it was fucking assault. And if it comes to believing her or that rabid bitch she married, I'm betting on the House.""Yeah, like the way you did when Mel and I were fighting for custody of J.R.! Lindsey came bleating to you and next thing we knew you'd hired her that fancy lawyer and everything was more fucked up than it was in the first place! And now she's got you interfering again!"

"I'm not interfering, Mikey. I'm supporting Linds because right now she needs me. And until she can get a job and a place to live and a school for Gus, I'll continue to support her."

He's silent for a minute. Then he says incredulously, "You mean she's not going back to Toronto?"

I laugh. "You'd better believe she isn't going back! And if Melanie thought she was, then she's an even bigger idiot than I gave her credit for. She crossed the line, Mikey. No second chances."

"Hang on a moment, what do you mean, Mel crossed the line? What about Lindsey and that professor at the art school she was fucking? Did she tell you about that?"

"As a matter of fact, she did. And she wasn't fucking him, it was just Mel being her usual crazy paranoid jealous-bitch self. And did you know she's been hitting Linds as well as Gus?"
"Well, from what I've heard she fucking deserves it!" Mikey yells.

"Like I used to, Mikey?" I ask softly.

"It is not the same!" he shouts. "It is not the same at all!"

"Keep telling yourself that the next time you see a bruise on J.R, and Mel says its because she fell down the stairs or tripped over her toys or fell off her swing," I snap. "Because I've heard it all before. I thought you were smarter than that, Michael!"

I can hear him breathing heavily. Then he says in a quieter voice, "And I thought you were smart too, Brian. Smart enough to know when someone's manipulating you … the way they've always manipulated you!"

"There's only one person who fits that description, Mikey. And we both know I'm talking to him right now!"

I slam the phone down on him.

_I've been to Redwood, I've been to Hollywood,

I've crossed the ocean for a heart of gold,

I've been in my mind, it's such a fine line

That keeps me searching for a heart of gold;

And I'm getting old._

- Heart of Gold - Neil Young

JUSTIN

"Jesus, J.T., it's fucking brilliant!" Dylan says in an awe-struck voice.

I study the page that's just slid out of the printer and smile. It's not brilliant, but it's pretty good.

Dylan's working on an anthology of his poems called _Black Dog_. He's hoping to get Daddy to finance a limited publication and sell it to his Goth friends at college. He's persuaded me to illustrate it.

Actually, I'm finding the project far more enjoyable than I expected. I don't think for a moment Dyl is ever going to fulfil his ambition of being acclaimed as a major poet, but his words have a dark, edgy resonance that suits my mood very well. He's encouraged me to make my own interpretations of his work and I have to admit the results are interesting. He says I'm giving him new insight and inspiration.

Fuck, I'm another muse.

"Do you want your reward now or later?" He's making sexy-eyes at me.

"I'll have to be later, Dyl. I have to get to work."

He scowls. "Why the fuck are you still at Gino's? You don't have to … you know the bills are all covered. And now we're together, maybe Dad will …"
I sigh. This argument is becoming a constant issue. He can't understand why I refuse to simply sit back and let his father pay for everything. I've got to admit it's great to sleep in a comfortable bed again, to live in a little luxury, to enjoy good food and the occasional dip into Dylan's bottomless drug supply. But even when I was with Brian I paid my own way as much as I could, and I'm not about to become a kept boyfriend now, no matter how tempting it sometimes seems. At least this way I can salvage some pride, knowing that I still at least pay for my own clothes and drinks and art supplies. Not much maybe, but better than nothing.

Really I need to get my own place, because Dylan is getting way too possessive; but I can't pay the ridiculous fucking rents without a good job. And I can't get a decent job without going back to college and finishing my education; only I can't pay the fees without working, and if I'm working I won't have time to go to classes in the first place!

It just keeps going round and fucking round.

"Dyl. I've tried to explain … I don't want your father paying for everything. And we're not together … not in the way you mean. I told you, I'm not looking for a boyfriend."

"No. That's why you won't stop tricking!" he snaps.

"I don't do it front of you, Dyl," I say softly. "And remember, you were the one who wanted me to move in. We both agreed, no strings."

I see that hurt look come into his eyes and feel a twinge of guilt. I like him okay, and he's fun to hang out with most of the time, but I know that he's looking for more than I can give him. I don't do very much to make him happy, considering how generous he's been to me – even if it is with his father's money - which is why I'd agreed to work on Black Dog with him.

"I'll be home early," I tell him, trying to make amends. I give him a kiss on the cheek, but I draw away when he tries to reach my lips. Fuck, now he's looking hurt again.

I walk away from him and head for the bathroom.

Standing in front of the mirror, I feel a slight shock when I look at myself. I wonder how long it will take before I get used to my new look and I stop thinking Who the fuck is that? every time I catch sight of myself in a shop window. I think I like it. I think I do.

Somehow it all got on my nerves, the barely concealed snide comments from Dylan friends about blond bimbos. It reminded me of the time with Ethan, when his pretentious arty friends had assumed me to be nothing more than an air-headed trophy wife; or Cody's malicious dig about my looking like Meg Ryan. So I decided to do something about it.

Dylan definitely approves, that's for sure. I'd barely moved in before he confirmed what I'd already suspected, that he's a total bottom. Not only that, but he's got a strong masochistic streak, particularly when he's high; and he says my new look makes me appear older, more dominant, more dangerous. That suits me fine; I left my taste for tenderness and love-making behind me in Pittsburgh, and if Dylan wants it hard and rough and mindless, I'm happy to oblige. It's funny, but I understand Brian's attitude better now – how topping keeps you in emotional as well as physical control. You can maintain a level of detachment which is impossible when you bottom, because then you're vulnerable. Then you have to trust your partner, the way I always trusted Brian.

Sex with Dylan is like sex with everybody else now … it gets me off. That's all I want, all I expect.

I brush my teeth and tie my hair back in a ponytail. Then I go back to the bedroom to get my work
clothes from the closet. White dress shirt, black pants, clip on black bow tie, black shoes. Very respectable.

When I get back to the lounge, Dylan's using a credit card to cut lines of coke on the coffee table. He rolls up a dollar bill and snorts a couple of lines. He wipes his nose and looks up at me, still a little sulky. "Want a hit?"

I'd done coke a few times with Brian. I'm always wary of trying new stuff because of my allergies, but I'd known he'd keep an eye on me, that he'd make sure I was safe. I trusted him. The first time, he'd been working non-stop on some new account Ryder wanted him to land, and he needed to meet his deadline. So he'd kept going on coke and caffeine: when he'd finally finished, he let me snort half a line and then fucked me senseless to celebrate. That was also the first time he tied me up. But he never did coke often because he said the high was too addictive, not to mention expensive. And also because prolonged use tends to suppress the sex drive, which was by far the most potent reason for him to avoid it. When I was in L.A., of course, it had been available everywhere, all the time. At one party that Brett took me to, the host simply put a crystal glass bowl filled with the stuff on the table and let his guests help themselves. But I'd never really got into that scene. I'd been running on adrenaline and enthusiasm, and they were all the drugs I'd really needed.

Now? I do it sometimes. When Dylan goes on one of his BDSM jags, the quick high helps. And sometimes, when I'm tired or down or just fucking bored. And sometimes, like now, when dressing up like a penguin and waiting in fucking Gino's is the last thing on earth I want to do.

So I take the bill from him and snort quickly, knowing that the buzz will last at least until I get to work. I'll smile, and wiggle my butt, and flirt, just like always. Maybe some hot guy will appreciate it. And when I get home, Dylan will be waiting for me.

No, I'm beginning to get the feeling of having jumped out of the frying pan straight into the damn fire. I really, really have to get out of here before Dylan gets any more fixated on me than he already is. What I need to do is figure out how.

TBC
"So you're going down there again this weekend?" Dan says, leaning over to take the joint from my hand and sucking on it. There's a definite tone in his voice, and I raise my eyebrows at him.

"I told you, Lindsey needs my support right now. She wants me to watch Gus for her while she goes job and flat hunting again."

"Fine." He hands the joint back and lies back against the pillows. "So do you want me to come over on Monday?"

I shake my head. "We're going to check out some schools. We want to get Gus placed as soon as possible."

Dan throws his head back and laughs. "Jesus, Brian, whoever thought you'd end up pussy-whipped!"

"Fuck you!" I glare at him. "I don't have to justify myself to you."

"No, you don't. It just seems kind of strange for you to have gone back into the closet after all these years."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Well, you have to admit that's what it feels like. You have your straight life with your wife and son, and I'm the dirty little secret nobody talks about. I bet you're even approaching the schools as Mr and Mrs Kinney."

"It's none of your fucking business." I'm not about to admit to him that's exactly what we're doing, because Gus has already had too much disruption and Linds wants to get him accepted with as little fuss as possible. It's not as though we haven't used the same tactic before.

"Whatever," he shrugs. "I can always find something else to occupy me."

Okay, now I'm getting seriously pissed. "What's that, a threat? Because I have to tell you, it's really not working."

"No, it's a fact." He pushes himself up on his elbow and stares at me. "Chill out, Brian. I don't own you, and you sure as fuck don't own me. So if you don't have time for this anymore, just say so. I'm not going to turn into a bunny-boiler over it."

The stupid thing is, he's only voicing what I've begun to think myself. It's not that I resent spending my weekends at the house – with Gus tucked up in his mini-four poster, Linds and I have drunk some wine and smoked some weed, watched old movies and laughed over old times, the same way I
used to with Mikey. It's been fun. But I'm finding myself getting uneasy somehow ... Linds seems to have got a little too comfortable at Britin. And much as I've enjoyed spending time with Gus, he's beginning to expect me to be there. I'm starting to feel like I commute in to work during the week and go home weekends ... the way I probably would have if I'd lived there with Justin. And that hadn't been the idea; I'd offered Britin to Linds as a temporary refuge, not a home. Never that.

If I'm honest, I'm beginning to feel a guilty sense of relief when Monday morning comes and I can climb into the 'Vette and head back to the Pitts. It's like escaping. Because while Linds is quite happy to share my weed when Gus is in bed, she doesn't like me smoking in the house while he's there, or in the rental if we're driving somewhere. And she keeps pulling me up about swearing. Which is all fair enough, I guess -- everybody knows you shouldn't smoke around kids, and he picks up words so fucking quickly ... but still, I can't help resent it because that's not what I signed up for. Coming back to the Loft, fucking Dan; going to Babylon, fucking tricks ... it's becoming necessary in a way it hasn't been for a long while; because that's what I do, that's who I am. I'm never going to be a full time Dad, picking Gus up from school and helping him do his homework, while Linds cooks us both dinner in a frilly white pinnie. I know Linds understood this from the beginning, accepted it, and still loves me in spite of it. And I also know that as soon as she gets on her feet and starts making new friends and a new life for herself, everything will get back to normal. But I'm going to have to talk to her and make her see that if I don't start distancing myself a little more, Gus is the one who's going to end up getting hurt.

"Okay, point taken," I tell Dan. "I guess I'm just getting a little freaked out by the situation ... I didn't think it would be so hard for Linds to find a job."

His expression is unreadable. "Maybe she's being too picky," he says at length. "'Night, Brian." He leans over to kiss me, and as always I avert my lips. He just smiles and rolls over, turning his back to me.

I lie on my back, staring up into the darkness. Like every other night, I let my thoughts drift far away to the east; I picture a blond head peacefully sleeping, bathed in moonlight, and I try to keep that image in my mind as I fall asleep. I try not to think that he probably isn't alone.

When I arrive at Britin Friday evening, I'm surprised to see the silver Merc parked in the driveway. I'm even more surprised to see Lindsay and her parents coming out of the front door, all beaming smiles and hugs and kisses. She looks a little startled to see me.

"Brian! You're home early!" She hurries over, Gus balanced on one hip, and busses my cheek.

"Hello, Brian." Al Peterson comes towards me with a big shit-eating grin on his face, extending his hand and exuding steamy breath into the freezing air. "Lindsay's just been giving us the guided tour. Impressive, very impressive."

I nod, giving his hand a cursory shake as I do so. His wife stands next to Linds simpering at me. Fucking simpering! The last time I saw her had been at that fucked up party Linds had thrown for them, and the expression on her face then had been as scandalised as the one my mother had been wearing when she'd walked in on Justin and me during our Viagra-fest.

"We both want to thank you for taking such good care of our daughter," she gushes. "And our darling grandson too, of course!" She pinches Gus' cheek, and I'm pleased to say the little tyke tries to push her hand away. At least I'm not the only one to recognise bullshit when I hear it.

Linds fusses around as her parents climb into the Merc's plush interior, telling them to drive carefully, to watch out for ice and to make sure they call to let her know they've got home in one piece. Blah,
"Don't forget," Renée Peterson calls, waving her hand at us like the fucking Queen or something. "Lunch next Sunday! We'll be expecting you all!"

I turn to stare at Lindsay, but she has her eyes fixed on the retreating car, a happy smile on her face.

"Do you want to tell me what the fuck that's all about?"

"Brian, language," she chides, taking hold of Gus' arm and waving it in the air as her parents turn out of the drive. She starts to walk back to the house. "Goodness, it's cold! Do you think it'll snow? Gus would love to make a snowman, wouldn't you, Sweetie?"

She sets him down and he heads for the warmth of the fire, safely contained behind the huge mesh safety guard we've had installed. He flops down on his tummy and starts playing with his discarded cars on the rug.

"Linds, what were your parents doing here?" I demand.

She walks through to the kitchen and turns on the oven. "Sorry, Bri, you'll have to wait for dinner … I didn't expect you for another hour. But it's only vegetable lasagne, so it won't take long to heat up."

If she's looking to distract me, it'll take more than fucking vegetable lasagne. I grab her arm. "Why do I get the feeling you don't want to talk about this?"

"Because there's nothing to talk about," she smiles brightly. "Mom and Dad wanted to see where Gus and I were living, of course. They've been really concerned."

"I thought the only daughter they were concerned about was Lynette. And I've never heard them refer to Gus as their grandson before. So what's brought about this miraculous transformation?"

"Well, of course they're happy and relieved that I've left Mel. You know they never liked her."

"About the only thing we have in common. Linds, if you think I'm going to your parents for Sunday lunch like some breeder son-in-law, you're out of your tiny mind."

She pouts at me. "I just thought it would be a nice idea for Gus to have a family dinner. After all, now you and Michael aren't speaking anymore, we don't get invited to Deb's … and Gus misses his Grandma…"

"No," I snap. I'm really pissed at her. "You're not laying that guilt trip on me, Linds. I've bent over backwards for you and Gus, but I draw the line at playing happy families with your fucking parents. You want to go with Gus and pretend like all the shit they gave you in the past never happened, fine. But count me out. In fact, I was going to give next weekend a miss anyway. I need some 'me' time. But hey, you can ask your Mom to baby-sit while you're job-hunting … and maybe your old man will give you the deposit for an apartment while you're at it!"

She goes quiet then, and gives me a little glance from under her lashes. "I'm sorry, Brian. I guess we're beginning to outstay our welcome, right?"

Christ. I hate it when she does that little girl lost act, especially when I know how resilient she really is. But I've never been able to resist it … not from her, or Gus, or Mikey. Or Justin.

I put my arm round her shoulders. "Linds, I said you and Gus were welcome here for as long as you needed. I'm not taking that back. But I don't want Gus getting used to me being around all the time,
because he'll think it's always going to be that way. You know better, because you know me; but to a little kid like him it's going to start seeming like we're a normal family. And he's not going to understand when he finds out we're not."

"Not normal?" she repeats with one of those brittle smiles of hers. "Oh, I think he's very used to being different. To not being normal. After all, he's never known anything else, has he?"

I want to point out that she should have thought of all this before she decided it would be such a cool idea to get pregnant and bring her son up in a lesbian household. Before she set her heart on me being the father. But hey, she's a woman. What do I know about how her mind works?

"Anyway," she goes on, tucking her hair back behind her ear, "I'm sorry about inviting my parents over. I know I was overstepping myself, letting people come into your home. I just … I just wanted them to know I haven't fucked up too badly. I know they'll never be proud of me the way they are of Lynette; and I know that's their problem, not mine. But I just wanted to show them that, even though I've made a lot of mistakes, at least I did one thing right. I chose you for Gus' father. And you're not some loser like the shmucks my sister marries. You're a successful man, with his own business, who owns this wonderful house. I wanted them to see the kind of inheritance Gus will have one day. I know that's pathetic, but what can I say; I've always wanted their approval, and I suppose on some level I always will."

And I do understand. Why else had I gone on subsidising my own father all those years, damn his drunken, bullying hide? Why else do I still feel that stubborn spark of resentment against my mother's bigotry? And I have no illusions about their total and abysmal failure as parents; I have no cosseted childhood to pine for. On the other hand Linds, for all her intelligence, has never quite broken away from her privileged WASP upbringing. She craves it still. Now she's suffered such a blow to her pride and emotions, I guess it's only natural she should try to give her confidence and ego a little boost.

"It's okay, Linds," I tell her. I have no problem with you inviting people back if you want. You have to start making new friends. I just don't want your parents making free with the place, is all."

"I'll remember," she says, smiling now. "And Bri, just let me say that you've been absolutely wonderful about all this. I can never thank you enough."

"You don't have to, Wendy." I kiss her forehead. "You're more than welcome."

TBC
"Look, Gus. There's a squirrel," I say, pointing to the small grey shape leaping through the branches. He says, "Um," and goes back to kicking through the dead leaves beside the path. I sigh. He's been off all morning, sulky and reluctant, and eventually I'd dragged him out for a walk in the hope of sparking his interest. Fat chance.

"What's the matter, Sonny Boy?"

He peers up at me. "When am I going home, Dadda?"

I crouch down to his level. "Why, do you want to? I thought you liked it here."

He wriggles. "It's okay. But there's nothing to do!"

"I thought your Momma did lots of fun things with you?"

"She does … but I want somebody to play with!"

"Like …" I search my memory for the names, "Ryan and Jason?"

"Yes!" His face brightens. "I liked playing with them!"

"Well, once you start school here, you'll make lots of new friends."

"Why can't I go back to my old school?"

Shit. Why the fuck hasn't Lindsay had this conversation with him? "Gus … you're not going back to Canada. You and your Momma are staying here."

His lip starts to wobble alarmingly. "But what about Mommie and J.R.? When am I going to see them again?"

"I don't know, Gus," I tell him truthfully. "Your Mommies aren't living together anymore."

"Like you and Juss?" Big, fat tears start sliding down his cheeks.

"Well, it's a little different. Justin had to go away because he had important things he had to do, not because either of us wanted it. But your Mommies … it's more complicated, Gus. Sometimes people
just change … they don't want the same things any more. And then they can't keep living together."

He's really sobbing now, and I pull him close, feeling his hot little face scrunched up against my neck. I rub his back helplessly. "Hey, come on, Sonny Boy, everything will be alright, I promise. You've still got your Momma and me, right? And your Granddad and Grandma, and Grandma Deb … and Uncle Mikey and Uncle Ben …" Because I know that's true. Whatever shit is happening between Mel and Linds and whichever sides get taken, I know the Novotnys will never take it out on an innocent kid.

"But I love Mommie!" he moans. "I miss her!"

I remind myself how young he is. How long did it take for me to stop loving my father? How old was I before I realised that physical abuse wasn't the normal state of affairs among sane families? A helluva lot older than Gus, that's for sure. To him, Mel is still his mother, still the same figure of love and security that she was when he was born. Of course he misses her and his little sister. Of course he still thinks of Toronto as home. And somehow or other, Linds and I have to ease this transition for him … because he didn't have a say in any of it.

We're going to have a long talk when she gets back from Pittsburgh.

"I'm just saying, Linds, he was pretty upset. I can't believe you didn't tell him you weren't going back to Toronto."

I hadn't said anything to her when she'd got home; we'd eaten, and I'd put Gus to bed while Linds had bathed. He'd been particularly clingy that evening, and I'd spent an hour reading to him before he'd begun to drowse, clutching his bear and gazing soulfully at his night-light. But now Linds was ensconced on the couch bundled up in a huge pink robe and slippers, her hair wrapped in a towel, and I couldn't keep quiet any longer.

"It just never seemed to be the right time," she says, looking at me with huge, sad eyes. "I didn't want to upset him … he's always been very close to Mel. When he was tiny, she could always get him to sleep even when he was being a fractious little shit. She could get him to eat his veggies when he just used to spit them back out at me!" She still sounds resentful, and I hide a smirk. Linds has always had the earth-mother vision of herself, and I know it rankled her no end that bitchy little Mel had such a strong rapport with her own son.

"Well, we have to do something about it … and fast. The boy's lonely, shut out here with only us for company. And even if you take him visiting, there still aren't any kids of his own age to play with. We've got to get him into school, Linds, and then we can start looking for a place for you in the same area."

"But I need a job, too, Brian! I can't expect you to keep financing us!" She reaches for the wine and pours herself another glass.

"Where did you try today?"

She gestures vaguely. "I left my C.V. at a couple of galleries. Oh, and there's a vacancy for a part-time assistant at a nice little bookstore not far from Carnegie Mellon which would be very suitable. I put in an application."

"Maybe you should widen your horizons a little."

She raises her eyebrows. "To what?" she says sharply. "Waiting tables? I don't think so, Brian."
"Justin did it for years," I point out, "and he was a little over-qualified for the position, too."

She doesn't answer, but I know I've just pissed her off. She's always a tad tetchy when she's been job-hunting. I sigh and reach for my weed. I think it might be a long night.

"Can I get another bottle of wine?" she asks suddenly.

"Sure. You know where it is."

I watch as she gets up and heads for the kitchen – a little unsteadily, I think. She's been getting tipsy quite a lot recently; usually she just gets giggly and sentimental, but I know from past experience she can get mean, too. And I really need her co-operation right now.

By the time I've finished rolling up, she's back clutching an uncorked bottle of Chablis. She plonks herself back on the sofa and re-fills her glass. I study her as I light up and inhale; she's taken the towel off her head and now she keeps flicking her damp hair back with a small, impatient toss of her head. There's something on her mind, alright.

"You know, there's an obvious solution to Gus being lonely. To him missing Mel and J.R."

I raise my eyebrows silently.

She reaches over and takes the joint from my fingers, inhaling deeply. "We could have another child."

Offhand, I don't think I've ever been so lost for words in my life.

Suddenly she's leaning towards me, all smiles. "Think about it, Bri. It would be perfect! I mean, you only refused last time because Mel wanted to carry it. And this time … well, you wouldn't even have to jerk off into a cup! We could do it the old-fashioned way …"

To my horror, she's reaching up to kiss me and I realise that her robe is slipping off her shoulder, giving me a glimpse of one creamy breast. I leap to my feet so fast I spill icy wine all over my crotch and she almost topples over.

"Jesus, fuck, Linds, what the hell are you talking about?"

She ditches the joint and stands up, pulling her robe together and laughing a little, shaking her head so that her hair swings about her face. "I should have thought that was obvious, Brian." She's looking at me with this sultry, smoky smile. "It's not like we haven't done it before."

"That was years ago, Linds. When we were still trying things out. Christ, we were kids! And I think it's fair to say the world didn't move for either of us!"

"But we're more experienced now." She walking towards me, her eyes locked on mine, her hips swaying seductively. "And you know you've often hinted you'd like to … when we've been alone …"

And the horrible thing is, she's right. I have implied that, in the same way I implied it to Michael all those years. Why? Fuck knows. Because I like to piss off Mel or Doctor Dave? Because my ego is so huge I need to know I'm still the centre of their world? Because I couldn't ever really let them go? Probably all of the above. And in all honesty, if I'd been straight, Linds would have been the one I ended up with. We'd have had Gus, and she'd have driven me insane with her middle class bullshit and I'd have fucked all her friends just to prove I could, and we'd have had an acrimonious divorce and hated each other for the rest of our lives. But none of that happened … because I'm a faggot, and
I fucking love it.

"That is the most fucked up idea I've ever heard." I'm back-pedalling fast. I'm totally, totally freaked by what she's just said. "Your marriage has just ended, you have no job, no place to live and no income, and you think that having another baby is the answer to your problems?"

"It could be, Brian. We're both alone, we've both lost our partners, we have so much in common … we've loved each other for years! That's more than most couples have."

"And we're both fucking gay!" I yell. "That's the only thing we have in common … that, and Gus! And you having another child just because he's missing his sister is not going to change anything!"

Thank fucking God, she's stopped coming after me. Her eyes flash. "You sound just like Mel!" she yells back. "Everything's so black and white! Like, you're either a lesbian or you're straight! You're gay or you're straight! Well, I happen to believe that it's not the gender you fall in love with, it's the person; and when you do fall in love it doesn't matter what sex they are! You just love them!"

"So what are you telling me, you're bi?"

"Maybe." She stares at me defiantly. "Maybe I am. What of it?"

"Nothing. Christ, Linds, it doesn't matter what you are. But you have to understand … I'm not. Not in any way, shape or form. And if I've ever given you reason to believe otherwise, then, God help me, I'm sorry. There's not going to be another baby, Linds. Not from me. I'm sorry."

There's so much pain in her eyes that it breaks my heart a little; and five minutes ago I'd have hugged her and kissed her and done anything I could to take it away. But whole fucking worlds can change in five minutes.

She turns away from me. "Go to bed, Brian." Her voice is flat, defeated. "I'm sorry. You're right. It was a stupid thing to say. Just put it down to too much wine and weed, and forget all about it."

I know I should stay with her. I know we shouldn't leave it like this; we've been friends too long, and this is … horrible. But I can't look at her just now. I'm afraid of what I might say. So I act like the pussy I am and beat a hasty retreat to my bedroom, leaving her sitting huddled on the couch staring at the dying fire.

For the first time since I've been staying here I lock my door. And lying there in the dark, lost in the huge bed I'd bought for Justin's wedding night, I begin to think – not to wonder, but to think – that Deb was right, and I've made a huge fucking mistake.

TBC
CHAPTER ELEVEN

WARNING – MINOR CHARACTER DEATH

Don't call pretty Peggy, she can't hear you no more
Don't leave no message round her back door,
They say the old laughing lady, she's been here before;
She don't keep time, she don't count score.
The Old Laughing Lady - Neil Young

BRIAN

You know sometimes how, when things start to go wrong, disaster just keeps piling on disaster until you don't know which way is fucking up anymore? Well, that's how things happened when I got back to Pittsburgh.

Linds had acted as though nothing had happened when I came downstairs the next morning. She'd made me breakfast, had laughed and fussed over Gus as always; I'd begun to think the whole fucking episode had been nothing but a drug-induced hallucination.

But when she'd come out with Gus to see me off, she'd given me a swift hug and breathed, "I'm sorry, Bri," in my ear. So obviously both of us remembered.

By the time I got back to the Pitts, I'd almost talked myself into believing that it had been just Linds, getting tipsy and spouting crap, as usual. Almost.

Tuesday morning I was sitting in my office at Kinnetic, catching up on shit. I was ratty and tired, and when Cyn buzzed me to say Debbie wanted to speak to me I snapped at her. I hadn't been to the Diner since my blow-up with Mikey, and I guessed she'd decided it was time to run a motherly intervention. I wasn't in the mood for a lecture.

"Boss, she says it's urgent," Cynthia said, sounding worried. "She says it can't wait. She sounds really upset."

And damned if I don't feel the hackles on the back of my neck rise, like some cheesy horror story. "Okay. Put her through."

"Brian?" Deb says, her voice shaking. "Oh, God, Brian have you seen the Herald today?"
Motorbikes. I love them, but they're fucking dangerous. Especially when they hit a patch of ice and dump you under a Mac truck.

He wasn't even speeding, according to witnesses. It was just an accident. Just fucking fate.

It's a beautiful day for a funeral. The sun shines brightly, despite the cold; a terse reminder that life will go on, that the world will still turn no matter whom the bell tolls for. We stay back from the mourners, Deb, Carl and I: away from the family members, the Taylors and the Hamiltons, all of them blond, well dressed and admirably restrained; the PFLAG contingent, the friends, the work associates. Craig Taylor stands stony faced with his new wife and baby, and beside them stands Molly, her strawberry blond hair unmistakable against her black coat. She's leaning against a young man whose black hair is pulled back in a ponytail.

"He's not here!" Deb hisses in outrage, dabbing at her eyes. "Don't tell me that fucking asshole hasn't told him about his own mother's funeral!"

"You're not looking for the right thing, Deb," I tell her. I don't need his blond hair to identify him; I know him instantly, standing with one arm around his sister's shoulders; hunched in his black pea jacket. I would know him in a dark room with a bag over his head. "He's there – with Molly."

My heart's fucking aching for him. Jennifer gone? Christ, how could that have happened? I remember her walking into my office at Ryders, carrying her son's life in a duffel bag. Calling me on my shit. I'd fucked him, he was my responsibility. And then, after he'd nearly died because of my stupidity, telling me I couldn't see him again, and then turning him over to me when she couldn't handle him. Being big enough to admit she was wrong. Nearly crying for me when she found that I'd proposed to him and he'd refused me. Brave, beautiful Jennifer. How the fuck can she be dead?

I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord. Whosoever liveth and believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth in me, shall never die.

I watch as Justin hands Molly a rose; steps forward with her, places it on top of the coffin. Molly hides her face in his shoulder.

I can't begin to imagine how he must be feeling. I remember how bratty he used to be about Jennifer when he was coming out, but that had just been teen shit. He knew his mother's worth, none better; and now he's standing there alone by her grave, being strong for his little sister.

I should be there beside him. I should have been there when he found out; and it makes me physically sick to think of how he heard about it. Had Craig had the balls to call Justin, to break the news himself? Or did he simply have the cops go to notify him about his mother's death? Whichever way it happened, I have to live with the fact that, at the worst moment of his life, when he needed me most, I wasn't there to help him through it.

Christ, I couldn't have fucked up more monumentally if I'd tried.

It's over now. The family mourners file forward, take handfuls of earth, sprinkle it into the grave; then they drift away towards waiting cars. Justin's hands are on Molly's shoulders, and he's talking to her bowed head. She shakes her head, clinging to him; Justin says something else and she reluctantly nods. He smiles at her and hugs her, then turns her away and gives her a gentle push towards Craig.

I watch as father and son confront each other. Justin holds his hand out; after a second Craig shakes it grimly. Then Justin's turning and walking towards us where we're standing, his hands thrust deep into his pockets.
He pulls up short when he nearly walks into us, and something flickers in his eyes.

"Sunshine …" Deb's voice breaks as she throws her arms around him. "Oh, baby, I'm so fucking sorry."

He closes his eyes and hugs her back. "I never expected you to be here." His voice sounds raw, strained.

"How could you think I wouldn't? Jen was my friend, and I'm proud of that because she was a very great lady. But you already know that, Sunshine."

He nods silently, then pulls out of her embrace and looks at me properly for the first time. "Brian," he says formally. "Thanks for coming." He holds his hand out to me, too.

I'm so shocked that I shake it automatically. For a moment I have the totally freaky idea that this isn't Justin at all … this is some dark imposter who looks like him and sounds like him but who … isn't. Like those pod-people from Invasion of the Bodysnatchers, or the evil Black Swan from Swan Lake.

My eyes flicker across his features, searching for something familiar; but everything is off. He's thinner, his face all sharp planes and angles; and paler than I remembered, although that could simply be in contrast to his mourning clothes and raven hair. The hardest thing for me is looking in his eyes – seeing how all the love and joy and laughter and youth have gone out of them.

I keep staring at him. I want to pull him into my arms and never let him go, but I'm frozen in place. I can hear Debbie saying that of course he'll come home with Carl and her for something to eat, but he's refusing adamantly. He says he has to get to Penn Station to catch a train back to New York.

"I'll take you," I hear myself say.

He shakes his head. "I'll take a bus."

Yeah, like that's gonna happen. I look him straight in the eyes and say quietly, "I insist."

And I guess I haven't lost it completely, because after a few seconds he nods his head.

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I glance across at him. "This is kind of freaky."

He pulls the band out of his hair and shakes it, letting it fall around his face. "What is?"

For a moment I can't fucking breath. He's stunning: the black hair frames his face, accentuating his pallor and making his eyes look like sapphires. But his beauty is unsettling … unworldly, even. I guess this is the sort of face Anne Rice had in mind when she wrote that stuff about vampires; he looks so young, so fragile, so vulnerable; but his eyes are old, old.

I force my gaze back to the road ahead. "I don't know what the fuck to say to you."

"Just don't say you're sorry."

"No. No, I wasn't going to. I'm sure you've heard it enough."

He's silent, staring out through the windscreen. Then he says slowly, "You know, I never really liked Tucker; but then, I never gave myself the chance to get to know him. I suppose part of me wants to blame him for killing her … for taking her on that fucking bike in the first place. But it wasn't his fault, anymore than it was the fault of the truck driver. All that matters is that my Mom liked him … loved him, I guess. And I know for fucking sure he made her happy … happier than Dad ever did.
He always made the decisions, called all the shots." His voice drops several registers, mocking. "'No wife of mine is getting a job, Jennifer. You have enough to do looking after the house and the kids.' Well, she showed him. She got a career and a hunky toyboy. And at least she didn't get left behind to mourn him."

His voice catches a little as he says this. I wait, because I'm pretty sure that it's a good thing that he's talking. But when he speaks again, he's changed the subject. "Why did you come, Brian?"

"Why wouldn't I? I know I wasn't always your mother's favourite person, but I respected her a lot. She was strong. Like you."

He laughs harshly.

"Justin …" I reach out me left hand and touch his knee. I'm relieved that he doesn't move away. "All I wanted to do was call you when I found out. But Deb could never get your Mom to give her your new cell number … I guess she thought I'd weasel it out of her."

He makes no comment.

"What's going to happen to Molly?" I ask.

He shrugs. "She'll live with Dad and the new family. She's not too happy about it, but there's nothing else she can do. She's thirteen, and he's got custody now. She'll be okay, though; she's never disappointed him like I did. And she'll have a new little sister to take her mind off things."

I hope he's right. "I was surprised not to see Daphne."

"She's in London. Guy's Hospital? Have you heard of it?"

I nod. I remember Daph was going to study medicine, but I hadn't realized she'd gone abroad to do it.

"She's just started her mid-term assessment. So I haven't told her."

It shouldn't surprise me. He always has had this deplorable habit of putting other people first. "You know she's going to kill you when she finds out, right?"

He puffs out a little breath. "So what's new?"

"Well, one thing I can think of," I smile, trying to lighten things a little. "What's with the new look?"

He doesn't smile back. "I got fed up with people seeing the little blond helpless twink every time they looked at me. It's not the kind of image you want to cultivate in New York."

There doesn't seem to be an answer to that. I watch him drumming his fingers restlessly on the knee of his black pants. "How's Gus?" he asks.

"Not too good at the moment. His Mommies have terminally separated."

"Fuck, really?" He's looking at me now with real surprise, sounding like his old self for a moment. "What happened?"

"Mel started using her fists on him. And on Linds."

He says nothing, so I flash him a glance. He's just staring at me. "What?"
He shakes his head. "I don't believe that."

"Well, it's true. And Linds wasn't going to stand by and see Gus hurt."

His face is carefully blank. "So what does Mel say about it?"

I shrug. "Haven't spoken to the bitch. Don't want to."

"So you've only heard Lindsay's version? Christ, Brian!"

I take a deep breath. I don't want to call him on his attitude, because I know he's upset and emotional. He's always been grateful and respectful to Linds … Christ, she was more of his mentor than I was, in many ways.

"So where are they staying?"

"I've moved them into Britin until Linds can sort out what she wants to do."

I can see him gaping at me. Then suddenly he starts to laugh. There's a hysterical edge to it.

"What the fuck's so funny?"

"I don't know. That you've kept Britin? That Lindsay's living there? Both of the above? And Dan … how does he fit into all this?"

"Dan's nothing to do with anything, Sunshine."

"Oh really. Tell me, Brian, what did Linds say when she found out about him? I'll bet she was seriously pissed."

There's something in the way he's talking that's getting to me, as though he knows something I don't. "Yeah, actually she was. She ripped me a new one for replacing you!"

The smile dies on his face. "You know, Brian, for someone who's so smart you really are a dumb mother-fucker, you know that?" He blinks suddenly and hurriedly turns his face away from me. "You know, I've changed my mind. I'll get a later train. I think I really need a drink right now."

We don't speak again until I've parked the 'Vette and we've found the nearest bar. He orders and pays for a Beam for me and a Tequila for himself, and I follow him to a table by the window. His mood has changed. He's brooding, morose. I figure he's thinking of Jennifer: I watch him fiddling with his glass. "How's your art going?" I ask, because I really want to find out.

"Dunno. Haven't painted anything since I left."

"What do you mean, you haven't painted anything?"

He shrugs and offers a small, false smile. "Well you see, my muse didn't get much inspiration sharing an apartment where there wasn't enough room to swing a cat, let alone set up an easel. And studio space costs money. More than a waiter's wages can pay for."

I can't hide my surprise. He's still waiting tables? "Yeah, but you're not at September's anymore. I heard you were sharing some rich guy's place, that you had your own studio there, you were painting …" I tail off as I realise I've said way too much.

He raises his eyebrows. "And how would you know that?"
"Jen told Deb. Deb told me."

"Mom was nothing if not an optimist." He laughs and tosses back his drink. I signal the waiter for another.

"So it isn't true?"

"Not that it's any of your fucking business. But yeah, I'm staying with a friend. He's at Art College and he's trying to get a book of his poems published. I'm illustrating it for him."

"How much is he paying you?"

He avoids my eyes. "Nothing, it's a favour."

I try not to think about what that might mean, and concentrate on what he's telling me. He's illustrating some crappy amateur's poetry book for free? This isn't how it's supposed to be working. Why the fuck isn't he painting? "What about the review you got? Didn't that open up any doors for you?"

He slams his glass down. "Weren't you listening all those weeks, Brian? One swallow does not a fucking summer make. And one review doesn't make a fucking career! Nobody is interested. Nobody was, nobody is, nobody will be! I'm not what they want; they think I'm too young, too inexperienced, too provincial. And neither you, nor Art Forum, nor fucking Lindsay is going to change that!"

"But Justin, you can't just give up on it. You knew it was going to be difficult to start with …"

"No, I knew it was going to be fucking impossible!"

"Well, with that attitude I'm not surprised you've not got anywhere. Did you try any of the agencies? What about that list of companies I gave you …"

"Yes! I told you! I tried all of them! And they weren't interested, Brian. Do you know how many applicants there are for every position? And guess what? They've all got qualifications! Turns out there's only one thing I'm qualified for … so that's what I'm doing."

"What you're doing is exactly the same thing you were doing here!" I snap. "Waiting tables and drawing fucking cartoons!"

He slowly claps his hands. "Well done, Brian. You finally figured it out." He giggles, high and mirthless. "Fucking ironic, isn't it? All that way just to end up in exactly the same place. I'm even still living off a rich guy! He's a lot younger than you, though."

I can't help wince, even though I can see how much pleasure it gives him. New York has sharpened his claws.

He stands up and spreads his arms theatrically. "Well I'm sorry your little fairy story didn't work out. I'm sorry the Glass Slipper didn't fit Cinderella. And as soon as I've paid a visit to the john, I'll be on my way before I turn into a fucking pumpkin or something!" He walks away from me, heading to the rest room.

I sit and stare at my Beam. My brain seems to have short-circuited, because all I can think is, How the fuck can this be happening? All these months I've been thinking he was settled, that things were going right for him. I'd imagined him being courted by critics and galleries, had expected to hear that he'd been offered his own show. He was supposed to be making a new life for himself … but all he's
done is recreate the old one with a different cast! Is this what I made him leave for? Is this justification for everything we've been through?

He's gone long enough for me to start to think he might have slipped out the back way, but then I see him threading his way towards me: his head is down, and there's a furtive, guilty look about him. I've seen him move that way before, and I don't need to see him wipe his nose, or note how dilated his pupils are, or how his pulse rate's gone up to know exactly what he's taken, and my heart drops right into my boots. I grab his arm. "What the fuck are you doing, playing around with that shit?"

"What?" He lifts his chin defiantly.

"This!" I snarl, wiping a small trace of white powder from skin above his upper lip. "Jesus, Justin, you know better than that!"

He's turning then, heading for the exit with me right on his heels. "You're not walking away from me!"

"Watch me," he snaps over his shoulder.

I pull him round by the arm.

"What?" he yells, oblivious to the looks people are giving us. "You're going to lecture me now on the dangers of using recreational drugs? Are you that big a hypocrite?"

"Justin, please. I don't want to argue with you … you've just buried your Mom, for Chrissakes… is this what your rich boyfriend's giving you, Sunshine? Is this how he's paying you? Fuck!" I shout into his face, fear and anger getting the better of me. "You saw what happened to Ted, you stupid little shit! Do you want to ruin your fucking life?"

I don't even see it coming. Next thing I know, I'm sitting on my ass on the sidewalk with blood trickling down my chin. I'd forgotten he can throw a mean right hook when he wants to.

He's standing looking at me with blazing eyes, fists clenched. "There is only one person who's ruined my life, Brian!" he screams at me. "And that's you, you fucking bastard!"

He whirls, and runs. I stagger to my feet as he darts out into the traffic; for a moment my heart's in my mouth and I think he's run under a bus. But the driver steps on his brakes and Justin ignores his curses as he dodges cars, heading for the opposite side of the street. I see him raise an arm and whistle, and then he's diving into the back seat of the cab he's spotted before it's even stopped moving.

And then he's gone.

"What the fuck happened to you?" Dan asks as I walk into the Loft.

I ignore him and go through into the bathroom where I survey my split, swollen lip. I guess I should think myself lucky he didn't take out a tooth.

Dan's followed me, and he's peering over my shoulder at the damage. "How did you manage to get into a fight at a funeral? Don't tell me that kid hit you!" The fucker's laughing.

All I can think of is the expression on Justin's face as he stood screaming at me in the street. Telling me how I'd ruined his life… words that hurt more deeply than any physical blow he could have landed. Christ, can that be true? No matter how much bullshit I've thrown at him down the years,
he's always refuted that accusation with his every breath. I desperately need to see him, talk to him; but how the fuck am I going to do that? I don't know his address, I don't know his cell number. I don't even know the name of the guy he's living with. And I fucking let him get away!

I turn to face Dan. At least there's one thing I can do. "You're a Simon and Garfunkel fan, right? So you know, according to Paul Simon there must be fifty ways to leave your lover. Well, you only need to pick one."

He says nothing for a second. Then he shrugs. "You know what, Brian? The only thing I'm surprised about is that it took you so long."

I stand listening to him getting his shit together, and wonder if I should feel anything. Because I don't. The only person I'm worrying about is Justin.

TBC
CHAPTER TWELVE

DAPHNE

- So what's the name of this guy?

- Boot.

- Boot? What the fuck kind of name is Boot?

- It's a nickname, Daph.

- And how is he a friend of yours? Justin, he'd better not be some ex-trick …"

- No, of course not. Boot's straight. He's a doorman at nightclub I go to. I've told him all about you. He's an amazing guy … you'll love him.

- You're not setting me up on a blind date, are you?

He'd laughed.

- No, he's in London for his sister's birthday. When I told him you were at Guy's, he said he'd like to meet you. So I gave him your cell number and told him to give you a call.

I'd sighed.

- Well, you'd better give me a description, so I know who to look out for.

- Don't worry, Daph, you'll know Boot when you see him. Trust me.

That conversation had been a couple of weeks ago, and is the reason why I'm sitting in this bar (oops! I mean pub) on a Saturday afternoon waiting for some guy named Boot who I've never met before.

I love London pubs. A lot of them have been taken over by the big breweries, and have become generically cloned with their wide screen TV, endless boring soccer matches and karaoke nights, but there are lots that still have their own character. The Black Horse is my local (as they say round here) and is Victorian. It has a real fireplace with a real fire burning in it, bare wood floors, a polished mahogany bar. All the beer pulls are original, and the walls are covered in these really cool black and white photos of the area dating from the nineteenth century. Justin would love it. There's even a guy on the street outside selling hot chestnuts! I mean, Dickensian or what!

Boot had called me yesterday evening, and that had been the first shock. I'd assumed that Justin's friend was an American coming to visit London and I'd that I'd be someone familiar to talk to in a
strange city. Duh! The guy is a Brit, from London, as I realised once he started talking. He seemed to
know Southwark quite well – at least, he knew how to find The Black Horse – and said he'd like to
meet me for a drink.

So here I am, toasting my knees by the fire, nursing my lager – I haven't developed a taste for warm
beer yet - and trying not to look too much as though I've been stood up. British guys (contrary to
everything I've been told about them) aren't slow to hit on a girl if she looks like she's on her own.

I'm eyeing every man who comes in alone, trying to spot my visitor. I mean, he's got to be pretty big
if he's a doorman, right? I wonder if he's blond or brunette. Ooh, it could be that one … he's certainly
big enough … and really hot … no, rats, he's gone over to that group by the bar … pity.

Then the door opens and this guy comes in who's, like, huge. He's so fucking tall that he has to duck
his head a little so as not to bang it on the frame. And he's not skinny like so many really tall guys
are; he's built like a fucking wrestler.

He stands looking around for a second and then his eye lights on me in my corner.

Oh no. Please God, no.

He's not pretty. He's got a nose that looks like it's been broken more than once, a heavy jaw, deep-set
eyes. His head's close-cropped at the sides, balding on top. I'd put him in his fifties.

And oh, God, he's coming over.

"Daphne? Pleased to meet you, love. I'm Boot." And he holds out a hand that looks the size of a
gorilla's.

I'm so going to kill fucking Justin Taylor when I get my hands on him!

Boot is a surprise in more ways than one. I mean, once you get over the way the guy looks he's
actually very nice; he'd shaken my hand gently and carefully and bought me another lager while he
had orange juice … which is all he seems to drink. I wonder if he's a recovering alcoholic? And he's
very polite, and obviously intelligent and articulate in his own way. Which kind of pisses me off that
I'd thought in those terms … just because a guy's big and ugly, doesn't make him an asshole, right?

We start off making small talk because I don't know what else to say.

"Have you been in the States long, Boot?"

"Ten years or so."

"But your family's still here? Why did you leave?"

He shrugs, and his grey eyes are suddenly veiled. "London changed," he says quietly. "England
changed. No jobs for working men, but Yuppies were making fortunes and bragging about it. You
had Yardies coming over from Jamaica and starting turf wars over drugs; gangs; kids sniffing glue
and pulling knives on each other in the streets. The Old Bill couldn't stop it then; they still can't. So
when my old man dropped dead with a heart attack in '93, there was enough insurance money to get
me mum a nice little cottage in Kent. Nice village, nice neighbours. I didn't have to watch out for her
anymore. And I was sick of being on the dole. So I took all me savings and got on a plane for the
first time in me life, and I've never looked back. I've worked all over, I'm not proud. I've worked in
construction, I've hauled trucks; I've even worked on a ranch, if you can believe that. Right now I'm
a doorman; glorified bleedin' bouncer, really. Pardon my language." He grins.
I laugh, too. It's so cute that he thinks I'd be offended! "That's how you met Justin, right?"

He nods, and smiles. "Yeah. One night last October I'm on the door at Tramps and I suddenly hear this bloke yelling. So I walk over to find out what's going on, and I see this little blond kid giving these three drunks all kinds of shit. Turns out one of them had pissed on a tramp sleeping in a shop doorway. So I knock their heads together and send them on their way, and then I says to this kid, *You ought to pick on people your own size, sunshine. You're going to get your head kicked in one of these days*. He sort of blinks, and then he straightens up and says, *Maybe something's been lost in translation, because I don't remember asking you for help. And don't call me sunshine.*" He chuckles and shakes his head. "Made me laugh. I liked his bottle. He reminded me of someone." Suddenly he looks sad and distant again.

I watch him gazing into his glass for a moment, until he sits up and looks back at me. "So you and Justin have been mates for a long time, right?"

I nod. "Since we started school. Neither of us were exactly popular with the other kids … him, because they always seemed to sense he was different, and me, well. Not many coloured kids went to St. James Academy. We just … formed an alliance, I guess. A mutual appreciation society."

He nods, seemingly thinking. Then he says, "What about this bloke he was living with in Pittsburgh? The one he's besotted with. They were supposed to be getting married, weren't they? What went wrong?"

I don't get it. I know Justin can charm just about anybody if he puts his mind to it, so it's not really surprising Boot likes him, but this is more than the casual conversation he's trying for. Justin says the guy's straight, and I have no reason to doubt it, but he's trying to pump me for some reason … and I'd really like to know what it is. "Um, usually I leave talking about Justin's private business to Justin. Unless I'm sure he'd want me to answer."

He gives me a quick look, and then suddenly laughs. "Yeah, well, he said you were a good mate." He leans forward, resting his elbows on the table. "Right, Daph. I'll come clean with you. I'm worried about the kid. When I first met him, he was okay. I mean, he wasn't happy living in New York; he missed his friends and his boyfriend and all, but he kept his pecker up. He didn't expect to be there long. And then one night a couple of months ago he turns up and it's like someone's broken his little heart."

Well, I can give him the reason for that. "That would be when Brian split up with him. Justin said he went home and found some other guy living there."

Boot stares at me. "Some other guy?"

"Well, Brian dumped him over the phone. Which totally isn't surprising because Brian isn't good at communication. So Justin went racing home to find out what was going on, and that was when he walked in on the new guy."

"Hang on a minute. You're telling me this prat let Justin think everything was pukka for months and then just dropped him like that? Over the bloody phone?" I nod and his face hardens. "I think I'd like to meet this bloke. Bloody hell. No wonder the kid was so upset."

I can't help but laugh. "Oh, he's been a lot worse, believe me! I mean, he was pretty hurt when it happened, but Justin's used to Brian's bullshit. They've been on and off ever since they first got together. And it's not like they've ever been monogamous. I speak to Justin at least once a week; he's bounced back, same as usual. He and Brian will go their own ways for a while, until the morning they wake up and remember they can't live without each other. And then Brian will turn up and
sweep Justin off his feet with some grand gesture and everything will be forgiven. Until the next
time."

Boot shakes his head. "Look, I don't mean to imply that I know him anywhere near as well as you
do. But I'm there and you're not; and I don't care what he tells you, he's messing up. The kid he's
living with is a tosser. He's got more money than sense. Goes around with all this makeup on his
face, dresses in black like a bloody vampire or something. And now Justin's doing the same thing …
he's even dyed his hair black! I bet he didn't tell you that, did he? I couldn't believe it. I said to him,
you're having a laugh, sunshine. And that's what he did; laughed. But not the way he used to."

I sit goggling, trying to imagine Justin with black hair. And no, he hadn't told me.

"But if it was only that I wouldn't worry," Boot says. "I mean, your bloke dumps you, you go and
change your hair and your look and take up with a younger model. That's only natural." He leans
forward and lowers his voice. "But this Dylan kid, he's into coke. He's got a bad habit. And he's got
Justin doing it, too."

I shake my head emphatically. "No. Justin wouldn't do that. He's not stupid! And if there's one thing
Brian did teach him, it's that you don't touch addictive drugs."

"Then it's a lesson he's forgotten," Boot says grimly. "Daphne, I spend most nights watching drunks,
pot heads, and tripping kids. I know how they look, how they talk and how they act. Justin's doing
more coke than is good for him. And I like him too much to see him go down the pan like that."

"I don't know what to say." My God, have I really missed this? I mean, I know I've been wrapped
up in exams and living in London and everything, but I'm not that easy to fool, am I? I honestly
haven't picked up on anything off in my recent conversations with Justin … but then, thinking about
it, maybe that's partly because he rarely gets a word in edgeways,

"Justin's a chatty little bugger," Boot continues, "and he's told me a lot. I know he's an artist, and I
know he's bloody good because I've seen his work. I know about his family and the way his old man
disowned him; I know about you. I know that this Brian bloke was his first, and that he tried to give
Justin the cold shoulder afterwards because he didn't believe in relationships. I thought he sounded
like a dick-head right then. I know Justin nearly got killed at his Prom and I know how Brian helped
him use his hand again. I know they had a pretty colourful relationship. I know about the violin
player. I know about Rage and how Justin went to Hollywood to make a film about it. I know about
that club of Brian's getting bombed, and how he asked Justin to marry him and then packed him off
to New York to make his fame and fortune. I know Justin always meant to go home and pick up
where he'd left off; but I didn't know what happened to change his plans, and to change Justin,
because after he came back from Pittsburgh he stopped talking to me about what was going on with
him. Probably because I didn't bother to hide what I thought about his new life-style. But there
wasn't anybody I could ask because I didn't know any of his old mates. Until I told him I was
coming back to The Smoke, and he said you were studying at Guy's, and Bob's your uncle! Here we
are."

"I feel like a total idiot!" I do, and not only because Boot has just shown me in no uncertain terms
that he's someone Justin both likes and trusts. But I'm the one who witnessed that story, and if Justin
has the Brian Kinney Handbook, then I have the one for Justin Taylor! "I should have known Justin
was more upset than he was letting on! Like, I haven't seen him before breaking his heart over Brian
Kinney! And of course he's not going to worry me with it, not when all I can do is tell him how
incredible it is over here, and about the latest hot British guys I've dated, and how amazing Guy's is!"

He reaches over and pats my hand, his eyes concerned. "Don't take on, there's a love. Justin knows
what a good mate you are. He's proud as punch of you, you know that? That's why he was so
chuffed when I said I'd like to meet you. So I could see what a great … what was it? Oh yeah. What a great fag-hag you were. Didn't sound very complimentary, but I expect he meant well."

I can't help but laugh, and he looks relieved.

"What can I do, Boot? We've always been there for each other … he needs me and I'm like a million miles away!"

"Daphne, what you are going to do is concentrate on your studies and pass your exams."

"While my best friend is turning into a junkie? That'll be easy!"

"Well, there's not much else you can do, is there, love?" he says kindly.

"I can call him and kick his stupid ass for him!"

"You're having a laugh, aren't you? That'll just let on that I've told you things he didn't want you to know. And that's not going to make it any easier to get him to listen to me, is it?"

No. He's right. Justin will feel betrayed, and he'll be furious and pitch a fit and be even more stubborn and closed up than usual. He and Brian are so alike in many ways. "Then what?" I sigh. "I can't make out like I don't know!"

"Just do what you always do; talk to him. Make him laugh. I'm flying back next weekend, so I'll be there to keep an eye on him. And cross me heart I won't let him turn into a junkie. Even if I have to kick his stupid arse! Now I know what's wrong, I'll sort it. Don't you worry."

And somehow I believe him. He's so solid and certain and calm, and I feel such a schmuck for ever having been scared of him.

Boot gets to his feet. "Well, I have to be going. My sister's expecting me for dinner, and she'll give me hell if I'm late." He towers over me uncertainly. "I'm glad to have met you, Daphne, even if I didn't bring good news." He smiles, an oddly shy expression for such a big man. "You're a great girl. I can tell Justin I'm well impressed with his fag-hag."

"Boot … will you call me? Let me know how he's really doing?"

He laughs. "Try stopping me." He picks up a beer mat and cocks an eyebrow at me. "Got a pen?"

I dig one out of my purse and he scribbles quickly, then pushes the mat across the table to me. "That's my number. You call me too, if you're worried."

I stand up and go to hug him. We must look totally ridiculous because I hardly reach higher than his midriff, and he has to bend right down to kiss the top of my head. But I don't care what anyone thinks. I'm so glad that Justin has this man for his friend.

TBC
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I caught you knockin' at my cellar door,
I love you baby, can I have some more?
Oh, oh the damage done.
I hit the town and I lost my band,
I watched the needle take another man,
Gone, gone, the damage done.
I sing the song because I love the man,
I know that some of you won't understand
Milk-blood to keep from running out;
I've seen the needle and the damage done,
A little part of it in everyone,
But every junkie's like the setting sun.

- The Needle and the Damage Done - Neil Young

JUSTIN

By the time I get back to New York it's evening. I can't face going back to the apartment because there's no way I can handle Dylan at the moment, so I wander round Chelsea; moving from bar to bar, club to club. I drink until I'm numb; I pull a few tricks; they buy me more drinks. It vaguely occurs to me that this is Brian's method of pain-management.

Right now I don't care; I'll take what I can get. As long as I don't have to think about Mom, or Molly, or Dad; Brian and Dan. Fucking Lindsay and Brian. It's all too much.

By morning I've drunk myself more or less sober. I find a diner, sip coffee, and watch the passers-by heading to work: the early-morning bustle of the city that never sleeps.

Everything goes on, just the same as it would have if I'd been the one to die five years ago. Another insignificant tragedy with a short run, memorable only to the players and some of the audience.

I wait until I'm sure Dylan will have left for college, then I head home. I need to sleep … I'm so tired.
I can hardly walk, but as soon as I lie down and close my eyes all I can see is Molly placing that rose on Mom's coffin, or Brian's face when I hit him.

Eventually I go and raid Dylan's stash for a couple of Diazepam's. Then I sleep … and dream of Brian.

We're at Penn Station and I'm standing on the platform. The train's pulling out. Brian's at the window, screaming my name and hammering on the glass. And I know I'm never going to see him again: never. I'm too late.

I wake up about three with dried tears on my cheeks, feeling like someone's stuffed my head with cotton wool: so I drag myself into the shower and stay there until the water runs cold. I rub myself dry and then go to the bedroom, wanting to dress and get out before Dylan comes home. I check my cell and find I've got thirteen missed calls. I bet they're all from him, so I leave it turned off. I know I should call him, I know I'm not being fair. But that's something else I don't want to think about.

By the time I'm ready it's nearly four. I still feel sleepy and lethargic, so I take a snort of Dylan's coke to wake myself up.

By the time I get to Tramps it's nearly eleven. Shaun's on the door and I'm surprised not to see Boot's familiar figure until I remember he's in London. I wonder if he's met up with Daph yet, and what they'll have thought of each other.

I'd give a lot to see either of them right now.

I make my way to the bar and order Tequila. Stay on the same drink if you don't want to throw up, right? That's what Brian says. Such a good teacher.

I don't know how long it is before Dylan turns up, but I'm dancing with this hot Hispano guy when I suddenly realise he's standing there, glaring at me. No, more than glaring. He's fucking furious.

"Where have you been?" he yells, grabbing my arm.

I stare at him in disbelief. "What the fuck are you on? I went to a funeral … remember?"

"That was yesterday!"

Was it? It seems much longer than that.

"You were supposed to be home last evening. Where the fuck have you been since then?"

I shrug. "Around."

"And why has your cell been switched off? I must have left half a dozen messages."

"Thirteen," I inform him. I pull away and start back towards the bar. "And I don't need Twenty fucking Questions right now."

He grabs me again. "You're so fucking selfish! It's all you, you, you! What you want, what you don't want! Well, I've been worried sick … you have no idea what I've been through!"

For some reason this strikes me as hysterically funny and I start laughing. "Oh, Dylan, if you only knew how little I care what you've been through!"
He stares at me, his face working, his eyes wild. "You've been with him, haven't you?"

I raise my eyebrows. "Who?" I ask innocently, goading him now because I know damn well which who he means.

"Him! Your precious Brian," he sneers; and I find myself thinking how ugly he looks when he's high.

"Yeah, I saw him," I snap.

He plants his fists on his hips, trying to look imposing but only succeeding in looking ridiculous. "Did you fuck him?" he demands.

I snort laughter. "No, actually it's the other way around. He usually fucks me."

Dylan's face goes white. "Bitch!" he shrieks.

I change my mind about another drink; all I want to do is to get away from him as far and as fast as I can. I head for the exit.

He's hot on my heels, still pulling at my arm and shouting. I keep going until we're outside, then I turn on him. "Leave me the fuck alone, Dylan, you insensitive prick!" I scream at him. "I've just buried my mother, don't you fucking get it! I don't need this crap!"

"My mother's dead too, you know!" he yells back.

It's too much. I start laughing again, and I turn to walk away from him. I need to find someplace else to sleep tonight, because I've just become homeless again; but Dylan still won't give up. I hear his feet running after me, and then he's grabbing both my arms and we're wrestling each other.

"Let me go, you tosser!" I yell, using one of Boot's favourite epithets.

For a second he freezes, eyes blazing, then he shrieks: "Fine! You wanna go, fucking go!" and he shoves me away from him as hard as he can.

We're standing near the kerb, and as I stagger backwards my right foot twists under me and I lose my balance and stumble out into the road.

And then all I hear is the squealing of brakes and a hard blow to my right leg, and then nothing.

TBC
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BRIAN

The night after Jennifer's funeral I sat alone in the Loft and got completely, falling-down shit-faced for the first time since … well, since Justin walked out on me. I woke up the next morning face down on the couch, with a mouth that tasted like an old jockstrap, a crick in my neck, and a bitch of a hangover.

It really didn't help.

My first call was to Cynthia to tell her I wasn't coming in. She didn't sound surprised. I told her to refer anything urgent to Ted, and found myself wondering how things had ever changed so much that I feel comfortable doing that.

And now I'm playing detective.

"Honeycutt Enterprises. How may I help you?" It's his bright professional voice, and I wince as it cuts straight through my frazzled brain.

"Relax, Emmett, it's only me."

"Me who?"

"Christ, Emmett, you must know my voice by now."

"Oh, me Brian! Sorry, I thought you were a client. This is my business number."

I sigh and press a cold, wet facecloth to my forehead. "And I'm only calling it because your cell is off, as usual."

"Oh. Right. Well, how can I help you, Brian?"

"Do you have Justin's new cell number?"

There's silence. Then, "No, I can't say as I do, Brian."

"Emmett, this is important. I went to Jen's funeral yesterday, and I saw him. We had … fuck, we had a fight. He ran away from me. I need to find out if he's alright, because I've got a really bad feeling about him." All morning I haven't been able to shake the memory of how I felt when I saw Justin bolting out into the traffic: I'm not superstitious, but fuck, it had freaked me. "Please, if you've got his number and you think you're doing the right thing by keeping it from me, well, you're not. Please. I need to speak to him."
More silence. Then he says in a different voice; "I heard about Jennifer. God, what a terrible, terrible thing … as if that poor Baby hasn't had enough heartbreak in his life already!"

"I think we're all agreed on that. And I'm not planning on adding to it, if that's what you're worried about."

"Brian, I'm so sorry, but I haven't spoken to Justin in a couple of months. Nobody has. I even wrote to him at the last address I had for him, at that friend of Daphne's, but I never got a reply. I wish I could help, because I'm sure the poor boy needs all the friends he can get right now."

I try not to feel too disappointed. I'd known it was a slim hope; but I'd thought if there were any member of the old gang Justin had kept in touch with, it'd be Em. Guess I was wrong. Again.

"What about Daphne? You don't by any chance have her number?"

"Daph? No. As far as I remember, she's studying to be a doctor in England."

"Yeah, I know. It was just a shot in the dark. Look, do me a favour; if he does contact you, let me know at once, okay?"

"I swear on Barbara's life… and I'll check with Michael and Deb, just in case he's called. But I don't think it's very likely, Brian."

I sigh. "Neither do I, Emmie-Lou."

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"Taylor Electronics. Tina speaking."

I put on my best smiley voice. "Good afternoon, Tina. I wonder if Mr. Taylor might be free for a quick word?"

"Could I ask what it's in connection with?"

"I'm sales director of a new advertising agency in Pittsburgh and I'd like to talk to him about whether he'd be interested in our representing his company. We could offer him some very attractive introductory rates." Well, it wasn't a total lie.

"Please hold the line a moment. I'll see if he's available."

I grit my teeth listening to a horrible tinkly muzac version of *Moon River* until it finally cuts off and I hear his voice.

"Craig Taylor. I believe you want to talk to me about opening an account with your company?"

"No. Not really."

"Pardon me? I thought you were calling on behalf of an advertising agency?"

"Only in so much as it got your attention. This is Kinney … Brian Kinney. I'm sure you recollect the name."

Even in these circumstances, I'd love to see the expression on the bastard's face. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that you're tasteless enough to call," he says, not attempting to disguise the disgust in his voice "If you're going to offer your condolences, don't bother. I have no interest in
"Wait," I say sharply before he can hang up. "This is important, and it involves your son."

There's silence for a second; then he says abruptly, "I'm listening."

"I don't know if you noticed or not, but I was at Jennifer's funeral yesterday. I spoke with Justin afterwards, and I'm very concerned about his mental state. I wanted to ask if you could give me a contact number for him so that I …"

He doesn't give me chance to finish. "I spoke to Justin myself and I can assure you he's perfectly well. And I assume that if he wanted to contact you, or have you contact him, then you wouldn't have resorted to lying to my receptionist to try to get information out of me. Give you his number? Kinney, I wouldn't give you the steam off my piss." He hangs up on me.

I look blankly at the receiver in my hand and resist the urge to hurl it against the nearest wall.

When I eventually fell asleep that evening, I guess it wasn't surprising that I dreamed of Justin. We were at Penn Station, loaded with baggage; I had no idea why, or where we were going; I just had this uneasy feeling that I couldn't let him out of my sight. There were so many people, pressing up against us as we made our way towards the carriage, and I was terrified of losing him in the crowd. I kept a firm hand on his sleeve as we were jostled.

When we got to our carriage I opened the door and shoved our bags inside. Somehow Justin slipped out of my grip.

"I just want to go to the stationers, Brian," he said, pointing at a kiosk at the far end of the platform. "You know I can't go without a sketchbook and pencils!"

It was true, I knew he couldn't. "But the train's about to leave!" I protested. "I'll come with you."

"No, you have to stay here and keep our seats, or someone else will take them," he said seriously. Then I knew why we were leaving, and why so many people were trying to get on the train. Something bad was happening in the city behind us. We were all running from it.

"Alright," I called to him, "but hurry, Justin! You don't have much time!"

He waved at me, casually, and I watched his blond head moving leisurely towards the stationery kiosk. I willed him to walk faster, the panic in me growing with every second.

And then the train beneath me lurched and I knew it was pulling out. "Justin!" I yelled from the door. "Come back!" I tried to leap down after him, but a porter swung the door closed on me. It was Craig Taylor. He used a huge old-fashioned key to lock me in. "Too late, Kinney," he grinned. "He'll have to stay here and take his chances with the rest of us."

I banged frantically on the window. Justin was standing on the edge of the platform, sketchbook clutched in his hand. He waved forlornly as the train pulled out.

I felt the horrible helplessness of a dream wash over me. I knew that if I couldn't get off the train I'd never see him again. Not in this world. So I did the only thing I could; I grabbed the emergency stop and pulled it as hard as I could. But instead of locking the train's brakes, all it did was emit a pathetic bleeping noise.

At which point I come suddenly awake, tangled in sheets and sweating, my heart pounding in my
I stagger out of bed, groggy and disorientated. I snatch it up. "What?" I bark.

"Mr. Kinney?" a female voice asks. "Mr. Brian Kinney?"

"Yes. Yes," I answer, running a hand through my damp hair and wondering what the fuck the time is. "Who is this?"

"I'm sorry to disturb you at this hour, Mr Kinney. This is Maria Lopez from Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan. Do you know a Justin Taylor?"

"Justin?" I'm beginning to feel this is a continuation of the dream. "Yes, of course I know him."

"Well, I'm sorry to have to inform you that Mr Taylor was involved in an RTA tonight and he's been admitted to this hospital. His wallet contained your name as his emergency contact number, so I was asked to call you."

"What?" I can't get my head round what she's saying. "No, you're mistaken. It was his mother who was involved in a traffic accident in Pittsburgh last week. Not Justin."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that. But it's Mr Justin Taylor who's been admitted to Mount Sinai tonight."

The Loft seems to lurch sickeningly as the world falls out from under me, and I hang on to the back of the couch to stop myself falling. This cannot be happening.

"What's his condition?" My voice seems to be coming from a great distance.

"I don't have that information, sir. All I can tell you is that he was admitted with multiple injuries and he's in surgery at the moment."

With a huge effort I pull myself together and go onto automatic pilot, still talking as I run back to the bedroom, dragging on clothes while I try to think. I can't afford to fuck up now. "You know he's allergic to a lot of medicinal drugs, right? Do you need me to list them?"

"No, sir, Mr Taylor carried that information in his wallet."

"And he suffered severe head trauma five years ago. He was treated at Allegheny General Hospital here in Pittsburgh. His neurologist was Dr. Fetterman."

"Thank you for that. I'll fax them for his medical records."

"And he's covered on my insurance. So whatever you need to do, do it. If I leave now I can be in New York in three hours. I'll need directions … can you hang on while I find a pen?"

I race back to my desk, grab up a pen and a post-it pad and start writing. Fucking thing's empty. I hurl it away, snatch up another and scribble down her directions without even being aware of what she's saying. I tear off the paper, stuff it in my jeans' pocket, toss the phone on the couch. I pull on my boots without bothering about socks, grab the first jacket I find, make sure I have my wallet, keys and cell, and then I'm gone.

TBC
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

 Blind man running through the light of the night
 With an answer in his hand,
 "Come on down to the river of sight"
 And you can really understand.

 Red light flashing through the window in the rain
 Can you hear the sirens moan?

 White cane lying in a gutter in the lane
 As you're walking home alone.

 Don't let it bring you down, it's only castles burning.

 But find someone who's turning
 And you will come around.

 Don't Let it Bring You Down – Neil Young

 BRIAN

 The rain beats against the windshield as I push the 'Vette as hard as I can, racing through the night beneath an endless procession of neon street lamps which reflect in sparkling fluorescent halos from the sweeping wipers. I'm thankful that at least there's little traffic at this hour, and I curse impotently whenever I have to waste precious time stopping for gas. I'm compelled by the need to keep moving, terrified of arriving too late. I'm tortured by memories of the last time I made this journey: how smug I'd been, how casual. How certain I'd been that I'd find my little blond stalker in the end, even though I had no idea where. Now I'm sure of my destination, but I have no idea what I'll find there. I find myself repeating that familiar, futile litany: Not him. Please God, not him.

 I don't know who I blame most: Jennifer for dying; Craig Taylor for being the insensitive, arrogant asshole he is; or me… for being me.

 How many times have I looked down this barrel? How many times have I nearly lost him? How many times have I made this same pathetic bargain: let him be okay, and I'll change. Let him live, and I'll do things differently. And always, once the danger was passed, once the fear had begun to fade, I'd forget. I'd go back to back to being Brian fucking Kinney, glorious, inviolable and unrepentant. In the past I at least had an excuse: I'd never really admitted how much he meant to me.
I could still fool myself. But now there is no hiding place, because this time I knew exactly what I had: I'd accepted it, embraced it, wanted it. Justin was everything to me … a partner who was an equal, who challenged me, made me laugh, drove me bugshit some of the time – and who loved me more than I ever had the right to be loved. Someone who I finally let myself love. And I still fucking threw it away!

I don't deserve another chance; I know it. I've fucked up too many times, hurt too many people. I deserve all the shit I've ever taken and I have no complaint. But I'm starting to be afraid that Justin has become my whipping boy, the helpless victim who suffers instead of me, and through whose suffering my own punishment is intensified. It's fucking ridiculous, I know, but I can't get the thought out of my head. You ruined my life! he'd screamed, and my soul shrivels. Because if I have, then he never deserved it, and I can only hope that if there is a driving force behind the universe, then it has compassion and justice enough to acknowledge that fact.

I really have only one desire. If he's dead, to go with him. To flip the 'Vette and follow him. Because I can't face the thought of going on without him.

By the time I hit the outskirts of New York the rain has stopped, and the sky is beginning to lighten.

Steering with one hand, I fumble in my pocket and pull out the paper with the directions to Mount Sinai and squint at it, trying to make sense of what I'd scribbled.

And that's when the whoop of a siren sounds behind me, and the revolving blue light spills off the Vette's windows, and fuck me if I haven't been pulled by the traffic cops.

Numbly I pull over, and watch as the cruiser stops a safe distance behind me. The passenger door opens and the cop climbs out. He walks over, shining his flashlight into my face, and I wind down the window. I'm suddenly uncomfortably aware of my appearance, wild-eyed and unshaven and unkempt.

Apparently the cop notices too, because his eyes narrow and he moves back a little. "Step out of the car, please sir."

Christ, can this get any worse? I have visions of sitting in a holding cell while Justin's dying without me. I open the door and get out, reaching for my wallet, and I see his eyes widen as his hand moves towards what I assume is his gun. "Officer, please," I hold my hands out, signifying no threat. "I'm Brian Kinney, from Pittsburgh, and this is my car. I have my license here in my wallet. I know I was speeding, but I got a call from Mount Sinai Hospital a couple of hours ago to say my partner had been involved in an RTA and was undergoing surgery. I don't know how bad it is, or even if I'm too fucking late." I give him my wallet and then wave the crumpled paper at him desperately. "These are the directions I took down, but I have no idea where I'm going. Write me a ticket or whatever, but please, I just want to get there in time."

He gives me a searching, wary look, then takes my wallet and opens it, inspecting my ID and licence while I suppress the urge to scream. Then he looks at the paper and studies it. "What's your partner's name?"

I take a deep breath. "Justin Taylor."

"Justine, huh? Pretty name." He hands me back my wallet and gestures for me to get back in. "Follow me, Mr. Kinney. I'll escort you."

I don't know whether to laugh or fucking cry. He's heard what he wanted to hear, but if it gets me to
Justin quicker I'm not going to disabuse him. I climb back into the 'Vette, wait for the cruiser to pull in front of me and then follow my escort into the New York dawn.

Even with the cops leading the way it takes another half an hour to reach the hospital, but eventually we pull up before the A&E entrance. The cop winds his window down and leans out. "You can leave your vehicle over there," he says, gesturing towards a designated parking area. "Good luck, Mr. Kinney. I hope your partner's okay."

I feel my throat closing up, but I manage to nod and smile. "Thanks for the thought, officer. And for all your help."

He waves as the cruiser pulls out, and I follow the signs to the parking area. I leave the Vette in the first available slot and head back towards A&E at a flat run. Even at this hour there are a few people sitting around in the reception area, I guess either waiting to be treated for minor injuries or to get news of patients still seeing the doctors. I head straight for the reception desk and the young coloured girl in a nurse's uniform sitting there. I think of Daphne and it gives me hope.

"I'm here about Justin Taylor – he was admitted after a road traffic accident tonight?"

She looks up at me. "Are you a relative, sir?"

"I'm his life partner," I tell her with no hesitation at all. "I received a call from a Maria Lopez to say he was undergoing surgery, and I've just driven in from Pittsburgh. I have no information at all about his condition, so please can I speak to someone immediately?"

She gives me a small sympathetic smile. "If you'd like to take a seat, Mr. Kinney, I'll try and find a doctor to speak to you."

I go and join the other people in the waiting room. Most of them are either reading magazines or dozing; I'm too wound up to do either. I sit, feeling the tension building inside me as I wait to find out what the fuck I have to deal with here. Thank God Ted had arranged for full health insurance cover for Justin as my partner when we were going to get married – at least I can make sure that whatever treatment or aftercare Justin might require is paid for. I refuse to allow myself to consider any less optimistic outcome. One step at a time, Kinney – all that matters is that he's alive. However serious the outcome of his injuries may turn out, we'll handle them.

It seems hours, although I suppose it's only ten minutes or so, before a man in a white coat approaches the reception desk. He speaks to the nurse, and she nods in my direction. I leap to my feet as he walks towards me; a middle-aged man with dark, greying hair and weary brown eyes. He extends his hand. "Mr. Kinney? I'm Doctor Truman. I've been treating Justin."

"Is he alive?" That's all I want to know right now, and I close my eyes as relief floods over me when he smiles and nods.

"If you'd like to come with me, I'll tell you about the extent of his injuries."

I follow him down the corridor, feeling my stomach roil at the ubiquitous hospital scents of antiseptic and illness. I've smelt them too often down the years, and they never get any more bearable.

Truman opens a door leading into a small office. He sits behind the desk and indicates me to take one of the other chairs, which I do; I watch him nervously, trying to read his body language. I think he looks relaxed. I'm sure he does.

"It appears Justin was struck by a car during an altercation with another man. It seems as though he
was either pushed or fell into the road, and the driver had no chance to avoid him. The right side of his body bore the brunt of the impact; his right tibia and fibula are fractured, as are three ribs on the right side of his chest. His right ankle is dislocated, although fortunately his knee is undamaged. He also suffered a concussion from striking his head on the car windshield."

"Shit!" My mouth is suddenly dry. Not again, please, not that again.

Truman nods. "Of course, that is our major concern at the moment, given Justin's history. However, although he had lost consciousness when the paramedics arrived at the scene, he had regained it by the time he was admitted; and there seemed no sign of motor impairment. His vital signs were all good."

I rub my hand over my face, unable to believe that we've dodged yet another bullet.

"Of course, we shall keep him here under observation for a few days just to be on the safe side; but at the moment I can assure you that none of his injuries are life threatening. He was lucky that the driver was keeping to the speed limit, otherwise things could have been very different."

"Thank you," I breathe; it's a heartfelt response, and not only addressed to the doctor.

"However, there are aspects of his condition which are still of concern to me." Truman leans his elbows on his desk and looks me straight in the eye. "I'm given to believe that you are his partner and that presumably you will be his primary carer when he's released?"

"Yes, of course." I have no idea how Justin will react to that statement, particularly considering our last parting, but I'll deal with that once I've seen him.

"His ribs will heal within three to four weeks. However, three fractured ribs are regarded as a serious injury, and he will require careful monitoring to ensure that no breathing complications develop. He will need regular analgesics so that he can breathe properly without pain. Unfortunately, the injury to his ribs means that he will be unable to use crutches for extended periods, at least to begin with. And since he has a full-leg cast, which will need to stay in place for perhaps three months, he will need to use a wheelchair. He will also require a great deal of physical assistance, particularly in the early stages"

"None of that is a problem," I assure him. "Our home is on one level, and it has elevator access. And I have my own business, so I can take as much as I need to look after him."

"Then you are both in a fortunate position," Truman says, smiling. Then he becomes more serious. "Mr. Kinney, I'm in rather a difficult position here. I'm bound by patient confidentiality, but there are a couple of issues about Justin's recovery which I must discuss with you."

I nod. "Go ahead."

"Justin's blood results showed not only high levels of alcohol, but also marked evidence of the use of cocaine and other drug abuse; specifically benzodiazepines. I'm not here to pry into your personal life, but the analgesics I'm going to prescribe will be dangerous if mixed with any of those substances. Will he have access to them at home?"

I take a deep breath. Coke and sleeping tablets. Jesus, Justin! "I'm not going to tell you I've never used recreational drugs, but I can assure you I haven't indulged in anything more than alcohol and pot in a long time. Justin's been living in New York for about six months now, and I only found that he was using cocaine the last time I saw him. He wasn't using when he was with me in Pittsburgh."

He raises an eyebrow. "I thought he was your partner … doesn't he live with you?"
"Justin's an artist," I reply. "He came to New York to see if he could establish himself. Unfortunately things didn't work out as we hoped … I believe that's probably the reason he began using drugs on a regular basis."

"So he will agree to go back to Pittsburgh with you?"

"Of course," I say with a lot more confidence than I feel.

Truman nods his head. "Very well. Contingent upon Justin's condition remaining stable, I'm prepared to release him into your care. He'll need to attend Allegheny as an outpatient to monitor his leg and make sure the bones don't move out of alignment. A nurse will instruct you in his pain management and symptoms to watch for regarding chest infections and post traumatic brain injury."

I smile thinly. "That's one area I don't need any training in, I can assure you. He lived with me when he was recovering the last time."

"As to the issues regarding his drug abuse, I'm sure you don't need me to tell you that the use of stimulants and depressants is a dangerous combination, especially when combined with alcohol. I can't stress too strongly that this is a matter that will need to be addressed."

I nod agreement. It'll be addressed, all right. "Can I see Justin now?"

"I don't see why not. He's out of Recovery, but he's sedated so he's quite sleepy. He's in a private room; I presume that's what you would have wanted?"

I nod, relieved that whatever conversation Justin and I end up having, it won't be in front of an audience. "He's covered by my personal health insurance. I want him to have the best possible treatment."

Truman raises his eyebrows. "He'd get that whatever his circumstances, Mr. Kinney."

A nurse takes me up to Justin's room; she's middle-aged, plump and determinedly jolly, and reminds a lot of Deb without Tourette's. She informs me her name's Annie. Justin's already obviously a favourite.

"Such a nice looking boy," she beams. "It's so lucky that he has no lasting facial damage."

I agree whole-heartedly. "Is he in any pain?" I ask. I really need to prepare myself if he is, because Justin in pain is about my least favourite thing in the world.

She shakes her head. "We try to avoid traditional analgesics where brain trauma is concerned, to avoid suppressing the motor functions any further. So we gave Justin an epidural infusion which will provide continuous pain relief while he's here."

"Doctor Truman said he'd been sedated."

"Only mildly. When he was admitted he was very distressed because he couldn't really remember what had happened or why he was in hospital. Amnesia of events either before or after the trauma is usual in cases of concussion."

"Yeah," I reply dryly. "I'm aware of that." I try not to think of how Justin must have felt, finding himself in a hospital again with no memory of what had happened. Distressed? He must have freaked the fuck out.
"Anyway, I'm sure your presence will be a great comfort to him." Annie pauses at a door at the end of the corridor, opens it and ushers me in. "I'll leave you two together," she says with a wink.

I don't hear her leave; my focus is all on the small figure in the hospital bed. Justin is lying on his back, quite still, his right leg encased in white plaster. I walk slowly towards him, and take in the rest of the damage; the discoloured swelling to the right side of his face; the cuts and scrapes on his hands and arms; the plaster on the back of his left hand where the I.V. had been attached. Suddenly it's very hard to breathe. I pull a chair from against the wall and place it beside the bed, and sit down.

His eyes are closed; he seems to be breathing peacefully, if a little shallowly. I reach out to touch his hair, noting inconsequentially how the dyed strands feel so much coarser beneath my fingers. But I don't care, this is my Sunshine, and he's as whole as is possible under the circumstances, and it's as much as I can do not climb on the bed with him.

He seems to sense me; his eyelids flutter, and then open, although the right one is swollen and slitted. He gazes at me blankly for a few seconds, and then he smiles sleepily.

"Brian," he mumbles, "I was having such a weird dream."

"Were you?" I ask softly. I'm still stroking his hair: I don't want to lose contact with him.

"Mmm. But I can't remember." He frowns a little.

"Never mind. You go back to sleep, Sunshine. I'm here."

He smiles again, and as I continue to caress him, his eyelids begin to droop and he drifts off again.

I wipe my eyes with my free hand, because they're suddenly leaking, and I can feel tears trickling down my face. Guilt, remorse, regret; all the emotions I claim never to feel; but I think mostly they're tears of relief; because however he feels about me when he wakes up later, right now I made him smile.

TBC
CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tell me lies later, come and see me
I'll be around for a while.
I am lonely but you can free me
All in the way that you smile.
Tell me why, tell me why,
Is it hard to make arrangements with yourself
When you're old enough to repay
But young enough to sell?
- Tell Me Why – Neil Young

BRIAN

"How long will you be gone, Boss?" Cynthia asks.

I sit on the hotel bed, kicking off my boots. My feet are sore where the leather's rubbed them; memo to self, Get some fucking socks. "Probably only a few days. I'll let you know if things turn out any different. But even when I get back to Pittsburgh, I'm not going to be coming in for a few weeks … maybe longer." I tuck the receiver between my cheek and shoulder while I massage my toes. "I can work from home … and I can always find someone to take care of Justin for a couple of hours if there's a crisis and I really need to come in. But I don't want anyone finding out that he's back, at least until he's more comfortable … so tell Theodore to keep his mouth shut. If anyone comes banging on the door bearing chicken soup and advice, I'll know who to come looking for."

"Gotcha." She hesitates. "So what did Justin say about coming back to Pittsburgh?"

"He hasn't said anything, because I haven't told him yet. He wasn't in any condition to discuss the matter."

"Ah. I foresee a problem."

"Well, he doesn't have much fucking choice, unless he wants to stay in hospital until his ribs heal … I think I can guarantee he'll prefer the Loft option."

"I guess." She doesn't sound convinced. "Do you want me to book flight tickets?"
I shake my head. "The doctor advised against flying so soon after a head injury. And the train's out for the same reason the Vette is; Justin can't sit cramped like that for hours. They're going to bring him back in an ambulance and I'll follow in the car."

"Okay. Well, I'd better let you get some sleep, then. Call me if you need anything. And, Boss … give Justin my love."

"Thanks, Cyn. I'll do that." I hang up and finish undressing. I'm going to shower and grab a couple of hours' sleep; then I'll go buy some socks and get back to the hospital. Justin should be awake by then; and then, we have to talk.

"I told you, it was an accident." Justin's voice carries the little rise in tone, which means he's getting pissed: seriously pissed. Well, he's certainly awake.

"Mr. Taylor – Justin – we have a number of witnesses to the incident, including the doorman at the club you'd been visiting, and most of them state that Mr. Fogarty pushed you under the car."

I stand outside the door of Justin's room listening. I didn't mean to eavesdrop; I was just walking up the corridor when I heard Justin's voice, and it was pretty clear the cops were interviewing him. So of course I listened in.

"I don't care what they think they saw. It was an accident."

"How can you know that? The doctor says you can't even remember the incident." The cop's obviously not buying it.

"I don't remember being run over, but I remember everything that happened before. Dylan and I were arguing … I won't deny that. We'd both had way too much to drink … and I just lost my balance. In fact, Dylan tried to grab me to pull me back. That's what they must have seen."

Whoever said he wasn't a good liar? He's almost got me convinced.

"Look," another voice says. This one sounds quite young, and he's trying to do the you know you can trust me bit. "If you're worried about giving evidence for some reason, you don't have to …"

"Puh-lease!" I can imagine the expression on his face. "I am not some sissy little faggot in need of protecting! I am not in any danger. Now I have given my statement, I am not pressing charges, and I want you to leave me alone!" He starts coughing.

Time to step in. "Gentlemen," I say, walking into the room, "I believe Mr. Taylor has made himself clear."

The two cops, both in plain-clothes, turn towards me. The older one steps forward. "And you are …?"

"Brian Kinney, Mr. Taylor's partner. And since he's just sustained serious injury, I suggest you let him rest, as he has requested. If you don't, I shall call a nurse and tell her you're harassing him."

They both look pissed at that; I've hurt their feelings. Hey, they're cops. I should give a shit.

The young one glares at me on his way out. "Just trying to help, Mr. Kinney," he snaps.

I raise one eyebrow and give them a little wave as they decamp. Then I shut the door behind them and hurry over to the bed. Justin's half sitting, propped up on pillows, wearing one of those
embarrassing blue hospital gowns. He's even paler than usual except for the bruise on his face, which has turned purple and black, the eyelid now completely swollen shut. He's still gasping, holding the right side of his chest. "Fuck! Are you okay? I'll call the nurse…"

"No. I'm fine."

"The fuck you are. You're hurting."

"I don't know how I feel," he replies a little breathlessly. "Doctor Truman said he'd given me an epidural to control the pain, and I guess it's working because I'm not really hurting at all … everything just feels kind of tingly and achy. My chest feels strange."

"That's because you've got three broken ribs."

"I know what's wrong, thanks."

I fetch my chair and sit down beside him. "You don't seem very surprised to see me. Do you remember me being here earlier? I thought you were out of it."

He shakes his head. "Annie told me you were here. She seemed to think I'd be delighted." He looks down at his hands, lying in his lap. "They told me I was conscious when I was brought in, but I don't remember that either."

I reach out and lay my hand on his. "So are you going to tell me what really happened?"

He moves his hand deliberately out of my grasp. "It's none of your fucking business."

I feel a hot surge of anger. "Report the fucker, Justin! Jesus, what are you thinking? Let them throw his sorry ass in prison and then slap him with a lawsuit for compensation!"

"Yeah, like that's worked before." He looks me in the eye. "Believe it or not, it was an accident. I do remember Dylan and me fighting. We were both high … and he pushed me. But I saw his face when I fell … he didn't mean it to happen."

He can make all the excuses he wants; I really don't give a flying fuck. The bastard nearly killed Justin, and I don't care how fried his brains were, I want him to pay.

Justin must see what I'm thinking, because his chin comes up defiantly. "It's my decision. I'm the only one who got hurt, and if I don't press charges there's nothing they can do. It was my fault as much as his." He starts to cough again, and tries to reach for the water carafe on the nightstand, grimacing with pain.

"Hold on, let me get it." I pour him a glass and hand it to him. "Can you manage?"

"I'm not a fucking cripple!" he snaps, glaring at me.

"Justin…” I run my hand through my hair helplessly. "Please … I'm sorry. I'm just fucking angry, that's all. I don't want to fight with you."

He swallows half the water, then turns his body slowly to replace the glass himself. Stubborn twat.

"I remember you saying the same thing last time we met." He settles gingerly back on the pillows and looks at me intently. "Brian, why are you here?"

"Well, I had a call in the middle of the night telling me that this little twink I know had got himself knocked over by a car, so I figured I'd better come and find out if he was still alive or not."
He makes a small dismissive gesture.

"I'm sorry," I tell him contritely. "I didn't mean to be flippant. You know I'm crap at this."

"Another rescue mission? Another guilt trip? Because honestly, Brian, you're not responsible for me anymore."

If only that were true. I reach out and take his hand again. "Come on, Justin, why do you think? I mean, if it had been the other way round, you would have come to me, wouldn't you?"

I can see the truth in his face. But he's not giving in

"Doctor Truman also seems to think I'm going back to Pittsburgh to live with you. Would you like to tell me how he got that idea?"

"Because that's what's going to happen."

"Oh right, like I don't get any say in this?"

"Sure you do. This is the way things stand; you can't look after yourself for at least a few weeks until your ribs heal. You're going to be in a wheelchair because you can't use crutches. So your choices are; stay in hospital; come back to Pittsburgh with me; or go back to the psycho who pushed you under a car in the first place. Tick, tick, tick. And the answer is?"

"None of the above," he answers, and I can almost see a smile tugging at his lips. "Why can't I stay with Deb?"

"Because her house has stairs and you won't be able to manage them. Whether she wants to admit it or not, Deb's getting old now; too old to lug you about. Plus, do you really want her helping you shower or take a piss?"

He pulls a face. "Emmett, then."

I sigh. "Emmett has his own business, and unlike me, he can't afford to take time off to look after you."

Jennifer's name hangs unspoken between us.

"I'm not helpless!" he protests vehemently.

"You are, at least until your ribs start to heal," I tell him gently. "And once you're released and you only have oral painkillers to rely on, you're really going to start hurting. Trust me, I know from personal experience that broken ribs are a bitch."

I watch his face as the realisation begins to dawn that he really is fucked here. But then he remembers the main objection. "And what about Dan? Where does he fit into this picture? Are you planning on setting up a ménage à trois?"

I look him straight in the eye. "There is no Dan," I tell him honestly. "Not anymore."

"Oh," he says with a laugh. "How conveniently you push people out of your life when you have no further need for them!"

"Believe what you want, Justin. Dan never had a place in my life. None that counted, anyway." The scepticism in his eyes is clear, but I can see that he's weakening, too. "Come on, Sunshine," I coax. "You know there really isn't any other option for you, don't you?"
He gives a little huff of breath, then looks at me. "Okay," he sighs wearily. "I guess I really don't have a choice. But it's only until I can get about by myself. Then I'll find someplace else."

"Fine." I smile at him. I'll agree to anything if it means I've got a couple more weeks to get this fucking mess straightened out.

TBC
Chapter Notes

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BRIAN

The apartment where Justin's been staying is part of a brand new riverside development complex in Chelsea called Bellamy Towers; all polished steel, huge windows and balconies. I punch the security code into the pad beside the wide glass entrance doors and they slide open automatically. I walk into a large, brightly-lit foyer with black and white tiled flooring; the elevators are directly opposite. I take the nearest, and hit the button marked penthouse.

I'm hoping to take the fucker by surprise.

Yes, okay, I promised Justin I wouldn't do anything and I won't … not unless he starts it. I just want to see his face when I walk in and he realises who I am.

But I guess I'm out of luck, because when I unlock the apartment door there's no sound from inside; I still enter cautiously, just in case the guy's asleep or something. I close the door behind me.

I look around the lounge area; it's at least as large as the loft, with a huge picture window running the length of the far wall giving spectacular views of the Hudson and New Jersey Shoreline. The furnishings aren't as tasteful as mine, but are still expensive: before the window stands a black glass dining table with a set of chrome and leather dining chairs; a massive red leather L-shaped sofa bisects the floor space, with a huge flat screen TV dominating the facing wall. There's also a top of the range entertainment centre, with glass and chrome cabinets housing racks of CD's, DVD's and videos. I wonder at the idiot who's splurged this amount of money on what's actually a student pad, as I take in the coffee table marked with dark rings from cups and glasses, the scuffs and stains on the leather upholstery and the cigarette burns and wine spills on the plush white carpet.

There are four doors leading out of the lounge area: two on the right and two on the left. The first right hand door opens into the master bedroom, which also has a picture window; I note the walk-in closet, the concealed lighting and the ensuite bathroom: the freaky Goth art work (not Justin's!); the king-size bed … the black sheets. I do my best not to visualise Justin's pale skin against them, and beat a hurried retreat. The next door leads into what's obviously a second bedroom but which has been furnished as a workroom; there's a computer consul and printer, a desk, shelves of books. Justin's easel stands empty by the window. I notice some prints lying on the desk, so I pick one up and snort as I read it; it's pretentious, self-obsessed, puerile drivel. But I see Justin's unmistakable talent in the accompanying illustrations, and as always I'm beyond impressed. The lad puts his heart into everything he does; the mark of a true artist, I guess.

The doors on the left lead respectively into a lavishly appointed kitchen complete with granite worktops and breakfast bar, and the bathroom proper, tiled in white and midnight blue. I feel another stabbing pain in my gut at the sight of the huge spa tub and the image of Justin languishing in it. I open the medicine cupboard but there's nothing in it except aspirin and mouthwash and Justin's
allergy and pain meds. I gather these up and then go back to the kitchen to check the refrigerator; not only are there no drugs, there's no food either. Someone has cleaned up and cleaned out.

I carry Justin's medicines back to the bedroom, toss them on the bed and open the closet. Justin's clothes are hanging on the left, where he'd said they'd be, but in actual fact I don't need direction to find them because the rest of the closet is empty. It appears his little chum has fled the scene. I spot Justin's worn old duffel and holdall on the floor next to the rack holding his array of trainers and sneakers, so I drag them out and start pulling clothes off hangers; his familiar shirts and cargos, his few good pants and jackets. He seems to have acquired some new items, though; black jeans and tops and tees with skulls and shit on them. I pack them away and then turn to the fitted drawers beside the closet; they're all empty except for the bottom one. I pull out Justin's socks and underwear and cram them on top of the rest of his stuff, and tuck his meds into a side pocket.

I open the nightstand, checking for any sketchpads or drawings, but all I find are condoms and lube. I spot a fitted drawer under the bed, so I check in there too. What I find is a selection of toys: manacles and butt plugs, beads and dildos; a couple of light whips.

I have a sudden vivid memory of a conversation I'd had with Justin, a long time ago when I'd first started fucking him. It had been the night he had his nipple pierced; and despite my blasé reaction to the news I'd hustled him back to the Loft as soon as the others had left, to introduce him to the joys of doggy-style sex and the exquisite pain that pinching a newly-pierced nipple can produce. Afterwards, I'd remembered uncomfortably that the kid had only lost his cherry a couple of weeks before, and he wasn't some experienced old hand from the back room at Babylon.

- Roll over.

- Brian ... I can't. Really.

- I know, twat. I just need to check you're okay.

- I'm fine, honestly.

I'd laughed at him. Christ, Justin. After the things I've just done to your ass, I can't believe that you're too fucking embarrassed to let me look at it.

- This is different. It's not ... He'd put his head down, blushing furiously. So fucking sweet.

I'd taken his chin in my fingers and made him look at me. Sexual? You're wrong. It's all part of the same deal. You do me the ... I'd sought to find the right word; honour of letting me fuck you. You trust me with your body. So it's up to me to make sure that you're okay afterwards.

He'd looked at me so bashfully as he allowed me to examine him, and I'd felt a completely alien flood of responsibility and protectiveness which seemed almost pleasant: a cocktail of emotions I'd eventually come to associate with only two people in my life; Justin and my son ... certainly never with a casual fuck. I wonder if that was the moment when he stopped being just a simple trick, and started becoming someone of supreme importance instead ... the first time I felt what I much later acknowledged as love.

Like the time Mel and Linds walked in on us, right before his disastrous career as go-go boy, and I'd been deflating his ego with a disciplinary spanking. He'd reacted so positively to the treatment that after they'd gone I was only too eager to continue the lesson. We'd eventually fallen asleep exhausted and sated, with his hot, stinging little ass pressed against my groin.

But in the morning, he'd been quiet, nervous. I was afraid I'd gone too far, afraid that he was hurting,
but he'd shaken his head.

- *Then what?*

He'd mumbled something into my chest.

- *What? I can't hear you.*

- *Do you despise me?* His voice had been very small and quiet.

- *Why the fuck would I do that?*

He'd raised his head. He'd been flushed and embarrassed … again. *Because I enjoyed it.*

I remember thinking that this was the reason I didn't do virgins. But I'd taken the time to try and reassure him, because it mattered more than anything that he shouldn't value himself any less because of what we'd done. *Do you despise me, then?*

- *No, of course not!* He'd looked shocked.

- *Well, if you expect me to despise you for enjoying being spanked, then you should despise me for enjoying doing it to you. Seems only fair.*

I'd watched him as he thought about it. *Justin, listen. We all have kinks; every one of us. Even your Mom; even your Dad. He'd screwed his face up. Some people never act on them … never dare do it. But everybody has them, and they're perfectly natural. This is nothing … Christ, do you know there's a website for guys who buy women's shoes? But not any shoes … these have to be worn ones, with sweat marks still visible, so they can smell them …* 

His face had been a picture. *You are kidding, Brian? That's one of the grossest things I've ever heard of!*

- *Cross my heart and hope to die, Sunshine. So you see, a little spanking fetish isn't so weird.* I'd wrapped my arms around him and indulged in a little recently acquired kink of my own: cuddling. *Justin, there is no fantasy you could have that I haven't either done or had done to me. You're not going to shock me, you're not going to disappoint me, and I am not going to despise you. What we do here is between you and me; and as far as I'm concerned, whatever gets you off is fine, so long as nobody gets hurt. That's the only rule I have. That, and the one that says you don't beat yourself up about it afterwards.* 

How young he'd been, how young and fucking trusting. I should have made sure he stayed that way.

I go back into the workroom. Justin's portfolio is propped against the wall, and I open it; there's nothing in it I haven't seen before. He wasn't lying when he said he hadn't been painting. I pick up the prints from the desk and find a couple of sketchpads lying beneath them, so I flick through them. There are a few new drawings of people and things that have caught his interest – destitutes, traffic cops, buskers in the subway; but neither are anywhere near filled. I wonder if any of the sketches are of Foggarty – I'd love to know what the bastard looks like, just in case I ever run into him. I put the pads together with the prints in the portfolio; then notice the art supply case Linds and Mel bought him standing beside his easel, so I pick that up as well. I won't be able to get the easel into the 'Vette, but I can always get him a new one in Pittsburgh. Either that or he can send for it.

I go back for Justin's bags, and then stand at the door looking around, trying to imagine him living here. I can't; there is not even a residual trace of his personality. It strikes me how little impact Justin has made on any of the places he's lived; Mikey's old room, Daph's digs, Ethan's shit-hole. He'd only
ever been a transient at any of them; and here I stand, with all his worldly belongings in a couple of ratty bags, moving him on again. Only the Loft had absorbed him and welcomed him, to the extent that his absence tore the heart from it - the Loft, and Britin, where his presence seems to fill every room, even though he has never spent a night there.

TBC
By the time Justin's paperwork has been filled out and his pain-killers dispensed, and I've been given instructions on dosage and contra-indications, dates for future check-ups and a crash-course in the finer points of getting him in and out of a wheelchair or bed, it's afternoon by the time we leave the hospital.

The journey back to Pittsburgh takes much longer than the trip out, mainly because of the increased traffic volume, but also because I'm following an ambulance.

I spend most of the trip freaking about how this is going to work out. This is the first opportunity I've had to really consider our position; I'm not only going to have to deal with Justin's physical injuries but his emotional ones, too: Jennifer's death, Molly having to live with Craig … Dan. The drugs he's been using. And then there's the disappointment he must be feeling at what he probably regards as his failure in New York; not to mention the fact that the guy he was living with tried to fucking kill him.

I realise belatedly that I have no idea how deep Justin's relationship with Foggarty was. I mean, whether I like it or not it's obvious they were sleeping together and doing drugs together, but were they fuck-buddies like Dan and me, or were they more deeply involved? I mean, he refused to give evidence to the police, didn't he? I already know Justin's grieving for his mother, but is he grieving for this guy, too? If so, I'm going to have to watch what I say; I'm only too well aware I can't let my jealousy get the better of me, because I'm hardly in a position to judge him, now am I?

All I know is, I'll handle it. However good my intentions, I'd ended up pushing Justin into a situation that nearly got him killed again. I'd deserted him when he needed me, and now somehow I have to restore his trust. Because neither of us is going through this fucking shit again.

I take the lead once we hit Pittsburgh, and I stop briefly at the Mall to stock up on Justin-food; milk and cookies and cereal, eggs and juice and chips, plus a couple of DVD's and some puzzle books.

By the time we turn onto Fuller, it's nearly six o'clock.

The medics deposit Justin on the sidewalk in his wheelchair, his cast propped up on a leg support. The bruising on his face looks even worse in daylight, although the swelling has mostly gone down. At least he can open both eyes now. I look at his face, and I can see how tired and sore and pissed he is, and decide not to ask him how he'd enjoyed his trip. I get handed the crutches that he'll still need to use, the medics wave goodbye, and then we're left alone.

I manage to get his wheelchair through the entrance without bashing his leg on the wall on the way in, and hit the call button for the elevator. I put the brake on the chair, then go back to get Justin's
luggage from the 'Vette. By the time I'm back the elevator has descended: Justin has managed to get his wheelchair inside and is now sitting there with an aggravated expression on his face.

"I told you, I'm not helpless!" he snaps in answer to the look I give him.

I load his bags and portfolio and art case and crutches and fucking shopping bags into the elevator and pull the door closed. We ride up in silence, and it stays that way until we reach the Loft. I lug everything inside and turn back for him, but he's already following. "I have to make sure I can handle the escape route," he explains sarcastically.

Crankiness and emotional swings, I remind myself, are typical symptoms of concussion.

I leave him to stew while I put away the groceries. "Do you want something to eat? I've got some soup." When he doesn't answer, I glance over at him. "Sunshine?"

He's sitting quite still, his head down, looking awkward and lost. "What I really want," he says miserably, "is to get out of this fucking gown and wash the stink of that fucking place off me!"

He hates hospitals more than I do, with better reason, and I understand exactly how he feels. I go and crouch down beside him. "Then you will. I'm sure I've got a trash bag we can cover your cast with."

I go and root one out from the cupboard under the sink and take it back to him. "Okay, we'll do this step by step. First we get you to the bedroom, so you're going to need your crutches." I go and fetch them and hand them to him, then wheel him over to the bedroom steps. I put the brake on the wheelchair and release the leg support, lowering his cast to the ground. "Okay, the nurses said to keep all movement as smooth as possible. So I'll take your weight … you just use your good leg to push yourself up with." I grip his biceps firmly, and pull him straight up onto his feet, trying to ignore his gasp of pain. His ribs are broken; they're going to hurt. It's a fact of life. I move to his right side, get a firm arm round his waist, and support him as he manages to hop up the steps. As soon as we're at the top he shrugs me off. "I can manage," he says irritably as he settles his crutches under his arms.

"Just wait a minute, let me get the rugs." I roll them up and stow them in a corner; I'll have to remember to get the ones from the rest of the Loft, too. He's already making his way towards the bathroom and I grab up the trash bag and hurry after him. "Justin, hold on for fuck's sake. You're not used to the crutches and this flooring's slippery. Take it slowly."

I get in front of him, and I can see how much using the crutches is hurting his ribs because he's biting his lip with pain. I shepherd him into the bathroom and stand him against the sink. "Now don't fucking move for a moment."

I kneel down and slip the bag under his right foot, and pull it up so that his whole leg's covered. Then I gather the mouth of it around his thigh and tuck the plastic carefully inside the top of the cast so that it's completely protected. Then I strip off my clothes.

"Did I ask you to join me?" His voice is cold.

"Nope. But if you think I'm letting you in there with a broken leg wrapped in a plastic bag, you're nuts. Tomorrow I'll buy some of those non-slip mats for in here, but tonight you get help."

I forestall any further argument by leaning into the shower to turn the water on. When it's at the right temperature I turn back to Justin.

He's managed to untie the hospital gown and he's standing there naked except for the huge black bag covering his leg, but for once my eyes aren't automatically drawn to his dick. I'm staring at the kaleidoscope of bruises covering the right side of his chest.
I don't say anything; I can't. As gently as possible I get him into the shower with me, lean his back against the tiles and turn the spray so it rains down on his head. I place my hands either side of him, caging him with my arms, ready to grab him if he slips.

For a few minutes I let him stand there, soaking up the heat; then I pick up the shampoo and start to work it into his hair. I expect him to protest, but he doesn't; it seems like all the fight has gone out of him for the moment. He just stands with closed eyes while I massage his hair and gently wash his body, uneasily noting as I do how much weight he's lost. His shoulder blades are sharp beneath my palms, his collarbones too prominent. When he's rinsed I turn off the water. "Sorry, Sunshine. We don't want that cast in here any longer than is strictly necessary."

I wrap a towel around my waist, and use another to carefully pat Justin dry. His wet hair now reaches his shoulders; I can't help but wish it were still blond. It would look fucking incredible.

He continues to let me handle him in silence, his eyes half closed. I can see the exhaustion clearly in his face.

I get a dry towel to wrap him in, hand him his crutches and we slowly make our way back to the bedroom. I lead him to the bed. "Sit down a moment." I take his arms and steady him as he lowers himself; then I go to the closet and pull on a pair of jeans. I find an old pair of sweats that I figure will fit over his cast, and my old Penn State jersey that he used to love wearing. I unwrap his towel and gently slide the sleeve of the jersey over his right arm before easing the rest of him into it. I get his feet into the sweats and pull them carefully up his legs, sliding the waistband under his butt. I turn up the bottoms so they don't hang over his feet.

I make a pile of pillows for him and then slowly lift his legs onto the bed, easing him round and moving him backwards so that his shoulders are supported. He looks white as a ghost. "Just rest there, Sunshine. I'll go heat up that soup."

His eyes open. "I'm too tired to eat."

"Well, you've got to have something. You need to take your Demerol, and you can't have them on an empty stomach." I'm really going to go with this. I figure if he wants his pain meds, he'll eat. At least I can get food into him every three hours.

I bring back chicken soup in a mug because I figure he can manage that better, and leave him to sip it while I go and fetch his bags. As I carry them up the steps, I see Justin sitting staring fixedly ahead of him. "What the fuck is that?" he asks.

"A television screen, Sunshine," I reply as I start to unpack his shit. "I'm sure you've seen one before."

"Not in Brian Kinney's bedroom, I haven't!"

I shrug. "So I watch films sometimes. What's the big deal?"

"Since when is your bed ever used for watching television?"

"Since I sometimes don't sleep too well." I find myself arranging his shirts in colour order, and stop myself. I pick up the remote from the nightstand and toss it onto his lap. "Put it on if you like." I tip his socks and underwear into the bottom drawer of my dresser, wondering if he's noticed that it was already empty. I shove his bags into the back of the closet and go back to the lounge, hearing the TV.
come on behind me. When I come back carrying his Demerol and a bottle of water, he's still surfing channels.

I hand him the capsules and watch him swallow them, then place the water on his nightstand in case he needs it later. I take the soup mug back to the kitchen and rinse it. I boot up my laptop and check my e-mails; I can't see anything that won't wait until tomorrow. I'm too tired to get my head around that shit anyway.

I head back to the bedroom, and notice that Justin's managed to shift himself over to his old side of the bed. He's asleep, propped up on the pillows. I take the remote from his lap and switch off the TV.

I pull off my jeans, debate with myself for a moment, then don a pair of boxers. I want to make it clear I'm not expecting anything from him. Then I slide in beside him, and lie watching him.

He's not fully asleep, because he stirs and opens his eyes. "Why do you have a television in here?" he mumbles.

I'm not sure why he's obsessing about the fucking thing. I sit up and lean over for a cigarette, then pause. "Do you mind? Will it make you cough?"

"Fuck off," he says with a flash of his old spirit.

I grin and light up.

"Did Dan suggest it?"

"Nope. I thought of it all by my wittle self. Why?"

"I thought it might have been him. I asked you for ages to put a television in here, but you never would; so I figured it must have been his idea. After all, it took me five years to get you to admit I was even your partner, but Dan seems to have managed it in a couple of months. I guess he must have been something really special."

I grit my teeth. "I've told you, Justin, Dan was never my partner."

"Yeah. Well, I really didn't get that impression when I met him." He turns his head to look at me. "Did you throw him out because of me?"

,Yes, Sunshine, actually I did. Although not for the reason you think. "I'd already finished it before I heard you were hurt. There was no point going on with it."

"Why? Did he get all clingy and demanding monogamy and bitching about your tricks?" His voice is rising and he's getting way too wound up now.

I reach out to touch his face. "Justin, I know we have a lot to talk about; I'm not trying to avoid it. But that's not a conversation we're going to have now, not when you're exhausted and hurting; it's sleep you need, not a fight. Tomorrow I promise we'll talk as much as you want … or you can yell and throw things, if it makes you feel better. But not now. Can't we just sleep?"

He's quiet for a minute. Then he says with a little sob in his voice: "I'm so fucking tired of lying on my back!"

"Well, let's try something else." I carefully pull some of the pillows from under him and help him lie down, then pull back the duvet. "Roll over." I place my hands on his right shoulder and hip and gently ease him onto his left side. I arrange his legs so that his left thigh is flexed with knee bent; his
broken right leg extended. He pillows his head in his left arm, and as I cover us with the duvet I hear a small groan of relief.

I snug in close to his back so that he can rest against my chest. I want to hug him to me, but I settle for laying my right hand on his hip. It's about the only place he isn't bruised.

I close my eyes, feeling my own exhaustion wash over me. I breathe in the scent of his hair, feeling it tickle my face. So fucking good. So fucking good to have him here.

Then I feel him shaking. Instantly I'm up on my elbow. "What is it? Does it hurt lying like that? Shall I turn you back?"

He shakes his head, and that's when I realise he's crying. "My Mom!" he sobs. "I'm never gonna see her again!"

And oh Christ, I'd forgotten. I'd been so engrossed with looking after Justin's physical needs that I'd entirely missed the one that's causing him most pain. I slide my left arm under his neck and hold him as carefully as I can. "I'm so fucking sorry, sweetheart," I whisper, kissing his hair while I rub his arm and stomach with my free hand. "Let it out, Justin. She deserves your tears. That's my Sunshine … that's my boy. I'm here … everything's okay."

I keep murmuring reassurances, hardly even thinking what I'm saying. Eventually Justin's sobs subside into shaky breaths, and finally he falls asleep. I keep pressed close against him, trying to give him comfort in the only way I can. Once such physical closeness would have struck me as unbearably embarrassing; now I'm only thankful that, even if I've missed so much in the last few months, I'm here to help him through this.

TBC
CHAPTER NINETEEN

JUSTIN

I wake to the smell of bacon. I open my eyes and for a moment I think I'm dreaming, because this is the Loft. Then I realise I'm awake: and one by one, the memories tumble back into place.

Mom's funeral. Dylan. The hospital.

Brian.

After the memories, the pain hits. I feel like I've been run over. Of course, I have been.

My bladder's bursting, so I try to move myself. I roll gingerly onto my back, then start to sit up. I can't hold back a sharp cry of pain as my ribs move, and I flop back down, gasping.

"Justin?" Brian's voice, tinged with alarm. I hear his feet on the steps. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," I snap breathlessly. "I'm just trying to get up."

"Well, don't. I'm fixing breakfast." He's smiling, pleased with himself. I try not to look at the healing scab on his bottom lip where I'd punched him.

"I need to piss, Brian. Now!"

"Then shout for me, twat. That's what I'm here for." He takes my arms and helps me sit up, then moves my legs carefully off the bed. "Ready?" I nod. I push with my good leg and he pulls me smoothly to my feet. He holds me while I get my balance, then goes to get my crutches. I hobble into the bathroom, with him following me like a shadow. I glare at him.

"Do you mind?"

"Don't worry," he smirks, "I promise I won't peek."

I relieve myself thankfully, wash my hands, and then get escorted back to the bedroom.

"Are you going to follow me everywhere?"

"Yes, until I'm sure you've got the hang of those things." He goes to help me back to bed, but I pull away. "Fuck that! I've spent the last four days lying down! I want to sit for a change."

He bites his lip. "Okay, then." He tries to take my arm to help me down the steps.

"For God's sake, let me be! I can do it."
"Justin …" he takes my shoulders, making me look at him. "Sure. I understand you want to do it on your own. Please … just let me go first, okay?" He jumps down the steps and stands at the bottom, arms outstretched. "Alright. Go for it."

I've never realised how far three steps can seem when you're on crutches. I edge up to the first, place the tips of my crutches firmly in the middle of the first step, take a steadying breath and swing myself down. It hurts my ribs like fuck, but I've done it. I pause, then repeat the manoeuvre. Once more, and I'm down. I can't help but feel a little pleased with myself.

Brian's grinning. "Okay, so I guess I can trust you to make it to the couch alone." He goes back to his abandoned breakfast.

I cautiously move towards the couch, noting that he's put away the rugs and anything else I could trip on. I turn, prop my crutches against the couch, balancing on my good leg and try to lower myself down. It doesn't work and I end up flopping backwards, which jars my ribs and makes me gasp again. I'm beginning to realise just how difficult moving around is going to be, at least until they start healing.

Brian is coming over, carrying a tray. He places it on my lap and I stare in disbelief at the bacon, scrambled eggs, buttered toast and orange juice. "Oh, you've become domesticated, too."

"Sunshine, I'm an educated man. I can handle a couple of eggs and a toaster."

"Well, I don't think I can handle all this."

Brian raises an eyebrow. "Oh come on, where's that black hole of a stomach I know so well?" He sits down beside me and sneaks a rasher of bacon. "It's good, even though I say so myself. And remember, you can't have your Demerol until you've eaten something."

I know. I take a forkful of eggs and put it in my mouth. They are good. I manage about half of them, plus a slice of toast. I leave the bacon for Brian. He seems satisfied, although he insists on me drinking the juice. Then he relieves me of the tray and puts it on the coffee table, gives me my two capsules, and sits down beside me.

"I hope you've got more in your stash to offer me than this shit," I tell him.

He shrugs. "There's some weed. You're welcome to that, if you want."

I stare at him. "Fucking weed? You always keep a regular pharmacy in there!"

"Not any more. It's been quite a while since I did any hard stuff."

"Then you'd better get Anita to re-stock it!"

He shakes his head, smiling. "Oh no, Sunshine, you're not sticking any more of that funny powder up your nose. Not on my watch."

Fuck. Fuck, fuck. I glare at him. "Then I'll have to go out and get my own!"

"Sorry again, but you don't get to leave here without me."

That's what he thinks. "I'm an adult. You can't keep me a fucking prisoner!"

"Watch me. I changed the locks, remember? And the security code. So unless you want to climb out the window, which I think might be little difficult in the circumstances, you're stuck."
"I'll call the cops!"

He smirks. "Go ahead. You can tell them how you got hit by a car and now you can't even get to the can on your own, so your partner's taking care of you. I'm sure they'll bust a gut racing round here to rescue you."

He looks so smug I feel like hitting him with a crutch. "You realise that as soon as I can walk I'm out of here?"

He studies me. "Maybe," he says quietly. "Maybe you'll leave and I'll never see you again. Maybe you'll never let me touch you again. Maybe you'll hate me for the rest of your life. I'll take that risk. But for the next few weeks you're here, and you're staying here, no matter how much you yell and sulk and how pissy you get. So you may as well start getting used to it."

I hate him, I really do. He cut me out of his life with much less compunction than he had his ball, and now he's doing the devoted boyfriend act? Well fuck that.

"You're fucking unbelievable, Brian. We haven't been together for six months, and now you're acting like nothing's changed!"

"I suppose that's because, as far as I'm concerned, nothing has," he replies with a small smile.

"I cannot imagine how you have the fucking nerve to say that!" I shout at him. "I am not your partner anymore, if I ever was! You replaced me, remember?" I draw breath a little too quickly, which hurts, and I start coughing. Unfortunately, coughing hurts even more.

"Take it easy, Sunshine," Brian says, taking my hand and looking worried. "I know I said you could yell, but not if you're going to choke yourself."

I glare at him through streaming eyes as I try to control myself. Eventually the fire in my ribs fades a little and I start breathing normally again.

"I did not replace you, Justin," he says with a sigh. "I don't know how many times I'm going to have to say that before you start hearing it."

"Then explain Dan!"

He rubs his hand through his hair. "Justin … it isn't like we promised not to see other people."

"'See' as in 'trick', yes. 'See' as in 'move in with somebody', no. I would have thought you of all people would know the difference."

He actually winces. "You moved in with someone, too," he offers.

"That is a pathetic defence because the situations were completely different! I was stuck in New York, ditched by my partner, homeless except for a sofa in a two-roomed apartment, and without any significant form of income! What the fuck did you expect me to do?"

He ducks his head but not before I hear him mumble, "Not moving in with a psycho would have been good." I forget my ribs and whack his leg hard, but it's still worth the pain.

He straightens up and meets my eyes. "Okay, I'll try to explain." He takes a deep breath and reaches for my hand again. "Justin, I'm not the same guy I was five years, or two years, or even one year ago. I changed … you changed me. After you left, I couldn't go back to tricking every night … or drinking myself into oblivion just so I could sleep. I was lonely … lonely for you, lonely for the time
we had together. Linds and Gus were gone, Mikey had his own life … and when work was over and I had to come home, I couldn't bear the fucking silence."

"Bullshit, Brian!" I snap, thinking of all the cold, lonely nights I'd spent on September's lumpy couch, aching for him, missing him, missing my home. "You say you love me … well, if you love someone you don't just go out and find someone to take their place like you'd buy a new suit! It isn't that easy!"

"How many more times, I didn't do that! Dan was just a guy; one I could share a laugh with sometimes, and who slept over sometimes, but nothing more! I let you believe he'd moved in because I knew it was the only way you'd let go. And since you and I were finished, it didn't seem to matter …"

"We weren't finished!" I yell. "Only in your screwed up imagination! I meant to come home!"

"I wanted you to have your chance," he whispers.

"No, Brian. You wanted me to have your chance. You were the one who wanted New York; you're the one who wants money and influence and power. That's always been the problem; everyone always knew what was best for me, what would make me happy. Never mind that those ambitions were only their own fucked-up hopes, not mine! Dad wanted me to go to Dartmouth and be a businessman like him. Mom used to want me to find a nice WASP boyfriend and settle down in a nice conventional relationship because that was how she'd been brought up. Michael wanted me to go to Hollywood and make his comic into a movie. Lindsay expected me to leap at the chance to go to New York and become the world-famous artist she never had the talent to be. But nobody ever asked me what I wanted!"

He stares at me. "Don't fucking tell me you didn't want to be an artist, because that's a lie."

"Brian, I never wanted to be an artist, I am an artist. I've always been one, I always will be. And whatever career I end up pursuing, art will always be part of it. I'm good, and I'll succeed. But I am not Andy fucking Warhol. Or Picasso. I'm just me, and I never wanted to be anyone else. And I'm fucking tired of trying to make you understand that."

Now would be a really good time to make a dramatic exit, and I try. Unfortunately the couch is too low and I can't get enough leverage to get up. And the bastard's laughing, although he's doing his best to hide it.

I really hate him.

TBC
CHAPTER TWENTY

When you were young and on your own

How did it feel to be alone?

I was always thinking of games that I was playing,

Trying to make the best of my time.

But only love can break your heart,

Try to be sure right from the start

Yes, only love can break your heart

What if your world should fall apart?

Only Love Can Break Your Heart - Neil Young

JUSTIN

I hardly speak to him for the rest of the morning. I know I'm being an asshole, but I can't summon the energy to make the effort required to stop. My mind just keeps running over the same thought; Mom's dead. How many times am I going to have to tell myself that before I can believe it? I'll never see her again, never hear her. And Molly … how the fuck is she dealing with it? I need to call her, to make sure she's okay. I wonder about Dylan, and where he is; Brian said there were none of his clothes or anything else at the penthouse; I guess he must have cleaned everything out in case I set the cops on him.

And Mom's dead.

I can't let myself think too much about that, or I'll end up a hopeless wreck like I did last night and I know Brian has no time for that shit. He's being fucking amazingly good, actually: trying to occupy me with films and stuff, getting my Demerol and making me eat. Unfortunately there's something perverse in me, so the more patient he's being the worse I'm acting. I don't really care; every movement, every breath, stabs like someone sticking a knife in my ribs, and I'm glad in a way because it's blocking nearly everything else. I just want him to stop fussing and leave me alone.

At last he seems to get the message, and goes to work on his laptop while I sit watching some moronic chat show, although it's really just background noise: I may as well be staring at a blank screen.

After an hour or so I hear Brian close down his laptop and he comes over. "I'm going to have to go
out for a while … I need to get some more groceries and some mats for the shower, and I've got to drop in at Kinnetic to sign a contract. I'll be an hour or so, tops."

"So what, you're going to leave me locked in here? What if there's a fire?"

"You've got your cell, haven't you? You can ring me if there's a problem."

"Well, get me off this fucking couch first. If I'm in the wheelchair at least I can move around … I can get myself a drink or something."

He comes to help me. "If everything in this fucking place wasn't so low, I'd be able to get up by myself," I gripe.

"Well, I didn't pick the furniture with handicapped twinks in mind," he smirks back, and I glare at him.

"Do you want the leg support up?" he asks, as I settle into the wheelchair.

"No, it just gets in the way. I'll manage like this."

"Just remember to put the brake on if you try to stand up."

"Yeah, I had the lesson, too."

He puts on his coat, then pauses. "Do you need to use the john or anything before I go?"

"No. Just fuck off."

He grins and comes to place a kiss on my forehead. "Won't be long, dear," he says sweetly. "Shall I bring back some Thai?"

I shrug irritably, and watch as he goes to the door and pulls it closed behind him. I hear him lock it, so he wasn't kidding about keeping me here.

Never mind. I have a plan.

I wait to make sure he isn't going to make a surprise return, then I grab my crutches. Laying them across the arms of the wheelchair I head for the bedroom steps. I'm going to raid his stash.

I put the brake on and lean the crutches carefully against the panels beside the steps; brace my hands on the chair's arms and, taking a deep breath, push myself up. That wasn't so hard. I'm on my feet. Now for the tricky part.

I pick up the crutches and settle them under my arms. Leaning on them as I much as I can bear, I put my left foot on the first step and transfer my weight to it, bringing my broken leg up to join it. Not so bad, as long as I move slowly. I make sure the crutches are seated firmly before I do the same thing again, and again; and then I'm in the bedroom.

Hah. Sucks to you, Kinney.

I hobble over to the bed and let myself flop onto it. I'll worry about getting back up later. I carefully lean down to open the drawer in Brian's nightstand, ignoring the pressure the manoeuvre puts on my ribs, and pull out his tin. Setting it on my knee, I open it. Fuck, he wasn't lying. There's some weed wrapped in shrink-wrap, but nothing else except cigarette papers.

I can't fucking believe it.
Well, since I've made the effort, I may as well get something out of it. I skin up a joint and light it, inhaling deeply. It feels great until I start coughing. But I'm determined to keep going, because I know weed is a good painkiller, right? As long as I can stop coughing. Ouch, that fucking hurts.

I look around and notice the bottle of water on my nightstand, so I use one of my crutches to hook it onto the bed and drag it over. A couple of swigs helps, and I finish the joint. Then I roll another. I try not to think about Mom, or being broke and homeless. Instead I think about Lindsay.

I can't believe that Brian hasn't even spoken to Mel about what's been going on. No matter how acrimonious their relationship might have been, he must know that she loves Gus. He'd never have signed over his parental rights otherwise, or let them go to Canada. The trouble is that Brian has a blind spot where his old friends are concerned, particularly Michael and Linds. It's like he feels they're the only ones he can totally trust, which is why they manage to manipulate him so easily when they've a mind to.

When Brian and I first got together, there was no doubt that Linds was one of my staunchest allies. And yet, even then there'd been times when I'd wondered… like when Brian offered her our tickets to Miami for their honeymoon, and she'd told him that the best present she could have was for him to go and fuck as many beautiful men as he could. When he'd told me about that, weeks later, I hadn't been able to suppress a small sense of betrayal … it seemed that, like Mikey, Lindsay's professed desire for Brian to grow up and put his clubbing and fucking days behind him was a very selective application. But the way she'd gone behind my back and primed Brian about the article in *Art Forum*, even if she'd done it with the best of intentions … well, that was simply sticking her nose in where she had no business. Especially when she must have known exactly how he'd react. But I'd persuaded myself that she'd just been another interfering friend who thought she knew what poor little Justin needed and who was determined to see that he got it. At the worst, I'd believed that perhaps she was subconsciously jealous of my staying with Brian when she was moving away, and had acted on it. I'd been prepared to give her the benefit of the doubt.

I've always known she loves him, in the same way Michael does. Hey, I'm an expert. I recognise the look, better than anyone; and I've always had the greatest respect for both Mel and Ben that they've been able to live with it. But I'd always believed that Linds loved Mel more, and that despite the hiccups they had along the way they would stay together. Until Brian told me about Mel turning into an abusive parent, and Lindsay and Gus moving into Britin … the timing seems too fortuitous, somehow. And I've always believed that true coincidence is a very rare thing.

But fuck it. It's not my problem anymore.

By the time I've finished my third joint I'm feeling a little calmer and more in control of myself, and I realise it would probably be an excellent idea to be back downstairs and in my wheelchair when Brian gets home. So I carefully re-wrap the weed, put it back in the tin and replace it in the drawer.

Now I have to get up off this fucking stupid bed.

It takes me few attempts and a final despairing grab at the nightstand for leverage before I make it and my ribs are screaming in protest, so I prop myself on my crutches and wait a couple of minutes to let them settle. Now I just have to get back down the steps.

Well, I did it easily enough last time. I make my way over, take a breath, and start my descent.

Maybe it was the weed, or maybe it was just overconfidence. Whichever, I'm halfway down when my right crutch slips off the step, and there's nothing I can do to save myself from going down hard on my back.
"Justin!" I don't think I've ever heard that precise note of panic in his voice, and I open my eyes as he's pounding across the Loft towards me. I'm spread-eagled on my back like a fucking starfish.

"What the fuck happened? Have you hit your head again? Let me see." His hands are running gently over my skull, looking for lumps or blood or something. "Don't try to move, I'll call 911." He's digging out his cell, his eyes wild.

"I don't need an ambulance," I gasp. "And I haven't hit my head. Just slipped … on the steps. Hurt my ribs." That's an understatement; I'm pretty sure I blacked out for a while.

"What were you doing up there? Christ, I asked if you needed a piss," he says, rubbing his hair distractedly.

"Didn't want a piss. Wanted your stash. To see if you were lying."

His face freezes. Then he reaches for my arms. "Come on. Up," he says grimly. He lifts me almost bodily into the wheelchair, not nearly as gently as usual, and I can't help crying out. He parks me by the couch, then goes to the refrigerator. He pours a glass of milk and brings it back to me together with an Oreo and my Demerol.

I stare at him. I feel sick and shaken. "Do I look like I want food?"

"You need your meds. Eat it." Unfortunately he's right; not only my ribs but my back is now hurting like a mother-fucker. He watches while I eat the cookie and wash the capsules down with milk. Then he virtually snatches the glass out of my hand and returns it to the sink. When he comes back he starts pacing.

"Are you telling me you risked your neck because you couldn't keep your hands off my stash? Because you thought I'd got some of Anita's shit tucked away? Is it so fucking important, you stupid little twat? What are you trying to do, break the other leg? Or maybe," he turns on me with flashing eyes, his hair all awry; "maybe you want to break the same leg again, so the bones won't heal, and you'll end up with one leg shorter than the other and a permanent fucking limp, is that what you want, Sunshine?"

In spite of the pain, or because of the weed, I can't help but giggle. "You're freaking out here, you know that, don't you?"

"Do not laugh at me!" he roars, leaning right down into my face. "Don't you dare! Do you have any idea how I felt when I heard you were in hospital and I didn't know if you were alive or dead? Or how I felt just now, seeing you lying there?"

"Pretty much the same as I felt when I found out you had cancer," I snap back.

He recoils as if I'd hit him. "That was along time ago. I would do things differently now."

"Or, how about the way I felt when I came home to find Dan moved in?"

Brian grits his teeth. "That is not the same thing."

I'm getting pissed myself now, and adrenaline is helping to control the pain. "The fuck it isn't! You gutted me, Brian! The only thing I had to hang on, the only thing that made me different, was that I was the only one you let stay here. How do you think I felt when you took even that away?"

His demeanour changes: his voice softens. "Is that why you started taking drugs?"
I laugh shortly. "I started taking drugs because they were there and they made me feel better! What the fuck did it matter? You might have thought we were finished when I left for New York … well, you proved it to me when you moved Dan in. I had nothing, Brian! Not even the hope of coming back home. So who cared what I did?"

He shakes his head. "It wasn't supposed to be that way, Justin! You were supposed to make a new life for yourself, be a big, fat fucking success …"

"Supposed to?" I repeat incredulously. "According to what, the Brian Kinney Law of Inevitability? This may come as a surprise to you, but you can't actually control fate. And while we're at it, let's talk about success. You told me once that success is the only thing worth celebrating. Well, success means different things to different people; some people count their lives a success because they're happy and fulfilled, not by how much money they have in their fucking bank accounts! What if Gus shows some kind of talent, at tennis or athletics or something? Are you going to decide he's an Olympic champion in the making, and turn into one of those über-parents who control every minute of their child's life? Will you teach him that nothing counts except winning, not even enjoying a normal childhood?"

He's watching me in silence, but I'm on a roll here.

"You know what your biggest fault is, Brian? The same as most Americans. We assume that the way we do things, the way we see things, is the same for the rest of the world … that all we have to do is show them what they've been missing and they'll fall all over themselves in the rush to sign up for it – MacDonalds, Coca-Cola, Nike, Hollywood. Fucking Capitalism. It's inconceivable to us that anyone could refuse the great American Dream, once they've experienced it. And you're exactly the same … you know what's best for Mikey, for Linds, for Gus, for me; and by God, we're going to get it. And be thankful," Suddenly I find my eyes beginning to tear up, and I swallow hard. My emotions are all over the fucking place.

"The thing that's always been wrong with us, Brian, is that while I've always believed in you, you've never believed in me."

His eyes flash. "The fuck I haven't! I believe in you more than anyone you'll ever meet! When you were fucking seventeen years old I could see the man you were going to become; how honest you were, how brave. And I always knew you had the intelligence and the persistence to achieve any goal you set yourself!"

"I'd be the last to deny it," I say immediately. "I know how much you think of me… how much you respect me. But you've never got over the idea that because I'm so much younger than you I can't possibly know my own mind: that I haven't seen enough of the world to judge what I want. Well, I'm sorry that the first time worked for me. I'm sorry that the first guy I ever slept with ended up being the one I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. I'm sorry that nobody else has ever come close to inspiring me, and fulfilling me, and making me happy the way you have. I'm sorry that you didn't just turn out to be some teenage crush so that you could break my heart and send me away with me tail between my legs; a little bruised but a lot wiser. I'm sure that would have been much easier for everybody." I take a shallow, shaky breath: talking so much is hurting. But I need to say this; and he needs to hear it. "That wasn't the way it happened, Brian. I loved you from the first … and if it was an idealistic kid's love to begin with, it grew up quickly. You never understood that I would have lived in a tent with you and I would have been happy! I would have counted every day a success, and a privilege. I knew exactly what I wanted, Brian, and it wasn't a picket fence in suburbia; not 2.5 kids; not wealth and fame. Not happily-ever-after and red roses. It was you, only you. The way it's always been."
He's silent for a moment, and then he presses his fingers against his lips in that odd little gesture which always means he's upset. "Then why did you let go so easily?" he asks, watching me intently. "I thought I was going to have to kick your ass all the way to New York but you jumped at it. You couldn't get out of the door fast enough!"

For fuck's sake, he's such an idiot sometimes. "Come on Brian, I knew how it was going to play out! It's not like you hadn't done it before! You'd got it in your head that I was destined to be some world-famous artist and that you were holding me back. You made up your mind that I needed New York because fucking Lindsay said I did, and nothing I could say or do was ever going to convince you otherwise. And living with you would have been unbearable." His expression admits the truth of that statement. "Up until you read that article, you were fine with everything, even the wedding! Oh, you made the usual little snarky cracks, but you couldn't hide how happy you were … it was in your eyes, Brian; your fucking eyes. And then, after Linds got to you, it all changed. You started doing the little Stepford fag bit, turning into all the things I never wanted you to be … but always with that little bit of regret or reluctance so I could see how much of an act it was. Like your stag night. Walking away from that trick and doing the 'right' thing by going home with me, but still making it perfectly clear that you were only going through the motions. You knew the only thing that would make me walk away was if you could make me feel that I was trapping you, because I knew if you made those promises about monogamy and commitment you'd keep them. Even if you didn't want to. And you wouldn't have let it go, Brian; you'd have gone on and on making me feel that way until maybe I'd start to believe it myself; that the only thing keeping us together were promises we should never have made in the first place. So it was easier to accept it, to go to New York like everybody wanted me to, stay a few months and come back and say, 'See? I'm no better an artist, and no more famous than I was in Pittsburgh, so I may as well come home and paint here.' I didn't expect everything to change. I didn't expect Dan."

He's standing quite still, his arms folded, not denying any of it. Then he drops his head. "You said I'd ruined your life." His voice is a whisper.

"I'm sorry," I tell him, meaning it; "and I'm so sorry I hit you. I guess I needed to lash out at someone. I don't need to tell you it was a bad day."

He nods, biting his lip. "For me, too. I've never felt so fucking wretched for you, not even when you were in hospital the first time. I should have been standing there with you and I wasn't: I let you down, Justin, and I'll never forgive myself for it. So if your taking a pop at me made you feel better, even if that's all I managed to do, then I'm pleased to have been of service."

We look at each other, silently acknowledging and accepting apologies. Then Brian moves, and suddenly he's down on his knees, his head buried in my lap, his arms going round me. "I can't stand this anymore, Justin! I can't keep thinking you're dead! It's fucking killing me!"

He's crying: a furious storm of tears, his sobs wracking his body.

How can I blame him? So much our relationship has consisted of dealing with the fall-out from my personal disasters: Chris Hobbs, the Sap, Ethan, Cody. Too many times Brian has had to pick me up, dust me down, and get me going again. And if I ever needed proof of how much I've hurt him and scared him over the years, here it is. I'm too stunned and shaken to do anything except stroke his hair. "You don't have to do it again, Brian," I say, trying to keep my voice steady, trying to make it easy for him. "As soon as I'm well, I'll find a place to stay and get out your hair permanently. No more dramas, no more rescues. I promise."

"For fuck's sake!" he cries, looking up at me with streaming eyes. "Why can't we communicate? I don't want you to leave, you twat … I love you! I want us back together … back the way we were
before all this shit started! I want to be fucking happy again!"

I blink. He wants me back: just like that. I think my heart may have stopped and I'm not sure whether it's with joy or surprise or disbelief. In the end I'm just pissed. "Brian! Everything is about what you want! You want me to stay, you want me to go … well, I want things too, just like the last time! Only now I want a partner who knows I'm his equal! One who makes joint decisions with me, not just executive ones! One who doesn't push me out of his life whenever he thinks it's good for me! One who doesn't use my love for him as a weapon against me! Because I can't stand letting myself trust, leaving myself vulnerable, knowing that in a month or a year or in fucking ten years time I'm going to get my heart broken again! That's what's killing me!" I can't say any more, because my voice chokes me.

He shakes his head, his expression full of regret and raw pain. I've never seen this side of him. I've never seen him fucking cry: I never knew he could. He takes both my hands in his, clasping them with his fingers and caressing the backs of my wrists with his thumbs. "Justin, you're right; I didn't trust you. I could never get away from the idea that you'd only ever come back because things didn't work out the way you'd hoped they would; because Ian turned out to be a love-rat, or because the film canned. Not because you needed me! I figured that if you had the chance to begin a new life, away from me and all the shit, then you'd realise what you were missing: that you wouldn't look back. Well, did I get that wrong!" He manages a little rueful laugh. "I may be a slow learner about some things, Sunshine, but I get there in the end. You and I are opposite halves: together, we work; alone, we're always out of balance. I finally get it. I swear on Gus' life, I'll never push you away again: but if you don't want me … if you find you can't trust me any more … fuck knows, I can't blame you. But you've loved me for so long while I was an asshole …" he gives me the sweetest smile; "surely you won't stop loving me just because I'm a fool?"

I can't resist him, not when he looks at me like this. My closed, closeted, Brian, baring his soul for me like he did after my bashing, after the bombing. How can I doubt him, when he's letting me see his fucking heart? And he knows it, the asshole. He knows how to get me.

I place my hands on his cheeks, holding him so that he can't look away. "Brian, I love you. And I believe you love me, and that you're telling me the truth. And if you're willing to take the chance, and try again, then I am too. So listen to me now: if you ever, ever, push me away again, for whatever reason, I won't come back. No matter what happens. And that's my promise."

He's on his feet, leaning down to me. "Put your arms around my neck," he says softly, and when I do he scoops me straight out of the chair; I can feel his biceps quivering with the strain but I know he'll never drop me. He sits down on the sofa with me in his lap, my left leg tucked against his chest, my stupid cast sticking out over the cushions. He wraps his arms around me, folding me against him so that I can feel his heart beating against my shoulder.

"Never gonna let you go again," he whispers fiercely. "You hear? Never," and then he's kissing my eyes and cheeks and lips, over and over like he can't get enough.

"Gonna get you well," he breathes against my neck. "That's the most important thing. You are not going to fight me anymore. And then we're going to show all of our fucking friends just what we can do together."

TBC
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

And the dreams that you're having, They won't let you down
If you just follow on cos you know where you're bound,
The well will be filling, the words will come fast
When the one who is coming arrives here at last.
When the red sun sets on the railroad town
And the bars begin to laugh with the happy sound,
I'll still be here right by your side
There'll not be anyone
In my heart but you.
- Red Sun – Neil Young

BRIAN

I strip him slowly, carefully. I examine the new pattern of bruises on his back and ass, matching the ones on his ribs: if this goes on his whole body will be the same fucking colour as his hair. While I was buying safety mats for the bathroom at the drugstore, I'd spotted a bottle of witch hazel and remembered that it was Debbie's sovereign remedy for bruises: now I soak a pad of cotton wool with the clear, slightly oily liquid and gently apply it to the contusions. Justin makes small appreciative noises. When I've treated his back I help him to turn over so that I can take care of his ribs, and he looks up at me with dreamy blue eyes.

"I want you inside me," he whispers.

And fuck, I need that more than I need to breath, right now. But still, it might not be a good idea. "Maybe we should leave it a little longer, Sunshine; you're not exactly flexible, are you? After all, it's not like I don't have other ways of taking care of you."

He shakes his head. "I need this, Brian. We both do. We can work something out."

So we do, as always. I position him carefully on his left side, making sure there's no pressure on any of his injuries. Then I spoon against his back, the way I did after his bashing, and I love him with all the tenderness and care that I can summon.

Fucking Justin is one of life's great pleasures: if I'm honest, the greatest. I'm sure any gay man who's
experienced the privilege (although, modesty aside, I don't believe there have been many) would agree with me. Even in the beginning, when he was a naïve inexperienced kid, we always had a connection that was both physical and emotional, and that empathy has only deepened over the years. In fact, my top ten fucks of all time are with him and my top twenty are almost as exclusive - not that I'd ever admit it to him. But there have been a handful of other occasions that are burned on my memory, not because of the physical fireworks involved but because of the emotional intensity.

The first, and in many ways still the benchmark, was the first time we had sex after he'd been bashed. My performance wasn't stellar, because I was too afraid of hurting or freaking him; he seemed so fragile and vulnerable that I'd concentrated instead on touching and caressing him, trying with every kiss to reassure him and to convey the love I couldn't verbally express. It was only afterwards, holding him safe and warm against my chest as he slept, it occurred to me that I finally understood the difference between making love and fucking. It was a revelation that changed my perceptions forever, I guess.

The second time was at Britin, after he'd accepted me. We'd made love slowly, languorously, revelling in each other: for the first time ever, he belonged to me and I to him, and the joy of having him lit a warmth in me then that had nothing to do with the fire we lay before. The future had stretched out before us, simple and uncomplicated: I had told him I loved him, I knew he loved me, and that was enough for both of us. That was the first time I experienced what truly being happy meant: and it was fuck all to do with landing a new account or nailing a new trick or even the Armani Spring Collection.

And then there was the exact opposite, the time we made love before he left for New York. For the last time, as far as I was concerned, and I'd tried to savour every taste, every scent, every feature, burning them into my memory, knowing that I'd never enjoy them again. And fuck, I'd wished then that I'd stuck to my principles and never admitted to myself or to anyone else that I might just have had a heart after all. Because getting it broken hurt every bit as much as I ever suspected it would.

This time, however … this is forever.

Justin said that everything was about what I wanted, but that's not true. I never wanted to lose him, not even back in the early days when I used to gripe and bitch about his presence. I'd never have taken him back as eagerly as I always did if that were the case.

But he's still right in a way; because I think he was really referring to what he'd said earlier: that once I make up my mind about what I'm going to do then I do it, and nothing and nobody will sway me. And that's what I've done; I've finally made up my mind. I want this; I want him, and unless the day ever comes when he manages to convince me that he doesn't love me any more, I'll keep him. And God help anyone who comes between us: he is my flood tide, and I intend to ride him to the end wherever the fuck he takes me.

There's no hurry, because he'll be here tomorrow. There's no sorrow, no doubt. I tell him I love him, over and over with body and voice. I'll never withhold that truth from him again.

He was right. This is what we both need.

After we've come down and our heartbeats have returned to normal, I lie stroking his hair. "I need to know," I say softly. "How much trouble are we in with the drugs, Justin? You don't have to worry about telling me the truth. I'm not going to freak out, I promise."

"I don't know," he answers. His voice is sleepy. "I've been using more than I should, but that might have just been because I was so unhappy and Dylan always had them around. I really don't know,
Brian.

"Why did you take such a risk to find my stash? Was it because you needed to?"

He turns his head and blinks at me. "No. No, I'm pretty sure it wasn't. I was just pissed at you … I thought you were lying, and I wanted to show you I wasn't as helpless as you thought I was. Don't get me wrong, if there'd have been anything worth taking I'd have taken it … but I wasn't aware of any craving of any kind."

"Okay." I kiss his forehead, relieved because I don't think he's lying to me. "We'll see how it goes. But please, Sunshine, don't try and hide anything. I won't judge you, and I'll do anything I can to help. Because there's just you and me now, kid … and if we can't trust each other, then we can't trust anyone."

The next morning I'm answering e-mails, listening to the rise and fall of Justin's voice as he talks to Molly. I try not to eavesdrop on the conversation, giving him space until the call's finished. Then I get up and go over to sit on the couch with him, which is kind of difficult because he's sitting with his back to the armrest and his broken leg stretched out along the seat. I make a mental note to buy some kind of padded stool or foot rest so that he can prop his cast on it instead.

"How's she doing?"

He shrugs, his eyes sad and moist. "It's hard for her, of course. She feels kind of isolated, I guess; it's not like she's met Dad's new wife more than a few times. But it sounds like he's trying … she's got her own room, and he's letting her choose her own colours and everything. I guess she'll settle."

I reach out to clasp the back of his neck. "Well, at least her big brother's back in Pittsburgh. She must be happy to know she can see you whenever she wants."

He smiles a little. "Yeah, you could say that. Although I guess that depends on whether Dad wants us to associate still."

"Don't you worry, Sunshine. I'm sure he'll see the sense in it." The fucker had better. I lean in to give Justin a reassuring kiss when I suddenly hear the Loft door sliding open, and I realise that in all the confusion of coming home yesterday to find Justin prostrate on the floor, I'd totally forgotten to lock it. I jump to my feet expecting to see Mikey or Deb, but instead it's Lindsay, laden with shopping bags and with Gus in tow. She looks majorly pissed.

"You said you were going to miss last weekend, Brian, not this one as well," she complains, coming towards me. "What's going on? You don't show up yesterday, you don't call, you're not picking up your phone and your cell's switched off. Gus was really upset."

Fuck. I'd totally forgotten that today was Saturday.

"Shit, I'm sorry Linds. It's just …"

She reaches me and then sees Justin sitting on the couch. Her mouth falls open. "Oh my God. Justin?"

His face is expressionless. "Hi Linds."

"Oh my God," she repeats. She drops her bags and takes a half step forward. "Look at you, Justin. What happened?"
"He had an accident," I explain unnecessarily. "And he dyed his hair."

Gus appears round the side of the couch, peering uncertainly. "Juss?"

Justin smiles. "Hey, little man!"

My son's face breaks into a grin of pure joy. "Juss!" He hurls himself forward and I grab him before he hits Justin amidships. "Whoa, Sonny Boy. You have to be careful; Justin's hurt. His leg's broken."

"Broken?" He wriggles out my grasp and approaches the couch slowly. "Are you broken, Juss?"

"Only a little bit. Now come here so I can give you a hug; just be gentle."

Gus puts his little arms round Justin's shoulders and hugs him carefully, while Justin returns the embrace with his left arm. "My toys get broke sometimes, and Mommie makes me throw them away. I won't let anyone throw you away, Juss."

"Me neither," I say.

Gus clambers up on the coach beside Justin and reaches up to touch the bruise on his face. "You've got a boo-boo," he says sadly. And your hair's funny!"

"Don't you like it, Gus?" Justin asks.

Gus shakes his head vehemently. "No. I like it yellow."

"I think I might like it better that way, too," Justin replies.

I guess that makes it unanimous.

"I'm hurt, too. Look, I've lost my tooth!" he displays the gap proudly. "Momma says I'll grow a new one, though."

"Yes, you will," Justin agrees. "You'll grow lots of new teeth, Gus. You're a big boy now, aren't you? I can't believe how much you've grown!"

Gus wriggles happily, then waves the book he's carrying. "It's the Very Hungry Caterpillar, Juss! My grandma gave it me. Will you read it?"

"Oh sweetie, don't worry Justin," Linds interrupts. "I'm sure he doesn't want to be bothered right now."

"No, it's fine." Justin's tone is cool, to say the least. "I've missed him. I'd love to read his book."

I lean down to Justin's ear. "Don't forget, the caterpillar's name is Ian," I grin, and he glares at me.

Lindsay keeps shooting nervous little glances in his direction as she picks up her shopping. "I bought you some groceries," she says brightly. "Come and help me put them away."

I follow her to the kitchen and she pulls open the refrigerator and starts shoving stuff inside. "What's going on, Brian?" she asks in a low voice.

I lean against the counter with my back to the couch. "In what way?"

She shoots me a look. "Why is he here?"
"Where the fuck else would he be? Or have you forgotten Jennifer's dead? I distinctly remember calling and telling you."

She has the grace to flush. "No. No, of course I haven't forgotten. But surely he has friends in New York who could look after him?"

I just stare at her. "Well, you know, it's his home now," she carries on, a little flustered. "I would think he'd need stability now … and what about his work?"

"His fucking work?" I try to keep my voice down. "How the fuck could he work at anything, like that?"

She finishes stuffing the fridge and turns to the cupboards and starts stowing dry goods. "It's just after all this time it seems silly to come back to Pittsburgh. I mean, how is he going to keep his job? And what about his rooms?"

"None of that will matter, Linds, because he isn't going back."

She freezes. "What do you mean, not going back? What about his art, his future …"

"He can paint here as well as in New York, Linds," I tell her calmly. "And his future is here. With me."

She shuts the cupboard door with more force than necessary and spins round to face me. "Oh Brian, you can't be serious! You're not going to drag him back to all this, not now he's finally broken away, not now that everything's opened up for him …"

I take hold of her forearms. "Lindsay, listen to me. Justin and I have talked. There's nothing for him in New York. He doesn't want to be there; he never did. And fuck knows I don't want him there. So we're doing what we should have done six months ago; we're going to sort our shit out, and we're going to do it here in Pittsburgh. Together."

"Oh," she says, with a shaky little laugh. "Well, if you've both made your minds up, I suppose that's the end of it. Although I still think he's wrong: he'll never have an opportunity like this again. If he would just stick it out a little longer …"

"No," I interrupt her firmly. "This is Justin's decision, the way it should always have been. And if you're his friend you'll respect it, the way you've always respected the decisions I've made, even if you haven't agreed with them."

She looks away. "Well, I guess I should congratulate you both. I suppose you'll want Gus and me to find somewhere else now?"

I shake my head. "No, you're fine. It's not like Justin could get around at Britin yet, anyway; and even if he could, there wouldn't be any reason for you to leave. Take as long as you need, Linds."

"You know she's in love with you, right?"

He's been silent since Linds and Gus left; now he's sitting staring thoughtfully into his coffee.

"Of course she does. I'm fabulous!"

He looks up at me and huffs. "Brian, I'm being serious. I know Lindsay's your friend … you've known her nearly as long as you've known Michael. And I also know that the longer you've known
someone, the more you trust them."

"Not quite true," I grin at him. "I trust you, and you've been around less time than anybody."

"Only because I'm the most mature person you know," he reminds me. "But we're talking about Lindsay here."

I put my mug down on the coffee table and lean my elbows on my knees. "Justin, she's been under a lot of pressure lately; she was just surprised to see you here."

He snorts laughter. "Surprised? Yeah, you could say that. She looked like she'd swallowed a wasp. Actually, I was going to say, 'swallowed a cock', but I get the feeling that wouldn't be such a nasty shock to her nowadays."

"Fuck, Justin!" I snap, more harshly than I mean to. "That's a shitty thing say to say about someone who's always been a good friend to you!"

He leans forward and manages to touch my hand. "I know she has," he says softly, "and I'm grateful for everything she's done for me. She … and Mel. Do you think I've forgotten all the times I slept on their couch … the way Lindsay encouraged me to be an artist, and to go on being one when I thought I'd never hold a pencil again?"

"She supported you in more ways than that! Christ, she was always bitching at me about the way I treated you … she gave me hell for blaming you when the Loft was burgled, and about the Birthday Hustler … and she was the only one who told me that I should try to get you back after you fucked off with Ian. She always knew you meant a damn sight more to me than I let on."

"I know," he replies quietly. "I think in the beginning she really did want us to get together. Maybe she thought that if you were in a relationship you wouldn't trick so much. Maybe you'd have more time for her and Gus. But something happened … I got the feeling that she'd started to resent me, only I couldn't figure out why. It wasn't like I kept you away from Gus or anything. She started changing towards me … ever since she split up with Mel over Sam Auerbach. And I've been thinking ever since I went to New York … that she wanted me gone, and she knew exactly how to do it."

"Justin…" I turn round to face him. "It wasn't Linds who forced you into leaving. That was all down to me. She just showed me that review because she was proud of you and she wanted to share it with me."

He's silent for a moment. Then he says slowly, "Did she tell you that she'd already spoken to me about it?"

"No. But I assumed she had."

He nods. "And I made it perfectly clear to her that I wasn't interested. I said that I'd already been offered the best opportunity I was ever going to have … you. Did she tell you that?"

"No," I reply, a little shaken. Lindsay hadn't exactly said so, but I'd had the distinct impression that Justin had been eager and excited about the article, but he hadn't wanted to disappoint me. Which was why Lindsay had brought the subject up … wasn't it?

"Brian, you always think you're in control. You see yourself as the Great Manipulator, and about most things you're right. But when it comes to the people you trust … to Lindsay and Michael … they know you as well as you know them, and they understand that the trick to handling you is to sit back and let you do all the work. All they have to do is to plant a suggestion in your mind and then
make sure you think the whole thing was your idea in the first place."

"The fuck they do!"

He gives me a pitying glance. "Please, Brian. I'm an expert, remember? I've been doing the same thing to you for years."

I glare at him. "Don't think just because you've got that cast on your leg you're getting away with that. I'll save your punishment up until it they take it off!"

"Promises, promises," he smiles, but his eyes are serious. "And don't try to distract me. Brian, think about it; what woman decides she wants a baby and then insists on having the man her partner hates more than anyone in the world to be its father? And no matter how much she claimed never to support you against Mel, how many times did Mel actually win?"

"Once, at least. When I signed my parental rights over to her."

"That was because Lindsay was going to marry that Guy asshole! You did it to stop her, not for Mel!"

"Only because I couldn't stand the thought of Gus growing up French," I point out.

"Well, Lindsay may not have seen it that way." He hands his me his now-cold coffee and I put it on the table beside mine.

"Please, Brian, I know you don't want to think about this. But you said we had to trust each other … so please, just listen. I've been thinking that Lindsay was only ever on my side so long as it suited her: when she didn't want you to move to New York or when she wanted you to be a good father to Gus. But in the end I was a threat to her … she was going to move to Canada with Mel and we were getting married. She'd lost you, Brian … and I don't think she could live with finally giving up on her fantasy. The timing of that review just fell right in her lap … she knew all she had to do was show it to you, and how you would react. I knew how you would react, which was why I never mentioned it! And then the wedding's off, and you're back to being single and lonely again, and then suddenly Lindsay's left Mel and needs somewhere to live, and you've moved her in to Britin and she's playing Lady of the fucking Manor! And while we're at it, don't you think it a little coincidental that Mel turned into an abusive parent? Like that wasn't the one situation you'd never be able to tolerate?"

I want to tell him he's talking bullshit, that he's just feeling neurotic and suspicious and angry because he's been hurt again. Or because his mother's dead. Because of any fucking reason. But suddenly I find little scenes replaying in my head: Lindsay dressed in that hideous wedding dress, saying wistfully, *Once or twice I used to dream of being a bride, it's true.* Lindsay hanging on to my arm at all those school interviews being the perfect little wife, the ersatz Mrs. Kinney: *In fact, there was a time when we first met, I thought this could have been the reality.* Did you ever think that, Brian?

Lindsay's parents, acting as though I was their fucking new son-in-law.

Lindsay, her bathrobe slipping from her shoulder, trying to seduce me into having another child with her.

"Brian, you've taken everything Lindsay's told you at face value, because it never occurred to you that she'd lie to you. I know you've never really liked Mel, but that's beside the point. You've always been a fair man … that's one of the many things I love and admire about you: so you must see you owe it to Mel to at least hear her side of the story. And as a fair man, and a good father, you have to find out the truth about this; because if Lindsay has put not only us but Gus too, through all this shit
just because she's got some fucked up fantasy about you, then you need to know it. Please, please speak to Mel."

TBC
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

BRIAN

"Hey, Mikey."

"What do you want, asshole?" he snaps.

I sigh. I'd known it wasn't going to be easy. "I want to talk to Melanie, but she's not picking up. I thought you'd know when she's at home."

"Yeah? And what brought about this change of heart? Last time we spoke, you had a fucking meltdown when I even mentioned her name! And you called me a manipulator!"

I pinch the bridge of my nose; Justin mouths Be nice! at me from the other end of the couch.

"You want me to apologise… fine. I'm sorry. Now will you talk to me?"

Silence. Then, "Why the fuck should I?"

When Mikey's being sulky, honesty's the only policy. But that doesn't make it any easier to say. "Because … I think I may have got it wrong. I think Linds might have been lying to me."

"I tried to tell you that!" he huffs indignantly.

I'm never going to hear the end of this. "Yes, you certainly did," I agree with as much sincerity as I can muster.

"So what's changed your mind?" he asks, sounding slightly mollified.

"A lot of things, Mikey. But mainly … Justin."

"Justin? What's it got to do with him?"

"That's a long story … and one I don't want to go into until I know all the facts."

"I didn't think you were even on speaking terms."

"Actually, he's here."

"What? You mean in Pittsburgh?"

"No, here as in here. At the Loft. With me."

"You mean he's back? Back with you?"
Christ, conversation with Mikey can be so fucking tiring. "That's the general idea."

"So Dan's gone?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, thank fuck for that, at least!" he says fervently, and I smile. Mikey's dislike of Dan outweighs any of his former jealousy for Justin. "So how long is he staying?"

I look over at Justin and my smile gets wider. "For good, Mikey. For good." The little twat crosses his eyes and grins goofily back.

"Well, shit! I don't know what to say … except he'd better get his ass over to the Diner and see Ma before someone tells her he's in town."

"He's kind of hors de combat at the moment. He had an accident in New York."

"Double shit! What kind of accident?"

"An accident with a car," I say, raising my eyebrows at Justin.

"A fucking car!" His voice goes all screechy, the way it always does when he gets emotional. "Is he fucking crippled or something? Is that why he's at the Loft?"

My best friend; ever the optimist. "He's got some broken bones," I explain, "nothing that won't mend. And no reason for your Mom to come dashing over with the soup. So it would be nice if you didn't say anything about him being back for a few days … I want to get this business with Lindsay straightened out first. Then we'll come over and break the good news to her in person. And Mikey …"

"Yeah?"

"Justin came back because of the accident, yes. But that's not the reason he's staying. He's staying because he wants to, and I want him to."

He's quiet for a moment. Then he says softly, "About fucking time. I'm glad, Bri. Really fucking glad for both of you."

I close my eyes, both relieved and touched by his sincerity. "Thanks, Mikey. We're going to work things out … and part of that involves talking to Mel. Besides … Justin says I owe it to her."

He chuckles. "Yeah, well, he always did have the brains. Okay, asshole: Mel picks J.R. up from the crèche after she finishes work… she gets home around four. She had to give up night school because she can't afford a sitter, so she's usually in from then."

"Right. I'll call her tonight."

"Only, don't give her a hard time, Brian. She's a little vulnerable at the moment."

"Aren't we all?"

"Yeah … but Mel more than most; just try to keep that in mind. Okay. I'll let you get on with it, then. Oh, and be sure to give Boy Wonder a hug for me. And tell him, I'm so fucking sorry about Jennifer… we all are."

"I know, Mikey. And so does Justin."
"Hello?" Her voice is quiet and subdued, not the brash, impatient tone I'm used to.

"Melanie," I greet her.

"Bri … Brian?" she stammers. "I… God, I wasn't expecting a call from you. Not after you refused all of mine."

I lean back on the bed and close my eyes. I'd retreated to the bedroom, not because I didn't want Justin to hear our conversation but because I was pretty jumpy about having it at all, and I'd rather do it alone. I was more than a little apprehensive about what Mel was going to say.

"I didn't want to speak to you," I tell her honestly. "After what Linds told me, I was too fucking angry."

There's a long silence.

"Mel? Are you still there?"

"Yes," she answers softly. "I just don't know what to say to you."

"How about the truth? Because I'm beginning to think that's a pretty rare commodity around you two."

"I … I tried. I wanted to speak to you … to try to explain … but when you wouldn't even take my calls …"

"Well, I'm listening now. So tell me. Did you hit my son?"

More silence. Then she starts to sob. "Fuck, Brian, I'm so sorry … I don't know where to start …"

I feel cold fury sweep over me again, and only the promise I'd made to Justin that I'd hear her out stops me from slamming the phone down on her. With a supreme effort I control my voice. "Maybe you'd better start at the beginning."

"When we first moved," Mel says, "she seemed quite happy and excited. We got a little house in a nice quiet suburb, the neighbours were all very friendly and we got Gus into school. We were so busy getting everything straight and getting the kids settled we didn't have time to argue, and I really thought we'd made the right decision. But then a few months ago it all started going wrong. It was my fault, I guess … I was so obsessed by the idea of getting away from Pittsburgh, starting a new life away from the bombing, and Dusty dying, and Linds' fucking parents, and Sam, and even you, Brian. I thought we could be just us … Linds and me and the kids, the way it was meant to be. I should have done my homework … I should have realised that I couldn't get any job as a lawyer in Canada without re-qualifying, never mind being offered another partnership.

"Anyway, I got a job as a legal secretary to keep us going, and I went to night classes so I could qualify, and that was when things started to get strained. Linds wasn't happy staying at home to take care of JR, and it got just like it did before she was born. I was working or studying or sleeping, Linds was keeping house and changing nappies and picking Gus up from school. She was bored, but we didn't have the money to spare to do anything … we'd used the proceeds from selling the house in Pittsburgh for furnishing the new place and paying bills. I was too tired and cranky and fucking disappointed to sympathise. So she found a crèche for JR and got a part time position as an assistant lecturer at an Art College.

"And things seemed better for a while. Lindsay seemed happier, and the extra money was a big help.
But then ... then she started getting this sly, furtive look again, the way she was when she was seeing Sam. She'd be all over me when I came home, cooking dinners and shit, but she couldn't fool me because I've seen it before. I knew she was seeing someone.

"So then one day I decided to drop in at the college and meet her for lunch. She was standing there with this guy – forties, six foot or so, dark hair. They weren't kissing or anything, but she was touching his arm and she had that look on her face – you know the one, she's looked at you that way often enough – and I knew it was him. So when she got home I confronted her about it, and she did the outraged little paragon of innocence bit. How could I possibly doubt her … he was just the Head of her department and they'd been discussing course work. I was being neurotic and paranoid, and how could we ever have a future if I refused to trust her? He was happily married, it was purely platonic … blah, blah, blah. I let it go because I guess I wanted to believe her … I couldn't bear to think she'd fucked me over again so soon. But I knew! I knew.

"And then a couple of weeks later I'm at home minding the kids while Linds is getting the groceries, when this woman turns up the door. She thought I was Lindsay, and accused me of having an affair with her husband. Apparently he'd left his cell lying around; his wife already suspected he was having an affair, so she read his texts. Let's say they'd been pretty explicit … can you imagine how I felt, trying to defend myself, and then having to admit it was my wife who was fucking her husband? She had no idea we were lesbians ... why would she? Christ, her face ... I don't know who she was more disgusted with: me, Linds, or her fucking husband.

"Well, I asked Candice next door if she'd take the kids for a couple of hours and then I sat down to wait for Lindsay. When she came home we had the mother of all fucking rows. We've always been a little volatile sometimes; her temper's as bad as mine when she really lets go. She threw things, I slapped her. I'm not proud of it, but I was so fucking angry, so sick of her bullshit."

Mel takes a long, shaky breath. "The next day was Sunday, and neither of us was speaking ... I took the kids for a walk in the park just to get them out of the atmosphere. I'm not trying to excuse what happened next, but I was tired and furious, and Gus kept running off and Jenny Rebecca was fussing, and I was trying to get her settled in the pram. I finally got her tucked in, so I stood up and looked round for Gus: only he'd disappeared. I was fucking frantic! I went running up and down, heading for every group of kids I saw, asking every person I met if they'd seen him, and I couldn't find him, Brian! God knows what I must have looked like, racing around with the pram like a fucking crazy woman, with JR screaming her head off! I couldn't find him anywhere. So I started running for the exit to find a cop ... and that's when I spotted him, trotting along holding this guy's hand. I screamed at him to stop and went tearing towards them. The guy said that he'd found Gus crying and lost and was taking him to the police. Maybe he was telling the truth, maybe he wasn't: he could have been a fucking paedophile for all I knew. I was just so angry with Gus, after all the times we've told him never to run off, and never, never go with a stranger ... and that's exactly what he did! I spanked him so hard, Brian, and he cried so much. I thought I was losing my mind."

"When we got home, Gus was still crying, so of course Linds wanted to know what happened. She went ballistic at me, and I couldn't even defend myself because I felt so fucking bad about what I'd done. I was always the first to condemn corporal punishment and I've never had time for parents who have to resort to physical discipline. God knows I've never raised a hand to either of the kids before."

"So then Linds said that she needed to take some time away ... that she was going to her parents for a couple of weeks to think about what she wanted to do. That she couldn't trust me around her son. And I felt so fucking guilty that I agreed!"

She's sobbing openly now, and I've never heard Melanie cry. I didn't think it was possible.
"That's why I tried to talk to you. I wanted you to know how sorry I was for smacking Gus. I wanted to explain it wasn't so much that I was angry with him, as just so fucking scared… but when you wouldn't take my calls, I guessed you didn't want to forgive me. I couldn't blame you … if I'd ever found out you'd hit Gus, you can bet your fucking ass I wouldn't let you near him, either … so I called Michael and cried on his shoulder, and he said he'd try to talk to you and find out what was going on. And then he called back and said that Lindsay had already made her mind up, and that she wasn't coming home. He said as far as she was concerned we were finished. He said she and Gus were living at the house you bought for Justin."

My jaws are clenched so hard my teeth are aching. I can feel my heart thudding dully in my chest. "So let me get this right … the only time you hit Gus was when you spanked him for running off with a stranger?"

"Yes," she hiccups. "I swear it. And God, Brian, I've never been so sorry for anything in my life!"

"Mel, listen to me. If I'd been there, I'd probably have done the same thing. And you know I don't say that lightly."

I listen to her struggling to control her tears. Then she says hesitantly, "Didn't Lindsay explain what happened?"

"She led me to believe that you were abusive, to both her and Gus. She told me she was afraid of you."

There's a sudden intake of breath. "She fucking said that about me? God, Brian, why would she do such a thing?"

"She never really spelled it out. She just made the implication and let me make my own assumptions … but she certainly never tried to tell me I was wrong." After all, she'd used exactly the same tactics about Justin, and they'd worked just peachy. "Although I can't deny I was more than willing to believe the worst. And I apologise unreservedly for that."

"With the childhood you had, I guess I can't blame you." She's silent for a moment, then she says, "Linds is the expert when it comes to passive aggression. You don't even notice the knife until she sticks it in you … and she always knows exactly the right place to hit."

"You're not the first to tell me that."

"Then let me tell you something else. The reason you and I never got on was because we're too alike … we're both control freaks, and we're both sure that we always know best. We were competitors … and Lindsay and Gus were the prizes. We were both jealous of losing something that was precious … so we vied for their attention, and bitched and groused and tried to be top dog. But I always knew you didn't want Lindsay, because you were gay … so even though you pissed me off a lot of the time, I knew you were never a physical threat to me. But she wanted you, Brian … she always has. If you'd ever given her reason, she'd have dropped me so fast my head would have spun. And the only reason I managed to live with that knowledge was because I knew she'd never be able to have you."

"But we were happy, despite the occasional fuck-ups. I loved her more than anyone I've ever met, and I still believe she loved me too. Perhaps one day she'd have let go her fantasy about you… if it hadn't been for fucking Sam Auerbach."

"I thought you'd got over that?"
"I did. Lindsay didn't." She sighs. "After Sam, things were never really the same … physically, I mean. She wanted it rough all the time … she always wanted me to fuck her hard … with a dildo. I knew I wasn't satisfying her the way I used to."

"Christ, Mel. Too much information."

"Yeah, sorry to outrage your gay sensibilities. But what I mean is, he was the first man who ever fucked her … strike that, the first straight man."

I gape into the phone. "You knew about me and Linds?"

"Yeah. She told me when we were arguing about you being the sperm donor. Why do you think I was so set against the idea?"

"I assumed it was because of all my other moral inadequacies." I'm completely floored that Mel knew about my little college fling with Linds: I'm also more than impressed at her ability to keep her mouth shut. But I guess I've underestimated her in a lot of things.

Now she's sniggering a little. "Well, those too."

"So why did you change your mind about me?"

"I never changed my mind, Brian. But in the end I had to agree because Lindsay refused even to consider anyone else as a donor, and I wanted to have a child with her more than anything I've ever wanted in my life. Enough to try to overlook everything else. Although with the benefit of hindsight … whether I like it or not, I have to admit Gus wouldn't be the little boy I love so much without your fucked up genes being involved."

"I love you too, Ms. Marcus."

"Anyway, like I told you; I realised very quickly that you weren't attracted to Linds: at least, not in any erotic way. Most of us experiment a little before we finally decide which side of the fence we're on. And I'm sure that, God's gift to gay men or not, you didn't turn in a stellar performance with her … that you couldn't with any woman. Otherwise you'd have gone back for more. But Sam … he was different. I think he kind of opened her eyes … made her start to wonder if she might in fact be bi, or not even be a dyke at all. And she started to think that perhaps, if she could be wrong about her sexuality, then you could be wrong about yours, too."

"Then she's fucked up on a cosmic scale."

"Yes," Mel agrees sadly. "I think she is. I think that's why she wanted Justin to go to New York so badly."

"Yeah. I'm afraid I agree with you."

"Brian, I knew something was going on there. She kept on and on about what a wonderful introduction the review was for Justin, how excited he was about the whole New York scene … it surprised me because I expected her to be batting for you and the wedding. After all, she was always the first one to put romance above practicality. But the whole idea always seemed a bit of a pipe-dream to me."

"You didn't think so when you told me what a sacrifice he was making for me," I can't resist pointing out.

"Brian, I told you; you weren't the only one to behave like an asshole. It cut both ways … I took
every opportunity to goad you, too. And Justin was always your weak spot, just like Lindsay was mine. But if my stupid comment had anything to do with you two splitting up, then I'll never forgive myself. And now he's lost you and Jennifer, and I feel so dreadful for him!"

"Well, at least I can put your mind at rest about that. Justin had an accident in New York and I was still his emergency contact. I brought him back to Pittsburgh a couple of days ago … he's going to stay. We're both ready, this time."

"Oh … oh, fuck." She starts to chuckle and actually sounds like her old self for the first time. "Well, that's the best news I've heard since … since Stockwell got busted!"

"Jeez, Mel," I grin, "I never had you down as a fan."

"Fuck you, asshole!" Then her voice drops. "Does Linds know?"

"Yes. And she wasn't very happy about it."

"No. No, I bet she wasn't." She's not laughing now. "Shit, Brian, what am I going to do?"

"We'll work that out once you get here."

"Brian, I don't know how I'm going to pay the next fuel bill. Don't you think I would have come back already if I'd been able to afford it?"

"Don't worry about your bills, Mel, I'll help out if you can't manage. What, you think I'm going to leave it like this? Forget what she's done to Justin and me, we're big boys. We can handle it. But if she's put Gus through all this for no other reason than her own selfish delusions, then she's not the person I want to have custody of my son. In which case, we're both going to need you, Mel. So book yourself and J.R. on the first flight you can and I'll pick up the tab. Deb will be more than delighted to put you both up."

After I hang up, I sit for a long time. I think of the woman who I'd always classed as one of my closest friends, someone who I'd always trusted implicitly. I remember the things we'd shared back in college, the secrets I'd never divulged, not even to Mikey … I think about the vibrant, wilful girl she'd been, and the secretive, manipulative woman she's grown into. And then I picture the expression on Justin's face when he came home to find Dan waiting for him, and the one on Gus' when he told me it was all his fault for being bad.

I pick up the ashtray and hurl it at the wall; instead of breaking, it ricochets off and goes straight through the nearest glass panel. Justin's voice comes immediately: "Brian? What the fuck, Brian?"

I spring to my feet and leap down the steps. Justin is sitting on the sofa, his face turned towards me, white and taut. Thank fuck the glass shattered in the other direction, away from him.

I grab him in my arms, heedless for once of his ribs. "I'm sorry, Christ, Justin. I think I'm so fucking smart, and I'm a moron. A fucking moron!"

"Well, duh!" he says.

I hold him close against me, needing the comfort of his warm body. "Mel … she told me what happened. Gus ran off while she was walking him in the park and when Mel found him - thank Christ - he was going off with some guy."

"Fuck! Was he alright?"
"Yeah, but it scared the crap out of Mel. She tanned his ass."

He pulls back his head and studies me. "And that was what this was all about?"

I nod. "Yes. And God help Lindsay when I see her."

"So that's why you bust the panel? What did you throw at it?"

"The ashtray. But I didn't aim at the panel … it just sort of bounced."

"So you weren't trying to kill me?"

I grin at him. "Did I scare you?"

"Of course you fucking scared me, you tosser!" He slaps me angrily.

"Tosser? What the fuck kind of word is that?"

"Never mind," he snorts. Then he gives me a sly little grin and pulls away from me. "Look at this!"

He wiggles his butt to the very edge of the couch, tucking his good leg as far under him as he can, sticks his elbows out and with a convulsive jerk manages to get to his feet. "Ta-daa! I've been practising!" he announces, standing beaming at me with his arms outstretched, even though his breath is hitching and he's gone several shades paler.

Fucking pig-headed little twat.

I stand up too and put my arms round him. "If I tell you I'm proud of you will you please stop practising?"

He pouts. "I just want to get better. I'm sick of being helpless."

I kiss him hard. "You, helpless? Don't make me laugh! And you will get better … but only if you do as you're told and don't set yourself back by pushing yourself too hard, just because you're a stubborn little shit who won't take advice! I swear, I'll tie you to that fucking wheelchair if I have to."

His smile is blinding. "I knew I'd get some pleasure out of the damn thing eventually!"

I stroke back his hair and look down into his laughing eyes, and all sorts of possibilities are floating through my perverted imagination. But before I can decide whether any are practical right now, someone starts knocking on the door. Banging, actually. No, make that hammering.

Talk about lousy fucking timing. I take a deep breath. "If that's Deb, I'm going to murder Michael."

I let go of Justin and start towards the door. "Alright, already. Fuck, I'm coming!"

I pull the door open, ready to tear someone a new asshole. Even if it is Deb.

But it's not.

TBC
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BRIAN

I open the door, and look up. And up.

The guy standing there seems to be about seven feet tall, and built like a brick wall. He's also one of the ugliest fuckers I've seen in a long time. Before I have a chance to ask how he got in and what the fuck he wants, he shoots out a long arm and grabs me by the collar of my fucking Versace shirt, hauling me up so I get a really close look at his broken nose and scarred eyebrows. My feet aren't even touching the ground.

"Where the fuckin' hell's my kid?" he snarls.

I can't seem to do anything other than make some small strangled sounds, so he drops me and strides into the Loft, shoving me aside as he does so. "Justin!" he bellows. "Where are you?"

I stagger back, looking for a weapon. My first panicked thought is that this must be the psycho Justin was living with, the one who pushed him under the car. I grab the first thing that comes to hand, one of the kitchen stools, intending to whack the fucker over the head before he can do any damage, because I can't imagine any other way I can possibly stop him. But the expression on Justin's face isn't one of fear … he's grinning with delight. "Boot!" he squeaks.

I swear I can hear the floorboards creak in protest as the giant crosses the Loft in a couple of strides and grabs Justin in a careful hug. "Fuck me, Sunshine, I take me eyes off you for a couple of weeks and look what happens! I can't soddin' believe it!"

I cautiously put the stool back down, although my heart's still going like a fucker. This guy, whoever he is, obviously doesn't mean Justin any harm. It's kind of bizarre, actually; looking at the two of them, it reminds me of one of the Hobbit scenes from *Lord of the Rings*, because Justin's nose is about level with the guy's stomach. And although they seem very cosy with each other, I've already dismissed the idea that this troll could be a lover … I don't need my gaydar to tell me the guy's absolutely straight. Nobody that ugly could possibly be gay.

He's looking at me now, still holding onto Justin with one huge hand, studying me with grave, steady appraisal. I plant my fists on my hips and return his gaze.

He's wearing worn jeans and work boots and a scuffed old leather bomber jacket. His head is bullet shaped, balding on top and with close-cropped dark hair around the sides. His eyes are grey and alert, and at the moment they're watching me with open suspicion and disapproval. He's probably in his fifties, and his waist's begun to thicken a little, but he must have been a tiger-tank of a guy in his day. And yeah, his name's about right. He looks every bit as tough and ugly as an old boot.

"So this is the dick-head boyfriend, I take it?" he grunts eventually. "Bernie, innit?"
Justin, the little twat, snickers. "This is Brian … Brian Kinney!"

The guy shrugs dismissively. "Well, don't expect me to shake your hand, mate. You're a fuckin' prick, you know that?"

Well, that might be true but I'm not going to stand for some Limey bastard telling me so. Even if he is bigger than Drew Boyd. I get into his face and glare at him. "Look, pal, I have no idea who you are, and frankly I don't give a shit. But if you think I'm going to stand here and be insulted in my own home by a total stranger, you're mistaken. So get the fuck out before I throw you out."

He gives me the kind of look you give an idiot child. "I'm not insulting you, I'm telling you. And if you want to try and throw me out, go right ahead. I could do with a laugh."

Justin stirs, and tugs at the guy's sleeve. "Come on, Boot, Brian doesn't know who you are!" He looks at me smugly. "This is my very good friend from New York. His name's Boot."

I glare at him, too. "I'd gathered that. What I'd like to know is, what the fuck's he doing here?"

"Yeah, I'd like to know that, too!" Justin chirps. "What are you doing in Pittsburgh, Boot?"

"Looking for you, of course." The guy smiles down at Justin's upturned face, and his expression is suddenly warm and kind. "I get back from England, and everybody's talking about how that little wanker shoved you under a car and you ended up in hospital. So I went looking for him to find out what the bloody hell was going on."

Justin's face falls. "You didn't do anything to Dylan, did you?" he asks worriedly. "Because it really was an accident … he didn't mean it, he was just high, we both were …"

"I didn't get a chance to see him." Boot sounds more than a little regretful. "It seems his old man finally twigged that his darling boy has a big fucking problem and got him into rehab as soon as the little bleeder showed up weeping and wailing about what he'd done. Probably shitting bricks in case you set the law on him."

"I'm not pressing charges," Justin tells him. "We just had a stupid argument and it got out of hand, that's all."

"Yeah, well. The bastard had better stay out of my way in the future, and I don't give a toss how loaded his old man is." Boot scowls like a thunderstorm and clenches his fists.

I'm beginning to warm towards the guy.

"So all the hospital would tell me was that you'd been discharged into your 'partner's' care," he goes on, pronouncing the word with heavy irony, and flicking a baleful glance in my direction. "I guessed that meant Pittsburgh, so I jumped into me truck and got here a couple of hours ago. I asked where all the poofs hang out and they told me, Liberty Avenue. So then I asked a bloke … well, I think he was a bloke … where this famous bloody Loft was, hung around outside until somebody opened the door to go out, and here I am."

I'm stunned by the idea of this man going up to complete strangers in Pittsburgh and blithely asking, where do all the poofs hang out? The image is mind boggling. I can't make out whether he's incredibly arrogant or just monumentally stupid. But asking for me on Liberty Avenue? What the fuck? I know the Gay Grapevine can't keep its collective mouth shut, but they never open up to outsiders. Especially ones that look like they just got off a chain gang. "Someone gave you my fucking address?"
Boot smiles thinly. "Listen, mate, if I ask a question, I expect an answer. And I usually get one."

At this point the phone starts ringing, so I go over to pick it up. "Yeah?"

"Brian! Thank God you're home!" It's Emmett, practically gibbering. "There's this monster, this dreadful monster, and he's been looking for you, and I think he's headed for the Loft! Barricade the door or something!"

"Too late, Em," I sigh. "He already got in."

Once I've persuaded the hyperventilating Emmett not to call a S.W.A.T team, I turn back to see Justin and Boot (Christ, do I really have to use that fucking name?) sitting together on the couch. They both look pretty sombre, and I hear Boot saying, "Fuckin' hell, Sunshine, you've had quite a week, haven't you?"

Justin looks up at me as I approach. "I was just telling Boot about Mom," he says, and I can't help but feel an irrational little twinge of jealousy that the lad's on intimate terms with someone I've never heard of. But then, he's had to make some new friends, right? I just hope this one's less of an asshole than fucking Foggarty.

"Well, at least I've got some news that ought to cheer you up," Boot tells him. "That little chum of yours, Daphne … she sends her love."

"Wow, you saw her?" Justin asks, his face lighting up. "How's she doing?"

"Having a busy time, by the sound of it," Boot chuckles. "Beating them off with a stick, she is."

"Tell me every detail," Justin demands.

Boot looks at him steadily. "I'm sure she'd rather tell you herself. And then you can tell her about your mum, and what Dickface did to you."

Justin shakes his head. "She's got enough to worry about without my problems."

"Bollocks!" Boot snorts. "That's one tough girl, and you're insulting her by thinking she can't handle it. She's your mate, and she'll expect you to be honest with her. You wouldn't want her to hide something like that from you, would you?"

I'm feeling more and more like an outsider, here. This troll knows Daphne, too? What the fuck?

"In fact," Boot goes on, "it's what, ten o'clock in London? She'll still be up. You can ring her and have a nice chat will I take Kenny here for a drink."

Hang on, hang on: who's fucking place is this? And Kenny? Who the fuck does this guy think he is?

I clench my jaw, willing myself to keep cool and assert some kind of control over the conversation. "Justin can't do much for himself at the moment," I say decisively. "It's not a good idea to leave him alone."

Boot looks at me disbelievingly. "He's not a child. I'm sure he'll be fine for a little while on his own."

"I wouldn't take a bet on either count," I mutter.

"Of course I'll be okay," Justin chimes in. "Boot's right, I should talk to Daph. And it's a great idea for you two to go and have a drink and get to know each other."
I look at Boot, who is regarding me with an expression that says if I don't agree he's liable to tuck me under one arm and carry me. I'm uncomfortably sure he could do it. So I content myself with glaring at Justin and trying to convey the promise of all the payback he can handle when I get him alone.

Boot makes a sound that might be amusement. "After you, Brendon," he says. And I really don't have any other choice than to get my overcoat and lead the way out of the Loft.

Once we're outside, I lock the door. I can feel Boot looking at me but he makes no comment and I'm certainly not offering an explanation. Then I head for the stairs, because there's no way I'm trusting the elevator with us both in it. But I've only taken a couple of steps before he stops me.

"Look. I'm sorry I barged into your place like that. I'm not normally so bad mannered. It's just I haven't slept for a day and a half and, like I said, I was worried sick about the kid. The last I heard you'd moved some other bloke in, so I didn't know what to expect. Anyway, I'm sorry I went off half-cocked."

I briefly consider making a suitable retort, and then think better of it. "Apology accepted," I tell him coolly, turning away and starting down the stairs. "However, you haven't apologised for calling me a prick yet."

"You'd have to prove to me that you're not one before I say sorry for that," Boot replies. "And it's not looking that way at the moment, Byron."

I stop dead. "The name is Brian," I grit out.

He raises an eyebrow. "Haven't made me mind up yet what I'll call you. I use Christian names for me mates, Mister if I respect you and Oi, you for everybody else. At the moment you're definitely in the Oi, you category."

I step out of the building and he follows me onto the sidewalk. I glare at him. "And what makes you think I give a flying fuck what you think of me?"

He gazes down at me imperturbably. "No reason you should. But just for the record, I don't care for many people outside me own family. And I respect fewer, because respect has to be earned, not demanded or bought. Your clothes don't impress me, nor your fancy gaff neither. I've seen class, I've seen real money … I've sat with fuckin' Royalty, mate! To me, you're just another geezer in a flash whistle."

"Excuse me? In a what?"

He gives me one his looks. "Whistle. Whistle and flute, suit."

I stare at him blankly, then the penny drops. "You mean Cockney Rhyming Slang. Um, apples and pears, stairs."

"You got it, me old china."

"What?"

"China plate, mate. And do you think we could get a move on if we're going somewhere? Because it's fucking brass monkeys out here."

I refuse to answer. I just raise both eyebrows, and stand waiting. "Cold enough to freeze the bollocks off one," Boot explains, and I can't prevent a chuff of laughter.
But he's right, I haven't thought where we're going. The Diner's out, that's for sure, and so is Woody's. Eventually I settle on the Shamrock, an Irish theme bar I favour when I'm trying to avoid family attention. So I set off in that direction with Boot striding beside me, seemingly oblivious to the horrified gasps and squeals he's getting from every queen he passes.

"So you're a Cockney?"

Boot snorts. "You Septics think everyone from London is a Cockney."

"I'm a Septic? What the fuck is a Septic?"

"Septic tank. Yank."

I shake my head. "Now I know you're full of bullshit."

"Not me, mate. I don't tell porkies."

I walk on in silence, ignoring him while I'm desperately racking my brains for any association I can think of that goes with pork … chop? Rinds? Ribs? That inane fucking breeder movie? I know he's playing with me, and Jesus, I am not going to get into some kind of infantile competition like this. I'm really not.

"Okay, I give up. Tell me."

"Pork pies. Lies," Boot explains, as if it were obvious.

Fuck me. I restrain the urge to kick him in the shins. "But you're still not a Cockney?"

He shakes his head. "They're East End. You've got to be born within the sound of Bow Bells to be a Cockney. To a Londoner, the only thing that really counts is whether you're North or South of the river. I was born in Twickenham, which is South. My old man went to school with Charlie Richardson."

"Who?"

"Ever heard of the Krays?"

I nod. "I saw the film. Martin Kemp was hot."

"Well, then you understand what I'm talking about. The Kray Twins' manor was North of the Thames. South London was Richardson turf. I left school at sixteen, and they'd have been more than happy for me to join the firm, on me own merit, not just because me old man was their mate." He scowls. "But I never got off on hurting people for the sake of it, or exhorting their money either. So I went me own way."

Well, this just keeps getting better and better. Not only has Justin managed to get himself involved with a crack-head psycho, he's best buddies with the son of an old henchman of the London Mafia. Way to go, Sunshine.

We reach the Shamrock and I push the door open, stepping gratefully into the warm interior.

"Of course," Boot says conversationally as he follows me to the bar, "I wasn't surprised you knew about the Krays. After all, Ronnie was a poof, too."

TBC
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

BRIAN

The kid behind the bar does a double take when Boot looms over him, ordering a Beam for me and a Florida orange with ice for himself. He serves them up with alacrity and then retreats to the other end of the bar, from where he keeps a wary eye on us. I lead the way to a corner table and sit down, and Boot perches himself on a stool opposite. His glass looks ridiculously tiny in his huge fist, and I can't help but notice his misshapen knuckles.

"You used to box?"

He shrugs. "Doesn't take much working out, does it, not with a mug like mine." He smiles suddenly. "Not that I was exactly pretty before. Well, it was a way of keeping out of trouble, and you could make money if you were any good. Better than joining Her Majesty's Forces anyway, which was about the only other option."

"And were you any good?"

He takes a sip of his orange. "I could hold me own."

I'll take that as a yes.

"Anyway, I'm not here to talk about me. I'm here to talk about you and the kid."

"If you mean Justin, I don't think our relationship is any of your business."

"If what you have is a bloody relationship. One minute you're proposing to the kid, and the next you've chucked him over for a new bloke. You didn't even have the balls to tell him. What kind of a man are you to treat him like that? You ought to be ashamed."

At which point I've had just about enough. "I don't need a lecture from you, thank you very fucking much," I snap. "You know fuck all about me, fuck all about what's going on here, and you have no fucking right to interfere. So shut the fuck up about what you don't understand."

He sits watching me calmly. "So what happened to the new boyfriend? Did you dump him too?"

Christ, the guy's as persistent as Justin. "He never was a boyfriend. And like I said, it's none of your fucking business."

"Well, I suppose I'm making it my business, because I like Justin; and since he seems pretty happy, I assume you two are back together. But I'd like to know that you haven't taken him on as some charity case that you're going to ditch again as soon as he's better. He deserves more than that."
"And you're basing that assumption on what? The fact that you've known him all of five minutes?"

"I've seen a bloody sight more of him than you have over the past six months. And since I know he's an intelligent and discerning young man I'm willing to believe there must be more to you than the arrogant git you appear. In which case, I'm curious. Now, I don't claim to know what a bloke sees in another bloke, but if I were that way inclined, then that lad of yours is just what I'd be looking for. Not just because he's young and nearly pretty enough to be a bird, but he's smart, he's funny, he's talented and he's kind. And judging from what I've heard about you he must be pretty good in the sack for you to have kept him around this long. Not to mention the fact that he worships the ground you walk on. So what the fuck's your problem? Grab him and hang on before some other bastard steals him from under your nose. That's my advice, mate."

"I don't need you to remind me of his qualities. And despite your protestations to the contrary, you don't seem exactly immune to his attractions yourself. Wanna think about why that might be?" I offer him one of my most insulting smiles.

I'm expecting the usual breeder reaction of outrage and denial, but instead he seems to seriously consider the question. "You know what ninety-nine out of a hundred people think when they look at me? Big, bald, ugly bastard. Big, bald, ugly, stupid bastard. And most people would laugh themselves sick if they knew that someone who looks like me likes art, and books, and music. If I'd been born later, I might have even studied it; gone to college or something. But where I was brought up, boys didn't admit to liking stuff like that … not unless they wanted to be labelled as a pansy."

"I know what I look like. It intimidates the fuck out of people. But not your lad. He showed up one night at the club where I'm the doorman, and he wasn't scared, not in the slightest. We got talking, and he mentioned he was an artist. When he found out I was interested he never took the piss about it, never seemed to think there was something funny about a bloke like me wanting to talk about paintings. He invited me up to that pokey little bedsit where he was staying to look at his work. Bloody impressive, if you ask me. Then he said he'd take me to a couple of galleries. I thought he was just being polite; I never expected him to even show up. But he did, and we went, and he didn't seem at all embarrassed to have me along. He talked as if I understood what he was saying, not like he had to try and spell things out. He treated me just like he would any other mate of his."

"And it never bothered you that he was gay?"

He's silent for a while, then he says quietly. "Let me tell you a story. My younger sister, Kitty, she was always my favourite. Her oldest boy, Andy, he was artistic. I used to flatter myself that he took after me that way, and I suppose I loved him the more for it. He took a lot of shit at school because he wasn't into football and stuff … he wanted to be a ballet dancer. He was good, too – so good that the Royal Ballet School accepted him when he was sixteen. I was so bloody proud … all the family was, and we were relieved that he'd be with other kids like himself, so he wouldn't get bullied anymore." He twirls his glass in his hands. "It was 1991, when all the shit about AIDS started to break, and people were saying it was God's judgement on gay men. Andy got jumped by a gang of skinheads one night, on his way to a mate's birthday party. They gave him a good kicking. Ruptured his spleen. They ran off and left him lying in a fucking alley on his own. He died without ever waking up."

"I'm sorry." What the fuck else can I say?

"Yeah, I would have made those little fuckers sorry too, if I'd ever got hold of them," Boot says grimly. "But the thing is, I never knew whether Andy was a poof or not … I don't suppose he was old enough to know himself, one way or the other. And it wouldn't have mattered to me anyway; you love who you love, right? It wouldn't have changed who he was: the sweetest, kindest kid you could wish to meet. A fuckin' sight braver than me. Those bastards killed him because he looked like
a poof… that was the only excuse they needed. So when I first met Justin, he reminded me a lot of Andy – not so much in looks, but in the way he was. The way he liked and trusted people … the way he always looked on the bright side: special, I suppose you’d call it. Made you feel happy just to see the kid. And when he told me about how that lad from his school nearly killed him, just because he was a poof … well, I couldn't help but take an interest."

Boot sits quietly brooding for a minute. When he looks up at me again, his eyes are hot and angry. "And then one night he turned up at the club, and it was like something inside him had died. All the light, all the happiness. That was when he started hanging out with that twat Dylan, and getting wasted every night, and dying his fucking hair! I didn't know it was because of you, you prick, and he wouldn't tell me … it took a trip to London and a chat with his little girl friend to find out what you'd done!"

The one thing I've always prided myself on is being a shit-hot judge of character. This guy could probably snap my back over his knee like a twig without thinking about it, but I really don't believe he's actually that much of a thug. Whatever else he might be, I don't doubt that he'd be a very good ally … and an extremely bad enemy. And since he seems to be one of those rare people who speaks his mind and doesn't bother too much about the consequences … I guess I'd better prove to him that I have the same philosophy myself.

"Okay. You want the truth? I never wanted a relationship. Why the fuck should I? I did what I wanted, when I wanted, and who I wanted, and when I first met Justin he was a responsibility I didn't need. He was a seventeen-year-old boy who was in love with me, and I treated him like shit sometimes. I'd be the last to deny it. I had no idea how to handle him and no inclination to learn. But when he got bashed, I came to realise that he was important… shit, he was the most important thing I had. Your nephew … he wasn't lucky enough to survive, and I'm not trying to belittle what his loss must have meant to you. But I saw what happened to Justin; I held him while he nearly bled out before the ambulance reached him, and if something like that doesn't change a man's outlook on what's important and what isn't, well I'm fucked if I know what does. I'm not saying everything was roses after that, because it wasn't; it took me another three years and another near-fatality to finally figure out that I didn't just need Justin, I wanted him; and I was prepared to do anything I had to do to make him happy. And that even included letting him go, because I believed he finally had the opportunity he deserved; to go to New York and make it as an artist, without me and my shit dragging him down. Or rather, let's say that was how it was put to me; by someone I classed as a friend and in whom I had the greatest trust. I know now I was misled, for reasons I'm not going to go into here. But this is the third time I've nearly lost Justin … and believe me, it's not going to happen again."

Boot takes a thoughtful sip of his orange. "My old man used to breed budgies," he says; "you know: those little parrot things with the long tails. Cheeky, clever, pretty little birds. Not scared of anything. Chirp all the fuckin' time… used to drive me mum mad, but dad loved them. He used to show them … won a lot of cups." I listen patiently, realising that, like Emmett, Boot likes to tell stories to illustrate his point. "One day his champion blue escaped, and it hung around the garden for days while dad tried every trick he knew to tempt it back again. It wasn't just because it was the best bird he had … he knew if he couldn't catch it then all the local birds – the sparrows, and the blackbirds, and the starlings – they'd all set on it, and peck and bully and chase it until it just gave up and died of exhaustion. Didn't matter how brave or clever or pretty it was; it was a foreigner and it didn't belong, and the other birds knew it."

"And did he get it back?"

Boot shakes his head. "No. It just disappeared. Dad was heart broken."
I sigh. "And the moral of this little homily is…?"

Boot shrugs. "Take it how you want. But whatever you believed, and whatever your motives, you had no business sending someone like Justin go to New York all on his own and expect things to turn out well. It was poor judgement, mate, and that's a fact."

"Yeah. Well, hindsight always has twenty-twenty vision."

He smiles. "Always the clever answer with you, innit? Well, I've said me piece. I'll leave you to think on it." He finishes his orange and sets the glass on the table. "If it's alright with you, I'll go and say goodbye to the lad before I leave … make sure he knows how to reach me if he needs me."

"You're going back to New York?"

"It's where I live, mate. At least, it is until me feet start itching again. Then I'll move on."

And right then I get one of my moments of inspiration. "If you had a job here … would you consider moving now?"

He stares at me blankly. "Sorry, I don't get you. Move here?"

"Why not? You say you care about Justin, and I believe you because you wouldn't have come running the way you did otherwise. And I need someone to help me look after him right now … I have some family issues I need to take care of, and the little twat's too stubborn for his own good. I can't trust him not to take risks… not to hurt himself trying to prove how much he doesn't need help. So I need someone to keep an eye on him for me … to help him get around and take him out and keep him company. Maybe take him to the hospital for his check-ups. To make sure … he doesn't get back into bad habits. And since he obviously likes you and trusts you, you're the ideal candidate."

Boot lifts an eyebrow. "You mean a minder."

"Huh?"

"Sort of like an informal bodyguard."

"Yes. Yes, that's exactly what I mean."

"Is that why you locked him in? Because you don't trust him not to try to leave?"

"Yeah. I don't know how fucked up he is with the drugs. I don't want to take the chance … not yet."

Boot shakes his head. "Sorry. I don't take payment to look out for people I care about. I do that for free."

"Well, I can offer you a real job too. You say you're a doorman, and looking at you I'm sure you're a good one. I own a club here in Pittsburgh … Babylon. Has Justin mentioned it?"

"Yeah. He said it was where you two met."

I nod. "That's right. And I'd like you to join my security team there - you can work as many nights as you want. I'll pay you top rates. All I ask is that you be available to take over looking after Justin when I have to be somewhere else … only it'd be best if you don't tell him that. He won't take kindly to the idea of having a … minder."

Boot narrows his eyes. "Let's suppose I was willing to do this. Theoretically, I've got nothing
keeping me in New York; I've been there a few years now, and I wouldn't mind a change of scenery. And I'm sure that the lad's a bit of handful, even in the state he is now. But you'd have to understand my loyalties are to Justin, not you. If you paid me, you'd be the boss; I'd work for you, and I wouldn't cheat you. But I wouldn't spy on him for you, or lie to him for you, and I certainly wouldn't keep him out of the way while you went round fucking everything you had a mind to. If that's the kind of minder you want, forget it. I'm not your boy."

I look him straight in the eyes. "I appreciate your honesty. But having someone who's on Justin's side … who'll protect his interests before anyone else's … well, that's exactly what I'm looking for. And if the time ever comes when you have to choose your loyalty to Justin over your loyalty to me … then I expect you to look out for him: in fact, I insist on it. And then I give you permission to kick my ass."

Boot returns my gaze unwaveringly. Then suddenly he throws his head back and laughs. "Alright, guv. Give me a couple of days to pack my bags and find somewhere to live and you've got a deal." He holds out his right hand, and I shake with him, trying not to wince as my fingers are engulfed.

"Guv?" I query.

"Governor. Boss." Boot explains.

I sigh. "Is there any chance you could supply a dictionary? I think I'm going to need one."

"Oh. you'll pick it up. Justin did."

I remember the little shit throwing the word 'tosser' at me, and I nod. "Yeah, well, he always was a quick learner."

Boot laughs again.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Yeah. I'm not guaranteeing an answer, though; that isn't part of the job description, either."

"Why did you never get your face fixed?"

He gives me a sharp look. "I'm surprised you haven't figured it out, smart bloke like you. After all, image is what you're all about, innit? You want to impress people, so you talk the talk and walk the walk, as they say. They don't say no to you, because they think you're rich and classy and fuckin' ruthless enough to take them down if they get in your way. Well, we're not so different … we just wear different masks. People look at mine and they draw their own conclusions. Makes the tossers of the world think twice about giving me any grief … they think I'll beat their heads in as soon as look at them."

"And because you look like you can, you don't have to?"

"You got it, guv. And it's lucky for us that Justin can see through both of us." He stands up and smiles. "And now I think you should get back home before the kid works out how to pick your fuckin' lock."

TBC
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

JUSTIN

It's so cool that Boot's here. I can't believe he's given up his job and his apartment in New York to come to the Pitts ... although I know he doesn't like to stay in the same place for too long, and I guess Brian made him a good offer to work at Babylon. I'm not surprised about that – Brian's brilliant when it comes to spotting the right person for a job, and Boot's the best doorman I've ever seen. Just his presence is usually enough to stop trouble, and if by some chance it isn't, then he's more than capable of taking care of it!

Anyway, he's here and it's great! When he pushes my wheelchair he doesn't even break into a sweat, although I guess it can't be comfortable for him because he has to stoop so much. I've told him I'm perfectly capable of wheeling myself, but he won't listen; he says it'll put too much strain on my ribs, and Brian of course agrees with him. Great. Now I've got two nursemaids worrying about me.

It's weird, but I feel happy for the first time since Mom died ... well, not happy, I can't be that yet ... more like comfortable; and it's really down to Boot being here. He's exactly how I imagine a favourite uncle would be: big, strong and dependable. I think the main reason I feel so easy around him is because, unlike every other male friend I have, he's actually straight. I get hit on by so many men, and I never really know whether they like me as a person or if they're just trying to get into my pants. It's a refreshing change to be around someone who definitely isn't.

I'm glad he and Brian seem to have hit it off ... they're so alike in many ways it's really quite freaky. I was afraid they might not be able to stand each other; after all, Boot is as outspoken and opinionated as Brian – he's just not quite so acerbic in the way he expresses it. But Brian seems quietly impressed by Boot, which is a pretty amazing phenomenon in itself. Boot makes him laugh, for one thing; genuinely laugh, not in the usual you're so pathetic it's ridiculous way. And Brian talks to him with what sounds like respect, as though Boot's an equal; not with the condescension he all too-often uses, even to his friends.

So when Boot pushes me into the Diner while Brian holds the door open for us, everybody's head swivels. Kiki's the first to recognise me; she stands with her mouth hanging open for a moment, her tray of orders forgotten, before dashing back to the kitchen, and then I'm surrounded by a gaggle of people all pushing and asking questions.

"Baby!" I hear Emmett squeal, as he pushes his way through the throng. "Oh my Lord, what have you been doing to yourself?"

He flings his arms out to hug me, when Boot steps in his way. "Watch it," he growls.

Emmett looks up at him and squawks. He starts back-pedalling as fast as he arrived. "It's him!" he gasps, clutching his throat dramatically. "Someone call the cops!"
"Relax, Lucy," Brian smirks. "I won't let him eat you."

I'm about to explain who Boot is when I hear a shriek of "Sunshine!" that's partly joy, partly horror; and I know Debbie's arrived.

She stands in front of me, her hands clapped to her face. "Jesus fucking Christ, what happened? Honey, are you alright?"

"Of course he's not alright," Brian answers. "That's a cast he's wearing, not Gucci loafers." He cocks his head and smirks again. "His leg is broken, as you can see. He also has three broken ribs and more bruises than an over-ripe banana, but then you can't expect anything else if you get in an argument with a car."


"It happened in New York; and I didn't tell you because Justin and I had a few issues to work out, and we needed to do it alone," Brian tells her. "We didn't want a lot of well-meaning family coming round and muddying the waters. Anyway, we're telling you now."

"So who the fuck's taking care of him? Is he staying with you?"

"No, he's living with me."

Deb plants her fists on her hips. "He is, huh? And what, may I ask, has happened to Dan?"

I can almost hear Brian's teeth grinding. "Dan is gone," he replies tersely.

Deb studies him. "Uh-huh. Glad to hear you've finally come to your senses. But that doesn't change the fact that this boy needs someone responsible to look after him, and I don't think …"

"Hello, I have a broken leg, I'm not deaf!" I protest. "You can speak to me, you know."

"Sunshine, I just want to make sure that you get the best care. I owe it to your poor mother, God bless her …"

"Deb, Brian's more than capable of looking after me," I interrupt firmly. "He's taken some time off work, and once my ribs heal I'll be able to get around a lot easier. In any case, I'm staying with him; the Loft's my home now."

Deb's eyes flick from me to Brian and back again. Eventually she nods. "Okay, boys." She wags a scarlet nail at us. "But I'll make sure to bring round a regular supply of comfrey tea for you, Sunshine."

"My old mum swears by it," Boot confirms. "She made me drink it all the time when I broke me arm when I was a nipper. Said there was nothing like it for making bones knit quickly." He frowns. "Tasted like old socks, mind."

Deb looks up at him, noticing him for the first time. "Well, you're a big bastard, aren't you?" she says.

"Debbie, this is Boot," Brian performs the introductions. "Boot, this is Debbie Novotny, our surrogate mother. Sort of."

"Boot? What the fuck kind of name is that for a human being?" Deb asks, snapping her gum.

Boot takes her hand and shakes it gently. "It's what I've been called for as long as I can remember.
I'm pleased to meet you."

Deb stares for a moment, taken aback: then she smiles. "I always heard you British had nice manners. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, too. And I'm plain Debbie."

"Debbie," Boot agrees, nodding.

"Boot is my new employee," Brian explains. "And since he and Justin were friends in New York, he's kindly volunteered to help out when I'm not around. So there's no need to get your tits in a twist, Ma."

Debbie snorts. "I've been doing that ever since Michael first brought you home. Can't see it changing any time soon." She pulls her pen from behind her ear and wiggles it over her pad. "So did you boys come in here to eat, or just to irritate me?"

"Both," Brian grins. "But mainly to introduce Boot to the culinary delights of Liberty Avenue. So I'll have the usual, and I'm sure Sunshine here will be pleased to eat whatever you see fit to give him."

"Damn right he will," Deb says. "We'll get some meat back on your bones in no time, baby."

I try to look enthusiastic about the prospect.

Debbie turns to Boot. "What about you, big guy?"

"Don't suppose you do Bubble and Squeak?" Boot asks hopefully.

Debbie stares at him. "What the fuck is Bubble and Squeak?"

"Never mind," he sighs. "Could I have a double cheeseburger with fries and a fresh orange juice?"

"Coming right up," Deb smiles. She hurries off to place our orders.

Boot wheels me over to one of the window booths and positions my wheelchair so that I'm sitting at the end of the table with my cast stretched out down the gap between the table and the right-hand bench. Brian takes the left-hand seat while Boot spreads himself in the next booth, where Emmett's trying to hide behind a menu.

"Bubble and Squeak? Is that another Cockney thing?" Brian enquires.

"It's an English thing," Boot replies wistfully. "One of the things I really miss ... like a proper cup of tea, and Yorkshire Pudding. And fish and chips, and bangers."

"We have tea, and Yorkshire Pudding, and fish and chips," I point out.

"Yeah, but they don't taste the same," Boot says glumly.

"What are bangers, anyway?"

"Sausages."

"We have those, too."

"The things you call sausages don't count. Bloody hot dogs. I mean proper sausages ... pork ... beef ... Cumberland. There was a deli in New York used to get them in special for me." Boot sighs reminiscently.
"Well, Pittsburgh also has some very good deli's," Brian tells him. "I'm sure they'd be delighted to supply you with … bangers, too."

Boot perks up immediately. "Then I'll treat you to a proper English breakfast … eggs, bacon, Bubble and Squeak, fried bread. The whole works."

I glance over at Em, who's still trying to be as inconspicuous as possible; which, given his outfit, is asking a lot. "What about it, Em? You up for a Boot Special breakfast?"

"Um, yes. I'm sure that would be divine," he replies shakily, sinking even lower in his seat.

"Honeycutt, come out from behind that fucking menu," Brian orders. "Boot won't hurt you."

Emmett peers nervously round the edge. "Did I hear you correctly, that he's working for you now?"

"Yep. He's going to join security at Babylon."

"Oh. How wonderful." Emmett looks a little green.

I hate the way everyone reacts to Boot. I know it's all part of the way he likes to come across, but still, it's so unfair. And I especially don't want Em feeling uncomfortable around him. "Boot, this is Emmett Honeycutt. He's one of my very best and very oldest friends."

Boot shifts round in his seat and extends his hand. "Then I'm pleased to be introduced properly this time," he says.

Emmett reaches out gingerly, and gives a little gasp as Boot shakes hands with him. "Likewise, I'm sure," he replies, massaging his fingers.

Boot laughs. "I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong impression the other day. I just wanted to find Justin urgently, so I apologise if I was a little abrupt."

"Oh?" Brian leans forward. "So you were the one who gave him my address? Honeycutt, I'm ashamed of you. Where's your sense of gay solidarity?"

"I … um … he took me by surprise," Emmett explains. "I wasn't expecting to meet someone so … imposing. Not on Liberty Avenue, anyway. And after all, I did call to let you know he was coming," he adds lamely.

We all laugh. "It's okay, Em," I reassure him. "Boot's a good friend, too."

"Oh. Oh, well that's good. Isn't that good? Because any friend of Justin's is a friend of mine. Usually," Emmett stammers.

He's saved from any further embarrassment by Debbie bringing our food, and I stare helplessly at the plate of meatloaf, creamed potatoes, carrots and peas she plonks in front of me. "And I expect you to eat all of it," she tells me. "You need a good balanced diet right now, with plenty of vegetables. For vitamin C, right?"

I think about pointing out that any vitamin C content has probably been boiled right the fuck out, but the expression on her face makes me think better of it.

She sits down next to Brian. "And what the fuck is going on with Mel and Linds? Michael asked if it would be okay for Carl and me to put Mel and the baby up for a few days and of course I said yes; like I'm gonna say no to spending some time with my grand-daughter, right? But if World War
Three's gonna bust out I'd kind of like to be prepared."

Brian takes a bite of his turkey sandwich. "It's all going to be sorted out, Deb. Seems like there's been a huge misunderstanding on everyone's part. That's why Mel's coming. And, Deb ... if Linds should happen to get in touch, don't tell her about Mel being in Pittsburgh. It's going to be a surprise."

She eyes him suspiciously. "Just what the fuck are you up to, kiddo?"

"Patience, Mama-San, patience. All will be revealed," he says in his Inscrutable Oriental voice.

"Well, I hope to God you know what you're doing, because it's about time those two got their act together. Families shouldn't be split up like this. It's not good for the kids."

Brian's reply is cut short by a yell from the other side of the Diner. "What the fuck do we have to do to get served around here? We've been sitting here for half an hour while you're fucking chatting!"

Everyone turns to look at the guy who's sitting with a couple of other men, each of them wearing pissed expressions and glaring at our table. Debbie opens her mouth to blow them off, but Boot's already on his feet and striding across the Diner. The guy who shouted suddenly looks a lot less sure of himself.

Boot leans his hands on the table and looms over him. "You shouldn't talk to a lady that way," he says severely. "Didn't your mother teach you any manners?"

One of the others laughs. "Yeah, only her manners are worse than his!"

"Then I suppose you have an excuse," Boot tells him evenly. "But I still think it would be a good idea to apologise, don't you?"


Boot shakes his head. "Not to me, my son. To Mrs. Novotny over there."

The guy looks over at her. "Sorry, Mrs. Novotny," he offers sheepishly.

Boot smiles approvingly. "Much better. And I expect if you just sit quietly and behave yourselves, your meal will be along in a few minutes. Cheers, lads."

He comes back over and sits down to resume his lunch, and Deb turns to him with a huge grin. "My fucking hero!" she proclaims. "That burger's on the house, big guy!"

"My goodness," Em puts in. "Are you always so forceful, Mr. Boot?"

Boot lifts an eyebrow. "That wasn't forceful. That was a polite suggestion. It's surprising how often it works." He smiles. "And me name's just Boot, unless you want me to call you Mr. Honeycutt."

"Oh, no. I'm only Emmett," Em flutters. "Nobody calls me Mr. Honeycutt, not even my proctologist."

"And you don't even want to know what one of those is," Brian grins.

Walking back to the Loft, Brian says; "Well, I hope that little taste of our friends hasn't made you think twice about moving here, Boot. Deb and Emmett are definitely the most colourful, but the rest of the gang's pretty bizarre too. They take a bit of getting used to. But I guess on the whole they're
okay."

"Family, guv," Boot replies, shrugging. "Got one of me own. I know what they're like, believe me."

TBC
"Your leg okay?" Brian asks for like the thirtieth time.

"Yep, just like it was the last time," I reply. It is. If Boot's big black Mac truck has enough legroom for him, it certainly does for my cast. My ribs however are another story. No matter how smoothly Boot drives, every jolt makes me wince. But Brian's got my Demerol in case I need it, and the trip to Britin isn't that far, after all.

I'm sitting between them, and listening to the conversation is about as good a distraction as is possible under the circumstances. I'm constantly amazed at how well they manage to communicate, considering the differences in age and culture. If Boot were gay, I'd definitely be worried.

At the moment, they're discussing boxing; a topic I can say with complete truthfulness I'd never have associated with Brian in any way, shape or form.

"Is that why you only drink orange juice?"


"You don't drink at all?"

"I wouldn't say that. I'll have a glass or two at weddings and birthdays, and I toast Her Majesty Christmas morning. It's not because I disapprove at all … I just like to stay in control. I wouldn't like to hurt someone just because I was pissed and forgot me own strength. I used to train at the Thomas A'Beckett on the Old Kent Road in the sixties. Lots of the top boxers went there. Henry Cooper was our bloody hero."

"Henry Cooper? Didn't Ali fight him?"

Boot nods. "He was still Cassius Clay then, mind. Yeah, he fought Henry a couple of times." He sighs nostalgically. "Now, Henry was a proper fighter, an elegant boxer. He should have won that first fight, should have been World Champion."

Brian shakes his head. "Come on. Ali beat the crap out of him."

Boot snorts. "Behave! He'd have done Clay if that cheating sod Angelo Dundee hadn't ripped his boy's glove and bought him enough time to pull himself together. They didn't call that left hook Henry's Hammer for nothing! No, he caught Clay cold. Not that Henry would have lasted long, mind – his eyes used to split like ripe tomatoes. And I can't deny it; the second time they fought, Clay took him apart. He didn't get taken by surprise twice. And, all credit to the bloke, he was the greatest
fighter the world's ever seen. Pity your government banged him up for the best part of his career over Vietnam." He gives Brian a quick glance. "But I'm surprised you know about the fight, guv. It was well before you were born."

Brian grins cynically. "Well, my old man was a bit of a boxing fan. Jack Dempsey and Rocky Marciano and those guys. But he hated Ali – called him a loud-mouthed chicken-shit nigger, and he went fucking crazy when Ali became World Champion. So of course, I had to rag him up about what a great fighter he was."

Boot chuckles. "I take it you didn't have a good relationship with your dad?"

"Think North and South Korea."

"What about your mum?"

"Israel and Syria?"

Boot says nothing.

"So why'd you quit, if you were good?"


"Which is why boxing is a dangerous sport and should be banned," I say.

They both stare at me. "Well, it is," I insist. "Look how many people have suffered brain damage, and even died, just so a bunch of morons can watch two men beat the crap out of each other. It's barbaric."

"There's a little more to it than that, Sunshine," Brian protests.

"Most sports are dangerous," Boot says. "Blokes break their necks playing rugby and football, or even skiing. And what about motor racing? Hurtling round a track at two hundred miles an hour? Now that's what I call fuckin dangerous."

"That's different," I argue. "Those are just accidents that could happen to anyone. But boxing's about deliberately trying to hurt your opponent, and I don't think that's right. Sorry, Boot, you know I have the greatest respect for you; but I can't pretend to like what you used to do."

"Fair enough. I know it's not everyone's cup of tea. And yeah, in the past they did let fights go on longer than was safe. But boxing's not just a slugging match … it's an art form too, in its way. More like fencing, really. Or even dancing. Most fights are won with this," he taps his head, "not these," indicating his huge fists; "and they're settled before you even step in the ring. Sure, you can take an unlucky punch that blows something in your brain and kills you, but that can happen anytime. And boxing's been the making of lots of kids who never had the money or the education to have made it out of the gutter otherwise. Taught them discipline and self-respect, not to mention self-control. All virtues, I've always thought."

"Maybe, but I still don't believe violence solves anything."

"Depends on the situation. I've met blokes who called themselves pacifists, so I always ask them; 'what if some nutter broke into your home, what if he was going to rape your missis and kill your kiddies? Wouldn't you do anything you could to stop them?' Some of them say no, they wouldn't resort to violence whatever the circumstance. Personally, I can't understand that kind of thinking; it's not moral courage, but it's not cowardice either. Don't know what the fuck it is."
"I seem to remember a time when you weren't quite so averse to physical conflict, Sunshine," Brian says, giving me a sly smile.

I feel my face getting hot. "Don't throw that at me, Brian! You know how I feel about all that shit."

"What's this?" Boot asks.

"There were a few episodes of queer-bashing on Liberty Avenue a couple of years ago," Brian explains. "So Justin here and a few friends formed a sort of civil defence group to patrol the streets."

"Yeah?" Boot grins. "Good for you, my son."

"That might have been the intention, but it didn't work out like that." I'm not going to let Boot think we'd been some kind of heroes. "What really happened was that we caused more trouble than we ever prevented, and it ended up more as a kind of private vendetta for me. I'm not proud of it."

Boot shoots me a look. "Things have a way of getting out of hand," he says. "Who was running this little gang?"

"Some psycho kid called Cody Bell, with a chip on both shoulders and a death wish," Brian snorts.

Boot shrugs dismissively. "There you go, then. Same thing happened with those atrocities in Vietnam … a lot of scared, hot-headed kids running round with no-one keep them in line. They'll follow a strong leader, even if he's a bad one. Then people get killed."

I have a vivid image of Chris Hobbs on his knees with a pistol barrel in his mouth, begging for his life. I remember how much I'd wanted to pull that fucking trigger.

"That's my whole point," I say. "I hate the idea of people getting hurt, yet I did things that make me feel sick to think of now. But at the time, I felt so powerful; like I'd finally turned the tables on all those assholes who'd been hurting and humiliating me for years. I loved it and I was terrified of it, all at the same time." Brian's hand rests on my left thigh and I can feel him watching me, even though I'm looking at Boot. This is another of those incidents we've never really discussed, and I wonder if he's regretting bringing the subject up.

"Perfectly natural," Boot grunts. "Anyone can lose their head if they're provoked enough, and Christ knows you'd been through more than most. To me, it's all about lines that you draw … for other people as well as yourself. How far do you let someone go before you step in and do something? That old saying about the only thing needed for evil to prosper is for good men to stand by and do nothing? Ain't that the truth. But it's about drawing your own line too, and understanding that if you cross it you're just as bad as the bloke you're trying to stop. That's moral courage. " He grins at me. "Sounds to me like you had sense and decency enough to pull out before you crossed that line … so like I said, good for you, Sunshine. You don't have any reason to beat yourself up over it."

Brian gives my leg a little squeeze and when I look at him he gives me a reassuring smile. "Couldn't have put it better myself," he murmurs.

I could mention that the old Brian would never have said such a thing, which was one of the reasons we split up so many times. But this is the new Brian; so I don't.

When we pull into the drive at Britin, Boot parks behind Lindsay's rental. He and Brian climb down, and I shuffle sideways so that Boot can lift me out, which he does with no trouble at all. Brian hands me my crutches and we stand looking up at the house. I can't help but remember the first and only time Brian brought me here; it had been dead winter then, but now the trees are beginning to break
into leaf with the first promise of the summer to come. And suddenly the full realisation hits me: this is my land, these are my trees; mine to watch and care for through all their seasons down long years ahead. This is my house … our house … the one which Brian not only bought for me, but which he had held onto. Despite everything, even his own nature; still taking a chance on love.

I reach out and take his hand, and he glances down at me and smiles.

Boot snorts behind me. "Tudor? My old mum lives in a Tudor cottage; a real one. This place is out by about four hundred years, guv."

Brian glares, but his retort is cut short by Lindsay appearing at the front door, with a startled expression on her face. She stares at the three of us and the truck we've arrived in, and her mouth falls open. "Bri? Justin? What are you doing here … and what are you doing in that?"

"It belongs to Boot here," Brian answers. "Justin can't fit in the 'Vette."

Brian picks him up and laughs. "No, it's Boot's."

Gus stares at Boot doubtfully. "Is he a giant?" he whispers.

Brian nods. "Yeah, but he's a friendly one." He sets Gus down, but he sticks close to Brian's side, holding on to his pants' leg like he always does when he's nervous.

"Like B.F.G."

"Yeah," I say. "Boot's the original Big Friendly Giant. Say 'hello', Gus."

"Hi," Gus says shyly.

"Hello yourself, mate," Boot replies, smiling.

"What's mate?"

"It means friend."

"Are you my friend?"

"If you want me to be."

"Are you my Dadda's friend?"

I can see Boot struggling for an answer, and grin. "Boot's my friend, Gus."

"Then he's my friend too, Juss. But why does he talk funny?"

"Because he's from London, in England."

Gus suddenly becomes animated. "Wow! Cool! That's where Arsenal come from!"

I stare at him "What?"

"Arsenal! My friend Ryan supports them! They're the best! Do you support them, Boot?"

"I've been to Highbury a few times, although I haven't seen the new ground, the Emirates, yet," Boot
replies, smiling.

"Oh, wow! Wait till I tell Ryan!" Gus is grinning like a maniac.

"So you're a Gooner?" Boot asks.

"Huh?"

"What's the Arsenal's nickname?"

Gus stands on one leg and wriggles. "The Gunners, of course! Everybody knows that!"

"And why do they get called that?"

"Cos of the cannon!" Gus makes a *duh* face.

"That's right. Because they've got a big cannon for their club badge. Well, do you know what club the Arsenal supporters hate most?"

Gus frowns. "Manchester United?" he hazards.

Boot chuckles. "*Everybody* hates United. No, the Arsenal's biggest enemy is Tottenham Hotspurs, because their ground is just down the road, so they're rivals. And one day the Spurs supporters thought it would be funny to start calling them *Gooners*, like a kind of insult. You know, trying to make them look stupid. But the Arsenal supporters turned it around, made it a thing to be proud of instead. So if you support the Arsenal, Gus, then you're a Gooner. And remember, it's always _the_ Arsenal. Because there's only one."

Gus is listening raptly with his mouth open, and I realise Boot has a devoted disciple. "I have no idea what either of you are talking about," I tell them.

"It's about soccer, Sunshine," Brian supplies. "Gus is a big fan, apparently."

"I've got some videos of matches you can borrow, if you like," Boot offers. "I brought a few back with me."

"Yeah! That'd be great! We can watch them together!"

"Gus …" Lindsay says, and there's a warning note in her voice. She's standing hugging her elbows defensively. "Why don't we all go inside? It's too cold to stand talking here."

"Actually, I thought it would be a nice idea for Justin and Boot to take Gus down to the village," Brian says; "go and grab a Big Mac or something. What do you say, Sonny Boy? Would you like to go for a ride?"

"In the truck?" Gus asks, bouncing with excitement.

"Brian … no," Lindsay protests, frowning.

"Are you saying that you don't trust Justin with our son?" Brian asks quietly, but there's an edge to his voice.

"No … no, of course not. But Justin's not very mobile, is he? And I'm sorry, but um … I don't really know … um, Boot … and anyway, Gus is far too young to be riding in something like that."

"We'll strap him in safe enough, Missis," Boot tells her. "And if you've got a football, Gus, and we
can find a park, you and I can have a kick about."

"Yes!" Gus squeals. "Please, Momma, can I? I'll be good, I promise!"

"Off you go and get your coat," Brian says decisively. "And while you're gone, your Momma and I can have a nice long chat."

I look at Lindsay, and I see the flicker of fear and apprehension in her eyes. Then she turns and hurries into the house after Gus.

Brian gives me a grim smile and follows.

TBC
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Now that you found yourself losing your mind
Are you here again?
Finding that what you once thought was real
Is gone, and changing?
Now that you made yourself love me
Do you think I can change it in a day?
How can I place you above me?
Am I lying to you when I say
That I believe in you.
-I Believe in You – Neil Young

BRIAN

I stroll into the great main room and head for the sideboard where the drink supply lives. I take out a tumbler and add a generous amount of Beam, and then settle myself casually on the sofa. Linds is standing with her back to the fire, trying to look nonchalant; but I know her too well. The tension in her neck and shoulders is unmistakable. But, being Linds, she goes on the offensive.

"How dare you give Gus permission to go off like that, with that … that man … when I expressly said I didn't want him to?"

I lift an eyebrow. "As I told you, Gus is with Justin. Boot is more than capable of keeping an eye on both of them. And I have some things to say to you, which I felt you would probably rather not have Gus hear."

She blinks rapidly; then recovers herself. "I don't appreciate having my authority with Gus undermined like this, Brian."

"And how should that concern me?"

She bristles at my tone. "Because I'm the one who's bringing him up, and I don't think you have the right to turn up and start throwing your weight around …"

"My rights? My rights?" I struggle to keep my voice under control. "Since when have they ever been
of any interest to you? There's only one person whose rights count with you, Linds, and that's yourself. I'm just sorry it's taken me so long to see it."

She opens her eyes wide. "You know that's not true, Brian! I've always supported your rights as Gus' father … it was Mel who never wanted you to be involved!"

"Ah, yes," I say, laughing. "The Mellie-monster strikes again! Such a poor little brow-beaten housewife you are, Linds … my heart breaks for you."

"How can you talk to me like that? When you know better than anyone what I've been through …" She's changed tack now, glancing down at me reproachfully, her huge brown eyes beginning to swim with tears.

I shake my head. "Won't work this time, Linds. As someone once told me, I'm on to you. It's taken me a while, but I finally get it." I fix her eyes with my own. "You shouldn't have involved Gus. I'd have forgiven you anything, but not that."

"Bri …" she steps towards me. "I don't know what you're talking about …"

She's interrupted by the doorbell, and I hold up a finger. "Then let's see if we can clarify things for you, shall we?" I place my glass on the coffee table and walk down the hall to the front door.

"Hey Mel," I say as I open it. "Come on in."

I don't think I've ever seen an expression that says *busted* more than the one on Lindsay's face when I walk in with Mel behind me. Shock, horror, guilt, anger … they all chase across her features before she makes a commendable attempt to rally.

"Mel … I'm surprised to see you here."

"Yeah, I bet," Mel replies. "Linds … how the fuck could you do it?"

"Do what?" Lindsay demands, folding her arms. "Remove my son and myself from a dangerous situation? I've heard you give the same advice to women with abusive partners, many times."

"I have never been abusive to you or Gus, you know that, you lying bitch!" Mel shouts, striding towards her; but I grab her arm and hold her back.

"Whoa, Mel."

"That's right!" Lindsay cries. "Don't let her hit me, Brian!"

"No-one's going to do that, Linds," I tell her, although in all truthfulness I couldn't blame Mel if she did. But I drag her to the sofa and make her sit beside me, where I can keep a grip on her arm. Lindsay remains standing by the fire. "We're going to act like sensible adults and we're going to get this whole mess out in the open. And then we're going to work out what we're going to do."

"We are certainly not doing anything of the kind!" she snaps. "I have nothing to say to you, Melanie, that I haven't already said. It's over. End of story. And I have to make a new life for me and Gus."

"Except you're not, are you?" I tell her. "You're trying to make a new life for you, and Gus, and me, Linds. And that's not going to happen."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she replies, drawing herself up haughtily.
"No? Then allow me to refresh your memory. You let me believe that Justin was eager to go to New York, that he was only going through with the wedding because I'd finally given him what he'd been asking for and he didn't want to hurt me. You never told me that he'd already discussed it with you, and that he had no intention of leaving because it wasn't what he wanted."

"Oh Brian!" she laughs. "Of course he wanted to go! Who wouldn't? It was the opportunity of a lifetime! And if he'd had the courage to stick it out, the way I said, then eventually …"

"You're not listening, are you?" I interrupt. "Justin had no home base there, no support. He couldn't get a decent job because he didn't have the suitable qualifications, so he ended up in a vicious circle … no job equals no money equals no studio where he could work. He knew that, before he even left. And if I'd had half the brains I thought I had, I would have known it too; instead of letting myself get carried away by your pretty pictures of fame and fortune."

"It wasn't a fantasy!" Lindsay snaps. "You're not an artist, you have no idea how talented he is!"

"No, I'm not; and yes, I do. And if he has as much talent as you believe, then it's not going anywhere … it's not going to dry up and disappear in the next few years just because he hasn't been 'discovered' yet. But even if it did, ultimately it would be Justin's decision as to where he goes and what he does – not mine, and certainly not yours."

Lindsay tucks her hair behind her ears. "Well, it's possible I may have mistaken his words, I suppose. If I did, then I'm sorry; but I did it with the best of intentions."

"I'd almost be willing to believe that," I tell her, "if it hadn't been for your reaction when you walked into the Loft and saw him. You had no concern for him whatsoever; not for his injuries, not for Jennifer's death. All that worried you was that he was back in Pittsburgh, and more importantly, back with me. And you did everything you could to persuade me to send him back to New York."

"Honestly, Brian, I can't believe you're misconstruing what I said so badly! I explained to you, I was just worried about him losing all the ground he'd made."

I can't help but admire the rational way she's justifying her actions, and if I didn't know her so well I could almost believe her. But my eyes are open to her now, and she can't fool me anymore.

"Okay, forget Justin for a moment. Let's move on to the way you allowed me to believe that Mel had been physically abusing you and Gus."

"Brian, I never said one word that was a lie! She hit both of us, and she can't deny it."

"Which is rather a harsh interpretation, given the circumstances."

"But still, a fact."

"So you've been honest with me about everything?"

"Yes."

"But you lied, Linds. You told a big, fat porky about how you never cheated on Mel."

Just for a second, her eyes flicker, then she lifts her chin. "I didn't lie. His wife was an hysterical, jealous bitch! She suspected every woman he spoke to! Tom and I were just friends and colleagues."

"She read your fucking texts to him!" Mel yells, trying to get up. I grapple her back down.
"You don't even know if there were any texts," Lindsay says dismissively. "She never showed them to you, did she? She probably made it all up ... Tom said she was always snooping through his things, looking for evidence that he was seeing someone."

And the horrible thing is that, put simply from Lindsay's point of view, her story makes sense. She gave what she thought was the best advice to Justin and to me. She may have been wrong, but her intentions were good. And then she gets dragged to Canada, where she has no friends and little money, where she spends her days looking after the kids while her partner's too busy and bad-tempered to notice her. Their relationship starts suffering. So she gets off her ass and gets herself a job, and starts making a contribution and meeting new friends. One of them is the head of her department, and they get on well and maybe flirt a little. Mel sees them, and jumps to the wrong conclusion, and accuses her of having an affair. She's hurt and angry that Mel has such little trust in her, so they argue. She thinks she's persuaded Mel that she's innocent, and everything settles down. But his wife is insecure and possessive, too; maybe she finds something that inflames her jealousy or maybe she doesn't, but anyway she hustles over to Lindsay's house and rows with Mel. Only instead of supporting Linds, and telling this woman to take a hike, Mel believes her, and when Lindsay comes home, Mel hits her. It's happened before.

The next day Mel hits Gus.

Lindsay doesn't believe in physical punishment, whatever the reason, whatever the circumstances. She's been prepared to accept the odd slap for herself, but not where her son's concerned. With him she doesn't compromise.

So she finds the courage to walk away, and starts to try to build a new life for both of them.

I guess most people would find her behaviour exemplary.

Except I know it's all fucking bullshit.

I smile at her.

"She didn't make it up though, did she, Linds?"

Once again she can't hide the flash of anger in her eyes. "I don't know what's going on here, Brian! You've never been able to stand the sight of Mel, and suddenly you're taking her side against me and implying everything is my fault, when I'm the injured party here! I'd like to know what the hell she's been saying about me, to turn you against me like this!"

"It's not just about what Mel said," I tell her. "It's about what Michael said, and Deb said, and Justin said, and even fucking Dan said. Little things that built up into one very big thing. So big that I couldn't fucking see it." I stand up and take a step towards her. "Not until the night you showed it to me. That night at Britin when you tried to seduce me, so we could have another baby together. So we could be a family."

I hear Mel's hiss of breath and her gasp of 'You fucking did what?", but my attention is on Lindsay's face. Her mouth falls open, her eyes widen; she hadn't realised that I would betray her like that; she simply hadn't taken it into account. She actually looks hurt, and I realise how much she'd assumed about my love for her.

I raise my eyebrows at her. "Going to deny it?"

She presses her lips together. Then her head comes up. "No, she says firmly. "I don't deny it. Why should I? I want stability for Gus. Together we could offer it; after all, you love him as much as I do;
even though you never expected to. Think of how happy he would be, living with both his real parents ... just like any normal little boy."

I'm aware of Mel weeping softly beside me, and know how much that statement must have gutted her. "We've had this conversation before, for fuck's sake! And since it seems that you didn't get it last time, I'll repeat myself: I am gay!"

She gives me a little condescending smile. "Are you really sure about that, Brian? After all, surely you must have noticed how much Justin resembles me."

I stare at her, utterly dumb-founded. "What?"

"Oh come on. Not just the colouring ... he has the same upbringing, the same perception, the same background. Dare I say the same feistiness? The same intelligence? Not to mention the fact that he's an artist, too ... don't you think that's taking coincidence a little too far?"

I stare at the smug look on her face and there's nothing I want more than to wipe it off. "You are totally and utterly mistaken," I tell her, my voice shaking with fury. "Justin is only and has always been his own person. He is not some fucked-up male substitute for you! And despite what you think, he is nothing like you! He would never have put Gus through what you have just to try and live out his own delusions!"

"I am not putting Gus through anything! I'm trying to do what's best for him!"

"You are not!" I roar at her. "You are doing what is best for you! Lindsay, you were the one who hurt Gus! You took him away from his friends, his home and his family, and that was hard enough for him. But then, just when he began to settle you got bored and started playing around; and when you got caught you uprooted him again and brought him back here! You know he loves Mel, and yet you took him away from her with the full intention of never letting him see her again. Not only that, but you let him think that it was his fault! Can't you see how fucked up that is?"

"I never told him that!" she protests.

"Come on, Lindsay! He's not stupid! He knows that the reason Mel spanked him was because he did something really wrong, and he thinks that's why you two split up! Of course he blames himself!"

"It was the reason we split up!" she insists.

"Bullshit!" I can't believe she won't give up on this. "The reason you left Mel was because you'd started to think you might not be a dyke after all, and you decided to try your luck with me. Why not? You'd already got rid of your main rival, and you figured there was a good chance I'd be lonely enough not to fight you too hard. Or that I loved you enough. Wrong on both counts, Linds!"

"I admit I want to live as a family with you ... even to maybe have another child. I still believe that would be best for Gus. But that has nothing to do with ..."

"Will you fucking stop? This situation is not what's best for Gus!" I stride over to her until our faces are only inches apart. "You stood here in front of me and implied that Mel - your fucking wife - wasn't even his real mother, that his life with you two hadn't been normal! As though he hadn't been happy! But Gus was a perfectly happy, normal little boy. He wasn't missing anything. It was you. You were the one who was bored, who was disappointed, who wanted more!"

She shakes her head in mute denial.

"What went wrong, Lindsay? Wasn't life enough fun for you anymore? Did you start to think things
hadn't exactly panned out as you'd imagined when you were at college? When you were going to be a famous artist and change the world? When you thought it was so much fun to outrage your boring parents' middle-class morals by turning into a dye-hard dyke rebel? God knows, you loved a challenge and you went for every one you could think of: setting up home with Mel; buying a house together. Having a baby, and getting me to be the father. Getting married. Sucks to everybody!"

She puts her hands on her hips. "So now you're accusing me of hypocrisy?"

I laugh at her. "We're all fucking hypocrites! We all lie to other people! It's when we lie to ourselves that we get fucked-up!" I take a deep breath. "You equate yourself with Justin, but here's another basic difference between you … Justin doesn't have a pretentious bone in his body. When his father threw him out, he did whatever he had to do to survive – if not willingly, then certainly without complaint. Even so, he never once regretted walking away. But despite all your posturing, you never stopped hankering after your wealthy, privileged, conformist heritage. You walk around wearing your fucking Liberal skin, but scratch you and you bleed WASP.

"You're trying to blame all this on what happened in Canada, but the rot had set in long before that. Justin said that he first became aware of a change in your attitude towards him when he came back from LA; when you and Mel had split up. That was after Sam Auerbach; after you found out what being fucked by a real cock was about – sorry, Mel. No offense. It's a pity you just didn't fall in love with him; it would have made things so much simpler. Instead, I guess the experience only left you more dissatisfied, more confused about who you really were. As it was, you must have been so fucking jealous of Justin … after all, he possessed the two things you wanted most in life: true talent, and me. The two things that you could never have."

"If that's the case, why did I agree to go to Canada with Mel?" she flashes back. "If I was so obsessed with you, why would I consider leaving you?"

"Because of the bombing," I tell her quietly. "The bombing shook all of us." I turn and walk over to the window, gazing out across the lawn because I really don't want to look at her right now. "When Justin was bashed, a lot of people were sorry. But it wasn't a life-changing event for them … not in the way it was for Jennifer and me. It altered both of us … it made her realise that there were many things worse than having a gay son. And me … well, it taught me I was capable of loving a seventeen-year old boy. But the bombing was different, because we were all personally affected. I guess we all re-evaluated our lives and our relationships … Justin and I, Jennifer and Tucker, Michael and Ben. You and Mel. We all looked again at the people we loved, and saw they were fragile and finite. For me, the change was permanent. For you, it wasn't." I turn to face her. "And when you agreed to go with Mel, you didn't know that I was about to buy Justin a house … that I was going to propose to him, and that he was going to say yes."

She stares at me wide-eyed. For once, she doesn't seem to have an answer.

"So what's the best I can say? That you genuinely had the intention of making a go of it with Mel, that showing me Justin's review was just your last little fit of pique - that if you couldn't have me then neither could he? That my being alone again would somehow make things easier for you? Yeah. I guess maybe I can give you that much.

"But when the new land of milk and honey didn't deliver, and reality started kicking in, then the old doubts and uncertainties started coming back… so you found a distraction. A married man!" I gasp theatrically. "I wonder who came on to whom? Did he let you know he was interested and you just went along for the ride, as it were? Or did the challenge of seducing him excite you? Whichever. It doesn't matter. When the shit hit the fan you didn't stay to deal with the fallout. You hustled your ass back home and threw yourself and Gus on my protection, knowing full fucking well that I wouldn't
turn you away; and that if you got your story in first, I'd believe you."

She's got tears running down her cheeks now, and fuck me, they might be genuine. "Dress it up however you want: tell yourself you never wanted Justin out of the way, or that you weren't jealous of his talent, or that you left Mel because she hit Gus … or even that I've been a closet hetero all these years, pretending that Justin is you with a dick. Tell yourself we could be the perfect couple. Tell yourself anything you fucking want. I really don't care. Because it's all bullshit. You wanted me, and you went after me, and that's all there was to it."

I walk back to her and grip her forearms: her face is anguished, and despite my resolution and my anger, I can't help but wish things hadn't turned out this way.

"I want to believe you didn't actively cause any of this … I want to believe that you simply took full advantage of every opportunity you were offered, and did it with consummate skill. Because otherwise I have to believe that you're nothing but a callous, selfish bitch who was perfectly prepared to use her son to get her own way. Who thought nothing of letting our family and friends think that Mel was an abusive partner and parent. Who deliberately drove a wedge between me – whom you claim to care so much about – and the only man I could ever admit to loving. The only person I could actually want to share my life with."

I give her a little shake and she flinches – for the first time, a small flicker of fear.

"I don't give a flying fuck whether you're a dyke, or bi, or straight," I tell her. "That would never be an issue; although I'd prefer you to be happy, whatever the case. Ultimately, I'm not going to lie awake at night fretting about it. But Gus is another matter, because I will not stand by and watch my son pay for your fuck-ups while you make up your mind!"

She's staring at me, with huge, wet, frightened eyes. I think she's actually listening; she'd better be.

"You get your act together. You find yourself a place to live, or you go back to your parents. Get Gus into school, find yourself a job, and work out what you want. Go to therapy, get a shrink, whatever the fuck makes you feel better about yourself … I'll even pay for it. Because if you don't, Mel and I will cite you as emotionally unstable and sue for sole joint custody."

Her mouth falls open. "You can't do that … no judge would find in your favour … look at your record … and you don't even have your parental rights anymore!"

"I'll rescind them if needed," Mel tells her, coming to stand beside me. "God knows I don't want to put Gus through a custody battle, especially if it gets dirty, but I'll do it if you leave me no choice. Gus is my son as much as he's yours: and I will not let you take him away from me without a fight."

"So it's really up to you," I say. "We can come to an amicable arrangement with as little disruption to the kids as possible, or I can contact my lawyer; who, as I'm sure you recall, is more than happy to dish the dirt … and God knows, there's a lot of it. It's your call."

"And what, ferry Gus backwards and forwards to Canada? If you're so worried about disrupting him, how is that going to help?" She's still trying to sound defiant, but her lips are quivering.

"Fuck you if you think I'm going back to Toronto and leave Gus in your clutches," Mel snaps, "not now I know what game you've been playing! I've already approached my old firm about renewing my partnership, and they informed me they'd be delighted to have me back. All I need to do is sell the house in Canada and find a place to rent in Pittsburgh. Oh no, Linds … you can rest assured I'll be keeping a very close eye on Gus from now on."
"We both will," I add. "So it's make your mind up time. Do we act like civilised people, or do we fight it out? Because if you try to take us on, you'll lose … I guarantee it."

TBC
"Keep your head over the ball when you kick it," Boot calls as Gus takes about his fiftieth penalty shot. "If you lean back you'll just sky it."

He's made a goal with their coats, laid on the grass about ten feet apart, and he's keeping goal between them. He's making Gus practice taking penalty kicks with both his right and left foot, and demonstrating the difference between hitting the ball with his instep or the outside of his foot. Boot catches most of Gus' efforts easily, but he makes sure that enough go past him to keep Gus' enthusiasm alight.

"Right, now I'm going to take a breather while you practice your dribbling skills … you'll never be a footballer if you can't run with the ball, unless you want to be a goalie. You don't have to go fast, just concentrate on keeping the ball close to your feet and as much under control as you can."

"'kay, Boot!" Gus cries and he's off like a rocket, desperately trying not to let the ball get away from him.

Boot watches him for a moment, chuckles, and comes over to flop on the bench beside me. "He's a lively lad." He reaches over and grabs some of my fries. I bat his hand away and he rumbles amusement.

"He really likes you," I say happily. "And believe me, that's quite a compliment. He doesn't take to everyone."

Boot shrugs, munching my fries. "We've got an interest in common," he says. "Always makes things easier."

"It's not just that." I wad up the now empty fry carton and dump it in the trashcan beside the bench. "You're good with him. You don't talk down to him."

"No reason I should. He's bright enough."

I dig out my Demerol and pop two capsules, washing them down with coke, and Boot frowns. "You alright, Sunshine? Do you want to go back to the house?"

"No, I'm fine. This is just my regular dose."

He nods acceptance and we both watch Gus' little figure diligently practicing.

"I hope Brian can sort all this mess out," I sigh. "I hate to think of Gus suffering because of what Lindsay's done."
"Kids are tough," Boot grunts. "They can put up with a lot … as long as they've got people around who love them. And Gus seems to have a lot of those."

"Did you never want a kid, Boot?"

"I'm not the settling kind, Sunshine. I got nothing against the ladies, God bless 'em … but they do tend to complicate things, and I like to keep things simple. I like to be me own boss, with nobody to question me. I come and go of me own free will, and I don't have to justify myself to anybody, nor be responsible for them neither." He laughs suddenly. "Besides, what self-respecting woman would want someone like me?"

I gaze at him. "Did you and Brian get given the same script?"

"You what?"

I shake my head. "Never mind. It's just he always used to say more or less the same thing."

"Yeah, well. Strikes me that what the guvnor says and what the guvnor means are not always the same thing." Boot smiles down at me, "at least where you're concerned. The difference is, when I say I'm happy being on me jacksy, I am."

I stare at him. "What, on your ass?"

He gives me a look. "No. It means being on me own. And as for nippers, I've got a big family with plenty of nephews and nieces. When they were little I could spoil them rotten and get to hand them back at the end of the day." He stretches out his long legs and puts his hands behind his head, the picture of contentment. "Best of all possible worlds, my son."

For a few minutes we continue to watch Gus in comfortable silence. Then Boot suddenly sits up. "You know, you got to play to your strengths, Sunshine. Back in the Nineties … well, longer than that, to be honest … the Arsenal got the reputation of being the most boring club to watch because so many of their games ended up one-nil. Not enough goals, see? Not flash enough. But the Gooners didn't give a toss, because they knew their defence was so solid, one goal was all it took to win the game. So they came up with a song, and they used to sing it all the time … a sort of club-anthem, if you like. Still sing it now, whenever the score's right."

He stands up and shouts, "Hang on Gus! We'll practice some tackling. You can be Thierry Henry, I'll be Tony Adams."

He jogs over and I watch laughing as they tussle together, Boot taking the ball off Gus and then letting Gus win it back, until eventually the little boy gets past him and heads for their makeshift goal. He pokes the ball into the space between the coats and screams "Yes!", bouncing victoriously with his arms in the air.

To my utter delight Boot raises his fists too and starts dancing around, bellowing,

"One-nil to the Ars-en-al,"

One-nil to the Ars-en-al,

One-nil to the Ars-en-al,

One-nil to the Ars-en-al!"

It's set to the chorus from Village People's Go West, and when Gus starts dancing too, adding his
shrill treble rendition, I nearly fall off the bench laughing.

When we get back to Britin, there's another car parked behind Lindsay's and I realise Mel must have arrived as planned. I don't know whether I feel gleeful or apprehensive.

Boot opens his door and hops out, then reaches in to unbuckle Gus' seat belt and lift him down to the ground. As he does so the front door opens and Mel hurries out. "Gus!" she screams.

"Mommie!" His cry is pure joy, and as he races up the drive towards her any lingering doubt I may have had disappears; he hurls himself into her arms and she sweeps him up, holding him in a breathless hug. Brian appears behind her; he leans over to give Gus a swift kiss, says a few quiet words to Mel, and then walks slowly towards us. His face is sombre.

"Come on," he says as he reaches the truck. "Let's get out of here."

I shuffle over to the centre seat and buckle myself in. Brian climbs in beside me and kisses my cheek. "You okay? Did you take your meds?"

"Of course." I try to judge his mood. "What happened?"

"Lindsay's moving back to her parents until she decides what she wants to do. I've told her I won't contest custody as long as she gets her shit together and understands that Gus and JR are the important ones here, not her."

"And do you think she will?" I ask nervously, as Boot starts up the truck's engine and begins to back down the drive.

"She'd better, because if she thinks I'm bluffing about getting joint custody with Mel, she doesn't know me half as well as she thinks she does. I'm not the drunken, drugged-up club-boy I was … I own not only an extremely profitable company, but considerable property too. If I have to appear a solid, respectable citizen then that's what I'll be, if it persuades a judge that I'm a responsible father."

"You really think a judge would find against Lindsay?"

"If we can prove that she's an unsuitable mother, which I don't think will be too difficult. We've got her infidelity with Auerbach – while Mel was expecting JR, remember – not to mention the guy in Toronto. She slandered Mel, and had no concern at all for what she was putting Gus through; and unless she gets her thumb out of her ass she has no job and no home of her own. Admittedly she'll get half the proceeds from the house once Mel sells it, but Lindsay's never been much good at the practical side of things. Whereas once Mel comes back, she'll have a decent income, her own place, and a strong family support base to help her look after the kids. Plus Mel is as much Gus' legal parent as Lindsay is, and there's JR to consider. Courts always like to keep kids together."

"Still, Linds is Gus' birth mother, and the law's bound to favour her."

Brian gives me a tight smile. "I'm sure it won't come to that, Sunshine. Lindsay won't risk it … despite everything, she does love Gus and I'm sure she won't take a chance on losing him. I know her, she's not stupid … now she knows she's busted, and I'm not playing her little game, she'll give it up."

I don't say anything. I'm not as convinced of Lindsay's rationality as Brian is, but I want to be as positive and supportive as I can, so I keep my thoughts to myself.

Boot, however, speaks up. "That's the problem with birds, guv. They can be a devious, conniving
lot. Stands to reason; they're physically weaker, so they learn very early to get their own way by using their brains instead of their muscles." He glances at Brian. "Look at this lass of yours. You've known her for years, you think she's your mate, you think you can trust her. But she's got her own agenda, and she doesn't hesitate to use your little boy as a lever if it suits her. She's got your weakness pegged, guv. And she doesn't care how much she hurts you or Justin as long as she gets her own way in the end. Like I said, devious. And more ruthless than most blokes could ever be."

"She didn't used to be like that," Brian says softly.

Boot shrugs. "How can you tell? Maybe she wears a mask too, but you could never see through it until now."

Obviously his comment has some meaning to Brian, who purses his lips thoughtfully but says nothing.

"So how come you support the Arsenal, Boot?" Brian asks casually.

Boot flicks him a look. "Why wouldn't I?"

"I got to college on a soccer scholarship, and we used to watch a lot of English football. Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't Highbury North London?"

Boot looks guilty. "Er … yes."

Brian raises his eyebrows. "Well, weren't you the one spouting all that north is north and south is south and never the twain shall meet shit? Why don't you support a South London team … what, Chelsea?"

"Fuck off," Boot snaps, looking outraged. "Gang of posers. It'd be Fulham, if anyone." He's silent for a while, then says, "Dunno, really. Maybe because everyone knocked them … they didn't have the reputation for having flash players, like Chelsea or the Spurs or the Hammers. And besides, the south London clubs were the ones with the big hooligan element … Millwall was the worst, the Old Bill used to bring out the Riot Squad when they were playing … but Chelsea came pretty close. Chelsea Boot-Boys they used to call themselves. Fuckin' skinheads."

There's something in Boot's tone that makes me look up at him. He's staring straight ahead, his knuckles white on the steering wheel and his jaw clenched, the way he does sometimes when he's really angry and is struggling hard to contain it. But when he speaks again his voice is normal.

"Being part of a club's like family … you share the same hopes, the same fears. You laugh at the same things … and a lot of those things only make sense if you're in the know. If you belong. Take the chants, for instance … over here, you have cheerleaders, but that's not the same thing. Chants at football matches … they're not just a way of cheering your team on, they're insults to the opposition, too. And bloody humorous, some of them."

"I thought One-Nil to the Arsenal was pretty funny," I say.

Boot grins at me. "David Beckham … you've probably heard of him, right?"

"Of course. He's married to Victoria from the Spice Girls."

"Yeah. Well, when he was still with Manchester United and they came to play at Highbury, all the Gooners started singing:
David Beckham, David Beckham,

*Do you take her up the Arsenal?*

*Do you take her up the Arsenal?*

He sings it to the chorus from *Bread of Heaven*. Brian and I look at each other, and then snort helpless laughter.

"Oh my God!" I splutter. "I have so got to get that on a T shirt!"

Well, any team whose fans sing Village People tunes *and* make double-entendres about taking it up the ass has got to get a gay man's vote, right?

I laugh until my ribs hurt so much, it's not funny anymore.

TBC
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

JUSTIN

"For fuck's sake, Justin, lie still!" Brian's voice rises hysterically. "You're driving me fucking nuts!"

"How do you think I feel?" I snap back. "I'm the one with the itch that won't go away!"

He must be really pissed, because he lets that go without comment.

Over the last few days, my ribs have begun to feel a lot better. Unfortunately, the relief I should have gained at their starting to heal has been totally wiped out by the excruciating itch that has developed on my leg beneath the cast, and I can't do anything about it except squirm helplessly. At first, Brian found my constant writhing and moaning highly amusing, and I had to endure a stream of lame comments and innuendoes before I exhausted even his originality; a couple of sleepless nights exhausted his patience.

"Christ, I've got a meeting with Remson in the morning!" He sits up and glares at me, his face haggard, his hair sticking up every which way. "I'm going to look like shit and it's all your fault!"

"Well fuck off and sleep on the couch, then!" I'm too agitated to be sympathetic or fair.

The look on his face is priceless, but I really can't appreciate it as much as I should. "Fine," he says tightly. "That's exactly what I'll do, then."

He jumps out of bed, flings open the closet and pulls a blanket down from the top shelf. Then he stomps across the bedroom, casting me a dirty look as he does so, and stamps down the steps. I listen to him muttering darkly to himself as he hurls cushions around, eventually throwing himself on the couch in high dudgeon.

I can't even laugh.

I wake after a couple of hours of restless sleep with the early morning light coming in through the blinds. I crane my neck to see the time: 06.18. No Brian; he must still be on the couch.

I flop back, hoping to go straight back to sleep … but immediately I become aware of the cast on my leg. And as soon as I've mentally registered that fact … my thigh starts itching.

I squeeze my eyes shut and desperately try to think about something else, but it's too late. Within minutes I'm wriggling, trying to twitch the muscle in my thigh in a futile attempt to rub the skin against the plaster encasing it.

As always, it fails.
Fuck, fuck, fuck! I twist my head from side to side in frustration. And suddenly my frantic gaze falls on the open closet … with rows … and rows … of clothes on … hangers!

Hope leaps within me. I cast a quick glance towards the steps, but there's no sound from Brian. I know the alarm's set for seven, but that gives me plenty of time.

I reach out for my crutches and pull them onto the bed. Then I shuffle quickly to other side of the mattress and carefully lift my cast to the ground. I'm pretty good now at getting up and down … it's keeping quiet that's bothering me.

I stand up, steadying myself with my right hand against the wall, pick up my crutches and … slowly … quietly … I cross to the closet.

Brian's hangers are of course useless. They're moulded, and padded, and expensive … and strong. Nope, what I'm after is one of the cheap wire things from the Big Mart that I use.

I grab one of my shirts and toss it aside. Yes! Soft, bendy wire – crap for hanging anything except light shirts, but brilliant for scratching itches!

I carry my prize back to the bed and sit down. Then I start work.

I try to prise free the end of wire where it's twisted round the neck of the hanger, but I can't get a good grip; so I dig out Brian's knife from the drawer in his nightstand and carefully use the tip for leverage. Once I've got the wire lifted, it's easy to unwind … and then I'm left with one long, pliable itch-stick with a big hook on one end and a cork-screw on the other.

Gleefully, I straighten out the hook-end and carefully start to feed it between my thigh and the cast, aiming for the area of skin that seems to be worst affected. Oh God! Oh God! Fucking bliss! Yes! Yes! Just a little bit further … Yes! Right there! I work the wire up and down vigorously.

"JUSTIN!"

The shock's so great I think my heart might have stopped.

Brian strides across the bedroom and stands naked and scowling before me. I look back at him guiltily.

"What the fuck is that?" He indicates the length of hanger-wire sticking out of the top of my cast.

"Um …" I honestly can't come up with anything.

He holds out his hand imperiously. "Give it to me."

I sigh. Regretfully I start to slowly withdraw the wire, trying to surreptitiously jiggle it a little on the way for one more tiny, exquisite scratch.

"Stop that!" he snaps, slapping my hand away. "I'll do it." He pulls the rest of the wire out carefully; then the harangue starts.

"Didn't the doctor tell you at your last check up, you must not try to stick things down the cast to alleviate itching in case you damage your skin and start an infection?"

I study my feet rebelliously.

"Well, didn't he? Did he not specifically mention things like fucking wire coat hangers? Which part of those instructions did you not understand?"
"Well, at the moment the idea of getting gangrene in it and having the fucking thing chopped off sounds pretty good, actually!" I'm aware I'm sounding ridiculous now.

His eyes widen. "That is so not fucking funny! You're collecting an awful lot of demerits, Sunshine, and I promise you that punishment will be administered just as soon as your ribs can stand being bent over my knee!"

"Well, at least then I wouldn't be thinking about my fucking leg!"

We glare at each other. Brian's sweaty and dishevelled. His chest is heaving.

Wow.

"You know you look fucking hot, standing there buck-naked scolding me?"

He continues to regard me steadily. Then the corner of his mouth twitches upwards. "I thought you were jerking off, you little twat … until I saw what you were really up to."

"Oh, did you?" I lift my left foot and twiddle my toes against his pubes, waggling my eyebrows suggestively. "So you were planning on watching?"

"No, brat. I was coming to help."

"Well, I'd hate to disappoint you … especially as I'm sure you can take my mind off my itch better than any damn coat-hanger." I smile sweetly and stroke the ball of my foot against his rapidly burgeoning erection.

"Mmh," he croaks. "Just give me second to think of something."

Which is how I've ended up on the floor, lying on my back on a pile of cushions, with my cast propped up on one end of the coffee table.

Let me explain.

We've been having sex regularly, but the only position we've been able to manage is with Brian spooning behind me … which can be wonderfully intense, but never vigorous because neither of us can get any leverage.

Lying face down is out because my ribs won't take it yet, which also means I can't bend over anything. We even tried it with Brian sitting on a dining chair and me straddling his lap, but the effort required to ride him whilst doing all the work with only one functioning leg kinda took the fun out of it.

Lying on my back with Brian on top is out too, because although Brian can easily support himself on his arms so as not to pressure my ribs, I simply can't angle my hips high enough with my leg weighed down by the fucking cast.

Believe me, I've tried.

So now, fuelled by lust and desperation, Brian has come up with a plan. Namely that if he props the offending cast up in the air, i.e. on the coffee table, then my hips will be elevated enough for him to get the required angle.

I've reached that foggy state of pre-coital anticipation where anything sounds like a good idea, and as Brian kneels between my legs, his eyes and hands hot upon me, it seems positively brilliant. I smile
as he leans in, caging me with his arms, and his hard, urgent mouth finds mine. But as he presses his body closer against me and my legs spread further apart, my cast starts to slip on the glass top of the coffee table and before I can do anything sensible it slides over the edge, and I end up with my legs split apart at ninety degrees.

"Ow, fuck, that hurts!" I squeak, breathless with pain. I'm mortified to find I can't free myself because the table leg is pressed against my thigh, preventing me from moving it, and Brian's body is pinning the rest of me. "Fuck it, Brian, help!"

He sits back on his knees and his eyes widen as he sees my predicament: he immediately shoves the coffee table out of the way, freeing my leg. "Jesus fucking Christ, Justin!" His voice sounds concerned, but his lips are twitching. "I knew you were flexible, but isn't that taking things to extremes? Are you okay?"

"Of course I'm not okay!" I gasp, torn between pain, embarrassment and giggles; because really, I can see how funny it is even though it fucking hurts. I grab my cast and try to haul my leg back into its normal position relative to my body. "I think I've dislocated my fucking hip!"

"In which case, you'd hardly be laughing," he points out, trying un成功fully not to snicker, and I glare at him. "Come on, let me take a look."

I smack his hands away. "No thanks, you've already done enough damage," I retort, "you and your clever ideas!"

He raises both eyebrows. "I seem to remember very clearly that you were the one begging me to distract you. I was only trying to be creative."

"I didn't expect you to distract me by ripping my leg out of its socket!" I half laugh, half cry.

"Ah, but you see, that's your fault because of what you said earlier. Don't forget, Sunshine; be careful of what you wish for, in case you get it." He reaches down and places his hand on the inside of my right thigh, his long fingers gently massaging the tendon. "Better?"

"Mmh. Maybe." I'm trying to be pissed, but the look in his eyes and the careful ministrations of his fingers are making me forget what I'm trying to be pissed about.

Brian shifts so that he's lying on my left side, leaning over me. His hand has crept up to my groin.

"I guess we'll just have to leave the energetic stuff until you get a leg brace," he whispers, his breath warm against my face, "and I hope you know that on that happy occasion I'm gonna fuck you on every surface I can find … but for now …" he lips fasten on my throat just above my collar bone and suck a little; "I guess I'll just have to do this instead."

I twist my fingers in his hair as his lips begin to trail south.

TBC
CHAPTER THIRTY

BRIAN

"Dadda!" Gus yells, launching himself from the staircase at me. I catch him in mid-air, breathing a sigh of relief that yet again my reflexes have proved equal to his unquestioning trust.

"Hey, Sonny Boy! How's it going? How was school?"

"Good!" he laughs back. "Guess what, they have a soccer team! And when I'm old enough I'm going to play in it!"

"You are, huh? Gonna take after your old man?"

He nods eagerly, his eyes sparkling. "Have you got the new car? Am I gonna ride in it?"

"Sure are, Sonny Boy."

Since the Vette is virtually redundant at the moment - what with Justin being unable to ride in it and Gus forbidden to (by his mothers in a rare moment of unanimity - an unfounded concern, as it happens, because hell will freeze over before I install a child-seat in it) - I've rented something a little more appropriate. It's a silver Hyundai Sonata, and it isn't totally horrible. It also comes with the bonus of an in-car entertainment centre, which I'm expecting Gus to go nuts over.

"Where's Gramma Deb?"

"In the kitchen, with JR."

I set him down and walk through to Deb's kitchen, where she's sitting at the table with a towel over her shoulder, spooning some kind of fluorescent goo into JR. She looks up with a bright smile. "Hey, kiddo! You're early."

I pull out a chair and sit down. "Well, that's one of the joys of being your own boss. You can delegate." I watch as JR turns her face downwards, opens her mouth and lets the orange goo plop out onto the tray of her high chair. She looks up at me, grinning with delight at her achievement, and then splats her hand into the mess.

"Oh Honey …" Deb chides, mopping up with the towel, and I realise that Michael has passed on more with his genes than just his dark hair and eyes.

"Yuck," Gus says, rolling his eyes in disgust, "babies!"

I refrain from pointing out that it wasn't so very long ago that it that he'd ruined my new Hugo Boss jacket by throwing up all over it. "Go and get your things, Sonny Boy, and say goodbye to Carl," I
tell him. "We've got to go pick up your Momma."

Deb waits until his feet are thundering up the stairs before turning to me with a serious expression. "I thought when Melanie came home they were getting back together, but Lindsay's still at her parents!" She scrapes a last spoonful from the bowl, pops it into JR's gaping mouth and then hands her the spoon, which she immediately begins to bash her tray with. "What happened between those two that was so bad?"

"That's between Lindsay, Mel, Justin and myself," I tell her. "I'm sorry, Deb, but that's all I'm saying. I have no idea whether there's any possibility of Lindsay and Mel ever being a couple again ... personally, I can't see it. But at least they're here and the kids have both their mothers again ... I know Gus seems a lot happier. That's about the best we can hope for."

"Well, if they think I'm just gonna stand by and watch my grandchildren get passed around from pillar to post again, just because Lindsay got her knickers in a twist about Mel spanking Gus ... which, may I add, was a perfectly understandable reaction under the circumstances ... God knows, I've whopped Michael a couple of times in the past and it never did him any harm ..."

"Deb, leave it," I tell her firmly. "It's Lindsay and Mel's business, and it's up to them which solution they come up with. As long as the kids are effected as little as possible, nobody else is getting involved."

Gus arrives back with fortuitous timing, clutching his coat and school bag and thankfully shutting Deb up. She helps him button his coat and plants a big red lipstick kiss on his cheek, and then makes him scrunch his face up in protest as she rubs the mark vigorously to remove it.

"What time is Mel picking JR up?"

"As soon as she finishes work. She's normally here by six at the latest."

I nod. I know Mel's working her ass off, what with re-establishing herself at the firm and getting settled into her new apartment. But with Deb, Michael and Ben - and even Hunter - helping out, she's got plenty of cover.

"Dadda ..." Gus complains, tugging at my shirt. "I wanna see the car!"

"Okay, Sunny Boy, I'm coming. Go kiss your sister and Gramma Deb."

"Bye, Gramma! Bye, JR!" He plants a hurried smack on each of their cheeks and then rushes back to grab my hand and tug me impatiently towards the door.

I glance in the rear-view mirror at Gus as I head for downtown. "You okay back there, Sonny Boy?"

He nods silently, intent on the headrest of the seat before him. "Is this a TV?"

"Sure is. You can watch DVD's on it. Or play games."

"Wow! While we're driving?"

"Well, I can't. But you can - that's the idea."

"This is so cool! Can I put something on now?"

"In a minute, Gus. I just want to talk to you, before we pick up Momma. Last time we talked, you were sad because you were missing your friends in Canada." I pull up at a red light and look back at
him. "Do you feel any happier now?"

"I still miss Jason and Ryan, I guess … but I'm glad I'm back, too. I'm glad I can see you and Juss, and Gramma Deb and Carl and Uncle Mikey." His face falls a little. "I don't really like living with Granny and Granpa though."

I grin. "Why's that? Is Granny a grump?" I turn my attention back to the traffic as the lights change.

He giggles. "Nooo. It's just she fusses over me … like I'm a little kid. And she doesn't like me to make a mess … or a noise."

"She's just not used to little boys. She only had girls." I make a mental note to chase Lindsay up about whether she's made any progress in finding her own place.

"Why can't we go and live with Mommie and JR?"

I sigh. "Because your Mommies are angry with each other, Gus. And it's not because of anything you did … not because you were bad at all." This is difficult territory for me; I hate not being completely honest with him, but I know how much he loves both his mothers; apportioning blame for him is the last thing I want to do. "People change, Sonny Boy. When you're bigger, you won't want to do the same things you like doing now. That's natural. And sometimes, people who have been together for a long time find that they've changed too, and they don't want the same things they did when they first met. I think that's what's happened with your Mommies."

His face in the mirror is sad, his eyes cast-down. "It happens all the time, Gus … you should talk to Justin about it. His Mom and Dad broke up, too … he was a lot older than you when it happened, though."

"Did they stop wanting the same things?"

"Yep. And Justin blamed himself, just like you did. But it wasn't his fault, either."

Gus is silent for a long time, and when I next glance at him I see tears running down his cheeks. "Hey, Gus … come on, it's okay."

"What if you change, Dadda?" he hiccups. "What if one day you don't want me anymore?"

I look for the nearest parking space, indicate and pull over. Then I get in the back with Gus and unbuckle him, and he scrambles onto my lap. "Not ever gonna happen, Sonny Boy," I assure him, kissing his hair, "because loving your kid is different. That never goes away, however old you get." I grimly ignore the mocking faces of those shining examples of parental devotion and selflessness: Craig Taylor, Jack and Joanie, and Hunter's mother. What the fuck else am I going to say to a little kid? And after all, it's not lying if they make you, right? "No matter what happens, no matter where you are, I'll always love you just the way I do right now."

He lifts his head, tears and snot mixing on his cheeks. "Promise?" he whispers.

"Yeah, I promise," I tell him, "cross my heart and hope to die. And your old man never breaks a promise."

Lindsay's waiting outside Macey's when we arrive, which is just as well because there's nowhere to park. She scrambles into the passenger seat as I stop the car, and as soon as she's buckled her seat belt I pull back out into the traffic.
"Hi, Lambskin!" Lindsay cries, turning to look at Gus. "Did you miss me?"

Gus is wearing earphones. "I'm watching *The Lion King!" he informs her at the top of his voice, a huge grin on his face.

"He can't hear you," I explain. "Or himself."

I half expect her to make a prissy comment about keeping children occupied by social interaction rather than simply plugging them into a media centre, but she doesn't. She doesn't say anything.

I glance over at her silent profile. "How was work?"

"Fine." Her voice is neutral.

I lift an eyebrow. "Just fine?"

"What do you expect me to say, Brian? That I had a wonderful day sucking up to rich, fat, middle-aged women? 'Oh Madam, that silk Dior negligée is going to drive your husband wild with desire!'"

"Maybe it will." I grin. "I'm not in a position to comment."

"Yes. You made that painfully clear."

I sigh. "Linds, I'm trying here. I don't want to fight in front of Gus."

"Who's fighting? I'm doing as instructed. Living with my parents, sharing Gus, getting counselling. Getting a job! Just forgive me if I'm not exactly euphoric about being a fucking store assistant!"

"Look, I know this isn't what you want to do. But it's work … and as soon as something better comes up, you can give them your notice."

"Whoopee," she mutters.

"Have you asked Sidney about getting your old job back at the gallery?"

"Apparently you and Mel weren't the only ones who disapproved of my relationship with Sam. *Disappointingly unprofessional*, were his words. Fuck him."

I raise my eyebrows. Lindsay is usually the first to jump feet first on any profanity around Gus. I flick a look at him in the mirror, but he's rapt and oblivious.

"Have you had any luck finding a place? I get the impression Gus isn't too happy at your parents."

"What do you think I can afford on a part-time salary, Brian? Or do you really want your son growing up alongside thieves and drug dealers?"

I take a deep breath. "You know I would never allow that. Besides, you've got the money from the house to come … that should keep you going for a while."

She doesn't answer.

"Won't it?" I persist.

She's fidgeting her fingers on the strap of her purse. "I might need to hang on to it."

"Why?"
"Legal fees."

"What? On the sale?"

"No." She looks out the side window. "Tom's wife is suing him for divorce. She's naming me as correspondent."

"Oh." Well, there's a surprise. "So just plead guilty as charged. The last I heard, you don't get fined for infidelity."

She glares at me. "And what if I fight it? After all, I have Gus to consider. And what about my reputation?"

I can't help but laugh. "It's a little late to start worrying about that. But Gus isn't going to know and neither is anyone else. The sexual indiscretions of a Toronto art professor are hardly going to make headlines in Pittsburgh."

She surreptitiously wipes her eyes with her fingers. I don't know whether it's for affect or not. "You really don't care, do you?" she says dully.

I wish I didn't. I wish I could just wash my hands and say *fuck you*. But there have been so few people who ever got close to me, and fewer still who knew me back in that bad old time, that I'm loth to let any of them Mikey; despite our glaring differences in taste, education and personality, our very different life-styles, our frequent tiffs and his unrequited crush on me, I've never wanted to sever the ties. And it's the same with Lindsay; despite everything she's done, despite my very real anger at her, there's a little place in my heart that aches to just forget, to turn things back the way they were: to have my fag-hag back. And, honestly? If it weren't for the way she'd used Gus, maybe I could. But unfortunately, as Justin pointed out, as a good father I can't ignore it … I may forgive her on my account, but I can't afford to forget.

"You and Gus come as a package, and since the best way for him to be happy is for you to be happy, I have to care."

"You could have made me happy…" she murmurs. "You could have made both of us happy."

I grit my teeth together. "I would *never* have made you happy! Even if you could have persuaded me to set up home with you, I would never have stopped missing Justin, and wanting him. I love him, Linds; that's never going to change. I'm gonna just have to keep saying it until you believe it."

She's silent.

"Haven't you spoken to your counsellor about this?" She'd better have. It's the reason I'm paying the fucker's exorbitant fees.

"He thinks I'm depressed."

No shit, Sherlock.

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As we pull up outside the Peterson's house, I see Renée kneeling at one of the flower beds with a trowel in her hand, filling an expensive wicker trug with weeds. She stands up and waves to Lindsay with a hand clad in a Laura Ashley gardening glove. I notice with some amusement she also has matching wellingtons.
"Hello, darling," she says as Lindsay climbs out. "And my little Gussy! Come and give your Granny a kiss!"

I wince as Gus trudges dutifully over and gives her a peck on cheek.

"Hello, Mrs. Peterson," I say, giving her my nicest smile.

"Brian." Her voice is frigid.

Everything back to normal there, then.

TBC
CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

BRIAN

When I open the Loft door I'm greeted by raucous laughter, profanity, the acrid smell of pot and what sounds like a minor engagement from the second Gulf War. I plonk the pizza boxes I'm carrying on the kitchen counter and survey the scene, where Justin and Hunter are occupying the couch. Neither of them is wearing shoes, and I'm not happy to see Hunter's stinky sock-clad feet sullying my spotless leather. The noise is coming from the TV screen, where an Alien has just exploded in spray of yellow acid blood.

"Gotcha, sucker!" Hunter gloats, turning a smug face to Justin and brandishing his control pad. "I beat ya again, Blondie!"

"In case you hadn't noticed, I'm not blond anymore," Justin points out. "And you only won because my fucking hand keeps locking. You've got an unfair advantage."

"Yeah," Hunter snickers. "It's called youth! And trust me, you'll always be blond, no matter what colour your hair is."

I lay my coat over the back of a chair and go to join them, knocking Hunter's feet to the ground.

"Hey!" he protests; then scoots up close to me and bats his eyelids. "Hi, Brian. Still looking good!"

I lean over to give Justin a long hello kiss, take the half-smoked joint from his fingers and then turn to Hunter. "Are we surprised?" I take a drag. "Although … aren't you supposed to be straight now?"

He leers, licking his lips suggestively. "Not so much that I couldn't be tempted …"

Justin leans over and punches his thigh. "Fuck off, he's mine. Go get your own."

"Do you want to stay to eat?" I ask. "There's probably enough for three … unless you prefer Ben's tofu shit."

The pizza smells really good and I can see him wavering. Then he sighs. "Nah, I'd better get home. They're expecting me." He stands up and picks up his coat and bag. "I'll leave you the Play Station, Blondie. You need the practice for when I whip your ass again."

Justin gives him the finger. "Don't expect me to get up and see you out, asshole."

"I'll do it." I hand the joint back to Justin and stand up to escort Hunter to the door. "Thanks," I tell him quietly as he steps onto the landing. "He needs distraction at the moment. I really appreciate it."

"No problem, dude," he grins. "You can pay me back sometime." He lifts his face and puckers his
"In your dreams, kiddo," I tell him, shoving him playfully towards the elevator. "Give my regards to your mothers."

Having closed and locked the door, I fetch a couple of beers from the refrigerator and collect the pizzas and take them over to the coffee table. "Here you go," I say, handing Justin one of the boxes, "Hawaiian, as requested."

"Garlic bread, too? And blue cheese dip?"

"God, yes." I might sound exasperated but actually I'm pleased as fuck that the lad seems to be recovering his appetite and is shovelling in the calories with his old enthusiasm. I open my own Margherita and extract a slice, then pick up the empty game case lying on the coffee table with my other hand. It's got lurid green monsters on the front. "Alien Versus Predator?"

"Yeah. It's pretty exciting actually. I never really played before. The graphics are amazing."

"One of the problems of growing up surrounded by people so much older than you, Sunshine," I grin through a mouthful of pizza. "You never had the chance to experience the joys of being a teenager."

"Oh, I experienced joys a-plenty," he laughs back, dunking a piece of garlic bread in the cheese dip and munching it.

"Actually, using one of those control pads is probably pretty good therapy for your hand," I say, picking it up and examining it. "I should have thought of getting you one before."

"There's still time," Justin smiles. "I'll give you a game later. It'll be good practice for when you have to play with Gus."

"I can think of games I'd rather play with you," I tell him. "Not, however, with your breath stinking of garlic."

"Well, you know the answer to that. Eat some yourself!" He holds a piece of bread up to my lips. What the fuck, if you can't beat 'em… I open my mouth and let him pop it in.

"You know," he says, suddenly serious, "I've been thinking. About something Hunter said."

I raise an eyebrow enquiringly.

"He said that he thought Rage would make a pretty cool video game."

I snort laughter. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, I'm not." He puts down his pizza and turns to face me. "It'd be great! I think it could really work."

"Justin, what the fuck do you know about video games? This is about the first time you've played one."

"Well … I could learn. In fact … I've been thinking a lot, Brian. I want to go back to college and get my degree."

Wow. This is progress indeed. "Do you think P.I.F.A. would take you back?"
He shakes his head. "Don't want to go back there. They can't teach me more than they already have; it's not like I have the fine motor skills to ever be a classical artist. But I could go to Carnegie Mellon … and major in computer animation."

I remember Jennifer once telling me that Justin had always wanted to be an animator. I reach out and clasp the back of his neck. "I'm all for you finishing your education, Sunshine, you know that. But are you sure this is what you want?"

He nods, eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. "Yeah, I'm sure. Maybe I can still make Rage a success … maybe I can still make Michael his fortune. See, I got to thinking about Dylan's father, and the company he owns. The one that develops and produces video games. I think maybe he owes me one."

"I think he's more likely to kick your ass out of the door."

"Maybe … but maybe not. He seemed a pretty decent guy, actually … he just had a blind spot where Dylan was concerned. Anyway, I think it's worth a shot."

Christ.

He has no idea how he blows me away, my indomitable, unquenchable boy. He sits here with his dyed black hair, his broken bones, his so-often shattered life; yet his eyes are as bright, as hopeful as ever, his determination as undaunted. And I feel … pretty fucking humble, really.

"Actually, there was something I wanted to talk about, too."

"Uh-huh?"

"I want our affairs tidied up. Ted got all the necessary papers for a civil partnership drawn up before the wedding … powers of attorney and medical probate, wills, joint ownership for the Loft, Britin and Babylon … and Kinnetic."

"Hold on," Justin says, shaking his head. "Britin … okay, that's ours; but Babylon and the Loft are all yours. And don't even think I'd ever take part of Kinnetic."

"Nu-huh," I shake my head. "Partners mean just that; what's mine is yours, and vice versa."

"But I don't have anything, that's the point!"

"Not right now. But if this idea for Rage makes it, then who knows? And I still haven't given up hopes of having a famous artist in the family yet."

"But that's all for the future," Justin protests. "Right now I'm the proverbial church mouse."

"But you may not always be. In which case, if something happened to you, would you really want your Dad swooping down and enjoying your hard-earned gains? Or if I pop off first, do you think I want Joanie and Claire running off with the proceeds while you're left with nothing? Fuck that. I've already got a nice trust fund set up for Gus … well, I want to make you executor so Lindsay can't interfere. You can do the same for Molly, and make me executor. I'll look out for her, I swear." I will. She's precious to him, and that makes her precious to me, too. "It makes sense, Justin."

He thinks about it.

Then I see that lazy, warm smile spread across his face. "I love you, Mr. Kinney. You know that, don't you?"
"Yeah," I tell him. "I do."

He's right. He doesn't taste anything like garlic.

TBC
CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

BRIAN

"You planning to keep this many horses, guv?" Boot asks, looking at the row of empty stalls.

I laugh. "No. Neither Justin nor I ride, and even if we decide to learn, it won't be for a while … we'll only be coming down weekends, at least until Justin finishes college. I was thinking of maybe keeping a pony for Gus, if he wants, and hiring someone to look after it."

"So at the most you'd need three stalls and a tack room."

"Yeah. I guess."

We're at Britin so that Justin and I can start making plans about completing the furnishing and redecorating. Although it's not practical for Justin to stay here yet, I want to start work as soon as possible so that once he's properly mobile the house will be ready for us. Of course, I'm also hoping that filling his head with colour co-ordinations and curtain fabrics will give him something else to think about other than his fucking itchy leg. So I've left him working out colour schemes and planning where to put furniture, while Boot and I go to inspect the stables and to start laying plans for my surprise studio.

We walk over the cobbles to the far end of the building and I unlock the padlock on the wooden double doors. Boot hauls them open and we step into the gloom of the stables. The stalls are all in a line down the left-hand side, with the tack room at the end. The hayloft, where I'm planning to install Justin's studio, is overhead.

"So you could lose these three stalls, and use the space for storing the straw and feed. It'd save you having to winch it up to the loft as well."

Against the far wall of the stable is a ladder leading up to a hatch through which hay can be forked down. I cross over to it and climb up to the loft. There's still a lot of loose straw lying around and the air is heavy with the scent of it. I walk over to the bale-loading door where the winch and pulley are installed, and slide it back. Sunlight streams in, sending the dust motes dancing. I brush the grime from my hands and sneeze twice.

Boot has managed to squeeze himself through the hatch; he steps off the ladder and stands looking around before coming to join me.

"Well, he'd have enough room up here, that's for sure. You've already got electricity and the water supply downstairs, so that's not a problem." He leans out and peers down at the ground. "Put in a flight of stairs and use this for access … he could get a big canvas through here. The winch might come in handy, too, if he's got anything heavy that needs shifting." He squints up at the sky. "Which way's north?"
"Don't know. Why?"

"You want a northern exposure for the most consistent light. If we're looking east now, then you want your windows in that side of the roof." He points to the left-hand slope.

I gaze at him. "Is there any fucking thing you don't know about?"

He shrugs indifferently. "Told you, I've done all sorts. You pick things up."

"I want it finished for when Justin gets his cast off."

He raises his eyebrows. "So you're talking a couple of months?"

"Probably. He doesn't realise it, but his leg's still going to be pretty useless, at least until he builds up the muscle again."

Boot chuckles. "Good luck with telling him that, guv."

Well, it's not like I haven't tried. But Justin has a mental block where his leg's concerned; he has this fixed idea that once the hated cast is removed he'll be frisking around like a spring lamb. I'm already steeling myself for the tantrum he's going to throw when he finds out it isn't true.

Speaking of which, I realise I'd better get back to the house in case the little twat has ignored instructions and tried to take his colour charts and samples upstairs. Just to be on the safe side, I've taken the precaution of locking our bedroom; he is not getting to see the inside until I'm good and ready. Gus' bedroom is, of course, already finished, although I think the one Lindsay used will have to be re-done. Justin and I haven't spoken about it, but I don't think either of us is happy about having any trace of her in our home … and it's not as though she's ever going to get the chance to use it again.

So I close the bale-loading door and lead the way back to the hatch; I climb back down to the stable and dust myself off while I wait for Boot to join me. He follows me out into the sunlit yard and waits while I lock up the stable door. I glance up at him as we follow the paddock fence back towards the house, and voice the question I've been wanting to ask since I first met him.

"So why Boot?"

"What do you mean, guv?"

"Well, I hardly think that's the name you were christened with. And it seems kind of an odd nickname, even for someone built like you."

He shakes his head. "It started when I was at school. Back then, the only things on the telly were Westerns … you know … Rawhide, Bonanza … Gunsmoke."

I nod. "I've seen the re-runs."

"Well, all us kids played Cowboys. We all wanted to be Billy the Kid, or Jesse James, or Wyatt Earp at the Okay Corral."

I frown at him, not getting the allusion. He grins. "It's because of me surname. Hill … see?"

For a moment I don't. Then it hits me. "Boot fucking Hill? You've got to be kidding me!"

"It just sort of stuck. And I've been Boot Hill ever since." He eyes me sardonically as I lean helplessly against a convenient fence post. "It's not that funny."
I'm still shaken by gusts of laughter as I go in search of Justin. I find him eventually in the small … well – *comparatively* small … room at the back of the house, the one we've tentatively earmarked as an office cum study. As I open the door he turns with a welcoming smile, which gets wider as he looks at me.

"Somebody's in a good mood."

I go to him and put my arms around him for a lingering kiss. "No," I correct him. "I'm in a *very* good mood."

His hands go to my hair; then he stops. "What's this?" He holds up a wisp of straw. "You'd better not have been fooling around with the stable boy."

I shake my head. "Haven't got one yet, not unless Boot wants to apply. He seems to have everything else on his résumé." *Boot Hill,* I think, and start chuckling again.

He cocks his head to one side. "You really like him, don't you?"

"He's one of a kind, that's for sure." I keep an arm slung round his shoulders. "So what does your artistic little soul have planned for my den?"

"*Our* den," he corrects, grinning smugly.

TBC
"Here, Sunshine, cut the cake," Deb beams, handing Justin the knife as everybody claps and cheers. Justin eyes the concoction, covered in white frosting and humorously shaped like a leg cast, and manages a smile.

Despite my advice, Deb insisted on throwing the lad a party to celebrate the cast's removal, and the whole family - apart from Lindsay - is attending.

Unfortunately, in reality Justin's every bit as disappointed as I imagined he would be. His excitement and happiness had died the moment the nurse lifted the cast away and he set eyes on his leg … fish-white wasted muscles with a flaky layer of dead, grey skin, with all the supportive ability of a piece of wet string.

He hid it while they fitted a knee brace, and was docile and co-operative while the physiotherapist showed him exercises to build up the muscles. He was silent as he resigned himself to his crutches again and silent as I accompanied him down to the car park. He hardly spoke all the way back to the Loft other than to reply in monosyllabic grunts to my faux-cheerful conversation. Eventually I stopped trying, knowing that the only way was to let the boy work it out on his own.

The first thing he did was to disappear into the shower, refusing my help and pointedly closing the door behind him. When he eventually emerged, damp-haired but fully clothed again, he took refuge on the couch.

"If you don't want to go to this thing, it's fine," I'd told him, sitting down at his side. "I'll call Deb. I'm sure she'll understand."

He'd shaken his head stubbornly. "No, I'm not going to disappoint her. I know she's gone to a lot of trouble for me."

She had. She'd put up balloons and bunting, made enough Lasagne and Rigatoni to feed the whole street, and Justin drew deep on his WASP training and did his best to join in. I think he even managed to fool her.

Right now he's sitting on the couch sharing a slice of his cake with Gus while Emmett regales him with gossip about his latest beaux, so I figure he's safe for a while. Clutching a glass of what I guess is red wine, I stop to trade insults with Theodore, dodge Hunter's attempt to waylay me and eventually manage to catch Mel's eye. When I go out into the back yard she follows me.

I light a cigarette. "So how's it going?"

She smiles. "I guess you could say it's a challenge. But I think I'm getting there."
"What about Lindsay? I hoped she might have come, too."

Her face tightens. "You've got to be fucking kidding, Brian. As far as she's concerned, we're all the enemy. She hardly speaks to me, except when I pick up Gus."

Lindsay moved out of her parents' a couple of weeks ago, into a tiny two-bedroom apartment downtown. It's furnished, albeit sparsely, and close to Macey's so at least she doesn't need a car to get to work. Mel and I take turns ferrying Gus to and from school.

"Christ, Brian," she sighs, "it's so hard. On one level I fucking hate her for what she's done to all of us … but still, she's Linds, you know? She's so bitter, so resentful … sometimes I feel so bad for her, because that's not the Lindsay I know. But then she'll make some snarky comment and I realise she's not sorry at all … like she said, she really believes she's the victim in all this. And then I get pissed at her again. If it weren't for Gus …" She sighs in frustration.

I can't pretend anything she's said is a surprise: Lindsay's sullen hostility seems to have become permanent. "I hoped going to therapy would help."

She cocks an eyebrow. "You don't believe in it, so why the fuck would you think it would help her?"

"Because she does believe in it," I say simply. "Or at least, she always claimed to."

Mel shrugs. "She's got to admit she's got a problem first," she points out. "The trouble is, Linds doesn't. She thinks it's everybody else. She feels she's been railroaded into it." She looks at me with worried eyes. "You know I'm willing to go with her. In fact, I don't really see the point of her going alone … I mean, even if we're not a couple, we're still involved. We have to work out some sort of an amicable relationship for the kids, if not for ourselves. But she won't hear of it."

"How's Gus dealing with it? I mean, I've spoken to him and tried to explain. But this still isn't easy for him."

Mel shakes her head. "He just wants everything to go back the way it was." She swirls the wine round her glass moodily. "Sometimes I wish that too, God help me."

I know how she feels.

Despite my vow to fuck Justin senseless as soon as I could actually bend him again, I end up sitting on the bed with his head on my lap, stroking his hair while his tears trickle down my thigh.

I think perhaps that the couple of glasses of wine Deb had pressed on him have reacted badly with his meds, because the queen out/meltdown/irrational fucking freakout he's having is pretty extreme, even for him.

"You hate me now!" he moans, burying his face.

I stare down at him. "What the fuck are you talking about? Why would I hate you?"

"Because I'm so fucking ugly," he sniffs.

I stifle the urge to laugh. "Quit being a princess. You are not fucking ugly."

"I am! My leg looks like a chicken drumstick that's past its sell-by date … all white, and scraggy, and horrible!"
I look down at the sweat pants he's refused to take off, even in bed. If he doesn't want to even look at his leg, he sure as hell isn't going to let *me* see it.

"Justin." I get my fingers under his chin and try to make him look up at me, but he twists away and buries his face deeper. "For Christ's sake, in a few weeks it'll look normal again. It's not like you had it amputated … and even if you had, do you think that it would make any difference?"

He moves his head vigorously. I think he's nodding.

"Christ …" I rub my hand through my hair. "Okay, listen. Maybe at first it would have mattered … maybe at first it was the way you looked that was important. But not now … we've come further than that, haven't we? I mean, when I had my ball cut out, I thought you wouldn't want me because I wasn't perfect anymore … like that was the only thing you saw in me. But that wasn't true, was it? You didn't care … you wouldn't have even cared if it had been my face that was scarred, would you? So give me some credit here. I'm not going to stop loving you whatever the hell you look like."

"So I'm right! I *am* ugly!"

"You are *not* fucking ugly, Sunshine." Jesus.

"But I'm not *Sunshine* any more! I even changed *that*. And you used to love my hair *sooo* much!"

I resist the urge to beat my head against the wall. "Do you really think I give a flying fuck what colour your hair is? Yeah, I liked it blond better, but black is pretty fucking hot too. Anything is fine, Justin. You can dye it purple for all I care."

He peers up at me dismally. "See!" he wails. "You don't care! You *do* hate me!"

I close my eyes, and wonder how the hell I ever signed up for this relationship crap … except I really don't seem to mind. When he's in a mood like this I know whatever I say is going to be wrong, and once upon a time that would have pissed the hell out of me. Now … it just makes me smile. And Justin would have rather dug his eyeballs out with a spoon than to let me see him cry, for fear of being labelled a silly little faggot. What a fucking amazing thing … I cup his face with my hands, wiping his wet cheeks with my thumbs. "No, I don't. I love you, you little twat."

Besides, his hair's growing out. I can see golden glints at the roots, like the sun peeping out from behind a thundercloud.

TBC
BRIAN

I should have known he wouldn't let it go that easily.

When I walk into the Loft the next evening, I have a horrible sense of déja vu … except that Boot's there instead of Jennifer.

Justin's cooking something involving chicken and tomatoes. I notice immediately that he's a lot more mobile without the cast; he's managing quite easily with just a crutch under his left arm, which leaves his right hand free for the spatula. I'm delighted to see it; I'm not quite so thrilled by the dark-blond fuzz that is all that's left of his hair.

I rub my hand over it and try to smile. "I hope this doesn't mean you're going to start wearing pink."

He turns to face me. "You said you didn't care what I did with it."

Little shit. "Yeah, well I wasn't expecting you to get scalped again."

He glares at me.

I turn to Boot, who's lounging on the couch ignoring us. "I thought you were keeping an eye on him."

Boot raises his eyebrows. "He said he wanted to get a haircut. He's an adult, he can do what he wants."

"Hey," Justin says, approaching me with a grim expression like a twink Long John Silver and waving his spatula menacingly, "if you've got a problem, take it up with me. Boot's not responsible for what I do, so don't you go bullying him!"

I cast an incredulous look at Boot, who hurriedly masks a grin as he stands up. "I think this is where I make a strategic withdrawal, lads," he says. "I'll see you tomorrow, Sunshine, and don't forget … the idea is to regain your muscle tone before you start trying anything strenuous. Don't go running before you can walk."

Justin grimaces. "I'll try, Boot … it's just so fucking frustrating!

Boot lays a massive hand on his shoulder. "I know, mate. But it takes time for the bone to regain its strength, never mind your muscles. So remember … if it starts to hurt, bloody well stop. Pain's a warning. So pay attention!" He chucks Justin lightly under the chin, getting a small grin in return.

When the door slides closed behind him, I turn to Justin. "How come you listen to him and not me?"
He gives me a pitying look. "Because Boot knows stuff."

"And I don't?"

"Oh, you know plenty." He smiles up at me. "But your expertise lies in other fields."

"Luckily for you." I lean in for a kiss, which he returns enthusiastically.

"Mmm," he murmurs. "Does this mean you don't altogether disapprove?"

I study him. The last time I saw him like this, he was younger; now, without the screen of his hair, I can see clearly how his features have matured; his face is more adult, his jaw a little heavier, his cheekbones more delineated. He might still have the skin and the eyes of a teenager, but he's a man now, and it shows. I caress his scalp again, his hair warm velvet beneath my palm. "I'm just concerned about the reasons behind it. You're not going to start packing concealed weapons again, are you?"

He shakes his head. "Come and talk to me."

He turns down the heat under the chicken, puts the spatula in the sink and half walks, half hops to the couch, where he sits down, propping the crutch beside him. "You're getting pretty good with just the one," I say as I join him.

"It's so much easier without the weight of that fucking cast," Justin replies. "And I'm sorry I freaked out yesterday … it was seeing the state my leg was in, and realising how useless it still was. It was just a bit of a shock … anyway, I'm sorry I acted like a girl."

"You're forgiven," I tell him, meaning it. "And when I said I didn't care what you look like … well, that didn't come out the way it should have. Of course I care … I meant the way you look doesn't change who you are, or how I feel about you. That's what I was trying to say."

"I know," he smiles. "But I just got to thinking … Mom never even knew I'd dyed my hair."

Just as well. Jennifer would have thrown a shit fit.

"I just got to feel bad," he goes on, suddenly downcast. "After I found out about you and Dan … after I went back to New York … you know I never saw her again?"

"No. I didn't know that." I reach out and take his hand, and he meshes our fingers together.

"She invited me home for Christmas, but I couldn't face coming back. I just couldn't." He looks up at me sadly. "And then she was dead, and it was too late."

"Christ, Justin." I feel like he's kicked me in the guts … like I'd stolen another precious memory from him, on top of all the others.

He hurry to reassure me. "No, I'm not blaming you. It was my decision to stay away. But when I got back from the hospital yesterday, I was feeling so down … and I was thinking about what you said when I first left, about how it was only time … and I know what you meant then, too … but it doesn't take a second for everything to change, for you to lose something you can't ever get back. And while I was in New York, pretending to be someone I wasn't, I lost my Mom. So when I'd showered, and spent, like half an hour scrubbing that gunge off my leg, I looked at myself in the mirror – really looked, you know? – and I hated what I saw. It wasn't me. I wasn't that person."

"You could have just dyed it back blond." I can't quite keep the regret out of my voice; fuck, I can't
help it if I like his hair long, can I? And just when I was looking forward to really getting to grips with it so-to-speak, once our sex-life had resumed its usual vigour, the little twat shaves it off … again.

He shakes his head. "That would have just been doing the same thing - covering it up. I wanted it gone, Brian; I wanted to draw a line under all this shit and start again, all new and untainted. Like us. So that's what I did."

I nod slowly. "Yeah. I can see how you'd feel like that. And if that was your reasoning, then I'm happy with it." I put my arm round him, tugging him close. "And I know exactly what you mean about time, because I had exactly the same feeling after your Mom's funeral, when you knocked me on my ass. I had the weirdest dream about you … something bad had happened, like the fucking plague or a nuclear war … and everybody was trying to get away. We were at Penn Station, and we got separated. The train left without you, and I knew … I just fucking knew … I'd never see you again. Totally freaked me out. And then I got woken up by the phone ringing, and it was Mount Sinai to say you'd been run over … it was like a fucking premonition, or something."

He's looking at me with a stunned expression. "You are fucking kidding me, aren't you?"

I frown at him "No. Of course not."

He's virtually bouncing in his seat. "Oh my God, that is so amazing! Because I had the same dream about you, after I got back to New York! I remember it now! I was on the platform, watching the train pull out, and you were struggling to get the door open but it was jammed or something … and I had exactly the same feeling, exactly the same, that I'd never see you again! And then I went out and ran into Dylan, and then we had that row! Oh my God, Brian! That's the coolest thing I've ever heard! Wait till I tell Daph!"

Did I say he looked like a man? Twelve years old, more like. Although, I've got to admit it's a pretty strange coincidence. "I think it's probably a common anxiety dream, Sunshine. I'm sure a lot of people have dreams about people they love leaving on a train, or a ship, or a fucking plane for that matter. It just means they're afraid of losing them, of being left behind in some way."

His brows draw down. "What, and two people hundred of miles apart have exactly the same dream just before one of them gets hit by a car and nearly dies?" He shakes his head vehemently. "No fucking way, Brian. It means we're connected … wow!" He smiles dreamily. "We really are soul-mates! I always knew it."

Christ. He'll be appearing on Oprah next.

TBC
CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

I used to have a treasure chest,
Got so heavy that I had to rest.
I let it slip away from me,
Didn't need it anyway, so I let it slip away,
I don't care if the sun don't shine
And the rain comes pouring down on me and mine.
Our kind of love just never seems to grow old;
It's better than silver and gold.
-Silver and Gold – Neil Young

JUSTIN

"Brian, why are we going to the stables? Don't tell me you've bought a fucking horse already." I know I sound grumpy, but it's quite a walk and my leg's beginning to ache. This is our first weekend at Britin, and really all I'm interested in doing is christening the huge tub in the bathroom, perhaps with a glass or two of champagne, and finally getting to see the inside of our bedroom. But Brian apparently has other ideas.

"Come on, Sunshine. It's a beautiful day … a little stroll won't hurt you."

I scowl at him. "As soon as I can stroll, I'll be happy to oblige." Boot's tireless attention during my rehab has paid dividends, although my knee is still stiff and weak. I'm ecstatic to have finally ditched the crutches, but the cane I've graduated to makes me feel old and decrepit. And Brian having to slow his long stride just so I can keep up is simply annoying.

"I promise it'll be worth it." He's grinning at me like a cat that's just eaten a very succulent canary.

"It had better be," I grump, making my way carefully down the dirt road we're following. But the sun's warm on my shoulders, the summer breeze is blowing the scent of cut grass from the paddock beside us, and it's so fucking beautiful it's hard to bitch. And … what the fuck?

"Brian! Look … is that a buzzard?"

Brian follows my pointing finger. "Dunno, Sunshine. It's pretty big, though."
We stand watching the bird making lazy circles above us. "Looking for rabbits, probably," Brian says. "Our rabbits."

"Our buzzard!" I tell him, all my bad-humour evaporating.

He grins at me, takes my hand, and we walk slowly down to the stable yard. Then Brian looks at me expectantly.

"What?" I ask. "What am I supposed to be looking at?" It's nice, and clean, and empty. Definitely no horses looking over the stable doors … nothing at all that I can see.

"Look," he says impatiently, pointing to the near-end of the building where a flight of steps lead up to what I assume is the opening into the loft where the hay bales can be loaded.

I stare at him, puzzled. "The stairs? Why are they there?"

He's grinning again. "Why, indeed?" He leads me over to them. "So that you can get up there, of course." He's already a couple of steps up, tugging me behind him.

"Brian, I am not climbing up there just to look at the fucking view. I can do that anytime."

"Okay, then. I'll just have to carry you." He jumps back down and picks me up, slinging me over his shoulder so that I squeak with surprise. "Alright, alright," I gasp, laughing. "Put me down, already. I'll do it." He sets me back on my feet, smirking. "But you are going to owe me at least ten blow-jobs when we get back to the house. And if I can't walk tomorrow, it'll be your fault."

"You can have a nice long soak later … I'll even throw in a massage, if you're a good boy." He leans down so that his lips are against my ear. "It'll be worth it," he repeats, and then he's leading the way up.

I have to admit that sounds like a deal to me. I follow him slowly, hanging on to the handrail, and he keeps glancing back to check my progress until we reach the small landing at the top. Then he turns and holds out his hand, almost shyly. "Here," he says, and gives me a key.

I realise we're standing by an actual door, so I fit the key into the lock and turn it. Brian grabs the handle and pulls, and the door slides open.

To say I'm speechless is an understatement.

The whole of the loft has been converted into a studio, with huge windows in the roof flooding the space with natural light. Triple banks of six-foot fluorescent bulbs hang from the rafters, a large trestle table dominates the middle of the floor and two massive stainless steel sinks with draining boards are set against the far wall, with cupboards beneath them. There are free-standing adjustable lamps, easels and a couple of stools. I make my way slowly over to a chest of long, shallow drawers and open the top one; it's stocked with trays of brushes and pens, pencils and charcoals. The drawers below are filled with tubes of oil paints and pastels, bottles of ink, turps and linseed oil, sketch pads and rolls of watercolour paper. And a rack standing beside it holds a variety of canvases in different sizes.

I turn to him. "Brian … I'm speechless." I am.

He's leaning against the wall just inside the door, his hands in his pockets, his lips pulled between his teeth. "I know you're going to study graphics now, but I figured you'd always need to paint, too. So when you get inspired, or sad, or pissed with me, you can come out here and get it out of your system." He smiles guilelessly, looking so much like his son it breaks my heart a little. "If it's wrong,
blame Boot. He fitted the place out."

"Fuck, Brian." I can't run yet, but I make a pretty good attempt and he catches me in both arms, pulling me against his chest. "I can't believe you did all this for me! Thank you so much!"

He laughs, and I can hear the relief in his voice. "You're more than welcome, Sunshine," he says. Then he frowns. "Only … who exactly owes whom ten blow jobs?"

"Christ, Justin," he says later, as we're lying in the four-poster (fucking four-poster!) that he swears he bought for my wedding present, "nobody in their right mind lights a fire in fucking June!"

I lie with my head on his chest, watching the flickering shadows. "Nobody in their right mind has a fireplace in their bedroom. Sorry, Mr. Kinney. I'm going to light a fire every night, and I don't care if it's fucking August. We'll just have to leave the windows open."

TBC
"Hi, Momma!" Gus yells, bursting through the door. "Guess what, I had to give the whole class a talk about what it was like in Canada, and I got a gold star! Mrs. Jenkins says I've got a very good vocablery."

"That's nice, Sweetie," Lindsay replies automatically. She's chopping vegetables and she hardly even bothers to turn to acknowledge Gus' presence. "Why don't you go and watch cartoons while I fix dinner?"

"Can I have a drink? I'm very hot."

"You know where it is."

"I got it, Sonny Boy." I retrieve the Arsenal mug Boot gave him from the pile of unwashed plates on the drainer, rinse it out and fill it with juice from the refrigerator. Gus takes it reverently and I grin as I watch him carry it carefully to the lounge. Then I turn to Lindsay. "You could show a little more enthusiasm."

I see her shoulders stiffen. "Don't start, Brian. I've only just walked through the door, okay? I'm sorry if I'm fucking tired."

"I thought you'd be happier now they've offered you full time. More money, at least."

She turns, brittle smile plastered in place. "More money, less time. And you have no fucking idea how hard it is to bring up a kid on your own!"

"Which is why I'd never try to."

She glares and turns back to her vegetables. "How's Justin?"

"Fine." I run the hot faucet to fill the sink with water, add detergent and dump the dirty plates in it to soak. "Boot's taken him swimming. It's a good way to strengthen his muscles without stressing the bone too much."

"Boot certainly spends a lot of time with him. But then, I expect you pay him well for it. Loyalty seems to come with quite a high premium nowadays."

"Boot's not a servant. He's been a good friend to Justin."

"All I'm saying is, it must be such a relief to have the finances to be able to afford someone like him ... you can't deny it would have been a huge strain on you if you'd had to care for Justin alone. Not
all of us are so fortunate."

I think of the thousands of dollars I’d shelled out for Gus’ day-care when she and Mel split up the first time, even though I’d been suspended without pay, and sigh. "You know people would help out. Deb hardly works anymore, and she’s always ecstatic to have the kids. And Michael and Ben have offered to take Gus too, when they have Jenny Rebecca."

"They hate me. Everybody does. They all blame me, thanks to Melanie."

"Lindsay, nobody hates you. As far as everyone else is concerned, you and Mel have had problems for a while, it all came to a head, and you walked. It's not like it hasn't happened before. It doesn't mean you're fucking ostracised."

She doesn't reply.

I try again. "Don't you think Gus notices that you never come to the family dinners anymore? That you never take JR, even when you can? Do you think you're being fair to him?"

"Fair to him!" she yells, turning towards me with blazing eyes, gripping the handle of her knife so tightly that her knuckles are white. I take an involuntary step backwards. "Fair to him? What about what's fucking fair to me?"

I've seen her fury before over the years, but I've never had it directed at me. I try to control my own anger. "In case you've forgotten, the situation you now find yourself in is entirely your own choice. You were the one who left Mel, remember. You were the one who wanted a new life for yourself."

"I didn't want this one!" she shrieks.

"Momma?" Gus' worried voice comes from the doorway. "Why are you yelling at Dadda?"

She rounds on him, white with anger. "I am talking to your father, not you! Go to your room, Gus!"

"But, Momma …"

"Don't you dare answer me back! Now go to your fucking room!"

Gus flees.

I reach Lindsay in two strides and grab her shoulders, heedless of the knife still in her hand, and I've never come closer to hitting a woman in my life. Instead I shake her roughly, and she gasps as my fingers bite into her skin. "Don't you do that! Do not take your frustration out on my son, you fucking bitch!"

I shove her hard away from me, and run after Gus.

He's sobbing on his little bed, hugging his bear; I pull him into my arms. "Gus … Gus, come on, Sonny Boy, it's okay."

He turns his little woebegone tear-soaked face to me. "Why is Momma angry with me? What did I do?"

"Nothing, Sonny Boy. Momma's not angry with you, she's angry with me. And herself."

He sniffs and wriggles his shoulders, wiping his nose on my shirt. I try not to wince.

"Gus?" Lindsay says hesitantly. She comes over to the bed and sits down next to us. "Momma's
sorry, Lambskin. She's just tired … she didn't mean to yell at you."

Gus buries his face in my stomach.

"Come on, Sweetie … you know Momma loves you, don't you?"

He looks at her reluctantly. Then he nods.

Lindsay smiles coaxingly. "Come here, then … come to Momma, baby."

He turns to her, and she hugs him. "Sorry, Bri," she says over his head. Her expression is contrite. "I don't know what got into me … must be the time of the month, I guess."

Right. I stare at her until she drops her gaze and then reach out to stroke Gus' hair. "You okay, Sonny Boy?"

He nods, and gives me a watery smile.

Poor little kid. He's caught up in a situation he can't understand, and the best I can do is to try to stop him being scarred by it. I have such vivid memories of my own childhood, lying sleepless in bed while my parents screamed obscenities at each other, and I am not going to expose Gus to that misery, no matter how justified. Somehow I have to make Lindsay see things the same way. I lean down and kiss the top of his head. "Gus, I've got to go and pick up Justin now, but you know you can call if you need me. In fact, I'm going to give you your very own cell phone, so you can talk to me anytime, day or night. Would you like that?"

His eyes widen. "Wow, really? My own cell? That'd be so cool!"

"And I swear if anything's wrong, I'll be right over… all you have to do is say the word. I want you to promise me, Gus. Okay?"

"I promise, Dadda."

I smile reassuringly at him, but I can't hold the expression when I look at Lindsay. "I'll talk to you later," I tell her.

I intend to. But I need to speak to someone else first.

TBC
I have a friend I've never seen
He hides his head inside a dream,
Somebody should go round and see if he can come out,
Try to lose the down that he's found;
But only love can break your heart
Try to be sure right from the start
Yes, only love can break your heart –
What if your world should fall apart?

- Only Love Can Break Your Heart – Neil Young

BRIAN

"You know, you could always ring and make an appointment like normal people," Alex complains, taking the seat opposite me. "Consultations in public bars are extremely unprofessional, not to mention distracting." He smiles at a well-muscled blond who's blatantly cruising him.

"But then I'd have to pay your regular exorbitant fee," I point out.

"Instead of just picking up the bar tab," he grins. "So; are you afraid for Gus’ safety?"

"Do you think I'd be sitting here if I were?" I shake my head. "I don't doubt that Lindsay would rather have her teeth pulled with pliers than physically harm Gus. But she doesn't seem to realise there are other ways of injuring him. I thought that once we'd called her on all her shit, she'd hold her hands up and get on with things … I mean, she's always been so capable, so together, so organised. Now she doesn't seem to deal with anything, not her job, not her life … her place is a tip, she's yelling and swearing in front of Gus, and even when she's making the right noises she doesn't seem to be interested, not really. And she seems to be getting angrier, more resentful. She still hasn't even admitted she was ever in the wrong at all."

Alex takes a sip of his beer and purses his lips thoughtfully. "It's perfectly possible she doesn't think she was."

"Oh, come on! Mel and I confronted her together. She knows what she did."

"If only the mind were so straightforward." He leans forward. "Tell me, Brian, what are you hoping
to learn from this little chat?"

"I want to understand why! Why, after all these years of thinking I knew her, thinking I could trust her … thinking she was my friend … why did that change? Was she just playing me for an idiot? And why isn't the fucking therapy helping her?"

"Brian, you virtually blackmailed her into going. Of course she resents it … of course she's not being receptive. And since she won't allow Melanie to go with her, we have no idea how honest she's actually being."

"Do you think she's lying to him?"

"How would I know?" He rubs his hand through his silver hair. "Christ, Brian, you're asking me to analyse someone I've never even spoken to! It's not likely to be an accurate profile, is it?"

"I'm just asking for your opinion, that's all. I need to try and fix this, for Gus' sake."

He glares at me. "Brian, your friends are not cars and I am not a mechanic!"

"I'm not an idiot! You know what I mean." I lay both hands on the table, palms up. "Please, Doc. Give me some pointers here, I'm floundering."

He sighs. "You're incorrigible, you know that? God knows how Justin's put up with you for so long."

I put my tongue in my cheek. "Can I help it if I'm irresistible?"

He chuckles. "If you weren't, you'd be paying for my words of wisdom like any other patient. Okay … you tell me that Lindsay's delusional about you. She's become convinced that the two of you are destined to be together, and she's been doing everything she can to engineer that happy event. She, on the other hand, denies everything except the fact that she believes that Gus would benefit from being reared by both his natural parents. How is that delusional?"

I stare at him. "Are you insane? Because I'm fucking gay! Because I don't and never will love her that way! It would be a travesty of a relationship … how would living a lie be of any benefit to Gus at all?"

He props his elbows on the table and meshes his fingers together, resting his chin on them and watching me intently. "Obviously it wouldn't be. But you want me to try to get inside Lindsay's head, right? And I'm sorry, but from her point of view she's a special case, and always has been."

"How?" I demand. "I slept with her once, in college. Fifteen years ago. Other than the fact that we have Gus, which may I point out was entirely her idea, I treat her exactly the same as any other of my friends."

He studies me calmly. "When you first met Lindsay, did you know she was a lesbian?"

"Fuck no, I thought she was straight. She always liked to be the centre of attention, and she always flirted with guys … she still does. No, I was surprised when she told me. After all, I'm equipped with gaydar, not a dyke detector."

He laughs. "Did she think you were hitting on her?"

"Lindsay knew right from the start I was gay," I protest. "Fuck, we were just friends … I liked the way she stood up for herself back then, how she loved to buck the system. She kind of took Mikey's
place for a while … we used to hang out and get stoned and talk politics … typical student shit. And then one night we went to this party and got completely trashed … Christ, I can still remember the shock of waking up next to a naked woman. I don't recall anything about the deed itself, though. Thank fuck."

"So I'm right to think she's the only woman you've ever slept with?"

"I've never even been tempted."

He sits back. "In other words, she managed to do what no other woman has ever been able to do … get the most committed gay man on the planet to have sex with her. That's some achievement."

I glare at him. "I told you, we were wasted. It doesn't count."

"And if that wasn't enough," Alex continues imperturbably, "she managed to convince you to father a child with her: you, who didn't believe in love, marriage, commitment or parenthood. Is it surprising she saw herself as holding a very special place in your life? That she might have always harboured the belief that you found her attractive in a way you did no other woman and that, given time, that attraction might grow to the point where you could admit it?"

"I know she always had a thing about me. But it was never sexual … I mean, she was never jealous of any of the guys I fucked … she always seemed to find it amusing. And however they've ended up, Lindsay was happy with Mel for nearly ten years. She's a dyke, for fuck's sake."

Alex grimaces. "It's just a label. Gay, lesbian, straight … there are no absolutes, Brian; just people. Sure, the majority are 100 % heterosexual and they've never felt the slightest attraction to members of their own sex. Equally, many gays and lesbians have been certain of their sexual orientation since adolescence. But there are all kinds in between … bisexuals who are equally attracted by either gender, or who will stay mostly within a hetero relationship but who will indulge in a homosexual fling if the opportunity presents itself. And of course there are a huge number of men who manage to maintain a conventional relationship as husbands and fathers even though their primary orientation is homosexual, and who hide their true desires through fear of society's disapproval."

"Lindsay was going to do something similar a few years ago, when she and Mel first split up," I tell him. "Some French asshole who didn't want to be deported. Lindsay agreed to marry him so he could stay in the country … they'd even booked the fucking church. It cost me my parental rights to stop her."

Alex gapes at me, and I grin to see his professional suavity so rattled. "Don't worry, the guy was queer."

"Oh, well, that's alright then," he says weakly. "My God, Brian, if I wrote a thesis on you and your relationships I could redefine the boundaries of psychological research!"

"You're so funny."

"Well, I guess that's a pretty good example of Lindsay's ability to remove herself from reality, if she believed any good could possibly come from such an arrangement."

"Yeah, well, that's what I told you. She always has made fucked-up decisions, but she never admits it. Like that Billy Joel song … and she never gives in, she just changes her mind. I never tried to understand it … I figured it was a woman thing. After all, I don't know many … only Deb and my mom, and I hardly think they're typical."

"Are you sure they weren't physically involved?"
I shrug. "He was definitely gay. But then, he was also French. So who knows? They seemed pretty
cosy with each other."

"And yet she dropped him the moment you made a concession. So much for her altruism." He takes
a thoughtful swallow of beer. "I'm afraid that no matter what your motives, you gave her another
example of how much you were prepared to sacrifice for her … just to stop her marrying someone
else."

"But it wasn't to stop her marrying someone else … it was just to stop her marrying him!"

"She probably didn't see it that way."

"Justin said the same thing." Smart little fucker. I sigh. "So you're saying she's bi?"

"Even if we give her the benefit of the doubt about your French friend, she's had three male partners
that we know of. Perhaps you, as the first, could be put down to curiosity, or normal adolescent
experimentation. But the two affairs she's had as an adult can't be looked on in the same way. These
appear to have been intense, physically satisfying relationships."

I ignore the implied sleight to my hetero sexual technique. "Then why the fuck didn't she say so?
Why hide it all these years?"

He shrugs. "Bisexuals have more problems than any other group when it comes to acceptance, both
by their peers and society, because they belong to neither the straight nor the gay world. Both sides
tend to despise them as being morally and sexually suspect, as though they simply lack the strength
of character to make their minds up one way or the other. Either that or they tend to be seen as too
promiscuous to care what gender their sexual partner is." He cocks his head to one side. "Just as a
matter of interest, how did Melanie react when she found Lindsay had been fucked by a man?"

"With total outrage," I reply. "I think she could have stood an affair with another woman … after all,
she's guilty of that herself. But a man? To Mel, that was the ultimate betrayal."

"A perfect illustration of the point I was making." Alex shakes his head. "But don't assume that
Lindsay recognised she was bisexual … that she was lying to you and Melanie. That's not
necessarily the case, particularly given her ability to confuse fantasy with reality. When she was
young, the same-sex attraction was strongest; after all, that's normal with all children, whatever their
sexual orientation. As she became sexually active, her preference stayed the same. She enjoyed
being a lesbian and she enjoyed the notoriety it gave her. And then she met you, Handsome Prince. You
probably weren't the first male she found physically attractive, but you were evidently the first male
she slept with and the first person she fell in love with. But after your drunken liaision you didn't
wake up and say 'Wow, Linds, I've seen the light! Let's get married!' … you were shocked, even
horrified. Think what a blow that must have been to her self-esteem; the man she'd lost her heart and
her virginity to, reacting with disgust to her naked body!"

I try to think back to that morning fifteen years ago, when I'd woken with a mother of a hang-over to
find Lindsay squashed up against me in my narrow dorm bed, and the dawning realisation of what
we'd done – the mute latex proof of which still lay where I'd tossed it. Shocked? Fucking aghast
more like, and I guess I hadn't been that tactful about it. But then, Lindsay had been pretty rattled too
… or I'd thought she was.

"So she accepted your version of the event," Alex continues, "a stupid drunken fuck that shouldn't
have happened, and she buried how she really felt. Easier for you, easier for her pride; it was a way
to keep your friendship without embarrassing either of you. She was a lesbian, you were gay, but
that didn't mean you couldn't still love each other … as friends, of course. She went on with her life,
settling down, getting a career, nesting. Consciously or not, she was living the way she would if she 
had been living with you … being the sort of wife she assumed you would approve of. Even rearing 
your child. It didn't matter that she was doing all these things with Melanie; her primary attention was 
always on you, and she was secure in the uniqueness of her position. And she sublimated her 
feelings for you into those of a sister and friend."

I grimace. "I always thought she was one of the most well-balanced, contented people I knew."

"She had no reason not to be. She was living in a bubble … she had your son, your guaranteed role 
in her life, your support, your love. She had her little fantasy about the two of you; she was probably 
as happy as she's ever going to be. She'd achieved almost everything she'd ever wanted, and as long 
as nothing threatened her she was content. But something happened to turn that secret dream into a 
full-blown obsession … something that made her take actual steps towards bringing it into reality."

"Mel says it was Sam Auerbach."

His eyebrows go up. "The artist?"

"The very same. Linds was organising his exhibition … he was the first guy to fuck her since I did. 
Very hot and steamy, by all accounts. Mel says it turned her straight."

Alex looks irritated. "Brian, Lindsay did not have one night of hot sex with a man and wake up a 
'real' women. That's the sort of simplistic thinking straight people indulge in. Sam Auerbach might 
have fully wakened her latent desire for you, but he certainly didn't create it. Her sexuality isn't the 
issue here, except as an added complication. Lindsay being bisexual isn't the problem; her inability to 
distinguish fantasy from reality is."

"Well, if it wasn't Sam, what the fuck was it?" I demand.

"Jealousy, of course. The strongest of all passions."

I sigh. I knew it, really. "Of Justin."

"Yes. Your relationship with Michael never threatened her at all, because it was never physical. 
Conversely, she didn't mind your tricking because there were no emotions involved. But Justin … he 
was a different matter. She may have been able to deny her jealousy at first … she may have been 
able to persuade herself that she was happy for you, as a good friend should be. But when you 
finally proposed to him … when you were going to marry him … then she had to face the fact that 
you loved him in a way you didn't love her; a way you didn't even love Gus. She would have had to 
admit she'd been wrong all those years; that her perfect world in the heart of Brian Kinney's universe 
was about to disintegrate. And … she couldn't do it." He shrugs. "So she projected her emotions and 
impulses onto you. You claimed to be gay, but you'd had sex with her. You swore never to have a 
child, but you fathered Gus for her. You loved him, not for his sake, but because she was the mother. 
You were prepared to give up your parental rights to stop her marrying another man, because you 
were jealous. You were with Justin because he reminded you of her. You were going to marry him 
because you couldn't marry her. You let him go because she wanted you to. In Lindsay's world you 
are as obsessed by her as she is by you, and all she has to do is to make you realise that fact. So to 
her all her actions are justified, because her aim is to fulfil you as well as herself. To make you 
whole."

"Christ." I can't believe I've known her so long and never seen any of it. Lindsay had just always 
been there … supportive, loyal, encouraging. I feel sick. "Then why is she being such a bitch to 
Gus? None of this is his fault."
Alex looks at me steadily. "Maybe she thinks it is. If he was her trump card, as it were, and he failed her? What then? After all, now she's having to raise him alone... not a scenario she'd ever envisaged. And Lindsay obviously doesn't react well when she's forced to face the truth. I'm sorry to say that you and Mel confronting her probably wasn't the best way of handling things." He frowns. "I wish you'd spoken to me first. I'm afraid that finally pushing her into a reality she wasn't equipped to face might simply have made her retreat further from it."

"So it is all my fault," I groan. "I fucking knew it."

He's silent for a moment, considering. "Let me ask you a question. Brian, I don't doubt that you love your son. You are obviously concerned for his welfare, and you are willing to do anything within your power to make this situation as painless as possible for him. But may I ask why you agreed to become a father in the first place?"

Once, a lifetime ago, I would have given him some sarcastic quip about the sudden dim intimation of my own mortality and my subconscious need to leap into the gene pool before it was too late. But Alex has earned my respect over the years and I don't bullshit him anymore. I guess I would even class him as a friend.

"Because Lindsay kept on about it. And I was arrogant enough to want a mini-me in the world ... just to fuck off the rest of them. Plus, I was fucking stoned."

Alex looks me straight in the eye. "You could hardly have had worse reasons, ... you know that, don't you?"

I glare at him. "I wouldn't change anything, even if I could. I got Gus out of it."

"But if you hadn't?" he persists. "What if you hadn't connected to your son? What if you'd simply walked away as you'd intended and felt nothing? You'd have just dumped a child into the world and left him to get on with it. Basically what your father did to you. Except you wouldn't have even bothered to stick around."

"Fuck you!" I slam my bottle on to the tabletop. "How did this end up being about me?"

"Because it is ... you and Lindsay." He lays a soothing hand on my arm. "Brian, you asked me whether this was your fault. It's not your fault, but that's not to say there's not some responsibility. You made an ill-considered, selfish, immature decision when you agreed to father a child with her ... and it's only dumb luck that things didn't turn out a lot worse than they have for Gus, and for you."

I think of the asshole I was in those days, and picture how my life would have turned out if Gus hadn't been part of it. "And Justin," I say softly. "I don't believe in fate, but it was kind of a strange coincidence that my two best influences both turned up on the same night."

"If I believed in fate I wouldn't be a psychologist," Alex grins, "because in that case nothing we did would make any difference. What I'm trying to say is that even though you made a poor initial decision it had good consequences as well as bad ... but that is the same for every choice we make, good or bad, every day of our lives. The only thing you can do is try to foresee those outcomes, weigh them, and go for the best option. The decisions you've taken over the years have resulted in Lindsay believing that you find her sexually attractive, that you fathered a child for her, that you loved that child for her, that you gave up your parental rights for her. But you're not responsible for the delusion that has led her to interpret your actions in that simplistic way."

"Then what the fuck is?"
"That's the million-dollar question, and I can't answer it. You describe Lindsay as a conflicted personality … that she's a passionate feminist, but she wants to be conventional housewife and mother. She derides middle-class values, but she craves the comfort and stability they provide. She rebels against her parents but she wants their love and acceptance. Even as a lesbian, she chose a partner who, if male, they would have undoubtedly approved of … assertive, career-driven, ambitious." He pauses, evidently struck by an idea. "You said she accused you of using Justin as a male substitute for her … but has it occurred to you that the same thing could be said of Melanie? That she's a female Brian Kinney?"

It hadn't. The concept's too horrible to think about. And there's no way I'm sharing that insight with Mel.

"But that in itself isn't unusual," Alex goes on, seemingly oblivious to my expression. "Most of us are paradoxes in many ways … the self-image we have of ourselves is often in direct conflict with subconscious behaviour and attitudes that were absorbed during childhood. Most of us can recognise this, and work out a balance. Lindsay doesn't seem to be able to do so. She tries to obey all her impulses, without distinguishing which are realistic and which are impossible. Why that is … I couldn't begin to make a conjecture." He shrugs a little and spreads his hands. "Of course, I'm basing all this on your perceptions. I could be talking complete bullshit."

I glare at him. "Fuck you, you quack! I need to know whether my son's being raised by a bitch, or a psycho!"

Alex smiles thinly. "I think the reality probably lies somewhere in between."

"Then what the fuck do I do?"

"Wait. Watch. Be vigilant for Gus. Give them both all the moral support you can. Try to reign in that sarcastic tongue of yours. But never allow her the slightest opportunity to mistake what you say or do … never be ambiguous. Make sure she is never in doubt that your loyalty lies with Justin, and your future is with him, not you."

"But she'll get better, right?"

"I wish I could reassure you of that." Alex sighs. "Unfortunately, I can't. Not if she's unwilling to ask for help."

Fuck.

TBC
CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Come to me now and rest your head for just five minutes,
Everything is good.

Such a cosy room, the windows are illuminated
By the evening sunshine through them,

Fiery gems for you, only for you.

Our house is a very, very, very fine house,
With two cats in the yard. Life used to be so hard,

Now everything is easy cos of you.

- Our House – Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young

(Okay – I know that's cheating but I couldn't resist!)

JUSTIN

"Will-yum Blake, painter, poet, and killer of white men!" Boot intones, peering over my shoulder at the canvas I'm working on.

I turn my head so quickly I crick my neck. "Oh my God! You've seen Dead Man! I didn't think anyone else in the world had, except Daph and me!"

"And me and my sister," Boot says. "She's had the hots for Johnny Depp ever since Edward Scissorhands. I got her Dead Man a couple of Christmases ago. Not exactly your regular Western, but I liked it."

"Me too." I turn back to my canvass, where I've roughed out the outlines in charcoal of the central figures from Blake's interpretation of God and Adam … except Adam's blond, and God bears an unmistakable resemblance to Brian Kinney.

Boot studies the sketch for a moment. "Is that how you see him … as God?"

"Once," I reply, smiling self-consciously, remembering the conversation I'd had with Daph after my first night with Brian. "When I was young and stupid I believed he was the font of everything … knowledge, inspiration, even life. Now I realise it cuts both ways, and I've given him just as much as he's given me."
I know that some people … maybe even most people … would find the concept of two naked queers posing as a sacred Christian image distasteful, even blasphemous. But to me it's all about the electricity arcing between their outstretched fingers … the vital life force that connects them. As a representation of the relationship between Brian and myself, I can't think of a better one.

"Talking of gifts," Boot says, looking down at me, "are you still digging your heels in over the car?"

I put down my charcoal and wipe my blackened fingers on the rag tucked into my cargo pocket. "Yeah, I am."

"Your leg's not giving you too much gyp, is it? I know it's still stiff, but I'd have thought you could manage the pedals."

"No, the leg's fine. It's not that."

"Well, the guv's just being practical. He doesn't want you having to rely on him to get around, or on me either. You're starting college now, and if you're going to be living out here you're going to need your own transport. That's just a fact of life, Sunshine."

"I know, but we're not living here yet," I object. "Only some weekends and the holidays, of course. And then Brian's here too."

"Still, it'd make financial sense, wouldn't it?" Boot persists. "He needs a second car for the nipper, so why not buy one instead of shelling out for the rental? Unless he's planning on selling the Corvette."

I laugh. "He'd rather lose a kidney. And I know you're right, we do need another car. I just don't want him buying me one."

Boot chuckles. "I may not have known the guv for long, but it seems to me money doesn't mean a lot to him. You'd probably know better than anyone what he's worth … and as far as he's concerned, what's his is yours. You need a car, he wants to buy you one. What's the problem?"

"You don't understand, Boot." I walk over to the door and stand looking out over the paddock. The trees beyond are already beginning to turn and I can't wait to see them in their fall colours; I'm already planning a piece depicting their transition through the seasons. "I've always been dependant on him … I've always been this helpless little twink who couldn't get by without his help. This time I want it to be different: we're supposed to be partners, equals. I'm living off him as it is. And believe it or not, I don't want to be a kept man."

Boot studies me gravely. "Good for you, my son. And I'm sure the guv understands that too. So why don't you just let him loan you the money?"

"Because I already have a loan from him, for my P.I.F.A tuition fees," I reply. "Besides, if I let Brian get involved he'll end up buying me some $30,000 piece of shit that only he can work out how to drive." I smile at him. "I need something practical, reliable and cheap. Something I can afford to buy myself … if only I had some money."

Boot looks thoughtful. "What about that comic of yours? Rage? Don't you get royalties?"

"Yeah. But not much … we only made three issues. After I moved to New York … well, we just gave it up."

"Then maybe you should think about issue number four," Boot suggests. "After all, if you're planning to release it as a game you need to keep pushing it, right? Keep the punters interested."
BRIAN

"What's this?" I lean over Justin's shoulder as he kneels at the coffee table, sheets of drawing paper strewn across the surface. "Rage?"

"Yeah." He looks up at me and grins. "I called Michael today … we tossed a few ideas around. We're going to bring out another issue."

"Really?" I'm surprised, but I can't say I'm unhappy about the prospect. Any signs of Justin's returning creativity is fine by me. I drop a kiss on his ear and go to fix myself a drink. "What made you change your mind?" I ask as I flop onto the couch.

"Boot said if I was planning to bring it out as a game then I should keep it in the public eye. Keep people talking about it."

"Boot is right," I grunt. He usually is.

Justin goes back to his sketching. "Besides, I thought I could use the proceeds to buy a car," he says casually.

"Uh-huh." I take a swallow of my drink and study him. "Come here."

He stands up, rubbing his right knee a little as he does. I know it still gets stiff if he keeps in the same position for too long, although he doesn't complain about it. He walks over and then crawls across the length of the couch to me, the way he used to in our bed at the Loft, the way that still makes him look twelve years old. I put down my Beam on the floor and let him crawl into my lap. He lays his head on my shoulder and curls his knees up. I hold him tight.

"You really want to buy your own, don't you?"

He gazes up at me and nods seriously. "It's important to me, Brian. It's not that I don't appreciate your offer, and I don't want to make a big thing about it. It's just I need to do this for myself."

How many times have I heard those words from him? And I understand, I really do. Stubborn little twat. It's one of the things I like best about him.

"Okay. On one condition."

His grin of delight disappears. "What?" he asks suspiciously.

"Just that I get it checked out first. I mean, if my son's going to be riding around in it I need to make sure it isn't a death-trap."

He pouts. "I'm not an idiot, Brian."

"I know that. But you also know jack-shit about cars."

Despite his frown, I can see that he's surprised and pleased to have won so easily. He hasn't figured out yet that I really can't deny him anything anymore. "Okay," he says at last, trying to sound reluctant. "It's a deal, I guess."
I laugh and hug him tighter, feeling his body relax against me. The early evening sunshine is streaming through the windows, and even though it's only the beginning of September there's a slight chill in the air. I hope Justin doesn't notice … the little shit has cost me a fortune in logs already and it isn't even autumn yet.

"Back to college tomorrow … you looking forward to it?"

"Of course. I mean, it's been wonderful spending every day with you, at the Loft and here. But I've been out of action for so long … I'm really ready to start working again." He slides his right hand under my shirt, stroking my chest lightly. His touch still makes me quiver. "I can't believe they accepted me so easily. Or that they were willing to take my P.I.F.A. credits into account."

I can. The boy had been offered a place at Dartmouth, for fuck's sake. Plus Ben had written him a glowing reference.

"It'll be a whole new start for you … new people, too." I refuse to let myself think of the last time Justin started college and of one new person he'd met in particular.

He reads my mind, as always. "It's different now," he says. His fingers continue to trace lazy circles around my nipple, distracting me from what I want to say.

Because it's so easy to just sit here with him like this, not thinking of anything or doing anything, not even really making out. Just to simply hold him, feeling his heart beating against my chest, his warm breath against my neck. And suddenly I feel an overwhelming desire for him; not just for his body, although that's always there, but the desire for his company, his friendship, his mind. I want him so badly I can taste it and my own heart speeds up in response. Because this is everything I had dreamed life with Justin could be like, if I could only pluck up the courage to take his hand and leap off the cliff with him, to trust that the fall wouldn't kill us both.

And now I have to say it. And it's scaring the shit out of me.

"Justin?"

"Mmmh?"

I run my fingers through his hair. It's nearly long enough now to twine round them.

"When you were in hospital … you had blood tests, right? Screening and stuff?"

"Mmh."

"And they all came back clear?"

"Yeah."

"Have you had your regular test since?"

He shakes his head, looking up at me curiously. "I didn't think there was a reason too … after all, it's not like I've been able to do anything for the past few months."

I hold his gaze. "Well, I think it might be a good idea if you had one."

He comes awake suddenly and sits up, wide-eyed. "Don't you dare tell me you've got fucking syphilis again!"

"What?" I'm thrown by his question for a moment. "Syphilis … no, of course I haven't. Jesus,
He looks at me suspiciously. "Then why do you want me to get tested?"

"Because I've just had my latest results, and they're negative." I swallow hard. Fuck, I don't know if I want to be doing this, but I press on regardless. "So I'm clear. Because there hasn't been anyone else but you since Dan. And that's, what? Seven months?"

It had come as quite a shock to me, that realisation. At first I guess it was understandable … after all, I'd cut down on tricking after Justin had left for New York, and I'd never quite regained the same taste for it. Then I'd been occupied by Justin's injury and the shit with Lindsay, and getting Britin habitable. Between all that and running Kinnetic and Babylon I hadn't really had an opportunity. And now that I have the time to look around … I find I don't want to. All I ever want to do now is to get home so I can bury my dick in Justin's ass.

He looks at me with a kind of wonder, his roaming hand stilled. "What? You haven't tricked at all?"

I shake my head. "Not once," I tell him softly. "So I figured, if I can last this long, why not go for the whole deal? We'd save shitloads on condoms."

For a moment he looks puzzled; then understanding dawns. His voice goes up a couple of octaves. "Do it raw? You said never, Brian," he reminds me as if I needed it. "You told me we'd never do it. That's one lesson I learned very well!"

I roll my eyes at his tone. "Jesus, do you think I didn't want to? Do you think I'd never thought about it before?" I shake him gently. "I thought about it that first night, knowing you were a virgin … Christ! How fucking hot would that have been," I growl, bending my neck to suck his lips between mine. "It was never about what I wanted, Justin; it was only ever about keeping you safe."

"So why now?" he whispers.

I pull back so I can look into his eyes. "Because I don't want there ever to be regrets. We've had enough warnings about how fragile all this really is … if someday one of us finally runs out of luck, I don't want to be left knowing that I'd denied us something we both wanted so badly, just because I couldn't keep my dick in my pants."

He blinks a little. I refrain from mentioning allergies. "Wow," he breathes. "I think that might be the most romantic thing you've ever said to me. But still … Brian Kinney monogamous? How does that work?"

"Brian Kinney at thirty-five?" I grin back. "How does that work?"

He's silent, considering me. I let him.

"I don't want you to decide now. You've had a helluva year and you need to get your bearings now your life's getting back to normal. Go to college, make some friends, take some time. Think it over. Think about how you'll feel if we commit to this thing and then one day I come home and tell you that we're gonna have to use condoms again for six months because I fucked up. Because I can't promise you I won't … just that I don't want to."

His eyes are inscrutable. "Maybe it'll be me who fucks up. After all, I always have before."

"If you do, then we'll fix it and survive. That's what we do, Sunshine. We survive." I smile at him because it's true. I've said the words and the sky hasn't fallen. We've leapt off the cliff and we haven't smashed into a million pieces on the rocks.
We've survived.

TBC
"Happy Thanksgiving, everyone!" Deb trumpets, following Carl as he comes in carrying the huge golden turkey adorned with curly rolls of crisp bacon. We all clap and cheer. I say 'all', but the table's not as crowded as it used to be. Ted and Blake are spending the holiday with Blake's parents, and Drew has taken Emmett to a formal Ironmen function. I don't know whether to be hopeful for them or not. I know Em's got a special place in his heart for Drew Boyd and I'm happy to see that they're maintaining contact, but Drew has been out for such a short time that it's too early to say if things will work between them. I just don't want Em getting hurt again.

Of course the most glaring and painful absentee for me is my Mom. After she and Deb had become friends and allies, Mom (and once Molly) had always attended Deb's family Thanksgiving and her absence only confirms the realisation that she'll never see one again. I'd rung Molly from the Loft earlier and although we'd shed a few tears together, we'd laughed a little too, which I guess is a good thing. Brian pretended not to notice but he's been quietly attentive since. I came close to tears again with Debbie's welcome-hug and whispered so glad you're here, Sunshine, but Brian was hovering and she must have taken note of his forbidding expression because she didn't belabour the point.

So there's just the Novotny-Brukners and Peterson-Marcus's plus assorted offspring, biological and adopted. Plus of course Boot, who's doing his bit as a space-filler by taking up one end of the table all by himself.

I was both anxious and pleased to find out Lindsay was joining us; pleased both because it's the first time she's accepted a family invitation and it wouldn't have been the same for Gus without her presence, and also because it might be sign that she's finally coming around. Anxious, because I wasn't sure how the tension between she and Mel might manifest itself. Or the tension between Lindsay and myself, for that matter.

But it hasn't been too bad. Our greeting was friendly, if restrained; and all the rest of the family was at pains to make her feel comfortable and included. She's less demonstrative than she used to be and certainly doesn't talk as much, but I guess that's to be expected. Thankfully she and Mel seem to have negotiated a truce … even if their conversation so far has consisted solely of 'Melanie, would you pass the potatoes, please?' and 'Of course, Lindsay.' At least they managed to smile while they said it.

"So, Brian," Hunter grins, as we all tuck in. "How's life down at the ranch?"

Brian chews a piece of gravy-free turkey and wipes his lips fastidiously with a napkin before replying. "So, Hunter, how's life in the straight world?"

Hunter pokes out his tongue and we all laugh. He might have a steady girlfriend now but he's never got over his early crush on Brian. I remember all the little digs he used to give trying to make me
jealous, and it really used to piss him off that I'd never bite. But come on, he's so not Brian's type it's ludicrous. The only one who could never see it was Hunter himself.

"When are we getting an invite?" Deb demands. "I know you two wanted your little honeymoon but, come on, boys. Enough is enough."

"Deb, they didn't get married, remember?" Mel points out.

"Well, no … I do know that, Melanie … but I meant that after the rotten year they've both had, especially Sunshine, they just deserved a little time alone to adjust. That's what I meant." Deb beams at us.

"Technically, you're wrong," Brian remarks casually.

Debbie stares at him. "I am?"

"Not about the needing time alone bit. About the marriage bit."

Now they're all staring - well, all except for Boot who, not realising the magnitude of Brian's words, keeps eating his dinner. "Can somebody pass the cranberry?" he asks. Deb does so without taking her eyes off Brian. Everybody else is frozen, me included.

"I had all the papers for a civil partnership drawn up before the marriage," Brian explains smoothly. "And since we've now signed them, we're about as tied to each other as any married couple."

"Man, you are so fucked!" Hunter doesn't know whether to look disgusted or impressed. I'm just … stunned.

"When?" Deb demands.

Brian shrugs off-handily. "Six months ago, I guess."

Debbie lets out a shriek like a locomotive.

"Congratulations, you two," Ben beams, standing up to reach over and shake hands with us. To my surprise Michael's right behind him, and even though he complains, "Why the fuck didn't you tell me?" he's smiling and his handshake is genuine.

"Okay, okay, settle down," Brian growls, warning off Deb with a glare before she descends and smothers us. "We didn't tell anyone because it wasn't anybody's business. There wasn't any ceremony, so there wasn't any need for witnesses or bridesmaids or fucking celebrations. There still isn't," he tells her pointedly.

Debbie's sitting with a proud, tearful smile, her hands clasped against her ample bosom. "You boys…" she wipes her cheek. "I knew you'd make it eventually. I just fucking knew!" She glances guiltily at Gus. "Whoops … I meant friggin', Sweetie. I friggin' knew."

Mel laughs and lifts her wineglass. "Then I would like to propose a toast." She stands. "To Brian and Justin, without whom this world would be a friggin' more boring place. May you always live in interesting times!"

The whole table rises. Lindsay pauses to make sure Gus has a glass of orange to drink from before standing too. She's the only one who hasn't congratulated us but she has a smile on her face. Maybe I'm just imagining that it doesn't quite reach her eyes.
"To Brian and Justin!"

"To Dada and Juss!" Gus adds solemnly, and I bury my face in my hands with embarrassment. I can't even look at Brian.

Unfortunately he doesn't seem to have finished.

"As to your subtle request for visiting rights," he says once they've all retaken their seats, "I was thinking of Christmas Eve."

"Chr … Christmas?" Debbie stammers. "You're inviting the family for Christmas?"

"Fuck no," Brian smirks. "Christmas Eve, I said. Buffet and drinks; I'll hire cars, so nobody has an excuse not to enjoy themselves." He gives me side-ways look. "And no reason to stay overnight."

There's stunned silence, then everyone begins talking at once. I tune out the racket and lean close to him. "Who are you and what have you done with my non-defined, non-conditional, significant other?"

He scowls at me but his eyes are twinkling. "What's the matter, Brat? I can do Christmas … I just never wanted to."

"And you do now?"

He leans his forehead against mine. "Told you Sunshine. No more regrets," he whispers. "We'll even get a tree."

And despite Mom, despite Lindsay, despite Dan and New York, despite this whole horrible year, I suddenly think we're going to make it. Not like thinking we will because I want us to, or thinking we will because some weird fate decreed it that way. Just thinking … we can make it, and knowing it's true.

So I grab his face and kiss him, and I don't give a fuck who's watching.

TBC
BRIAN

After dinner I duck out for a smoke, callously leaving Justin to deal with the fall-out from my little announcement. I snicker, thinking about how pissed he's going to be about that I sprang the surprise on him as well as the family and didn't give him a chance to prepare his defences.

Well, always keep them on the hop. I wouldn't want to start boring the lad.

The door creaks behind me and I turn to see Lindsay, her collar turned up against the cold and her hands snugged into her armpits. I smile. I'm genuinely pleased that she's made the effort to come.

"Congratulations," she says softly, her breath pluming in the frozen air.

I shrug. "They're not required. Nothing's changed, except we've made sure that people like Joan and Craig can't fuck things up if anything happens to one of us." I offer her the cigarette, which she accepts, taking a shallow breath of smoke in the quick, prissy way she has which I've always found vaguely irritating. I mean, if you're going to smoke, at least act like you're enjoying it.

She hands it back. "I wish you'd told me."

I raise my eyebrows. "Why? It doesn't affect you."

"It affects Gus," she says quietly.

I shake my head. "Not at all. Gus is secure, the way he always was. Even more so, since I've made Justin executor of his trust fund."

Her head jerks up. "And you didn't think that would be of interest to me?"

"Lindsay, you've always known I had a trust fund set up for Gus. You never bothered before who was executor."

She shrugs her shoulders. "I always assumed it would be Mel or myself."

"Then you assumed wrong. Up until Justin and I signed the civil partnership papers, it was Theodore."

Her mouth falls open. "After what he did to us? Brian, you can't have trusted him like that!"

I pinch out my cigarette and toss the butt into Deb's flowerbed. "I trust him with my business finances," I remind her. "Ted's the best man with numbers I know. And we're all allowed one fuck-up, Linds."
She bites her lip. I walk up to her. "Justin would die for Gus," I tell her, "of that I have no doubt whatsoever. If anything happened to me, he would watch out for Gus to the very best of his ability. You know that too."

"For your sake!" she says, and she can't quite disguise the bitterness in her voice.

"No, because he loves Gus. The fact that he loves me too is only an added bonus."

She's silent. Standing this close I can see the sheen of tears in her eyes and, try as I might, I can't totally suppress the urge to comfort her. But I remind myself of Alex's warning, and stuff my hands resolutely into my pockets instead. "How's it going, Linds?" I ask quietly. "Really?"

She looks up at me and smiles tightly. "Better, I guess. Charles has prescribed me Prozac and it seems to be helping. At least things don't seem to be getting on top of me so much."

I try to hide my scowl. Charles Warren is Lindsay's chosen psychoanalyst. All I know about the guy is that he's published a couple of books, which of course makes him the voice of God as far as she's concerned. When I asked Alex about him, he'd replied that Warren was very successful and highly thought of in certain circles. Judging from the curl of his lip when he spoke, Alex didn't include himself in that category.

"You don't want to be drinking on that shit."

"One glass of wine, Brian," she huffs. "That's not going to hurt me."

I refrain from pointing out that it must be a magically self-filling glass, because I haven't seen it empty yet.

"Are you comfortable seeing this guy? I mean, if you feel like he's not helping … you could always try someone else…"

"No, no, Charles is wonderful," she replies with the first genuine enthusiasm I've heard from her. "He has such depths of understanding … such insight. He says I have self-esteem issues because of my parents' attitude to my sexuality and because of the way they always favoured Lynette. He says I compensated by trying to appear ultra confident and capable but that actually I'm very insecure and self-critical. Charles is trying to make me focus on the positive aspects of my life, and to make me realise that I'm not a bad person. He says if I want people to like me, I have to learn to like myself first."

"Oh. Well, I'm sure that's good." Actually I think it sounds like clichéd horse shit; low self-esteem has never been something I've associated with Lindsay. I try to focus on something positive myself. "I'm glad you seem to be getting on better with Mel."

"I know. I'm sorry. I guess I don't have much of a sense of humour nowadays. That's another thing I need to work on."

I step past her towards the door. "You know, I thought at least you would be happy for me. Whatever's gone wrong between us, I always thought you were my friend."

She looks down at her feet. "Of course I'm happy for you, Brian. I'm glad you finally made your
I press my lips together. "There never was a choice, Lindsay. That's what I've been trying to tell you."

She shrugs a little. "Just a figment of speech, Brian. You know what I mean."

"Whatever." I push the door open, then pause to look back at her. "I expect to see Gus on Christmas Eve ... Justin and I would like you to be there as well. You're still family, Linds."

She smiles. "Wouldn't miss it for the world, Bri."

TBC
I pull on my gloves as I leave the warmth of Carnegie Mellon and make my way carefully down the steps to the street. Snow flakes are sifting down, melting into wet sludge on the sidewalk, and I'm in a hurry to get back to the Loft even though Brian won't be home for a couple of hours yet. I smile to myself at the ease with which I can think of that word now – *home*. For the first time since I left my parents I feel that I finally have one, without having to worry about how long it will last or how long I'll be welcome.

I'm not stupid. I know our life together hasn't been miraculously converted into a paragon of domestic bliss, nor do I expect or want it to be. I love my Big Bad Brian, warts and all: the difference now is that I think Brian understands this; he certainly hasn't shown any recurrence of the dreaded Stepford Fag Syndrome. I think that honestly, I'm the one who's changed most … I've learned a lot over the last year. I used to take everything so personally … a sign of my insecurity, I guess. I used to see myself as being the cause of all Brian's bad moods; now, if he comes home scowling and silent I know that it's because he's had a shit day at work, not because he resents my presence. All I have to do is keep out of his space until he's had a drink and a shower and has calmed down a little, and nine times out of ten he'll open up and tell me what the problem is, and we'll tackle it together. It's such a difference from his old attitude, that his business was his alone and everyone else could just keep the fuck out. He's trying so hard to be more open and communicative, which I know is still difficult for him, and it proves more than anything else he does just how much he wants our relationship to work.

I head towards the bus stop, because although my leg is pretty much okay now, the cold weather makes it ache and I don't fancy walking back to the Loft. I'm thinking about Christmas and how much I'm looking forward to it, and whether Dad will let Molly come over for the party, and I really don't notice her until I nearly walk into her.

Lindsay.

"Justin!" She sounds as if I'm the person she most wants to see in the world. "I was hoping to catch you … I didn't know what time you finished classes, so I've been hanging around just in case." She shivers. "Can we go and grab a coffee? I'm freezing!"

I study her. She's smiling warmly; dressed in black ski pants and a cream parka, she actually looks more like the Lindsay I used to know, before she got so fucking weird.

That doesn't mean I actually want to go for a coffee with her, though. "Uh … I was going to catch the bus. Brian said he might be home early." So it's a lie. Shoot me.

Her smile doesn't falter. "Oh, I won't keep you long. In fact, I'll give you a lift back … if you don't think my little Honda is too much of a comedown." She giggles as she takes my arm and before I
know it I'm being steered down the street. "How's college?"

"Great." It is. It's completely different to P.I.F.A.; much as I'd enjoyed my time there, I'd always felt a little intimidated by the rarefied atmosphere and the po-faced attitude of most of the professors. It had always reminded me a little too much of St. James' for comfort. But the computer animation course at Carnegie Mellon is so laid back and relaxed, yet challenging too, and I'm loving every minute. I'm even thinking of taking a secondary course in Business Studies, which may come in handy if I ever think about setting up on my own.

How Dad would laugh.

Lindsay clings to my arm as she walks beside me, chattering inconsequentially, and I do my best to concentrate. Despite the fact that she's acting so fucking normal I feel like I've been kidnapped somehow, and I'm annoyed with myself that I'm still letting her manipulate me. Then I'm annoyed for being annoyed, like I'm a silly little faggot who can't look out for himself. I remind myself that I'm an adult, and I don't have anything to be worried about.

We go into the nearest Starbucks and Lindsay orders two lattes and two jelly do-nuts, despite my protests. "Oh, come on, Justin. We've been so busy with the Christmas rush, I haven't had time for a break since lunch, and I'm starving. And don't even try to tell me you're not!"

I follow her to a table by the window and slide into the seat opposite. She undoes her parka and smiles. "Isn't this nice … just like old times!"

I smile back, although I can't help but feel old times weren't anything like this. In the old times I trusted and admired Lindsay, and looked on her as a mentor and councillor. Now I know differently, and the more she behaves like that old Lindsay the more uneasy I feel.

She seems to sense my disquiet because she suddenly becomes serious. "Justin … I think I owe you an apology."

I take a sip of my latte. "I think you do, too," I answer honestly.

She nods contritely. "I shouldn't have interfered … Brian was right about that. Your art is your own business … but honestly, Justin, I really wanted you to make the most of your opportunities, despite what Brian thinks. You're the most talented artist I've ever met … and well, I guess a little part of me wanted you to succeed the way I never could. I suppose I was selfish. I wanted to be the one to discover the new Andy Warhol!"

I hold her gaze. "That isn't who I am. And you don't have the right to make my choices for me."

"I know that now. I've discussed it with Charles, and he says I have to stop trying to live vicariously through others … that I have to make my own future, with my own goals. I think he's right, don't you?"

"Yes. As long as that future isn't Brian."

Her eyes flicker just for a second. "Of course not. I know that was all just silly day dreams … I guess all the business with the bombing, and Michael nearly dying, and losing Dusty … I guess it was just too much to deal with. I think we were all acting a little strange back then." She laughs, a little nervously, and takes a hurried bite out of her do-nut.

This is the trouble with Lindsay. Everything she says always sounds so reasonable, so plausible … because yes, we all acted out of character after that trauma … Ben, Emmett, Mel, Ted, Brian. And me, of course. I know better than anybody how PTSD can alter someone's emotions and behaviour.
So why should Lindsay be any different? Why shouldn't I grant her the benefit of the doubt? Once, I would have, without hesitation.

"Is this the only reason you wanted to speak to me, to apologise? Because it really isn't necessary."

She wipes sugar off her lips with her napkin and gives me a little smile. "I'm sorry. I forgot how perceptive you are."

"Please. I don't need your flattery, Lindsay. I'm not a kid any more. If you have something to say, say it."

She straightens up and clasps her hands on the table. "I wanted to ask you a favour."

"Shoot."

She fiddles with her napkin. "Charles thinks it would be good for me to get back into my art again, for therapy. He feels it would be a good to work out my problems by expressing them … that I would benefit from letting my emotions out."

"I agree." After the bashing, much of my anger and frustration came from my inability to release my emotions in the only way I knew, through creating. Like I'd told Brian after the bombing, as long as I could make something – anything - then it meant the bad guys hadn't won.

"So I'd really like to start painting again … only, my place is so small. And I don't make enough to rent somewhere, and I don't want to share a place because I'm not confident enough for a stranger to see my work …"

Oh God, I know where she's going with this. She sees the expression on my face and hurries on: "I know you don't owe me anything, and I probably have no right to ask, but Gus mentioned your studio at Britin and I just wondered … while you and Brian aren't there, of course … if I could use it sometimes?"

And I have no idea what to say.

TBC
CHAPTER FORTY

I got to bet that your old man
Became fascinated with his own plan
Turned you loose, your mother too,
There wasn't a thing that you could do.
But I got faith in you,
It's a razor love that cuts clean through.

*Razor Love – Neil Young*

BRIAN

"Brian, just listen."

He's perched nervously on the edge of the couch, and I glare at him as I pace backwards and forwards across the Loft. I'm too fucking pissed to stand still. "No Justin. I'm not listening. There is no way Lindsay is getting a foot back in the door at Britin."

"I haven't said yes, Brian. I told her I'd have to talk to you."

"But you want to say yes."

He sighs. "No, Brian, I don't. But I think perhaps we should say yes. That's what we need to talk about."

"We are talking. And I'm saying no."

"Hey, you're the one who keeps going on about how we all need to stay friendly. And you're the one who said we wanted her at the party."

"Christ …" I pinch the bridge of my nose. Hard. "That's different … that's just one evening. Letting her use the studio … that's more permanent." I know what I mean; there's all the difference in the world between a one-off invitation and an arrangement that might go on … and on …

Justin's got that earnest look on his face, the one that makes me either smile at him or fuck him. Usually both. "She is permanent, Brian, because of Gus. What are you really going to do, say that your son is welcome in our home anytime he likes but not his mother? How are you going to explain that to him?"
I go and sit next to him. "I don't know. But I don't like the idea of her having access to Britin."

"And you think I do?" he demands. "I don't trust her anymore than you do, and I certainly don't feel comfortable around her. But what if we're wrong, Brian?" He lays his hand on my knee. "What if she really is trying, and being able to paint again helps her, the way it helped me?"

"Then I'll rent her a fucking studio!"

"Yes. Okay, that's an option. But it's not solving the problem, Brian. Throwing money at it won't make it go away!"

"Justin …" I don't see his point. "Lindsay needs a studio … I rent her a studio … how is that not a solution?"

"Because it isn't the studio that's the problem!"

I stare at him. "Have you been raiding my stash again?" I ask, genuinely curious.

"No! Look … okay." He rubs his hand distractedly through his hair. "If it were any other friend of ours … say Emmett. Say Emmett asked me if he could use my studio while we weren't at Britin, would that be a problem?"

"No, of course not. It's your studio, you can let anyone you want use it."

"Then how can I say no to Lindsay? What reason do I give? Because if she is still a friend as we say she is, then we're obliged to give her all the support we can."

I shake my head. "We don't owe her anything, Sunshine."

"That's what Lindsay said. And maybe you're right, the harm she's done does cancel out all good she did before. But that's beside the point, isn't it? Either she's a friend, in which case we have to help her. Or she isn't a friend, and all this harping on about playing Happy Families for Gus' sake is just cant. We have to decide which she is, Brian, because she can't be both. It isn't fair."

When I suggested he should grow some balls, that day at Vanguard when I fired his ass for having had a better artistic eye than my own, I'm amazed that my tongue didn't cleave to the roof of my mouth with the sheer effrontery of the statement. There is no doubt that Justin is the ballsiest little fucker I've ever met. He sees the truth behind the lies and the innuendoes, behind the masks and the evasions, and he champions it with all the passion of his honest, ardent heart, never counting the cost to himself. His father, Hobbs, St. fucking James Academy, Henry Bellweather, the board of P.I.F.A., gay-bashers, Stockwell. He's gone toe-to-toe with all of them since he was fucking seventeen, and I have no doubt at all he'll still be doing it when he's ninety.

I only hope I'll be able to keep up with him.

My mind goes back to Alex saying that the only thing anyone can do when faced with a dilemma is to try to foresee the outcomes of each choice, weigh them, and go for the best option. Our choices here? We can keep Lindsay at arm's length; sure, it's the safest thing for Justin and myself, but if she is genuinely trying to climb out of the hole she dug herself then we run the risk of permanently alienating both her and Gus. On the other hand, if we take her at face value and let down our guard, we risk a sucker punch when we're least expecting it. Of course, our position is much stronger than it was a year ago; then it was easy for Lindsay to drive a wedge between us because we – or rather I – didn't think she was capable of deceit.

I know differently now.
I put my arm around his shoulders. "Okay, Sunshine, I understand where you're coming from and, believe it or not, I agree. Let her use the studio. But only while we're in Pittsburgh, and she never gets access to the house. Because, much as I want to trust her, I don't. And you shouldn't, either."

He looks at me with his blue, blue eyes and smiles. "I trust us, Brian. And if you do too, then she can't hurt us, can she? Nobody can."

Did I say balls? The world doesn't know the half of it.

TBC
"So why can't Rage and Zephyr rescue JT from Siren's evil clutches?" Michael asks.

"Because their relationship isn't the same as it was at first." I look up from the storyboard I've been working on. "JT's not some helpless little twink anymore, always needing Rage to come swooping down to save him. They're married now ... they're partners ... equals."

"So who's this Siren?" Ben enquires, coming in with JR in his arms.

"She's a kind of witch," I reply, "beautiful, but evil. She has this amazing voice that makes you believe anything she tells you, so you lose all sense of reality."

"Ah." Ben sits down at the table beside Michael and setting JR in his lap. "Like the Sirens from the Odyssey?"

"Yeah, just like that. She's secretly in love with Rage, but her voice won't work on him because he can block it out with a jamming device Zephyr designed. So she goes after JT instead and persuades him that Rage is neglecting his super-hero obligations and it's all JT's fault. So JT leaves Gayopolis to start a new life alone."

"We could always let JT develop some super-powers of his own," Michael suggests. "Rage could sort of impregnate him with some of his abilities. Or maybe he could meet a kind of mentor ... some kind of Obi-Wan-Kenobe character who teaches him how to meditate or something ... so he could see through Siren's illusions."

"Mm. Maybe."

"Juss?" Gus is sitting beside me, making his own drawings on a sheet of paper. They mainly consist of little stick-men dressed in red and white, kicking a football around with big smiles on their faces. "Why don't Rage and JT have a baby?"

We all stare at him. "Um ... because they're both men, Gus," I explain. "You need a man and a woman to have a baby."

Gus gives me a look so much like his father does that I nearly choke. "I know that ... duh ... but they could find a lady to have their baby, like Dadda did. And then if the lady was married to another lady, then the baby could have two Mommies and two Daddies like me."

I realise my mouth is open, and shut it hurriedly. "Well ..." I look helplessly at Michael and Ben, who are both pop-eyed at the statement. "I'm not really your Dad, Gus."
"Nooo… I know that … like I know Mommie isn't my mommie the same way Momma is. I came out of Momma, not her … like JR came out of Mommie. But she loves me anyway, and I love her. And Dadda loves you, and so do I. And you love me. So that makes you my Daddy too, doesn't it?"

Michael gives me a get out of that one, smartass grin. I have no idea how Brian would react to such an idea, let alone Lindsay. I swallow hard, and then turn to look down at the confiding brown eyes. "Gus, I'm proud that you think of me as another Dad. And knowing that you love me makes me very happy, because I love you, too. And I'll always be here for you, however old you get. But I don't think I'm old enough to be called 'Dad' yet … I'd much rather you went on calling me 'Juss', the way you always have. Nobody else calls me that, so it's kind of special."

"Okay." He grins at me. "I'm glad I gave you a name, because you gave me mine. Dadda told me Mommie was going to call me Abraham, " - he scrunches his face up comically - "but you liked Gus better." He leans over and hugs me. "You can be my Juss." He scribbles some more. "But why can't Rage and JT have a baby?"

"Well," Ben replies, leaping heroically into the breach, "protecting the world from all the bad guys is a full-time job. And so is bringing up a child. I guess it wouldn't really be practical for Rage to be a father yet. Not until he's done with being a super-hero." I give him a thank you smile.

Fortunately Gus seems happy with that explanation. "That's why I can't live with Dadda, because he's so busy all the time. It wouldn't be practical." He nods agreement. "But I get to stay with him when he's not working, for holidays and things. Then he has time to look after me. He's promised me a pony when I get older!" He glances at his sister. "I expect he'll get JR one too, if she wants. Or she can ride mine … as long as she isn't a pest."

"I'm sure she will be, Gus," I laugh. "I've got a little sister too, and she's a real pest. Her name's Molly, but I call her Mollusc sometimes, just to bug her."

"That's a funny name … why did you call her that?"

"It means things like slugs and snails … or clams. Slimy things with shells."

He giggles. "Your sister's like a slug? That's so gross!"

I ruffle his hair. "Of course she isn't. But that's how brothers and sisters tease each other … it doesn't mean they don't love each other too."

We're interrupted by the doorbell ringing. "That'll be Linds," Ben says, getting up to answer it. He opens the front door and Lindsay hurries in. "Oh, Ben, I'm sorry I'm running late," she gasps. "The others were going for a Christmas drink and they wouldn't take no for an answer!"

"Hi, Linds." He kisses her cheek. "Everything's fine … we've fed Gus, so you don't have to worry."

"Oh, thank you." She comes over, pulling off her gloves, smiling at Michael and me. She's a little flushed, and her eyes are a little too bright, and I wonder fleetingly how much she's had to drink. But then I realise she's driving, so she must be okay. She'd never be reckless enough to endanger Gus. "Hi, Sweetie!" She leans down and kisses him on the head. "Watcha drawing?"

"The Arsenal," Gus answers, and I grin at the stress he puts on the article. He's taken Boot's lessons very much to heart. "Juss is drawing too. I thought he should make Rage and JT have a baby, so it could grow up with two Daddies like me. But that wouldn't be practical."

Lindsay seems to freeze for a second, while I cringe inwardly. "You only have one Daddy, Gus."

There's an awkward silence. "Gus knows that, Linds …" I say hurriedly.

"Why?" Gus interrupts me, looking up at her curiously. "I have two Mommies, so why can't I have two Daddies?"

"Well, Mommie isn't your mother in the same way I am. You really have only one mother and one father, Gus," Lindsay lectures him.

"I do too have two Daddies!" Gus' bottom lip juts defiantly. "Dadda and Juss live together like you and Mommie used to. So how come Mommie can be my mommie but Juss can't be my Daddy?"

"There's more to being a parent than just living together," Lindsay replies, and her voice has a chill I've never heard before. "Your Mommie and I are married … we raised you together. She's been part of your life every day since you were born, and Justin … hasn't."

"He has," Gus insists, his voice beginning to quiver. "And Juss loves me, so he is my other Daddy, even if he wants me to keep calling him Juss because he's not old enough to be called Daddy!"

Lindsay looks furious. "I don't have time to stand here arguing with you, Gus," she snaps. She grabs his arm and hauls him to his feet. "Go and get your coat and scarf, right now."

She gives him a push, hard enough to make him stumble a little. Michael, Ben and I avoid each other's eyes uncomfortably, and I think it's a relief for everybody when JR, picking up on the tension, starts whining fretfully. We all start trying to hush her while Lindsay stands tapping her foot angrily until Gus comes back with his things. She bundles him roughly into his coat, winding his scarf around his neck, and then takes a secure grip on his arm. "Now come on. Say thank you to Uncle Michael and Uncle Ben for taking care of you."

"Thank you," Gus repeats, his voice subdued and reluctant. But he turns to me and throws his free arm round my neck, kissing my cheek fiercely. "Bye, Juss. I love you!" he says clearly, and despite my discomfort with the whole situation I can't help but feel a little thrill of pleasure at his defiance; his refusal to be bullied into denying what he believes, and defending someone he loves, even from his own mother.

His father would be proud.

TBC
"Okay, Sonny Boy. I'll speak to you again soon. Don't forget, we're here if you need us."

"Kay, Dadda." He yawns sleepily. "Give Juss a kiss for me."

I put the phone down and turn to Justin, who's watching me worriedly. "He's fine."

"You sure? Because Lindsay was, you know, kind of freaked."

"You said she'd been drinking?"

Justin shrugs. "She said she'd had a drink. And she didn't act drunk, otherwise I'd never have let her take Gus. But she seemed so strung out ... like she was barely hanging on."

"She's been like that for a while. She's supposed to be taking Prozac, but it doesn't seem to be doing a lot of fucking good."

"Maybe she's not taking it." He looks down at his lap, worrying his lip with his teeth. "I'm sorry, Brian."

I stare at him. "What the fuck for?"

"For making things worse," he sighs.

I take his chin in my fingers, making him look at me. "Self-flagellation is my prerogative, not yours. It's not your fault that Gus loves you."

"Yeah, but I could have deflected him somehow. I just didn't expect him to come out with that in front of Lindsay."

"Gus didn't do anything wrong, either. He was making a perfectly valid point. It's Lindsay's problem if she can't deal with it."

"Which makes it our problem, too." He flops back on the couch despairingly. "Christ, this is so fucked."

"Sunshine, you can't keep fretting about what Lindsay's going to do, or what Lindsay's feeling. We can't live our lives tip-toeing around her, and we're not going to. You were the one who said as long as we trust each other then she can't hurt us, weren't you? So stop worrying."

"Brian, you don't have to remind me that it was me who persuaded you to let her use the studio."
"And has she?"

"She says not. But I'm not so sure … when we were down there last weekend I just got the feeling that she'd been there … like things had been moved a little, that it wasn't quite the way I'd left it." He sighs again. "Probably just my imagination."

"The whole point of her using the studio is for her to paint there, so I'm sure you'd have noticed if she had. Maybe she's just thought better of it." I can hope.

"The way she was looking at me today, I don't think she ever wants to see me again."

I lay my arm along the back of the couch, threading my fingers through his hair. "She'll get over it. She'll have to."

He gazes at me with worried eyes. "Maybe I should keep a lower profile for a while."

I shake my head. "Not gonna happen. I don't give a rat's ass whether we see Lindsay or not, but Gus needs all the reassurance he can get right now, and he's made it perfectly clear how he feels about you. He missed you like fuck when you were in New York, and I'm not having you drop out of his life again just to please Lindsay."

He smiles a little at that. "Did he really miss me?"

"Yep. Little fucker kept going on and on about where you were and when you were coming back."

He takes my hand in his, twining our fingers together. "You know, he really took me by surprise with all that father stuff. Not that it wasn't nice to hear … I'd just never realised he thought of me that way. I figured he probably saw me as some kind of older brother or something."

"Would you rather he did? I thought you had a secret longing to be a father."

"I've thought about it, sure. But there's too much I want to do, too much I want both of us to do. I suppose it's different for straight guys; I guess they don't really get a say a lot of the time. They just come home one day and their wife or girlfriend says, "Hey Honey, guess what? I'm having a baby!" How many of them would actually choose to be a father, I wouldn't like to judge. But we're different … it has to be a conscious choice, and we have our whole lives to make that decision. Maybe I never will. Maybe there'll always be too many other things I want to do. Maybe I'll never be mature enough to take on a child. I just didn't want to have that option arbitrarily closed to me, that's all."

I remember what I'd told Alex about my motives for fathering Gus, and it seems to me that Justin is more than mature enough. But I can't deny there's a little part of me that's hugely relieved he won't be getting broody anytime soon … because if he were, and he'd laid that on me as a condition for his staying, I might have had no other option than to give in to him. And I really don't want to think about that scenario, because there's a helluva lot I intend to do with him, too.

"What about you?" he asks, tracing idle patterns over the back of my hand. "Do you mind … Gus thinking about me that way?"

"What, am I jealous or something?" I chuckle. "No, Sunshine, I don't mind. I'm pleased my son seems to have inherited my taste, and that you have this irresistible attraction where Kinney men are concerned."

He wiggles happily and for a moment he's that seventeen-year old boy again, the one for whom the most insignificant compliment from me could make light up like a beacon. Then his face falls again. "I wish Lindsay felt the same way."
"Sunshine, it's Christmas break in a few days. Then we'll be at Britin, and she'll be out of our hair. Aside from the party, I'm not planning on seeing anyone for three weeks."

"Really?" He gives me a seductive little glance from under his lashes. "You'll be sooo bored … however will you cope?"

He gasps with surprise as I grab his shoulders and fall back on the couch, hauling him down on top of me, my right hand sliding under the waistband of his cargoes until it reaches the firm swell of his ass.

"I suppose I'll just have to suffer," I whisper, squeezing it hard enough to make him gasp again. "And by the way, Gus told me to give you a kiss."

So I do what my son asked, like any good father. Only it sure as hell isn't the kind of kiss he'd intended.

With any luck, we'll have the worst winter in history and get snowed in for two months.

TBC
"Hey, Brian." Lindsay's voice echoes from the answering machine, "It's Linds. I thought you and Justin were going to the house today, but I rang and there was no answer, so I thought I'd try…"

I push back my chair and cross to the phone and pick it up. "Yeah, Linds, I'm here," I say, flopping down on the couch.

"Oh!" She sounds surprised. "Oh, hi. Hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Just working. I could do with a break, actually." I lean forward to grab my cigarettes and Zippo from the coffee table, and light up, holding the phone against my ear with my shoulder.

She laughs. "I thought you were supposed to be on holiday?"

"I am," I say bitterly, sitting back with the ashtray on my knee. "Unfortunately no-one informed the latest strain of winter flu virus. Half the staff has gone down with it."

"It's the same at Macey's. Everybody's doing double-shifts." She pauses. "Does this mean you're cancelling Christmas?"

"Does it fuck. Nope, I told Theodore by hell or high water I'm out of the door by lunchtime tomorrow, and then I'll go join Justin."

"Isn't he with you?"

"No, he broke up a couple of days ago, and he wanted to get down to the studio … something he needs to work on urgently, apparently." I grin to myself. I'm pretty sure it's my Christmas present. "Boot took him down in the truck."

"But he didn't answer the phone …"

"I spoke to him earlier and he said he was going to be working. He's probably forgotten what time it is." At least he's got a distraction. The night before last was the first night we hadn't slept together since Justin came back to Pittsburgh, and I was totally unprepared for how bereft I felt. I'd left half a dozen messages with variations on take your fucking cell with you, twat, that's the whole reason for having one!, cursing myself each time for being a pathetic cock-whipped faggot. He'd eventually rung me back abjectly apologetic at one thirty a.m., and I'd been nearly pissed enough to refuse the incredibly hot make-up phone sex he subsequently forced on me. "So why did you want to talk to me, Linds?"

"Um … just to confirm that both Gus and I will be coming at Christmas … if the offer still stands."
"Why wouldn't it?"

She sounds a little nervous. "I thought Justin …"

"Might have been pissed and persuaded me to withdraw our invitation?" I finish for her.

She gives a short, high laugh. "Something like that. I don't think I was very … gracious the last time I saw him."

"You got that right," I tell her bluntly. "Well, you don't have to worry, you're still on the guest list." I put down the ashtray and head for the drinks cart. "Justin isn't pissed, he's worried. He doesn't want bad feeling between you any more than I do. And in case you were wondering, he was as uncomfortable as you were … because he knew you'd be upset."

"I wasn't upset," she protests. "I was just a little surprised … I didn't know Gus felt that way about Justin."

"It was every bit as much of a revelation to him, believe me." I pour myself a shot of Beam and take it back to the couch.

"And how do you feel about it?" she asks hesitantly.

"Personally, Lindsay, I'm delighted that Gus looks on Justin as a father. If and when my past debauchery catches up with me and I croak, I'll feel a lot better knowing Gus has someone he can trust in his life."

There's a long silence. "Meaning he can't trust me?" She's trying to sound like she's joking but she's not making it.

"No…" I squeeze my eyes shut. Fuck. I take a long swallow of Beam. "No, I didn't mean that … I meant a man he can trust."

She sighs. "Oh, Brian, I know what you meant. I'm sorry, I just have this really bad migraine and I was sick this morning, too. I hope I haven't picked up the virus."

"How's Gus?" I ask quickly.

"Oh, he seems fine. It's his school Christmas Party tomorrow, so he was bouncing off the walls before I finally got him to bed. I think that's where the migraine may have come from."

"Well, if you're sick, take tomorrow off. Everybody else in the fucking world is."

"That might not be a bad idea." She sounds thoughtful. "I could drop Gus off for his party and then go back to bed for a few hours … God knows, I could do with a rest. Things have been insane at work this week."

"There you go then. And if you don't feel up to taking Gus, ring me and I'll arrange something."

"Oh, I'm sure I can manage. If not, I'll let you know." She's quiet for a moment, then says softly, "Thank you, Brian."

"What for?"

"For being … kind," she answers simply. There's another pause. "Brian?"

"Yeah?"
"You know I only wanted what was best for you, don't you Peter?"

I force myself to ignore the lost, wistful tone of her voice. "I'm not Peter any more, Linds. And you're not Wendy. We grew up."

She makes a small sound that might be a laugh or might be a sob.

"Justin's not going away," I tell her. "Not for you, not even for Gus. So if you want to still play a part in our family, you have to accept him. There's no other way, Linds. You and Mikey, you're my oldest friends … I'm never going to deny how much I owe both of you. And I'm well aware that I interfered way too much in your lives because I was a selfish asshole, and I needed you both too much to really let you go. But Justin … he's the real deal, Linds. I'll tell you the same thing I told Mikey: don't make me choose because, believe it or not, I do love you and I like having you in my life."

"I know." Her voice is a whisper. "And I love you too. Just promise, whatever happens, you won't forget that."

"I promise," I tell her.

TBC
CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

JUSTIN

"Have you finished my present yet?"

"Brian!" I flop onto my back. "It's supposed to be a surprise!"

He chuckles. "Right. Like there's any other reason you'd be buried in your studio until the wee hours."

"I could be working on something else! My creative urges aren't exclusively limited to you, you know!"

"Uh huh. So have you finished it?"

I sigh. "Almost. It just needs a few touches." I'd begun my Blake painting almost on a whim, but as it developed I'd begun to realise that it actually had potential. It was the first time I'd tried to paint figures in detail instead of the broad abstracts I'd favoured since the bashing, and I wasn't sure my fine motor skills were up to it. It had certainly been a challenge, both physically and emotionally, and in the beginning I couldn't work for long before my hand cramped, which is why it's taken so much fucking time to complete. But I've persevered and, since the piece has turned out much better than I thought it would, I've decided to get it finished as a Christmas present for Brian. A few more hours work and it will be done; then all I need is to find a frame for it. I'm hoping that Brian will see it for what it is: not just as a representation of the two of us, but as a statement about the future … that it doesn't have to be defined by the past.

"Don't wear yourself out," Brian says softly, as though he's read my mind. "I have plans for tonight, and I don't want you falling asleep on me."

I grin at the sultry tone of his voice. "Why, Mr. Kinney. Are you saying you've missed me?"

"Why, Mr. Taylor. Are you saying you haven't?"

I hug Brian's pillow and pull the duvet tighter, pretending it's his body I'm wrapped around. "So when do you think you'll get here?"

"I've just got to go in this morning to wrap up a couple of things, then Theodore can take care of the rest. I'm planning to be at Britin some time after lunch."

I roll over, squinting out of the window at the dull, leaden sky. "Don't leave it too late. The weather forecast said there was going to be really heavy snow later. I don't fancy being snowed in by myself over Christmas. I might starve to death."
He snorts. "Not likely. You must have enough nutriment stored in your ass alone to last you into New Year."

"My ass is not a camel's hump," I point out. Then I sit upright, ignoring the chill in the air and glaring at the phone. "Are you saying I have a fat ass?" I demand, outraged.

"Let's call it generous," he replies judiciously.

"Generous? Fucking generous?" I can hear my voice rising. "Let's call it fucking fat!"

"Justin," his voice is beginning to shake with laughter. "Justin. Stop queening. You know that your ass is without doubt the hottest, tightest ass I have ever had the pleasure to know, and fuck, I've known a few. I will always maintain that, from a plethora of outstanding features, your ass stands out most of all."

"Meaning it's fat!" I lean back on the pillows, beginning to giggle.

"Twat."

"Whatever." I start to shiver, so I lie back down and pull the duvet up to my chin. "Anyway. Don't risk it. Promise."

"Never fear, Sunshine, I'll get to you. I promise."

"Make sure you bring something interesting for dinner," I tell him.

"Only if you promise to supply the dessert."

"Deal," I smile.

"I'll expect a warm welcome, then."

"I'll get the logs in."

"Just don't set the house on fire before I get there," he laughs.

"Brian. I am an adult. I can be trusted with matches."

"Uh huh. Like the way you singed your eyebrows when you thought it would be a good idea to get the logs to catch by squirting lighter fuel on them?"

"Shut up." I brush my fingers over my eyebrows; most of the crispy bits have snapped off now. "I won't do it again."

"Uh huh."

"Stop saying Uh huh."

"I'll see you later."

"Later," I reply. I wait until I hear him hang up and then lean over to check the clock on the nightstand. Only eight.

I put down the phone and snuggle deeper into the bed.

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BRIAN
"Mel? What the fuck's wrong?"

"Brian, I'm at Allegheny General!" She's breathing hard. "It's Gus!"

I sit bolt upright, my hand clutching the phone in a death-grip. I have nightmare flashes of fists, bats, cars. "What's happened?"

"His teacher called me at work. He threw up at his party … they thought it was something he'd eaten, but the other kids were fine. When he threw up again they called me … when I got there he was crying because his tummy was hurting. I took him home, but he was still being sick. In the end I just stuck him in the car and took him to Emergency!"

I'm on my feet, buzzing for Cynthia as I grab my coat. "Where's Linds?"

"They couldn't contact her," Mel replies breathlessly. "Her cell keeps going to voicemail. That's why they called me!"

Cynthia appears at the doorway. "Gus is ill," I tell her tersely. "He's at the hospital … tell Ted he's going to have to take the reins." She gives me a startled look before nodding and hurrying away.

"Lindsay said something about being sick yesterday," I say, juggling the phone as I wrestle with my coat. "She said she was going to drop Gus off and then go back to bed … I'll swing by on my way, find out what's going on."

"Good idea," Mel says. "But hurry, Brian. Please."

"I'll be there as soon as I can. Don't worry, Mel. He'll be fine."

I hang up, grab my brief case and hurry out of the office, tossing 'I'll call you," in Cynthia's direction as I pass. Of course Gus will be alright. It's probably just a bug, a kid thing, and Mel's over-reacted the way she did when the kid had earache. It's not like he's been bashed or run over. Still, it'd be really nice to stop getting these fucking phone calls telling me that someone I love is in hospital.

Really, really nice.

I walk through reception and push open the doors, and the first lungful of freezing air makes me gasp. A few snowflakes are already beginning to fall.

TBC
CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

BRIAN

"For Christ's sake, Justin, pick up the fucking phone!" I bark into his voicemail again. "I'm going to be late… Gus is in hospital. He keeps being sick … we don't know what the problem is because no-one's fucking spoken to us yet. Look, just call me as soon as you get this, right?"

I bang the phone back into its cradle and walk down the corridor to the waiting room where Mel's sitting, chewing her nails. She looks up as I approach.

"Did you speak to him?"

I shake my head in frustration. "He doesn't like to be distracted when he's working, so there isn't a phone in the studio. And the little shit always forgets his cell."

"He'll pick up the message sooner or later," Mel says, laying her hand soothingly on my arm as I take the seat beside her.

"Like Lindsay is?" I'd stopped by her place on the way to the hospital and let myself in with my emergency key when pounding on the door hadn't produced a response. I'd half expected to find her unconscious and puke-covered, but there'd been no sign of her. Her ratty little Honda wasn't in the garage either, so she'd obviously gone off somewhere. And her cell, like Justin's, was going straight to voicemail.

"She wouldn't just disappear without leaving a contact," Mel says worriedly. "What if she went out for a drive to clear her head or something and got sick … she might have had an accident!"

"Jesus, Mel. Get a grip. She hasn't had an accident … maybe she's just somewhere she can't get a signal."

"Maybe … but it's late, Brian. She told Gus' teacher she'd be there to pick him up after the party … that finished hours ago. So where the fuck is she?"

I shrug angrily. I'm only too well aware how late it is … it'll be getting dark outside, and somehow I've got to get to Britin. If only I could let Justin know what's going on …

I stand up. "I'm going to find a nurse," I tell Mel. "Somebody must know something by now." I stride to the door and nearly collide with a tall, bespectacled, coloured woman wearing a white coat. She looks at me enquiringly. "Are you Mr. Kinney?"

"Yes, I'm Gus' father," I tell her.

"And I'm Melanie Marcus, Gus' adoptive mother," Mel says, coming to stand beside me.
"My name is Doctor Sanchez," she says, shaking our hands. "I've been treating your son."

"Do you know what's wrong with him? Is it serious?" Mel asks nervously.

She considers us with her dark eyes for a moment, with something that almost looks like suspicion. "Yes, to the first question, and I'm not sure to the second."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" I snap, and Mel elbows me, hard.

"Forgive Brian, Doctor," she says. "We're both a little strung out. Please will you tell us what's wrong?"

Sanchez is still regarding us with that wary expression, but she nods. "Your son has suffered acute bouts of vomiting, with resulting stomach cramps and mild dehydration."

"No shit?" I find myself saying, and Mel elbows me again. "I kinda figured that out for myself."

"Has he got food poisoning?" Mel asks. "He was at a party … he might have eaten something …"

Sanchez shakes her head. "The onset was too soon. Besides, his temperature is normal."

"Then what? Is it Norovirus?"

"No."

"Doctor …" I force myself to speak calmly and not pin her to the wall. "Just stop hedging and tell us what the fuck is wrong with our son."

She regards me steadily. "Nothing is wrong with him, Mr. Kinney. It seems that Gus is simply reacting to the syrup of Ipecac he ingested." She cocks her head to one side. "Perhaps you'd like to hazard a guess as to how that may have happened?"

I gaze at her blankly. "Ipecac? What the hell is that?"

"It's an emetic," Mel says in a low, troubled voice. "It's used in cases of accidental poisoning."

"And also by patients suffering with bulimia," Sanchez adds, eyeing Mel. "I don't suppose you suffer from the condition?"

"No!" Mel looks stunned. "Never, and I don't know anyone who does. I have no idea how Gus could have gotten hold of it."

"So I take it that this information is a surprise to you too, Mr Kinney?"

"I haven't seen him for a week," I tell her. "Gus lives with his birth mother."

"And where is she?"

I rub my hand through my hair. "We don't know. We can't contact her."

"Perhaps she can show some light on the matter. Ipecac is a legal substance, and freely available, although most doctors would debate its use on children, except in an emergency. And the patient should certainly never be left unsupervised. The drug can cause palpitations, respiratory problems and, as you have seen, prolonged stomach cramps and vomiting."

"Is Gus in any danger?" Mel looks stricken.
Sanchez' face softens a little. "No, not at all. Although we'd like to keep him in overnight to monitor his fluid intake." She looks at me curiously. "Mr Kinney? Are you alright?"

I realise my hands are shaking. There's a lump of ice in my chest and it's killing me. "I'm fine," I hear myself reply, although my lips are numb, too. My voice seems to be coming from a great distance.

"Can we see him?" Mel asks hopefully.

Sanchez nods. "He's sedated, so he's quite sleepy. We've transferred him to the paediatrics ward … if one of you would like to stay the night, I'm sure we can make arrangements."

"I'll stay," Mel says. "I'll call Michael, I'm sure he can keep JR overnight."

"I'll inform the nurses."

She walks out into the corridor and Mel moves to follow her, but I grab her arm and pull her back. "Mel … I have to go."

She glares at me. "Fuck off, Brian. You can spare five minutes out of your busy schedule to check your son's okay!"

"No, I can't." I lock eyes with her. "You don't understand … I told Lindsay that Justin was alone at Britin … I have such a bad feeling about this, Mel."

Her face changes as she sees my implication. "Oh God, Brian, she wouldn't … don't be insane! I'm sure there's a logical explanation …"

"I hope I am fucking insane," I interrupt her, "because if I'm not, and Lindsay's there, it might already be too late." I drop a kiss on the top of her head, and she stares at me in shock. "I can't take the risk. Take care of him for me … and tell him I'll be back as soon as I can."

Then I go, pushing past the surprised Sanchez, first walking and then running, echoes chasing me down the corridor like the footfalls of doom.

I stare in disbelief at the snow swirling down from the dark sky. It's settling thickly already, and it looks like it has no intention of stopping anytime soon. I glare upwards, cursing the fates or God or whoever the fuck is conspiring against me. An ambulance pulls up, snow crunching beneath its tyres, it's flashing lights turning the tumbling flakes blue and red, and I think of trying to drive the Vette down the country roads all the way to Britin and cringe. But I don't have any fucking choice. What the fuck was I doing, trading in the Jeep for a fucked-up sexmobile with all the traction of an ice-skate? What I really need is something with four-wheel drive … something big. Big like a big, fucking truck.

And then I know. I pull out my cell, punching in the number, praying he'll pick up. After a minute, he does.

"Boot?" I say, feeling the relief wash over me. "Get your ass in your truck and get over to Allegheny … I have to get to Britin. I think Justin's in a shit load of trouble."

TBC
CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

You can't have a cupboard when there ain't no wall
You've got to move, there's no time for you to stall
They say the old laughing lady dropped by to call
And when she leaves, she leaves nothing at all.
- The Old Laughing Lady – Neil Young

JUSTIN

I don't hear the studio door slide open, but I feel a chill draught of air and I smile. "About fucking time," I say, finishing the first application of varnish with careful, even strokes. "And don't even think about coming in … this is a surprise, remember?"

He doesn't answer. "Brian?" I look up, and freeze.

Lindsay is standing in the doorway, wrapped in a snow-spattered Parka. I don't know what takes me more by surprise, her appearance or the darkness behind her. I hadn't realised how the daylight had faded away.

"Linds? What are you doing here?"

She slides the door closed behind her. "I wanted to have another little chat, Justin."

I put the jar of varnish on the floor and balance my brush across the top. Then I stand up and face her. "Uh … I don't know what you want, but Brian will be here any minute …"

She shakes her head. "I'm afraid Brian has been unavoidably delayed. And, judging from the way it's snowing out there, he won't be arriving any time soon." She pushes back her hood, smiles and comes towards me, and I realise she's carrying a half-empty bottle of Jose Cuervas. "It looks like it's just you and me, kiddo." She's as pale as a ghost, her eyes shadowed, her lips bloodless.

For a moment I wonder if I'm asleep, because this has all the surrealism of a dream. "What are you talking about? What's happened to Brian?"

"Nothing. But Gus isn't well, so Brian has to be where he's needed. Where a good father belongs."

I'm trying to process what the fuck's going on, trying to make sense of what she's saying. "Gus isn't well ...?" I repeat stupidly. "What, he's sick or something?"

She shrugs. "You could say that … but don't worry, he'll be fine. They both will be."
She turns abruptly and crosses to my table, which she hops onto. She sits there swinging her legs and uncaps her bottle. She proffers it. "Want a drink? It'll keep the chill out."

I feel my temper rising. I wipe my hands clean and throw the rag to the floor. "No, I don't want a fucking drink. I want to know what you're doing here … and what's happened to Gus!"

She smiles again, and for the first time I feel a jolt of real fear, because her lips just stretch mirthlessly. Her eyes have no humour in them at all.

"None of that is your business anymore," she says quietly. She takes a swallow of Tequila, then caps the bottle again. "This has to stop, Justin."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I demand, although my heart is beating like a trip-hammer and my mouth is dry.

"Oh, you know." She's using her teasing little girl voice, still smiling, her head tilted to one side. "This little charade we've all been playing."

"Speak for yourself," I snap.

"I am." She nods gravely. "Finally, I am." She slides off the table and approaches me, the bottle dangling from her right hand. I can't stop myself taking a step backwards. She pauses beside me, her eyes on my painting. "Oh, you've finished it. I thought you would."

"So you have been here! I knew it!"

"I've looked around." She does so again. "It's beautiful, Justin. Brian is so generous with his money."

"You should know better than most."

"As is only right," she agrees calmly. "I'm the mother of his child."

"You make it sound like you're the fucking Madonna!" I know I'm baiting her, but I can't help it. "You're the one with the God-complex where Brian is concerned," she smiles. "as this piece of sycophancy proves. I know how huge Brian's ego is … it's hardly surprising I couldn't compete with such puerile devotion."

"There never was any competition, Lindsay! Brian loves you, sure, but he doesn't love you the way he does me! He never has, and he never will, and I have nothing to do with it!"

She shakes her head. "Justin, Justin … don't pretend to be so naïve. It's always been a competition … between Gus' and my rights, and your demands. And you've always won, because you seduced and smiled and wormed yourself into everything Brian did. You'd never just give up and go away, would you?" I open my mouth to deny it but she silences me with a wave of her hand. "The funny thing is that everybody thinks you're so smart, but you're dumb. Dumb and selfish. I gave you the perfect opportunity to get out and make something of yourself, but would you take it? No. You couldn't leave well alone; you couldn't give Brian and I the chance to make a real family together. Instead you come worming back into his life, stringing him along again … and now you've stolen the home we should have shared together!"

"Brian bought Britin for me, not you!"

She laughs. "Oh please. He might have told you that, but it's obvious to anyone he bought it as a family home. It should be Gus' birthright, not yours!"
"It is!" I protest. "It will be Gus' one day. It's in Brian's will!"

She turns on me, her eyes blazing. "Not for fucking years, not until you die!" she spits at me, engulfing me in Tequila-laden breath. "What good will it do then? It's now he needs the benefits of living here, not when he's sixty years old!" She paces towards me and I find myself back-pedalling again. "And if that wasn't enough … you have to turn my own son … my Lambskin …" - her voice cracks a little – "against me as well!" Her face is an ugly mask of fury. "You should have died years ago, Justin. We'd have helped Brian grieve for a while, and then things would have gone on … the way they were supposed to. But even then, you just … wouldn't go away."

I find myself looking into the eyes of a total stranger, and it hurts. It reminds me too much of the expression I'd seen in my father's eyes at the end, and in Hobbs' when I outed him on Liberty Avenue, and I feel the same sense of shock that someone can hate me so much. "I always thought you were my friend, Lindsay," I say shakily.

"I tried. I felt sorry for you; so young, so optimistic; so certain you could tame the untameable. So helpless. Until I realised … what a viper you are!" She takes a long, hissing breath. "Well, I'm not standing for it any more. Tonight, we finish it."

Suddenly I've had enough. "You know what, Lindsay? Fuck you. I tell you what, you sit here with your Tequila and your fucking delusions, because I'm out of here." I stride past her. "I'm going back to the house and I'm calling Brian, and you do whatever the hell you have to."

She moves so fast I only have time to fling up my arm as the bottle comes at me. It's not enough to deflect it from smashing against my skull, and everything greys out.

TBC
CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

There's a fever on the freeway, blacks out the night

There's a slipping on the stairway just don't feel right

There's a thunder in the bedroom and a flash of light –

There's the old laughing lady – everything is all right.

- The Old Laughing Lady – Neil Young

BRIAN

"Fuck! Still nothing!" I stuff my cell back in my pocket and peer out at the wall of white through the sweeping arcs of the windscreen wipers. I'm a backseat driver: I hate being a passenger, unless I'm too wasted to be critical. But Boot handles the big truck with his usual calm assurance despite the Arctic blizzard we're driving through: beyond the powerful beams of the headlights, visibility is non-existent. We seem to be the only ones crazy enough to be on the road tonight. "Can't this pile of junk go any faster?"

Boot gives me a sideways look. "Sorry, guv, I thought the idea was to get us there in one piece."

I glare at him. "Just … fuck, look this is my fault, okay? I told her … I fucking told her! How the fuck was I that stupid?"

He sighs. "You didn't know … you still don't. We might find him tucked up with a cocoa, happy as Larry."

The logical side of me has been saying the same thing. Unfortunately it's being drowned out by my primal, instinctive gut, which is screaming in my ear that I've fucked up on a monumental scale … again. And that voice has been proved right too many times for me to ignore it now. I fumble nervously for my cigarettes, and thumb open my Zippo. Then I remember, and throw a quick glance at Boot.

He shrugs. "Go for it. I'll make an exception, given the circumstances."

Gratefully, I draw a lungful of smoke. "I don't even know what I saw in him," I say, half to myself. "The little shit wasn't even my type … you think he's skinny now, you should have seen how scrawny he was when he was seventeen. And blond … Christ, I'm not saying I've never fucked a blond, but they've been few and far between. Fifteen years of fucking the hottest, hunkiest studs I could find, and then … bam! I get love-bashed by a teen twink." I'm aware I'm babbling, but I don't seem to be able to stop myself. Anything is better than silence, anything to take my mind off the helpless churning of my insides. "I tell you … it was fucking humiliating. No names, no numbers
Kinney being blind-sided by a persistent kid... a fucking virgin, even."

Boot grins. "Sorry to tell you guv, but you're not the first and you won't be the bloody last."

"Thanks for telling me I'm not unique after all." I look for something to tap ash into, and end up using my left palm as an ashtray. "The thing about Justin ... he looks like a fucking angel, right? All blond hair and blue eyes and smiles ... and the first time I met him, that's all I saw. A sweet, scared, naive kid. Hot as hell, yeah; but harmless ... no way he could be a threat, right? By the time I found out he was only blond on the outside, it was too fucking late."

Boot raises his eyebrows. "Somehow I don't see you as the kind of bloke to keep someone around if you didn't want them. No matter how hot they were."

"It took me a while to figure that out. Right up until he nearly died on me. And then ... it didn't seem to matter so much ... suddenly he wasn't a kid any more. He grew up ... we both grew up. Christ!" I wind down the window and hurl the cigarette out, letting in a blast of freezing air and a swirl of snow-flakes as I do so. "When he got hit by that car I swore this wasn't going to happen again! I swore if I got him back I'd keep him. And I have! But here I am again, scared fucking shitless that I'm too late ... and it's still my fault!"

"Leave it out, guv! It's not your fault, or the lad's." Boot shakes his head. He glances at me shrewdly. "You feeling guilty about leaving your nipper, too?"

"No ... yeah. Yeah, I guess. I'm his fucking old man, right? He needs me right now, especially if his mom ..." I don't finish that thought. "But Justin ... I've got to get to him. I had to choose ... that fucking bitch made me choose!"

"You didn't choose," Boot says severely. "You had to prioritise ... your son isn't in any danger, Justin is. What else were you supposed to do? Gus will understand."

"That's the whole point, isn't it?" I reach for another cigarette. "My Sonny-Boy will forgive me anything ... just like I did Jack ... and Justin did Craig. I guess it's human nature to love your father until you get old enough to realise what an asshole he is."

"Bloody cynical outlook, guv, if you ask me," Boot grunts. "And no, I never felt that way about my old man."

"Then you're lucky." I close my eyes and let out a long stream of smoke. "The thing is, Gus is blood. How I felt the first time I saw him ... I just never expected it. I mean, now ... well, I'm beginning to like him too, as a person ... you know? But then, he was just a baby ... for all I knew he'd grow into some spoilt, whiny brat, or a fucking bully like his grandpa. So what I felt that night was just instinct, because he was my son and part of me." I look over at Boot. "But Justin ... he has no blood ties to me. He doesn't have to forgive me anything, but he has; more times than you can imagine. He doesn't see me as a hero, or a god. He doesn't expect me to fulfil his dreams for him. He knows all my faults and he accepts them ... and he still chooses to love me. He's the only person who ... the only thing I have that truly belongs to me. You have no idea how amazing that fact is."

"I can probably imagine," Boot answers, and then reaches out to pat my knee, a reassuring gesture that in any other circumstances I'd have resented the fuck out of for its familiarity. Instead I'm relieved that I have his solid, common-sense support. "Don't worry, guv. It's always darkest before the dawn, as my old mum always says. In fact," he goes on, peering through the wipers, "I think it's letting up a bit."
By the time we make the turn into Britin the snow has eased to a moderate fall. The house looks breathtakingly beautiful in its white shroud, but I'm of no mind to appreciate the winter wonderland around me; I stare up at the dark windows as the truck ploughs up the drive and my heart drops.

"Where the fuck is he?"

Boot pulls up and I have the door open before the truck stops moving. I leap down into knee-high snow and begin wading towards the front door, trying not to lose my loafers in the process. Though I still can't see any lights, I can smell smoke, so I realise he must be inside; he's lit the fire. "Justin!” I yell at the top of my voice. I fumble my keys out and unlock the door. "Justin!”

There's nothing but darkness and silence inside. I switch on the lights; the door to the main room is open, so I trot down the hall and look in. The room is cold and empty, the fire laid but unlit. I call his name again and head for the staircase, intending to check upstairs, but stop when I hear Boot yelling outside. I run back to the front door.

He's hanging out of the truck door, gesturing towards the trees beyond the house. "It's the fucking studio, guv!"

I look where he's pointing, and see smoke rising.

TBC
Chapter Notes

CHAPTER FIFTY

Lover, there will be another one who'll hover over you beneath the sun,

Tomorrow see the things that never come today

When you see me fly away without you

Shadows of the things you know

Feathers fall around you and show you the way to go

It's over.

Birds – Neil Young

JUSTIN

I think it's the smell that brings me round.

At first I'm completely confused; I'm not in bed, not on the couch ... there's hard floor beneath me, pressing into my cheek, and that smell ... the first thing I think of is the night I tried to light the fire with Brian's lighter fuel, and I wonder dazedly if it exploded or something, because my head hurts and I feel sick and woozy. Then I hear a voice, a woman's voice, humming; bizarrely, it sounds familiar. I will my eyes open and turn my head towards the sound. At first my vision's kind of fuzzy, and I wonder vaguely if I'm badly hurt; I blink a few times, and gradually my sight clears.

Lindsay has a large bottle of turpentine in her hand and she's pouring it over my painting, humming softly to herself as she does so.

She hit me. With a bottle.

I reach up automatically, and my fingers find a large painful lump above my right eyebrow; there's sticky stuff in my hair, and when I look at my fingers, they're red.

Lindsay turns towards me, and actually smiles.

I sit up groggily and the studio lurches sickeningly around me. I force down the nausea. I feel blood trickling down my cheek and wipe it away. "Lindsay ..." my voice comes out as a croak, so I swallow hard and try again. "What the fuck ...?"

"It would have been easier if you'd stayed asleep, Justin." She tilts her head. "On second thoughts, though, perhaps it's better this way. Now you get to watch."

I realise with chilling certainty that she's deranged. Not just delusional, not just obsessed ... she's
dangerous, and for the first time I'm genuinely afraid. I try to get to my feet but my legs aren't listening and I end up on my knees.

"Be careful, Justin!" she chides sharply. "You might fall and hurt yourself."

"You've already hurt me," I say shakily.

"Yes, and I'm sorry for that. But you must realise you brought it on yourself." She throws more turps over the painting, heedless of the puddles that are forming on the floor.

Keep her talking. Distract her. Give yourself time to recover. Maybe Brian will come. I sit back down, and wipe away more blood. "Lindsay, we can sort this out. Just call an ambulance ... I'll say I slipped. I won't press any charges."

She turns towards me again. "I'm afraid things have gone too far for that, don't you think?" Her tone is conversational, as though we're chatting about the weather or some damn thing, and I find that the most disquieting fact of all. "Anyway, as I already told you, this ends tonight."

"So, what? You want to go to prison?" I'm appealing to whatever reason she still has. "What about Gus? You want him to go through that ... knowing his mother's been locked up?"

She shrugs. "Maybe I won't be. But even if I am, then at least Gus will know how much I loved him ... how much I was prepared to sacrifice for his sake."

"Don't kid yourself that this is about Gus!" My voice rises and I wince as pain lances through my head. "If it were, you wouldn't be doing this ... you'd know that the most important thing for him is that you stay with him, not get locked up for assaulting your love-rival!"

"I should have known you'd try to twist things," she replies with cold distain. "Anyway, Gus will be fine. Brian will make sure of that ... he will have the opportunity to become the kind of father Gus deserves, without your interference. I have every confidence in him."

"He can't be full-time father, you know that," I say desperately. "He'd have to give up work ... he wouldn't be able to afford to keep Britin."

"I'm sure Brian will come up with a solution. And if not, well, he can afford to hire someone to help. Like he did when you came back from New York so pathetically needy, and he hired that thug as a nursemaid."

"He didn't," I protest. "Boot's my friend, and Brian offered him a job at Babylon, that's all."

She throws her head back and laughs. "That's what they told you! I said you were dumb! No, sweetie; Brian paid your good friend Boot to keep you amused and out of his hair while he got on with the important stuff. Why do you think he'd have given up a job standing outside a nightclub in New York for one standing outside a nightclub in Pittsburgh, if he didn't have a financial incentive? Or did you really believe that a man like him would care about a silly little boy like you?"

I tell myself that she's lying, that she's just seeing things from her own fucked-up perspective, but I can't deny that she's shaken me. I'd guessed that part of Boot's motive for moving here had been to look out for me, but I'd assumed that was out of friendship ... I wouldn't like to think Brian had paid him to do it. Apart from Daph, Boot is the only friend I've made all by myself and I trust him explicitly. I hate her for making me doubt him.

She's turned away again, shaking the last drops from the bottle over the painting. "Brian will never forgive you," I tell her.
She pauses and looks back at me consideringly. "It's possible," she answers thoughtfully. "Although I think he will, once he understands. He's really a very forgiving person with the people he loves ... you should know that. He's forgiven you enough." She drops the bottle and reaches into the pocket of her Parka. "It's immaterial, anyway. I'm doing what I have to."

She pulls out a lighter and thumbs it. "Brian gave me this, for my eighteenth birthday." She glances at me smugly. "Much more thoughtful than a hustler, and so much more useful! Don't you think?"

She touches the flame to the bottom of the painting, and the turpentine ignites instantly. In seconds the whole canvas is alight, while Lindsay watches with a proud smile.

I'm on my feet. For a moment I think I'm going to fall, but I get my legs working and stagger towards her. I grab her wrist and she glares at me as I try to drag her away from the blazing painting. Already fiery gobbets of paint and varnish are dripping to the floor, and the puddle of turps goes up with a whoosh!, making Lindsay squeal as it singes the arm of her Parka.

"Jesus!" I scream, tugging at her and trying to blink away the blood that's got into my eye. "We've gotta get out of here!"

"Oh no, you don't," she gasps, grabbing my arm and pulling me towards her. "You're not going anywhere!"

I hit her, hard.

"You little bastard!" she shrieks, her hand flying to her cheek, eyes blazing. "How dare you?" Then she's on me, flailing with her fists, trying to kick me. I stumble backwards and knock over the jar of varnish. It spins towards the wall, and trails of fire follow it hungrily.

I hold up my arms to ward off her blows; she might be a woman, but she's taller than me and I'm still wobbly and uncoordinated. "Lindsay!" I yell. "We're going to fucking die!" From the corner of my eye I see my rack of canvasses go up in a burst of flame.

She doesn't even seem to get it. We stumble backwards and forwards, me trying to pull towards the door, she struggling to stop me. The heat in the studio is already intense, and the acrid smoke from burning wood and chemicals makes my eyes water and my throat sting. We're both beginning to cough.

And then I hear his voice. "Justin!" he bellows. Lindsay leaps back as though she's been shot, and I turn to see Brian barrelling towards me, snow in his hair and crusting his Gucci loafers, his black overcoat flying behind him. Boot is on his heels. If ever I doubt his love again, all I'll have to do is remember the look on his face at this moment: fear, joy, fury, concern ... his emotions are written naked and clear for me to revel in, and I've never seen him more beautiful. Relief floods through me and I feel my knees start to buckle, but Brian reaches me before I fall and his arms go round me, holding me up. For a long moment he crushes me against him and I feel his lips on my hair; then he pushes me towards Boot. "Get him out of here," he snaps. "I'll see to her."

Boot doesn't hesitate. He grabs me by the arms and begins to manhandle me towards the door as the flames snap and crackle around us. Brian gives me one last, long look and then turns to Lindsay, who's backing away from him, further into the studio, both hands clapped to her stricken face.

"Brian ... Brian!" I shriek, struggling uselessly in Boot's grip. "Don't ... let me go, for fuck's sake!" I aim a kick at Boot's shins, but he simply grabs me round the waist and picks me up bodily, tucking me under his arm as effortlessly as he would a child. I frantically try to hold onto the door frame as Boot carries me out into the darkness, but he forces my fingers loose with his free hand and starts
down the steps. I have a last glimpse of Brian's back as he disappears into the smoke, and then the flames converge behind him.

TBC
"You mother-fucker!" I scream at Boot as he sets me on my feet knee-deep in snow in the stable yard, "You left him, you coward! You fucking left him!" Tears are streaming down my face. All I can see is the expression in Brian's eyes as he gave me that last look – a look of longing, and goodbye. I start back up the steps but Boot grabs me by the neck of my sweater and hauls me back down.

"Don't be a wanker!" he yells.

A small succession of explosions comes from above, and I realise with horror that the fire must have reached the chest with its bottles of turps and varnish. A second later a great gout of flame billows out of the door and my last hope dies within me. "Brian..." I moan.

Boot shakes me hard. "He can get down into the stable through the hatch! Come on, move your arse!" He starts ploughing through the snow towards the far end of the stable.

Fuck! How did I forget the hay hatch? My heart pounding, I follow as fast as I can, cursing Boot's long legs as I flounder.

By the time I reach the corner he's already at the stable doors. He's holding the padlock in his hand. "Please tell me you've got the soddin' key!"

Stricken, I shake my head.

Boot plunges back towards me. "I've got a hammer in the truck. Don't fucking move!" he orders as he rushes past me.

I run to the doors and tug savagely at the padlock. "Brian!" I yell, trying to raise my voice above the sound of the fire above. "Brian!" I kick the wood as hard as can, and then pull frantically again. I'm tortured by the thought that he might be burning, dying, just feet away from me. I'm sobbing like a baby.

"Get out the way," Boot says behind me.

He's got a big claw hammer clenched in his right fist, and as I step back he distances himself from the door, takes a trial swing, and then begins to rain a torrent of blows against the padlock. Sparks fly from the metal as the hammer strikes again and again, and suddenly the screws holding it in place tear loose and Boot uses the claw end of the hammer to prise them free. Then he grabs one of the doors and flings it open.

A cloud of thick black smoke billows out, making us choke, and I dash forward; but Boot wraps his
arms round me in a bear hug so I can't move. I struggle wildly as he hauls me backwards away from the stable. "Guvnor!" he bellows. "Brian!"

The only answer is the dull roar of the flames, the hiss of melting snow and my agonized sobbing. The seconds stretch out into eternity and I feel myself sag. If Boot weren't holding me up, I'd be on my knees.

And then suddenly, incredibly, I hear a wracking cough, and my heart leaps. Somehow I tear myself free from Boot's grip and fling myself forward towards the dark figure I can see staggering through the smoke.

He has Lindsay thrown like a doll over his shoulder, and his heavy overcoat covers the pair of them. Boot grabs Lindsay and I hold onto Brian; coughing violently, he manages a few steps before collapsing on his hands and knees. He coughs until he retches and throws up, green slimy strings of vomit that steam in the snow. I don't care; I drop beside him, my arms around his waist, my chest pressing against his back, not minding the way his suit stinks of smoke, not minding the ash and filth on his face and in his hair. He's here and he's alive, and nothing else matters ... not the studio, not Lindsay; nothing. All I want to do is hold onto him until I can believe that he's real.

But Boot has different ideas. He pulls me to my feet, and I see Lindsay lying nearby on the snow, her eyes closed. I can't even bring myself to care whether she's alive or not. "You can't stop here!" Boot says urgently. "And I've got to move the truck so the fire brigade can get in!" He grabs Brian's arm. "Come on, guv. Can you walk?"

Brian looks up at him with red-rimmed eyes, still coughing. He nods, and clings to me as he gets unsteadily to his feet. I grab up his overcoat and sling it around him. Boot picks up Lindsay and we all move round to the front of the stable block where Boot's truck is parked, its powerful headlights washing the yard with light.

Brian's arm is heavy across my shoulders, and he staggers slightly. I cling to him, trying to support as much of his weight as I can. But he stops and looks down at me. "Wait ..." he croaks. He reaches out shakily and touches my face. "You're hurt ..." he mourns softly.

I'd forgotten. I raise my hand to check the damage and feel tackiness but not wetness; at least it seems to have stopped bleeding. "I'm fine," I assure him, although I feel anything but. I'm a little dizzy and light-headed, and my stomach is churning uncomfortably. Please God don't let me have a panic attack now.

"Was it her? Did she hurt you, Justin?" he demands hoarsely.

I shake my head, trying not to shiver. Away from the heat of the fire, the night is freezing. "It doesn't matter. Don't try to talk now, Brian."

But he pulls away and looks at me, really looks; taking in my thin sweater and sneakers. "You're freezing ..." The next second he's shrugging off his overcoat and wrapping it round me instead.

"Get a bloody move on!" Boot bellows from the truck. "The whole bloody place is going up!"

He's right. Burning flakes of ash drift through the air towards us, and the doors of the stalls are beginning to blaze. I can hear the sound of beams falling as the stable roof starts to collapse. I grab Brian's arm and tug him to the door of the truck, pushing him up and then climbing in after him. I have to sit on his lap because Lindsay is sprawled unconscious next to Boot. I put my arms round Brian's neck and bury my face in his shoulder.
"What happened to her?" Boot asks, jerking his head at Lindsay as he guns the engine and begins to turn the truck to negotiate the exit from the yard.

"I had to slug her," Brian answers. He coughs again and then takes a shallow breath, wincing as he does so. "She wouldn't stop fighting me ... I don't think she even really knew what the fuck was going on."

"She knew," I mutter.

He looks down at me. "Justin, tell me what happened."

So I do.

Boot has guided the truck up the long, snow-filled track to the house and is pulling up at the entrance by the time I'm finished. Brian wraps his arms closer around me and I can feel him trembling. "She hit you? Like ..." He swallows, hard, as his voice cracks. "You need a doctor ... fuck, you need a hospital!" His hands gently examine my head. "Christ, Justin! You can't keep getting knocked out like this!"

"I didn't exactly plan to," I snap back. "And I'm not the only one who needs a doctor!" I grab his right hand and turn it over. There are wet red burns on his palm and fingers.

"The back of her Parka caught fire ... I had to beat it out," he says bemusedly. "Funny, I didn't even realise ..."

"And the way you're breathing!" I go on. "Fuck, Brian! What were you thinking of? You risked everything to save her! You could have died! Fucking died!" The full realisation of it crashes down on me and I huddle against him, shaking.

"What the fuck else was I supposed to do?" he asks helplessly. "I couldn't just leave her there."

"Why not?" I flash back, lifting my head to stare at him angrily. "She was all set to leave me!"

"Jesus Christ, lads, leave it out," Boot sighs. He's climbed down from the truck and, taking hold of Lindsay's upper arms, drags her across the seat towards him. She moans and coughs a little, so I guess she isn't dead. Boot gets a grip under her armpits and hauls her out of the truck, none too gently it seems to me. "I'll dump her inside, then I'll give you a hand, guv."

"You keep an eye on her, and call for ambulance," Brian orders. "We can manage." He starts to grip the handle and then winces, pulling back his injured hand: and all my anger evaporates.

I wriggle off his lap and open the door, sliding out into the snow. Brian follows carefully. I keep my hand on his back as he climbs down, partly to steady him but mainly because I need to keep contact with him. He must feel pretty much the same because the instant he's down he winds an arm round me too, and together we make our way slowly to the door.

In the main room, Boot has already lit the fire, and now he's standing by the couch giving directions over the phone. Lindsay is curled up at the far end, coughing fitfully. Her blond hair is tangled and filthy and her face is smeared with soot. She's cradling her left ankle with both hands, her eyes wide and shocked. A large purple bruise has bloomed on the left side of her jaw.

I help Brian into an armchair as Boot hangs up the phone. "They'll get an ambulance here as soon as they can."

"What about the fire department?" I ask.
"We called them as soon as we saw the smoke," Boot replies. "They shouldn't be much longer. Not that there'll be anything left to save."

There's an awkward silence, punctuated by hacking coughs from Brian and Lindsay. It jolts me into action. Brian's shoes and the legs of his pants are soaking, and he's shivering. "I'll get you some blankets and towels ... you need to get dry, Brian."

He grabs my hand. "I'm not the only one," he croaks, "and you're the one that's hurt. You're not going anywhere ... Boot can get them."

"I know where everything is," I object. I don't want Boot leaving; I cast an uneasy glance at the still figure on the couch.

"You sit yourself down, Sunshine," Boot says kindly, patting my shoulder. He stands for a moment staring down at Lindsay, while she gazes back with wide, fearful eyes. "I've never hit a woman, and I don't really want to start," he tells her. "But if you so much as move a hair while I'm gone, I'll twat you."

She shrinks a little further into herself.

While Boot goes upstairs I kick off my sodden sneakers and feel the wet legs of my jeans chilling my skin as I crouch to pull off Brian's loafers and socks, and rub his cold feet between my hands. I can tell it's hurting him to breath, and suddenly I'm angry again; angry that he had to be a hero, angry that he had to try to do it alone. I drop my head so that he can't see the tears in my eyes, and rub his feet harder so he can't feel the tremors in my hands.

Boot comes back, his arms full of towels and blankets. He hands some to me, and drops a blanket on Lindsay's lap. "I'll put the kettle on, make us all a nice cuppa," he says. "You'd better call the cops, guv." He picks up the phone and tosses it into Brian's lap.

Brian freezes, and so do I.

"Fuck ..." Brian breathes.

"You do it or I will," I tell him bluntly.

"Justin ..." he looks at me with haunted eyes. "She's Gus' mom ..."

"Some mother," Boot grunts, "poisoning her own nipper just to buy herself some time!"

"What...?" I look from one to the other. "She poisoned Gus ...?" Tears spring into my eyes again.

"No, no, he's fine," Brian reassures me, taking my hand. "I promise. She gave him an emetic ... he was just a little sick, that's all."

"Oh, well, that's okay, then!" I fling him off, and he pulls back, startled. "As long as Gus was just a little sick, and I just got a little bashed, and she only burned down my studio and not our fucking house, let's just forget all about it!"

"No," he says, looking shocked. "Of course not, Justin. But ... the cops ..."

"You have to, guv," Boot says firmly. "She stepped over the line. She's not just a danger to herself ... she can't be trusted with your son anymore. And if we hadn't got here in time, God knows what would have happened to Justin here. I don't know what the fuck's wrong with her, but I do know she needs to be put somewhere safe so she can't hurt anybody else. And that means you've got to involve
"And I can't believe you're even hesitating!" I yell, jumping to my feet. "Fuck you, Brian! Fuck you and your fucked-up loyalties! All the times you stood back and let Michael bait me, and I could never say anything because he was your best friend and nobody was allowed to upset him, not even me! And now fucking Lindsay drugs Gus and tries to fucking kill me, but you don't want to set the police on her because, what? You think you're grassing her up or something? Are you insane?" I feel myself sway, and then Boot's there, his steadying hand on my shoulder.

"The lad's dead right, guv," he says, "you can't sit on the fence on this one."

Brian stares at us; then he lowers his head. "Fuck ..." he repeats softly. "Fuck." He slowly turns to Lindsay. "You got anything to say for yourself?" he asks, addressing her for the first time.

She doesn't answer or look at him. Only her fingers move, twisting nervously in the blanket still lying on her lap where Boot threw it. I can hear the harsh wheeze of air as she breathes.

"Well, I guess not." Brian straightens his shoulders and his voice hardens. "Okay. I'll call Carl. He'll know how to handle it."

I suppose I should feel relieved.

But really I only feel sick ... sick and tired.

TBC
CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

I'll only give you till the morning comes, till the morning comes;

I'm only waiting till the morning comes, till the morning comes.

- Till the Morning Comes – Neil Young

BRIAN

"Jesus Christ, Brian. What a mess. What a god-damn mess!" Carl paces backwards and forward beside the bed. I'm grateful that he's come alone; I know Deb and the family will have to be filled in on the situation, but the last thing either Justin or I need is to have Deb descend in full overbearing-Mom mode tonight.

"You're sure Justin's okay?" Mel asks for the third time. I'd asked a nurse to page her in Gus' room as soon as we'd arrived, and now she's sitting, pale and taut, on the chair beside my bed.

"Christ, Mel. Same answer as last time." Justin had needed a couple of stitches, but his CAT scan was fine. The lad seems to have more lives than a cat. However, since this was his second concussion within a few months nobody was taking the injury lightly, and his neurologist insisted on his being kept under close observation - a decision with which I heartily concurred. I was diagnosed with second degree burns combined with mild smoke inhalation, but the doctor still wanted to keep me overnight with an oxygen mask handy in case I developed breathing problems. Under normal circumstances it would take a damn sight more than a sore throat, a bandaged hand and a bitch of a headache to keep me in hospital, but since they were keeping Justin and I didn't intend to leave without him, I'd called Boot (or rather, a nurse had placed the call for me) and told him to hold the fort until we got back. He'd stayed at Britin to deal with the fire department when they belatedly arrived, and he'd confirmed what I'd already thought; the studio and stables were burned to the ground.

Of course, Lindsay has been admitted, too. She's suffering from smoke inhalation and minor burns like me, plus a badly sprained ankle and some cuts and bruises from when I'd dropped her limp body through the hay hatch. The difference is she's under arrest for arson, assault and attempted murder, and when she's discharged she'll be taken straight into custody. Carl, I have to admit, has been great; once he understood what had happened at Britin he took immediate charge, meeting the ambulance at the hospital to make the arrest himself, with a female officer in tow to guard Lindsay.

I realise that just about every member of my personal family is here as either patients or visitors, which says just about everything about how fucked-up the situation is.

"I've spoken to the doctor who treated Gus ... Sanchez? And she confirmed your story," Carl says.

"You thought she wouldn't?" Mel demands. "You think Brian and I would lie about something like
"No ... of course not." Carl looks more harassed and agitated than ever. "Although, since the drug she gave him is non-prescription, she hasn't technically committed an offence where Gus is concerned. But to use him that way ... to deliberately make him sick just so she could keep you out of the way ..." He stops pacing and gestures helplessly. "That just doesn't sit with the Lindsay I know."

"The Lindsay we all thought we knew!" snaps Mel. "And don't you dare give me that bullshit about how she hasn't technically committed a crime ... she acted with both knowledge and forethought, and that makes her as guilty as sin in my book!"

Carl shakes his head. "Deb and I always thought she was devoted to the kid."

"She is," I tell him. My throat's sore as fuck, so I reach awkwardly with my left hand for the water glass from the bedside table and swallow some. "The same way she's devoted to me. The trouble is, it's not the kind of devotion Deb has for Michael, or Mel has for Gus and JR, or that you have for Deb. It's the kind that makes her want to destroy the object of that devotion rather than see anyone else enjoy it."

He fixes me with a look. "So why didn't you tell anyone what was going on?" he demands. "Either of you?"

We exchange glances. "Because it was personal," I say. "We hoped we could draw a line under the thing and go on. None of us realised how bad she really was ... not until it was too late."

"It wasn't like she was acting like a crazy woman," Mel agrees. "She was just a little ... off sometimes, but then she always was. It's easy to look back with hindsight, for fuck's sake."

Carl drags his hand through his hair. "Well, the system will take care of things from here on. She'll be given psychological evaluation before they decide where to remand her. You'll have to come down to the station to make a statement, as soon as you feel up to it ... Justin, too." His face softens. "I guess that won't be easy for you."

He has no idea how difficult it will be. While I understand and agree absolutely with the need to do it, I loathe the fact that I have to. Lindsay poses a threat to the two people I love most in the world, and she must be dealt with as such: but she's also inextricably linked to one of those people, and to hurt her is to hurt him. The thought of trying to make Gus understand how his Dadda could be responsible for his Momma being taken away from him makes me sick to my stomach. How do I begin to explain to a six-year old – even a smart one – that his mother was prepared to make him sick enough to be hospitalised so that she could try to kill Justin, for no other reason than that Gus and I love him?

I don't think Justin gets that. I didn't like his comment at Britin about my fucked-up loyalties, like he thought I was worrying more about protecting Lindsay than protecting him. He'd spoken as if I might have tried to stop him calling the police or some fucking thing. Like I wouldn't have insisted on it. He's not the scared, friendless kid he was after Hobbs bashed him; he's a man, and he stands up for his rights. No; what had knocked me sideways was the realisation that Lindsay was fucked-up-big-time-loony-toons, and nothing was ever going to be quite the same again.

Christ ... what kind of mother would deliberately drug her own son like that? I thought Joanie was the worst example of maternal compassion I'd come across, but her sin had been that of compliance rather than instigation. I think even she would be appalled by Lindsay's cold-blooded manipulation. And Justin ... she hit him. Knowing what he'd been through before, knowing the danger ... even if I
could ever be persuaded that burning down the studio had been an act of drunken stupidity that had
gotten out of hand, does he really think I could ever forgive her for that, nor want her to pay for it?

I know he's upset about my risking my life to get Lindsay from the studio ... but, fuck, I couldn't
have just walked away. How could I have looked Gus in the eye and said, Sorry, Sonny-Boy, there
wasn't a thing I could do? Sticking her in prison pales into insignificance compared with leaving her
to fry. Anyway, I would have done the same thing for a lot of people ... shit, if the truth be told I
don't think I could leave anyone in a situation like that if I thought there was a chance I could get
them out. Neither could Justin; fuck, the lad wouldn't have left a kitten to burn, let alone a person.
No, he's just freaked and upset and angry, as he has every right to be. Once again he's been betrayed
by someone he thought he could rely on, and it's bound to have thrown him through a loop. I get
that.

I'd wanted to explain all this on the way to hospital. I'd wanted to tell him how I'd felt, turning away
from him, knowing there was a good chance I might die. Knowing I might never see his face again;
knowing exactly what I could be losing. How it was only the thought of him, and of Gus, that gave
me the strength to get Lindsay through that hatch – thank fuck Boot hadn't sealed it up – and carry
her through the choking, blinding smoke, trusting rather than knowing that he and Boot would have
figured it out and got the door open. I wanted to tell him how much I fucking loved him. But talking
had been kinda difficult what with all the coughing and the subsequent wearing of an oxygen mask;
and Justin hadn't been talking either. He'd just sat beside me, pale and dishevelled, another bloody
bandage around his head. He'd held my hand, but he'd hardly said a word.

He hadn't met my eyes, either.

I remember telling him not to burn the house down before I got there, and wishing for the heaviest
snow in years; and I remember once warning him to be careful what he wished for, in case he got it.
I should have taken my own advice.

"What the fuck are we going to tell Gus?" Mel moans, burying her face in her hands, and bringing
my thoughts back to the present.

"The truth ... or at least, we'll be as honest as he can bear," I reply. "And we'll do it together.
Tomorrow."

Looks like I'll be doing a lot of talking.

Fried lungs or not, I wish I had a fucking joint.

JUSTIN

Everything was fine up until I saw that look on his face when Boot told him he had to call the cops.
Well ... not fine, exactly; not with us both nearly dying, and dealing with what Lindsay had done to
Gus as well as me, and the studio burning down. But all I'd really cared about was the fact that we'd
made it out alive and relatively unscathed, and I was so fucking thankful for that.

Then I saw that he'd realised the full implications of what had happened ... that Lindsay was going to
end up inside one way or another. I saw how much the idea hurt him.

It's not that I didn't understand; fuck, if someone told me I'd have to give evidence against Daph and
maybe send her to gaol, I'd be sick too. And no matter what Lindsay's done, the thought of her
ending up as new meat to some bull- dyke lag isn't an image that gives me any satisfaction. I learnt
how pointless vindictiveness was when I shoved a gun in Chris Hobbs' mouth.
Lindsay. I can't even begin to work out how I feel about her. I don't want to hate her ... I don't want to hate anyone ... but how else am I supposed to feel about someone who has deliberately undermined my relationship with Brian for years? About someone who was prepared to compromise her son's health in order to further her own ends? Who tried to fucking kill me because she couldn't get rid of me any other way? And yet none of that hurts so much as the fact that all the time she pretended to be my friend, my advisor. I'm used to being hated, but it's always been by homophobes ... my father, my teachers, Hobbs, Stockwell. At least their hatred was open and honest. Lindsay betrayed me in a way I never thought possible, and I'll never forgive her. But that doesn't mean I wish she'd died ... I know I came across like a petulant, selfish brat at Britin, bitching at Brian about saving her, but I didn't mean it. I understood he couldn't run away and leave her there - fuck, I'd been trying to get her out myself, and I had more reason than him to hate her.

I'd been scared when the studio went up, but it was nothing compared to the terror I felt when I thought Brian was going to burn in it. That terror had been replaced by euphoria when I realised he wasn't. But then, when we were both safe, my joy had morphed into something else: something like fury. At Brian, because he'd risked himself for her. Because he'd been prepared to leave me alone, to face the rest of my life without him; because he'd been prepared to leave Gus without a father ... probably as an orphan. Pissed that he'd put her first. And yeah, that old resentment reared its head: my exclusion from the Grand Fellowship of Brian, Michael and Lindsay, because their bonds had been forged in the past, not the future; and they were more binding than any more recent ties.

I've always understood this; I've always accepted it. Maybe I don't like it, but I can live with it. But somehow, understanding that didn't help. I resented the fuck that he hesitated, that her welfare should have even been worthy of consideration at that point. I was scared, and I was angry, so I yelled at him.

I listened while he talked briefly to Carl, and I gave my own version when Brian handed the phone over to me. Then Brian took the phone back and asked Carl to please keep Debbie in the dark, at least until tomorrow. Carl promised he would, although he must have known Deb would give him all kinds of holy hell when she found out what was going on.

And all the time I was getting more and more freaked, and more and more angry. I couldn't even stand to look in Lindsay's direction. My heart was racing erratically, and my mouth kept filling with saliva so that I had to keep swallowing, and that made me feel nauseous. Boot wrapped us in blankets and served us with tea, and all the while he kept shooting worried little glances at me. I resented the fuck out of that, too. I was glad when the fire truck showed up and distracted him.

Not long after that an ambulance battled its way up the drive, and the medics carried out their assessments and rendered basic first aid before bundling Brian, Lindsay and I inside and ferrying us back to Pittsburgh.

I sat beside Brian and he kept trying to talk to me even though I could see it hurt every time he took a breath; but then he began to deteriorate and he started making that horrible, hacking cough again, so the medic fitted an oxygen mask over his face. I held his hand and tried to hold back tears again; I hadn't forgotten the terror I'd felt when I thought he was trapped in the burning studio, and mostly I was still just scared for him. But another part of me blamed him, because his smoke-filled lungs were his own fault – just like his burned hand wasn't a badge of honour, it was an emblem of his foolhardiness.

When we finally arrived safely at Allegheny we were whisked into different cubicles while the doctors did their thing. I answered their questions, let them peer into my eyes and ears, squeezed their hands when asked and counted raised fingers. They took blood samples and assessed my
coordination. They did a CAT scan. Eventually they let me take off the stupid neckbrace the medics had insisted I wear, and allowed that I might have been lucky again. But they were still insisting I had to remain under observation.

And all the time I was worried sick about Brian. I managed to sweet-talk one of the nurses, a pretty little brunette called Josie, into going to find out how he was doing; I was on tenterhooks until she returned to say that he seemed to be suffering from nothing more serious than smoke inhalation, but they were keeping him in overnight to make sure he didn't develop any adverse reactions. After that I managed to relax a little, and once I was installed in my room I wrote him a note, which Josie agreed to take to him: *Glad you're OK. Wanted to come see you, but they won't let me out of bed. : ( . He sent one back: *Neither will I. ; D. I'm not allowed up either, so I'll see you in the morning. Sweet dreams, Sunshine.*

In a way I was glad. I didn't want to see him right then; I wanted a little distance. I needed to work through all the shit going through my head. But first I had a couple of visitors.

Carl, looking tired and upset; he gave me a brief summary of his talk with Brian, and reassured me that Lindsay was under arrest and would be taken into custody as soon as the hospital released her. He patted my shoulder in his kind, gruff way, told me I'd had a lucky escape, shook his head heavily and predicted that Debbie would break her heart. He said that I'd need to make a formal statement, and that if I didn't feel up to going to the station he'd come to the Loft or Britin.

I told him I'd be fine.

Next came Mel. She was quiet and subdued ... shocked, I guess you could call it. She hung round my neck and cried a little; told me how sorry she was, how she'd never imagined Lindsay would be capable of such a thing. I managed a smile, and told her it wasn't her fault and not to worry. I asked how Gus was; she assured me that he was well and that the doctors expected a full recovery. I told her to give him a kiss for me.

But all the time I was numb; I couldn't feel Carl's sympathy, or Mel's regret. All I could feel was disbelief that the cosy, secure world I had been building with Brian had been pulled out from under my feet ... again.

Now I'm alone at last and the lights have dimmed, and the bustle has subsided into the usual quiet hospital night time murmur. The nurse will be round soon, to wake me and make sure I haven't slipped into a coma in my sleep: I know the drill.

Somehow I don't think she need bother. I don't think I'll be sleeping.

No, I'm lying here thinking about why I'm freaking, and what's really making me wonder if Brian and I have a future together.

It's nothing to do with my jealousy.

I know how much Brian loves me; I'm only too well aware how much I love him. But the thing I long for more than anything else ... for him to look on me as his equal ... that seems as elusive a prospect as ever.

I could have helped him with Lindsay. Together we might have got her out of the studio before the fire blocked the door, and he'd never have had to risk his life escaping through the stable. But once again he'd made my decision for me, as though I was some kid who had to be protected, not as a man with the right to make his own choices. He'd treated me like he would Gus, not his partner. So he'd told Boot ... oh, sorry, my hired bodyguard ... to carry me out of harm's way like a poor little
helpless wife while he got on with the manly heroic shit.

It seems that, no matter how much respect Brian might have for me intellectually, emotionally he will always react in the same way. I'll always be twelve years younger than him, even when I'm fucking fifty. No matter what he promises, he will always assume he knows the best way to take care of me, and my opinion won't ever come into it. After all, he'd pushed me away again. No matter how you look at it, that's what it comes down to; despite his swearing (on Gus' life, no less!) that it would never happen again; despite my promise never to come back again if it did, he'd still done it.

This has always been the cause of every rift between us. I'd believed things had changed after New York, but I realise now that they never will. What I have to decide is, am I prepared to live the rest of my life as a junior partner, with Brian paying lip service to the notion of consultation and equality but ultimately calling all the shots? Is that the kind of relationship I want? No matter how much he loves me and I love him, no matter how good we are together ... can I really ever respect myself if I live with him on those terms?

TBC
BRIAN

I stand at the door of the playroom watching Gus colouring posters with a couple of other kids. He's still wearing his PJ's but he looks his usual chatty, enthusiastic self, so I guess he can't be feeling too bad.

I slide onto a chair next to Mel, who's wearily sipping a coffee from the vending machine. "Hey."

She looks round in surprise. "Brian?" She takes in my appearance. "Have they discharged you already?"

"Not really." The first thing I'd done when I'd awoken was to ask after Justin and Gus, and I'd been assured that they'd both spent peaceful, uneventful nights; Gus was expected to be discharged today. Justin's neurologist would make a further assessment before deciding whether to release him or not, but the signs so far were good. So I'd abandoned the pathetic excuse for breakfast the nurse had served me, struggled into the clean clothes Boot had thoughtfully sent with us and headed off to see my two favourite boys. "I just couldn't hang around waiting for the doctor ... I wanted to come and check on Gus. And I wasn't about to let my son see me in one of those fucking gowns with my butt hanging out."

She manages a small smile. "Heaven forefend. How's the hand?"

"Hurts like a mother-fucker," I tell her cheerfully. I'd gotten off lightly, and I know it.

"Have you seen Justin yet?"

I shake my head. "He's my next stop. But I never got to see Gus last night, and I promised I'd come as soon as I could. He doesn't look any the worse for wear."

She shrugs. "You know kids ... they bounce right back." She fidgets uncomfortably. "He asked for Linds ... as soon as he woke up."

"Fuck." Of course he would. "What did you tell him?"

"I didn't know what to say," she replies sadly. "I didn't want to upset him, but I didn't want to lie to him either. I just told him that Linds was sick too, and she was here in hospital like him. He wants to see her." She looks at me with tired, worried eyes. "Should he see her? Will the police even allow it? Shit, Brian, what the fuck are we going to do?"

"We take it a step at a time," I answer. "There are going to be a lot of changes, that's for sure. I take it he'll live with you and JR?"
She gives me a look.

"Okay, stupid question. But we need to keep things as normal as possible ... school, home, everything. The important thing is to make him understand that none of us are going anywhere; what happens to Lindsay is out of our hands now, but we can sure as hell make certain Gus has all the love and support he needs to get through it."

"You really think it's that easy?" she demands. "Do you honestly believe anything is going to compensate for losing his mother?"

"No," I tell her bluntly. "But it's the best we can do. And like you said, kids are tough. Gus will be alright."

She hangs her head and sniffs a little.

"Mel, it'll be okay." I reassure her. "Once Sanchez gives him the all-clear, we'll take him back to your place, sit him down, and explain what's going on. And then we'll deal with it, any way we have to." I pat her shoulder. "I promise you, I'll be there ... and I'll help anyway I can. No limits, no conditions. Whatever you and the kids need, Mel ... you got it."

She looks up and gives me a watery smile. "Never thought I'd hear the day you'd say that, Kinney. You're human after all ... Lindsay was right, damn her."

"Dadda!" Gus finally spots me and comes racing over. He leaps onto my lap and hugs me. "I've been sick! I puked over everything! It was gross!"

"I know, Sonny-Boy. That's why I've come to see you ... to make sure you're alright."

"Why is your hand all wrapped up?" he asks, examining the bandage. "Have you hurt it?"

"I just burned it a little," I tell him. "It's nothing to worry about."

"I burned my hand once," he tells me earnestly. "Momma made me hold it in cold water until it was better. You should do that too, Dadda. Then it won't hurt so much."

I'm really glad I've spent all these years schooling my face to behave itself, because I'm sure none of my emotions show when I smile at him. "I'll remember that, Gus. Now why don't you show your old man what you've been colouring?"

His face lights up; he slides off my lap and drags me over to the table where the other kids are still busy with their crayolas. I follow willingly. Giving him a little of my time is the least I can do. Let him be happy for a while longer ... before Mel and I pull his little world apart.

"What the fuck do you mean, he's discharged himself?" I snap at the duty doctor. He's tall, fortyish, good looking. I'd fuck him, but not now. "You mean you just let him walk out?"

He folds his hands on the table. "We advised against it, at least until he'd been assessed again. But he was adamant. He signed a disclaimer. And since he's of legal age and of sound mind, we had no way of stopping him. This is a hospital, Mr. Kinney, not a prison."

I glare at him. "You'd better not be as ineffectual with Ms. Petersen ... you know, the one who put us in here in the first place?"

He raises an eyebrow. "She has a police guard to make sure she doesn't abscond, Mr. Kinney. She is
under arrest. Mr. Taylor isn't."

I can't fucking believe this. I can feel the headache building again behind my eyes.

"When did he leave?" I demand.

He shrugs a little. "An hour ago ... maybe more."

"And nobody thought to tell me? Christ!" I explode.

"We were under no obligation to, Mr Kinney. As I told you before, Mr. Taylor is an adult. He can choose for himself whom he wants to inform about his movements."

I want to smack him right on his straight, sanctimonious nose. "If anything happens to him ... if he has a stroke or falls down the fucking stairs or something ... I'm going to sue the fuck out of this hospital!"

He smiles thinly. "Since you're not a relative and Pennsylvania doesn't recognise civil partnerships, I think that a highly unlikely scenario, don't you?"

Smug bastard. I hope his WASPy wife is even now spread-eagled buck-naked on the dining table, being rammed senseless by the delivery man.

"Guvnor!" Boot sounds pleased. "You on your way home?"

"No. Not yet." I pace round the Loft, searching for any sign that Justin has been there. "I promised Mel I'd take Gus home with her ... we want to break the news about Lindsay to him together."

"Don't envy you that one, guv. I expect the nipper'll take it hard."

"So do I." I go to the bedroom and cross to the closet, sliding back the door and running my eyes over Justin's clothes, trying to check if there's anything missing. To my relief everything still seems to be in place ... but where the fuck is he?

I sit down on the bed. "Boot ... I've kinda lost Justin."

"You what?"

"I don't know where he is. He discharged himself from the hospital first thing this morning ... I thought he'd come back to the Loft, but I can't see that he's been here."

I'm dying for a cigarette but I've discovered trying to light a Zippo with my left hand is virtually impossible. "I'm fucking worried, Boot."

"What, do you think something's happened to him?"

"No. Not physically. I think he might have figured this is all too much effort."

There's a pause. "How do you mean, guv?"

"Christ! How do you think? This shit just keeps going on and on ... how much more can he take? And it's not going to get any better, because Lindsay's not going to be around for the foreseeable future, so it's going to get really complicated with Gus. He's going to be much more involved in our lives than I ever thought about. And Justin ... he told me he didn't want a kid, that there were too many things he still wanted to do ... what if he's decided it's all too much baggage and he's just decided to cut his losses?" I draw my breath too quickly and start coughing.
Boot waits until I've got myself under control. "I think you might be over-reacting a little bit, guv."

"Oh, you think?" I wheeze. "You saw him last night ... and then in the ambulance, he wouldn't hardly speak to me. And if there's one thing I know, a silent Sunshine is not a happy Sunshine. It means he's making his mind up about something."

"Guv ..."

"You might think you know him, but you don't. He says I'm stubborn ... I'm nothing compared to him once he digs his heels in. If he's really made up his mind he doesn't want me ... or at least, me and Gus ... then I've already lost him! I've fucking lost him!" I hear my voice break a little, and I bite the inside of my cheek, hard.

"Guv, calm down. Don't be a plonker." He actually rumbles with laughter. "You poofs ... always the drama. Did it occur to you that the lad might just be a bit rattled and might need a bit of time to himself?"

"Then why the fuck didn't he say something? Why just walk out of the hospital like that? The little twat didn't even wait for the doctor to check him out!"

"Did you?"

I glare at the cell in my left hand. "We're not talking about me. There's nothing wrong with me. I only stayed in the fucking hospital because they were keeping Justin in."

"Maybe he thought you wouldn't let him go."

"Then he'd have been fucking right!"

Boot snorts. "Maybe he's coming here."

Please God. "Yeah. That's why I'm calling. I need to ask you a favour ... another favour."

"Go for it."

"I can't come down yet ... I've got to talk to Gus before I do anything else ... I can't just leave it for Mel to deal with. I promised. I know you've probably got a lot of other things to do, but is there any way you can hang on at Britin until I get there ... just in case he shows up?"

Boot sighs heavily. "I think I gave you the answer to that the first time I met you. If I could drag my soddin' arse all the way to Pittsburgh to look out for the lad, I'm sure can hang around here for a few more hours."

I close my eyes with relief. "Thank you. And not only for this ... for everything else, Boot. Most of all for getting Justin and me out of there last night."

"I watch out for me own, guv. I told you that. You don't need to thank me."

"Well, I am. I owe you big time ... I won't forget it."

He laughs. "I'll call it in one day. Now go talk to your nipper. If the lad turns up here, I'll see to him. Don't worry, guv."

He hangs up.

I stuff my cell into the back pocket of my jeans and get up, heading for the steps. I figure I can get a
light for my cigarette from the gas jet on the hob, if I don't set my fucking hair on fire in the process. I can smoke it while I'm waiting for Mel's call to say that she and Gus have left hospital; then I'll get a cab and join them at her place. And once I've spoken to Gus, I'll go and find Justin and I'll ... deal with it.

I'm not letting him go. That just isn't an option.

One step at a time, Kinney. One step at a time

TBC
I don't have a problem getting a cab; the ploughs have been out all night and the roads are pretty clear. When we reach the cemetery I ask the cabbie to wait, and start off in what I think is the right direction. It's the first time I've been here since the funeral; the first time I've seen it under a shroud of snow. It takes me a while to find Mom's grave, and then I crouch to brush away the snow so I can read the inscription on the graceful, simple grey stone. Dad hadn't consulted me on the design, and I'm quietly pleased and relieved that he'd chosen something so fitting.

JENNIFER TAYLOR

1962-2006

Loving wife, mother and daughter

At least he got something right.

It's very still; even the sound of traffic seems muffled. The only living thing I can see is a huge black crow perched on a cross nearby, stark and ominous amid the snow, watching me with a fierce, inimical eye.

I breathe in the fragrance from the small bunch of scarlet carnations I'm carrying and then lay them against the headstone.

They were always her favourites.

Mom, I think, this is so fucked up. I don't know what to do.

The crow gives a caw like derisory laughter and leaps into the air, its black wings clapping.

I wait a little, but if I'm hoping for any other response I'm disappointed. No words, no comfort: just the white, empty silence. I stand up and follow my tracks back towards the gates and the waiting cab. When I look back I can still see the carnations lying there, like blood spilt on the snow.

As the cab turns into the drive at Britin I can see Boot's truck still parked in front of the house, so I tell the cabbie to stop, give him his fare plus a hefty tip and trudge quickly down towards the stables, walking in the tracks made by the fire truck.

The temperature has risen and the snow is beginning to melt; the stink of smoke hangs heavy in the chill, dank air.
The stable yard has been swept clear by the fire crew's hoses, and the cobbles are slick with dirty slush. The building itself is just a blackened shell – the stables where Gus' pony was going to live, the studio Brian had built for me. My brushes ... my paints. My canvasses. All gone. Charred rafters stick out of the debris at odd angles, and I can make out the shape of the double sink, hanging forlornly against what's left of the far wall.

Somewhere among the ashes is Brian's painting ... and I think that hurts the worst of all.

"What a bloody mess." Boot's voice behind me makes me jump; I turn to see him walking slowly towards me. "I heard the cab ... saw you come down here. You alright, Sunshine?"

I shrug, turning away from him.

Boot stops beside me and surveys the ruins. "You can build it again."

"Yeah," I agree bitterly. "Brian can build it good as new. Except it won't be the same. Money can't put everything back the way it was."

"No. But sometimes it can be better."

I don't answer.

He rubs his big hands together and blows on them. "Well, you stay and freeze your nuts off if you want. I'm going back to the house."

I watch him stride away from me, and suddenly I realise I'm acting like a sulky kid. So I follow him slowly back up the track, and by the time I reach Britin he's in the kitchen sipping a mug of coffee. I try not to be pissed that there's a second cup already made for me.

I pull off my soaked trainers and socks and sit down at the breakfast table, wrapping my hands around the steaming mug to warm them. Boot sits on a chair at the other end, eyeing me curiously.

"You ought to give the guv a bell ... let him know you're alright. He's a bit frazzled."

"He called you?" So that's why Boot's still here. "Don't tell me, you're supposed to recapture me."

He frowns. "You're a man, not a bloody puppy. You can go where you want, my son."

"If Brian's so concerned, why isn't he here?"

"Because he has to go and talk to Gus," Boot replies simply. "With ... what's her name? Mel. He's got to explain to the lad why his mum isn't coming back."

Fuck. I hadn't even thought about that ... of course Brian would take the burden of breaking the news to Gus himself. I can't begin to imagine how hard that will be for both of them. And here I am, moping and feeling sorry for myself, causing more problems for him when I should be back in Pittsburgh helping. Poor Brian. And poor Gus. What a shit morning for both of them. I hang my head. "Maybe she was right," I mutter.

Boot lifts his eyebrows. "Who?"

"Lindsay. She said Brian would be a better father without me around to distract him."

He snorts. "I wouldn't give tuppence for anything she says. She's a wrong'un if ever I saw one."

"Doesn't mean she isn't right."
Boot puts down his coffee and folds his arms. "Don't talk rubbish, Justin. If it weren't for you, I doubt he'd have anything to do with the lad at all."

My head jerks up at that insult. "Don't you dare say that! Brian's a wonderful father ... he loved Gus from the moment he saw him! You don't know ... you weren't even there!"

"Sometimes it takes an outsider to see things clearly," Boot replies calmly. "I've watched the guv around other people, and I've watched the way he is around you. Everything he's learned about loving he's got from you, my son."

"You're wrong. All I did was show him how he already felt ... inside."

"And without you, that's where it would have stayed. Inside." He looks at me steadily. "You know what's frightening him? That you might not want to have the nipper around."

I stare at him. "Huh?"

"You said something to him about not wanting kids. He thinks that now he's got more responsibility that way, you might have got cold feet, so to speak."

"But I love Gus!" I protest, stunned by the accusation. "He's part of Brian, how could I not want him around?"

"I told you, he's a little frazzled. He can't think of any other reason you'd take off without a word like that."

"It was nothing to do with Gus!" I jump to my feet. "Will you drive me back? I have to talk to him. I can't let him think that about me!"

Boot doesn't move. "As soon as I've finished me coffee," he says easily. "And in the meantime, why don't you tell me just what the bloody hell's got you so wound up, Sunshine?"

I stare at him. How can I make someone like Boot understand how I feel ... someone who's never known a moment's doubt, a moment's fear? Who's so strong, so secure in his ability to take care of himself and everyone else? How can I explain what it's like to be trapped in a 5'8, 140lb body like mine? It's not my fault I'm blond. It's not my fault I've got blue eyes. It's not my fault I still get carded at bars. I'm not saying I've never taken advantage of those assets, especially when I was younger; but for years now I've only thought of them as a curse. I've always been looked on as the weakest, the youngest, the most vulnerable and Boot can have no idea how that feels. How can this confident, capable mountain of a man even begin to understand what it's like to be me?

I sit back down. "He'll push me away again. Like he always does. If that's what he believes, he'll make the decision for me."

Boot snorts. "Of course he won't. Don't be a dick head."

"Ha! That's how much you know! You ... the guy who dragged me out of the studio like I was some fucking child just because Brian told you to!"

"Ah." He sits back casually, stretching out his long legs. "So it's your pride that's hurt."

I bang my fist on the table. "Yes! Fucking right it's hurt! It's bad enough that the man I want to spend the rest of my life with doesn't think I have the intelligence or the experience or even the right to make up my own mind ... he even buys my fucking friends for me! To make sure poor little Justin stays out of trouble!"
Boot blinks. "Where did you get that idea?"

"It's true, isn't it?" I demand. "Tell me he isn't paying you to watch out for me!"

Boot's gaze doesn't waver. "The guvnor is not paying me to watch out for you," he says emphatically.

"Liar!"

Boots eyes flash. "You're treading on dangerous ground, Sunshine," he warns. "I don't let many people call me that and get away with it. I'll make an allowance for you because you're me mate and I know you've been through a lot, but don't push your luck."

"You think I'm afraid of you?" I snap. "I've been threatened all my life, so don't flatter yourself! And you're not the first person I trusted who sold me out, either!" I get up and head for the door, meaning to get some dry shoes and socks and get out of here, but Boot's voice stops me.

"Did she put that into your head, too? That bloody Lindsay?"

I turn and look back at him.

"Seems to me that woman is too fond by half of giving people ideas," he says quietly. He studies my face for a moment, then sighs heavily. "Alright, this is how it happened. The guvnor asked me to move here and help him look after you, that first night I came to Pittsburgh. I told him no, I don't take payment to take care of me mates. So he said he could give me a job at Babylon, if I'd help him out too. I told him it wouldn't work, because my loyalties were to you, not him – conflicting interests, as they say. He said that was the way he wanted it, and if the time ever came when I had to choose between you and him, I was to choose you. He insisted on it. And that was the way I played it." He smiles a little. "Justin, we were mates long before I met him. I thought he was a prat. I've learned different since ... but that doesn't mean I've changed sides. I get paid for working at Babylon and I get me expenses, like diesel for running about. I don't get paid for any baby-sitting."

I look at his blunt, honest face and all I can feel is shame. "Fuck, Boot." I go back to the table and sit down. "I'm sorry ... I know you're not a liar. It was just ... what she said made sense. It's the way Brian thinks ... that money can buy anything. I'm sorry." I can't look at him; but when he speaks, his voice is kind.

"Don't take on, son. I've been called a lot worse, and I know you didn't mean it. But you and the guv ... fuck me, but you're a right pair. I can see why you've lasted so long ... nobody else would put up with either of you. Can't you just trust each other and leave it at that?"

"We do," I protest. "It's just ... well, when things go wrong, Brian pushes me away and I let him. And no matter how hard we try, we keep doing it. I'm beginning to wonder if it's ever going to change."

Boot frowns. "Hold on, you've lost me. When did the guvnor push you away?"

I stare at him. "You were there ... in the studio, of course."

He raises his eyebrows quizzically.

"He didn't wait ... he didn't give me a chance to help him. He just acted."

Boot's expression is grave. "So what you said ... about him not respecting you as an equal ... that's really what you thought it was about?"
"Wasn't it?"

"No it was not!" Boot sits up with a jerk. "The man was trying to make sure you were safe, for crying out loud!"

"He didn't have the right to make that decision!"

"Yes, he did!" His eyes are angry. "All of this is his mess, not yours! Of course he wanted you out of there! He loves you, doesn't he?"

"But I want him to respect me ..."

"Fuck me, Sunshine, give it a rest. He does respect you. More than anyone he's ever met."

"Then he should have given me the right to choose whether I left or not!"

Boot puffs out his cheeks. "Okay, I know the guvnor hasn't got a good track record where you're concerned, and I don't blame you for being wary. But in this case you're being unjust, because you're putting thoughts in his head that weren't there."

"But he ...

"You're not getting it." Boot sighs again and shakes his head. "Right. Let's start from the beginning. You take a man - any man. His ... partner ... is the usually the most precious thing he has, and I don't see it makes any difference whether that partner is a bird or another bloke. The sex doesn't come into it. Being a man, it's only natural he's going to want to protect them and keep them safe ... and to think he knows what's best for them, that goes without saying. That's just instinct. So what you're complaining about ... well, it's not a Brian thing. It's more of a bloke thing."

I glare at him. "Meaning I'm somehow excluded from that generalisation? You don't think I'm a real man too?"

"No," he replies patiently. "I know that you are. You just don't look it. But the guy ... he may be a poof, but he comes across all male. If I'd have met him as a stranger, I'd have sworn blind he was as straight as I am." He drums his fingers briefly on the table. "The first time you saw him, what attracted you to him?"

The guy must be insane. "The fact that he was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen?"

"Right. So ... what if he'd looked the same, but he'd acted and dressed like your Emmett. Like a nancy. Would you still have gone for him?"

"Fuck, no," I shudder. "That is the most horrible idea I've ever heard."

"You're not wrong," he chuckles. "That'll give me nightmares for a while! But what I'm trying to say is; you like the fact that he's dominant. That he's got bottle. That he could pass as a straight man."

"Of course. I'm not denying it."

"Then don't be surprised when he acts like it! He loves you the way he does, right? The only way he knows how. You wanted him to commit to you, and he has; and it's all or nothing with him. You should know that better than anyone. So if you're going to be offended every time he worries about you and tries to look out for you, maybe you shouldn't have started all this in the first place."

I realise my mouth is open and shut it hurriedly.
"Think of it like this. You're a well brought-up lad: I bet you always hold a door open for a lady, or lend a hand if you see one struggling to carry something. Or you stand up when one comes into a room. Do you do it because you think they're somehow inferior to you ... weaker or something?"

"No, of course not."

"Well, some women think you do, and they won't thank you for it. They take it as an insult to their equality. Luckily, most are sensible enough to see it for what it is ... a mark of respect. Means a bloke's got manners. So if your man pays you that respect ... take it in the way it's meant, my son. Don't go complaining about how much it demeans you."

"So that's it?" I ask hotly. "I should just resign myself to being Brian's little wife?"

He gives me a look. "The only person who thinks that is you, Sunshine. Do you honestly think a man like him would have fallen for you in the first place if he saw you that way? He'd have gone for someone like that little chum of his, Michael, if he wanted a bloody doormat. But the guv doesn't fancy nancies any more than you do."

Oh God. He's telling me what I know, deep down. I'm acting like an idiot in front of this man. I look down at my hands. "You think I'm being stupid, don't you?"

Boot laughs. "No, I don't. I understand more than you think. It's the bloke thing again. You're at the age where you need to assert yourself ... you're not a kid anymore, but you haven't been adult long enough to feel sure where you fit in. And God knows you've taken more knocks in your few years than most people go through in a lifetime. So it's only natural you overreact if you think someone's taking the piss. The trouble is, sometimes it makes you pick a fight when there's really nothing to be fighting about."

I manage a smile. "You mean I have to prove I've got balls."

He snorts. "What you have to realise is that you don't have to prove that to anybody ... least of all the guv."

And you know what? He's absolutely right. Brian once told me I had to grow some balls, and I did. And now I'm going to pull them up and take them back where they belong.

TBC
CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

I was lying in a burned-out basement with the full moon in my eyes,
I was hoping for replacement when the sun burst through the skies.
There was a band playing in my head, and I felt like getting high,
I was thinking about what a friend had said, I was hoping it was a lie.

After The Gold Rush – Neil Young

BRIAN

"But if Momma's sick, why can't the doctors give her pills to make her better?"
"They will, Sweetie," Mel replies soothingly. "It just might take a while, that's all."
"Why can't she come home? Will she make us sick, too?"
"No, Gus," I tell him. "It's not that kind of sickness."

He looks at me with scared eyes and my stomach knots. "Is my Momma gonna die?" He gulps, and then the tears come.

"No, Baby, no." Mel hugs him against her and he buries his face in her lap. "Momma's not in any danger, it's nothing like that." She rocks him gently.

"Then what's wrong?" he wails. "Why can't I see her?"

I get up and cross over to them, crouching down so that I'm on his level. "Gus, look at me." I tug his hands away from his face. "Look at me, son."

Eventually he does, and I see his mother's eyes peering back at me.

"You know your old man never breaks a promise, right? Well, I promise you your Momma's not going to die. And you will see her. I'm not gonna say tomorrow or even the next day, but it'll be soon."

"And then she can come home?" he asks hopefully.

"No, Gus. I'm not gonna lie to you; it'll be a long time before that happens."

"Why?" He's beginning to sob again.
I settle myself more comfortably. This is the hardest part. "Because your Momma did something wrong. Something to Justin. She tried to hurt him."

"Juss?" He looks bewildered now as well as terrified. "Why would Momma want to hurt Juss?"

"Because she thought he wasn't good for you ... or for me." I stroke back his hair. "She ... she wanted to get rid of him, to get him out of our lives."

"But I love Juss ... I thought Momma did, too."

"It's hard to explain, Sonny Boy. You see, the sickness your Momma has, it's not something you can see, it's not something you can put a bandage on. It's inside her head, and it gives her bad thoughts and makes her do wrong things. She thought Justin was taking you and me away from her, so she tried to stop him."

He screws his face up. "But how could Juss take me away? He loves me. Didn't Momma understand that?"

I nod. "I think she did ... and that was what worried her. She was afraid that you loved Justin more than you did her."

"But that's silly!" he cries. "I don't love anyone more than Momma, not even Mommie or you!"

"I know you don't. But that's what I'm trying to tell you ... it was the sickness making her think that. That was why she felt she had to do something."

"Is Juss okay?" he whispers.

"Yes, he's fine. Boot and I got there and stopped your Momma. That's how my hand got hurt. But Justin's studio burned down, and so did the stables."

"My stables?" he starts crying again. "Where I was going to have my pony?"

"I'm afraid so," I tell him gently. "But we'll build it again, so don't worry. You'll still have your pony, I promise." I take his arms and lift him off Mel's lap. "Now I want you to dry your eyes and listen to me for a moment, because this is important. Can you do that for me?"

He nods, and Mel digs out a tissue and wipes his eyes and nose, and he sits looking at me sorrowfully.

"I know this isn't going to be easy for you, Gus. I know you're going to miss your Momma: sometimes you'll be sad, and sometimes you'll be angry. That's okay. Everyone will understand. But it's going to be hard for us, too ... especially for your Mommie. She's got JR to look after, and you too, because you'll be living here with her from now on. So I want you to be as brave as you can, and help her as much as you can, because she's going to be relying on you a lot. Do you think you're up to it, Sonny Boy?"

Gus glances up at Mel, and then he straightens his little shoulders. "Yes, Dadda. I'll take care of Mommie and JR until Momma comes back."

Fuck, he's a little trooper. Christ knows where he gets it from. "Good man. Now you get your coat on, and we'll go and get all your stuff. Then we'll pick up JR from Uncle Mikey, and then you can get settled in your room."

"Okay, Dadda." He manages a teary smile. "She'll get better, won't she?"
I want to tell him yes more than anything I've ever wanted in my life. Instead, I opt for the truth. "I hope so, son."

He stands up, and I hug him close. "Don't forget, Gus," I tell him. "You've got a big family, and they all love you. You're not going to be alone; we'll all get through this together."

He sniffs a little, but he nods. I watch his little figure as he walks slowly away, then I turn to Mel.

"Good job, Dadda." She smiles sadly. "Thank you for being here, Brian."

"I told you I would be." I put my hand on her shoulder. "We will get through this, Mel. Don't doubt it."

"Do we have a choice?" She gets up as Gus comes back carrying his coat, and starts helping him on with it. I go to grab my jacket, and as I pick it up my cell starts to ring. I fumble it out of my pocket with my left hand and glance at the ID – it's Boot.

My heart speeds up as I answer. "Yeah?"

"I'm down at the stables," Boot says quietly. "He's here."

Thank God. Thank fucking God. I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment. "Is he alright?"

"Haven't spoken to him yet, but he looks fine."

I move over to the window out of earshot. "I can't leave yet ... Gus is pretty upset. I have to help Mel get his things over, then I'll grab a cab. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"You stay put, guv," Boot replies. "I'll bring him back to the Loft when I've had a word with him. You do what you have to ... don't worry about us."

He hangs up and I let out a long, slow breath, relieved that I can now fully concentrate on the task ahead of me. Boot will bring Justin back. He said so.

I don't doubt it for a second. I daren't.

JUSTIN

"Make yourself at home, Sunshine. I'll just grab a shower and throw on some clean clothes, then I'll run you over to the Loft." He disappears out of the door and I stand looking around me.

I don't think I've ever been in a straight man's apartment, and I'm intrigued.

Boot's place is in an old brownstone not far from Liberty Avenue, and I suppose by Brian's standards it's pretty basic. There's a nod to modernity in the small TV and sound system standing on a coffee table in the corner, but the rest of the furniture is old and shabby. Actually, that's wrong ... most of this stuff I guess would be classed as antique, but it's all been too well-used to be valuable. Still the room is scrupulously clean and polished, and everything looks solid and comfortable; there's a vast leather armchair, battered and cracked but still welcoming; a small oak dining table with two chairs; and a piece I recognize from my grandmother's house, a Davenport – a small drop-fronted writing desk. An old-fashioned brass carriage clock sits on top of it, ticking steadily.

A pair of tall mahogany bookcases stand against the far wall, stuffed not only with books but what look like magazines, DVD's and videos. I wander over to the nearest and start checking the titles; a volume of Shakespeare rubs against a well-thumbed Steven King paperback, while a leather-bound
A Tale of Two Cities is sandwiched by Dracula and Huckleberry Finn. Rudyard Kipling props up T.S. Elliott. Boot's tastes are nothing if not eclectic. There are reference books too: a huge Atlas; a copy of The Native Birds of North America; folios of the Impressionists and the Pre-Rapaelites; a dog-eared Who's Who of Rock'nRoll.

I smile. Brian has that, too.

On the bottom shelf are a stack of old vinyl records, so I kneel down and pull out a few. I've heard of The Rolling Stones and Black Sabbath and Pink Floyd, but who the fuck are Yes? I stare at the cover of the album and my mouth falls open. The artwork is amazing ... Tales of Topographic Oceans, what kind of a stupid title is that? ... I turn it over, looking for the artist's name, and the design on the back is even better than the front, a shoal of tuna-like fish drifting over a dry sea-bed beneath a dark, star-filled sky. Roger Dean. Why the fuck haven't I heard of this guy? I make a mental note to check out the rest of his work as I put the album reluctantly away and stand up.

On top of the bookcases are several framed photographs. Some of them are black-and-white, and I guess are of Boot's family; a man and a woman, who might be his parents, standing arm-in-arm and smiling; a dark-haired girl in an old-fashioned school uniform; a photograph of what seems to be a party in a street – all the kids are wearing paper hats, sitting at what look like wooden trestle tables set up in the road, while smiling adults serve them plates of food. A lot of them seem to have Union Jack flags in their hands. I guess it must be at the end of the war or something. I wonder if any of the kids are Boot, but I don't think he's that old.

My gaze is drawn to the one colour photograph in the collection ... a stunning boy with black curls hanging almost to his shoulders and brown, long-lashed eyes. A beautiful, sensitive smile. If he's a relative of Boot's, I'd sure like to meet him ... although I'd perhaps on second thoughts I'd better keep him out of Brian's way. He might have been in his early teens when the photo was taken, but that would have been a while ago ... the kid's clothes are of the style Brian and Michael were wearing in that cheesy school photo, which would make him more Brian's age now.

I move over to the next bookcase to check out the photos there. These are obviously from Boot's career as a boxer, and I grin with delight as I see a publicity shot of him in a pair of what seem to me very revealing boxing shorts, his hands gloved, posed as though he were sparring; his hair, black and thick then, flopping over one eye. He's scowling menacingly, his nose already broken; but fuck, he had a fit body when he was young!

There's another photograph of him, obviously taken in the ring at the end of a fight; he's covered with sweat and there's swelling around his eyes and blood on mouth, but he's grinning victoriously as he holds a huge, ornate belt of some kind above his head while men wearing suits stand around applauding.

And there's one of him dressed in a suit ... a fucking suit ... I didn't know they even made them that large ... and he's among a lot of other well-dressed people in what seems to be a garden, and he's sort of bending over the gloved hand of this lady wearing a Jaquie Onassis outfit with one of those little pill box hats on her head, and it looks funny because he's so tall and she's so tiny, and I wonder who she is because she seems really familiar ...

And oh... my ... God. It can't be. It is. It's her. Looking impossibly young and pretty, her hair dark instead of silver; but it's her. It's the Queen of fucking England and she's looking up at Boot, and she's smiling and saying something ... oh, my fucking God ...

"That was taken at a garden party at Buckingham Palace in 1974, just after I won this," Boot says behind me, making me jump out of my skin and spin round. He picks up the photo of him in the ring. "I don't expect you know what this is, Sunshine, so I'll tell you; it's a Lonsdale Belt."
"Oh." It still means nothing to me, although I can tell from the pride in Boot's voice that it's a big deal to him. However, he could have told me it was part of the Crown Jewels and it wouldn't have registered. I'm still too busy picking my jaw off the carpet. "You've met the Queen, Boot? I mean, obviously you have. It's just ... wow."

"And a proper lady she is, my son, and don't ever let anyone tell you any different," he says seriously.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

He grins, a little shyly. "Believe it or not, it's not the kind of topic that crops up in conversation. Besides, there were a lot of other people there ... the Queen holds garden parties every year, and all sorts of people get invited. Sportsmen, artists, writers, politicians, pop stars ... but a lot of ordinary folk too, like people who work for charities, or who have been recognised for serving the public. Most of them deserved to be there more than I did. I just won a few fights."

I can't take my eyes off the photo. "Oh my God, Emmett will just die!"

"Emmett won't, because you aren't going to tell him."

I swivel to look up at him. "Why wouldn't you want people to know? I would have thought you'd be proud!"

"I am ... and it's not that I don't want people to know ... it's just none of their business. Besides, it was a long time ago. I don't live in that world anymore." His heavy brows draw down. "People think it takes bottle to stand up in a ring, but it doesn't. You just don't have to mind getting hurt. I tell you, walking away from it was a bloody sight harder than fighting in the first place. Real courage ... that's a different thing, Sunshine." He moves over to the other bookcase and picks up the photo of the boy I'd been admiring. "Courage is what he had. That's me nephew, Andy. Never told you about him, did I?"

I shake my head. "Had?" I ask, picking up the past tense.

"He was what ... fourteen when this was taken? He was killed ... murdered, in fact ... when he was sixteen. He's been dead twenty-five years, more or less."

"Murdered?" I repeat stupidly.

Boot gives the glass a careful wipe and sets the frame back in position. "He was a dancer. While all the other lads wanted to be Paul Gascoigne or Gary Linneker, he wanted to be Nureyev. He went through all sorts of grief at school because the other boys thought he was a nancy ... you know, tripping him up, spilling drinks over his books, calling him names. Same sort of thing you went through, I expect." He gives me a quick glance. "He never let it get to him though; he was going to be a great dancer, he reckoned, and who knows? Maybe he would have made it. He had determination and dedication and talent enough, even for the ballet world. But he never got the chance to find out because he got beaten to death one night by some skinheads who took exception to the way he looked."

I gaze at the boy's ... Andy's ... beautiful face and feel my eyes tearing up. I had no idea. "God, Boot ..." I step close to him and give him a hug. "I'm so sorry ..."

He hugs me back. "You reminded me of him the first time I saw you, standing up for that tramp when that arsehole was pissing on him. That's exactly what Andy would have done ... and you reminded me of him in other ways, too; the way you smiled, the way you moved. You both had the
same love for anything that was beautiful in life. And you nearly died too; the difference was, you had the guvnor there and Andy didn't." He smiles at me. "He would have liked you. I suppose I wanted things to work out for you because they hadn't for him ... and I was prepared to go out of me way to make sure they did. Because people like you and Andy are important, my son ... you give hope to this miserable fucking world, because you never give up, no matter how bad it gets. You're always true to yourself, never mind what the rest of us think or do. And that's real bottle."

Well, at least I know the answer to why Boot has always been so protective of me. I'd always wondered. "That's why you got me out of the studio, wasn't it? Not because Brian told you to, but because of Andy. Otherwise you'd never have left him in that fire on his own."

He screws up his face. "Behave! You're always too quick to put yourself down, Sunshine. Just because I took to you at first because you reminded me, doesn't make you a substitute. Andy was the last thing on my mind that night, believe you me!"

I do. Boot has never given me the slightest reason not to. I think of the countless occasions he's lent his unstinted support from the first night I met him; of all the times he's uncomplainingly given of his generosity, his patience, his huge strength. The way he dispenses his simple, irrefutable wisdom with kindness and humour; of his unwavering sense of morality. I think he's the wisest man I've ever met. And I am so proud that he classes me as a friend.

"Boot ... I called you a coward. I can't believe I did that, and I am so ashamed of myself." I hold my hand out. "Will you please accept my apology?"

He throws his head back and laughs, and then grips my hand and shakes it. "Spoken like a man, my son, and accepted in the same way. And I'm sorry too, for manhandling you the way I did. I just didn't have time to argue the point with you." He pats me on the back. "Now let's get you back to the guvnor before he throws another wobbly. And Justin? Do me a favour. You two start communicating like sensible people, because I might not always be around to bang your heads together."

TBC
The sound of the Loft door sliding back is probably the most beautiful thing I've ever heard. I leap to my feet.

Justin stands just inside, unwinding his scarf. He looks nervous.

I don't give myself time to wonder if that's something I should be worrying about; I stride over and wrap my arms around him. To my relief he responds, and we stand holding each other while my heart rate drops back to normal.

"You okay?" I push back his hair, checking the white dressing taped above his left eyebrow. No sign of blood. "I was so fucking worried about you ..."

He nods. "I know. I'm sorry. I just had some things I had to work out, and I couldn't do it with everyone around ... I needed to be on my own for a while."

Uh. I feel that old familiar tightness in my chest, because I've heard those words too many times before, and they've never boded well for either of us. "So you went to Britin?"

He nods. "I wanted to see the studio." He pulls away from me so that he can shrug off his coat. "There's nothing left, Brian ... the stables, too."

"I know. Boot told me."

He stands fiddling with his coat, so I take it from him and toss it over the nearest chair, then turn and rest my arms on his shoulders. "What's up, Sunshine?"

"Before I went to Britin, I went to the cemetery. I took some flowers for Mom ... I needed to see her, too."

Fuck. Of course he did. Why the hell hadn't I thought of that? Sometimes I guess I forget just how young he is.

"Brian ... we have to talk."

Oh God. Oh God. Please don't let him drop this on me, not now. I'm not sure I can stand any more emotional shit, not after Gus. But if I've learnt anything over the last few years, it's that burying my head in the sand and hoping it will all go away has never been the answer to anything, so I take his hand and lead him to the couch, tugging him down beside me. "Okay, Sunshine. Tell me what's bothering you, and we'll work out what to do about it."
He looks at me with accusing blue eyes. "How could you think I wouldn't want Gus around?"

Fucking Boot. But at least he's cutting straight to the chase. I return his gaze. "Maybe because you told me you didn't want kids."

"No, I don't. But Gus isn't a baby, it's not like he needs his diapers changing every couple of hours. And I guess he'll be living with Mel most of the time, so it's not like you'll have to be a 24/7 father. But even if you were, do you really think it would make any difference? This isn't his fault, or yours... I can't believe you think that I'd leave you to deal with this by yourself! Just how selfish do you think I am?"

"I know that you're not, and that's why I'm concerned. I wouldn't want you to feel you had to take him on because of me." I clasp his neck with my left hand. "I can't blame you if you're having doubts... anyone would. Fuck, I'm enough for you to handle without having a kid in tow."

"Don't!" he snaps, swatting me away. "Don't you dare try to twist it round, Brian, so that you can justify yourself by making it seem like you're doing me a favour!"

I stare at him, completely confounded. "Don't do what?"

"Whatever you're planning in that devious mind of yours. Whatever cliff you're planning to hurl me off this time. Because I'm not fucking going!"

He's not going. He's not going? I look into his eyes and see nothing but steely determination. "I thought you'd already gone! What the fuck else was I supposed to think? You left hospital without a word... you didn't even bother to leave me a fucking message!"

He drops his eyes. "Yeah. That was pretty selfish. But I was hurt... and mixed up, I guess. I was angry that you were making my decisions again for me, after all you promised."

I gape at him. "When?"

"In the studio, when you told Boot to get me out. I wanted to stay and help you, but you didn't give me the chance."

"Fuck, Justin!" For such a bright boy he can be such a little twat sometimes. I'd be pissed if I wasn't ecstatic that he's not planning on leaving anytime soon. "Is that what the silent treatment was about? Have you any idea how I felt coming through that door, seeing flames everywhere and you in the middle of it with blood all over your face? Knowing you were hurt again? All I could think about was getting you out safe, not ruffling your feelings!"

He has the grace to look sheepish. "I know. Boot and I had a long talk. And I'm sorry for acting like an idiot, and worrying you, and not even thinking about you having to deal with Gus and everything. Is he okay?"

"He's been better."

He sighs. "Brian, I was wrong. I shouldn't have just taken off like that, I admit it." His eyes spark again. "But that doesn't give you the right to act like an idiot as well! You've got to believe me when I say Gus isn't a problem for me. I love the little guy, and I don't mind how much time he spends with us. So please, just don't do anything stupid about it because it won't work! I'm not running away again, whatever you do. So just don't put us through all that fucking crap again, okay?"

"Justin..." I run my hand through my hair. "I thought we'd got beyond this. I promised, didn't I?" I cautiously touch his thigh, half expecting him to bat me away again. I'm relieved when he doesn't.
"I'm not planning anything ... I swear to you the only thing on my mind was how I was going to persuade you to stay if you'd made up your mind to leave. I was going to tell you that whatever concerns you had, we could work them out ... that I was willing to do whatever it took ... anything in my power ... to make this a viable situation for you."

His eyes are wide and wondering. "You were?"

"Yes, twat." I reach for his neck again and lean my forehead against his. "I'm not letting you go ... I told you that. Seems you didn't believe me."

He scrunches his face adorably. "Old habits, I guess."

"Die hard. Yeah, I know." I pull him close again, needing contact. "But they will die, Sunshine, eventually. If we give it long enough, and trust each other."

His breath is warm against my cheek. "That's what Boot said."

"He did, huh?"

He nods. "He also said he understood why we'd been together so long, because nobody else would put up with us."

I laugh. "He's not wrong."

"And he said we should learn to communicate like normal people, because he might not always be around to knock our heads together."

"Boot is one smart mother-fucker."

"I know." He laughs. "I told you ... we talked a lot. We went back to his place so he could change, and ..." He glances up at me, his face suddenly lightening. "Brian, can you keep a secret?"

"Excuse me?" I'm insulted.

"No, this is really a secret. He doesn't want other people to know, but you're not other people." His eyes are sparkling. "Boot's met the Queen!"

"I've met a few myself."

"No, Brian!" He wacks my arm. "The Queen! As in Elizabeth the Queen of England Queen! I saw a photograph of him at Buckingham Palace!"

I grin. I half expect him to squee with delight. "No shit? What, did she give him a medal?"

"No. He said it was because he'd won a belt, or something."

"What, as a boxer?"

"Yeah. There was a photo of him holding it. He said it was a ... London Belt or something."

"Lonsdale? A Lonsdale Belt?"

"Yeah, that was it."

"Wow."
"So what is it?" Justin asks. "I could tell it was something big, the way Boot said it. And you look like you just shook hands with Patrick Swayze."

"It's not that big, actually, but it's very prestigious, especially in England. You know about Belts in boxing, right? Like the one they give the World Champion?"

He rolls his eyes. "Yes. Even I know that."

"Well, they award a Belt for every weight at national level too. In England, it's called the Lonsdale Belt... and if you defend your title twice successfully, you get to keep it. So Boot must have been British Heavyweight Champion before he had to give up fighting." I'm impressed; I hadn't realised Boot had been in that sort of league. I wonder if I can get a look at it?

"Oh my God," Justin says faintly. I pull back and study his face; he's not smiling anymore; he looks sick. "Oh my God ... and I insulted him!"

I raise my eyebrows.

"Brian ... do you realise I called an ex-British Heavyweight Champion a coward ... and a liar? And... and I accused him of selling out to you. Oh my God." He's panicking.

Uh huh. I stare at him. "Then you're a fucking braver man than I, Gunga Din."

He wacks me again. "That so isn't funny!" He jumps up and begins to pace distractedly. "I mean, he took it pretty well... except for the liar bit... and we shook hands and everything. But even so..." He stops dead. "And now I've told you about the Queen! Oh my God. He really will kill me."

"Justin, calm down." I struggle not to smile. "Come and sit here and tell me why the fuck you would say something like that to Boot? What the hell were you thinking?"

He flops beside me and looks at me despairingly. "I wasn't! I was upset! I called him a coward because he left you alone in the studio, and I thought he only did it because Lindsay said you'd hired him to look after me, and then when he denied it, I called him a liar!"

I figure he probably just used up a few more of his lives. "Think yourself lucky Boot isn't the kind of guy to hit someone so monumentally smaller than he is." I can feel the laughter building and press my lips together desperately.

"You think I don't?" He chews his thumb doubtfully. "I just hope he can forgive me."

"If he says he does, he does," I reassure him, and I'm confident that's the truth; even so, I'll call Boot as soon as I get the chance to make sure he's cool. "If it puts your mind at rest any, Boot's devotion to you is entirely emotional and in no way mercenary. I'm sure he won't hold it against you... Rocky." I start giggling. I can't help it.

"Bastard!" He dives on me and starts tickling me on the sides of my waist, which he knows is my weak spot. Normally I'd simply grab him and roll him over before he can do any damage, but having my right hand incapacitated takes away my advantage. I'm in dire danger of being reduced to a helpless, weeping wreck so I take refuge in low deceit; I shake my bandaged hand and yelp loudly and go for the sympathy vote. At once he's all concern and contrition, kissing and cooing over it in a highly satisfactory manner.

I let him pamper me for a few minutes. "You know what would really make me feel better?"

He looks up from his ministrations inquiringly.
"A joint would be really, really good."

"No, Brian." He shakes his head adamantly. "I'm not a doctor, but I'm pretty sure you shouldn't be breathing any more smoke right now."

"Just one," I wheedle, giving him my best pathetic look. "It would really help the pain, and it's not as though I can roll one myself with my left hand ... besides, I think we both deserve one after the night we've been through. You can smoke most of it, I'll just have a couple of tokes." I can see him weakening, so I give him a small, helpless smile. "And then ... I'd really like a shower. I stink of smoke and sick people."

His eyebrows go up. "I'm also sure you shouldn't get that dressing wet."

"If we could cover your cast with a trash bag, I think we can deal with my hand. Only you'll have to help me, of course ... to undress and stuff ... and to wash ..." I lean in and kiss his lips gently, savouring the taste of him.

Oh yeah. I'm going to need lots and lots of help ... in all sorts of ways.

"Wow." He gives a shaky little laugh. "There's a first ... Brian Kinney admitting he needs someone!"

"Yeah." I kiss along the line of his jaw and settle just below his earlobe, nibbling gently, making him shiver. "But then, you know how much I've always enjoyed exposing you to novel experiences. I intend exposing you to many more during the years ahead."

"Really." He's smirking a little. His right hand strays to my thigh and slides upwards. "And what would they be, Mr. Kinney?"

"Uh huh." I bite back a groan as he reaches his target. "That's for me to know, and you to find out, Mr Taylor."

The doctor said the dressings can probably come off in a week.

They'd better; I'm going to need both my hands come Christmas.

TBC
"Morning, Jeeves." I pull the car door shut behind me and lean over to kiss Mikey's cheek.

He grins at me as he reaches to buckle my seat belt. "Someone's in a good mood."

"Freedom, Mikey. Freedom!" I raise my hands above my head and shake them. "Today's the day I get my life back. In a couple of hours I'll be able to drive again, cut up my own food again, use my laptop again ... even wipe my own ass again." Well ... the last isn't true. I still have some pride. But I'd never realised how fucking frustrating and limiting it is to have to use your left hand for everything, and it's certainly increased my understanding of Justin's predicament after the bashing.

"Yeah," Mikey smirks, checking the rear mirror before pulling out onto Tremont. "I'm sure it's been a very restrictive week."

In more ways than he can imagine. Fucking Justin one-handed has required a vast amount of ingenuity and compromise, and I'm eager to get back to normal. The lad, devious little opportunist that he is, has taken full advantage of his chance to play a more dominant role between the sheets, with the result that my ass is a lot sorer than it's been for a long time. The fact that he claims he's only acting out of conjugal sympathy and concern doesn't fool me for a minute.

Payback's going to be a bitch, Sunshine.

"Everything ready for the party, Brian?" Mikey asks.

"I don't think anyone's gonna be disappointed," I reply, wincing at the glare from the low winter sun. I fish out my Raybans from my jacket pocket and slip them on.

"Emmet's so excited you let him do the decorations. I haven't seen him so happy since old Georgie made him a millionaire."

"He'd better not be too excited." I don't have a problem with Emmett handling the catering because I know he's a competent and inventive chef. But if Justin and I hadn't both been hors de combat I'd never have trusted the decor of my home to a flaming queen like him ... I have a nightmare vision of Britin with plastic reindeer perched on the roof and a ten-foot Santa on the front lawn. But I trust Boot to keep Emmett's more tacky tendencies under stern restraint. "Is your Mom talking to Carl yet?"

"She wouldn't be talking to you if she didn't want to keep her invite," Mikey chuckles. "She's majorly pissed that all that shit with Lindsay was going on under her nose and she didn't pick up on it. I think she figures she's losing her touch."
"She'll get over it."

"I think she already has ... she's gone shopping for a new dress. She says she hasn't got anything classy enough for a formal do at Britin ... so she's taken Carl's credit card."

I briefly contemplate what outfit Deb might regard as classy and grin. Poor Carl. Still, he knew what he was taking on when he moved in.

Same as me.

A few hours later I'm driving down the street Boot lives on, checking the numbers of the buildings against the address Ted's given me. Of course, it's on the opposite side, so I park in the nearest slot and pull off the stupid cotton glove I'm supposed to wear when driving and tuck it under the visor. The burns on my fingertips and palm are healing well, but the new skin is tender and fragile, and I'm under strict instructions to protect it as much as possible. I lock the 'Vette and weave back through the traffic. I press the bell to his apartment and wait until I hear him answer. "Hey, Boot."

"Guvnor?" He's surprised. "What you doing here?"

"Freezing my balls off," I tell him. "You gonna let me up?"

"Oh. Yeah. Hang on." He buzzes me in and I take the stairs to the third floor. I can hear the sound of Dire Straits echoing through the stairwell, and I grin when I realise it's coming from Boot's open door. "Knock, knock!" I call, walking in.

Boot pokes his head through another door. "Take a seat, guv. I'm just putting the kettle on. Tea or coffee?"

"Coffee's fine," I tell him, raising my voice against The Walk of Life. "Black, lots of sugar." I look around; there doesn't seem to be an awful lot of choice in the seating arrangements; I guess Boot isn't much of one for company. Obviously the big leather armchair is his, so I pull out one of the dining chairs and sit on that.

Boot comes back carrying two steaming mugs and sets them on the table. Then he turns to the sound system and cuts Mark Knopfler off in full flow. "Sorry about that. I like me music loud."

"Me too." I pick up my coffee and take a sip.

"You got the bandages off." He indicates my right hand. "It's healing up okay?"

"Yeah. I'm not supposed to use it more than I have to, and I'm not supposed to get it wet for long and yaddah yaddah yaddah. Basically it's good."

Boot takes his tea and sits down on the other chair. "I don't have anything stronger to offer you, I'm afraid," he says apologetically. "I don't have many visitors."

"This is fine," I assure him. It is; in fact his coffee is surprisingly good.

He's watching me curiously. "I didn't know you had me address, guv."

"I employ you, of course I know your address." At least, Ted does.

"So what's important enough for you to come personally? Should I be worried?"

I shake my head. "Nothing like that. Only Justin told me what he said to you ... he feels really guilty
about it. I thought I should come and check there aren't any hard feelings."

He rumbles laughter. "What, about the lad going off on one? No skin off my nose, guv. I was impressed, if you want to know. I don't get yelled at very often."

"Yeah, well." I take another sip and eye him over the rim of the mug, hiding my smile at the image of my little blond pitbull tackling Boot. "He was particularly shaken when he realised who he'd been mouthing off at." I raise my eyebrows suggestively. "Champ."

Boot shakes his head heavily. "I knew the little sod couldn't keep a secret."

"Well, he didn't understand the implication of a Lonsdale Belt until I explained it to him." I'm not letting slip about Justin's other little Royal disclosure. "He didn't realise he was insulting a British Heavyweight Champion. Then he kinda freaked."

"Tell him there's no harm done." He puts down his mug. "Only I'd rather it didn't get about ... it was a long time ago, and people get the wrong idea."

"Don't worry. Justin's had the fear of God put in him, he won't breath a word to anyone. And I don't intend to. Your past is your business ... I respect that. Only ..."

Boot gives me a wary look. "What?"

"I was wondering if there was any chance I could see it."

He goes very still. "I haven't got it anymore."

"Boot, that's a porky. I'm ashamed of you."

He shuffles his feet guiltily.

"If it's a really big deal, forget it," I tell him casually. "I don't mean to intrude on your privacy ... it's just ... well, how often am I gonna get the chance to say I've held a Lonsdale Belt? It would score me a lot of points with the next sport-obsessed prospective client I have to wine and dine."

Boot gives me a look.

"Okay. The truth is, I'd like to see it for myself. Because I know how much it took to win it."

He sits weighing me up with his shrewd grey eyes and I look back unflinchingly, allowing him to see the person that very few people ever meet – the real Brian Kinney.

Suddenly he gets up and strides out of the room. I stay where I am, and as the minutes pass I begin to wonder if he's going to come back at all. Then I hear his heavy footsteps approaching, and he walks in carrying an oblong box made of some dark, polished wood. He sets it on the table and I get to my feet, moving to stand beside him as he opens the two little fastening clasps and lifts the lid.

The Lonsdale Belt nestles inside on a lining of dark blue velvet.

Boot lifts it carefully, then puts it into my hands.

The weight takes me by surprise, although it shouldn't. Gold's heavy and there's a fucking shit load of it in this mother. The basic design consists of three parallel lengths of oblong-shaped gold plaques, connected together by small flexible links and backed by horizontal bands of red, white and blue cloth to form a belt perhaps four inches wide. Four large oval embossed medallions of solid gold are set around it at regular intervals, and at the front is an even bigger, even more flamboyantly moulded
medallion set with an oval porcelain panel. It depicts the head and shoulders of a middle-aged gentleman wearing a suit with a white flower in his button hole. The medallion is crowned with a majestic golden lion.

"That's Lord Lonsdale," Boot tells me. "He introduced the Belt in 1907. You know, Henry Cooper won three of them outright? The only man in a hundred bloody years to do it."

"Christ, Boot." I remember once asking him if he were any good, and how he'd shrugged the whole thing off. "How long did you hold the title?"

"Only a couple of years, before me eye was buggered. Could have had a pop at the World Championship, otherwise. Not that it matters now." His voice holds only the slightest hint of regret.

The glint of gold is everywhere. The thing is typical over-the-top Victoriana, but God, it's impressive. "How much is it worth?"

Boot shrugs. "Never thought about it."

"Well, it ought to be in a fucking bank. What if you're burgled?"

His eyebrows go up. "What self-respecting burglar would think I had something worth nicking?" He chuckles. "And if one did try it, I think I could still give the bugger a run for his money."

"Not if he had a gun."

He scowls. "Don't hold with 'em. Like knives ... evil bloody things. A coward's weapon. Got no time for them, nor the people that carry them, neither."

I'm about to point out that courage and integrity are no protection against either, when I turn the Belt over in my hands, and my gaze lands on the inscription engraved on the back of the central medallion. I read it ... and slowly turn to look at Boot.

I see instant comprehension in his face, followed swiftly by an expression of total chagrin.

"Bugger," he says disgustedly.

For the first time in our acquaintance I have the pleasure of seeing him completely discomfited.

"Eric? Your real name is Eric?" I am so happy.

Boot gives me a hunted look as he takes the Belt unceremoniously and lays it back in its box.

"Dare I ask what the W stands for?"

He glares. "Winston."

I can't help it. God knows I don't mean to make fun of him, but this is just too much. I flop down on the chair, laughing like a fucking hyena, while Boot stands watching me stoically. "I'm sorry. Christ." My eyes are streaming. "It's just ... Eric! Fuck!" I lay back, howling.

"You know I could really get offended the way you keep laughing at me name. Not very polite, now is it?"

"Sorry." I am. I really, really am. Unfortunately, it's not helping. I struggle to get myself under control and glance up at Boot; beneath his severe expression I'm relieved to see his eyes twinkling.
"At least I understand now why you went with the whole *Boot* thing ... it's much more you."

"The only person who still calls me Eric is my old mum, and I know better than to try and argue with her." He smiles, a sheepishly. "You know, *Brian* isn't exactly the dog's bollocks, either."

"Fucking right," I agree, still wheezing. My stomach hurts, but I feel ... I don't know. Cleansed, maybe? God, I don't remember when I last laughed that hard ... not since school, probably. "I always wanted to be a James ... there were so many cool James. James Dean, James Coburn, James Stewart. Jim Morrisey. Fucking James Bond."

"And you've done your best to live up to all of them." He closes the box and re-latches it; and as he stands for a moment gazing at it, the huge fingers of his right hand resting lightly on the lid, I find myself sobering pretty damn quickly.

Because this guy is something else, right? He had the world at his feet only to have it snatched from him before he'd managed to do more than sample it, and yet he walked away into the foreign obscurity of America with no bitterness and no self-pity. I've always preached *no apologies, no regrets*, but this man lives it. And the real fucker of it is that his contentment with whom he now is and the position he holds in life is absolutely genuine, and that's what makes him inviolable. I pay him his wages, but I don't own him. I could never buy him because I have nothing that he envies, or desires, or even wants; not my money, not my possessions, and certainly not my body – which makes him unique in my universe. He holds his head higher than any fucker I've ever met, figuratively as well as literally, and I would not offend him for the fucking world.

"Boot..." I pause until he turns and looks at me. "I have the greatest respect for you, and for your past, and for the way you guard your privacy. I wasn't making fun of you. You just make me laugh ... and there's not a lot of people I can say that about."

He grins. "Then I'll take it as a compliment, guv. Although, if anyone starts calling me bloody Eric I might not be so understanding. Remember, I'll know where it's come from." He picks up the box to return it to whatever sanctuary it resides in ... his sock drawer, probably.

"Boot, you are coming to the party Christmas Eve, aren't you?"

He pauses and looks back at me. "I thought it was family, guv."

"Family and friends. And I think you fit both categories. So I hope you've got a suit."

I see a brief flicker of surprise in his eyes before he smiles and nods slowly. "I think I've still got one somewhere."

... 

TBC
CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

And the dreams that you're having, they won't let you down

If you just follow on cause you know where you're bound,

The well will be flowing, the words will come fast, when the one who is coming

Arrives here at last.

-Red Sun – Neil Young

BRIAN

"This is why I hate you fucking me when I'm stoned," he mumbles into my shoulder. He sounds like Gus.

"Why? You hate feeling good?" I ask. I take another hit. My free hand is stroking his hair. It's not nearly as long as before he shaved it, but it's getting there.

He shakes his head. "Of course I don't hate feeling good ... that would be stupid." He hoists himself onto his elbow so he can look at me, pinching the skin of my armpit as he does so. He doesn't even notice me wince. "I hate ... what I really hate ... is that while you're fucking me I get all these mind-blowing ideas going off in my head, like my brain was a pinball machine or something ... patterns I've never seen, colours I've never seen ... concepts, you know, like the meaning to the whole fucking universe or shit ... and I know, I just know ... that if I could get up right this minute and start painting, I know I could capture it and it would be like nothing I've ever done before, like nothing anyone's done before ... because right now I really do see it ... only, I can't. Because I'm too fucking wrecked. And tomorrow, when I wake up, all I'll have is the shadow of a memory." He tries unsuccessfully to snap his fingers. "Pfftt ... gone, just like ... that..."

I lean down and kiss the top of his head. "You're very eloquent when you're stoned."

"That's not eloquence, that's ..." he gestures vaguely. "That's philosophy, Brian! That's, like how all our great intentions, all our dreams, they ultimately come to nothing because the revelation that inspired them is also the barrier to accomplishing them ..."

That's it. He's such a fucking little hippie sometimes. I stub out the joint and shut him up the best way I can, with my tongue. When I finally release him, he's lost his train of thought.

"It's great Daphne's going to make it to the party," I say, distracting him further.

"I can't believe it's been over a year since I've seen her!" Mission accomplished. I lean back against the pillows and close my eyes, letting his voice lull me. "She's promised to show me photos of all the
hunky British studs she's met. She says the latest one plays Rugby and he's hung like a horse."

I snicker. "Whatever else our little Daphne might have picked up from her stay in England, it certainly isn't the art of subtlety." I raise one eyebrow. "Is she bringing him?"

He pokes me in the ribs before settling back down, tucked under my arm. "No, she is not. He's with his parents in Cheltenham."

"Shame. I'd have loved to see how he reacted to Emmett."

I'm beginning to drift off when he starts again. "Brian?"

"Mmm?"

"Why do you want us to wear the wedding suits?"

Uh. His brain's on fast forward. "Might as well get some wear out of them. They fucking cost enough."

"Why didn't you send them back?"

I open one eye. "Sunshine, they're bespoke suits. How many other blond midgets with your particular endowments do you think there are?"

"I'm sure there must be a few."

"Look, I kept them because, right? Just because. And because we're throwing a sort of house-warming-cum-Christmas party-cum-whatever the fuck it is, I thought it would be nice to do it properly. And it just seemed kind of fitting to wear the suits." Plus I want to see your ass in those pants again, Sunshine. It's a little fantasy I've been having regularly. And if you'll just shut up and go to sleep, I'd like to get back to it.

"Brian?"

This is the major drawback of getting Justin stoned. The sex is incredible but it comes with a lot of earache, as Boot would say.

"I don't feel right about shipping Mel and the kids back to Pittsburgh after the party. It'll be late ... there's no reason they shouldn't stay at Britin, is there? Then you could see Gus Christmas morning."

I come awake. "No way, Sunshine. I already made that clear, no-one stays the night, not even Gus."

"But, Brian ..."

"Justin, that's why we're hiring cars, so they can all get home. The kids are coming early, so they can open their presents and play with them and have their Christmas Party before everyone turns up. We've got the baby monitor in Gus' room so JR will be fine in there, and Gus can crash with her if he gets tired. Besides, Mel's got her parents coming for Christmas lunch, so she's not going to stay that late."

"It's just that I don't mind, honestly ... it'd be really fun ... and with Lindsay not being here, I just thought ..."

"Justin!" I use the tone that he knows means I'm not fucking around. "No. Christmas morning is going to be you, me, and nobody else." I take his chin in my fingers and turn his face to me. "This is going to be the first real one ... the one I was hoping to spend with you last year. And it's private ...
okay?"

He smiles, his guileless, sweet smile that always hits me straight in the gut. "Is that your present to me?"

I kiss the tip of his nose. "Part of it. The privacy bit, I mean."

His eyes widen comically. "You've built me a dungeon!"

I snort. "I think that might be beyond even Boot's ingenuity. Anyway, that's for next year. When you've started getting bored with me."

He giggles, then falls silent. I feel his mood change.

"I don't have a present for you. I mean I did ... but it's gone now."

Fucking Lindsay. I wrap him tighter in my arms. That was the last thing she'll ever take from him... the last thing anyone will ever take from him. "Justin, it doesn't matter. You made it for me ... that's all that counts."

His fingers trace slow circles on my chest. "I didn't want to just buy something ... I wanted to give you something from me, something special. But now, even if I had time to paint it again, it wouldn't be the same."

"I guess I'll just have to take your sweet, eager little body as forfeit, then." I trap his wandering hand and bring it to my lips, gently biting each fingertip. "But don't worry ... I'll make sure and give you plenty of new inspiration."

That was all I'd wanted for Christmas, anyway.

TBC
CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

When you dance,  
Do your senses tingle?  
Then take a chance?  
In a trance,  
While the lonely mingle  
With circumstance?

I've got something to tell you, you make it show.  
Let me come over, I know you know  
When you dance I can really love.

- *When You Dance I can Really Love – Neil Young*

JUSTIN

I open the door and stand there with my mouth open. Wow. Daphne's wearing this clinging midnight blue gown, with a daringly low scalloped neck and a silver-shot black lace shawl around her shoulders. Her hair is pulled back in a tight chignon and she looks so grown up, so beautiful it takes my breath away. For a moment I don't know what to say to her.

Fortunately she instantly shatters the illusion by bouncing on the toes of her matching midnight blue slippers, squealing "Justin!" and throwing her arms round my neck. I hug her back thankfully.

"Daph, you look incredible!"

She pulls back to study me. "Well, you've scrubbed up pretty well yourself! And this house ..." she spins around, taking it all in. "Omigod, it's so *awesome!*"

I take her hand. "Come on, everyone's here." I walk her down the hall towards the sounds of voices and laughter and George Michael singing *Last Christmas*. Emmett and Boot have cleared the Great Room of most of the furniture, rolled up the rugs and moved the chairs and the couch against the walls so that there's room to dance. The dining table occupies one corner, laden with food and wine and a vast crystal punch bowl. In front of the windows stands a ten foot spruce, sparkling with lights and tinsel and filling the air with the scent of pine. The Yule Log, ceremoniously lit by Brian and Gus this afternoon, crackles cheerfully in the fireplace dispensing heat and light with equal generosity. Holly and ivy wreaths hang on every wall, and candles blaze from every available surface.

I have to admit, Emmett's done a great job.

"Theodore," I hear Brian's voice, "when I told you to take care of the music I wasn't talking about fucking *Wham!*"
"Come on, Brian. It's a Festive Classic." Ted is seated beside the entertainment centre, a pile of CD's on his knee. "Where's your Christmas Spirit?"

"I think you've imbibed quite enough of my Christmas Spirit, Schmidt, if you're calling that a classic. What else have you got?" He snatches some CD's and studies them. "Fucking Perry Como Sings Christmas? What the fuck is this shit?"

Blake, sitting cross-legged on the floor at Ted's side, snickers. "Now that really is a classic, Brian."

"Yeah, if you were born in the fucking 1950's!"

I think it's a good time to interrupt, so I lead Daph over. "Look who's here!"

Brian smiles with genuine pleasure; he's always appreciated my fag-hag. "Daphne," he says, taking her hand and eyeing her gown with approval, "you look stunning."

She giggles and blushes as usual, and then does a double take. "Boot!" she squeals, and Brian winces.

"Hello, Daphne, luv." Boot looks even bigger in a suit and he towers over her, patting her carefully on the head as she hugs him. "Good to see you again."

"And you!" She laughs up at him, tugging playfully at his sleeves. "And looking so dashing, too!"

He runs his forefinger around the collar of his shirt a little self-consciously. "It's a bit tighter since I put it on last;" he confides. "And a bit dated, too."

"Crap," Brian replies. "It's Saville Row, it's a classic. A real classic never dates." He throws a withering glance at Ted.

"I'm so glad you haven't got tired of keeping these two idiots in line ... it's a full-time job, isn't it?"

"No insulting the hosts, please," Brian murmurs. "Aren't they teaching you any manners in London?"

Daphne puts her nose in the air snootily. "I'll have you know, Mr. Kinney, I'm mixing with the highest level of society."

"Well, let's hope some of it rubs off, then."

Daph aims a whack at his arm, but then stops with a little gasp. "Oh my God, is that Molly?"

"Yeah." I can't help but smile. My little sister is sitting on the couch with Deb on one side and Gus – proudly wearing the mini-Arsenal shirt Boot's given him - on the other, sharing a plate of chicken wings. She'd been a little shy at first, but Molly's never been one to hide her light under a bushel for long, and she seems to be actually having a good time. She was even dancing with Hunter earlier. "Dad actually seems to be mellowing a little... since Mom died he seems to have re-evaluated a few things." I don't believe that my father and I will ever be close again, but for him to have made even this much of a concession is huge.

"Daphne! Yoo hoo!" Debbie's voice cuts above the noise; she's gesturing animatedly for Daph to join her, her face beaming welcome. Daph grins resignedly at me and goes over to say hello.

"She's looking fucking hot, dude!" Hunter has appeared at my side, blatantly ogling Daphne's retreating figure.
"Which is more than can be said for you," I retort. It's true. I don't think I've ever seen anyone look worse in a suit; it hangs off his lanky shoulders making him look skinnier and geekier than ever. "And before you even think about it, forget it."

"What?" He raises his eyebrows innocently.

"Firstly, you're not her type. Secondly, she's way too mature for you."

He grins. "What makes you think I don't like older women? Like her..." he nods surreptitiously at Cynthia, who's wandered over to chat with Brian, a glass of red wine cradled in her hand. "Bet she could teach me a thing or two!"

Cynthia, cool and elegant in lavender silk, chooses this very second to glance over; she's met with what Hunter fondly assumes is a seductive expression but which only manages to be a lop-sided leer. He makes it worse by licking his lips suggestively, a ploy which results in Cynthia raising her eyebrows as far as they can go and firmly turning her back on us.

I gaze at him in disbelief. "Hunter, you are such a dork."

"Hey dude, she's just playing hard to get. You don't understand female body language... she's interested, all right. I can tell." He's practically drooling. "What a fox!"

I spot Michael and Ben chatting with Carl as they help themselves to more party goodies, so I leave him to his delusions and make my way over. "Justin!" Michael throws an arm round my shoulder, sounding giggly and tipsy. "We're having such a good time!"

"Here, Baby, try some of Aunt Lula's Special." Emmett, resplendent in purple ruffled shirt and cream leather pants, presses a glass of punch into my hand. "And I've put up a nice selection of dainties just for you, all your favourites... before somebody eats them all." He glares accusingly at Michael's heaped plate.

"I just came to say one of you had better retrieve your ward before he hits on Cynthia and she eats him as an hors d'oeuvre." I nod over at Hunter, who's still orbiting hopefully.

Ben's eyebrow's shoot up the same way Cynthia's had. "Oh! Whoops. Right away, Justin." He puts down his glass and heads off to intercept, Michael hurrying in his wake.

"Great party, Justin," Carl says. He's wearing his best suit, but he still manages to look rumpled. "I'm playing waiter..." he indicates the loaded plates he's carrying. "Do you think you could give me a hand with the drinks?"

"Sure." I snaffle one of Emmett's yummy salmon mousse vol-au-vents before picking up my punch with my left hand and gathering a couple of full wine-glasses in my right. Then I follow Carl to towards the couch, sipping my punch as I do so.

"Don't get too drunk tonight." Brian's whisper in my ear makes me jump, and I come close to spilling punch all down my dress shirt. I turn to see him smirking at me.

I raise my eyebrows.

"I mean... have a good time and everything. Only... it'd be better if you didn't get shit-faced."

"Brian," I huff. "I'm the host. I'm not gonna get shit-faced in front of our guests."

"Good." He sticks his tongue in his cheek and disappears again.
Whoa. That was weird. I bring my attention back to task and make it to the couch without further mishap, perching on the arm as I offer the wine to Deb.

"Why thank you, Sweetie." She takes the glasses graciously and hands one to Daph. Carl sets the plates of food on the coffee table and Gus makes a dive for another chicken wing, so I quickly steal his place, sliding down beside Molly.

"Enjoying yourself, Mol?"

She nods, looking up at me with sparkling blue eyes. "Your house is really cool, Justin. And your friends. And Gus is so cute!"

It's strange; when she was young I never thought we looked much alike, with her strawberry red hair and freckles. Now she's older I can see the similarities; she has my teeth, my nose, my eyes.

"How are you settling at Dad's?"

"Not so bad." She looks at me shyly. "Justin? Is it being disloyal to Mom to like Terri? I mean, at first, I just expected to hate her. And I thought she'd hate me, too, especially with her having the baby. But she's been really nice to me, and kind, you know? She was the one who persuaded Dad to let me come tonight. And she talked him into letting me get my hair cut!"

She tosses her head, making her stylish bob swing round her face. She's very nearly a young woman, and that makes me feel... kind of weird. Like I did when I saw Hunter dancing with her earlier ... weird that my kid sister is going to date boys and get married and probably have kids of her own. Weird and sad, that so many years have gone by so fast. But I smile and put my arm round her.

"Mol, Mom would never have wanted you to be unhappy. She would be really pleased to know that you were getting on with Terri, and with Dad. Don't you worry about it."

"And how about you?" She's looking at me earnestly. "Do you mind?"

"Of course I don't." I lean over and kiss her cheek, and she doesn't make a show of wiping it off like she would have a couple of years ago. "Dad has a problem with me, not you. I don't need you to fight my battles for me."

"I won't let him say shit about you," Molly insists. "At first, he got pretty angry whenever we called each other, but I told him I wasn't gonna stop talking to you whatever he said. Then I heard them discussing it – rowing actually – while I was bed. Terri sounded really upset. I don't think Dad ever told her about you being gay ... I think he just gave her the impression you were hard to handle ... you know, hanging out with the wrong crowd, taking drugs, that sort of shit. When she found out the truth, she really went off on him. She said she didn't care what Courtney grew up to be as long as she was happy and healthy, and if Dad didn't want the same thing for his kids, well, maybe she'd married the wrong man. Dad sounded ... kinda shocked. Maybe he thought because Terri was young, she wasn't gonna think for herself – boy, was he wrong." She snickers.

I can't say I'm sorry. When he and Mom split, he'd definitely thought that she was weak for siding with me, like if she'd only upheld his principles I'd have stayed on the straight and narrow, so to speak. But if his new wife reacts the same way Mom did, then maybe, just maybe, he might start to realise that perhaps he might be the one with the screwed-up morality. And that's got to be a good thing for Molly, and for the baby too.

"Molly! Molly!" Gus is tugging at her arm. "Let's dance!" Brenda Lee is singing Rockin' Around The Christmas Tree and several couples are bopping; Michael and Emmett, Blake and Daph, Ben and Cynthia. Hunter's sulking in a corner. Molly allows herself to be pulled over to join in.
"He's getting way too excited," Mel says, coming to flop beside me. "He'll crash soon, and then I'll call the car." She smiles at me. "Thanks for inviting us to your home, Justin."

"It's Gus' home too," I remind her. "You're all welcome here."

"I know, and I never thought the time would come when I'd say that." She glances over at Brian, propping up the mantelpiece and talking to Carl and Boot. "I was wrong about a lot of things, Justin. About Brian. He's not as big an asshole as I thought he was."

"Sometimes he is," I grin.

"Not when it counts." She sighs. "I don't think I could have got through taking Gus to see Lindsay if Brian hadn't been there. He's been great all through this ... you both have."

"You're taking him again next week, right?"

Mel nods. "It's important she and Gus keep contact as regularly as possible – under supervision, of course. It's a major part of her therapy." On the floor Molly is teaching Gus the basic moves of a jive, spinning him with her hand while he staggers around giggling. "I don't think it's really registered with him yet. When it does ..." she shrugs. "I'm just glad he's happy now. At least he's got something good to remember from this Christmas ... I guess that's the most I can hope for."

I give her a hug. "At least she's getting the help she needs, Mel. Maybe it'll make a difference."

"Maybe." She looks up at me and laughs. "Hey, this is a party, right? A celebration. No sad thoughts." She stands up and takes off the jacket to her tailored white trouser suit and tosses it to me, revealing a clinging scarlet halter neck beneath. "Hey, Gus! Come and dance with your Mommie!"

She holds out her arms to him, and swings him up into the air when he rushes up to her.

I drape the jacket over the back of the couch, then turn to see Deb regarding me fondly. "Would you mind taking this old lady for a turn on the floor, Sunshine?"

I rise to my feet and offer her my hand. "Not so old, Deb," I grin, "not in that dress. You look beautiful." In gold lamé, topped with her flaming red hair, she's Christmas personified. I escort her onto the floor and as Perry Como starts up with *White Christmas* she places a scarlet-nailed hand on my shoulder, I clasp her ample waist decorously and we begin to sway, slowly revolving to the music.

"I don't have to ask if he's treating you right ... everyone can see it." Debbie beams at me.

"I've never been happier, Deb," I tell her truthfully.

"Neither has Brian," she chuckles. "And I knew, right from the fucking beginning, that you were the one. I told him that, a long time ago. But he always was a stubborn shit." She gestures around. "And now... look at you two. Look at what you have." Her smile mists a little. "It's at times like this that we miss them ... Vick,, Christ, how he'd have loved to see this ... and Jennifer. She'd have been so proud, Sunshine. So fucking proud." She tilts her head to one side. "Do you think she'll mind me claiming her dance tonight?"

I remember all the love, the support, the encouragement she's offered me from the first time I walked into her life as a clueless, starry-eyed kid; the way she'd instantly accepted me into her adopted band of Lost Boys. I think of how Mom grew to admire and respect her, and I shake my head and smile at her. "No, Deb. I don't think she'll mind at all."
"So when do you think the trial will be?"

Carl shrugs. "Not for awhile. She'll stay on remand while they make pre-trial assessments before the C.P.I. decide whether they'll bring a criminal prosecution. Her lawyers are probably going to plead diminished responsibility." He looks at me narrowly. "They'll do a lot of digging ... her childhood, her relationship with her parents ... it might get messy."

"I'm sure." I don't expect there's a family anywhere that hasn't got its dark, nasty secrets; the Country Club set aren't immune, any more than the rest of us. My only concern is to protect Gus as much as possible from the fallout.

"Well." He sighs. "This isn't the time or place to discuss it. I'll keep you posted as soon as I hear anything." He claps me on the shoulder and wanders off like a despondent old hound.

I look over at Boot, looming beside me. "Christ, Boot. How did my life get so fucking complicated?"

He laughs. "Dunno, guv. But for someone who doesn't believe in commitment, it looks like you're doing a bloody good job of handling it."

Not that Brian Kinney needs anyone's approval, fuck you very much; but damned if I don't feel pleased. Because he's right; I am doing a good job, a fucking kick-ass job; and what's more, I'm beginning to believe I just may be able to keep it up. I study him curiously. "Do you ever wonder how you ended up here?"

He shakes his head. "Nah. See, guv, I'm a fatalist." He stares off into the distance. "When Andy died, my sister, she spent months eating herself up about if there was anything she could have done that would have changed things ... so that he wouldn't have been in that place, at that time. Me, I think it just happens. Doesn't matter where you are, or what you're doing ... when your time's up, that's all there is to it. So there's no point fretting yourself, is there? Just take what comes, and enjoy it while it bloody lasts. That's my motto."

I smile at him. "Now that's a sentiment I'd really like to drink to." I lift my wine and toast him. "Your very good health, Boot."

He grins. "To you and the lad both," he replies, raising his orange juice and clinking it against my glass. "Cheers, guv.

"Brian ..." Mel has appears at my side, a truculent looking Gus in tow. "I'm going to take the kids home. Gus is dead on his feet. Do you think you could call the car while I get JR?"

"Don't wanna go," Gus says sulkily. "I wanna dance some more."

"Hey, Sonny Boy." I crouch down to look at him. "Haven't you had a good time today?"

He nods reluctantly.

"Well, you're going to have a good time tomorrow, too ... you're going to have more presents, and then on Boxing Day I'll bring Justin and you can show us everything you got."

"But I wanna stay here now," he complains, rubbing his eyes.

"Then Santa won't know where to find you," Boot tells him. "He's expecting you to be at home tonight. How's he going to know he's supposed to bring your presents here instead?"
"We could send a note up the chimney, like we did with my present list," Gus suggests hopefully.

Boot looks thoughtful. "That would be a really good idea, if he was still at home at the North Pole. But he'll be already out, taking all the kiddies in Australia their presents."

"Oh." Gus' face falls. Then he glances up shyly. "Will you come Boxing Day, too, Boot?

"I can probably drop in for a while, if it's alright with your mum and dad."

"Pleeeze, Mommie?" he wheedles, tugging at Mel's hand. "Please can Boot come and see me on Boxing Day with Dadda and Juss?"

Mel laughs. "Sure, if he can fit through the door." She smiles at Boot. "What the hell, the more the merrier. I'll even throw in dinner."

"The way to every man's heart," Boot chuckles.

"Not with a Lesbian cookbook it isn't," I warn.

Mel raises her eyebrows challengingly. "You wanna take care of the catering, buster, be my guest. I'm sure our son would love to sample his father's culinary skills ... such as they are." She smirks and goes off to fetch JR, Gus trailing wearily beside her, leaving me staring at her back and wondering why the roof hasn't been struck with lightening or some fucking thing. Our son? Maybe I'd just misheard her. Yeah. That must be it. I head for the office to summon her ride back to Pittsburgh.

After I've placed the call I return to look for Justin, and see him dancing with Deb. Ted's put that sentimental Perry Como shit on, and Deb's got this teary look on her face that means she's gone all reminiscent and maudlin. I quickly haul the lad out of her clutches before she can dampen the mood too much, and we gather up the ridiculous hoard of presents that Justin has talked me into buying for the kids and ferry them to the front door. I bundle Gus up in his coat and scarf, and he doesn't fuss once so I know he must be really worn out. I carry him out to the cab while Mel brings JR and Justin gamely staggers under the weight of all the paraphernalia without which it appears impossible for a baby to survive, even for a few hours. Boot brings up the rear with the pile of presents clutched in his arms. By the time everything's loaded Gus is already asleep, only held upright by the seat belt, his head lolling on his chest.

We stand at the head of the drive, waving as the cab lights disappear; then I turn to Justin and put my arms around his shoulders. "Okay, Sunshine. Now I'm going to fire Theodore, and then we'll get some decent music going. Boot, you're the new DJ."

He grins. "Right you are, guv."

The rest of the evening goes by in a series of snapshots, as inhibitions are shed with along with jackets and ties. Emmett, exuberantly flailing to Brown Sugar, as a giggling Daphne does her best to join in; Deb and Carl clasped in each other's arms and looking happier than any middle-aged straight couple has the right be; Molly dancing with a wary Hunter, all uncoordinated knees and elbows, keeping his careful distance beneath Justin's suspicious eye; Ben doing an improbably hysterical Bruce Springsteen impersonation as Santa Claus Is Coming To Town blasts from the speakers. The expression on Mikey's face after catching Ted and Blake with their hands down each other's pants in the kitchen.

I remember laughing. Laughing a lot.

And now I have my arms resting on Justin's shoulders as we sway together and Cockney Rebel
seems so very appropriate. "You've done it all, you've broken every code ... brought the rebel to the floor ..." I find myself murmuring into his ear.

He pulls back and looks at me oddly. "Brian ... you're not trying to sing, are you?"

I look straight into his eyes. "Come up and see me, make me smile ... or do what you want, running wild ..."

"If you start oooh-la-la-ing, I'm gonna knee you in the crutch and yell for help," he warns.

"Come on, Sunshine." I pout at him. "Gimme a break, I'm trying to be romantic here."

"Well, cut it out," the ungrateful little shit replies. "The reason you don't ever sing is because you can't sing, remember?"

I hike an eyebrow. "Like I can't dance, you mean?"

His smile is blinding. "Yeah. Just like that."

We dance on, laughing at each other. Steve Harley warbles into silence. And then Boot does something amazing. Well, something else amazing. And I still don't know if he did it on purpose.

The unmistakable bass intro to Ben E. King's *Stand By Me* fills the air.

Suddenly everything changes.

I can dance, right? I've attended functions, I've wined and dined and wooed clients. Of course I can fucking dance. What I do at Babylon doesn't count; that's just a courtship display, and all I'm looking to do there is to flaunt what I've got.

There's only two people in this room who've ever seen me really dance, and one of them doesn't remember.

*When the night is come, and the land is dark*

*And the moon is the only light that we see,*

*Well I won't be afraid, no I won't be afraid*

*Just as long as you stand, stand by me.*

I start a slow rumba, and just as he did all those years ago, Justin follows me. As then, our bodies mesh instinctively; our steps sure, our rhythm perfect. He sways into my arms, then pulls away; but I control him, always keeping contact with hand or thigh or groin, our movements languidly sensual. Once again we have the floor to ourselves. I guess they've all drawn back to watch, like they did last time, although I'm not consciously aware of what anyone else is doing. My attention is focussed solely on my partner, as his is on me.

*If the land we walk upon should crumble and fall*

*Or the mountains should tumble into the sea,*

*I won't cry, I won't cry, no I won't shed a tear*

*Just as long as you stand, stand by me.*
Looking into his face, seeing the wonder in his eyes, I can see he knows. He fucking knows.

And when everybody's gone and he turns to me, and looks up at me, and asks; 'It's tonight, isn't it?', I cup his cheeks in both hands and press a simple, lingering kiss to his lips. "Yes, Sunshine. It's tonight."

TBC
Okay, so this is - eventually - the end, except for probably a very short Epilogue. I meant to post yesterday, but got a little wrapped up in another wedding I was watching!

Anyway, my very grateful thanks to everyone who's stayed with me and for all your support and kind comments ... it's good to know you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it!

CHAPTER SIXTY

Well I thought I saw the silver spaceships flying in the yellow haze of the sun

There were children crying, colours flying all around the chosen ones.

All in a dream, all in a dream, the loading had begun

Flying Mother Nature's silver seed to a new home in the sun.

- After The Goldrush – Neil Young

JUSTIN

He undresses me with torturous care, relishing each removal; hanging my suit, my shirt – even tucking my socks into my shoes and putting them away in the closet. Under normal circumstances I'd be screaming at him to get on with it; but the look in his eyes as he strips me tells me that this is prolonged foreplay. When I'm finally naked he guides me onto the bed, while he undresses with the same slow precision. I know he's putting on a show for me, and as I watch him I shiver – with anticipation, not through lack of warmth from the glowing logs in the fireplace. Since Brian had first casually broached the subject back in the summer, neither of us have alluded to it ... I hadn't wanted to push things, assuming that Brian had thought better of the whole idea and was just hoping I'd forget about it. I hadn't wanted to push things, assuming that Brian had thought better of the whole idea and was just hoping I'd forget about it. I'd assumed it was on permanent hold. It never occurred to me that he wasn't tricking; not that he's been away from meт hat much, at least not in the evenings; but he could have easily found the opportunity if he'd wanted to. I'd just figured that he was being discreet, and was grateful that he didn't feel the need to rub my face in it any more. The realisation that he hasn't been doing it at all – because he would never risk me like this if he had – well, it says more than anything else how committed he is to making this thing between us work.

So I watch, as nervous and eager as ever I was the first time Brian stripped for me. When he's done he walks naked to the bed, picks up a small glass bottle from his nightstand and removes the stopper. He gently pushes my shoulder. "Roll over, Justin."
I settle comfortably on my stomach, my arms pillowing my head, and feel the mattress dip as he straddles my hips. Then I feel cool liquid between my shoulder blades, followed by the gentle pressure of his palms. I smell cinnamon and sandalwood, and the heavy scent of musk.

"Mmmnh. What's that?"

"Something new." His voice is soft against my ear as he leans forward. "Just relax, okay?"

He works his way slowly down my back, rhythmically kneading my muscles. I wiggle beneath him. "Brian ... what about your hand?"

"It's fine. Don't worry about it. This is all for you, Sunshine."

He moves on, smoothing the aromatic oil into my glutes, my thighs, my calves; he massages my Achilles tendons with his strong, cunning fingers. By the time he's working on the soles of my feet, I'm breathless.

"Turn over." He lifts onto his knees so that I can move, then settles back down. He pours more oil onto his palms and then begins on my chest, fanning his fingers across my pecs, lightly brushing my nipples; I groan as he uses his thumbs to massage the tendons along my collar bone and the sensitive muscles around my shoulder joints. He kneads my biceps and the muscles of my forearms, and my palms and fingers. He pays special attention to my right hand. And all the time he's watching me with a smouldering intensity that makes my breath hitch and my heart stutter, and as he slides further down my legs so that he can work my thighs, I reach desperately for my aching dick, but he removes my hand with a small smile and a shake of his head. "Uh huh, Sunshine, don't anticipate. We're saving the best bits for last."

So I make myself lie still as he begins at my knees, anointing each one carefully before turning his attention to my thighs, working his way ever closer to the sensitive skin of my groin. I'm sure every drop of blood in my body has migrated to my painfully engorged dick, but Brian ignores it; instead I feel his warm palms glide up my hips to my waist, and then he starts to massage my belly. My skin twitches helplessly beneath his touch; I want to both squirm away and arch closer. I run my tongue over my suddenly very dry lips. "Brian ..." my voice sounds hoarse, pleading.

"Ssh." He leans forward to kiss me, and as he slides his tongue into my mouth his slick right hand closes around my shaft and I moan with relief. But he does no more than gently pull a couple of times, his thumb caressing me; then he settles back on his heels between my legs, and carefully lifts my calves onto his shoulders. He reaches for the lube and squeezes some onto the fingers of his right hand; the tube is shaking in his grip and I realise with dim wonder he's every bit as nervous as I am. He rubs his fingers together, warming the lube, and then I feel him gently stretching me. He prepares me more thoroughly than usual, never breaking eye contact as he delves and twists inside me.

Then he grips my wrists with both his hands, folding me in half, squeezing the breath out of me, and I feel the hot, wet head of his naked cock pressing against me.

My heart's going so fast, I can hear the blood rushing in my ears. He's going to do it, we're going to fucking do it, is the only thought yammering in my head. And as he slowly pushes into me, it's this knowledge that arouses me more than the sensation itself ... to me he feels hotter and maybe slicker, but otherwise not much different. But Brian ... I have never seen such emotion on his face, and I'm overwhelmed. He looks stunned; his mouth falls open and his eyes glaze as he hangs above me; I can feel his heart hammering, his gasping breath on my face. "God," he whispers in an awed voice, and then "Don't fucking move."

As if I could. He has me pinned, totally at his mercy; and you know what? I love it. I've always
loved it. Loved that he's bigger than me, heavier than me, stronger than me: that physically he's completely in control. I love trusting him that much. It makes the times I top him all the sweeter.

He squeezes his eyes shut, clenching his jaw muscles; I can feel him trembling as he fights for control. And then he draws a long, slow breath, opens his eyes again, and smiles at me; his fingers wind themselves into my hair, and then he begins to move.

The thing about me and Brian, which nobody knows or understands and which they probably wouldn't believe anyway, is that our bodies are so in tune with each other that fucking is kind of like masturbating. When Brian's getting close, he knows I am, too ... and all he needs to do in order to postpone my orgasm is to control his own. He's always been a master at it, which is one of the reasons why no other partner has ever truly satisfied either of us. Now, it's like he's reached a whole different level of empathy with my body; I lose count of the times he pushes me to the very brink before he pulls back, his breath hot on my face, sweat dripping from his hair, his biceps quivering with the strain. He has me folded so tightly that I'm panting for breath and I know that tomorrow my hamstrings are going to be sore as fuck, but I wouldn't ask him to stop even if I could. His hands and his lips are everywhere, first punishing and then soothing, and there are great explosions of light going off in my head, luminous parabolas climbing higher and higher behind my eyelids; and there are more, and more, and then it's like every cell, every atom in my body contracts at once, concentrating sensation into something as bright and hard and ice-cold as a diamond ... and then I shatter. I can hear myself whining; a primal, animal sound, as my heart, my mind - even my fucking soul - everything flies apart until there's no Justin left anymore, only a collection of fizzing nerves going into melt-down. The muscles in my thighs and belly spasm, twitching helplessly. Brian holds me impaled until the last quivering fades, and then he smiles at me.

He's still the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

"Justin ... love you ..." it's half a sigh, half a prayer; he thrusts a couple more times and I feel him cum, and that sets off one more faint explosion, a dim echo of the conflagration that's already swallowed me, that floods my body with warmth. Then, finally, I'm still.

**Brian**

"God." I'm so glad I've got him in this position because if he made the slightest movement now I'd lose it. As it is, I hold him still, poised just within him, and wait until my brain is back in command and the almost irresistible need to cum has faded into a burning ache in my balls. Then I can move. I press in, watching the emotions on his face; feeling the heat, the pressure ... everything more intense, more concentrated than I ever imagined; and suddenly I understand why men are willing to pay such a price for this privilege. Because this is ... beyond everything. And all I can think - while I am still capable of thought – is why the fuck I ever hesitated. Why the fuck have I been denying myself this? Denying him? I always knew fucking him raw would be an intensely intimate experience ... I just never realised mind-blowing the sensation would be.

There are no barriers, either physical or emotional: we're both virgins here, freely giving something we've never surrendered before. I pause when I'm flush against him, struggling again for control; I rest my forehead against his, my breath rasping against his face.

In this moment I know I'm bound tighter to him by this act than by any law that either man or God could ever devise.

I really hadn't planned how this would go, other than to take my time and try to relax both of us ... fuck it, to be romantic if that's what you want ... but sex with Justin has always written it's own rules and you're never really sure which direction it's going to take until you're actually doing it. So I let
our bodies take over, setting their own pace and rhythm, and concentrate simply on trying to hang on, because I don't want this to end.

I never want it to end.

He's clutching frantically at everything he can reach ... the sheets, his own hair, me. I know I'll have moon-shaped nail marks all over my arms and back tomorrow, but the sting of his grip only spurs me on harder and faster, determined to take him somewhere he's never been – fuck, somewhere I've never been. And when I can't bear it anymore, when I know he can't bear it anymore, I let him go and watch his face as he goes into freefall, and realise the true reason I've always resisted doing this. Because I'm not going to be able to stop.

As soon as I can move, I release his legs and shift my weight off him. He's completely still, his eyes closed, and I run my hand gently down his cheek.

"Justin? Justin ..."

His eyes flicker. "Mmh?"

"You okay?"

He blinks at me, flushed and a little dazed. His hair is plastered to his skull and his body sticky with sweat and cum. He looks ... fucking gorgeous. He runs the tip of his tongue over his lips and croaks, "I think that was probably Number One."

Fucking little shit. "Probably?"

He smiles brilliantly. "Okay. Definitely." He puts his hands behind his head and smirks. "Was that my Christmas present?"

"Only part of it." I unpeel myself from his skin and roll over, opening the drawer to my nightstand and pulling out the small silver-wrapped box inside. I sit back against the headboard and hand it to him. "Here."

He glances at me a little apprehensively as he takes it, hesitantly studying the package for a moment before untying the ribbon and carefully removing the paper. He freezes as the familiar box comes into view. "Brian ..." He holds it for a moment, cradling it in his hands before lifting the lid, disclosing the simple platinum bands within. "I can't believe you held onto these..."

"They're ours, Justin. I couldn't stand the thought of someone else buying them ... wearing them ..."

He studies me solemnly. "Like the suits?"

"Yeah. Just like the suits." I try to read his expression, to see that I haven't made a huge fucking mistake. "It's okay. You don't have to wear it or anything ... and I'm not asking you to walk down the aisle again. Fuck all that. Like you said, we don't need it. The only vows that count are the ones we make to each other."

He looks down at the ring-box, stroking the gleaming metal with his right forefinger; then his head comes up, and his eyes are wet as they meet mine. "I'd be proud to wear it, Brian," he says simply, holding the box out to me.

I reach over and remove the smaller of the two rings, my heart bumping painfully in my chest. Hard to believe it, but my mouth's fucking dry too. I have never been more sure, or more afraid, in my life.
Because, as they say, the third time is the charm.

I take his left hand in mine, and feel it tremble.

I hadn't meant to say anything. He knows, right? I don't need to tell him anymore. But my tongue has other ideas, and the words come before I have a chance to think about them; "I, Brian, take thee, Justin … to have and to hold from this day forward; for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health till death do us part." Ancient vows formalised nearly five hundred years ago: words I've derided and negated all my life but which in this moment achieve a weight and validity I've never dreamed of. My voice rings out, strong and confident. "With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow. And thereto I plight thee my troth." With utter certainty I slide the ring onto his finger.

He gaze is locked on his hand as if he thinks it might disappear. Then he looks up into my face, His eyes are wide and wondering as a child's.

Then he laughs, clear and joyous. "Trust you to do the fucking first, and save the ceremony for after!" He picks up the other ring and kisses it, and then puts it on my left ring-finger. "I plight my troth, too," he says softly. "To all of it. All of it, with you."

And because I'm incapable of speech right now, I do what any good husband does, and kiss him; slowly, thoroughly, and sensuously. It's as much a vow as any other.

Eventually I release him and roll over onto my stomach, looking at him expectantly.

He looks back questioningly.

"Well?" I demand.

"Well?" he echoes, confused.

I raise my eyebrows. "Just because this is our wedding night, Sunshine, don't expect me to do all the fucking work."

Whereupon he leaps on me.

"Where do you want to go for our honeymoon?"

He stares at me. "Our what?"

"Our honeymoon." I stub out my cigarette and smirk at him. "Sunshine, a honeymoon is the only sensible reason for getting married in the first place. If you think I'm going to deny myself two weeks of fucking your brains out, you're very much mistaken. So where do you want to go? Italy? Paris?"

He shakes his head. "Nope. Vermont."

I stare at him. "Vermont?"

"Uh huh."

"I offer you Paris, and you take Vermont?"

"I don't know." He shrugs. "It just seems right ... like tying up all the loose ends, or something."

I remember how happy he was, that long-ago night I'd promised to take him there; so excited that I'd
finally offered him a small crumb of my attention. And it's a promise I've yet to make good. I nod. "Okay. If that's what you really want. But if I fall off a snowboard and spend the whole time flat on my back, it'll be your fault."

He wiggles his eyebrows. "Mmm. Actually, that's quite a nice idea. Although I wasn't really thinking of snowboarding ... I was thinking more of hot baths ..." - he leans over and presses a soft kiss to my lips – "and log fires ..." – kiss – "and big, soft, four-posters ..." – kiss.

Now I know why I love the little twat. I pinch his ass, making him yelp. "May as well stay here, then. I'll even throw in breakfast in bed."

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_You and me we got caught down there, in the twisted canyons of the Great Divide;_

_We walked the floor, now we don't go there anymore._

_In the Great Divide, nothing to decide_

_No-one else to care for or love;_

_In the Great Divide I don't fit in too well._

_-The Great Divide – Neil Young_

BRIAN

"So what happened to 'Love, honour ... and obey'?"

"Don't ask me. You're the one who left them out." He's putting away groceries, and as he bends to open the vegetable bin I get a wonderful view of his ass.

Fuck. I knew I should have paid more attention to Bible Class. I fold my arms across my chest and eye him accusingly. "So now we're married ... I'm not allowed to spank you or shit?"

He straightens up and stares. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

I can feel myself pouting. "I don't know. You going all prissy on me?"

He sighs as he picks up a lettuce and a bag of tomatoes and stows them in the refrigerator. "I am not being prissy."

"Are too."

He giggles.

I walk up behind him and put my arms round his waist, nuzzling the back of his neck. "I just don't want ... 'marriage' to equal boring ... or predictable."

He gives me a look. "'Marriage' equals trusting, Brian," he says. "I trust you to do anything, you know that. Haven't I proven it enough times?"

I raise my eyebrow.

"Anything reasonable," he qualifies. "Having a zucchini stuck up my ass is not reasonable." He waves the offending vegetable under my nose. "And don't even try to tell me it's not as big as your cock."
Okay. The lad has a point. But still ... "I just don't see how it's different to any of the other kinky shit we do."

He rolls his eyes. "It's a fucking vegetable, Brian. It's not kinky ... it's weird. Like Golden Showers and Scat and shit."

I chuckle. "Scat is shit, Sunshine."

He turns round in my arms and peers up at me. "You know you're turning into a dirty old pervert, don't you?"

"Mmm. But I'm your dirty old pervert," I tell him, grabbing a double handful of butt and pulling his groin against me.

*Love, honour and obey.* How the fuck did I forget that bit? I wonder if it's too late to negotiate our pre-nuptial agreement ...

THE END
EPILOGUE 2030

I'll light the fire while you place the flowers

In the vase that you bought today …

BRIAN

"Haemorrhoids? You've got fucking haemorrhoids?"

Justin glares at me, folding his arms across his chest. "Yeah, that's what thirty years of being fucked in the ass by you does to a guy!"

I press my lips together in a desperate bid to stop laughing. "Um … wow. Sorry. Guess that's one of the penalties of being such a dedicated bottom-boy." My cheeks are twitching and I bite them hard. Most of it is pure relief; he hasn't let me anywhere near his ass for a while now and I was beginning to worry there was something seriously wrong.

His expression doesn't change. "Glad to know that my ass being off limits is such a source of amusement to you, Mr. Kinney."

That wipes the smile off my face in a hurry. "What? You mean I can't fuck you anymore?"

He rolls his eyes. "Oh, suddenly it's serious."

You'd better believe it's serious. Forty-seven years old, and he's still hot as hell. Contrary to all my dire predictions, his calorie intake over the years never did result in his becoming a lard-ass, thank fuck. I might not be able to span his waist with my hands anymore, but otherwise there's little change. "You can have them treated, though, right?" I ask fretfully, taking his hand.

He relents a little. "Yeah, I can have them cauterised." I wince. "But the skin tone will never be the same. We'll always have to be careful … and not so frequent."

Despite his casual tone, his eyes are worried. Maybe we don't manage our old standard of three fucks a day (judged purely by number, not by the number of orgasms achieved per fuck) anymore, but our sex life has never lost its enthusiasm. Thirty years of fucking the same guy and I'm still not tired of it: he's still as great a challenge to me as he ever was. Who'd have thunk?

He leans against me, laying his head on my shoulder. "If … if that's not enough for you anymore … I just want you to know I understand. I won't like it, but I'll understand."

I stare at him, then bray laughter. "Christ, Sunshine, I'm fifty fucking nine years old! If anyone should be out looking for a younger model, it's you, not me."
"Yeah, but I'm the one with the worn out ass," he smiles, but his eyes don't. They're still so blue, so bright, even after all these years. I envy him his sight; I started having to wear glasses for reading many years ago. I wanted to get contacts, but Justin likes me in glasses. He says they make me look like a lawyer.

Jesus.

I run my hands through his hair; he wears it shorter now, and it's a little thinner, but the texture is just the same. He also has the advantage of being blond, so the grey doesn't show so much. When I started seeing grey hairs at my temples I plucked each one daily, until Justin pointed out that I was beginning to look like I had mange. So I visited my stylist and came home sporting a full head of glossy chestnut, which only resulted in the little twat deploying the most lethal weapon in his arsenal - withdrawal of conjugal rights. He said he wasn't turned on by the thought of being fucked by an ageing lothario with coloured hair and Botox. Faced with that ultimatum, what the fuck was I supposed to do? Now I'm more grey than brunette, but Justin doesn't seem to mind.

"You are so full of shit," I tell him. "You know that's all over." It is. I won't pretend that neither of us fell off the monogamy wagon over the years, but it was never an issue, other than having to resort back to the dreaded condoms for a while. Which was about as effective a deterrent as you could wish for, really. We survived, as we always have. I found it easier every day to withdraw from that scene, to allow the younger studs to take my place and to retire undefeated, with my dignity intact. After all, I walked away with the prize, didn't I? And there hasn't been anyone else for a long, long time.

I put my arms round him and he settles against me, his fingers toying with the buttons on my shirt. "This getting old shit really sucks, doesn't it?" he sighs.

"Actually, it's not nearly as traumatic as I'd been led to believe," I tell him.

"No," He chuckles. "Remember that party Michael threw at the undertaker's when you turned thirty?"

"With that fucking coffin and the Tombstone birthday cake? How could I forget?"

"You thought it was the end of the world." He looks up at me and smiles. "But thirty years on, you're still beautiful. So you had nothing at all to worry about, did you?"

No. No, I didn't. And I still don't, because contrary to everything I'd believed up to the age of thirty-five, I am an extraordinarily lucky man.

"You really don't mind, then? About ... " He still sounds uncertain.

"I'm sure we'll find a solution," I tell him, kissing the tip of his nose. "We always have. After all, creativity has always been our strong point." I place my lips against his ear and whisper huskily, "I could always try kissing them better."

He scrunches his face up. "Eew, Brian! That is so gross. I knew you were going to turn into an old pervert eventually!"

"And as I keep telling you, I'm your old pervert. And you love me that way."

He looks up at me with a full Sunshine smile. "No, you love me! You so love me!" he croons. "You sooo love me!" He's seventeen again.

"Shut the fuck up, Baldy," I say, stopping his noise with my lips.
THE END

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