Not Like You

by TrueIllusion

Summary

It’s funny how life works sometimes -- in cycles, repeating the same themes in different ways with different situations. Leaving it up to us to recognize a familiar situation and call on our past experience to get through it.

But sometimes you can’t see the forest for the trees.

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Justin decides to make a huge transition in his career, but things are not always what they seem.

Notes

Thanks to SandiD and PrettyTheWorld for all of the brainstorming and the beta work, and for staying with me as this story continues to take shape in my mind.
Two days after Rob officially became an employee of Kinnetikcorp, Justin told me he was quitting his job.

It seemed like any other day. I'd been at the office from nine in the morning until after six in the evening, and I'd come home to dinner on the table, exactly as I did most nights. Even during the school year, Justin got home two hours before I did, which caused the cooking responsibilities to fall to him the majority of the time. On that particular night, he'd made Debbie's lasagna -- which he did on occasion because it made us both feel like she was still here with us -- and it was every bit as delicious as I remembered. He'd brought home a bottle of wine that I was sure was much more expensive than his usual, more frugal choices, leaving me wondering if perhaps we were celebrating something -- if there was some important date I'd forgotten.

We were halfway through dessert -- sharing a gargantuan slice of cheesecake from the deli on the next block -- when he said it.

"I called Michelle today to let her know I’m not coming back in the fall."

The way he said it was so nonchalant, like it was nothing at all -- like it was something he’d been planning for a while. Like we’d had prior discussions about it, even though we hadn’t had a single one. I stopped chewing and studied Justin for a moment, but his countenance was every bit as casual as his tone.

I was still trying to figure out what to say when he started speaking again.

"I think I’d like to concentrate on my art for a while, you know?" He paused and took another bite of the cheesecake, while I continued to stare at him, evaluating him. Then, before I could find a way to respond to the bomb that had just been dropped in the middle of our dining room table, he changed the subject. "I’m so glad Rob gave me Debbie’s lasagna recipe. I really thought no one would ever get it out of her, but every time I make it, I’m so grateful that she gave it to him."

The sudden shift in topic did give me pause in the moment, because it made Justin’s statement about his job seem even more random. But I chose to focus on the positive -- Justin was going back to doing his art full time.

I remembered what a huge deal that had been for him -- for both of us -- when he’d resigned from his graphic artist position at Kinnetik years ago. How exciting it was. How it was like Justin was embarking on a new frontier. A new stage in his life.

Before everything changed and we got thrown into a totally different dimension.

It’s funny how life works sometimes -- in cycles, repeating the same themes in different ways with different situations. Leaving it up to us to recognize a familiar situation and call on our past experience to get through it.

But sometimes you can’t see the forest for the trees.

While, on one hand, I was happy for Justin -- that he’d decided to spend more time on his art -- on the other, I was surprised because it came completely out of the blue.

He loved his job. Loved the kids. Came home every afternoon chattering away excitedly about his day. From my perspective, it looked like he had the best damn job in the whole world.
So why was he quitting?

Looking back, I should have known right then that something was wrong. But I didn't.

Maybe I didn't want to.

He'd come so far -- overcome so much to put his life back together and find a new way to make a living and feel fulfilled. Maybe I just didn't want to entertain the possibility of setting so much of that progress back to start.

But I felt justified in not seeing it as a big deal because in the beginning, he hadn't wanted to take the job in the first place. Sure, he did, and he loved it, but perhaps it had just been a stepping stone -- something to validate him and help him feel like he was doing something worthwhile, while he tried to find a comfortable place in the art world again. So maybe it was time to move on. I just wanted him to be happy, and this seemed like what he wanted.

He seemed happy, too. At least, back then.

We spent the rest of the evening together, finishing the wine and talking softly to each other as we caught up on a couple of shows on our DVR. Justin was tucked into my side with his head resting on my shoulder, and everything was normal. He asked me how things were going with moving the team from GoodLife Robotics into their new office space, and I asked him about his latest sculpture project. It was just another comfortable night in our home, in our married life. The sort of marital bliss that I would have pretended to be allergic to twenty years before, that had become something I really enjoyed and couldn't imagine living without. The progression of life changes a person, though, I suppose. I know it's changed me, and it's changed Justin, but we've gotten through it all together, in one way or another.

We fucked in the shower and fell asleep with our bodies pressed against each other, Justin’s fingers brushing idly over my back the way they did most nights, tracing the scar that runs the length of most of my spine. I always wondered why he did that, because it seemed to be unconscious -- like his fingers just naturally wandered to that spot, perhaps because, on some level, it reminded him of what I survived, the same way that the barely-visible scar on his own temple had always reminded me of how strong he was, and still is.

But strength doesn't preclude struggle, unfortunately. Particularly not where traumatic brain injury is concerned, with its unpredictable, ever-changing ways. And, unbeknownst to me -- to both of us -- we were about to enter one of the most significant struggles of our marriage.

I woke up the morning after Justin’s big announcement to find myself alone in our bed, and I could smell eggs and bacon cooking in the kitchen. By the time I made it into the living area, Justin was plating up breakfast, humming quietly to himself. He greeted me with a smile, then gave me a hug and a kiss after he'd placed our plates on the table. He had plans to work in the studio that day, and he seemed excited to get started on a couple of ideas he’d been rolling around in his head for a while.

A couple of hours later, we left the apartment together, then went our separate ways on the sidewalk out front -- Justin headed to his studio, and me to Kinnetik.

The next several days looked exactly the same -- every bit as predictable as my old routine of work, Woody’s, Babylon, and an anonymous fuck. Everything was fine; no reason to worry.

The shift was so subtle that I thought nothing of it at the time, though now, with the benefit of hindsight, it feels like I should have seen the flashing lights and heard the sirens. I wish I had, just because I could have saved him so much pain. But there’s no changing that now.
It started with a headache, and Justin with his face buried in his pillow groaning at the morning sunlight as it filtered through the blinds in our bedroom. I got up and closed the blackout curtains we’d had installed after Justin’s accident, when debilitating migraines became a regular part of our lives. I got him his meds and a glass of water, and I made him his favorite tea, but he didn’t drink it. I called Cynthia and told her I wasn’t coming in that day, ignoring Justin’s mumbled pleas that he was fine and I should go to work anyway.

He slept most of the day, while I worked from our living room via my laptop. I ordered us lunch and cooked us dinner, but he wasn’t interested in eating. When I went to the bedroom to tell him dinner was ready, he said he felt sick and rolled over and went back to sleep. The next morning, his headache was gone, but he was exhausted, so he stayed in bed while I went about my morning routine and went to work. When I came home, he was gone, and he’d left me a note on the kitchen counter that he’d gone to his studio.

Justin didn’t get home until well after nine o’clock, but that wasn’t unusual for him when it came to working in his studio. When he really got absorbed in an art project, he would lose all sense of time and space, and I was used to that, so I left him alone, vowing to myself that I wouldn’t worry unless he gave me a reason to. And at that point, he’d given me no reason.

So I took a long, hot shower, which I desperately needed because I’d been having a flare-up of some of my chronic pain, thanks to a couple of stressful months at the office. Everything worked out in the end, but that didn’t stop my body from reacting however the fuck it wanted. When I got out of the shower, I found Justin in our kitchen, sitting at the bar, eating a sandwich, with dried paint all over his face and hands. But he didn’t seem happy, and he wasn’t ready-and-waiting to tell me all about what he’d been working on, like he usually would have been. Instead, he was obviously frustrated, and the aggressive way in which he was eating his sandwich showed it.

“Everything okay?” I asked, pushing myself into the kitchen for a glass of water.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he muttered, without even looking up from his plate, where he’d practically just thrown down the remaining half of his sandwich.

Normally, I would have at least tried to find out what was frustrating him -- and he would have told me without much pushing on my part -- but that night, I was too tired and too uncomfortable, and all I really wanted was to medicate and go to sleep. Still, I couldn’t deny that paint on Justin’s skin always has been and always will be a turn-on for me, and sex is still one of my default modes of stress relief.

“Missed you tonight,” I said, getting closer to Justin and slowly running a finger down his arm, across the small splotches of acrylic paint that dotted it. When I got to his hand, I brought it to my lips and kissed it, hoping he’d start to return my affections so we could go to bed and work out all of our pain and frustration together.

But instead of leaning into my touch, he pulled his hand away and continued looking down, pausing for a moment to rub his temples, which I knew probably meant his headache was back, or otherwise threatening to do so.

“Come to bed,” I said in a low, seductive tone as I rubbed my hand across his back, where I could feel the tension radiating from his muscles. “I’ll give you a massage.” Even in my own state of discomfort, the last thing I wanted was to see Justin hurting, and if that meant delaying my own relief to help provide him with some, I’d do it, no questions asked.

But he leaned forward, away from my touch, and ran a hand over his face. “Not tonight,” he mumbled.
“Come to bed,” I said again, this time without the sexual undertone. “Just to relax. I promise I’ll keep my hands to myself.”

Justin didn’t move and didn’t engage -- he just sat there with his eyes closed. It was obvious that he wanted to be left alone, but that was close to impossible for me to do because I wanted nothing more than to take his pain away and make him feel better. I couldn’t keep my fingers from reaching out again to make contact, to try and soothe my partner, even if I had no idea why he was upset. But this time, he took his resistance one step further.

“I need to take a shower,” Justin muttered, pulling away from me as he stood, turned and walked back toward the bedroom without so much as a backward glance, leaving the plate with his partially-eaten sandwich on the countertop.

I watched his back as he retreated down the hallway, disappearing into our bedroom. I fought the impulse to follow him -- to press and try to get him to let me in, tell me what was wrong. Instead, I picked up the plate and threw away what remained of his sandwich, then placed the empty plate in the sink. I heard the shower turn on, and I hoped the warm water would bring Justin the small sense of relief it had brought me a few minutes before.

Turning off the lights in the kitchen and living room, I made my way to the bedroom, sliding my body into the bed and watching my legs shake to work out their own tension before they settled back into their now-familiar stillness. I downed the small handful of pills I’d already laid out for myself on the nightstand, then leaned back into the pillows and closed my eyes, trying to relax my mind as well as my body -- telling myself Justin would talk to me when he was ready. We didn’t keep things from each other anymore, and I was sure this would be no exception.

I chalked up his odd behavior to being tired and probably still dealing with the remnants of a migraine, and tried not to think much of it as I pushed myself over onto my stomach to prepare for sleep, and it only took a few minutes before I was starting to feel the effects of the medication I’d taken. Soon, I was falling into a dreamless slumber as I listened to the sounds of water spattering on the tile in the adjacent bathroom, hopefully washing away my husband’s pain.
Chapter 2

I awoke the next morning with Justin’s arm weighing heavily across my upper back and his face inches from my own, eyes still closed, sound asleep. I hated to disturb him, so I laid there and watched him for a few minutes, relishing the sense of peace that had overtaken his features and replaced the previous night’s turmoil, before I had to find a way to slide out from under him or else I’d be late for work.

I tried to do it as carefully as possible, but when only half of your body works, sometimes being sneaky is a distinct impossibility, particularly when it comes to getting in and out of bed. So, I wasn’t surprised when Justin’s eyes fluttered open as I pushed myself up so I could roll over.

“Sorry,” I said. “I was trying not to wake you.”

“S’okay,” he mumbled, the tone of his voice matching the still-sleepy look in his eyes as he pulled his arm back and slid it under his pillow instead.

“Go back to sleep,” I said as I pushed myself over and into a sitting position. “Lucky you, now you can work on whatever schedule you like.”

Justin hummed and blinked, which wasn’t really the reaction I’d expected, but given the way the past few days had been for him, I decided to overlook it.

“Need the bathroom before I go do my thing?” I asked, mostly because ‘do my thing’ meant a nearly one-hour sequence of tasks just to get ready for the day, most of which had to be done in our master bathroom. Sometimes I miss being able to roll out of bed and be ready for work in fifteen minutes or less. But it is what it is. After thirteen years, I’m used to it. It doesn’t piss me off anymore, but sometimes it’s still inconvenient.

Justin shook his head, still on the pillow, giving me a small smile as his eyes slid shut once again. The smile was a good sign. Maybe he was okay after all.

Once I’d completed my morning routine -- which I had to remind myself used to take me more than two hours instead of not-quite-one -- I went into the kitchen, where I found Justin making breakfast, and coffee already on the table. That was a good sign too -- something normal.

“Sorry about last night,” Justin said, as he brought me my breakfast -- oatmeal, healthy carbs that I needed to be eating according to my doctor, and that my public-service-announcement, rule-following husband was determined to be sure I ate. He’d stirred cherries into it, and offered me dark chocolate chips, which I passed on, because no way in hell am I turning breakfast into a dessert. However, Justin wasn’t the least bit shy about dumping a generous portion of chocolate into his own bowl.

“It’s okay.” I shrugged and offered Justin a reassuring smile. “Believe me, I know what it’s like to have a bad day that just won't quit.”

Justin snorted and stirred his oatmeal. “You can say that again. I should have never said yes to this commission, but I figured it would probably be good to make some money, since I quit my job and all.”

“You know you don’t have to worry about money. I’m not worried about money.”

“I know, but… I don’t want to be a kept man, you know?”
“You’re not. You do plenty. You don’t have to take on commissions you don’t like to make money we don’t need.”

Justin sighed and took a bite of his breakfast, and I knew exactly what he was thinking, even if he’d never say it. He’d always insisted on pulling his weight somehow, no matter how many times I told him that I didn’t mind supporting us both.

“Remember, you can always pay me back with sexual favors,” I said, grinning, trying to lighten the mood, though it seemed to have the opposite effect where Justin was concerned. Instead of laughing like I’d expected him to do, he looked down and bit his lip.

“I’m sorry about that too, last night. I just wasn’t in the mood.”

“Stop apologizing,” I said, really wanting to pull out my old line of ‘sorry’s bullshit,’ but not sure how Justin would take that in his still-odd mood. “It’s fine. I can go a night without sex, I promise. We’re good.”

“I just get frustrated sometimes,” he said, still not looking at me. “When I feel like I should be able to do something, and I can’t anymore. It’s like sometimes I forget. That I’m… different now.”

“I know.” My words were a short and simple acknowledgement, but my brain almost immediately went back to a night almost thirteen years before, when I’d said those exact words to Justin about myself in Debbie Novotny’s living room.

“I know you know. And that’s why I hate complaining about it to you.”

“Hey, what have I told you before about that? There’s no comparison. There shouldn’t be. You feel how you feel. Just do what you can. Remember, they hired you, didn’t they? You’re still you. Even if what you do now is different, it’s still your work, and that’s what they asked for. And if you need someone to sell it, well…”

Justin snorted. “I don’t need my husband coming to my rescue, even if you could sell ice to someone living at the South Pole.”

“Well, I have faith in you. You’ll get it.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to? I’m always right,” I smirked, this time succeeding in making Justin laugh.

“Don’t I know it,” he said, shaking his head a little as he looked down at his bowl.

The rest of our breakfast conversation was much lighter, and by the time he kissed me goodbye and I went to the office, everything seemed to be status quo. I knew we were still feeling out a new normal and a new daily routine, but Justin was at least talking to me and telling me what was frustrating him, so that helped me feel better about things.

Of course, now I know that it was a false sense of security, but we all know what they say about hindsight. I’ve tried to keep that in perspective -- to not feel so guilty about where we ultimately ended up -- but it’s hard. I keep going back over everything in my mind, trying to find all of the little things I missed that I shouldn’t have. I know it won’t change anything -- and Rob has told me that ad nauseum -- but I still can’t stop.

The next week or so added to that false sense of security, with Justin and I continuing to fall into a
comfortable routine, though it hardly ever involved me coming home to a home-cooked meal anymore. I didn’t care about that though -- what I cared about was Justin doing what he wanted to do. If that meant we ate takeout or I had to dig into my own bag of cooking tricks, that was fine.

We got Gus moved into his dorm at NYU and played host to Lindsay and Melanie for a few days, and during that time, Justin seemed to be okay. Normal, even.

Then came another subtle shift.

I remember that it was a Tuesday. I’m not sure why I remember that, but I do. Rob had a staff meeting with his crew at our usual lunchtime and Cynthia had a client meeting, so that meant I was on my own, and I decided to surprise Justin by bringing him lunch at his studio. I stopped by the cafe he always wanted to go to whenever he came by the office, and I got him his favorite thing -- the club sandwich -- and picked up one of their giant brownies for good measure. Balancing everything carefully on my lap, I made my way to the subway and rode the several blocks to SoHo, where Justin’s studio was.

But when I got there, what I found wasn’t exactly what I was expecting.

I knocked lightly on the door and got no answer, but that wasn’t surprising because Justin often worked while wearing a giant pair of noise-canceling headphones to block out distractions, regardless of whether or not he actually used them to listen to music. So I dug my own key out of my pocket and unlocked the door, opening it slowly so as not to startle my husband.

My eyes immediately fell on an easel by the largest workbench, where there was a half-finished canvas, covered in bright colors that formed an abstract pattern that looked almost floral. But Justin wasn’t working on it. Instead, he was sitting just beyond the workbench, in the armchair in front of the window, asleep, with his feet pulled up into the chair and an arm wrapped around his knees.

I pushed myself into the room, looking around at the three other empty easels scattered throughout the room as well as the workbenches, which were nearly as empty, serving as a home to only a couple of half-finished sculpture projects. It wasn’t at all the typical state of Justin’s studio, where artwork normally filled every wall and every surface.

He’d been spending a lot of time in his studio, so that made it even more surprising that there were so few works in progress. I knew that the piece on the easel was the commission piece he’d told me about more than a week before, intended to hang above the bed in the room of a little girl whose parents clearly had a lot of money, because Justin isn’t cheap. Even it, though, appeared to be nowhere close to done, and the nearer I got to the canvas, the more I felt like something was just… off.

The strokes didn’t look like Justin’s careful, confident ones. They looked… shaky. Unsure. Almost muddied, which was a stark contrast to Justin’s usual work. Even right after his accident, his work had never looked like this. Don’t get me wrong, the piece was good, but it just didn’t seem to be Justin.

I looked across the room again to my husband, curled up in the chair by the window, still sleeping soundly. Looking just as peaceful as he usually did when he slept. But I also knew it wasn’t like him to sleep in the middle of the afternoon. Even when his brain injury had forced him to take almost daily naps in the months after his accident, he wasn’t exactly willing. He did it because his doctor told him he had to, and he was desperate to recover whatever he could, but it wasn’t his favorite thing, and the only time he’d taken any naps in recent memory was when he had a migraine or was sick.
That thought left me wondering what was wrong, because the scene before me was so not like Justin. Not at all.

Our lunch still sitting in my lap, I pushed closer to Justin, gently laying my hand on his forearm. It took him a few seconds to come back to consciousness, and when he did, his surprise at seeing me in his studio was palpable, but it was also layered with something else I couldn’t quite identify. Looking back now, I think it was shame, and that hurts to think about, because there shouldn’t have been any shame in the way Justin felt. Not at all.

But he’d kept it to himself, and tied my hands behind my back in the process, leaving me unable to be the support he needed, simply because I didn’t know the full breadth of what he was feeling.

Again, fucking hindsight.

“I brought you some lunch. The club sandwich from that cafe you like by the office,” I said, hoping to see that familiar sunshine smile spread across my husband’s face, but it never came.

Instead, Justin grunted a nonverbal response that I wasn’t sure how to interpret as he untangled his limbs and stood, walking past me and over to the easel, where he regarded the canvas with a critical eye.

“It sucks, doesn’t it?”

His words were the ultimate self criticism -- harsher than I’d heard from Justin before, even when he was being unfairly hard on himself. In his tone, I could hear the dejection layered with the frustration and condemnation. He still wasn’t looking at me. He was staring at the canvas like it had offended him somehow, but even in my denial-prone state, I couldn’t ignore the fact that he also looked lost. Of course, in my mind I blamed it on the fact that the piece was a commission he’d never wanted to do in the first place. How could he expect to feel inspired by something he wasn’t emotionally connected to?

Now that I look back, I know exactly what was standing before me in that moment -- my husband, feeling like he’d been “caught.” Like he should have had something to show for all of the hours he’d spent in his studio, but having almost nothing at all. That he wouldn’t look at me because he was embarrassed, and some dark corner of his mind was telling him that I would judge him. Inadvertently, I’d entered into his private struggle, uninvited and unwanted, by the simple act of bringing him lunch.

I tried to play the part of the supportive spouse, telling him about all of the good things I could see in the painting, and doing my dead-level best to ignore the flaws that I was fairly sure were a big part of the reason Justin was being so critical of the work. I know that’s not my typical style, but Justin didn’t need criticism in that moment. He needed support. Even in my willfully ignorant state, I recognized that. But Justin was having none of it. He wouldn’t listen. Wouldn’t look at me. He just stared at the canvas with narrowed eyes for several more seconds, then went back to his chair and slumped down in it, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands.

“Maybe you just need a break,” I said, keeping my voice gentle. I looked at him over my shoulder as I placed the bag containing our lunch on the workbench, then turned and went over to him again.

“Why don’t you try to eat something? Maybe go out and get some fresh air? At least, as fresh as it can be here in good ol’ Manhattan.” I grinned at him, hoping I’d be able to break through his mood with a little sardonic humor, but my attempt was unsuccessful. Justin didn’t move. Didn’t look up.

Finally, after a long silence, Justin mumbled, “I’m not hungry.” Still looking at the floor. Uttering what was perhaps the most un-Justin-like statement he ever could have uttered. And still, I clung to
the idea that everything was fine -- that Justin was having a bad day, or in a bad mood, or maybe he was getting another one of his headaches.

Still, I refused to see what was right in front of me.
I ate lunch by myself that day, in Justin’s studio, with Justin sitting mere feet away, but both of us still somehow very alone. It was yet another small thing that should have added up to something much bigger in my mind. Slowly, those little things started happening more and more, but instead of allowing them to pile up and form something that might have caught my attention, I kept sweeping them away. Making excuses on Justin’s behalf, for reasons unknown.

He started sleeping a lot -- at first, remaining in bed all the way until the time when I left for work, then ultimately, still being in bed when I got home some days. Sometimes still in his pajamas. Never making a meal. Hardly ever leaving our apartment, really. He’d always been one of those bizarre people who loved grocery shopping, but even that fell by the wayside, along with our dinners out and the walks we used to take on the High Line in the evenings when the weather was nice. We tried to have Gus over for dinner at least once a week -- although his busy schedule made it a challenge sometimes -- and while Justin would put on his best “I’m okay” face on those evenings, when I look back now, it should have been easy to tell that it was all an act.

On occasion, Justin would still go to his studio, but he always came home frustrated, and he never wanted to talk about what was bothering him. But I still didn’t know what to make of it all. My husband was gradually turning into some other person, yet somehow I was content to ignore it all. That was, until Michael said something that made me sit up and pay attention. Not enough attention, mind you, but at least more than I had been paying.

I had to go to Pittsburgh for a business trip, so I started making plans for both Justin and myself, since he’d accompanied me on just about all of my recent trips to the Pitts, and it had become something I really looked forward to, since it gave us some time alone with each other, away from the city. Away from at least some of the responsibilities of our lives. However, when I told Justin about the trip, his reaction was the exact opposite of his usual one. I knew it was at the same time as a mother-daughter trip that Jennifer and Molly had planned, but I didn’t think that would cause him to not want to go. After all, I’d still be there, and we’d still have our house, with the outdoor hot tub and the indoor jacuzzi and the big screen TV and our comfortable, king-sized bed. But he didn’t want to go.

I tried not to look hurt or confused when he told me that -- because those are emotions that I’m not fond of showing, to be honest -- and I accepted his reasoning that he had a lot of things he needed to get done at his studio. Two more commission projects and a show to prepare for. I understood that, because art is Justin’s job and business is business, and sometimes it has to take precedence over pleasure.

In the back of my mind, though, there was still a hesitation there -- a tiny voice nagging at me, that made me reluctant to leave Justin alone in New York and very nearly pushed me to try to reschedule the meeting that was bringing me to the Pitts in the first place. On the other hand, though, I didn’t want to hover or make Justin feel like I didn’t trust him, so I went, and I tried to keep my text messages to a minimum so as to not look like a worried wife -- because Brian Kinney doesn’t fucking do “worried wife.”

Our house felt lonely though. It was the first time I’d ever been there by myself, and even though I spent more than a decade and a half living alone, through that trip, I came to find out that I didn’t much care for it anymore. I kept finding myself turning to say something to Justin before I remembered that he wasn’t there, causing me to question whether or not I was losing my mind or becoming senile in my old age. And every time I thought of Justin, I wondered if he was in his
studio, working, or if he was spending all of his time in bed. I hoped the former was true. But, again, I had to try not to hover. I had to tell myself that everything was fine. He’d been okay in the days leading up to my trip, and he was responding to my text messages in a mostly-timely manner, so I had evidence to support that theory, and I tried to carry on with my trip as normal. I missed him, though.

Michael and I met at the diner for lunch on my last full day in the city, both for the sake of nostalgia and also just to catch up with each other -- as had become customary when I returned to the Pitts.

I didn’t get to see Michael as much as I once did, but we were still brothers, and we would always have a special place in each other’s lives -- something I’d especially come to realize over the previous several years. While we were no longer each other’s first call when there was news to share, we would always be bonded for life by our past history and everything we shared as kids. We were just babies back then -- immature kids trying to find our way in the world. Now, we were both grown men with businesses and families, but we would always love each other, no matter how long we were apart or how different our lives became. So I always looked forward to getting to spend some time with him when I was in town, and I also looked forward to the opportunity it presented to push his buttons a little, since I no longer got to do it on a daily basis. At the same time, he somehow always managed to push my buttons a little too, by making me think about things I’d rather not think about but probably should. This visit was no different.

When I arrived -- late as usual because the staff meetings at the Pittsburgh office always ran long as fuck -- Michael was already sitting in the very last booth, grinning like the Cheshire Cat.

“What’s got you so happy?” I asked, as I transferred to the bench across from Michael, then lifted myself up to put my wheelchair cushion under me, because as much as I liked sitting other places, after a few scares and some very, very boring week-long stints in bed to heal hot spots, I was no longer inclined to take chances where my skin -- or my ass -- was concerned. “Is Captain Astro poised to come back from the dead?”

“I’ll choose to ignore that remark,” Michael said, reaching forward to grab my chair and pull it back against the wall next to him, without my having to ask. It was simply part of the routine that neither of us even thought about. “Anyway, Ben and I just got some good news last night--”

“You’ve been elected co-presidents of the Stepford Fags’ Neighborhood Association?”

“No, asshole.” Michael’s grin belied his insult as he rolled his eyes at me. “We’re going to be grandparents.”

“Don’t you think Jenny Rebecca is a little bit young to be having a baby?” I smirked at Michael and waited for the eye roll that I knew was coming, and I wasn’t disappointed.

“Hunter and Kate are the ones having the baby.” Michael shook his head at me, laughing. “I didn’t think I needed to specify.”

“Well, congratulations, Gramps. I guess that makes you officially an old man.”

“Need I remind you that you’re not far behind?”

“Hey, Gus is only eighteen. He’d better not be making me a grandpa anytime soon.”

“Ma was seventeen when she had me.”

“And look at how you turned out.”
Michael narrowed his eyes and glared at me, but he only managed it for a few seconds before he was shaking his head again and chuckling softly. “You never change, do you?”

“You wouldn’t know what to do if I did. Besides, you know you love me. And if Gus impregnates anybody in the next four years, you can rest assured that I will kick his ass, right after Lindsay kills him.”

“Still, you can’t deny it’s probably going to happen someday, right?”

“Not everyone has big breeder dreams, Michael.”

“You didn’t, and you’ve got a kid.”

“Lindsay’s idea, not mine.”

“And you love him more than life itself. Come on, admit it. You can’t imagine your life without him. I’m sure you’ll feel the same way about your grandchildren.”

“Can we not age me prematurely, please?” Desperate for distraction, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and checked to see if I had any new messages. While Michael wasn’t wrong -- I’ve loved Gus since the first moment I laid eyes on him -- that didn’t mean I wanted to wax eloquent or get all mushy or teary-eyed about it.

“Pardon me, I forgot, the Great Kinney never ages. Except for these gray hairs right here.” He reached across the table and stroked the small swath of gray on my chin in the beard that Justin said was sexy and made me look sophisticated, that I actually kind of liked because it was a hell of a lot less maintenance than shaving every day. And when your morning routine is already much longer than you’d like it to be, shaving off a few minutes -- no pun intended -- can be a big help.

“Hey, you said it yourself, Mikey -- I’ll always be young and I’ll always be beautiful,” I said, swatting his hand away. “Just because you inherited some Italian gene that has somehow kept you from sprouting any gray yet doesn’t mean you’re not still older than me.”

“You never let me forget it.”

Before I could fire back another smartassed remark, our waitress -- a trans woman with purple hair and a better rack than most cis women -- was standing beside our table, ready to take our order.

Michael, whose eating habits while away from home were clearly unchanged even after a decade and a half of marriage to a health food nut, ordered a cheeseburger and fries, while I opted to take the gamble with the pink plate special -- meatloaf with mashed potatoes and green beans, which felt a little nostalgic as well.

Once we’d handed our menus back to our waitress, I picked up my phone again, just to double check that I hadn’t missed any notifications.

“Everything okay?” Michael asked. “You’re not usually one to be glued to your phone unless there’s a reason to be.”

“Just waiting for Justin to text me back to let me know whether or not I should pick him up some of those Eat’n Park cookies he loves so much. I’ll never understand why everyone else from this town has such a soft spot for them. They’re not even that good.”

“What’s Justin been up to, anyway?” The look on Michael’s face was that of innocent curiosity, but there was a small note of worry there too, though I wondered if that might just be a figment of my
imagination, born of the worry I’d been trying to push out of my mind with little success.

“He’s staying busy,” I said, shrugging, though I knew that statement wasn’t entirely true. “Just working on his art. He’s got a show coming up.” I didn’t particularly want to talk about this, but at the time I didn’t understand where my own involuntary resistance was coming from. Normally, I love talking about Justin and his art -- because I’m proud of him and everything he’s accomplished -- but at the time, it felt like a sore subject.

“I’m sure that is keeping him busy,” Michael said. “Em was telling me he hadn’t heard from him in a while, and he was getting kind of worried. So I just wondered.”

I shrugged again, toying with my silverware just to have something to do and somewhere to look other than my childhood best friend’s big, brown puppy-dog eyes, which I was sure were expressing some of the same concern that I was feeling and trying to ignore. “Like I said, he’s been focused on his art. Spending a lot of time in the studio.”

An uncomfortable silence settled between us, though I could feel Michael’s eyes on me. He reached across the table and laid his hand over mine, stilling it. “Brian,” he said, his tone serious but gentle, “is everything okay with you and Justin?”

I sighed, then raised my gaze to meet Michael’s, which, as predicted, was full of worry. I really, really didn’t want to talk about this, but I also knew that Michael wasn’t going to give up easily. “I just wish I knew how to read him lately,” I said. “He’s just been so… distant. Sometimes I feel like he’s pushing me away. He’s spending almost all of his time either in bed or at his studio, and he doesn’t want to do anything with me anymore. Sometimes he doesn’t even want to talk to me.” I paused for a moment, already having said more than I intended, evaluating whether or not I wanted to give voice to my next thought, because I hated to make this about me, and even more, I hated to admit that I actually felt hurt by the way Justin had been distancing himself from me -- and that was something I’d come to realize through my solo trip to Pittsburgh and all of the time I’d had to think. But if I couldn’t be vulnerable with Michael -- the person who knew all of my history, even the ugly parts I liked to pretend didn’t happen -- who could I be vulnerable with? So I kept talking. “It just makes me wonder if everything has gotten to be too much for him. If I’m too much.”

“What are you talking about? He’s chased after you since the day you met. Sometimes relentlessly. Over and over again. Why would you suddenly be too much?”

“Fuck if I know. But actions speak louder than words.” My tone was bitter and I knew it, but I also knew it was serving as a bit of a shield, guarding my true feelings. All of my old insecurities were rearing their ugly heads, and there was no way Michael wouldn’t see it. Of course, he’d always know exactly how to deal with it.

“It doesn’t sound like he’s just distancing himself from you though,” Michael said, completely ignoring my resentful tone and offering a reassuring, balanced one of his own that seemed to be a mixture of the way he’d always known how to respond to me when I got like that, combined with having been married to Zen Ben for so many years. “It sounds like he’s distancing himself from everyone. He loves you. You know that. I think you’re right that something is off, but I don’t think it’s because of you.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I know I’m right. A world in which Justin Taylor doesn’t love Brian Kinney is one that’s so far off its axis there’s no coming back.” Michael squeezed my hand and gave me a soft, sincere smile. “But there is something this reminds me of.”
“What’s that?”

“You. Right after your accident. You went to work and you went home, and that was it, and if I got you to go out with us, I had to promise that it would be halfway across town in some place where no one would know you. I’d call you at 8 p.m., and you’d be in bed. You didn’t want to see anybody. Half the time you didn’t even want to see me. Sometimes the only way I could get you to talk to me was to just show up at your office, unannounced.”

“I tried that with him. Still didn’t work.”

“Most of the time it didn’t with you, either.”

“This isn’t the same situation though. I was trying to work through some shit.”

“How do you know he isn’t? Maybe he just needs someone to talk to.”

“He can always talk to me. He knows that.”

“Maybe he’s afraid to. I thought the same thing about you all those years ago, and I told you, over and over, that you could talk to me about anything, but you never would.”

“I didn’t want to burden you with my problems.”

“Maybe Justin feels the same way. Talk to him. Ask him what’s wrong. Don’t give up when he tells you it’s nothing. It’s something. And if you need someone to talk to, I’m just a phone call away.”

Blessedly, our waitress chose that moment to show up with our food, giving me a perfect opportunity to shift the topic away from the uncomfortable truth Michael had just voiced. Michael seemed to sense how much I needed that too, as he released my hand and smiled at me -- his final, nonverbal reminder that he was there for me, just like he always had been -- then changed the subject.

We spent the rest of the meal discussing much lighter topics, and Michael didn’t bring up Justin again, but I did notice that his farewell hug was just a little bit tighter and a little bit longer, and I saw the unspoken message of support in his eyes after he kissed me and told me he loved me. Still, for the rest of my afternoon at the office, and the evening I spent alone at the house, Michael’s words kept running through my head, on an endless loop.

Don’t give up when he tells you it’s nothing. It’s something.

As I sat by myself in the jacuzzi tub, trying not to think about how lonely I felt and how much I wished Justin was sitting beside me, I kept turning my phone over and over in my hand, willing it to ring. I’d tried to call Justin twice already, but he hadn’t answered. I kept telling myself he was probably working on something at his studio and didn’t hear the phone. Again, pushing away the thoughts that coincided with the situation I didn’t want to see. But I couldn’t deny that Michael was right. Something was off with Justin, and I needed to pay more attention to that, so I could help him.

My phone remained silent until I was lying in bed, well after midnight, arguing with myself about whether or not I should try to call Justin one more time before I fell asleep, but it wasn’t the call I’d been hoping for. It was a text message instead.

Sorry I missed you. Was at the studio. I’m sure you’re probably asleep by now. Safe travels in the morning. I love you.

I wanted so badly to hear his voice say those three little words -- to have his reassurance in vocal form -- but I didn’t call him back. The last thing I wanted to do was sound as desperate and alone as I
felt, because Brian Kinney doesn’t do desperate, and I knew he’d see right through any casual, nonchalant facade I tried to put on. I didn’t want to worry him. Didn’t want to burden him with my old insecurities and feelings of not being good enough -- especially not if he was going through something himself. Instead, I set the phone aside on the nightstand, rolled over, and closed my eyes, vowing to myself that when I got home, I’d try to get Justin to talk to me.
My flight -- which was supposed to be at 10 a.m. -- was delayed three times and ended up with a brand-new plane by the time we actually boarded, which quickly turned my early afternoon arrival home into an evening one. I texted back and forth with Justin a few times, and he seemed fine, though it sometimes took him a while to respond, and the one time I tried to call, he didn’t pick up. Justin had never been much of one for voice calls though -- except for the rare times when we were apart and one or both of us was horny -- so that didn’t surprise me too much, and I tried not to let it worry me. He was texting me back, and he was giving me answers longer than a word or two, so that was a victory.

I wasn’t sure I’d ever been happier to see the New York City skyline than I was right then, despite the fact that it had been my home for more than a decade. But I was eager to see my husband -- to check in with him, to kiss him, and to give him the cookies I’d bought him anyway, even though he’d never told me whether or not he wanted them. Of course, I also knew I needed to figure out the right time to follow Michael’s advice and ask Justin some questions about what was going on. The trouble with that was, after several hours in the airport and on the plane with a lot of time to think, I was more than a little bit afraid of the answer, mostly because I had no idea how to help him. But, I figured the first step was getting him to be honest with me, and from there, maybe we could figure it out together. Assuming I could get him to talk to me.

When I finally found myself opening our front door and pushing over the threshold, though, Justin had thrown me for another unexpected loop.

Dinner was on the table -- Debbie’s lasagna again, and garlic bread that smelled like it was going to rival Vic’s recipe -- with a pair of candles lit alongside the casserole dish, their flames dancing in the dim light of our open living area. Justin was standing in the kitchen, putting the finishing touches on two bowls of salad, sprinkling croutons over the top with his left hand.

“Hey,” he said, looking up at me and smiling as he changed tasks, pouring oil and vinegar into a carafe with some special blend of herbs that he’d mixed up a while ago after reading about it in one of those cooking magazines he subscribed to that sometimes made me wonder if he had some secret desire to become a chef. I had to admit, he’d probably be good at it. “How was your flight?”

I was surprised as hell to find Justin not only in the kitchen, but smiling at me and greeting me like nothing at all was amiss, but the last thing I wanted to do was show that surprise -- though I wasn’t completely sure why. Maybe because I didn’t want Justin to know I’d noticed the difference between what was in front of me at that moment and the Justin I’d been seeing for the past couple of weeks. So instead, I acted like everything was normal -- status quo -- while hoping and praying that it actually was.

I set my suitcase down by the door and moved into the kitchen, rolling up behind Justin and wrapping my arm around his waist.

“The flight was okay,” I said. “But I’m glad to be back here with you.”

Somehow, Justin’s smile seemed to get even larger -- and maybe even a bit coy -- as he poured the dressing over the salads and picked up the bowls to carry them to the table.

“That smells amazing,” I said, inhaling the aroma of the steaming dish of lasagna, which had already filled our kitchen, dining room, and living room. I washed my hands at the sink, then opened a cabinet, pulled down two wine glasses, and nestled them between my thighs for easy transport to the
table, where a bottle of wine was waiting. I poured the wine while Justin plated up lasagna and bread for both of us, and we proceeded to have the most normal evening we’d had in weeks.

In fact, it was almost as if the past few weeks hadn’t happened at all. And it was enough to make me believe we’d dodged the bullet -- despite my complete and total inaction -- and to cause me to move on as if everything was just fine. But even when I look back, I don’t see how I could have interpreted it any other way, because Justin seemed absolutely fine. To the point where I almost wondered if I’d been making something out of nothing. If it had been my own insecurities that caused me to read too much into everything.

It was clear that Justin had missed me as much as I’d missed him -- from the lasagna to the expensive wine to the lemon cake he’d picked up at Monetti’s -- and that became even more clear when we finished clearing the table and shifted over to the sofa. Justin started off in his usual position, cuddled up to my side with his feet pulled up onto the cushions, while I stretched out on the chaise lounge, but it didn’t take long before his intentions became clear.

Soon, the soft kisses he’d started planting on the back of my hand and up my arm turned into something much more intense and passionate, as he moved to straddle me, his lips pressed against mine, hard. His tongue pushed into my mouth as his hands wandered over my torso, untucking my shirt before he started to unbutton it slowly, his eyes locked with mine and filled with the lust that I’d been missing more than anything.

In that moment, any lingering thoughts I might have had about confronting Justin were gone -- vaporized -- and replaced with the intense arousal that was quickly overtaking my senses. We hadn't had "real" sex in weeks, in spite of some of my best efforts, because Justin simply hadn't been interested in much more than cuddling and kissing, and he'd rarely been interested in that.

I may have been a changed man -- no longer the Brian Kinney who spent his twenties fucking his way through most of the gay men in Pittsburgh -- but I still enjoyed sex, and going weeks without felt like an eternity, and made me wonder how I'd ever survived the six months after my accident when I hadn't been intimate with anyone at all. Although, I supposed if I really wanted the answer to that question, I needed to look no further than my "cure" -- Justin. So, suffice to say that Justin being uninterested in sex was more than a bit unusual, but at the same time, I hadn't wanted to push too hard and risk having him shut me out even more than he already had been.

But all of that was forgotten as I felt my husband's tongue begin to trace the tiniest circles over my earlobe, right before he brushed his teeth across it, biting down ever-so-gently. My back arched involuntarily as the tip of his tongue grazed the side of my neck while he slipped my shirt off of my shoulders and tossed it aside. He paused for a moment to pull my t-shirt over my head before continuing his journey -- nipping and sucking at my collarbones first, then my nipples, pausing there to give my second-most intense erogenous zone some attention, while his hands slid down to the first.

A soft moan escaped my barely-parted lips as I closed my eyes and gave myself over to the sensations I was feeling, letting the waves of ecstasy wash over me, bathing me in a feeling that was somehow warm and cold at the same time, but oh-so-pleasurable. Justin was still straddling my legs, and I could clearly see how aroused he was as well, even through his jeans, which made me wish, if only for a brief moment, that I could feel his growing erection pressing against my leg. He continued working his magic on my nipples with a nearly overwhelming combination of licking, sucking, and nibbling, while his fingernails dug into my waist and my hips, adding to the sensation. Justin was an expert in finding ways to bring me the sort of euphoria I’d once thought I would never experience again, fully utilizing all of the areas where I did have sensation to bring my brain to the edge of short-circuiting. Then, just when I thought I might come just from being sucked and caressed, I felt his
tongue trace a path across my chest, and his mouth once again found its way to mine.

Our lips locked, and I pressed my palm into the back of the sofa for leverage as I leaned forward, taking control. Our tongues danced around one another, and I found myself savoring the taste that was uniquely Justin -- always a little sweet, and this time flavored with the slightest hint of lemon, left over from the slice of cake we’d enjoyed after dinner. I slid my hands under his shirt, gripping his torso just above his hips, then pushed his shirt upward, allowing our lips to part briefly as I pulled it over his head and tossed it on top of mine, on the other end of the sofa.

As always, I could give as good as I got, and I did -- finding my own path down Justin’s chest with the soft, light kisses that I knew drove him wild, then tracing circles around his nipples with my tongue. Sometimes I missed the nipple ring he’d gotten only a few months after we met, but it had gone missing after what happened at prom, and never returned. As much as I’d teased him about that piercing, I loved the way he reacted when I used my tongue and my teeth to play with it. But I’d never brought it up, because that would mean bringing up the bashing, which was still my most painful memory of our time together, and not something I cared to talk about.

I unbuttoned Justin’s pants and pushed them down over his hips, freeing his erection, then watched as he slid them down the rest of the way and added them to the growing pile of clothing on the other end of our leather sofa. He did the same with mine, and soon we were both completely naked, our hands sliding over each other’s bare skin, my fingers taking in every curve of my partner’s beautiful body as my lips moved against his. I felt his hands come to rest on my shoulders, pushing against me as he pulled away slightly, sucking at my bottom lip as we separated, right before he leaned in close to my ear and whispered, “I want to ride you.”

I watched as he moved his mouth -- that talented mouth, that had clearly learned so much from me, but was at the same time different enough to keep me guessing -- down to my cock. He took me in, using his tongue and his lips to initiate the reflex that would bring me to my own erection. Briefly, I wondered how long we’d be able to go without the help of the silicone cock ring that had become one of the best purchases I’d ever made, but I didn’t have to wonder for long, because my partner had clearly been planning ahead, and had all of the supplies we needed for a night of passion right there in the drawer of our side table. He used the fingers of his left hand to stretch the ring just enough to slide it over my entire length, then handed me the bottle of lube.

After squeezing some out onto my fingers, I started to prepare my partner, savoring the feel of his warmth and tightness around my fingers -- first just one, then two, scissoring them open as Justin moaned into my mouth, his lips locked tightly with mine. When he was ready, I let my fingers slide free, moving them instead to grip his hips as he positioned himself over me and took me in. He kept his hands on my hips, just below my waistline, using his fingers to provide me with physical stimulation, as my mind filled in the rest of what was missing down below. I watched him move over top of me and imagined what I would be feeling, had I been able to feel, letting the memory of those sensations fill my consciousness.

I moved one of my hands to Justin’s cock, sliding my palm back and forth over the shaft, ever-so-slowly -- almost painfully so -- and watched the expression on his face change as the sensations he was experiencing built upon themselves, bringing him closer to his peak. It was a dance we’d all but perfected, both of us working together, in tandem, to give each other exactly what we needed -- what we craved.

A key part of that well-practiced dance was how adeptly we were both able to bring each other to orgasm at the exact same time -- his breathy moans turning into a cry of ecstasy as he came, leaving a pool of warm stickiness across my lower torso, while my own breathing gradually became more and more ragged and heavy. Then, my vision faded out momentarily, and I felt the intense sensation of
my own peak -- a wave of bliss so strong that I wanted to ride it out forever, to the edge of time and space. But I couldn’t. I had to come back to earth, and so did he.

Our bodies collapsed back into the sofa cushions, both of us sticky, sweaty, and breathless. The candles still flickered on the dining room table, casting a romantic glow over the room. After a few more minutes just holding each other and sharing soft, tender kisses, Justin slid off my lap, separating my body from his before he gently removed the ring, allowing my body to begin the process of bringing itself back into its normal state. He rose and walked over to the table, extinguishing the candles, before moving toward the hallway, stopping for a moment to look over his shoulder and say, in a sultry tone, “You coming to bed?”

While our sexual escapades for the evening were done, we remained close as we showered together, then retired to our bed, where Justin treated me to a full-body massage that eventually lulled me into a peaceful sleep. A sleep that cast away all of my doubts, fears, and insecurities and replaced them with feelings of gratitude -- gratitude that all seemed to be well, and whatever had been bothering Justin apparently no longer was.

Looking back, I wished I had savored that feeling even more than I did, because as much as I wanted to hold onto that bliss -- that normalcy -- we had another storm to weather.
After my surprise homecoming celebration, everything was exactly as it should be, and Justin and I both found ourselves back in our comfortable routine -- me going to the office, him going to his studio, and the two of us enjoying dinner together at home most nights. However, those perfect days were short lived, and soon the routine started to fall apart once again, but this time not in a way that was overly concerning. Now, I could kick myself for thinking that, but there’s nothing I can do to turn back time and change the progression of events.

Justin’s show was creeping nearer and nearer, and as a result, Justin started spending more and more time in his studio -- leaving early in the morning and staying until late in the evening. And, just as he had been before, he was coming home frustrated, but he never wanted to talk to me about it. I tried -- god, did I try -- but I couldn’t get him to open up to me. Still, though, I wasn’t worried, because this was a familiar scene -- Justin throwing himself fully into his art, to the exclusion of all else. I just wished he’d been happier about it, and enjoying himself more. But that would come, I told myself, once Justin met his deadline and had the reassurance of everyone telling him how brilliant his work was.

I offered to bring him lunch and dinner at his studio, but he was always quick to decline, assuring me that he was ordering delivery and setting an alarm on his phone so he wouldn’t forget to eat. Sometimes I wanted to surprise him with a meal anyway, but I kept remembering the last time I’d done that, and how it had resulted in me feeling shut out and pushed away, and a little bit like I’d intruded into Justin’s private space. It was the memory of those feelings that kept me away, because the last thing I wanted to do was invade Justin’s privacy or do something that would result in him turning his frustration around on me, because as much as I used to live by the mantra, “You’re the only one you need; you’re the only one you’ve got,” I had to admit that my recent time in Pittsburgh had demonstrated for me just how little I desired to be alone. I wasn’t afraid of Justin -- I hadn’t been afraid of anybody in a long, long time -- but I also wasn’t fond of the vulnerable feelings that being lonely stirred in me, so any situation that might result in that was best avoided, and pushed through with as little thought as possible.

Then, as a result of a simple slip of the hand, everything shifted again.

Justin had left for his studio before I’d even managed to drag myself out of bed, though he did kiss me goodbye before he left and told me to have a good day. I felt like there was something in his smile that belied the brightness in his tone, but as quickly as it appeared, it was gone, and I told myself not to read too much into it. After all, I was tired because I’d been late coming home from the office the night before, thanks to a client changing their mind about something at the very last minute. I had been trying to avoid late nights, because I knew what they did to me physically, but sometimes they couldn’t be avoided. And somehow, knowing Justin was busy too, with his own work, made it even easier to just stay at the office and keep working -- perhaps because it meant I wouldn’t be sitting at home alone.

A few minutes after I heard the front door to our apartment close, I finally pushed myself up into a sitting position and slid my body from the bed to my wheelchair, going into the bathroom to start my daily routine. For the next thirty minutes, everything was fine and went off without a hitch, despite my tiredness and the dark circles I could see under my eyes in the mirror. I could tell it was going to be a rough day at the office, but I’d get through it -- I always did. The entire time I was in the shower, I was mentally going through my calendar, thinking about my schedule for the day. Sometimes being the boss meant sitting in on a lot of conference calls and staff meetings, that was exactly what this particular Wednesday morning was about to entail. I was busy dreading one of
those calls -- which always proved to be hopelessly boring -- when I started to move from my shower bench to my wheelchair, but my right hand slipped on the wet, still slightly soapy surface of the shower bench, and before I could even comprehend what was happening or make any sort of attempt to readjust or recover, I was on my ass atop the low threshold between the shower and the rest of the bathroom, my right leg and foot folded underneath me at an awkward angle.

It was one of those moments when I knew I’d done something that should have really, really hurt, but -- as always -- my paralyzed body’s reaction was strange. My ears started ringing, and I immediately felt like I was burning up, and for a brief moment, I’d actually thought I might pass out. But then, as quickly as they had arisen, those feelings faded away, leaving me sitting on the floor between my wheelchair and the shower bench, butt naked, both wishing Justin was there to help me and at the same time being glad he hadn’t been there to witness the embarrassing show. I didn’t even have a good excuse for what had just happened -- I simply hadn’t been paying attention. Once the lightheaded feeling had completely passed, I leaned to the right so I could dislodge my foot from underneath me and extended my leg, watching as it shook with a spasm then settled into stillness once again. Then, I extended my left leg as well and checked myself out. As best I could tell at that point, I’d gotten lucky, as there weren’t any deformities present that would indicate broken bones, so I sat on the wet floor until my hands stopped shaking and I felt like my strength had returned, then cautiously and carefully started the process of getting myself up and into my wheelchair.

It was more than a little bit challenging on a wet surface, completely naked, while also trying to avoid injuring myself any further than I might have already, but I was finally able to get myself into the right position, seated sideways in front of my wheelchair, with my feet pulled in as close to my butt as I could get them, knees tucked under my chin. Another wave of lightheadedness hit me as I completed the final step -- using my legs and feet as a base to pivot on as I pushed my body upward and settled my ass safely on my seat cushion -- but it passed quickly, after a few seconds with my head down, and I assumed it had more to do with the adrenaline still flowing through my veins than anything else.

Once my head was no longer swimming, I went into the bedroom to get dressed, more than a little apprehensive about transferring to the bed to put my pants on, but I quickly told myself that I was being stupid -- I’d done that transfer thousands of times without a problem. Of course, the same applied to transferring in and out of the shower. But I was fine, I reminded myself. No need to worry.

I got dressed without any further incident, glancing at my watch as I put it on and realizing that I needed to get my ass out the door or I was going to be late. Luckily, the subway ride was short and uncomplicated, with no out-of-service elevators to contend with, and I made it to the office just in time. I stopped for coffee and a slice of quiche at the cafe on the ground floor of the building, then went up to my office, where I managed to eat breakfast while checking my email, before I had to be on that conference call I’d been dreading.

The call wasn’t as terrible as anticipated, though I was grateful that my full attention hadn’t been necessary, freeing me up to look at and approve a handful of print ads on my second monitor while the video call continued on the other screen. Once the call was done -- though I wasn’t sure anything had truly been accomplished -- it was time for me to head downstairs for an in-person meeting that I was far more interested in, because it concerned some recent developments at Kinnected.

Though Kinnetikcorp’s most recent acquisition was, for all intents and purposes, headed up by Rob, I still took an active interest in what was going on, purely because I found it so fascinating to watch creative minds come up with solutions to help people live their best lives. And since this was Rob’s baby, that meant that, for once, I wasn’t the one leading the meetings. So they were a little bit of a mental break, too.
I needed just such a break on that day, because I was still tired, and there was a strange, uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach that I wasn’t sure how to identify. But I ignored it and hoped that a little bit of positivity -- and the caring, oh-so-zen way in which Rob managed his employees -- would give me whatever it was I needed to get through the rest of my day.

When I got to the conference room Rob always used for his team meetings, there were a few people already there, and Rob’s electric tea kettle sat in the middle of the table, having apparently just finished its cycle, with steam still rising from the spout. Alongside it was an assortment of various individually wrapped teabags and a bowl full of healthy energy bars and fruit. All of these items were a far cry from the typical “coffee and doughnuts” fare that tended to dominate the meetings we held upstairs -- both for clients and employees -- though neither of those things were there because I wanted them. They were there because people were used to them, and meetings and sugar highs apparently went hand-in-hand.

But Rob’s crew was different. Even though he’d only been at the helm for a couple of months, it seemed like longer than that because everyone was already so comfortable with him, and I knew a lot of it was because of his management style, which was very even-keeled, much like his life and his entire personality. And the same characteristics that made him a damn good friend also made him a damn good manager, so I was glad he had finally agreed to join our team.

I was pouring myself a cup of tea -- because, when in Rome -- when my longtime friend came into the room with a stack of papers and folders in his lap. He acknowledged me with a nod and a smile as he took his place at the head of the table and started the meeting. As always, the sheer diversity of knowledge and skill in that room was impressive, as was Rob’s ability to effortlessly bring them together into a cohesive unit where everyone felt respected and no one talked over anyone else or tried to out-do the person next to them. And, just as I always did, I sat and observed and didn’t throw in my opinion unless it was asked for, because this simply wasn’t my area of expertise. It was Rob’s, and to be honest, I loved watching him work, while I simultaneously tried to figure out ways I could be a little more like him in my own management style without people wondering whether or not I’d been replaced by a pod person.

In this particular meeting, though, I was having a hard time concentrating. The queasy feeling in my gut lingered, and the ginger tea I’d chosen -- which should have helped calm my stomach, as I knew thanks to my unfortunate bout with testicular cancer and the resulting radiation treatments what felt like a lifetime ago -- was doing absolutely nothing. I could feel the beginnings of a headache starting behind my eyes -- a subtle pulsation that seemed to follow each beat of my heart -- and after a while, I started to feel like the words being said around me were entering my consciousness but simply weren’t computing.

I had paused to rub my eyes and to pinch the bridge of my nose -- my unconscious habit anytime I had a headache -- when Rob stopped talking for a moment. When I looked up at him, he was looking back at me with slight concern in his eyes, though, thankfully, he kept talking before the pause became long enough to be awkward, and before anyone else in the room turned their attention to me.

I tried to stay present and pay attention after that, but I kept noticing Rob’s gaze would occasionally fall to me, and the same concern would be there in his eyes each time. I wondered if it would help to eat something, but the uneasiness in my stomach didn’t seem conducive to that, and the last thing I wanted to do was have to leave the room in a rush because I was sick. So I stuck with the tea and hoped it would kick in soon.

When the meeting concluded, I managed to sneak out while Rob was busy talking with a couple of his tech experts, and I went back upstairs. I was feeling a little better than I had been a few minutes
before, but I wanted to get back to my office in case that changed again. Thankfully, I didn’t have any more meetings until after lunch, so that gave me a couple of hours to resolve whatever the fuck this was so I could get on with my day.

I was cursing having stopped at the cafe downstairs for the quiche, though with as many times as their food had been of questionable taste, it had never actually made me sick. But I couldn’t think of anything else it could be, and given my symptoms, it seemed to make sense. Naturally, it would happen on a day when I really didn’t have time for it, with my full slate of meetings and calls and Cynthia out of the office because she was back “home” in Pittsburgh, visiting her mom. But I would get through it, come hell or high water, because I always did.

However, my body seemed to have other ideas, and I was still wading through my email when I noticed that the headache was gradually ramping up in intensity, transitioning from a dull, pulsating ache to a full-out pound. And -- as if I needed something else to make me feel uncomfortable -- nerve pain had joined the party as well, starting with a low-level burning sensation that felt like it was emanating from my legs. So I decided to get out of my chair for a while and stretch out on the sofa -- perhaps the most invaluable piece of furniture in my entire office -- because taking a few minutes to lie down usually helped, or at least alleviated the need to fall back on taking the extra medication I kept on hand at the office for just such occasions, since I would prefer to keep my mental faculties completely intact and not be falling asleep at my desk.

Once I was lying down, though, my body unleashed a torrent of symptoms it had apparently been holding back, and soon I was sweating and feeling unbearably hot, still with a pounding headache, and nerve pain that was quickly escalating from a smolder to a blaze. I closed my eyes and tried to breathe deeply, hoping I’d be able to relax at least some of this away, though I knew it was a long shot.

I wasn’t sure how long I’d been lying there with my eyes closed -- I might have drifted off briefly -- when I heard the door to my office open. I cracked one eye open, ready to put the fear of god into whichever employee of mine was dumb enough to barge right into my office when the door was closed, but instead, I found myself looking at Rob, whose brow was creased with worry.

“I knocked,” he said softly, as he closed the door behind him and started to cross the room. “You didn’t answer, but I could see you lying down, so I wanted to check on you… make sure you were okay.”

“I’m fine,” I said, trying to sound convincing, even though I knew Rob wouldn’t be fooled by my automatic response. No one close to me ever was, but sometimes they’d humor me anyway.

“Sure,” Rob said, the slightest hint of sarcasm present in his tone, which matched his wry grin. “Because lying on the couch in your office, sweating, is totally normal.”

“Thought I’d add a little excitement to the day.” Though I was speaking through gritted teeth, I still managed to pull off the sardonic inflection I intended, resulting in Rob rolling his eyes.

“What is it?” he asked, still obviously concerned and undeterred by my attempts at deflection. “You looked sick all through that meeting.”

“Bad food or something. I don’t know. But I don’t have time for this shit.” I listed off my myriad of symptoms for Rob, trying my best to ignore the ever-increasing furrow of his brow as I continued on.

“You know…” Rob let his voice trail off as he scratched his ear, tilting his head a little to the side. He looked every bit like he was trying to talk himself out of something while simultaneously trying to convince himself of that very same thing. “I know it isn’t supposed to be a concern for someone
with a lower level injury, but…” He trailed off again, still looking confused, before he shook his head and appeared to make a decision. “Take off your shoes,” he said, his voice suddenly sure and unwavering.

“Huh?”

“Take off your shoes,” he repeated.

“If I move, I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Then I’ll do it for you.” He moved forward and reached for my left foot, deftly removing my shoe and my sock before I could form any sort of objection. “Take your belt off, too. Anything that’s tight.”

I was confused, and not just from the fog in my head, but my first line of defense against uncomfortable situations -- sarcasm and making inappropriate jokes -- was alive and well. “Gee, I didn’t know you and Adam were open,” I said, gritting my teeth once again through a wave of nerve pain and dizziness that hit me as Rob started to remove my right shoe.

“Don’t flatter yourself.” Rob’s voice was flat and clearly not amused, though I couldn’t look at his face because I had closed my eyes in an attempt to stop the room from spinning. “And take your damn belt off.”

I started fumbling with the buckle, still distracted by the cacophony of nerve signals coursing through various parts of my body, and had just finally managed to get it undone when Rob muttered, “Jesus fucking Christ, what did you do to your foot?”
Chapter 6

I was almost afraid to look, but I knew I had to, because not looking wasn’t going to make it go away, and I needed to know what I was dealing with. What I saw when I looked didn’t surprise me nearly as much as it had Rob, because I was the only one of us who knew what had happened earlier that morning.

Perhaps I hadn’t gotten as lucky as I first thought.

The top of my right foot was covered by a large, dark purple bruise, and my foot was so swollen that it had just about taken on the shape of the inside of my Gucci loafer. I was no medical expert, but I didn’t have to be to know that whatever was going on with my foot wasn’t good.

"Brian," Rob's voice broke through my thoughts and pulled me back to the present moment. "What happened?"

"Fell getting out of the shower," I mumbled, my tone reluctant because I didn't particularly want to recount this embarrassing story to anyone -- not even someone who knew all of the ins and outs and was intimately acquainted with the not-so-glamorous parts of paralysis. "I thought it was okay though. It looked okay earlier."

"Well, it’s not okay now. Did you hit it on something?"

"Fell on it." Oddly enough, taking my shoe off seemed to have helped at least a little bit, as the intensity of the headache lessened ever-so-slightly, though I still felt extremely uncomfortable. I reached up and rubbed my eyes again, trying to breathe through the pain I was feeling, even though it clearly wasn’t the pain I should have been feeling.

"Sit up," Rob said, his voice almost commanding, but still with the caring undertone that was always so very Rob, so long as I didn’t piss him off. "If this is what I think it is, it’ll help."

"How about you tell me what the fuck you think it is?"

"It looks and sounds a hell of a lot like AD."

"What the fuck is--"

"Autonomic dysreflexia. I don’t know if that’s exactly what it is, since your injury is so much lower than mine, but if it is, you need to sit up to help regulate your blood pressure."

I still wasn’t sure exactly what the fuck he was talking about, but I did what he said, and that seemed to help as well, taking my headache down to a slightly more tolerable level, though the dizziness and the nausea were still very much present.

"I need you to tell me exactly how you’re feeling," he said, looking me straight in the eyes in a way that made me feel a little uncomfortable -- like he was searching for something, though I wasn’t sure what. "How bad is the headache?"

"It’s no walk in the fucking park, I’ll tell you that much."

"Stop being a smartass." Rob’s gentle tone started to disappear, in favor of mild annoyance. "I’m trying to help you. Do you feel like you’re about to pass out? How’s your vision?"
"No, and it’s fine. Why?"

"Because I’m trying to decide whether we can take a car to the hospital or if we need to call an ambulance."

"I don’t want to go to the fucking hospital."

"I’m not sure you have a choice. I think your foot is broken."

"Then we can go to the urgent care. That’s where I took Justin when he broke his wrist a few years back. They had everything we needed. I don’t need a hospital."

"Do I really have to remind you that things for you -- for us -- are more than a little bit complicated when it comes to broken bones, given that you can’t fucking feel it?” Nice Guy Rob was completely gone now, replaced with “I-Mean-Business” Rob, who wasn’t taking any of my bullshit.

He did have a point, though.

"Fine,” I said, trying to make it clear through my tone just how reluctant I was, even though I knew I needed medical attention, and the shitty way I felt was making it extremely difficult to convey much of anything other than the fact that I was in pain. “Just let me put my shoe back on, and I’ll call for a ride.”

"There’s no way in hell you’re getting that shoe back on."

"And there’s no way in hell I’m going anywhere in public barefoot or in just a sock."

"You don’t have a choice."

I wanted to continue arguing, because Brian Fucking Kinney did not go in public half dressed. Ever. But I had barely opened my mouth when a particularly strong wave of nerve pain washed over me again and I was forced to close my eyes and breathe through it.

“We probably need to go soon if we’re taking a car, because if you wait until this escalates again, you will be leaving here in an ambulance,” he said, more gently this time, probably because he could see I was hurting, and he was the one person who knew exactly what I was feeling. “And I know you don’t want to be the focus of that spectacle. So let’s just call for a car and leave quietly, okay? No shoe.”

“There’s no one here in charge but me,” I grunted, still not able to open my eyes. “Cynthia is out all week.”

“Who’s your senior staffer up here?”

“Julia,” I breathed, finally feeling some slight relief, though it wasn’t much. “The art director. I’ve got a meeting with the art department at two.”

“Where’s her desk? I’ll go ask her to hold down the fort for a few hours. I’ll tell her we have something we have to take care of, and ask her to reschedule the meeting.”

I knew Julia would be more than a bit suspicious of the fact that I wasn’t telling her myself, but I didn’t have the energy to worry about it, and I knew that showing up at her desk in the state I was currently in would raise even more alarm than having Rob deliver the message. So I told him where to find her and hoped I’d be back in an hour or two, though I was starting to have my doubts.
“Can you call for the car?” Rob asked.

I nodded, still focused on keeping my breath even and deep because it did actually help sometimes when it came to relieving nerve pain that nothing would touch. I’d picked that up from Rob, though hell would freeze over before anyone ever got me to admit it.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

With that, Rob disappeared out the door to my office, leaving me sitting on the sofa, barefoot. I looked at my shoes and socks sitting on the other end and briefly entertained the thought of at least trying to put my shoes back on, but one look at my right foot told me exactly how likely that was to happen. Somehow, it was even more swollen than it had been just a few minutes before -- now that it had room to expand, I supposed -- and the bruise seemed to be spreading too.

I reached over and grabbed my socks, but even sliding a sock over that foot was more challenging than usual. By that point, I was really hoping that I wasn’t totally fucked, but in the back of my mind, I think I already knew I was. My head was aching and foggy, and I was still burning up, though I no longer felt quite as queasy as I had when I was lying down.

Once my socks were both on, I reached for my wheelchair and pulled it as close as I could, giving myself as small of a gap to traverse as possible, in hopes that would lessen the probability of missing the transfer. I hadn’t been gunshy about a transfer in a long time, but the morning’s events had brought that back, and with good reason, I supposed.

I made it, though, and went over to my desk to grab my phone. I was just hanging up with the car service when Rob came back into the room. Not long after that, we were both in the back seat of a town car, with my wheelchair in the trunk and Rob’s in the front passenger seat, and me wearing only one shoe. Though, thankfully, I don’t think anyone I saw noticed that. Maybe there was a benefit to how reluctant people were to look at my legs most of the time.

“You still doing okay?” Rob asked.

I was leaning against the window with my eyes closed, relishing how good the cool glass of the window felt, but I managed to nod. I’d bumped my foot against the door frame on my way in, launching another wave of nausea, so that was the only response I could manage without risking being sick.

“Good,” he said. “Not much farther.”

“Just a couple more minutes,” the driver interjected. He wasn’t my regular driver, and I was pretty sure he was new, because I’d never seen him before. But in this instance, I was glad for that, because Martin would have been very concerned for me, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to answer any questions. Having Rob worried about me was plenty. I didn’t like to have anyone worried about me, ever, if I could help it. Sometimes, however, it couldn’t be helped.

True to our driver’s prediction, we stopped in front of the emergency room doors a few minutes later, and Rob and I made our way inside after he had reassembled both of our chairs and done what he could to help me into mine, which wasn’t much.

We checked in, and I honestly was thankful Rob was with me, because he was a damn good advocate too -- pushing just enough to get me back into a room and on a morphine drip within a few minutes’ time. That morphine drip turned out to be exactly what I needed, and soon the majority of my discomfort was gone, and what remained had been lessened considerably.
I tried to ignore the pained “Ooh, honey,” that the triage nurse uttered after she took one look at my foot, but by that point, it was obvious that I was well and truly fucked, and the rest of my week was probably shot.

Once I was floating peacefully on a cloud of chemically-induced bliss, Rob started trying to call Justin -- who should have been at his studio -- but he didn’t have much success.

“It keeps going to voicemail,” Rob said, clearly frustrated, after his third attempt to call my husband.

“He’s got a show coming up,” I said, a little embarrassed by how slurred my speech was, even though I knew Rob wouldn’t care. “Lots of hours in the studio. Doesn’t hear his phone sometimes.”

“I’ll keep trying. I just wish he’d answer.”

“I’ll be okay if you need to go back to work. I’ll figure something out.” Never mind the fact that I sounded drunker than I had been in a long time, purely from the pain medication. But I’d always been independent, either by choice or by necessity, and that meant that admitting that I needed someone -- especially out loud -- was pretty much a no go.

“I’m not leaving you here alone. Or at all.” The look in Rob’s eyes dared me to argue, but it didn’t matter because I hardly had time to form a thought in my drugged-up haze before someone showed up to take me to radiology for x-rays, which confirmed what we all already could have guessed by that point -- my foot was broken. My fifth metatarsal, to be specific. Apparently I’d hit the outer edge of my foot squarely on the raised ledge between our shower and the bathroom floor, and my bone had more give than the tile.

I was no stranger to broken bones, having had more than a few over the course of my childhood -- though usually not for the accidental reasons most children end up in casts -- but this was different. This time, there was no cast, and no lesson on how to properly use crutches before they would allow me to be discharged. Instead, they put my foot in one of those hideous walking boots -- not that I was going to be walking on it anytime soon, or ever, more than likely -- and discharged me with instructions to keep it elevated above my heart and ice it intermittently, using a timer, and being careful to inspect my skin to make sure I wasn’t keeping it on too long and that the boot wasn’t creating any hot spots. They’d also set me up an appointment with an orthopedic specialist for the next morning, so he could map out the rest of my treatment plan.

Yeah, the rest of my week was shot. Maybe even more than that, depending on whatever the orthopedist decided. Excellent timing, too, given that Cynthia was out of town. I was going to be spending the rest of the week in bed when I was the only one in charge at the office, and I had taken Rob out of the equation too, at least for the afternoon, because he was busy tending to me.

Rob called for the car when we left the hospital, because I sounded like I was either drunk or stoned out of my mind, and I was just self-aware enough to know that and be a little embarrassed by it. I was also exhausted, and I’d been close to falling asleep on the gurney they’d put me on in the emergency room as we waited an hour for the doctor to see me. Apparently all of the upheaval my nervous system had put me through so far that day had taken its toll, leaving me barely able to hold my eyes open while we waited for my prescription to be filled at the pharmacy around the corner from Justin’s and my apartment building.

Finally, they called my name and we were free to go, and I was adding yet another medication to my collection, at least temporarily. I just hoped that whatever the orthopedist would do for me was simple, short, and uncomplicated, because I didn’t have time for anything else.

When we got to the apartment, I was in bed within fifteen minutes of arriving, having only taken
enough time to take a piss before I dragged my tired ass into bed. By the time I got out of the
bathroom, Rob had already brought all of the pillows from the bed in our guest room and stacked
them up on the bed so I’d have something to elevate my leg on. Normally, there would be no way in
hell I’d be letting anyone take care of me like that, but between the pain medication and how
physically spent I was, there was simply no fight left in me.

Rob taking care of me was something we hadn't yet broached in more than a decade of friendship.
Even though we’d talked about a lot of very intimate topics, we’d never been in this position before.
But Rob knew me well enough to be fully aware that I don't like to feel vulnerable or helpless, and
he seemed to be doing his best to keep me from feeling that way -- at least, as much as was possible
in that moment. He let me get myself situated on the bed with no interference, then left me alone to
change out of my work clothes and into my sweats. When he returned, he had a couple of bottles of
water that he left on the nightstand, and he offered to make me something to eat, but I wasn't hungry.
All I wanted was a nap. I knew that wasn't at all like me, but, well, it was what it was, and Rob
didn’t tease me about it when I said it. He merely nodded and gave me a look that told me he
understood what was happening inside my head.

I knew that she knew -- knew how hard it was to accept help, and how it felt to suddenly be forced
into that position -- but that didn’t make it easier to let him provide that help. I struggled for a moment
to try to get my foot into a good position atop the small stack of pillows near the foot of the bed, and
I could see in his eyes how much he wanted to step in and help, but he didn’t do anything. He didn’t
even speak until I had myself settled and finally leaned back into the pillows with a heavy sigh.

“I’m going to set a timer for this,” he said, as he laid the cold pack I’d been sent home with over my
foot, wrapped in a towel. “You go to sleep.”

My eyelids were suddenly very heavy, and the small nod I managed to give Rob felt equally heavy.

“If you need anything, just yell. Don’t try to get up.”

I nodded again, my eyes almost closed this time. “You don’t have to stay here,” I mumbled, wishing
my speech was clearer but I felt like my lips and tongue were barely working by that point. “I’ll be
okay.”

“It’s fine,” he said. “I don’t mind. I’ll stay here until Justin gets home. I’ll keep trying to call him. I
don’t want to worry him, but I want him to know where you are and what’s going on. Stop trying to
send me home, okay? Adam has the girls. We’re good.”

I felt Rob’s hand lightly touch my forearm, giving it a gentle squeeze that I was sure was intended to
be reassuring. Even in my drugged-up state, I idly wondered how long it would be until Justin came
home this time. I wanted to tell Rob that it could be a while, and I really would be okay if he needed
to leave, but sleep was moving quickly to claim me, and I couldn’t get my voice to work. Unable to
force my eyes to stay open any longer, I let them slide shut as Rob left the room. As I drifted from
wakefulness into slumber, I could hear Rob in the living room, leaving another voicemail for Justin.
Chapter 7

When my eyes opened again, it felt like no time had passed at all, though it was clear that quite a bit had, because the quality of the light outside the bedroom window had completely changed, going from the brightness of afternoon sun to the golden glow that came just before sunset. I blinked to clear the bleariness from my vision, noting that most of the bleariness seemed to have cleared from my head as well, which signaled that the morphine had finally worn off. The low-level burning sensation I felt in my legs confirmed that observation, telling me it was probably time to start taking the pills Rob and I had picked up at the pharmacy. Hopefully they would be able to keep the uncomfortable set of symptoms I’d experienced earlier in the day -- my body’s unconventional reaction to intense pain below my injury level -- at bay.

No sooner had I brought my vision back into focus than I heard a quiet melody coming from our home office -- the ringtone Justin used for all of the reminders he programmed into his phone to make things easier for himself. Even nearly three years later, traumatic brain injury still had quite an effect on Justin’s short-term memory, so he’d become dependent on his phone to keep him from forgetting things. That sound meant Justin was home.

A few seconds later, the doorknob clicked and the door to our bedroom slowly opened and Justin stepped through it.

“You’re awake,” he said, his voice flat and strange -- surprise mixed with discomfort, as if he didn’t know what to say. The look on his face was just as odd -- like he felt guilty -- when he reached out and moved the cold pack off of my foot, then sat down on the edge of the bed.

Normally, Justin would have been all over me -- asking if I was okay and probably not believing me when I told him I was, with his anxiety driving his every move and every word that came out of his mouth -- but this time, he just sat there looking awkward, his gaze cast downward, like he didn’t want to make eye contact with me.

“I’m sorry,” he said, still not looking at me. “Sorry I wasn’t here. My phone was in my backpack, and I didn’t hear it. Adam came and got me at my studio and told me what was going on. God, I’m so sorry. I should have been here, but I…” His voice faded into silence, leaving his sentence unfinished as he used his left hand to toy with the fingers on his right.

“It’s okay,” I said, because I’d learned a long time ago not to say sorry was bullshit when Justin was even a little bit anxious, unless I wanted him to freak out on me. In any case, I wasn’t sure if Justin was referring to the afternoon I’d spent sleeping while Rob babysat me, or the morning when I’d fallen and set this god-forsaken chain of dominoes into motion. My voice was still thick from the deep sleep I’d apparently spent the last few hours in, given that I had no recollection of Rob leaving or Justin coming home, or anyone putting on or taking off the ice pack from my foot, though I was sure that with Rob and Justin in charge, it had happened exactly on schedule. I intended to ask Justin how things were going at the studio -- and I still to this day wonder if I’d been able to do that, if Justin’s response would have tipped me off that something was seriously wrong that I wasn’t seeing - - but my body chose that moment to ramp up the pain in my legs, making an abrupt transition from the burning that I could ignore into the sharp, electric shock-like sensation that always demanded my full attention and usually resulted in me being unable to do anything other than curl in on myself and wait for it to pass.

“Shit,” I heard Justin say, though I couldn’t open my eyes at that moment to look at him. “What’s wrong? What do you need?”
Of course, I couldn’t respond to him at that moment either -- I had to ride out the pain first. When it had finally faded enough for me to be able to open my eyes, the Justin I saw was no longer in the awkward state he had been when I’d closed them. Instead, his eyes were wide, and I could see in them how desperate he was to make things better for me -- to take away my pain. That was my “normal” Justin. And seeing that, in combination with how distracted I was by the turmoil happening inside my body, was enough to make me not question Justin’s odd behavior when I’d first awakened.

“I’m okay,” I said softly, once I finally felt like I could speak, though my voice was still much weaker and more breathy than I’d prefer. I tried to smile, to give Justin the reassurance I knew he needed in that moment, though I wasn’t sure how convincing it was. “I promise,” I added, just as extra insurance.

Justin swallowed and nodded. “Rob told me you’re supposed to check your skin every few hours tonight,” he said, sounding a little more like himself, although he still looked a bit uncomfortable. “He wasn’t sure you’d remember. Do you want to do it, or do you want me to?”

I did remember -- sort of -- and I was fine with Justin taking care of it for me because he’d have a better view without aggravating my injury (though I did appreciate the fact that he’d been around the block a time or two and knew better than to do anything without asking). However, I had other shit to tend to first -- namely, the tightness in my abdomen that got pretty damn noticeable once the pain had subsided.

“Gotta piss first,” I said, as I furtively checked that my sweatpants and the bed underneath me were still dry. Thankfully, my body hadn’t decided of its own accord to add a bladder spasm to the chaos and really make the day complete. Still, there probably wasn’t any time to waste, so I pushed myself up to a sitting position as quickly as I could, while still being mindful not to just flop my legs over the side of the bed like I usually did, but to carefully place them there, one by one, instead. I hadn’t realized just how little attention I paid to my legs most of the time until I was deliberately trying not to injure one of them any further. The boot was heavy, and I could feel the difference in the weight when I picked up my right leg, but I managed not to bash it on anything on my way into my chair, so that was a victory. Clearly the damn boot was going to take some getting used to.

Justin didn’t step in to help, because he knew better, but I could tell he looked nervous. That wasn’t unusual though, as Justin’s anxiety (another of traumatic brain injury’s many gifts) often led to him running worst-case scenarios in his head any time something was going on with me, no matter how minor.

I pissed for longer than I had at once in a long time -- apparently I hadn’t been far from disaster, so I thanked the god I didn’t believe in that I woke up when I did -- then finally glanced at my watch, which told me it was after six o’clock, and I’d slept for more than three hours. At that point, I still felt a little groggy, but I wasn’t exactly sleepy, which didn’t bode well for the fact that I was sentenced to spending the next few days in bed.

I sighed and stretched, savoring the opportunity to be upright, even though I knew it would be short lived. Then I went back into the bedroom to prepare for an evening in bed, which wasn’t my favorite thing unless there was sex involved. And I knew there wouldn’t be -- not that night, anyway.

Justin brought me dinner -- chicken parmesan he’d apparently ordered from Monetti’s -- but instead of staying in the room with me while we both ate, he left right after he brought me the tray. Not that I needed him to stay or some other clingy shit like that, but I did actually like his company, so it felt odd to eat alone. But I knew Justin had a lot on his mind as he prepared for his show, so I told myself he was just sketching or brainstorming while he ate. No big deal.
He came in about thirty minutes later to retrieve the tray and ask me if I needed anything else, but he didn't stay, which again, was strange, but I tried not to think anything of it. For the rest of the evening, he only made brief appearances to check on me, never staying for more than a minute or two, and always seeming preoccupied. That continued until after midnight, when he finally showered and came to bed.

I was still awake, of course, because instead of making me tired, my new pain meds had apparently given me a raging case of insomnia.

I'd been to the bathroom more than a few times that evening, finished the book I'd been reading for the past month but hadn't had much time for, caught up on email, and even watched a couple of episodes of "Tales of the City" on Netflix, which Michael had told me on multiple occasions that I needed to watch. (And, surprise, I was actually enjoying it.) But I had yet to fall asleep again after my three-hour morphine-induced nap.

Justin's phone rang at some point while he was in our home office, probably working on something on his computer. It sounded like he was talking to Daphne, based on what was said, but the animated, joking, smiling-with-his-voice Justin that I usually heard when he talked to his childhood best friend was conspicuously absent, replaced with one whose intonation sounded flat and almost annoyed at times. But I had reasons in my head to explain that too, and at the time, they felt valid -- Justin was really focused on his work, that was all.

Justin came to bed right after his shower, his hair and skin still a little damp because he was the absolute worst at drying himself off. He kissed me goodnight, told me he loved me, then rolled over and let out a long sigh, which was followed not even a minute later by the deep, even breathing that signified my husband was asleep.

There was a space between us in the bed that I tried not to read too much into. Justin probably hadn't snuggled up to me because he didn't want to make me uncomfortable, I told myself. I didn't normally sleep on my back, and with the pillow fort my legs were propped up on, I was definitely in a bit of an awkward position. So cuddling with my husband was probably out for the next however-the-fuck-long. I tried not to get too pissed off about that, but it was hard, and the longer the night went on with me still awake, the harder it got, simply because I was uncomfortable and I really was tired because it was three in the goddamned morning but I couldn't manage to get comfortable enough to fall asleep.

I spent the rest of the night doing as much tossing and turning as I could while keeping my foot elevated, feeling like every time I would finally fall asleep, some uncomfortable sensation in my body would wake me up again. My alarm went off at seven, telling me it was time to drag myself out of bed so I could get ready for my appointment at the orthopedist, which I was dreading because I didn't really want to hear any bad news. Justin barely even stirred when my alarm sounded, instead rolling over and letting out another one of those long sighs, clearly still asleep.

I sighed too, mostly because I didn't want to get up, but I knew I had to. I pushed myself up into a sitting position, then slowly and carefully got myself up and into my chair so I could start getting ready. When I'd completed the first few tasks of my morning routine and was ready to get into the shower, I started the process of taking off the boot and inspecting my skin, although it was hard to tell much of anything with the mottled color of my foot, which was somehow even more bruised than it had been the previous day. Less swollen, yes, but still fucked up.

I was more careful than I'd ever been in my life as I transferred in and out of the shower, because the last thing I wanted was a repeat performance. But everything went as planned, without incident, and soon I was fully dressed and ready for my appointment, while Justin was still sleeping soundly in our
bed.

Briefly, I wondered if I should wake him up, because I knew if he had been awake he would want to go with me, but in the end, I didn't because I figured he could use the sleep, and I really didn't need a chaperone. So I let him sleep and called for a ride, grabbing a protein bar in the kitchen on my way out the door.

This time, Martin was the one who picked me up, and though he was concerned when he saw my new accessory, I was in a much better state to deflect that concern now that I wasn't in as much pain. My body still wasn't happy by any means, but what I felt that morning was much more tolerable than what I'd endured the day before.

The orthopedist had good news for me too -- thank god -- and after taking a look at my x-rays and evaluating my situation, told me to continue wearing the boot and scheduled me a follow-up appointment in two weeks. While I would have rather not worn the boot at all, I knew it was a necessary evil, and if I did as I was told, I'd be able to leave it behind soon enough. In the meantime, I was just going to have to be a little less than fashionable.

As that thought crossed my mind while I sat in the back seat of a town car on my way home, I wished Justin would have been beside me, so I could have told him that and he could have teased me about it. I missed that Justin -- the one who laughed with me, and sometimes at me, and could brighten my day just by giving me that sunshine smile he'd always been famous for. I don't think I had realized until that moment how few and far between those laughs and smiles had become. Justin was so damn distant, and he'd been even more distant the night before. It was obvious that something was off, but I had no idea what to say or ask to try to figure it out without potentially making things worse. Maybe Justin was feeling guilty about being so busy lately and how much time we'd spent apart, but the last thing I wanted to do was make assumptions or come at Justin with anything that might sound like an accusation, especially if it turned out to be off-base. I also didn't want to call attention to his anxiety, which I already knew he was sensitive about, if it was underlying all of his odd behavior. Still, I felt like I was missing something, although I had no idea where to begin in figuring it out.

As I looked out the window at the cityscape slowly rolling by, I hoped Justin might still be sleeping when I got home, because I wanted nothing more than to climb into bed alongside him and feel his body against mine, in whatever way we could manage it. But my imagination hadn't run very far with that fantasy when my phone started to ring, and Justin's picture popped up on the screen.
Chapter 8

That was the phone call that finally got me to push aside my own apprehension and ask Justin if everything was okay, because he sounded so guilty and so… dejected… when he told me he needed to take care of something at the studio and asked me if I'd be okay on my own for a few hours. Of course I'd be okay -- I was a grown ass man -- but it just wasn't like Justin to not be hovering over me in an unusual situation like the one we'd found ourselves in. Not that I particularly enjoyed the hovering, but it was just what Justin did. And Justin staying so distant when I was stuck in bed with an injury was just plain fucking weird.

So I asked him.

Silence took over the line for a beat, before Justin said those two little words that had been my own mantra for so long: "I'm fine."

I'm not sure why I expected him to say anything else. After all, he'd learned from the best.

He was pretty damned convincing too -- going on to tell me that he had some projects he was working on for his show that he really needed to get finished, and sounding so much more like his normal self when he told me that. I know I should have questioned him more, but again, I didn't want to accuse, and I didn't want to make Justin any more uncomfortable than he already sounded. Add to that the fact that I was bone tired because I'd barely slept at all, and we had the perfect storm -- one that I now realize allowed me to keep my head in the sand when it came to Justin's obviously-off mental state, and at the same time allowed Justin to keep up whatever charade he was putting on, pretending to be okay when he wasn't.

I came home to an empty, quiet apartment, with Justin already gone to his studio to take care of whatever he needed to take care of. It was too quiet, and it had been too quiet for a while. I missed Justin's idle chatter about his students at the dinner table and hearing stories about some of Jennifer's more unusual (or just plain weird) real estate clients, and the quiet way we would often catch up with one another on the couch after a long day at work. None of that had happened for far too long. Instead, it was like we were moving in two separate worlds whose paths almost never intersected.

I sat for a moment between the living room and the kitchen, debating whether or not to make a pot of coffee in an effort to keep myself awake so I could get some work done, or if I should attempt a nap first. I really hated being out of the office when Cynthia was out of town. Even though I knew our employees were perfectly capable of getting things done on their own without me looking over their collective shoulder (and I’d been trying to embrace that concept more) being forced to stay away made me feel like I wasn’t doing my part. Working from home was always an option, of course, but it wasn’t the same as being there in person.

A pulse of pain working its way up from my toes to my hip brought me back out of my thoughts, and the yawn that followed made my decision for me. I didn’t need coffee; I needed sleep. But first I needed to check in with what was going on at the office.

Once I had myself settled in bed -- which took much longer than I would have liked -- I opened up my laptop and started a video call with Maurice, the account manager I’d hired a couple of months back who had been saving Cynthia and me a hell of a lot of trouble ever since. Normally, his job was to act as a liaison between us and our clients or to iron out logistical needs like scheduling photo and video shoots or lining up contractors to fulfill other needs we couldn’t take care of in-house, but that day, I needed him to also be the liaison between me and the rest of the office.
However, what I didn’t expect to hear when Maurice answered the call, was Cynthia’s voice in the background. It turned out that Rob had called her the day before to tell her what was going on, and she’d chosen to cut her vacation short and take a redeye back to New York so she could pick up my slack. I wasn’t sure how I felt about any of that, but Cynthia quickly shut down my objections by telling me it was fine -- her mom would be visiting New York in a month or so anyhow, and she was only cutting her trip short by two days.

“Someone has to keep you from running off all of our employees,” she said, grinning, once I’d hung up with Maurice and started a call with Cynthia instead. “But seriously, I know you too well. And I don’t mind. So stop feeling guilty, put your laptop away, and get some sleep. You look like shit.”

“Thanks a lot,” I groused, trying to sound insulted, although I knew Cynthia probably wasn’t off-base, and I could feel the brain fog that came with lack of sleep quickly catching up with me. My body punctuated the sentence with a yawn, just in case it wasn’t already clear how tired I was.

“I mean it,” she said, her expression softening a little. “You’re officially off for the rest of the week, and I’ll see you Monday. No phone calls, no emails. Don’t make me do what I did last time.”

“I’m not sick this time. I’m just stuck in bed. Or wherever else I can elevate my damn foot. There’s a difference.”

“Rest is rest, Brian. Your body is healing. It needs some rest so it can get started with that. And working is not resting.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I rolled my eyes, knowing full-well that Cynthia wouldn’t hesitate to have Damon, our IT guy, block my access if that was what it took.

“So, get some sleep, spend some time with Justin, and I promise I’ll catch you up on everything on Monday. Goodnight.” Cynthia smiled sweetly and waved goodbye to me, then disconnected the call, effectively cutting me off before I could object.

I sighed and closed my laptop, then set it on the nightstand and settled back into the pillows. I knew I needed sleep, and I really wished I could spend some time with Justin, but that apparently wasn’t happening. Instead, I was lying in our bed, alone, having a hard time getting comfortable because after thirteen years of being a stomach sleeper (since it helped me get off my ass for a while) sleeping on my back felt strange. And lying there by myself, not knowing when Justin was coming back, felt lonely, but I needed to push that thought out of my head because I didn’t like the way it made me feel. Closing my eyes, I tried to let exhaustion take over and carry me off into dreamland, but the dull ache pulsing through my legs -- my body’s own version of the throbbing I was sure I should have been feeling with a broken foot -- kept me hovering just on the edge of sleep.

While I was definitely glad that I wasn’t feeling the full breadth of the pain I knew I should have been feeling -- paralysis does have some benefits, I guess -- it was frustrating to be so damn tired but to feel like I just couldn’t get to sleep. Maybe on some level, my body was still feeling every last bit of the discomfort, and that was what was keeping me awake, even though my brain wasn’t registering it because the signals weren’t getting through. Regardless of the cause, it was seriously fucking annoying, and it gave me a lot of time to think -- probably too much time.

I drifted back and forth between full and partial consciousness for a long time, trying out a lot of different positions to hopefully find comfort while also keeping my foot elevated. I had to admit that the strange set of symptoms I had been experiencing were better when I had it propped up, and I was sure that the couple of hours I’d spent in my chair that morning were a big part of the reason for the pain I was feeling. I knew it was going to be a long few days, because I’d never been fond of resting or staying in bed for reasons other than fucking -- especially not when there was work to be done.
Still, I knew the doctors were right, and Cynthia was right -- working wasn’t what I needed.

While a part of me wanted to be mad at Rob for calling Cynthia without telling me he’d done it, another part of me was grateful he had, because it meant I had less to worry about at the office. And, honestly, I knew why he hadn’t told me -- because if he had, I would have stopped him. So he’d done what needed to be done without any input from me, proving just how well he knew me.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, I found a comfortable position and managed to drift off into a deeper sleep. I was in the middle of a slightly bizarre dream about purchasing real estate -- in fucking Cleveland of all places -- when my phone started to ring, jarring me out of the sleep I so desperately needed and yanking me back into the present. I groaned and rolled over, and my initial thought was that I wanted to kill whoever was on the other end of the line. But then I saw it was Justin, and my thoughts shifted to hoping that nothing was wrong.

“Hello?” I mumbled, my voice only working about halfway as I tried to blink my vision back into focus.

“Hey,” Justin said. Even though he’d only said one word, I could hear how uncomfortable and unsure he was, and it made me wonder what he was about to say or ask. “Were you asleep? I thought you might be working.”

“Got kicked out of the office again for a few days, and Cynthia has officially barred me from working from home,” I said, trying to sound more awake than I actually was. “So you’re stuck with me. What’s up?”

“I wanted to see if you’d mind if I stayed at the studio for a little while longer.” Justin paused and took a breath, and I heard what sounded like the shuffling of various art supplies. “I’m having a lot of trouble getting something exactly the way I want it.” The same frustration that had become a common thread of every single one of our evenings lately was clear in Justin’s voice, and the distance he’d been maintaining from me was discernible as well -- he even sounded distant. Distant and distracted. “Dammit,” he muttered under his breath, just loud enough to be audible on my end, along with the sound of something either falling or being thrown.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah,” he sighed, still sounding like his mind was anywhere but our phone conversation. “Like I said, I just can’t get this to come out right. I was hoping you wouldn’t mind if I stayed here and worked on it.”

“Stay as long as you need to. I’m fine.” I stifled a yawn as I looked up at the ceiling, still fucking exhausted, wondering when in the hell I was going to be able to get a few hours of uninterrupted sleep.

“Thanks,” Justin said, once again sounding preoccupied, continuing to shuffle things around on the other end of the line. I heard something drop, and again, I wasn’t sure whether it had fallen, or if it had been thrown. “Shit. Goddamn it,” he murmured. “I have to go.”

Then, before I could ask Justin again what was going on, my phone beeped three times in my ear -- the signal that Justin had ended the call, without even giving me a chance to say goodbye. My first instinct was to try to call him back, but I stopped myself with my thumb hovering over the screen, because I knew Justin probably wouldn’t answer anyway. Frustrated and confused, I let the phone drop to the bed, sighing heavily as I let my eyes close. Once again, I was back to wishing that Justin would let me in and tell me what the fuck was going on, because it was obvious that he was keeping me in the dark, but every time I tried to ask a question, he would head me off with one of my
answers: “I’m fine.”

Maybe this was payback for all of the times that I’d uttered those words when they’d been anything but true.

I still felt like I was missing something, but I didn’t know what it was, and I wasn’t sure how to go about figuring it out when it seemed like Justin simply did not want to let me in. If anything, it seemed more like he wanted to be alone, and quite frankly, I wasn’t sure what to do with that, because it wasn’t like Justin at all.

We supposedly didn’t keep things from each other anymore, but I sure as fuck felt shut out -- left on the wrong side of a wall Justin had constructed around himself, for reasons I couldn’t figure out. Walls weren’t Justin’s thing; they were mine. Justin had found his way inside my walls, whether I wanted him to or not, and after a while (and a lot of perseverance on his part), I ended up being glad he was there, because life was a lot easier -- and its never-ending challenges were much easier to deal with -- with a partner by your side to share in the pain, or give advice, or help you with whatever you needed, without judgment. It took me a long time to get there, but I did it. And I never would have expected to find myself on the wrong side of any wall constructed by Justin Taylor.

But there I was -- alone in our bed. Wondering what was happening in Justin’s world and why I wasn’t a part of it.

Why was Justin keeping his distance from me at a time when he would ordinarily be playing the part of Florence Fucking Nightingale, constantly in and out of our bedroom to check on me and make sure that I had everything I needed? Normally, Justin would almost drive me insane with his constant worrying about me, and his simultaneous need to reassure himself that I was okay. And he’d be all over the internet, researching the best foods to eat for bone healing and spending most of his day cooking those exact foods. But this time, Justin wasn’t doing any of that. Instead, he was staying away from me. Not totally, but much more than usual, and it was enough to make me wonder. I could still see shades of Justin’s “normal” anxiety in his actions, but it was different. It seemed like it was about something else completely, and not just whether or not I was alright. It was like there was something he needed to tell me, but he either didn’t want to or didn’t feel like he could, and I had no idea what it could be.

Was there a problem with us or our relationship, and Justin was too scared to tell me I’d fucked up or that he wanted something I wasn’t giving him? At the time, I didn’t know, and Justin’s self-imposed isolation was more than enough to reignite my old insecurities, no matter what Michael had told me back in Pittsburgh to reassure me that Justin and I were simply meant to be. However, the situation I’d found myself in told me something completely different, and it was hard not to buy into those doubts, particularly while under the influence of increased pain medication, which always seemed to make me emotional (by my standards, anyhow), or morose, or both.

Unpleasant as they were, those were the thoughts that ushered me back into sleep as exhaustion claimed me again, allowing me to slip back into unconsciousness for a few more hours. When I woke up, finally feeling at least a little more rested, I hoped that Justin might be home, but he wasn’t. Not that I was surprised, because I did know how absorbed he could get in his art, to the exclusion of everything else around him. Most of the time, he had no idea how much time he’d spent painting or sculpting, even if hours had passed.

Of course, I also knew that if he’d lost that much perception of time, he probably also hadn’t eaten, which motivated me to place a call to Nick over at Monetti’s to have Justin’s favorite dish -- fettuccine alfredo with grilled chicken -- delivered to his studio as a surprise from me. It felt a little like an effort to make sure he knew I still gave a shit, but I did, and I was worried -- though not
nearly worried enough, as I would find out soon. Regardless, I wanted to take care of him, and that was why I did it.

When my phone started ringing about forty-five minutes later, I expected it to be Justin, but it was Nick, calling to tell me that his delivery person had just called to double-check the address, because he wasn’t getting an answer at Justin’s studio. Nick assumed that Justin must have come home, and I wished that was the case, but it wasn’t -- at least, not yet. We made arrangements to have the food dropped off at the apartment instead, and I figured it wouldn’t be long before Justin came in the door. Perhaps the delivery driver had just missed him.

However, as the minutes crawled by and turned into an hour, long after Justin’s fettuccine alfredo had been delivered to me and put in the fridge for safe keeping, with no sign of Justin, I started to get worried. I convinced myself I shouldn’t be, though, because Justin was known to take the “scenic route” home, especially if he was thinking about art, which was most of the time. He often made at least a couple of unscheduled stops to pick up new inspiration for paintings or sculptures, or to take a picture of something he found interesting. So I told myself that was what he was doing, and I had no need to be concerned. He’d probably be home soon, with a phone full of photos of the harbor or some kids playing at a park or something.

As the second hour wound its way to an end, still with no Justin, I was finding it much harder to convince myself that everything was fine. I tried to call him three times, but he didn’t answer, which wasn’t at all helpful in my efforts to not worry. Although most of the time, the lingering effects of Justin’s brain injury were minor at that point, there were still times when an unusual situation would get the best of him and leave him virtually paralyzed, unable to sort out his thoughts to make a decision, and I’d end up finding him in the throes of a panic attack as he struggled against the chaos in his mind. There were also the headaches, and he’d been having a lot of those in recent months. A sudden migraine could easily force Justin to stay exactly where he was until it passed or until I came to get him, because when the headaches got bad, there was no way he could get home on his own. We’d been there, and we’d done that -- more than once.

I was pulling my leather jacket out of the coat closet, already having made up my mind that I needed to go out searching, when the door to our apartment opened and Justin walked in.
Trigger Warning: Discussion of past thoughts of suicide

Justin’s entrance was totally casual, like nothing at all was amiss and he hadn’t just been completely out-of-touch for two hours, and I had to fight my impulse to immediately start making demands or sounding like Debbie Novotny, asking where the hell he’d been and what the fuck he was doing and if he had any idea how goddamn worried I was. But I didn’t confront him, and he kept right on acting like everything was normal. The only thing unusual that happened after Justin came home was that he didn’t eat, but he told me he’d ordered a late lunch at the studio, so I was willing to excuse that.

But even among all the normalcy, I still felt like something was off -- like there was something underneath Justin’s behavior that I couldn’t quite identify. Now, I know exactly why I felt that way - - because the whole damn thing was a ruse -- but at the time, I was just so thankful that Justin was home safe that I didn’t really want to ask any questions.

I should have asked questions -- a lot of questions -- but I didn’t. Maybe because I was a little afraid of the answers, as my old demons continued to stir at the back of my mind, pushing me farther away from realizing what was really going on. The rest of the evening only bolstered my ability to continue ignoring whatever problem was at hand, because it was spent doing our regular thing, watching television together in the living room -- at least, for as long as my foot was willing to allow me to stay upright, which wasn’t nearly as long as I would have liked it to be. I enjoyed what I could, though, until the pins-and-needles sensation in my legs started to become constant, and I had to relinquish my position on the sofa with my arm around Justin. He still seemed distracted, but I was willing to overlook that in favor of being able to feel his body against mine, probably because, somewhere deep in my subconscious, I was afraid if I questioned him, he would pull away again -- physically and mentally.

I’d hoped he would come to bed with me, but he didn’t. Instead, he elected to stay in the living room, slowly nursing a beer as he absently watched TV, his mind clearly elsewhere. He did at least give me a goodnight kiss and tell me he loved me, but the sense of absence was still there, and that did nothing to mitigate the doubts that lingered deep down in the furthest recesses of my brain. I know now that those doubts were ridiculous and completely off-base, but at the time, I didn’t know what to think.

I didn’t remember Justin coming to bed that night because I’d drugged myself up and fallen into a deep sleep fairly quickly, but I did know that he slept until almost noon -- not even stirring when I slid out of bed to take care of the more vital aspects of my morning routine and make myself a smoothie, then continuing to sleep soundly while I got back in bed and tried to find various ways to amuse myself as I settled in for another day of forced rest.

Once Justin did wake up, he acted like he’d overslept, and he was up and out of the apartment in a rush, after taking the fastest shower I’d seen him take since his days of being late for class at PIFA following a late night of fucking. I tried to question him and get him to slow down, but he hardly acknowledged that I’d spoken and continued to rush around the apartment. He barely even paused for a few seconds to tell me goodbye, but he did, complete with a deep, long kiss on the lips that only added to my confusion about what the fuck was going on with him, or with us. For the next few days, we repeated that process -- Justin staying late at his studio, coming home and giving me just
enough “normal” to allow me to push my concerns aside, going to bed long after I did, then sleeping in until lunchtime and rushing back to the studio. Lather, rinse, repeat.

Come Monday morning, I was completely bored out of my skull and more than ready to go back to work, and also not at all surprised that Justin was still in bed when I left for the office. That alone wasn’t particularly worrisome because Justin had never been a morning person. He’d always been a bit of a night owl, unless something else forced him to be on an earlier schedule, so the early mornings that he’d been spending at the studio were what was unusual for him, not the later schedule he’d recently adopted. Honestly, I wasn’t a morning person either -- I’d just been in the business world for nearly thirty years at that point, so I was used to the “nine to five” schedule and wasn’t really into staying up until the wee hours of the morning anymore unless I had a reason to. Justin, however, got to make up his own schedule -- lucky fucker -- which meant that if he wanted to work from noon until well after dinner, he could. I would miss him, but if it meant that he was doing what he loved, it would be worth it.

If only I’d realized that wasn’t what was going on at all.

Monday was a busy day at the office for me, playing catch up after being gone for most of the previous week, without having had an opportunity to plan for it the way I usually did. I sent Justin a quick text message around lunchtime to remind him that we were supposed to have dinner at Rob and Adam’s that night. I remember hoping that spending the evening with Esme and Sophia might help pull Justin out of his strange mood, because he always loved being around them, and honestly, I was looking forward to a meal that I wouldn’t be eating alone, especially after doing a hell of a lot of that in the last week.

However, the universe had other plans for me. I’m not typically one to buy into any of that intuition or divine intervention or whatever-the-fuck crap, but now, I have to wonder if there was something at play that made sure everything went exactly as it needed to go to force me to wake the fuck up and take a good, hard look at what was happening with my husband and just how deep it went. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

Justin replied back fairly quickly -- and I hated that I was surprised by that, but I was -- letting me know he’d meet Rob and me at the office around five. At 4:45, my phone rang, and I halfway expected it to be Justin with some sort of an excuse for why he couldn’t come to dinner, but it was that motherfucker Solomon from Remsen, with some “emergency” that wasn’t really an emergency, but when it’s a billion-dollar account, you have to do whatever the fuck they want -- even if it means upending all of your plans to work on something totally ridiculous. I was just wrapping up the phone call, rolling my eyes and waiting for the idiot to stop droning on when Rob came in, followed by Justin.

They were talking quietly when they came in -- apparently having run into each other in the hallway or the elevator -- but stopped their conversation once they realized I was on the phone. As Solomon droned on in my ear about shit I already knew, I had a chance to observe Justin -- who, at first glance, seemed fine. Or at least no different than he had been for weeks. Perhaps it was his “new normal” that masked what I now feel I should have seen in that moment -- we’ll never know and it doesn’t matter at this point.

“Yes, sir,” I said, internally cringing at my forced use of that word to address the ableist motherfucker that had been doubting me at every possible opportunity since Remsen signed a new contract with us back in the spring. “I’ll make sure it gets done by tomorrow.”

I sighed as I hung up the phone, knowing I was in for a long night that probably wasn’t going to do my foot any good, and there was no way in hell I was going to be able to go to dinner at Rob and
“Bad news?” Rob asked, as he repositioned his bag on his lap.

I recounted the story for the two of them as Rob nodded in understanding and Justin stood awkwardly near the door, staring out my office window, his expression unreadable, verging on totally blank.

“So, looks like no dinner for me,” I said, keeping my eyes on Justin, looking for any discernible change in his face -- maybe subconsciously searching for a hint that he was disappointed or that he would miss me, as lesbionic as that sounds -- but there was nothing. “You should still go though,” I added.

“The girls would love to see you,” Rob agreed, looking toward Justin, who still just stood there, not reacting at all. “It’s been too long.”

Justin left with Rob easily enough, but there was still something unsettling about his body language when they left that I had a hard time pushing out of my mind. Normally, Justin would have been excited about going and seeing the girls, but I hadn’t seen any indication of that at all. Instead, he was preoccupied -- distracted and distant, just like he had been with me for far too long. And now that I look back, knowing what happened next, I see what I couldn’t at the time -- he was lost and confused, desperate for comfort and afraid to ask for it.

I couldn’t go down that road, though, because I had work to do that required my full attention, and if I wanted to get home at a decent hour, I had to get started. So I told myself that Justin was in good hands with Rob and Adam, and everything would be fine. Hopefully he’d have a good time, and he and Esme would paint or draw while Sophia tried to throw in her seven-year-old perspective, and he’d come back home talking a mile a minute about whatever they’d worked on. And “my” Justin -- the one I recognized, the one I missed -- would be back.

But that wasn’t what happened at all.

When I got home, a little after nine, Justin was already in bed, sound asleep, with the blackout curtains pulled, blocking out the glow of the city that was a constant outside our window. His migraine medication was on the nightstand alongside a bottle of water, allowing me to easily put two-and-two together that Justin’s night had not ended in a positive way. I hadn’t heard anything from Rob though, so I figured it must have hit Justin hard after he came home. That wasn’t unusual for him, although it happened far more often than either he or I would like.

I needed to get horizontal myself, as my legs were hurting like a motherfucker by that point, so I tried to be as quiet as possible while I showered and got ready to join my husband in bed. He was down for the count, as was typical when he took that particular medication, and didn’t stir at all as I hoisted my body over to the bed and carefully brought my legs up to join me. It took me a few minutes to get my stack of pillows arranged so that my legs were propped up, but not so much that it made my lower back ache -- it was a delicate balance, as I’d found out in the previous days -- but I finally got it, and settled back into the pillows to try to relax and let go of my day, eventually allowing the sweet bliss of unconsciousness to carry me away.

Justin was still asleep when I woke up, and, as had become usual, stayed asleep while I got ready for work. He was still snoring when it was time for me to go, and he didn’t even move a muscle when I went into the bedroom to kiss his cheek and tell him I loved him before I left for work. I wondered if he’d been up in the middle of the night and taken more of his meds, because sleeping for ten-plus hours straight was a bit unusual, even for Justin. But if the headache wasn’t gone, that was probably what had happened, so I wasn’t too worried about it.
The worry came later, after I got to the office.

I’d only been at my desk for a few minutes, enjoying the last of the quiet in the office before the majority of the staff arrived at nine, when Rob knocked on the door frame.

“Hey,” I said, surprised to see Rob that early, since most of his staff didn’t come in until 10. “What brings you up here at this hour?”

I expected to hear him say that he was out of coffee or just wanted to shoot the shit for a few minutes, but the look on his face was serious, and he didn’t have his coffee cup.

“We need to talk,” he said, as he pushed himself into the room, pausing to close the door behind him before turning to face me. “I’m worried about Justin.”

“He’s fine,” I said. “He was asleep when I left for work. Looked like he might have gotten a headache last night after he came home. Was he okay when he left your place?”

“Cut the bullshit, Brian. You have to know this isn’t about a headache.” Rob was staring intensely at me, his piercing blue eyes boring into mine.

I had to look away, because I did know -- I just hadn’t wanted to admit it. And Rob was calling me right out onto the carpet, in the way that he always does.

“I was surprised to hear Justin’s taking a break from art for a while,” he said.

“What?” I looked up to meet his eyes again, because I couldn’t not look at him after he’d just delivered news like that.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Rob came closer, then ran a hand through his hair as he let out a breath. “Adam kept trying to tell me I was overreacting, but I’d rather be safe than sorry.”

“What?” I repeated, still trying to process what Rob had just told me and what it meant. “What are you talking about? He’s been at his studio every day, working on something.”

“How long has it been since you’ve been to the studio?”

“More than a month. It was before I went to Pittsburgh… But it seemed like he didn’t want me there, so I’ve stayed away. Trying to give him some privacy.”

Rob nodded and bit his lower lip, looking like he was trying to put the pieces of something together. “Well, Adam went last week, since I never could get Justin to answer his phone. Justin didn’t answer the door, but it was unlocked, so Adam went in, and he found Justin asleep on the couch.”

“He’s been pretty tired lately.”

“I think there’s a lot more to it than that. And I’ve been there before. I know you have too. And that’s why I can’t figure out why you’re not seeing it.”

I had to look away again, because I was seeing it, and I’d been seeing it for awhile. But I’d kept telling myself there was nothing to worry about, or otherwise making excuses for Justin in my head. And then, there I was, making excuses to Rob too, for reasons I couldn’t even explain.

"Or maybe you do know," Rob said, probably noting the guilt I was sure was written all over my face. "But why, Brian? It's not like you to just stick your head in the sand and not tackle a problem head on."
I continued looking down at my desk, because I really didn't have an answer for him, and I didn't have a good excuse.

"Justin needs help." Rob's voice was much softer and more gentle as he said those three words -- three words that hit me square in the chest so hard it physically hurt. "He needs you to hear what he isn't saying, so he doesn't have to say it."

I let silence settle between us for a few moments, trying to let Rob's words sink in, but eventually my urge to argue overpowered my good intentions. "He can tell me anything, though. He knows that," I said, realizing the moment the words left my lips that I'd said the same thing to Michael over a month before, but Justin had yet to open up to me about anything, even when I'd asked. Of course, I hadn't pushed very hard either.

"Did you know he dropped out of the art show?"

"What?"

"I thought not. But he did. Yesterday. He told us that, too. Listen, I’m not sure he can figure out how to articulate what he needs at this point. But I can tell you what I saw last night. I saw someone who looked a hell of a lot like I did a long time ago, when I felt like there was no hope and only one way out."

I knew exactly what Rob was alluding to there, and my initial impulse was to refuse to entertain that thought and tell him that he was wrong, before I realized that would only be doing more of exactly what Rob was accusing me of doing in the first place -- burying my head in the sand, sweeping things under the rug, or any other number of cliched euphemisms for being totally blind to what was happening around me.

"When you’re in that kind of mindset, it doesn’t matter who you have or how much they love you," Rob continued. I could hear the emotion in his voice, and I knew he wasn’t just talking about Justin. "You’re not thinking about them. You’re only thinking about your pain, and you’re so deep in it that you can’t see anything else. That’s where Justin is right now, I think. He has a lot of things he needs to say, but he can’t figure out how. He’s confused, and his brain is telling him lies. He needs you to make it to where he doesn’t have to say anything. He needs you to help him, before it’s too late." He paused and took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "I hope for both of your sakes that Adam is right, and I’m overreacting, but I don’t think I am. After what I saw last night… He wasn’t eating, he was hardly talking to any of us, not even the girls, then he left suddenly, saying he had a headache and blatantly refused to let me go with him to be sure he got home okay. After he told us that he was taking a break from art for a while, Adam asked him what he was going to do, trying to be positive and encouraging -- you know, just being Adam -- and the answer he got was a vague, ‘Nothing.’ I couldn’t let it go. It’s been eating at me all night. I wanted to call you last night, but Adam convinced me not to. He texted Justin to be sure he made it home, and Justin replied pretty quickly, so that was enough to make Adam feel like Justin wasn’t isolating, but now I’m not so sure. What I saw last night felt like he was isolating himself. I’m just not sure he sees a way out. But that’s what depression does."

The word echoed in my head: depression. Something I should have seen, but didn't. Somewhere I'd been before myself. Someplace I'd seen Justin before and somehow failed to recognize this time. I had absolutely nothing to say to Rob in response, because there was no excuse. But I knew I couldn’t plead ignorance anymore -- mostly because I didn’t want to think about what might happen if I did.

"Where is Justin right now?" Rob asked, his voice still bearing the kind and compassionate tone that was his trademark when he wasn’t calling me out on my bullshit. It was a big change from the way
he had been when he first came into my office, and it made me wonder what sort of aura I was projecting that made him decide to take a gentler approach.

“He was asleep when I left. He’s probably still asleep.”

“Check on him,” Rob said softly. “Make sure he’s okay. Then later, when you get home, talk to him. Tell him that you know, and you understand, and you’re going to make sure he gets the help he needs. He needs you right now. He needs you to take control of the situation, because I don’t think he feels like he can. I know I didn’t. Just promise me you won’t wait.”

I looked down at my phone on my desk and nodded, not sure what to say and feeling like anything I could say would be inadequate in the face of what had just been said to me.

“Like I said, I hope I’m wrong,” Rob said. “But I don’t think I am. I just couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t say something, and…” He stopped speaking and let his sentence trail off, but I didn’t need him to complete it. I knew what came next, and I knew it was something neither of us wanted to think about. “Anyway, just call him.” Rob came closer and pulled me into a hug that I hadn’t realized I needed until it was happening. “I love you both. I wouldn’t be saying any of this if I didn’t. And if there’s anything at all I can do to help, just tell me, and consider it done.” Rob let me go and turned to leave, pausing for a moment at the door to my office to add, “I mean that. You guys are family, and family takes care of family. I’m just sorry I didn’t put it together sooner.”

Truthfully, I wished I had as well. I still do.

Rob was gone seconds later, leaving me staring at my phone, trying to digest all that had been said, before I picked it up and, with a trembling hand, made a call to Justin. I had no idea what I was going to say when he picked up, but I guessed it didn’t matter -- I just needed to know he was okay. But the phone never rang. It went straight to Justin’s voicemail greeting, modeled after my own from so many years ago: “It’s Justin. You know what to do.”

I hung up and tried again, but got the same result -- no ring, just voicemail. Everything Rob had just said was echoing in my head on an endless loop, only serving to ratchet up my fear as I tried a third time -- hoping for the phone to at least ring, so I could tell myself he was just asleep or in the bathroom or the shower and hadn’t heard the phone -- but I was again met with Justin’s prerecorded voice immediately after the call connected. His phone was off. But why?

Was I already too late?

As I stuck my phone in my pocket and hurriedly grabbed my jacket, I silently recited the only sincere prayer I’d ever made in my life for the fourth time.

*Please don’t let anything happen to him.*

Chapter End Notes

I know, another cliffhanger. But this should be the last one. Thanks for hanging in with me!
Chapter 10

Trigger warning: Implied suicidal ideation

As I sat on the sidewalk waiting for my ride, I wished harder than I ever had for anything in my life that I could somehow teleport home, so I could be there right then, but I couldn’t. The reality was that it was still rush hour, and I was probably at least twenty minutes from home no matter which method of transportation I chose. By that point, I was so caught up in my own fears that I wasn’t even sure how I’d managed to coherently call for a car, but I had, and blessedly, it had arrived within five minutes.

I recognized the driver, as I’d ridden with him a handful of times -- enough that I didn’t have to give him any lessons on wheelchair-handling, thank god, because that was another thing I wasn’t sure I would have been able to coherently do, but not so many that he actually knew me or wanted to carry on a conversation with me. At the time, I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing, because the last thing I wanted to do in that moment was try to make small talk, but the lack of conversation also gave me a hell of a lot of time alone with my thoughts in the back seat of the car.

Why had I let myself miss all of the red flags? Why had I been so wrapped up in somehow making it all about me, that I allowed myself to misinterpret all of the signs that something was seriously wrong?

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and looked at it, fighting the urge to try to call Justin again -- telling myself that maybe the reason it went straight to voicemail was because he was on the subway, on his way to the studio after all, and had hit a dead zone with no signal. But I knew full-well that the real reason I didn’t want to try to call him again was because if another call went straight to voicemail, that explanation would be a lot less likely.

Of course, I know now that was exactly how we’d gotten into the mess we were in, but at that point I’m not sure I was quite ready yet to completely face that truth, or to consider the active role I’d played in helping Justin pretend that everything was fine.

After what felt like an eternity, we pulled up in front of our apartment building, and I must have set a new record for putting my chair back together and transferring out of a car, because the only thing on my mind was getting upstairs and getting to Justin -- seeing him with my own two eyes and confirming that he was alright, or at the very least, seeing that he just wasn’t home, and knowing that he was probably at his studio and I’d be able to easily find him.

The elevator ride took for-fucking-ever, and I dropped my keys twice while I was trying to unlock the door, but I finally got the door open, and the first thing I saw was Justin’s messenger bag sitting in the chair that he liked to curl up in to read. The sight made my heart sink, because I knew right then that Justin wasn’t on the subway on his way to the studio, because he never left without his bag. His sketchbook was in there, and all of the little trinkets he’d always pick up because they inspired him and made him want to create. Though I didn’t realize it at the time, the bag lying there, abandoned, said a lot about how Justin felt about his art career in that moment.

With my own anxieties running higher than they had in a long, long time, I turned to go down the hallway toward our bedroom, hoping that Justin was still asleep, and perhaps he’d simply forgotten to plug his phone in and the battery had run out. Still making up goddamned excuses. But when I got to our bedroom door, the bed was empty, still unmade. I pushed into the bedroom and looked toward the bathroom door, expecting to see it closed because that was the last place Justin could possibly be in the apartment that I hadn’t already passed. But it was standing wide open, and the floor was
littered with what looked like dozens of pills of varying colors and sizes, some of which I knew were his, and some of which were actually mine.

No sooner had I made that realization than I started hearing the sound of someone crying softly in the bathroom. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying to prepare myself for whatever I might find once I passed through that doorway, but at the same time knowing that in this case, crying was a good thing, because it meant that Justin was alive.

My eyes were focused on the floor as I went into the room, trying to take stock of just how many pills were on the floor and wondering why they were there and what the fuck had happened, before my gaze settled on Justin’s trembling form, curled up in the corner with his knees pulled up to his chest and his arms wrapped tightly around his legs, as if he was holding on for dear life. Maybe he was.

Justin looked up at me, his beautiful blue eyes that had once been so bright and full of happiness and intensity and passion, now filled with despair and shame. I watched as another tear fell from the corner of his eye, unabated, as if he didn’t even realize it was happening. His phone sat alongside him, the display dark, and his whole body was quivering with some emotion I wasn’t sure of at the time. Was it fear? Or was it something else entirely?

My immediate impulse was to go to him -- to hold him, to feel him against me, to feel his breath and his heartbeat, to know that he was still here. To let him know that I was there, however he needed me to be. Before I could even think about it, I was out of my chair and sitting on the floor beside Justin, holding him as he cried, wondering what I’d just come in to, and at the same time being scared to death of the answer.

It took a few seconds for the gravity of the scene in front of me to truly sink in -- for my brain to run through the “oh shit” and the “what the fuck do I do” and figure out what I was really looking at. My husband, the man I loved more than life itself, crying alone in our bathroom, surrounded by pills. Pills that he very well might have taken. Pills that could easily kill him if taken in the right amounts and combinations.

And if he had taken them, I needed to know. I had to ask the question, even if I didn’t want to know the answer. Even if I didn’t want to entertain the thought that my worst fears might be correct.

Because not asking questions that I didn’t want to know the answers to was exactly what had brought us here.

This was not about me, or what I felt, or what I did or didn’t want to hear -- it was about Justin, and making sure Justin got the help he needed, whatever that might entail.

And as much as I wanted to break down and cry right along with him, I couldn't. Not yet. I had to keep my shit together, so I could be the person Justin needed in that moment. I'd been there before, once upon a time, in a parking garage outside his high school prom.

“Did you take anything?”

The first time it came out, my voice was little more than a whisper -- perhaps subconscious resistance toward asking the question at all, or hearing my worst fears confirmed. I didn’t want to think about Justin feeling desperate enough to want to end his life, despite how much clear evidence was right in front of me.

I felt the weight of Justin’s body against mine, leaning heavily on my chest, as he continued to shake with silent sobs, but there was no change, no movement, nothing that could be interpreted as any sort
of answer to my question.

“Did you take anything?”

My voice was stronger this time, because I knew how much I needed the answer, even though I still desperately wanted to deny the possibility that the answer might be “yes.”

Justin shook his head, his face still buried in my shoulder, then mumbled a weak, “No.” He inhaled a shaky, shallow breath, then spoke again, his voice as unsteady as his breath. “I just wanted the pain to stop.”

I tightened my hold on Justin’s body, running my hand over his back, trying to comfort him as best I could, while at the same time trying to stop myself from falling apart, and finding that progressively more difficult as the harsh reality of what had just happened continued to sink in.

“What do you need?” I asked, my voice thick with the full range of emotions that I was trying desperately to hold back -- the overwhelming fear and sadness that I felt once I realized how much pain my husband had been in, and for how long. He’d been deteriorating right in front of me, but I’d refused to see it. I’d let him feel his way through the darkness alone, because I’d been too wrapped up in my own shit to acknowledge the truth.

It took Justin a few shuddering breaths to respond, and by then my shirt was damp with tears that I still wasn’t sure Justin realized were falling. When he did speak, it was a low whisper, barely audible even though his lips were inches from my ear.

“I don’t know.”

“Okay. It’s okay,” I said softly, still rubbing my hand over his back, hoping it was bringing him some measure of comfort, but at the same time feeling like anything I could possibly do or say was like trying to patch up a severed artery with a bandaid. “We’ll figure it out together. I’m here now. I’ll always be here.”

He inhaled another trembling breath, and the exhalation was where the dam broke, and his silent sobs turned into loud ones that left him gasping for breath, on the verge of hyperventilating before he whispered the words that shattered my heart into a thousand pieces: “I’m sorry.”

It hurt to hear him say that -- to hear him apologize to me when he had nothing to apologize about. I was the one who needed to be apologizing, for turning a blind eye to the signs that had been in front of me for months, that were suddenly clear as day. But before I could tell him any of that, Justin spoke again.

“I’m scared.”

That was the moment where I lost the battle with my own emotions, and the tears that had been pricking at the corners of my eyes while I fought against the lump in my throat began to fall, sliding down my cheek and mingling with Justin’s as I cradled the back of his head, holding his cheek against mine while we cried together.

I wanted to tell him that I was scared too -- that I couldn’t imagine my life without him, that I didn’t want to, that he was my rock and he had been for a long time. But I couldn’t say any of those things. I couldn’t put that on him. Not in that moment.

So I said the only thing I could say: “I know.”

We spent a long time together on the bathroom floor, me holding Justin, thanking the god I didn’t
believe in for answering my prayer as I let my own tears fall unheeded -- tears of sadness for what Justin had been feeling mixed with tears of frustration with myself for letting things get to that point, and tears of relief for getting there in time. He’d been so lost for such a long time, and I’d allowed myself to remain blind to it, at Justin’s expense.

As I continued to sit there, focusing on feeling the breath and the life flowing through my husband’s body, I realized that I didn’t know what would have happened had Justin not gone to that dinner alone. Had Rob not come in early just to talk to me. Had I continued to immerse myself in willful ignorance and denied what Rob was telling me. Was me breaking my foot tied into this too, somehow? Was this all one gigantic game of dominoes where all of the pieces had fallen exactly where they needed to in order to make me open my eyes and see what had been right in front of me all along?

I’d made a promise to Justin to help him, but the truth was that I had no idea how best to do that. Did he need to go to the hospital? Did I need to take him somewhere so he could check himself in and get the professional help that I knew he needed? Or did he just need an emergency appointment with his therapist, John? He hadn’t been to see John in a while, and I realized in that moment that I didn’t know when Justin had stopped mentioning his therapy appointments, so I really didn’t know how long it had been. But clearly there was a need now.

I spent the next several minutes trying to evaluate whether or not it seemed like the crisis had passed, looking for subtle hints and resisting the urge to ask Justin again what he needed. He’d already told me didn’t know, and I didn’t want him to feel pressured to have to come up with a solution to his own problem -- the one that I now realize I played an active role in exacerbating, by letting myself make it all about me. I’d enabled his downward spiral, simply by refusing to step in when things got uncomfortable for me.

Right then, though, I knew it was time for me to step up -- to push my own feelings aside and focus on Justin, so I could do what I’d promised. So I could help him get to the other side of this, as his partner. I also knew that meant I needed to be honest with myself, and with Justin -- no masks, no walls, and no pretenses. And maybe neither of us would know what we were doing, but, as I’d already promised him, I knew we’d figure it out. Together.

Once Justin’s breathing had slowed to a more normal pace and the tears had stopped, I released my hold on him just enough to be able to look into his eyes. The layers of what I saw there -- confusion and frustration combined with unimaginable pain -- made me uncomfortable, but that was one of those feelings I had to get past and not let push me away from taking action.

“I think we should call John,” I said, keeping my voice gentle yet assertive -- not wanting to take away Justin’s autonomy at all, but at the same time still not wanting to pressure him to have to come up with his own solution by framing it as a question instead of a statement. “Maybe we could get you an appointment this afternoon?”

Justin blinked a couple of times, his eyes still glistening with moisture, then closed his eyes and nodded.

I made the call, while Justin sat in front of me, continuing to blink back tears, his breathing a little less than steady, though nowhere near as ragged and uneven as it had been earlier. He still looked like he was holding himself together by a thread, and I was grateful that I was able to get him an appointment for right after lunch, because I knew Justin needed more support than I was qualified to give.

“He can see you at one,” I said, hoping that knowledge might help give Justin some relief -- knowing that help was coming. Not that one session was going to fix this -- not by a long shot -- but it would
be a start.

“Okay,” Justin breathed. He looked down at the floor, and I could see his eyes surveying the scene, almost as if he wasn’t quite sure what had happened or how he had gotten to that point, before he looked back up at me, his eyes full of fear and uncertainty as he said, “I don’t want to go alone.”

“You don’t have to go alone,” I said, as I reached out and took both of Justin’s hands in mine. “I’m here with you. I always will be.”

I knew I’d already told him that, though not in the same words, but it still seemed like what he needed to hear. He needed to know I was there for him, in the way that I hadn’t been for the past couple of months. I’d let him go it alone because I hadn’t wanted to dig deeper, but I knew in that moment, as far as I was concerned, Justin would never have to go it alone again.

I’d be there -- even if it hurt, even if things were said that I didn’t want to hear, even if the situation raised feelings in myself that I didn’t like to feel -- because Justin deserved that. He deserved my full partnership, unencumbered by the demons of my past. I couldn’t promise I’d be perfect, but I would try.

And, at the end of the day, that was really all I could offer. All of me. Unconditionally.
Chapter 11

If I thought it had broken my heart to hear Justin tell me that he was sorry, the way I’d felt then paled in comparison to what it felt like to sit in his therapist’s office and watch him cry while I summarized what had happened that morning, with Justin’s permission of course. I said what little I knew and watched as he struggled to respond to the handful of direct questions he was asked, which all seemed to be aimed at figuring out the answer to my earlier question of how best to help him -- what he needed. Meanwhile, I had to continue holding myself together and not let how scared and overwhelmed I was -- and how helpless I felt -- create any sort of distraction.

In the end, we went home together, after scheduling another appointment for two days later, with Justin holding a sheet of paper that contained a "safety plan" -- basically an outline of the things Justin would do instead if he started feeling that way again, and a list of people he could use as a support system if needed. When John had asked him who those people should be, Justin immediately said my name first, as if he didn’t even have to think about it. And honestly, that was a relief to me. I don’t know why I was afraid he would say someone else -- maybe because of how badly I felt I’d already fucked this up -- but he didn’t, and I was grateful for that. Maybe he did feel like I could help him, after all. Justin had also signed the paper as a promise that he wouldn't hurt himself, and that he was okay to go home with me. As I sat with him in the back seat of a cab -- Justin's request because he didn't want to ride with anyone who might know us -- I found myself wondering again how we'd gotten to that point. How had I not realized just how bad things were? How blind had I been? And knowing that Justin had been all alone with those feelings for so long was enough to break my heart all over again.

Justin was sitting in the middle of the back seat, leaning against me, and I could tell he was exhausted -- not just emotionally, but physically too. So was I, to be honest, but his needs came first. He didn’t say anything on the ride home, and after a while, I thought he’d fallen asleep, but when I looked down, his eyes were open, staring straight ahead, just blinking. Numb.

I wasn’t surprised that the first thing Justin wanted to do when we got home was lie down for a while, and honestly, I was grateful to have an opportunity to do that myself, once I’d taken care of a few things. Justin’s focus for the rest of the day was supposed to be practicing self care and letting go of anything he’d been holding against himself. Though Justin hadn’t said much in his session with John, one thing we’d managed to decipher was how scared Justin had been that I would find out how “not together” he felt, because he hadn’t been sure how I would react. Apparently my “not good enough” complex was contagious -- at least to Justin’s mind in the state he was in. But now I knew, and I was still there, so that was one thing he could let go of. The rest, however, was still a mystery. I also knew from my own experience that letting go of things could be a tall order, so I wasn’t exactly sure what to expect from the rest of the afternoon and evening.

First, I had to call Cynthia -- who I was surprised hadn’t called me yet -- so I could get her help with clearing my calendar for the next few days. I didn’t want Justin to feel like I was hovering, but at the same time, I wanted him to feel like I was there for him if he needed me, so it seemed best if I stayed home, at least until after he’d had his next therapy appointment. I wondered if Rob had already said something to her, since she hadn’t called, but regardless, I had a couple of things I was going to need covered, so she and I had to talk.

It knew it would be a slightly awkward phone call, because I didn’t want to “out” Justin. This wasn’t my story to tell; it was his. I respected that, and I wasn’t going to put his private business out there, not even to someone I considered a close friend. Luckily, Rob had already laid the groundwork by telling Cynthia that Justin hadn’t been feeling well the night before, and suggesting that perhaps I’d
gone home because of that.

“I wondered why you’d left your computer on, and you hadn’t bothered rinsing your coffee mug out,” she said, still sounding a little confused, after she’d explained what Rob had told her. “Is Justin okay?”

“He’s okay.” I really didn’t want to get into any details, so I kept right on talking, without giving her an opportunity to press further. “I need you to take care of the pitch I’ve got with that formalwear boutique tomorrow. And I’ve got a conference call in the morning with Remsen, so if you could join me on that call and be ready to take care of anything that needs done at the office after that, I would really appreciate it.”

“Sure, anytime. You know I don’t mind.”

“Thanks. You’re a lifesaver. As always.”

“You know you don’t have to thank me either.”

“Hey, at least I’ve learned how to do that, so you’d better take it when I’m giving it out.” I managed to joke, somehow, in spite of how raw I was still feeling after the events of the past several hours. Lots of practice at building walls, I supposed, though I didn’t often keep Cynthia on the outside of them, and I hadn’t for a long time.

I could practically see Cynthia rolling her eyes as she said, “Alright. You’re welcome.” Then, her inflection turned from teasing to serious when she added, “Let me know if you need anything. I can stop by on my way home.”

“I’m good,” I lied. I actually would have liked to have a few things from my desk, but I really didn’t think Justin would be up to visitors, and frankly, I wasn’t sure I was either.

When Cynthia and I hung up, I went back to the bedroom to check on Justin, finding him in bed with his eyes closed, breathing deeply. His facial expression looked so peaceful, his body relaxed -- a sharp contrast to the deep despair and internal chaos that had been present earlier. I was thankful he was getting a break, though, physically and mentally.

Trying to be as quiet as possible, I cleaned up the bathroom -- something I’d wanted to do earlier, but I hadn’t wanted to leave Justin alone. He also hadn’t wanted to be left alone. But now that he was sleeping, I could finally get rid of the evidence I didn’t want to look at anymore, and that I didn’t want him looking at either. I took stock of what was left of both of our prescriptions, making a note of what I needed to reorder and what I had to call about, but he actually hadn’t emptied anything completely. He had a pretty even assortment, and had left a good amount behind in every bottle, which seemed oddly conscientious, especially given how dire the situation had been.

Once that was finished and the bathroom was back to its normal state, I went back into the living room so I could stretch out on the chaise lounge. As much as I would have loved to climb in bed with Justin and snuggle up against him, hug his body in close to mine and never let him go, I also didn’t want to take a chance on waking him up in the process, because I knew it was going to take me awhile to get comfortable, and I didn’t want to disturb his peace -- peace that he desperately needed. Peace he deserved to have.

I hadn’t realized just how loudly my legs were talking to me until I got myself into a position that was at least semi-reclined and propped my right leg up on a couple of pillows. I’d been so distracted by everything else that I hadn’t had time to think about it. I knew I needed to relax, and that I was going to have to find a way to not completely ignore my own physical needs while also giving Justin
what he needed. I had no idea how I was going to find that balance, though, especially given that my first impulse was to swing the pendulum in the other direction and focus only on Justin -- myself be damned.

I leaned back and let my eyes close, suddenly realizing just how exhausted I was too, though I was reluctant to allow myself to drift off, because I wanted to be available if Justin needed me. Logically, I knew those two things were not mutually exclusive, but at that point, I felt so guilty for having done so much to ignore what was really going on with Justin, that I didn’t want to take a chance on that happening again, even inadvertently.

I was still fighting sleep -- though I was getting closer to losing the battle -- when my phone started buzzing in my shirt pocket. I’d already made up my mind before I even pulled it out that if it was anyone from the office other than Rob or Cynthia, I wasn’t answering. I wasn’t in the mood for dealing with anyone’s mundane bullshit -- not with what I’d already been dealing with that day -- and I couldn’t guarantee that I wouldn’t go off on them. But it was Rob. Rob, to whom I now owed a debt of gratitude I’d never be able to repay, because the wakeup call he’d given me very well might have saved Justin’s life.

“Hey,” I said, hating how tired I sounded, even though I knew Rob wouldn’t judge me for it, and he’d know what was behind it without even asking.

“Just checking on you guys,” Rob said. His inflection was casual, but there was also an underlying note of concern. “Seeing if there’s anything you need.”

I took a deep breath and let it out before I responded. “We’re okay,” I said, though I could hear how not-convincing my tone was, and I knew Rob would hear it as well.

“How’s Justin?” Rob’s question was simple, but it had a lot of unspoken underlayers too, and I knew exactly what they were. We both did.

“He’s…” I paused for a moment, because I really didn’t know how to answer the question. Honestly, I didn’t know if there was a way to verbalize exactly how Justin was, or if I even understood the half of it. I was sure I didn’t. We’d probably barely scratched the surface of how Justin was feeling, deep down inside. And that was a little scary. “He’s okay,” I said, almost as if I was trying to convince my own self of the truth of that statement. “But you were right. It was…” I stopped and took another breath. “It was bad. Thanks for the wakeup call.”

“I just wish I’d been wrong. But I’m glad he’s alright.” Rob didn’t ask what I’d come home to, and I was thankful for that. I knew he could make his own inferences based on what he’d seen, though, and that was likely why he wasn’t asking for details.

“He’s resting now. We just got home from his therapist’s office. It’s…” I had to stop again, this time because the emotions that had been pounding against the dam I’d been keeping them behind for hours were threatening to overflow, now that I was on the phone with someone who was “safe.” I swallowed, trying to push them back. “That was hard.”

“I know. It’s not easy to be on his side of it either.”

“I know,” I echoed back, still struggling against my own emotions. “We got here because I was being selfish. I’m doing it again, aren’t I? Goddamn it.”

“Not at all.” Rob’s voice was understanding, and I’d known him long enough that I could see the exact look he’d have on his face if he were sitting in front of me -- one full of compassion and patience. “You’re not being selfish; you’re being human. Your partner is hurting really badly. You
get to have feelings about that. It’s not easy for anybody.”

I couldn’t respond to that, because if I did, I was going to lose what little control I had over my emotions, and I didn’t want to do that. Not yet.

“I’ll let you go,” Rob said, as if he was sensing my silent struggle. “But if there’s anything either of you need, any time, just call me.” He paused for a moment, then added, “Take care of him. But promise me you’ll take care of yourself too. If you need to cry, let yourself do it. And if you need someone to talk to, I’m here.”

I didn’t say anything back, because I couldn’t, and after a few seconds, Rob seemed to realize that and ended the call, opening the door for me to let go of all I’d been holding back. I just hoped that Justin was still asleep, because the last thing I wanted was him coming out there and seeing me losing my shit. He didn’t need anything else to worry about.

It was hard to put a name to everything I was feeling and everything I was letting out at that moment -- fear, uncertainty, overwhelm, guilt, and sadness, among a multitude of other emotions that had been building behind the wall I’d tried to lock them behind for Justin’s benefit. But that wall was only so strong, and it could only hold for so long. Now, it had been breached, and I was sitting alone, crying silent tears on our sofa. Honestly, wishing I had someone to hold me the same way I’d held Justin before -- even though that’s something I’d never have admitted out loud. I wasn’t sure I’d been so desperate for a hug since I was a teenager, showing up on Michael’s doorstep with a bloody nose or a black eye.

But I couldn’t do this alone; I was going to need a support system too. That thought made me feel weak, even though I knew it shouldn’t have, and I also knew that Rob was right -- I was human. But openly having feelings about anything still wasn’t a position I liked to be in, especially not when I wasn’t sure I deserved to be having those feelings, in spite of what Rob had said. However, I knew that if I was going to be helpful to Justin, I was going to have to get past that shit. I didn’t have a choice. I just wasn’t sure how to do it.

I didn’t remember falling asleep, but I must have, because the next thing I recalled was hearing someone moving around in the kitchen, and looking over to see Justin standing behind the island, making himself some tea. He still didn’t look well -- not at all, and I wouldn’t have expected him to - - but it was nice to see him doing something “normal,” even though I was sure he felt anything but.

“Hey,” he said softly. “Sorry if I woke you up.”

“It’s okay,” I said, meaning it more fully than I had at any point in our relationship, or perhaps my entire life. At that point, I felt like Justin could wake me up every hour for the rest of our lives, and I’d continue to be grateful that he was there to do it at all. But I also had no idea what to say next, because everything that was coming to mind felt inadequate. Asking him if he was feeling better seemed stupid, and I didn’t want to make him have to tell me how he was doing, because I already knew the answer. This was a situation I’d never been in before, and in some ways, I felt as lost as I was sure Justin did.

But he took the burden off of me when he carried his tea over to the sofa and sat down next to me with a sigh, saying, “I don’t want to talk about it. Not yet. Maybe not for a while.”

I put my arm around him, hesitantly at first because I wasn’t sure what he wanted or what was right in that moment, then pulling him in close once I felt him lean in to my touch.

“Whenever you are, I’ll listen,” I said. “I’m here. I’m not going anywhere, ever.”
And I meant every word.

I’d never meant anything more.
Chapter 12

The next twenty-four hours were probably the hardest for me -- trying to make sure I was giving Justin the support he needed without smothering him. Trying to not jump to conclusions when he chose to engage in one of the activities he’d written down on his safety plan -- practicing yoga -- and not assume that he was back in a bad place just because he wanted to take some time to do it alone in our bedroom with the door closed. Trying to not make Justin feel like I didn’t trust him, and reminding myself that what Justin had been looking for was relief from pain -- a deep, emotional pain -- and he needed to work through finding ways to get that relief, and more effective ways he could channel his feelings. Trying to go on with my own life as best I could in the meantime, to help keep myself from hovering.

I was the least present I possibly could have been on that conference call with Remsen, but as usual, Cynthia saved the day, before telling me in no uncertain terms that she’d take care of anything else that needed to be done, and I wasn’t to concern myself with it. But I needed the distraction. And her insistence made me wonder how much more she knew, or how much she’d inferred from how mentally spent I was -- if she’d already figured out that the situation was much more serious than Justin coming down with a virus or something else equally innocuous.

I tried to find as much distraction as I could in work, and, blessedly, Cynthia didn’t say anything else to me about it. I stayed out of the Remsen account because I didn’t want to fuck it up, but I had dozens of smaller accounts I could work on, and that was exactly what I did. I spent the majority of the day sitting at my desk in our home office, with my right foot propped up on a pillow in the chair Justin sat in when he worked on his own computer, while Justin did what he needed to do to take care of himself.

That day, I felt like I was sharing the apartment with a shell of my husband, and it made me realize just how long that had been happening while I tried to pretend nothing was wrong. It seemed like all of Justin’s zest for life was gone, and I could tell he was struggling even with his simple mission of “do what feels good to you and what will help support you.” He spent a large portion of the day in bed, though I’m not sure how much time he spent sleeping compared to how much was spent watching TV or reading, because I was trying to give him space.

Meanwhile, I was struggling with how best to support him. I hadn’t felt that out of my element when it came to knowing what to do to help Justin since the bashing, when I’d felt like I was just feeling my way through blindly, trying not to fuck up and do more harm than good. Somehow we’d made it through back then, even though in retrospect, I’m not so sure that some of what I did was smartest decision -- such as trying to fuck his fear of being touched right out of him or taking him back to that goddamned parking garage where I nearly lost my shit because I was still seeing his blood on the concrete. This time, I decided to try to stop overthinking it and just follow his lead, though at times that was easier said than done, because I knew there were things he needed to do to take care of himself -- like eat -- that he probably still didn’t feel like doing. So I had to give him gentle reminders sometimes, but he was receptive to them, and he did eat, though it was obvious he didn’t have his usual appetite. Still, he was trying, and that was enough.

Justin had an odd, anxious energy about him that was palpable that day -- just as he’d have for many days to come. That shame was there too. God, was it there. So much that it hurt me to just have to sit there and watch and not be able to fix it. I knew there were probably things that he wanted to say but didn’t know how, and I didn’t press, because I didn’t want to inadvertently end up pushing him over the edge. I had to be patient and let the process play out exactly as it needed to, and that was hard. Really fucking hard.
I was working on a slogan for a new pitch -- mostly just doing a lot of typing and erasing and revising because I felt like my creative energy was completely missing that day -- when I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and turned my head to see Justin standing in the doorway.

He had his arms wrapped around his midsection, like he was protecting himself from something, and he looked nervous. Just the sight of him sent my heart into my throat and made me afraid of why he was standing there -- what he might say, or what he needed. Whether or not he was coming to me because he was sliding back into the bad place again. And what would I do if he was?

“You okay?” I asked, honestly afraid of the answer, but at the same time knowing that I couldn’t allow myself to give into that fear. Not again.

Justin nodded, looking down at the floor briefly before looking back up at me. “Yeah,” he said. “I just… I need to get out of the apartment. Go for a walk or something. If you want to go.” He focused his gaze on my computer screen, then added, “But if you have to work, that’s okay. I can wait.”

“No, no, it’s fine,” I said, trying my damndest to keep my voice casual even though inside I was elated that Justin was taking this step toward normal all on his own. It was a tiny step, but still, a step. And I was surprised, but I certainly wasn’t going to object. “We can go wherever you want. Do whatever you need.”

I quickly saved my work and closed the window, then shot Cynthia a quick instant message to tell her I was taking a break, and Justin and I went for a walk. It wasn’t our longest walk ever, but it felt good to get out in the sunshine, and it felt even better to hold Justin’s hand and reestablish the connection I’d been missing. We didn’t say much, but we didn’t have to -- we were together, and that was all that mattered. I could tell it wasn’t easy for Justin to be out like that, but he seemed to know it was important for him to step outside of his comfort zone a little. Again, he was trying. Trying to do what he needed to do to take care of himself and support himself, which would ultimately be the overarching theme of the next several months of our lives.

When we got back to the apartment, Justin went to take a long, hot shower -- more for therapy and relaxation than anything -- while I tried to get back into my work, albeit unsuccessfully. I still couldn’t concentrate for shit because my mind was all over the place, trying to figure out what was next for Justin and myself, which made it all but impossible to think of a clever slogan or a catchy layout. I was just about to give up and try to find something else to distract myself with -- something a little less high-risk that didn’t involve my livelihood -- when I thought I heard a knock on our apartment door.

I had no idea who the fuck it could be, since I wasn’t expecting any visitors and I honestly didn’t think Justin was expecting any either, particularly not with the state he was in. Unsolicited sales calls typically weren’t something we had to worry about in our building, thanks to the doorman, but occasionally one would somehow sneak by and come knocking. I hoped that was all it was, and that I’d be able to get rid of them quickly, assuming I could manage to harness my usual sardonic wit in spite of how mentally drained I felt.

I leaned forward to look out the lower of the two peepholes that were on our front door, fully expecting to get my usual view of someone’s shirt, but instead, I saw Rob’s face. Part of me was surprised to see him, because I knew he’d recognize Justin’s and my need for space and privacy, but another part of me wasn’t surprised at all, because I also knew Rob’s midwestern upbringing wouldn’t allow him to watch a friend go through a difficult time without trying to make everything better with a casserole or a pot of soup.

The first words out of his mouth when I opened the door were, “I’m not staying.” He had a small cooler in his lap, sitting on top of a Tupperware container, all of which he immediately unloaded
onto our kitchen island. “I’m just dropping these things off. I know it’s not a good time for visitors, but Adam and the girls made Justin some cookies, and I thought I’d make you guys some vegetable soup too. Easy and nutritious. Where’s Justin?”

“He’s in the shower,” I said. “We just got back from the High Line.”

Rob gave me a slight nod and a small smile, and I knew that he was reading the same thing into that small bit of “normal” as I had. “How’s everything going?”

“It’s as okay as it can be, I think. He’s got another appointment tomorrow. Then three times a week after that for however long it needs to be.”

Rob let out an audible exhale as he picked up the soup containers and turned toward the refrigerator. “I remember those times well. A little too well.”

“I just keep wondering how I didn’t see it.” I looked down, rubbing my thumbnail absently over the leg of my jeans, just to have something to focus on. “Kicking myself because I didn’t.”

Rob closed the refrigerator and pushed himself toward me, then reached his arms out and pulled me into a hug -- the one I was wanting and needing so desperately the night before.

I’m not sure what it was that got to me in that moment -- if it was a need for connection, or for comfort, or if it was how much Rob was reminding me of Debbie, showing up unannounced with food and a hug, and how fucking much I missed her -- but before I knew it, I was blinking back tears and swallowing against a lump in my throat. Rob either felt it or sensed it, and held me tighter as I fought against my own emotions, not letting me go until I managed to get the hitch out of my breath and settle back into a normal, calmer pattern of breathing.

“Brian, look at me.” Rob’s hands were still on my shoulders as he waited for me to comply with his request, which I did reluctantly, because I felt so damned vulnerable that the last thing I wanted to do was look anybody in the eye -- especially not someone who could read me well, the way I knew Rob could. “You can’t keep beating yourself up. It won’t change anything, and it won’t help anybody. So stop. Promise me you’ll stop.”

I closed my eyes, mostly so I wouldn’t have to look at Rob anymore. I knew he was right. I just felt so damn responsible for everything that had happened that it was hard to let go of that sense of blame -- particularly since it was a familiar feeling and place for me to be, and had been ever since I was a kid. Rob didn’t know a whole lot about that part, but he did know about the present-day iteration of those feelings and how pervasive they could be.

“It’s not your fault,” he said. “If you need someone to remind you of that, call me. I mean that. Call me any time you need to talk, about anything. And since I know you, I’ll say this up front… You are not a burden or a bother. You’re my friend, and I care about you, and I care about Justin. You can’t help him if you keep blaming yourself for what happened, and you also can’t do this alone. Adam and I are here for both of you, for whatever you need, anytime. Even if it’s two in the morning. Just like you’ve been there for me. Understood?”

I had to laugh a little at Rob’s explicit call-out of every single stumbling block that might keep me from reaching out; he did know me well. “Should I say, ‘Sir, yes, sir?’” I let the corner of my mouth twitch upward into a sardonic grin. It felt good to do that after the heaviness of the previous day. Like getting back to normal in my own way.

“If it means you’ll do it.” Rob smiled back as he reached for his cooler on the countertop and set it in his lap. “Anyway, I’m gonna go. I have to pick up Sophia from her dance class. Call me anytime.
That goes for Justin too.”

“Thanks, man.” I paused as Rob gave me a much shorter goodbye hug. “For everything.”

I knew he’d know what that meant without me having to spell it out, and his nod of acknowledgment confirmed that for me. He gave me a reassuring smile and a wink as he left the apartment, just as I heard the water in our master bath finally turn off. I turned and opened the lid on the container of cookies, inhaling the aroma of chocolate chips and butter. They were Justin’s favorite -- a classic chocolate chip cookie, baked just a little bit longer so they’d be crispy on the edges, exactly the way he liked it.

I wasn’t sure what we had done to deserve such good friends -- and I’m not sure I’ll ever understand it completely -- but in that moment, I was grateful to have them.

We ate Rob’s mom’s famous vegetable soup that night, with cookies for dessert, and finally had a night that felt “normal” for the first time in a long time, which was exactly what we needed, especially knowing that Justin’s first “real” therapy appointment, post-breakdown, was early the next morning.

I remember not knowing if Justin would want to go alone -- which I told myself I had to let happen if he wanted it that way, even though the sheer thought made me nervous -- or if he’d want me to come with him. Thankfully, he saved me from asking when he sat down at the table with his meager breakfast of buttered toast -- all he could apparently stomach at that point -- and looked down at his plate to avoid eye contact as he asked me if I could come with him. If I had time, he added, still without looking at me. Of course I had time. I would fucking make time. I’d already made up my mind that I would make time for anything Justin wanted or needed me to do, from that point forward.

The people who’d known the “old” me so many years ago on Liberty Avenue likely would have mocked me for being “whipped,” but as far as I was concerned, they could go fuck themselves. They hadn’t been where I’d been or gone through what I had in my life, and even I could look back and see what an asshole the old me was sometimes, and how I’d stood in the way of my own happiness more than once, seemingly just for spite, or maybe because I felt like that was all I deserved. But that, like a lot of things in my life, was over and done with, long gone. I wasn’t that person anymore. And I was on the precipice of yet another change that had been wrought by an event I could have never predicted that had turned my world upside down.

I sent Cynthia a text to tell her I was taking the morning off -- maybe the rest of the day, depending on how things went -- and I went with Justin to his therapy appointment, where I sat in the waiting room and had a hell of a lot of time to sit and wonder what was happening down the hallway and behind a closed door, and what condition Justin would be in when he came out. If he’d be totally numb, the way he had been right after his breakdown, or if he’d be sad, or angry, or just lost and confused. It turned out to be none of those things.

The Justin that came out of that office spent the rest of the day making it painfully clear that he didn’t want to be alone, and he preferred to be touching me if at all possible -- holding my hand, tucked up against my side, or lying with his head in my lap while I played with his hair. He still didn’t want to talk, and that was fine, but it left me wondering what exactly was behind his suddenly insatiable need for physical contact. Regardless of what the reason was, it gave me back the connection with my husband that I’d been missing so much. One that we’d always had, from the beginning of our relationship -- touch. It was a little unsettling to have Justin clinging to me so hard without telling me why, but everything seemed so fragile and we were both so on edge that I felt like I had to just take things as they came and let Justin talk about it on his own terms, in his own time. It felt strange to have him be so silent though, save for making the occasional idle comment about something on
As the afternoon turned into evening, and the bright sunlight outside our windows turned more golden, I started to notice Justin pausing every so often to rub his eyes or massage his temples. Then he turned off the TV -- which I hadn’t even been paying attention to since I was attempting to work on my laptop -- and got up and closed the blinds before curling up in the armchair and burying his face in his arms, which were folded atop his knees. He looked like he was trying to make himself as small as possible, though I didn’t know why, and soon the deep, steady breathing he often did to try to stave off a headache turned into barely audible whimpers as he apparently lost that battle.

I didn’t know if this headache was one of Justin’s “usual” headaches, or if it might be tension related and rooted in all that had happened in the previous 48 hours, especially since I was sure his therapy appointment had likely been focused on starting to work through it all. I knew from my own experience -- completely different as it was -- that sorting through all the dark shit in my brain had been difficult as fuck, and it often left me with a lot to think about. A lot of thoughts that I just needed to sit with for a while. Thoughts that sometimes made me feel anxious or stressed as I tried to process them. And headaches were one of the ways Justin’s body manifested stress. But in the end, I didn’t need to know the cause of the headache. What I needed was to get Justin into bed, relaxed and letting go, physically and mentally.

So that was exactly what I did -- gently coaxing Justin out of the chair by taking his hand and tugging him forward until he got up, then ushering him into the shower, where I hoped the warm water would help him relax. It certainly wasn’t one of our usual shared showers, but it felt just as good to me as one of those would have, because I was taking care of Justin.

After the shower, I led him to bed, which again, was far from our “usual.” I brought him his meds and his favorite tea, and the ice wrap that always seemed to help numb the pain even when nothing else was touching it, then I slid my own body onto the bed alongside his as gently as I possibly could, and opened the bottle of massage oil we hadn’t used in a long time -- longer than I’d realized, once I thought about it. As I slid my hands across Justin’s back and shoulders, kneading the tense muscles with my fingers until I felt them start to soften under my touch, I noticed how much Justin seemed to be leaning into that touch. Savoring it. Much like how I was savoring making the contact at all, after so long with an uncomfortable, mysterious distance between us.

Gradually, I felt Justin’s body start to relax, and his breathing become even and deep, until he was asleep.

I just hoped he was getting some relief -- not only from the physical pain, but also from the chaos and confusion that I was sure was in his mind.

Mostly, though, I was relieved to finally be able to do something for Justin that felt helpful. Something that he needed. Somewhere in the back of my mind, it felt a little like atoning for my sins -- starting to make things right where I’d been fucking it all up for far too long. Trying my best to let go of the blame, knowing that I had to because Rob was right. I wasn’t helping either of us by blaming myself. All I could do was help Justin move forward. And I was committed to doing exactly that.
Chapter 13

The way forward was slow, and progress wasn’t always steady, but that was okay. I had no expectations because I was letting Justin lead the way, and I was content to do that -- shocking, I know. I’m not sure what changed -- if the many conversations I ended up having with Rob helped me shed some light on how my tendency to push down uncomfortable feelings didn’t serve me at all and had not helped Justin’s situation, or if I had just finally realized that I couldn’t always fix everything for everybody I cared about. Regardless, I ended up being much more able to live by the adage, “whatever will be, will be” than I ever had been in my life. Realizing that sometimes I had to give up control, and that maybe it wasn’t as scary as I thought it would be.

I spent a lot of time becoming well-acquainted with the waiting room at Justin’s therapist’s office, merely a spectator, just watching as “my” Justin came back to me, gradually, in pieces. With each new piece, I realized just how much was missing that had faded away so slowly that a lot of it had escaped my notice. I felt bad about that too, but that was another mental quagmire Rob refused to allow me to get caught up in. Instead, he pushed me to focus on the here and now, sounding every bit like some sort of motivational quote meme -- but that was just Rob. And honestly, I needed the reminder.

Then, Justin told me one day that he felt he’d be okay going to therapy by himself -- holding my gaze and making full eye contact the entire time, so different from how he had been just a few weeks before when he could barely look at me when he spoke. It was another example of the “old” Justin coming back, thanks to therapy helping him sort through his thoughts and medication bringing his brain chemistry back into balance. His confidence slowly returned, and he was smiling more. There was still an internal fight sometimes, and I could see it, but the Justin I’d always known was shining through more and more, and that was an enormous relief for me to see.

Not every day was a good day, but that was to be expected. Sometimes Justin wanted comfort after a session, and he’d spend the evening holding my hand or leaning up against me, letting me hold him. Other times, he just wanted to be alone so he could process something particularly difficult. Those were the times that were the hardest for me and the “fixer” mentality I’d had since I was a teenager -- fixing things for the people I cared about as some sort of a way to compensate for the lack of control and the lack of caring I’d experienced in my childhood. Those were the times that tested my willingness to let go and allow the path to take us wherever it led. But I did it. And we both lived.

One evening, while Justin was taking some time to be alone in our bedroom as I worked in our home office, trying to catch up on everything I’d had to put off thanks to my unexpected time away and the erratic, abbreviated work schedule that had followed, I heard him talking on the phone to Jennifer. I realized then that those phone calls were another thing he’d done less and less often, so gradually I hadn’t noticed it. I tried not to eavesdrop, but I got concerned when I realized he was telling her the whole story -- why he’d been so out of touch, and what had happened the day I found him on the bathroom floor. I still tried not to listen, out of respect for his privacy, but I caught bits and pieces, and that was enough to get the gist. I was worried that revisiting that day might cause Justin to backslide, but it seemed to have the opposite effect. By letting Jennifer in, Justin was able to affirm to her and to himself that he was okay, he was working through the thoughts and feelings that had led him to that moment, and everything was going to be fine. He’d gone into the bedroom that day looking anxious, but when he came out, he seemed a little bit lighter -- like a burden had been lifted.

Eventually, I returned to my normal routine, working at the office from nine to six each weekday, while Justin spent his days focused on taking care of himself and doing what felt good. Sometimes that meant I came home to dinner on the table after Justin found a new recipe he wanted to try, and
sometimes that meant an extra yoga class or two, or going for a walk together in the neighborhood. Sometimes it meant going to one of Gus’ soccer games and being proud parents together. And sometimes it meant letting Justin have space and time to be alone, which also gave me a lot of time to think.

I kept thinking about what Justin had told Rob and Adam at dinner, the night before our entire world was turned on its ear, about how he wanted to take a break from art for a while. As Justin slowly returned to normal, or some semblance of it, I knew he would probably start needing or wanting something to do to fill his days and give him a purpose. Art had been that thing for him for a long time, in one way or another, either working on his own stuff, or teaching art to kids, or working for me at Kinnetik. But it sounded like Justin wanted to eliminate art entirely, at least for a while. The last time he’d said something like that had been a few months after the bashing, when he was frustrated with school and his “gimp hand” and the asshole dean who refused to make reasonable accommodations for a student with a disability. (If only I’d known then what I know now, we’d probably own that damned school.) But back then, Justin’s self-imposed break hadn’t lasted long, because it hadn’t been something he really wanted -- it was just something he said out of frustration. Was this the same? Possibly. I didn’t really know, since I hadn’t been there. But I did know that Justin hadn’t been to his studio since that day, nor had he mentioned it. So maybe he was serious this time.

I found myself sitting at my desk in my downtime at the office, trying to think of ideas for things Justin might like to do that had nothing to do with art, and finding that to be a very difficult prospect. Art and Justin had been synonymous for such a long time that it was hard to separate the two. But if he wanted to do something else for a while, or even for good, I would support that. I just wanted him to be happy, no matter what that looked like. I knew it wasn’t my responsibility to figure that out for him, but it helped me feel useful and was another way I felt I could make up for any contribution I’d made in enabling Justin’s negative behaviors when I should have fucking said something. Anything. Trying to continue to let that shit go through positive action.

That was exactly what I was doing when Cynthia came into my office on a Friday afternoon, holding a bottle of wine in one hand and two glasses in the other.

“You allowed to drink?” she asked, holding up the wine and raising an eyebrow.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” I looked up at her, arching my own eyebrow in return.

Cynthia gestured toward my foot -- still in the damn boot anytime I was upright for another two weeks at least, and currently propped on an ottoman I’d asked an intern to drag into the office for me from the huddle space.

“Oh,” I said. “No, I’m good. I’m off the heavy duty shit now.”

“Good.” She smiled and set the glasses down on my desk, then poured us each some wine. “Because I’d hate to have to celebrate all on my own.”

“What are we celebrating?”

“Yours truly landing the Kate Spade account.”

“No shit.” I knew she’d been after that account since she moved to New York, so that definitely explained the very expensive bottle of wine that was currently on my desk.

“What can I say? I was irresistible.” Cynthia winked as she took a seat in the chair in the corner and kicked off her shoes. “How’s Justin doing?”
I tried not to sigh outwardly at her question, because I knew it came from a place of caring, and I appreciated that people cared, but I never felt like I could answer those questions with anything more than a cursory, “He’s doing okay,” or “He’s doing better,” since no one among our family and friends knew the whole story except Justin and myself, and now Jennifer. It still wasn’t my story to tell, though, and it never would be. It was Justin’s, and that meant that the three of us might be the only ones who ever knew, save for Justin’s therapist, of course. Rob had never asked for any further details, but I could tell from the things he said and did that he had made some presumptions about what I’d gone home to that day, and that he was likely right on target. Cynthia had never asked either, though I’d gotten an impression that she had a vague idea of what had happened as well, or at least that she understood the seriousness of the situation. She knew Justin’s history and how his brain injury affected his mental state, and she’d been around Justin on more than one occasion in the past few months, so I knew she would have at least noticed something was off, even if she didn’t mention it.

“He’s doing better,” I said, hoping that would be enough. It was an honest answer, vague as it was.

“Good.” Cynthia gave me a reassuring smile as she sipped her wine. “I’m glad he’s okay. What are you working on? Now that I’ve interrupted you and given you alcohol,” she laughed.

“Justin mentioned he’d like to take a break from art for a while, so I’ve been looking for things, trying to find something he could do that wouldn’t involve art, but it’s fucking hard.” I left out the part about just how deep in the shit he’d been when he said that, making it sound a hell of a lot more casual and natural, even though my brain was still wondering who this Justin without art was going to be.

“He’s been doing art for a long time. I can understand needing a break, especially if there’s a lot of pressure. Sometimes you get burned out.” She paused and took another drink. “What does he think he might like to do instead?”

“Hell if I know.”

“You haven’t asked?”

Cynthia looked confused, and I didn’t blame her, because I knew it made no sense that I was trying to solve this “problem” for Justin without having any direction from him at all. He and I had never even talked about what he’d told Rob and Adam at that dinner. But I also didn’t want to have to explain why I felt like this was just something I needed to do, to make things up to Justin.

“Just thinking ahead,” I said, shrugging. Hoping she’d accept that answer. Thankfully, she did. Probably only because she knew me a little too well.

“Well, he likes to read, right? I saw a sign at the library that they were looking for volunteers.”

I wasn’t sure I could see Justin working at the information desk at the library, but I think a lot of it was that unbreakable tie I had in my mind between Justin and painting, or drawing, or sculpting… just creating. I had trouble seeing him doing anything else. But I supposed I would have to get used to it.

“I know they have a lot of events at Central Park. I bet they could always use people to help with those,” Cynthia continued. “Or he could be a tour guide.”

I knew how much Justin loved going up to Central Park, but I also knew that what he really loved to do when he went there was look for inspiration for art projects. Still, it might not be too bad of an idea. And there was Bryant Park, too, a little closer to our apartment. We’d been to a few events
there ourselves over the years. So maybe that would be a good fit.

Cynthia and I spent a little more time kicking around ideas together, before the conversation shifted over to her weekend plans with her new lawyer boytoy. We finished the bottle of wine while talking about a few “dream” accounts we were after, then decided to declare an official end to the workday and close the office a couple of hours early.

Justin wasn’t home when I got back to the apartment, but that was to be expected, since his Friday therapy appointment was later in the afternoon. I wondered what sort of mood he’d be in when he got back. I knew it could be just about anything, but I was hoping for one of the good days, so we could spend the evening doing something fun, or otherwise just being together. Still, I also knew I had to accept whatever happened, and if it was a night when Justin wanted or needed some time to himself, I would give him that, even though it was Friday night and I really wanted to go out to dinner, or a movie, or go listen to some live music. Something we hadn’t done in a while. Though honestly, it didn’t matter what we did, as long as I was with Justin.

When Justin walked through the door, I could tell he was still reflecting and thinking, as he’d likely been doing on the cab ride home, but the upright way he was carrying himself -- and the way he was humming quietly to himself as he hung up his coat -- seemed to indicate he was in a good mood. I was thankful for that. It was such a shift from where we’d been a few weeks before that it really made me appreciate those good days. Maybe because I knew just how bad the bad days could get.

I was sitting at the dining room table, paging through a cookbook Justin had apparently been looking through himself at some point that day, since it hadn’t been there when I’d left for work that morning. I’d changed into a pair of jeans and one of my favorite long-sleeved t-shirts, ready for a casual night out or else an evening at home -- whatever Justin wanted to do. Mostly, I was letting my mind wander, trying to unwind from the day.

I watched Justin’s eyes as he looked me up and down, his perfect lips turning up into the slightest hint of a smile as he crossed the room and came up behind me, wrapping his arms around me from behind and leaning down to kiss my cheek. God, I’d missed those little things.

“Surprised to see you looking at desserts,” he said, giving me a teasing grin over my shoulder. I’d missed that too.

“For you. Not for me,” I said. Justin could certainly stand to put a few pounds back on, after his lack of appetite had resulted in him losing a noticeable amount of weight that he didn’t need to lose. “But this does look good.” I tapped my index finger on the open page, which featured a picture of an apple cinnamon coffee cake that the author declared “perfect for all of your fall gatherings.”

“What else were you thinking about?” Justin asked, as he took a seat in the chair to my right and propped his elbow on the table, his chin in his hand. “I know you better than to think you were just admiring the coffee cake.”

“I was just thinking we hadn’t cooked together in a while. Things have been so…”

I wasn’t sure how to finish that sentence without making Justin feel guilty, and I wished I hadn’t started it, but he saved me when he just said, “I know. I miss it too.”

“Why don’t we do that tonight, then? We can go to Trader Joe’s, pick up some stuff for dinner, and just have a night in.” That was another thing that the “old” Brian Kinney would never in a million years have suggested -- something so domestic, bordering on romantic with the right attitude. Like candlelight picnics with wine and cheese on the floor of my loft in Pittsburgh, that I now regretted not taking the time to enjoy. But if I had, who’s to say that Justin and I would still be where we are
right now?

“I’d like that.” Justin smiled at me -- still not quite his full-wattage sunshine smile, but it was getting there. Still, I wanted to soak it in and savor it. Justin’s smile was among the things I never wanted to take for granted again.

We walked to the store together -- well, he walked and I pushed, but you get the picture -- and bought the ingredients to make homemade pizza with a slightly non-traditional twist, choosing pesto and parmesan instead of red sauce and mozzarella, and lots of vegetables. Justin made a big show of picking up the ingredients for the coffee cake too, teasing me about all the carbs and sugar, but for once I didn’t protest. It really did look good, and if Justin wanted to make it, I sure as hell wasn’t going to stop him. I’d probably even eat a slice or two, just because. We bypassed the wine section, since I’d already had enough to drink for the day, and Justin wasn’t supposed to be drinking at all while they tried to get his new medications regulated. Then, we made our way back home, taking in the cool fall evening and what remained of a beautiful sunset, painting the western sky with shades of deep red and purple.

We made our pizza, enjoying our time together in the kitchen, laughing and teasing each other -- all things I’d missed much more than I realized -- then settled down in front of the television to watch a couple more episodes of “Tales of the City.” I was glad Michael had turned me on to that series, because Justin seemed to be enjoying it just as much as I was. Mostly, though, I was happy to be spending time with my husband, and to see him smiling a little, laughing a little, and to feel him snuggled into my side, seemingly content. He still wasn’t back to one-hundred percent, and I was sure it would probably be a long time before he was back there, but things were definitely looking up, and I was happy about that. Happy for Justin, really, because it meant he was feeling at least somewhat better, and that was all I wanted for him -- to find his new normal, whatever that would be.
Chapter 14

Trigger warning: Discussion of suicidal ideation

All in all, it was a good night -- the best we'd had in a long time. But I had no idea what I was about to start when I decided to bring up all of the brainstorming I'd been doing on Justin's behalf.

We were lying in bed, my arm around Justin’s shoulders and his fingers intertwined with mine, alternating between talking quietly and just enjoying the closeness of our bodies in the dim light as we both prepared for sleep. It was nice, and it was something I was glad was back, because I’d missed it. A lot. And I was glad that we could do it comfortably now, without either one of us accusing the other of trying to be something we weren’t or doing something for sacrifice instead of love. We'd grown beyond that a long time ago, and I couldn't help but feel like we were growing again, together, as we felt our way through the resolution to the crisis we’d found ourselves in.

“Any plans this weekend?” I asked, more in the interest of continuing idle conversation than anything else. Usually, our plans did involve each other, but not always. We were both independent people with our own separate lives, and neither of us made it a habit to keep tabs on the other if we wanted to go out with a friend or check out something that the other wasn’t interested in.

“Nope,” Justin said softly, nestling deeper into my side and laying his head on my chest. “My schedule is wide open… just like it always is now.”

“I’ve been thinking,” I said, running my fingers through Justin’s hair, lightly massaging his scalp.

“Always a dangerous sign.” I could hear the smile in Justin’s voice as he echoed the words I’d used on more than one occasion to tease him in the first few years of our relationship -- before I was willing to call it a relationship.

“Maybe. I’ve been trying to think of ways that you could eliminate art, if you wanted to… either just for a while or for good.”

“What?” My fingers slid out of Justin’s hair as he sat up a little and turned his head to face me, his brow furrowed in confusion. “How did you… Did I tell you that?”

“Rob did. You told him and Adam that, when you went to dinner at their place. That you wanted to take a break from art for a while.”

Justin was silent for several seconds before he simply said, “Oh. I guess I forgot.” He paused to rub his eyes, then continued. “I barely even remember that night. I don’t think I meant to say that out loud, but I’m not surprised I did. I was just in a fog the entire time. I knew I felt hopeless, but I guess I didn’t realize how out of it I was.”

That took me back to remembering Justin standing in my office that day, staring out the window, not saying anything, not reacting to anything. Just lost and looking so far away, even though he was standing right there. More signs I should have seen for what they were.

“Did you mean it?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe. I mean, a break might be a good thing. And I don’t think I want to go back to working on what I was working on. I’d been thinking about taking a break for a while. But I can’t believe I said it out loud.”
“Rob was surprised too. He told me Adam asked you what you wanted to do instead, and you said, ‘Nothing.’”

“Yeah.” Justin’s voice was soft, and he seemed to be looking past me, rather than at me. “That was a really hard day.”

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.” As much as I wanted to understand more about what Justin had been thinking that night and the next morning, I also wanted to give him an out, in case he still wasn’t ready. By then, I’d made peace with the fact that he might never feel ready.

“No, I want to.” Justin settled back onto his back, looking up at the ceiling. I could feel the soft rise and fall of his chest against mine as he breathed. My fingers found their way back into his hair, tracing a lazy pattern and hoping it had the same soothing effect on him that it was on me, with the simple act of touch. “We should talk about this. I’ve wanted to for a while… I just wasn’t sure where to start. And then I’d get scared, and I’d talk myself out of it again.”

“You don’t have to be scared. I’m right here, and I’ll always be here. I told you that, and I meant it. But if you’re not ready—”

“I am.” Justin cut me off, his voice suddenly much stronger. “I’m ready. I need to tell you this.” He stopped and took a deep breath before he continued. “When I said that to Rob and Adam, it wasn’t just about art. It was about everything. I just felt so... uninspired and empty. And everything I tried to create turned out empty too. Like I was just faking it.”

I knew exactly how that felt, because it was how I’d felt in the months after my accident. I’d thrown myself back into work because it gave me a distraction, but it was all a façade. I’d go home, exhausted and hurting and feeling like some person I didn’t know, and I’d ask myself how I was going to keep it up for the rest of my life. How I was going to pick up and go on the way everyone seemed to expect me to. Michael had told me that no one expected that, but it was hard for me to believe him. And it was a shitty, shitty way to feel. I hated that Justin had felt that way, and I hoped I hadn’t done anything to make him feel that way, but I had a feeling that my last visit to his studio a few months back probably hadn’t been helpful. I was afraid to ask, although I guessed it really didn’t matter. What was done was done. It was water under the bridge.

“So I quit the show,” Justin said, still staring up at the ceiling in the darkness, continuing on before I could say anything. “I was so tired of being frustrated. I was so damn tired. So I called them and I told them I couldn’t do it, and then I felt like a failure. Like I’d let everybody down. And I sat in my studio, and I cried. Wondering how I was going to tell you that I was a big, fat failure.”

“You’re not a failure. Look at all you've done. All you've overcome. You are the farthest thing from a failure.”

“I know. John and I have talked about that. But I felt like one then. My brain kept telling me how disappointed you were going to be in me. I’d been feeling so awful for such a long time. I knew something wasn’t right, but I thought I could get through it on my own. Then, when I figured out I was wrong, I was afraid to tell you. Afraid you wouldn’t want to deal with me. Afraid you’d leave me. Then I was just focused on keeping it to myself. Not letting it show, so you wouldn’t know.”

I wanted to jump in and tell Justin exactly how ridiculous that was, to think that I would leave him over any of that, but I didn’t want to belittle his feelings, so I stayed quiet. Just letting him talk. But that certainly explained the distance he’d kept from me for so long. And now the days when he’d clung to me after his breakdown made a lot more sense too. He’d needed reassurance -- to know I was still there with him.
“I know that’s the kind of lie my anxiety tells me sometimes, but I wasn’t in a place where I could see that. I was believing all of it… all of the lies. I felt like I should have been able to pull myself back up, and when I couldn’t, it felt like a personal failure. Like something was wrong with me, and that was why I couldn’t get myself out of the hole. Then it just kept getting worse, until I felt like there was no way I could tell anyone I’d let it get that bad. I felt so empty about everything.”

I held Justin’s body tightly against mine in the quiet that followed, wishing there was something I could do to turn back time and do everything differently, so he wouldn't have to feel that way. Thinking about the moments when I’d held him as he cried in the bathroom -- when I’d realized exactly how close I came to losing him. Remembering how empty it made me feel to think about going on without him.

“That’s how I feel about a life without you in it.”

As soon as the words left my lips, I wondered if I should have said them at all. If I was making it about me again, or if I was laying something on Justin that might be too heavy for him to handle. Especially since I heard my voice break when I said it. But something pushed me to keep going. Maybe I just needed to be honest with him too, while he was being honest with me.

“I was so scared that day,” I said, my voice thick with all of the emotions that I was trying to hold back. "Afraid I was going to lose you. I didn’t know what I’d do if I did.”

Justin closed his eyes for a moment, and when he blinked them open, there was a brightness there that I could see even in the dim light of my bedside lamp. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Don’t be sorry.” I wrapped my fingers around his and squeezed them. “I feel like I’m the one who should be sorry. For not seeing it. For not helping you sooner.”

“I should have been honest with you sooner. I should have told you how I was feeling, so you could have helped me. But I told myself I didn’t want to bother you with it. You had enough going on already.”

“You’re never a bother,” I said. There were plenty of jokes I could have made about the tiny little annoyances that come up when you live with someone, but now wasn’t the time or the place, so I pushed those thoughts back. They were the deflections I would have ordinarily used to avoid an honest conversation. To avoid feeling vulnerable. I wasn’t doing that anymore. “I want you to always feel like you can tell me anything. I’m not going anywhere, I promise.”

“I know. I know that now. But I was confused. My thoughts were so jumbled up… I couldn’t make sense of anything. It was all so foggy. I didn’t really want to die. I just wanted the pain to stop. But it all ended up wrapped up together… jumbled up again. My head hurt so, so bad. My meds weren’t working anymore, so I started wondering what might happen if I took more, and maybe some of yours too… then the next thing I knew, I had a handful of pills and six open bottles on the counter. I turned my phone off, I guess so no one could try to talk me out of it. But then I couldn’t do it. I guess I realized it wasn’t what I wanted. Then I just broke down. That’s all I really remember. The rest is just a blur.”

I let the silence settle between us for a few moments, thinking about everything Justin had just told me. Feeling the full range of emotions that hearing the whole story -- his story -- stirred in me. Sadness that he felt that way, and that he’d felt like he couldn’t talk to me about it. Regret for anything I might have done that reinforced that notion. And gratitude that he’d stopped when he did. For the second chance we’d both been given.

“I’m glad you’re still here,” I said, hearing myself actually say those words for the first time. I’d
thought them so many times in recent weeks, but I hadn’t said them out loud until that moment. Once I’d done that, and the full weight of what they meant sank in, all of the emotions I was feeling came bubbling up, leaving me fighting against their rising tide. I closed my eyes, trying to will away the tears I could feel gathering at the corners of my eyes.

I felt Justin’s thumb lightly brush my cheek, wiping away a tear that had fallen in spite of my best efforts to hold myself together. Then, his lips brushed the same spot in a soft kiss that was followed by another, and another, as he made his way to my mouth. When he got there, he pressed his lips to mine, a little hesitant at first, but quickly finding his way. His tongue pushed into my mouth ever-so-slightly -- just enough to be a tease -- before he pulled back, allowing our lips to separate just long enough for him to whisper, "Me too."

The second time he kissed me, there was no hesitation -- just his lips hard against mine, as if he wanted to prove to me just how “here” he actually was. We hadn’t been intimate in so long, and I wanted more, but I knew I had to let Justin lead. I was just along for the ride. Soon, the kissing escalated into Justin’s hands wandering across my torso, pushing up my t-shirt, and mine doing the same to his, until our clothes were coming off. When Justin started tugging at my pajama pants, eventually pulling them off, then did the same for himself, I wasn’t sure where exactly we were headed, but I was okay with anything.

Once we were both naked, I felt Justin’s fingernails scrape across my hips -- an intentional way for him to light up my nervous system like a Christmas tree, and that was exactly the effect it had. Then, he kissed a path up my torso until his mouth found my left nipple, then the right, eventually working his way back up to my mouth, where our hot-and-heavy makeout session resumed, with the added element of our hands grabbing at each other, arousing various parts of one another’s body. I felt Justin’s fingers on my hips again, this time a light, gentle touch, then they seemed to disappear, as would sometimes happen when his fingers found their way south of my transitional zone. I assumed he wanted to ride me, and he was preparing me for that, but then I felt an odd sensation of pressure that I recognized as the muted, not-at-all-what-it-was-before feeling of something inside me. When I blinked my eyes open and looked down, I saw Justin looking up at me, a questioning expression in his eyes as he worked his fingers in and out in a steady rhythm.

I wanted more -- god did I want more -- and a part of me felt selfish for wanting it so badly when I was the one who should have been taking care of Justin, not the other way around. But my baser instincts soon took over, as the pressure increased when a second finger joined the first. Then, something hit my prostate, and a wave of pleasure pulsed through my entire body, causing me to let out a moan that I couldn’t have held back even if I wanted to. Justin kept going, until I was panting and arching my back involuntarily, then he stopped.

When I opened my eyes again and looked down, I saw the same questioning, unsure look on Justin’s face and in his eyes. He bit his lip, then opened his mouth to speak.

“Can I…?”

He let his voice trail off, leaving the question unfinished, though we both knew what the conclusion was. And before any rational part of my brain could form a thought, my mouth, driven by sheer desire and want, was saying, “Yes. God, yes.”

Justin’s entire countenance changed when I said those words. I could see the desire in his eyes, matching mine, and I wondered what it was that had him wanting to do this -- to give me this gift, on this particular night. Our first time in such a long time. Sex was always something we’d both needed and wanted, but for some reason this time it had gotten lost, and an important part of our connection had gotten lost with it.
As Justin pushed into me, I realized what I was actually feeling, not just on a physical level, but an emotional one. It was the two of us reuniting as one. As partners. There didn’t need to be blame, or fear of being selfish -- there was give and take, exactly as there should be. We each needed the other, in so many different ways, for so many different reasons. Sex was just one of those needs, but that night, it felt symbolic. Like we were letting go of everything that had been weighing us down -- all of the doubt and the fear -- and moving on together, as a united front.

I looked up at Justin, his eyes closed as his body moved against mine, his fingers wrapped around my ankles, holding my legs on his shoulders, and for a split second, I wished that I could still feel things the way they used to be -- the full sensation of Justin’s length inside me, sliding in and out, increasing the pleasure every time he brushed against my prostate. It wasn’t something we’d done very often, but with Justin, I actually didn’t mind it. Truthfully, I enjoyed it, though I never would have admitted that back then. But those sensations were gone -- something I would never have again. And I couldn’t allow myself to get caught up in regret over what was missing, or in comparison to the past. I had to stay in the here and now, paying attention to what I could feel. Savoring each sensation, and using my mind to amplify them. Reconnecting with my husband.

I felt the change in pressure as Justin’s body moved in and out of mine -- it was subtle, but it was there. And I felt the increasing sensations of pleasure coursing through my body, being reflected in Justin’s facial expression as he journeyed toward his own climax. When he arrived, his whole body seemed to spasm, muscles clenching and pulsing as he made one final, hard thrust into me, pushing me over my own edge into oblivion, where everything around me faded into white noise for a brief moment before leaving me floating on a cloud of bliss -- this time not drug induced, but a feeling of sheer contentment. A feeling I was never going to take for granted again.
It felt good to have everything out in the open -- to be intimate, and to find our connection with one another again. Things were looking up. But there’s no switch to turn off depression, so there were certainly bad days in the mix as well. And I’d be lying if I said that sometimes the bad days didn’t scare me, especially now that I knew the whole story.

The days when Justin still struggled to get out of bed or to find his appetite -- or the days when he just seemed down and needed to give himself permission to feel that way without feeling like he needed to “fix” it or hide it or get past it somehow -- were all hard days for me, because they left me questioning whether or not the next day would be better, or if we were headed back in the same direction we’d come from. But the next day was almost always better, and that did a lot to allay my fears. I had to keep reminding myself that Justin was under the care of a professional, and even if he didn’t always frame things that way when he mentioned them, a lot of Justin’s new behaviors had come from his therapist’s suggestions.

We were going for strolls on the High Line more often -- which was good for both of us, to be honest -- and Justin was cooking again most nights. I’d missed his cooking more than I was willing to admit, and I was glad it was back. Justin had also taken up spending some time every night writing in a little hardcover book he’d picked up at the same discount store he bought most of his clothes from. (No doubt at the same time he’d bought the slouchy, two-sizes-too-large hoodie he’d been wearing around the apartment every day.) Writing in the journal was supposed to help Justin find an outlet for his feelings -- to give him what he’d once had in art, before the pressure of trying to make a living from it changed everything and attached a shit-ton of negative emotions to it.

Watching Justin write reminded me so much of watching him draw after the bashing, when he’d drawn some of the most disturbing images I’d ever seen him produce as he tried to process the fact that someone had wanted to hurt him enough to swing a baseball bat at his head. While this situation wasn’t exactly the same -- and thank god, he wasn’t out holding a gun to anyone’s head this time -- I could see every bit of the anger, frustration, anxiety, and sadness he was feeling coming out in the way that he moved the pen across the paper. The faces he’d make as he wrote. The way that he sometimes chewed on the pen as he looked thoughtfully across the room, sitting beside me in bed, turned just slightly so I couldn’t see what he was writing.

A part of me was curious about what he was writing, if for no other reason than because it would give me more insight into how my husband was feeling, but I had to trust that if it was something I needed to know, or that he needed my support with, he would tell me. Otherwise, it was none of my business -- just a part of the process, and something Justin needed to do in order to bring himself back into a comfortable equilibrium.

Of course, part of finding equilibrium was being social again, including having the occasional dinner with Rob, Adam, and their girls, either at their apartment or ours. Rob’s birthday fell on a Sunday, which happened to be our regular night, and Rob and I felt it would be the perfect opportunity to get back into that particular routine, since the focus would be on Rob, not Justin. It was harder than I expected it to be to convince Justin to go, though, given that the last time he’d been to their apartment was the night before his breakdown.

“I’m embarrassed,” Justin admitted reluctantly to me in bed that morning, probably only because I’d asked him why he was anxious -- why his breathing was more rapid than normal, and why I could feel his heart beating, even though we’d just woken up. “Especially since I don’t even remember it. Who knows what else I said or did?”
“It doesn’t matter. They get it,” I said, tightening my arm around Justin and hoping it was comforting. “You don’t have to be embarrassed. And you’ve seen Rob at my office a couple of times already. It was fine. This will be too.”

“Do they know?” Justin closed his eyes, and I knew right then what Justin was worried about, because that was what he did when he asked a question that he really didn’t want to know the answer to. I’d been wondering if Justin had talked to Adam on the phone at all, and that gave me my answer. Apparently he hadn’t, and it seemed like the reason why was because he was afraid to talk about what had happened the last time they saw each other.

“I haven’t said anything. I think Rob has a pretty good idea though, and I know he and Adam don’t keep secrets. But it doesn’t matter. Like I said, they get it. No one’s going to interrogate you. They’ll all just be glad to see you.”

“What about the girls? They were there too.”

“I’m sure if they had questions, Rob and Adam have answered them. I know they’re pretty open about that kind of thing.” Given the girls’ past -- especially Esme, who was old enough to remember the years of her young life before they came to live with Rob and Adam -- I knew that talking about feelings and not keeping secrets from each other was an important part of life in the Anderson-Manning household.

“Yeah,” Justin sighed as he blinked his eyes open again. “It would be nice to see the girls.”

“Just focus on them. And teasing Rob about being older than dirt.” I grinned, hoping Justin would laugh at my attempt to lighten the mood, and I was rewarded with a chuckle, a small smile, and a shake of the head.

“You know you two are practically the same age, right?” Justin turned his head to look up at me, still smiling.

“Yeah, but he’ll be 49 for a whole eight months before I get there. Details. They’re important, Sunshine.”

“Whatever, old man.”

I hadn’t realized just how much I missed hearing Justin use that moniker -- one I’d previously felt he used far too often -- until that moment. But I’d missed my husband’s good-natured teasing, be it about my age or my vanity or the fact that my clothes took up more than three-quarters of our walk-in closet. Those little things were a part of us. Another part that had been missing for too long.

Eight hours later, I was in the elevator at Rob and Adam’s building with a still-nervous Justin, holding his hand and trying to offer silent reassurance. I’d been offering him reassurance all day, both verbally and otherwise, though I wasn’t sure how much of an effect it had. Justin had spent most of the afternoon sitting on the balcony, staring out toward the river and writing in his journal off and on. I wondered what he was writing about, but again, I knew it was none of my business. Just part of the process. And apparently something he needed to do in order to psych himself up to go see our friends -- people we considered to be family, actually -- which made me a little sad. But I hoped that once this first time was out of the way, Justin would feel a lot less anxious about it.

Sophia answered the door, barely getting it open before she bounded out into the hallway and wrapped her arms around Justin’s waist briefly before throwing herself into my lap and giving me a bear hug of my own.
“You have to let them in, Soph.” I heard Rob’s voice call from inside the apartment. Sophia slid reluctantly off my lap and led the way inside.

There were hugs and smiles exchanged all around as we entered, and it wasn’t long before Justin’s nervousness seemed to melt away. We sat around the table, enjoying good food and good conversation, and those few hours gave me a chance to remember how much I enjoyed watching Justin smile and laugh. No one brought up anything that might have happened the last time Justin had been there, just as I figured they wouldn’t, and it seemed like Justin had a great time.

I wondered if things might get awkward when Esme started talking about an art project she was working on for school, but Justin was still engaged and interested in everything she was telling and showing him, even though I could tell he was a little bit lost in his thoughts after the topic of conversation shifted again. Soon, though, he was back to being fully involved, rolling his eyes when I teased Rob about being on the edge of fifty, chatting with Adam about the books they’d both been reading, and making a show out of sliding his plate of birthday cake away from me when I tried to steal a bite. For those few hours, it was like the “old” Justin was back, only minus the talk about his own art projects.

Justin still hadn’t been back to his studio, and I hadn’t brought it up, because I didn’t want him to feel pressured. It felt so strange for me to consider the idea that Justin might not ever go back to being a professional artist, but at the same time, I knew it wasn’t my place to reject that, if it was what he wanted.

Still, I was struggling to figure out what Justin-without-art looked like, and sometimes I wondered if Justin was struggling with the same. But he helped me start putting the pieces together when he began volunteering at Bryant Park, first helping with an outdoor movie, then an ice cream social, and always coming home smiling and looking fulfilled, just like he had when he was teaching, or when he was really pleased with the work he’d gotten done in his studio on a given day. So maybe he didn’t need art to feel like he’d accomplished something or done something worthwhile. Maybe I just needed to learn how to separate Justin and all things art.

I felt like that got easier with each time Justin came home from an event with a smile on his face -- one that was progressively getting closer to his sunshine smile with each passing day, it seemed. I loved it when he told me all about someone he’d met or helped or talked to, because it meant that Justin was putting himself out there again.

Then, I came home from work one day and Justin told me what the next event was that he would be assisting with -- an all-day art show.

I was apprehensive about it because it sounded to me like Justin was going to be putting himself right in the middle of a giant trigger, just as things were starting to look better on a more consistent basis. He’d likely be associating with many of the same people he had when he was actively showing his own art, and I wondered if he’d be comparing himself to them. If he’d end up sending himself down the same road all over again, feeling like a failure.

“I’ll be fine,” Justin said, and I could have sworn I saw him roll his eyes before he turned to face me fully, the fingers of his left hand still wrapped around the spoon he was stirring our dinner with. Then, he smiled at me. Peacefully, reassuringly. A look I hadn’t seen from him in far too long. But there still seemed to be something else underneath. “I’m okay. I promise.”

“But what if--”

“I can’t hide forever. I’m going to see people I know eventually, and those people are probably going to ask me about art. I have to get used to that.”
I could tell he was trying to be blasé, but his posture as he turned back around and stared down at the skillet looked anxious -- tense shoulders and a faraway look -- and totally different from the way he’d been just a few seconds before. I came closer and wrapped my arm around his waist. “You don’t have to do it now, though,” I said softly. “Maybe you should wait until--”

“Until what? Until everyone in the art world forgets about me?” His tone was acerbic, and I hadn’t heard that from Justin in a long time either, though this didn’t seem like a positive return. This seemed like it was masking something else. Justin was pushing the spoon around the skillet almost aggressively, and I wondered if he wanted to yell at me or if he wanted to cry, or both.

“People aren’t going to forget about you or your story,” I said gently, as I took the spoon from Justin and set it aside before taking both of his hands in my own and pulling him around to face me once again. “Your work still exists. It’s hanging in galleries and in people’s homes and their offices. Hell, people still ask who painted that gorgeous mural in our lobby, and I’m so fucking proud to tell them that it’s my husband’s creation. Even if you never paint another stroke, that isn’t going to go away.”

“I know,” Justin said, this time much quieter. He was looking me in the eye, but I could see the reluctance there. “I feel like I need to do this, though. I need to face it. And if I’m never going to paint or sculpt again…” He stopped and took a shaky breath. “I don’t know if that will be the case, but if it is, I need to make peace with that. Accept where I am and be okay with it.”

I knew he wasn’t wrong, but it was hard to continue to respect Justin’s autonomy and allow him to make this decision for himself when I was scared to death that he might be putting himself in a bad situation. But I couldn’t make this about me or what I thought. It had to be about what he thought.

“Are you sure that now is the time, though?” I asked, mostly because that was the only way I could think of to express my own hesitation -- my concern for his mental health -- without straight-up saying, ‘I think this is a bad idea.’

“I already said I would do it.”

“You could tell them something came up. I can plan us a ‘surprise’ vacation that just so happens to be next weekend.”

“It’ll be fine. Like I said, I can’t hide forever. Do I feel totally ready? No, not at all. But I’m not sure I ever will. John and I have talked about this. I’ve got a lot of things I need to figure out, and this could be the start of it. Just being there, without pressure. Being in the art world without being in it. I need to do this. I promise I’ll be okay.”

I let the topic drop after that, even though in the back of my mind, I still wondered if Justin’s promise was really just him reassuring me, or if he was also trying to convince himself. Either way, I knew that once Justin Taylor had made his mind up about something, there was no changing it, because Justin was nothing if not persistent -- the wedding band on my finger was a prime example of such.

When the day of the show came around, I had to keep myself busy, purely because otherwise I ran the risk of going down to the park to check on Justin, which I knew I couldn’t do. I had to trust him and let him have his space, which meant I also had to remind myself continually that if he’d wanted me to come, he would have asked me to. Still, I wondered what the outcome would be -- if he’d come home feeling down or upset, or if he would have accomplished his goal of figuring out where his life went from here, and whether or not art would be a part of it.

I tried to find things to do at home to distract myself, but that was hard -- mostly because I didn’t want to sit at home alone, since it reminded me too much of the many days I’d done that when Justin was stuck in the depths of his depression, spending almost all of his time at his studio but getting
nothing done. And this was a day when I especially did not need to be reminded of that.

So I ended up deciding to go to the gym and at least make an attempt at getting back into my regular routine. I’d had to skip my last several scheduled sessions with my personal trainer, partially because of what had happened with Justin, and partially because of my broken foot. I was still in the damn boot, but hopefully not for much longer, since I’d already been told that a good x-ray at my next appointment would mean I was free. I’d still have to be careful, of course, because the bone was weaker now and it would be easy to reinjure it, at least for a while, but I was ready to get back to wearing my designer shoes and not feeling the extra weight of the boot every time I had to reposition my right leg.

As usual, I drew a lot of attention at the gym -- and not the kind of attention I used to seek out back at Ript Gym in Pittsburgh. I was never quite sure if I actually got less stares when I worked out with my trainer, or if I just didn’t notice because I was so focused on what we were doing. But anytime I was by myself, it seemed like people’s eyes were drawn to me, like they were wondering what I was doing there, which was frustrating. Rob and I both shared that frustration, as did a lot of our friends who used wheelchairs as well -- the idea that it was somehow surprising that we were working out and taking care of ourselves. As always, Rob had a positive way to frame it -- he said we were helping break down stereotypes about wheelchair users -- but sometimes I struggled to look at it that way. Mostly, I found it distracting, and I really just wished people would mind their own business. That day, I felt like I got even more curious glances, probably because of that damn boot, but I used my frustration as motivation to push myself even more, to start getting back any strength I’d lost over the last several weeks.

After about an hour at the gym, I was tired and hungry, and it got even harder to resist the urge to just stop by the park to scope things out and see how Justin was doing. But it wasn’t exactly easy for me to blend into a crowd, so I knew that would be risky at best, if I didn’t want Justin to know I was there. And I didn’t, because I didn’t want him to think I didn’t trust him and his judgment. I did trust him, but after all we’d been through in the last few months, it was hard not to worry. Hard not to be there. Hard not to know if he needed me.

In the meantime, I needed food and distraction, so I rode the subway over to the office, stopping by the cafe on the corner for a salad before going upstairs to a peaceful, deserted Kinnetik. Truthfully, I liked being the only one at the office, because it was so quiet, and with no one there to bother me, I usually felt like I could get a lot of work done. But that day, my brain had other ideas, and no matter how many times I tried to force myself to focus on the campaign on the screen in front of me, my mind kept going back to wondering what was going on at Bryan Park and resisting the urge to call Justin and check up on him. I knew there would be no way I’d be able to get away with trying to make that phone call sound casual or coincidental; he’d know exactly why I’d called. So it was best not to call at all.

Eventually, I gave up and headed back toward home, but when I passed by Monetti’s shortly after exiting the subway, I decided a drink sounded pretty good. Lucky for me, the distraction-granting gods were on my side, and I ended up going into the restaurant just as the last customers of the late lunch rush were leaving, freeing up Nick to shoot the shit with me for a bit before he had to get back to doing whatever restaurant owners do in the back office.

We opened a new bottle of wine -- one he was sampling to decide whether or not to add to the menu -- and I even got to try a new dessert for the holiday menu that I was sure Justin would love.

"I’ve missed seeing you guys in here," Nick said, as he refilled my glass despite my protests that I could serve myself, especially since the wine was free.
"We've had a lot going on," I said, keeping my wording purposely vague. I still felt awkward about responding to people's concern about why Justin and I had been a little out of touch lately. Like I was lying to them somehow when I gave them a cagey answer. But it still wasn't my place to say anything more, and it never would be. I just hoped it would all pass soon, and I wouldn't have to worry about it anymore.

Nick nodded, easily accepting my response. "I get that. Not sure why fall always seems so crazy, but it does. Then come the holidays, and it's a madhouse in here until January, then it's dead for a month because everyone's on some diet that has them avoiding pasta, and I have to wait until they give up on that, usually just in time for Valentine's Day. Speaking of diets, I'm surprised as hell that you didn't even pretend to refuse that orange ginger cake."

“Let's just say I'm turning over a new leaf when it comes to things like that. Appreciating the good things in life and all.” I stopped short of adding one of Rob’s favorite sayings -- you only live once -- lest Nick think that Rob’s motivational quote disease was contagious. But what I had said was true -- after the events of the last few months, I wasn't taking anything for granted, and I was going to try my damndest to enjoy it all.

“I think that’s a good philosophy,” Nick said, as he turned up his wine glass and swallowed what little was left in the bottom. “We never know how much time we have, do we?”

“Nope.” I finished the last of my own glass of wine, using the action to fill the silence, since I didn’t want to elaborate on the details of my newfound perspective on life and what had brought it about. But even though I wished the circumstances that had led me there were different -- more positive, and less dire -- I was thankful for where I’d ended up.

“I guess I’m not telling you anything new there,” Nick chuckled, giving me pause for a moment before I realized he was looking at my chair.

I didn’t often think about my injury that way -- that I could have died that day, from shock if nothing else. That I was brought into a trauma center by helicopter, and I didn’t remember any of it. But even all of that hadn’t been enough to fully awaken me to what was important in life. It had taken a lot more than that, and I still hated that my own awakening had come at the cost of a lot of suffering on Justin’s part. But I knew there was no point dwelling on that -- I just had to remind myself again that the only way to go from here was forward.

Nick’s head chef had just brought us a plate of bruschetta with goat cheese and roasted red peppers -- another possible menu addition -- when my phone rang on the table, and Justin’s face flashed up on the screen.

For a split second, the worry I’d been feeling all day -- and had finally managed to sufficiently distract myself from -- came bubbling back to the surface. I tried my best to push it down, though, as I slid my finger across the screen and held the phone to my ear.

I could still hear the hesitance in my voice as I answered, not quite sure what to expect from my husband, but as soon as Justin spoke, any anxiety I’d been feeling instantly melted away.

“I just had the best day I've had in a long time.”
Chapter 16

I could hear the smile in Justin’s voice as he spoke. His excitement as he told me all about someone he’d met at the show who specialized in trauma therapy through art -- specifically, pottery, which Justin said he hadn’t tried since high school.

“It just wasn’t my thing then, you know?” Justin said, as he now sat across from me at Monetti’s, twirling his fork in a mound of fettuccine alfredo, telling me all about his day. “But he really sold me on it today… How you can just put whatever you're feeling into the clay… and then let the kiln burn away all the negativity and turn it into something beautiful. How sometimes all you can do is let the clay slide between your fingers and then call it a day, but that’s okay because you’re doing what you need to do. You’re listening to your intuition. There’s no pressure. You just do what you can.”

I mostly just sat and nodded, throwing in a word or two here and there as Justin talked excitedly -- animatedly -- about his plans to meet up with this guy at a studio somewhere in Brooklyn so he could try it out for himself. To see if this was the outlet he’d been looking for.

I couldn't stop the smile that spread across my face, purely from listening to Justin talk, because I hadn’t heard him sound like that in so long -- genuinely excited to try something new. The pieces were finally coming together; Justin was becoming more whole. He wasn’t quite there yet, and we still had a long road ahead of us, but things seemed to be getting better all the time, and the sense of relief that brought me was beyond measure.

Maybe the “new” Justin would include art after all, just in a different way.

Justin tried it out for the first time two days later and came home with a smile on his face, pleased with what he’d done. Of course, it wouldn't always be that way, and there were plenty of down days too, but that was part of it -- the reason he was doing it was to give him an outlet for the negative emotions that had dragged him down for so long. So sometimes shit was going to come up. The difference was that it didn’t stick.

I still remember the first time he brought home a finished project -- a bowl that was far from perfect in shape, painted in a beautiful blue that reminded me of Justin’s eyes. I didn’t ask about the meaning behind it, and he didn’t tell me, but every time I look at it, sitting on our side table in the living room, it reminds me of our life together -- that even though it’s not always perfect, it’s always beautiful in its own way.

Pottery seemed to be the connection Justin had been looking for; the link that had been missing thus far in his recovery. He kept writing in the journal, but less often, and he was spending more time out of the apartment, utilizing the studio space that his new friend had invited him to share any time he wanted or needed to. But this time, Justin wasn’t coming home from the studio frustrated and distant. This time, he seemed to be getting what he needed out of his creative outlet.

John was pleased with Justin’s progress too, and the therapy sessions soon dropped from three times a week to two, which I took as confirmation that things were, indeed, getting better. Making our way back toward “normal,” whatever that was, and whatever it would be.

One Friday afternoon, I came home from my last orthopedist appointment -- finally free of that damn boot -- expecting to find Justin in the kitchen if he'd decided to cook, or in the living room if he wanted to go out. Only he wasn’t in either of those places. It took me a minute or two of searching before I found him out on our balcony, sitting cross-legged on the tile, his face softly illuminated by a tiny flame he’d lit at the corner of the small piece of paper in his hand before dropping it into a
ceramic bowl, which I recognized as his second pottery project.

I watched him for a moment, taking in the sight of his pale skin in the warm firelight as the flame slowly consumed the paper. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then opened his mouth and let the breath go. Once that paper was gone, he picked up another from alongside him, scribbled a few words on it, then studied it for a few seconds before flicking the lighter with his left hand and igniting the corner of the new piece of paper, again dropping it into the bowl to watch it burn.

I moved closer and reached for the door handle, and that’s when he saw me, turning to look at me as I slid the door open and pushed myself out onto the balcony, in the space between his bowl and the railing.

I wanted to ask him if he was turning into a pyromaniac, but the scene in front of me seemed far too serious -- too sacred -- to make a joke. He smiled at me -- a soft, serene smile. A peaceful smile that made me feel like I was in a sacred space, even amid the evening hustle and bustle of the city twenty floors below. Then, as the flame burned itself out, he closed his eyes again, inhaling and exhaling with a soft sigh.

“I’m letting things go,” he said, blinking his eyes open and answering the question I wasn’t sure how to ask. “Writing them down and burning them… releasing them into the wind.” He paused and grabbed another piece of paper, then picked up the pen and wrote the words “not good enough” on it, showing it to me before he flicked the lighter and let the words burn along with the paper, a thin tendril of smoke rising up into the night as the flame flickered and glowed until it extinguished itself, prompting Justin to repeat the breathing exercise. “Want to try?” he asked, reaching his right hand out in my direction, holding a piece of paper and a pen.

Hesitantly, I took it from him, not quite sure what I should write. I knew I probably had no shortage of things I needed to let go of, but picking out just one -- and putting it into words -- felt harder than it should have been. Finally, I settled on one word, four letters, beginning with “F.” I wrote the word slowly and carefully, in capital letters large enough to take up the entire sheet.

Fear.

Justin looked at the paper, then up at me, studying my eyes as if he was searching for something. In that moment, I felt the connection between us -- that this was something we both needed to let go of, in different ways. To release into the wind. To turn it into dust and not allow it to stand in our way or come between us ever again.

He started to hand me the lighter, but I stopped him, instead leaning forward to wrap my hand around his as we ignited the flame together, touching its warmth and heat to the corner of the paper before I dropped it into the bowl and we both watched it crumple and writhe, the edges turning brown and disappearing into nothing as the flame consumed it, turning it to ash and smoke. Then, we closed our eyes and took a breath together. Inhaling. Exhaling. Letting it go.

I lost track of how long we sat out there, writing words and short phrases on small slips of paper and just watching them burn, letting go of all the shit that went along with them. But it was long enough that eventually we were both sitting on the tile, leaning against the glass that lined the railing, holding each other close as we watched each piece of paper fade into nothing, looking out toward the Hudson River and the city lights in the evening darkness, enjoying each other’s company. When the chill of the fall evening got to be too much, we moved inside, ordered takeout, and opened a bottle of wine, electing to just spend the evening together. No need to go out; we had all we needed right there.

A couple of weeks into Justin’s journey with pottery-as-therapy, I felt like we were finally finding a
routine -- a new normal, perhaps. And it felt like Justin was easing his way back into life. It felt good to leave for work and know that Justin had somewhere to go too, and something to focus his energy on. Sometimes he even left before I did, and that was exactly what had happened on a Wednesday morning in early November, when I found myself sitting in our living room with my coffee, catching up on the day’s news on my tablet, thinking about the conversation Justin and I had at dinner the night before.

I’d arrived home before he did, so I already had dinner started -- a simple chicken-and-vegetable stir fry, because I was still no chef, but I’d at least risen above ordering takeout every single night. When I heard the door open and close and Justin’s footsteps coming into the kitchen, I turned to greet him while at the same time evaluating his mood, as I did every single time he came home from seeing John. Seeing if that night would be a pensive and reflective one, or one when Justin needed some silent support, or one when he felt like he’d made a breakthrough and we got to enjoy the resulting peace of that.

That night, he had the slightest hint of a smile on his face, and his energy felt positive -- clearly, good things had been discussed. He didn’t tell me what they were, though, and I didn’t ask. That was something I’d become well-practiced at in the preceding weeks -- being patient and waiting for Justin to tell me what he wanted me to know, and being okay with the fact that sometimes I didn’t need to know everything.

He’d walked up to me and bent down to give me a hug and a kiss before settling into one of the chairs at the bar, silently watching me cook. I kept looking over my shoulder, wondering if he was going to say anything, still trying to read his face. I’d just turned back toward the skillet for the half-dozenth time when I heard Justin giggle, and I turned around again to see him smiling even more, his left hand partially covering his mouth, his eyes bright and smiling.

“What’s so funny?” I asked, wondering what had prompted that laugh I’d missed for so long, but at the same time realizing that it didn’t really matter; all that mattered was that another piece of Justin was falling more solidly into place.

“Nothing.” Justin’s hand was still covering his mouth, but I could see the corner of it quirking upward into a grin.

“What, is the sight of seeing me cooking really that shocking? Or are my cooking skills laughable?” I turned back to reevaluate the doneness of our dinner, electing to turn the heat off so it could cool for a minute or two before I plated it up.

“No, it’s not that.” Justin seemed to be trying to force his facial features into a more neutral expression, lest I think he was trying to insult my cooking, though I could still see the hint of an amused smile on his lips.

“What is it, then? You can tell me.” I rolled closer to him and took one of his hands in mine, studying his eyes and just taking in the joy and happiness I could see in them -- a sight I was always going to appreciate from now on.

“Just something John said today. We were talking about how much it’s helping me to be able to throw all the shit my brain conjures up into a bowl or a cup or a vase… how sometimes it’s like I can feel the negative thoughts leaving me through my hands, going into the clay. And how good it feels to just let things go. Being able to feel things without worrying about what anybody thinks about it. Having a purpose again.” He stopped and took a breath, giving me a moment to let all of that sink in, and perhaps doing the same for himself. “Anyway, he said that getting a pet can help too, with some of those things.” Justin paused again, but this time it was short, as he quickly added, “But don’t worry, I told him you’d never go for that. I just thought it was funny. I mean, Molly and I had a cat
growing up, and sometimes I kind of miss having an animal around, but really…” He paused again, laughing this time. “You’d freak the fuck out the first time you found a cat hair on your clothes.”

He’d changed the subject then, and we ate our dinner while talking about our plans for the rest of the week, but my mind kept going back to what he’d said. How quickly he’d written off John’s suggestion because he thought I’d never go for it, and that was what I was thinking about as I drank my coffee, tablet in hand, staring absently out the floor-to-ceiling windows in our living room.

Justin wasn’t wrong that animals weren’t my thing; I was a neat freak, and I’d always thought of pets as messy prospects. And there was no way in hell Jack and Joanie ever would have let Claire and me have one, even as much as Claire begged and whined, so it just wasn’t something I’d ever had in my life, and as a result wasn’t something I thought about.

But by that point, I’d be damned if I was going to do anything to stand in the way of Justin’s recovery. As far as I was concerned, I’d already done enough damage when we were in the thick of things, so I sure as hell wasn’t going to be the reason something didn’t happen, especially if that something might help Justin. And if that something was a cat, well…

By the time I got to work, I’d made up my mind that I was going to make it happen; I just needed to figure out how. I sat alone in my office, again enjoying the quiet before everyone else arrived, checking my email and letting my mind continue thinking about ways to get Justin a cat. I’d just decided that a good place to start might be asking Cynthia where she got Louis (and made myself a note so I wouldn’t forget once the office got busy and my focus became the hustle and bustle of work) when I heard a knock and looked up to see Rob sitting in the open doorway.

Even though the setup was exactly the same, the scene was so different from what it had been several weeks before -- this time, Rob had a smile on his face, and he didn’t close the door behind him, and he didn’t gravely tell me that we needed to talk. This wasn’t the first time he’d been in my office in the morning since then, but each time it happened, I always found myself taken back for a moment to the day when Rob had finally forced me to wake the fuck up, and very well might have saved Justin’s life, and mine along with it, in a way, because I honestly don’t know how I would have gone on without Justin.

As I looked at my friend, I had no idea how I’d ever repay Rob for what he’d given me -- and I still don’t, even though he’s told me at least a dozen times now not to worry about it. But I did know I was grateful we were in each other’s lives, and that everything had happened exactly as it should have to bring us together more than a decade before, and to ultimately lead us to him working for me. And just like in so many other areas of my life, the circumstances that had led us to where we ended up weren’t always positive, and some of them were terrible, yet they’d each played their own important role. I suppose that’s just life, though. Taking the good with the bad, playing the hand you’re dealt, and letting the cards fall wherever they may. Because even as much as I might have tried in my life, I couldn’t control everything. Sometimes all I could do was trust that it would all work out in its own way. That was hard, but I had to do it, and it was something Rob reminded me of often.

“I know you’re busy, and I won’t stay long, but I have a proposition for you,” Rob said, as he pushed himself closer to my desk.

I raised an eyebrow, feeling the beginnings of a smirk pulling at the corner of my lips, but before I could make my joke, Rob spoke again.

“Not that kind of proposition,” he chuckled.

“Too bad. Things could get interesting. Just takes a little creativity.”
“Somehow I think Adam might get a little upset, and probably Justin too.” Rob grinned and shook his head. “Anyhow, Adam and I were talking last night, and he mentioned that he’d spoken with Justin on the phone a couple of days ago. Justin brought up feeling like he wanted to try going back to his studio, but he didn’t want to see the things he’d been working on before, and the thought of trying to clear everything out was too overwhelming. That he doesn’t feel like he can handle that right now, so he thinks it’s best to just stay away.”

Rob paused, which gave me a moment to think about what a strange mix of emotions his words had just made me feel. I was glad -- and a little surprised -- to hear that Justin wanted to go back to his studio, but at the same time, I hated to hear that he was feeling overwhelmed about anything, and that he hadn’t told me. But at least he’d told someone -- he hadn’t just kept it bottled up inside, like he’d done with far too many things in the preceding months. I had to look at that as progress, too. Even if that someone wasn’t me.

“So Adam and I were thinking we’d like to clear it out for him, as a gift, with your blessing of course. And hopefully your key,” Rob continued. “So when he is ready, it’s ready for him.”

I agreed quickly -- not only to let them, but to help them -- and Rob and I had soon worked out all the details, agreeing to meet up on Saturday, while Justin would be busy at his volunteer gig, to get Justin’s studio back into working, trigger-free condition.

As we wrapped up our conversation, the scent of cinnamon and sugar that appeared to be emanating from the box in Rob’s lap seemed like it was growing stronger. “What do you have in that box that smells so good?” I asked, leaning forward to peer at it a little more closely.

“Oh, bagels from that place around the corner from our apartment. I brought them in for my crew today.”

“ Aren’t you going to share?” I teased, raising an eyebrow at my longtime friend.

“I guess I figured you wouldn’t be interested… I know they aren’t your thing. But sure; I’ve got plenty.” He opened the box and set it on my desk, presumably for me to pick one. “I have to ask though… why the change of heart? You’ve never even tried one before, and I seem to remember more than one disparaging comment about carb consumption being uttered in my presence. Not that I’m judging. I’m just curious.”

“A wise man once told me, you only live once.”

Rob looked up at me and smiled, his eyes sparkling in the morning sunlight that was coming through my office windows. “A wise man, huh?”

“Yeah. I think maybe he knows his shit. And I really owe him one.”

Rob leaned forward and laid his hand over mine. “Let’s just say we’re even.”
I met Rob and Adam at the studio on Saturday morning, not long after Justin left for one of his favorite parts of his volunteer gig -- storytime in the park. He always came home from that in a great mood, because he loved being with the kids, and sometimes he got to be the one to read the book. He said their smiles could help pull him anyone of a bad mood, but I had my doubts about that -- I was pretty sure that a prerequisite to that might have been also liking being around random people’s children. I loved Gus as a kid most of the time (probably due to the limited time I had him), and I love Esme and Sophia in small doses, but there’s definitely a limit to how much I can handle when it comes to interacting with kids. Justin clearly didn’t have that struggle, and I was glad he’d found something to do that he enjoyed, that didn’t remind him too much of his on-hold art career.

The whole way over to the studio, I wondered when Justin might feel ready to go back. If it would be soon, or if it might still be many months yet. I’d already decided that indications were that it probably wouldn’t be “never,” since he was enjoying the pottery thing so much. But I knew there still had to be a lot of baggage associated with going back to painting and sculpting that simply wasn’t there with pottery.

When I arrived, Rob and Adam were already there, sitting in the building’s otherwise-unoccupied lobby, ready to get to work. I hadn’t been in Justin’s studio in months -- not since the day I brought him lunch -- so I wondered what we’d find when we got upstairs, and I couldn’t deny that I was more than a little apprehensive as I stuck my key in the lock, turned it, and pushed the door open.

The blinds on the floor-to-ceiling windows were all closed, leaving the room with a dim, somewhat depressing cast. The sofa we’d bought so he could rest if he needed to (and honestly, so we could fuck, though we hadn’t done it there in a long time) had clearly been set up for sleeping, with a pillow and a blanket that he’d apparently bought for the studio, because I’d never seen them. There was a small pile of wadded-up tissues on the floor below the pillow, suddenly reminding me of what Justin said he’d been doing on the last day he’d been there -- crying as he tried to figure out how to tell me he’d dropped out of the show. In my mind’s eye, I felt like I could see him there, curled up, with his face buried in the pillow, and it made my heart ache. It made me wish I could turn back time and take the afternoon off and drop in and visit Justin in the exact moment when he’d needed me most. To comfort him and tell him I understood. To tell him it was okay. That I was there and I always would be. To just be there for him, in hopes I could have somehow prevented what happened in the twenty-four hours that followed.

As if he could read my thoughts, Rob chose that moment to come up beside me and put his arm around my shoulders.

“Don’t go there,” he said. His voice was soft, and he was running his fingers back and forth over my bicep.

“How’d you know?” I asked, as I turned my head just slightly to face him, blinking to force back the dampness I could feel building in my eyes.

“I know you.” He smiled and gave my shoulders a squeeze, then let go and backed up, moving toward one of the workbenches, gesturing with his head for me to follow him.

Both of Justin’s large workbenches were completely covered in art supplies, discarded canvases and drawings, lumps of clay, and half-completed sculptures. There were partially-completed paintings on every easel and lining the empty walls, but nothing appeared to be finished. Some of them looked like they’d been painted over a time or two. I felt like I was looking at ghosts -- ghosts of how Justin
had felt when he’d been in the depths of his depression. Everything he’d been working on was
dominated by dark colors, clearly reflective of his mood at the time, just as his art always had been.
Looking at it all was hard for me, even, so I couldn’t imagine what it would have been like for him.

Beside me, Rob and Adam looked around, evaluating the room for a few moments, before Rob
cleared his throat -- a clear indication that he, too, was having a hard time processing the scene and
imagining the headspace Justin must have been in -- and said, “Well, I guess here’s as good a place
to start as any.”

Three hours later, all of Justin’s previous work had been stored in a closet that I knew he never used,
locked safely away where it would be ready when -- if -- he wanted to work on any of it again. The
blinds were open again, bathing the room in a bright, renewing sunlight. Justin’s workbenches were
all clean, and we’d trashed any supplies that hadn’t been properly stored, and organized everything
else. I knew perfectly well that nothing would stay that organized once Justin came back, though,
because Rob and I were the neat freaks in our foursome, and we were the ones that had taken care of
that part, while Adam did most of the heavy lifting.

We were just about finished -- tidying up the last of the paintbrushes and putting them in the drawer
they belonged in -- when my phone rang. I pulled it out of my pocket and saw that it was Justin,
which still always made my heart skip a beat, because in the back of my mind, I wondered if
something was wrong. I also wondered if that feeling was ever going to go away -- if my
subconscious would ever learn to trust that Justin might be calling with good news instead.

“Hey,” I said into the phone, as I signaled to Rob and Adam to be quiet, so as not to give away our
location or what we were doing. “What’s up?”

“Just wondering where you were… I got home a little early. Did you go over to see Nick again?”

“No, I, uh…” I struggled for a second or two to come up with a believable lie, ultimately deciding to
go with a half-truth instead. “Rob and Adam needed me to help them with something.”

“Oh, okay. I could come and help too. Are you at their place? What are you guys working on?”

“We’re almost done,” I said quickly, finally feeling my talent for creating smooth lies starting to kick
in. “I should be home in about a half hour. Then I’m all yours.” I purposely made my voice sound a
little more sultry for those last few words, in hopes that they might get Justin’s wheels turning and
distract him from asking any further questions. (And the possibility of spending a little time with one
of us inside the other wasn’t bad either.)

Justin laughed -- the breathy chuckle that told me my message had been received. “I’ll be waiting,”
he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice. That coquettish, slightly shy smile he always had
whenever I got him too aroused in public, and he was having a hard time waiting until we got home.
Only he was home; I was the one who wasn’t.

After I hung up the phone, Rob, Adam, and I quickly finished what we’d been working on before
turning off the lights, locking up the studio, and going our separate ways.

I took the subway back to our apartment, which should have only taken me about twenty minutes,
tops, but ended up taking much longer because the elevator at the station closest to our apartment
was out, which meant I had to get back on the next train and go out of my way until I got to a place
where I could turn around and try again from the other direction, where thankfully, that elevator was
working.

Should have taken a car, I thought to myself, as I finally pushed through the front door into the lobby
of our building, making my way to the elevator. One thing I had gotten out of my unusually long ride was a lot of time to think about how we pretty much had the best damn friends in the entire world, and to talk myself out of telling Justin right then that we’d cleaned up his studio for him. The cleaned-up studio wasn’t the only surprise I had for Justin, and I didn’t want to ruin any part of it.

But when I got upstairs and went into our apartment, keeping the secret got much harder, because the sight that was in front of me when I opened our door was one that I had to blink a few times before I believed it was real life and not a hallucination. Justin was sitting on the sofa, his feet pulled up onto the cushions, sketchpad balanced on his lap, drawing. With his right hand, no less, using the tool Rob had given him right after his accident, that hooked over his index finger and held the pencil in the crook between the finger and his thumb, so Justin wouldn’t have to grip it as tightly. I hadn’t seen him use it in a couple of years -- not since he’d retrained his left hand to be his dominant hand -- and I wondered why he was using it then, but now that I look back, I wonder if it was yet another way to get some separation between past and present. Between what he had been doing before, and what he was doing now.

“Hi,” Justin said, a shy smile on his face as he looked down at his work. “I was just doodling.”

I took off my jacket and crossed the room, transferring to the sofa so I could sit next to Justin, because sitting in front of him -- separated -- was never the same as being able to touch him. I halfway expected Justin to turn his drawing away from me, not wanting me to see what he was working on, but he didn’t. He was still looking down at it, absently rubbing his right hand with his left as he studied it.

It was a rough sketch, still missing a lot of fine detail, but it was easy to tell what it was -- an older couple, two men, holding hands and leaning on one another as they sat on a bench, gazing at two children sitting on the ground in front of them.

Gently, I took Justin’s hand in my own, sliding the pencil grip off of his finger before taking over the massage -- being mindful not to put too much pressure on the muscles that I knew got sore and cramped when he overworked it. He hadn’t needed this from me in a long time, but I still enjoyed doing it. It felt good to do something that helped Justin. It always had, even in the times when I never would have admitted it.

“I forgot how tired my right hand gets now when I try to draw with it,” he said, his voice quiet and a little detached, like he was lost somewhere in his thoughts.

“Who were you drawing?” I asked, partly because I was curious, and partly because I wanted to pull Justin back to the present, in case the road his thoughts were about to lead him down wasn’t a good one.

“Oh, just a couple I saw at the park today. They were there with their grandchildren, and you could just see how in love they still were with each other, and how much they loved those kids. I kept thinking about them the whole way home… What they looked like. The love that was in their eyes when they looked at each other. So I decided to draw them.”

That was something the “old” Justin had done often -- sitting down to sketch something, mostly to get it out of his head. Putting it down on paper so he wouldn’t forget it. But it was something I hadn’t seen him do in months. Longer than I realized, once I thought about it, just like so many other things in our lives that had once been a constant and somehow ceased to be once depression took hold.

I was still rubbing Justin’s hand, feeling the tense muscles relax slowly beneath my fingers, when I heard his voice again, soft and wistful.
“I want that to be us someday.”

“It will be.”

The words came out of me before I could stop them. Before I had a chance to even think about what they meant or whether or not I had it in my power to make them true. Whether or not I could keep that promise. If anything in my forty-eight years on earth had shown me that life was unpredictable -- that I wasn’t in control, but I was merely along for the ride, and I had to allow the universe to take me wherever it would -- the last few months in our lives had.

Justin went still for a moment, then looked up at me, his eyes shining with tears.

“I know that we don’t know that,” I said, still holding his hand in mine, my voice much huskier than I would have liked. “We can’t know. But I want it to be us.”

He blinked, and a single tear slid down his cheek as his lips turned up into a smile. His sketchpad fell to the floor as he wrapped his arms around me and kissed me -- hard. Reminding me of a night years ago, when I’d finally admitted what I felt for Justin, standing in the middle of the street as smoke poured from the building that had once been my playground. This was different, though. This time, my words weren’t motivated by fear, but by desire.

Justin kissed me again, tears still glistening in his eyes, then laid his head on my shoulder. His arms around me, and my arms around him.

As we sat there together, holding each other, the realization of what I’d just said -- my own prayer, in a way, for what I wanted to have happen in my life -- started to sink in. How differently I felt now, compared to the early months and years of our relationship, long before I would even admit that was what it was. How on my thirtieth birthday, when Lindsay had gone on and on about how she wanted to grow old with Melanie, get wrinkles and gray hair, and become a grandmother, insinuating that I might someday want the same sort of things, I’d shrugged off her words with a joke.

Some past version of myself would have made a sarcastic comment this time, too. Changed the subject. Anything to avoid talking about the idea of getting older, much less sharing those years with another person. But this version of myself wanted to give Justin what he wanted, because I loved him. And I really did want the same things. Maybe not the wrinkles and gray hair, but spending as many years as possible with Justin by my side… that, I wanted. Without a doubt.

I wasn’t the same person anymore -- the King of Liberty Avenue, whose entire sense of self-worth was based on looks and how many guys he could fuck in the back room on a given night. I’d been forced to let go of that person a long time ago, by life and a circumstance known as spinal cord injury.

Through it all, though, I never lost Justin. He still loved me, even though I’d spent six months lying to him by omission -- not telling him what had happened to me. He loved me as I struggled to accept it all. As I tried to figure out who I really was underneath all of the bravado and the sex-god reputation that I could no longer physically maintain. As I worked toward becoming the person I now realize I’d had the makings of all along. Justin was always there, even when I felt lost. Because he loved me. Unconditionally.

I still didn’t always feel like I deserved it, but I was trying to be better about that. Trying to be more accepting, more open. Trying to be the partner Justin deserved to have. Supporting him in the same way he’d supported me -- the way we’d promised to support each other as we stood together in Boston twelve years before, on a snowy December day.
The way I wanted to for the rest of our lives.

The way that I promised myself I would, from that point forward.
For the rest of the afternoon and evening, keeping what Rob, Adam, and I had done at Justin’s studio a secret felt like torture. Seeing Justin drawing again was like watching a huge piece of him fall back into place, filling in the gaping hole that the turmoil and doubt and uncertainty of the last few months had left behind. And honestly, I had to keep reminding myself not to take it too far -- to remember that Justin was still recovering, that there were still (and would still be) plenty of bad days, and I couldn’t expect him to drop right back into his old life just because he’d seen something he wanted to sketch.

Justin, of course, wasn’t making it easy to remember that, because he wanted to go out dancing that night too -- yet another thing we hadn’t done in a long time. But we did it, throwing it back to the old days of the two of us being all over each other on the dance floor of a gay club, complete with flashing lights and the thumpa thumpa and me having a little too much to drink, not giving a shit what anyone around us thought of what we were doing. We had fun, though, and that was all that mattered -- not to mention the fact that watching Justin smile and lose himself in the music, his hands draped over my shoulders as we moved together, was like a balm for my soul. God, I loved that smile. I always had, even before I would admit it. We fell asleep in each other’s arms that night, sleepy, sated, and happy, after I’d finally made good on my promise to Justin from earlier that afternoon.

The next morning, I woke up with a slight headache -- likely the result of the several shots of whiskey I’d had at the club, mixed with the fact that I wasn’t 21 anymore -- but my excitement over what was about to happen that day made it easy to ignore any discomfort I felt. I had a big day planned for Justin; I just had to hope it would go off without a hitch and that his reaction would be as positive as I expected it to be.

Not only had Rob, Adam, and I cleaned out the studio, but I’d also spent a couple hours of my Thursday afternoon meeting with someone from the cat rescue Cynthia had gotten Louis from, trying to find the right cat for Justin. We thought we’d found the perfect match -- a white Persian cat, which sounded high-class, and thus appealed to me immediately based on that alone. The cat was currently living in a foster home and had shown herself to be very loving, calm, and affectionate, which sounded like exactly what Justin needed. I’d set up a meet and greet at Justin’s studio, with the intent of combining that particular surprise with the fact that Justin’s studio was cleaned up and ready for him to go back whenever he was ready.

Now, I just had to get him there.

I knew Justin was going to be nervous about going back to the studio, based solely on what he’d told Adam about why he hadn’t been yet, so I figured it was probably best to ply him with food first, and a brunch place Rob had pointed out as we left the studio turned out to be the perfect ruse. Rob said their brioche french toast was killer, and french toast was Justin’s favorite breakfast in the history of ever, so it seemed like a surefire way to get Justin to SoHo.

Justin padded sleepily into the living room after I’d already been up for an hour, gotten dressed, and finished my first cup of coffee. At first glance, I wondered if we’d overdone it the night before, but when he sat down on the couch next to me, kissed me, then put his head on my shoulder with a contented sigh, it confirmed for me that he’d had as great a night as I had.

“Sleep well?” I asked, even though I already knew the answer, because Justin had been in the exact same position when I woke up as he had been when I’d finally fallen asleep, and if he had a headache or a nightmare, it always woke me up.
Justin nodded. “It feels weird to not be a little hung over after spending a night at the club.”

I snorted. “Speak for yourself. I think I just figured out how much Jim Beam is too much for me now.” I stopped short of saying I was getting old, but I thought it.

“Should I make you more coffee?” He lifted his head and kissed me again, then looked at me expectantly.

“Nah, I’ll be alright. I thought we’d go out for brunch this morning, if you’re feeling up to it.” I was pretty sure he was thinking about his own coffee addiction.

“I thought we’d go out for brunch this morning, if you’re feeling up to it.” I was pretty sure he was thinking about his own coffee addiction.

“Sounds good.” He laid his head back down on my shoulder and sighed again. “Anyplace in particular?”

“This place in SoHo Rob told me about. He was practically drooling when he told me about their french toast, and I heard the blueberry ricotta pancakes are to die for.”

“So that means you’ll order eggs and dry toast and then steal half of whatever I get?” I thought I could see Justin grinning out of the corner of my eye.

“Actually, I was thinking I’d order the pancakes.”

Justin lifted his head again, this time to look at me as if I’d suddenly sprouted a third eye. Then he started laughing. “So Rob is the one who can get you to eat carbs without a fight, huh? I’ll have to ask him what his secret is.”

“There’s no secret. What’s that Zen Ben is always saying? ‘Savor each moment?’ Thought I’d give it a try.” I thought I could see Justin grinning out of the corner of my eye.

An hour later, we were brunching in SoHo. We’d held hands on the subway on our way over and for most of the walk between the station and the restaurant. I’d realized just how much I loved doing that, and I was thankful that we lived in a place where most people wouldn’t give us a second look for doing it -- not that I gave a fuck if they did. It made Justin nervous sometimes though -- and who could blame him -- so I tried not to do it if we were in a less-than-gay-friendly place. But in the city, we usually didn’t have to hesitate, which was a good thing since I was pretty sure I was going to be holding Justin’s hand a lot more often.

I was nervous about pulling off the rest of my plan, mostly because I had no idea how Justin was going to react when I suggested going to the studio. I did know it was probably going to involve some anxiety, though, so I waited as late as I possibly could before broaching anything remotely related to art -- putting it off until we’d finished our meal and I was working on my triple-shot nonfat latte.

“How are things going with that fruit bowl you were making for your mom?”

That question seemed innocuous enough, and it worked -- Justin answered me by telling me he’d finished painting it on Friday and it was supposed to be fired in the kiln over the weekend. I kept talking about his pottery for a little bit longer, purely in the interest of trying to make a smoother
segue, before I took a deep breath and dropped what felt like a bomb, at least in my mind.

“Maybe we could stop by the studio to see what might need to be done to make it so you could work on your pottery projects there. So you won’t have to go all the way to Brooklyn.”

I held my breath as I waited what felt like forever for his reaction, trying to read his face and suddenly having an appreciation for how much Justin had probably struggled over the years to read my well-practiced poker face. Then I saw him start chewing his lower lip as he looked down at his empty plate, slowly rotating his glass through the ring of water left behind by the condensation. I knew he’d picked that behavior up from me, and I knew exactly why I did it -- usually because I was feeling unsure about something and really didn’t want to engage with whatever had been said. And that told me a lot about why he was doing it.

It took Justin several seconds to speak, and when he did, he still didn’t look up.

“I don’t know,” he said softly, continuing to rotate the glass. “I mean, it’d be great to be able to work on things there, but…” He didn’t finish the sentence, letting his voice trail off instead, the unsaid portion something I already knew, that he wasn’t aware I knew.

“We don’t have to stay long,” I said, hoping I would be able to stave off at least some of Justin’s apprehension. “But if we’re going to be adding a bunch of new stuff, that’ll take time, and I just want to make sure it’s ready when you are.”

Justin was quiet again, letting go of the glass and moving his left hand up to scratch behind his ear, still looking down. He opened his mouth and took a breath like he was going to speak, then closed it again without saying anything. I wondered what he wanted to say -- if he was trying to figure out how to tell me what he’d told Adam. If he felt embarrassed or ashamed, and that was why he hadn’t told me in the first place. I’d meant what I said when I told him I wanted him to always feel like he could tell me anything, and I hated that he’d apparently felt he couldn’t tell me he was feeling overwhelmed. I was a little hurt too, although I was trying not to be, because this wasn’t about me and I knew that.

“I’ll be with you,” I said, as I reached across the table and laid my left hand over his right, which was resting on the table, muscles tense and fingers curled just slightly. “Everything will be fine.” I knew there was no way I could promise that, but I wanted it to be true. So I said it anyway.

I didn’t want to tell Justin what Adam had told me -- not yet. Not in the restaurant. Mostly because I wasn’t sure how he would react, and I didn’t want to put him in a potentially emotional position in a public place, or embarrass him, or do anything to cause any more anxiety than I was already causing.

He continued looking down at the table for a few more seconds, then I saw him close his eyes and take a deep breath, shaking his head a little as he exhaled. Finally he looked up at me, the uncertainty in his eyes belying the composed confidence he tried to display in his facial expression as he nodded his head and said, “Okay.”

I paid our bill and tried not to think too much about the obvious restlessness Justin was exhibiting, even as he tried to act calm, cool, and collected. He held my hand more tightly than usual as we made our way down the sidewalk -- two blocks down and one block over -- to his studio. I also tried not to think about how much anxiety Justin was probably really feeling, since it was also obvious that he was making a concerted effort to hide it, but a lot was still coming through loud and clear. I wondered what he was thinking about -- if his brain was reminding him about how dark things had been the last time he’d locked his studio door and left behind the artwork that had left him feeling empty and unfulfilled. I figured it probably was, so I tightened my fingers around his, hoping the simple action would help Justin stay grounded and present, and not get too caught up in his head.
When we entered the lobby, I felt like I could see Justin’s internal fight taking place as he struggled between wanting to run away and wanting to go upstairs and face his fears once and for all. I hated that I was making Justin feel anxious at all, because it made me feel like I was making things worse after I’d vowed to never do that again. But I hoped that once Justin saw the studio, he’d feel better, and all of his apprehension would melt away, just like had happened at Rob and Adam’s dinner party.

The ride up in the elevator was a hell of a lot like the dinner party, but that was where the similarities ended.

I unlocked the door, feeling just as edgy as I had the day before when Rob, Adam, and I had gone, although for an entirely different reason. This time, I was excited and nervous, wondering how Justin would react, rather than dreading whatever I was about to see behind the door. Justin, however, did seem to be dreading what he was about to see. His nervous energy was palpable, leading me to grab his hand and squeeze it -- just as a reminder that I was there and he wasn’t alone.

When I pushed the door open, Justin closed his eyes briefly, as if he was trying to delay laying eyes on whatever was inside for as long as he possibly could, then took a deep breath as he blinked them open. I saw him look around, and I saw his facial expression flit through a mixture of emotions -- surprise, confusion, and overwhelm -- before he stumbled over to the couch and sank down onto it, burying his face in his hands.

Immediately, the sense of self-doubt I’d always felt when it came to relationships crept in, and I wondered if I’d fucked up. Should I have waited until Justin happened to go to the studio on his own, and not brought him down there to show it to him? Or should I have not agreed to let Rob and Adam do this at all? Should I have just minded my own goddamn business?

Already kicking myself, wishing I could turn back the clock and do this differently even though I wasn’t sure how I should have done it, I slowly pushed myself toward Justin and slid my body over to the couch, so I could sit next to him. I hesitantly placed my hand on his back, hoping I wasn’t going to feel the telltale shudder of a quiet sob, because I would really be kicking myself if I’d made him cry. But he seemed to be breathing normally, albeit deeply, like he was trying to keep himself calm.

We sat there together in silence for at least a minute or two, Justin breathing and trying to collect himself while I kept my hand on his back for reassurance, to let him know I was there, and I wasn’t going anywhere.

“Talk to me,” I said, keeping my voice low. “If you hate it… If you’re mad at me… It’s okay, you can tell me.”

Justin shook his head and lowered his hands from his face, leaving his elbows still resting on his knees, and his gaze fixed downward. “I don’t hate it,” he said softly. “And I’m not mad. I just need a minute.”

I let silence take over for several seconds, waiting for Justin to continue. Fighting my impulse to fill that silence and try to alleviate whatever Justin was feeling with words. Words that probably wouldn’t have been effective anyhow. But sometimes I couldn’t help myself. I still can’t.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Justin lifted his head and turned to look at me, asking, “How? How did you know?” His brow was furrowed in confusion, but there weren’t tears in his eyes, so I took that as a good sign.

“Rob and Adam told me. Well, Rob did. Adam had mentioned something to him -- that you thought
you wanted to go back but you felt overwhelmed -- and they’d decided they wanted to clear the studio out for you. Rob came to me to ask for my blessing and to borrow my key. I helped them, though. I wasn’t going to let them do it alone, because I wanted to do it for you too. I wanted you to feel like you could come here again. Whenever you’re ready. And if that’s not now, that’s okay. I just wanted you to see it. So you’d know it’s here.”

Justin nodded, seemingly trying to process everything I’d just said and what exactly it meant. I wondered what was going through his mind, but I didn’t ask.

“I wish you would have told me sooner, though,” I said, looking into Justin’s eyes and still trying to read everything he was feeling that he might not have been outwardly displaying. “I would have helped you.”

Justin looked away, chewing his lip a little before he spoke. “I wasn’t sure I wanted that. That’s why I didn’t tell you.”

Justin’s words gave me pause, and left me feeling a little hurt, honestly, in spite of my best efforts to not make any of this about me. And he seemed nervous about having said them. I put my hand on his knee and squeezed it, still trying to offer reassurance, even in the midst of my confusion. Maybe trying to prove that I wasn’t making it about me.

Taking another breath, Justin turned to look at me again, his eyes pleading this time. Pleading with me to understand.

“When I tell you things, you always try to fix them,” he said, his voice soft, as if he knew that what he was about to tell me wasn’t something I wanted to hear. “I feel like your wheels are already turning before I’ve even finished my sentence. I told Adam because I just needed someone to listen, and not be immediately trying to fix it. Sometimes I just need someone to listen.”

Those words stung, because I knew he wasn’t wrong. I’d always been a fixer. If someone I cared about told me they had a problem, the first thing I wanted was to find some way to make it better. And Justin was the person I wanted that for the most, because I loved him more deeply than I’d ever loved anyone in my life. I wanted him to have everything. I wanted him to be happy. I wanted his life to be perfect. Only perfect doesn’t exist -- not really. I know that now, and I knew it then, but I still wanted it for him. And I wanted to be able to give it to him if I could.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to--” Justin looked down at his hands, twisting his fingers around one another.

“No,” I cut him off, taking his hands in mine and pulling them into my lap. He looked up at me, his anxiety plain to see in his eyes. I wondered if seeing that would ever get easier -- if someday it wouldn’t make me hurt, and make me want to fix whatever was causing it. But that was exactly what I needed to stop doing all the time. “You’re right. Sometimes I need to just listen. I’m sorry that I haven’t been the best at that.”

“It’s okay.” Justin looked down again, breaking eye contact with me. Gently, I pulled one of my hands free, using it to tilt his chin back upward.

“No, it’s not.” I studied his eyes, which were now glistening just a little with the sheen of unshed tears that would sometimes come over them when Justin was really worried about something. And I hated that the reason he was worried was because he was afraid of what I would do or say. “You need me to listen, and I need to do that.”

“I don’t mean to say that I don’t like it when you do things for me… and this…” He let his voice trail
off, exhaling as he looked around the room at the empty easels and the well-organized supplies on every shelf. “This is amazing. I really do love it, and I can’t believe you guys did this for me. But sometimes I’m just venting, you know? I need to say it, but I don’t need you to fix it.”

I nodded, because I did know, and I’d done more than my fair share of venting over the years. Sometimes Justin would try to fix it (Yak shit tea, anyone?) and sometimes he wouldn’t, but I knew how frustrating it could be when you just wanted to get something out of your head without having to worry about what it might make someone else do. I’d learned at a young age to keep things to myself, but that strategy didn’t exactly serve me well most of the time -- a lesson I’d learned the hard way. We both needed to be able to talk to each other -- and we both needed to be heard.

“I might need you to help me sometimes,” I said, tightening my fingers around Justin’s. “Help me tell the difference. Tell me when you just want me to listen. I can’t promise I’ll be perfect, but I can promise I’ll try to be better at it.”

“Okay,” Justin said softly, his lips turning up into the slightest hint of a smile before he pulled his lower lip into his mouth, this time in a shy way, instead of a nervous one.

“I love you.” I leaned forward and pressed my lips against Justin’s in a kiss that started off sweet and gentle but ended hard and passionate, wishing it could turn into more, but I knew we were expecting another visitor soon -- one who would definitely be none-too-impressed by finding the two of us naked on the couch in Justin’s studio. Still, I let it go on as long as I could -- savoring the feeling of Justin’s fingers on my back, holding me close and not letting me go as our lips and tongues moved against one another, until I heard a knock on the door.

I pulled away -- still not really wanting to, but knowing I had to -- sucking gently at Justin’s lower lip as we separated. He looked at me, his brow furrowed in confusion once again.

“Is someone outside?” He turned his head slightly and looked toward the door. “You’re the only one who comes without calling first. Unless you’re sending me food, but we just ate…” Justin’s voice faded out as he looked back at me again. “Who’s out there?”

“Why don’t you go see?” I tried to suppress my grin as I untangled my body from Justin’s, watching as he pushed himself up from the couch and started toward the door, glancing back at me over his shoulder once or twice, still confused. I kept watching him while I got myself back into my chair, not wanting to miss the moment when he realized what was happening.

When Justin opened the door, there stood Suzanne -- the woman I’d met on Thursday from the cat rescue. She was clutching the handle of a plastic crate in her right hand, and inside the crate, I could see a fluffy, white cat, presumably the one we’d talked about as we sat together in my office.

“Uh, hi,” Justin stammered as he looked back and forth from her face to the crate. “I think you must have the wrong--”

“You’re Justin, right?” She said, smiling as she peered around Justin and made eye contact with me. “Ah, Brian, so nice to see you again. And it’s nice to finally meet you, Justin.”

Justin turned around and looked at me, confusion still clear in his eyes and in the wrinkle of his brow as he stepped back out of the doorway, giving Suzanne room to come in. “What’s going on?” he asked, shifting his gaze at first between me and Suzanne, then the crate that she had just set down on the floor by one of Justin’s workbenches.

“I’ll let Brian answer that question,” Suzanne said. She crossed behind Justin, who still seemed rooted to the spot where he stood, and pushed the door to the studio closed.
Since Justin clearly wasn’t moving, I went to him, taking both of his hands in mine. He looked down at me, his blue eyes full of uncertainty and bewilderment. His cheeks were flushed, either from our makeout session or from the embarrassment of not knowing what was going on.

“Remember how you came home one day and told me that John said having a pet might help you?” I asked, my voice rougher than I would have liked.

Justin nodded, holding my gaze, though he still looked like he wasn’t quite sure what was happening.

“Well, I wanted to make that happen for you. So I asked Cynthia where she got Louis, and she told me… after she asked me whether or not I’d fallen in the shower again and hit my head this time.”

Justin’s face broke out into a smile and he chuckled softly, exactly as I’d hoped he would when I threw in Cynthia’s comment. Hell, I’d laughed too when she said it. And I probably would have thought the same thing if I were in her shoes.

“So I called, and here we are. This is Suzanne, and she’s got a cat with her that we both really think you’ll like. And if you do… she’s yours.”

I saw movement out of the corner of my eye, and it was Suzanne, bending down to open the door to the crate, clearing the way for the small-ish white cat inside to hesitantly step out, lured by the promise of the treat Suzanne held in her hand. Justin looked over at both of them, and Suzanne held out one of the treats for Justin to take. He let go of my hands and took it, kneeling down in front of the cat and extending his hand, palm up, holding the treat.

“Her name’s Minnie,” Suzanne said. “But you can probably change it if you want.”

Slowly, Minnie approached Justin, at first sniffing the treat in his hand before flicking her tongue out to take it. Then, she ducked down under Justin’s arm, rubbing her head across the underside of his forearm as she walked past him, her regal air clear in her movements, before turning around and doing the same as she walked back the other way.

“I think she likes you,” Suzanne said. She was smiling, and Justin was too. He reached out to pet Minnie, who paused in front of him, letting him run his hand over her head and back.

Justin turned his head toward me, smiling the megawatt smile that was the entire reason why Debbie Novotny had nicknamed him sunshine all those years ago. “You did this for me?” he asked. His voice was soft, and I saw him blink back the sheen of wetness in his eyes, but I knew that they were happy tears this time.

I had to clear my own throat before I spoke, because if I was being honest, watching this scene was warming my supposedly cold, dead heart in a way that nothing had in a long time. “Yeah,” I said, my voice still breaking in spite of my best efforts not to show any emotion. “I did. So what do you say? Want to take her home?”

Justin nodded, seemingly unable to speak at that moment, instead turning to look at the cat -- his cat - - as he swallowed hard and blinked a few times. I rolled toward him and laid my hand between his shoulder blades, and he stood up, bending over to give me a hug, whispering, “Thank you,” in my ear.
Two weeks later, Mildred the cat, whom Justin had renamed and decided to call “Millie” for short, was pretty much a full-fledged member of our family. If I needed anything else to confirm I’d made the right decision, the peaceful, calm, totally content expression on Justin’s face anytime he pet her was it. Sometimes it was like he was in a trance, his thoughts clearly elsewhere, as he stroked her fur.

Millie was in love with Justin, and Justin was in love with her. Millie and I, on the other hand, had a bit of an adversarial relationship, especially in the beginning. She wasn’t exactly mean, but the fact that she meowed endlessly every single time Justin left her alone with me and took up lounging in my wheelchair any time I wasn’t in it, giving me a look that practically dared me to make her move, didn’t exactly make us the dearest of pals. But we got along okay, and it didn’t really matter what I thought anyway -- this was about Justin. If having Millie helped Justin, I’d figure out a way to make it work. Cat hair and all.

Justin still hadn’t been back to his studio since the day we adopted her, but his return didn’t seem to be far away, now that it had been cleaned out and anything that might have reminded Justin of one of the darkest times in his life had been put away. He was continuing to work on his pottery, while I tried to figure out how we could cram more equipment into his studio so he could work on it there. I’d seen him sketching a time or two also. Still with his right hand, but he seemed to be managing just fine. And if he never touched those old projects again, that would be okay. All I wanted was for him to feel happy and fulfilled, no matter what it was that brought him that.

I left Justin in charge when it came to our Thanksgiving plans too -- whatever he wanted to do, we would do. Jennifer and her new beau had a vacation planned to a bed and breakfast somewhere in South Carolina, so it turned out there wasn’t much draw for Pittsburgh, now that Debbie was gone. (Though, honestly, I did kind of miss her calling to threaten us within an inch or our lives if we even considered not coming home for any major holiday.) We thought about going to Michael and Ben’s, but in the end, we decided to stay home and celebrate the holiday with the friends we thought of as family -- a “Friendsgiving,” as Justin called it.

He tried to suggest making the whole meal from scratch, but I vetoed that idea quickly because I knew it would be overwhelming for him, even as much as he enjoys cooking. Too much, too soon. Particularly since we were expecting eight people in addition to the two of us -- Rob, Adam, and their girls, Cynthia and her boytoy, plus Gus and his boyfriend, whose family was all the way out in California, so he was waiting until winter break to go home.

Eventually, we compromised on Justin making his favorite Thanksgiving dish -- his grandmother’s stuffing -- and having the rest of the meal catered, so we could wake up on Thanksgiving morning and enjoy each other’s company, instead of stressing out and rushing around trying to pull together every aspect of a totally perfect Thanksgiving meal. And I knew that with Justin’s upbringing and the way he normally acted when we hosted just Rob and Adam, he would want everything to be perfect. I also knew that the less stress he put himself under, the better.

Even though Justin agreed to relinquish the cooking duties to the caterer, he still spent a lot of time planning and, yes, making sure everything was perfect. I could tell he was enjoying it though, so I made up my mind to just quietly observe and keep my mouth shut, unless I started seeing warning signs that Justin was stressing himself out.
I came home from work a little later than usual on the day before Thanksgiving -- because the advertising business doesn’t stop just because everyone is getting two days off, especially during the holiday season -- and I wasn’t the least bit surprised to find Justin standing in our dimly-lit dining room, putting the finishing touches on a floral centerpiece that hadn’t existed when I’d left that morning.

“What’s all this?” I asked, brushing the snow off my legs as I shed my wool coat and scarf and hung them up by the door, then took off my gloves and stuffed them in the pockets of my coat. I could have done without the unseasonably cold temperatures for November, but it was what it was. And Justin liked snow, so I tried to use that to look on the bright side, even though I was freezing my ass off and I knew it was going to take me forever to get warm.

Justin smiled -- that genuine, serene smile I’d been seeing a lot more often -- and used the remote to turn down the music he had playing on our sound system. “I want it to be special,” he said, and I felt like I could hear his smile in his voice too. I wasn’t sure if I’d just been noticing that more, or if it really was happening more often. Either way, I liked it.

Once I had most of the snow and the nasty muck off of myself and my tires, I pushed closer to the table, admiring Justin’s handiwork. “So you did get the gay flower-arranging gene,” I commented, smiling as I ran my finger along a crimson-colored table runner that I also didn’t recall owning. “How did I not know this?”

“You never bought me flowers.” Justin shrugged and continued changing the positions of the sunflowers, zinnias, and roses in the vase, all in deep, autumn colors, while I tried not to think about the time in our lives when he’d wanted nothing more than for me to buy him roses and I’d been too damn proud to do it. I wondered if he was still upset about that, but he was humming along with the now-barely-audible music -- some of that top-forty bullshit I was sure -- so he didn’t seem to be. In any case, I decided that was another thing that was going to change -- I was going to put more effort into being the partner Justin had always wanted. Flowers included.

Because when you’ve been where I’ve been and seen what I’ve seen, you change some shit, especially if it means keeping something that’s important to you.

“I wish I would have.” I looked up at Justin, taking in the warm glow of his skin in the dim light and thinking about how much my old mantra of “no regrets” was straight-up bullshit. A lie I’d told myself, once upon a time, so I wouldn’t have to think about the consequences of my actions.

“I know.” He smiled again. “That wasn’t you back then. I wanted you to be something you weren’t yet.”

I wasn’t sure that statement was entirely true, since my main motivation in holding back had been fear, but I decided to let it go, instead choosing to examine the stack of dishes on the table -- another thing I wasn’t sure we’d owned earlier that morning. “Did you buy out Pottery Barn?” I chuckled, hoping to shift the mood more solidly back to lighter topics.

Justin laughed too. “Don’t worry, I used your platinum card. You got lots of frequent flyer miles.”

“Guess that means I’ll have to take you on a trip.” I let a salacious tone slip into my voice as I rolled closer to Justin, resting my hand on the small of his back at first, then letting it slide down to his ass, which was finally starting to fill back out, thanks to his appetite returning to normal.

“Guess so.” He grinned at me, then turned toward me and straddled my legs, lowering himself down into my lap before he kissed me. “How was the office?”
“Same shit, different day. But it’s better now that I’m here with you.” And it was. And it got even better when he kissed me again, and still better than that when he pinned my back against the wall, pressed his erection against my stomach, and started unbuttoning my shirt.

A few minutes later, Justin’s decorating was all but forgotten when we made our way to our bedroom and I fucked Justin from my glider chair while he laid on the chaise lounge, his legs resting on my shoulders, before I joined him on the lounge chair and he brought me to my own orgasm purely by finger and tongue action.

We ate a simple dinner that night of spaghetti and meatballs with garlic bread from Monetti’s that Nick delivered personally and refused to let me pay for, and Justin and I spent the rest of the evening on our sofa, splitting a slice of that luscious orange ginger cake -- which Justin loved as much as I had -- and watching the flames dance in the gas fireplace while the snow fell outside the window, with Millie curled up by Justin’s side. The meal felt more symbolic than it probably should have, but I’d already found that I appreciated the simple things so much more at that point than I ever had in my life.

Who knows; maybe money really can’t buy happiness.

We finally finished “Tales of the City” that night. Justin cried at the end, and honestly, I got a lump in my throat too, because it felt to me like yet another reminder of what was important in life: love, honesty, and being there for the people you care about. Being open to the possibilities. Four things the version of me Justin had pursued so many years before on Liberty Avenue would have cringed to think about, and four things that I now viewed as the cornerstones of Justin’s and my relationship, alongside open communication -- a new one that we’d recently added, after seeing the painful result of what could happen when we kept too many things to ourselves.

Now, we make sure communication happens. We have dinner together almost every night, with no phones and no laptops, not only talking about our days, but what’s on our minds too. Even the difficult parts. And I’ll be damned if Justin wasn’t right all those years ago when he was talking about how good a home-cooked meal made him feel.

When Justin needs to share something with me but doesn’t want it fixed, he tells me that. And I’ve been doing okay with not fixing it. (The majority of the time, anyway. I’m still not perfect, but I’m trying.) Mostly, though, we’ve both realized that we need to be partners on this great journey called life, and allow each other the opportunity to be that partner, even if sharing something is uncomfortable, because we never want to find ourselves in the same mess again. I especially don’t want to repeat history, because all I can think about is how next time we might not be as lucky. And I’m still not sure how I’d go on if that happened, because there’s no one else that I trust in the same way that I trust Justin, and I don’t think there ever will be.

We moved to our bed just past midnight and fell asleep with our bodies tangled, and Millie curled up by Justin’s feet on top of the duvet. Probably getting cat hair everywhere, but that was the reason I paid someone to clean the apartment once a week -- so I wouldn’t have to worry too much about it. It wasn’t my favorite thing then, and it’s still not, especially with a white cat, but seeing how much Justin loves her and enjoys having her around makes it all worth it. I know that sounds sappy, and I’m sure some previous version of myself would probably want to jump out a window for even having that thought, but when I look back now, I can see that I’ve always been willing to do things for Justin that I wouldn’t do for anyone else, even if it sometimes took a fight to get me to do it. I guess I knew, even back then, that Justin was different.

I woke up alone in bed, and I could hear the sounds of pots and pans being banged around in the kitchen. By the time I got in there, craving coffee and hoping Justin had already made some, the
kitchen looked like Debbie Novotny had been cooking in it, with pans, utensils, and various ingredients -- some of which looked like logical parts of stuffing, and others that didn’t -- strewn all over the countertop, and Justin was digging in the back of the pantry.

“Dammit.” I heard Justin curse, his head still in the cabinet as he pushed several spice jars aside to peer all the way into the back.

“What’s wrong?” I stifled a yawn as my gaze fell on the still-empty coffee pot.

“I either forgot to buy dried sage, or I forgot where I put it, and I’m not sure which. Fucking brain injury.” He kept rummaging around in the cabinet, cursing under his breath as he moved ingredients out of the way. “Fuck,” he muttered as he stood up, pinching the bridge of his nose and squeezing his eyes shut.

“Hey,” I said, keeping my voice calm and even, hoping it might help prevent Justin from becoming any more agitated than he already was. I came closer and laid my hand on the small of his back. “It’s okay; I can get more. I’m sure at least one of the little corner stores around here is open today.”

“I swear I remember buying it, though. I just don’t know where the hell I put it, and I thought I remembered the recipe, but the more I think about it, the more I’m not sure I do, or if I’m missing pieces of it, like I’m missing pieces of so many other things that I used to remember, and I don’t realize it until--”

“Justin,” I interrupted, because I could hear the anxiety in Justin’s voice as words poured out of him in a breathless torrent. I could also tell by his unsteady inflection that he was getting close to tears, and we were going to be punching a one-way ticket down panic attack street -- headed straight toward migraine territory -- if I didn’t do something. I took his hands in mine and pulled him around to face me. “Look at me.”

He did, but I could see in his eyes how much he didn’t want to, probably because he knew I’d also see how close he was to panic, and I knew how embarrassing it was for him when his thoughts ran away with him like that, leaving him powerless to stop them. “I have to find it,” he said, his voice still unsteady, though it was much softer this time, barely above a whisper. “It’ll fuck up the whole recipe if I don’t find it.”

I could tell that he wanted to say more, but he stopped himself. His internal fight was clearly visible, though, in the way he chewed his lip, as if he was trying to keep himself from continuing.

“We’ll find some,” I said, still making an effort to keep my voice as calm as possible. “But right now, you need to sit down and breathe. Take a break.”

I stopped short of telling him he needed to calm down, since I knew from experience that only made him more agitated because he felt like he couldn’t.

I hated making him sit, especially when he didn’t want to, because he wasn’t a child; he was an adult and he could make his own decisions. But I knew it was what he needed, and I also knew that on some level, he probably did too. Eventually, I got Justin to come over to the sofa with me, where Millie immediately jumped up in his lap and pushed her head under his hand in the way she always did when she wanted him to pet her. I wrapped my arm around his shoulders and reminded him to breathe, slow and steady, as we waited the several minutes that it took for his breathing to return to normal and for the noticeable nervous tension in his body to fade.

“I just want everything to be perfect,” he said softly, still stroking Millie’s fur as she purred quietly.
“I know. But it doesn’t have to be. It’s okay if it isn’t. Remember the year after we moved to New York, when Deb took the turkey out of the oven and the fucking foil pan collapsed and the turkey ended up on the floor?”

Justin huffed out a laugh as the corners of his lips turned up into a smile. “Yeah, and the kitchen floor was basically a grease slick for the rest of the night because of all the drippings, even after Carl mopped it three times.”

“Lindsay fell and busted her ass.”

“And I thought she was going to kill you, because you wouldn’t stop laughing.”

“Hey, it was funny.”

“Until she pushed you and you ended up falling over backward,” Justin smirked. “Then I thought I was going to have to kill her if she didn’t stop asking me if I was okay.”

“Served you right.”

“And Gus spent the whole night skating around the kitchen in his socks, no matter how many times Lindsay told him no.”

“With Grandma Debbie egging him on the whole time, telling Lindsay to just let him be a kid.” Justin’s smile was bigger now, and I could tell he was as lost in the memory as I was.

“But see? We don’t remember the years when everything was perfect,” I said. “We remember the ones when it seemed like nothing went right, but we all still had a great time, because we had each other.”

“And enough sides to feed a small army.”

“That too. But we were with our family. That’s what matters. That’s who’s coming tonight.” I took Justin’s left hand in mine and squeezed it. “They won’t care if it’s not perfect. They’ll have a great time no matter what.”

And they did.

I went and got some more sage, and Justin called Jennifer to be sure he was remembering his grandmother’s stuffing recipe correctly, and the caterer brought everything else just a few minutes before our friends started arriving. We all enjoyed a delicious meal around our dining room table -- finally using all of the extra chairs Justin had insisted on buying when we’d purchased the set.

After dinner, we spent the rest of the evening in the living room, with the adults enjoying cocktails, coffee, and conversation, while a random Christmas movie Justin had found on cable played in the background. Sophia played with Millie until Millie got tired of it and escaped to our bedroom, where I later found her sleeping on Justin’s pillow, and Esme spent a good chunk of the night curled up in Justin’s favorite armchair with her sketchbook, drawing quietly.

Gus and his boyfriend Alex were almost sickeningly sweet, holding hands and occasionally sharing a kiss, talking softly among themselves, and generally looking like a couple out of a romance novel. They were clearly smitten with each other, and if I’m being honest, it was cute.

“Why couldn’t you have been more like that when we first met?” Justin asked quietly, after Gus kissed Alex’s cheek for about the third time in fifteen minutes.
“Because I’m not half Lindsay,” I said, keeping my voice low. “She’s into all that romantic shit. Besides, I think you enjoyed the thrill of the pursuit.”

“True.” Justin nodded, his eyes twinkling, before he turned to give me a kiss of my own.

Esme was visibly (and amusingly, from my perspective, anyway) worried about Alex’s presence until Justin got her alone and quietly assured her that Gus liked girls too. Meanwhile, Cynthia and her boyfriend, the lawyer she’d met not long after her pregnancy scare, seemed to be getting more serious than I’d ever seen her get with a man. And Rob and Adam were exactly the way they always were -- never missing a chance to be squeezed in together in one corner of the sofa, with their fingers intertwined, casually intimate.

Through it all, I kept finding myself just observing, thinking about everything the past year had held for all of us. We’d each had our own changes and transitions, some because of unforeseen events, and others because they were a natural part of life. But we were all not only surviving; we were thriving. Somehow, everything had brought us right where we needed to be, just as had happened to Justin and myself so many times in our lives.

Even the parts that felt like shit when we were going through them had led us to a better place in the end, and Justin’s depression was no different, because it brought us to where we needed to be in order to appreciate each other and our lives. To live in gratitude, being thankful for each moment. Knowing that the next moment is never promised.

I only wished Justin hadn’t had to suffer through so much pain for us to arrive at that point. But there was no turning back the clock, no fixing it, and no keeping it from happening. No matter how much I wished I’d seen the signs earlier.

All I could do was be grateful that Justin was still there with me, and hope that we’d be by each other’s side for many more years to come.

One by one, we said goodbye to our guests, with Rob and Adam being the last to linger, waiting for the girls to finish putting away the board game they’d been playing with Adam and Justin at the dining room table when the wine had really started to flow in the living room. Then, we were alone.

We cleaned up the kitchen before sharing a shower and ultimately falling into bed together, unable to keep our hands off of each other. Sharing the intimate connection that had been ours from the beginning in some ways, but was so different now than it was all those years ago, when I couldn’t even remember Justin’s name when we woke up side by side after our first night together.

But it had to be different, because everything we’d seen in our lives had changed us. Not just trauma, but time, wisdom, and life in general had all changed us too.

In that moment, with Justin’s body pressed against mine in the dim light, his fingers trailing lightly over my chest, I realized just how close we’d come to losing everything we’d built and everything we had together, for good. But we hadn’t. We’d been given a second chance. Or a third, or a fourth. Regardless, I knew right then that no matter what came, we’d get through it together, because that was how much we loved each other. We’d never needed rings or vows to prove it -- our love just was. Unconstrained by time or space. Transcending it all. Always.

Even before I’d realized what it was.

Those little things are nice too, though -- the rings, the vows, dinners together, holding hands. I never thought in a million years that I’d ever want those things, but I do. I want it all.
We’d been lying there for a while, not saying anything, just enjoying being with each other, when Justin’s voice broke the silence.

“Thank you.” His voice was soft as he looked up at me, his eyes glistening. “For everything. For sticking by me… for listening… for being there.”

His words hit me hard, especially in light of all I’d been thinking about, and I felt my own emotions start to rise to the surface, but I swallowed to try to push them back, making up my mind that I wasn’t going to cry, even though I’d already been close on more than one occasion that day.

“You don’t have to thank me,” I said, still unable to stop my voice from breaking. “I love you. We’re partners.” I paused, wrapping my hand around his before I leaned down to kiss him. “Promise me you won’t ever forget that. And I promise I won’t either.”

“I promise,” he whispered. “And I love you too.”

Justin let his voice trail off as his eyes slid closed, snuggling his body in closer to mine, his head resting on my chest. Slowly, his breathing changed from shallow to deep, as he drifted off to sleep. I lay awake for awhile, feeling the weight and the warmth of Justin’s body on mine, thinking about how grateful I was -- so damn grateful -- that we were both still here, and that we had the best damn chosen family we could have ever asked for. We had everything we ever could have wanted. Some of it was hard-won, yes, but we had it. Love, fulfillment, friendship. The ingredients for a good life. It might have taken us a while to figure out the recipe, but we finally got it, and that was all that mattered.

I wrapped my arm tighter around Justin’s body, catching the brief glint of light reflecting off my wedding band’s metal surface from the bedside lamp I had yet to turn off, because I liked being able to see Justin’s face as he slept -- the peacefulness of his expression, and the perfection of his fair skin and his facial features. Carefully, I slipped the ring off my finger, rotating it slowly as my fingertip traced the inscription inside, feeling its slight roughness, giving depth and texture to the smooth titanium surface. Remembering the words and what they’d meant when we chose them all those years ago.

Worth fighting for.

We’d fought in one way or another from the very beginning of our relationship -- Justin, with his relentless pursuit of me, and me, fighting my feelings almost every step of the way. Sometimes we fought with each other, and sometimes we fought for each other. We had to fight our way back to each other more than once too, but we’d made it, each and every time.

Those three words meant more to me in that moment, though, than they ever had -- maybe because of how hard Justin had to fight to still be there, in my arms. To become himself again. How hard he was still fighting. But we didn’t just fight for ourselves; we were a team. We always had been, even when I’d tried to fight that. And after all that we’d been through in the previous months, it all felt even more worth it. All of the pain, all of the strife, all of the struggle, alongside the joy, the happiness, and the love -- it had all brought us here, to this moment.

Right then, as my husband slept on my chest, his heart beating softly and steadily against my side as my own throbbed beneath his head, I knew we’d never stop fighting. And that somehow, some way, our love for each other would always win.

I slipped my ring back on my finger and reached over to turn off the light, then pulled Justin’s body in closer to mine as I let my own eyes close, feeling a single tear trace a path down my cheek to the pillow. A tear of relief. A tear of gratitude, for how fucking lucky I was.
How lucky we both were.

And how I was never going to take that for granted again.

***

_And all the lies, and all the fears_
_Wash down your cheek and disappear_
_Here’s to light, let the dark be gone_

Chapter end notes: The end of this chapter was heavily inspired by the lyrics to the song “I’m Not Running” by Vertical Horizon -- the song the lyrics above in italics came from. I highly recommend clicking here and giving it a listen -- the lyrics remind me so much of Brian and Justin.

Lyrics by Matt Scannell and Richard Marx

Chapter End Notes

As we have wound our way to the end of this story, you may have noticed how much all of this feels like closure for our boys. And I’ll be honest that it started to feel that way for me too, as I wrote the later chapters -- like Brian and Justin were finding themselves and where they needed to be. Finding peace and serenity, and being content in the moment, grateful for everything they have. And I realized that if I were to end this series, this would be a good place to do it. But, that said, I’ll also be honest and say that I’m not yet ready or willing to let “this” version of Brian and Justin go, so don’t worry, there will be more. However, I am slowing down a bit.

When I rediscovered this fandom and ultimately started writing again, I was in the depths of depression myself, though it took me a long time to recognize it for what it was. I started using writing as a release, and a way to move some things out of my head, using our beloved fictional characters to do that. While Justin’s story is not mine, writing it out through Brian’s eyes has been cathartic for me as well, helping me to let go of some things and start to find peace and equilibrium, much in the way Justin was in this story. I started writing at a time when I wasn’t doing much else, because I couldn’t bring myself to do much of anything else. So I was able to write at a fairly quick pace as a result. And now, as I am working on not only finding my way back to a good place again, but staying there, that is not a pace I can keep up, so slowing down is necessary. And the subject matter might change a bit too, with a little more fluff mixed in, perhaps. I am still an angst girl at heart and always have been when it comes to fiction, so there will definitely be angst and hurt/comfort, and release when and where I need it, but I’d like for this bit of closure to represent turning over a new leaf and using my writing in a healthy way, rather than something to bury myself in when I want to isolate myself from the world.

Thank you all so much for continuing to read my stories, and leave kudos and comments. I so appreciate all of you, and the faith you’ve had in me as you kept reading. I’m looking forward to seeing where this journey takes us, and I hope you are as well.

I also owe a huge thank you to my friends and beta readers SandiD and PrettyTheWorld for joining me on this journey. Thank you for all of the brainstorming sessions and
ideas, and most of all for your encouragement. Writing may be a solitary activity for the most part, but it sure is a lot easier to do it with a friend.

Lastly, if you are struggling, please don’t hesitate to reach out to someone -- whether that someone is a loved one or a stranger. And if you love someone who is struggling, be there. Listen.

Sending love to you all. Thanks for everything through this journey.

Here’s to light. <3

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