Timeless

by cynical21

Summary

What happened after Justin left for New York

Notes

This is NOT a quick read. It will run to many, many chapters, and it will take quite some time to publish. Furthermore, not a single chapter will prove light or frothy. In addition, I make no apologies for the fact that I adore Brian Kinney. Thus, anyone who does not feel the same will probably want to avoid this story like a big dose of ebola.

Standard declaimers apply. I write this as a labor of love, and make no profit from it.

Also, as usual, if you're looking for sweetness and light and fairy tale romance, you're in the wrong place.
Chapter 1

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It was only time. He had said so himself.

Only time.

Except that it was time without end, and he had known it from the beginning.

But that wasn't quite right either. One element of it was infinite, true enough - the part that was the absence of the young man who had once been the center of his world. But another element - the primary element - would end when the moment was right; when the damage inflicted by time's relentless passage would make it impossible to continue the existence he had embraced throughout his life.

Less than a year passed before he knew that he had been right from the beginning. He had allowed himself to watch from a distance - had followed the articles in the Times and in the art magazines and read the insider reviews that Lindsey thoughtfully provided for him, and things were turning out exactly as he had expected.

Justin was taking the New York art scene by storm, heralded by virtually every critic as a "new, sexier version of Jackson Pollack".

His first big exhibition was only three days away, at a very exclusive, very prestigious little gallery called Bergéree in the East Village.

Brian had received a personal invitation a week earlier, followed by dozens of messages on his answering machine, confirming the time and the place and the circumstances.

He had answered none of them, and failed to RSVP.

It was not that he didn't want to go, didn't want to see Justin. Didn't want to walk into the place where he would find the young man and promptly throw him down and fuck him through the floor. Yes, that was exactly what he wanted to do.

But he wouldn't.

First of all, it would be counterproductive. That time had passed. And secondly, it would violate the only rule he'd ever cared to live by: no excuses, no apologies, no regrets.

Brian Kinney did not allow himself to regret anything, and if, perhaps, there was a quiet spot deep in his heart - a dark, locked space contained within a pristine wall which was full to the brim with the tears he never allowed anyone to see or fathom - it was absolutely no one's business but his own.

Beautiful hazel eyes - eyes that had mesmerized an entire generation of gay men, along with a not insignificant number of women, gay or otherwise - gazed down into the dark amber of his drink and did not focus on the memories that stirred in his thoughts.

He did not allow himself to dwell on the past, or to ponder any questions of what might have been. He had never once, for example, reflected on the fact that he had volunteered, during their very brief formal engagement, to give Justin exactly what he'd always claimed to want - total commitment, total love, total acknowledgement of his feelings. Of course, Justin had ultimately realized that a devoted,
committed, totally faithful Brian was not the Brian he had fallen in love with. At almost the same moment, Brian had realized what Justin would be giving up in order to become his spouse, and known immediately that it was a sacrifice that he could not accept and Justin would one day grow to resent.

It had been an intensely busy year.

Thus he had come to the only conclusion he could reach. Their commitment to each other - their love for each other - was simply not meant to be. So he'd found other things to occupy his time.

He had rebuilt Babylon, even though he'd meant to sell it; he had canceled the sale of his loft, and the purchase of the big estate that Justin had wanted to christen "Bri-Tin", had grown his business into a huge success, with offices in Philadelphia and, just recently, in New York, although he never went there himself. He had even invested time and effort in a little private project of his own involving honest-to-God manual labor, and who the fuck would ever believe that about Brian Kinney. And he had regenerated his old lifestyle, in a renewed effort to fuck any new man who caught his fancy, although he never again broke his rule about no repeats.

He had built a good relationship with his son, taking him on a trip to Disney World and spoiling him with designer duds for tots and an obscenely huge pile of expensive toys. He forced himself to spend holidays at Debbie's house so he could be a peripheral part of a family unit, and he and Mikey occasionally engaged in familiar adolescent behavior, to renew their connection to each other.

But inside, Brian remained alone. And more so with every passing day.

He sat on his horrendously expensive Italian sofa and spent a moment gazing at the framed photograph of his son, and listened as the phone rang. He made no attempt to answer it, and was not surprised when the voice on the answering machine sounded weary and frustrated.

"You're not coming, are you? I think I knew it all along. It's really . . . over. Isn't it?"

There were a few seconds of silence, the sound of a deep breath being drawn, and a soft click.

Brian glanced at his watch. Almost ten, but not really too late.

He dialed the familiar number quickly, and was inordinately grateful that Lindsey's dulcet tones greeted him, rather than Melanie's brusque rumble.

"Are you going to New York?" he asked, without preamble.

"Yes, of course," she answered, not even bothering to chide him for rudeness. "Shall I meet you there?"

"No," he said sharply, "but I need a favor."

He explained quickly and succinctly what he wanted and then waited for Lindsey to respond. There was a heavy sadness in her voice when she did.

"Brian, why do you . . ."

"Will you just do it, please? Or do I need to make other arrangements?"

"I'll do it," she said quickly. "But can't you at least . . ."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, can we please not have another session of Dyke Psych 101?"
He could almost hear her frown. "Mel's right. You really are an asshole."

"Which has nothing to do with what I asked. So . . ."

"I'll do it," she answered with a sigh, "But I don't have to like it."

"No," he agreed. "You just have to do what I asked."

"And you?" she snapped. "What are you going to be doing?"

"Same as always," he replied easily.

"Brian," she said, after a slight pause, "we've talked to Debbie several times lately. And we've heard some ugly rumors about things happening in the Pit. Gay-bashing. Vigilante crap. Nasty graffiti on some of the Liberty buildings. Shit like that. Is everything okay? Are you . . ."

"Awww," he drawled. "The kwazy wesbians are worried about wittle old me? I'm touched."

"Don't be touched," she snapped. "Be careful. I don't want to have to explain to my son why his daddy had to depart to shop in that great Armani superstore in the sky."

Brian heard the genuine concern beneath the strident tone, but refused to respond with equal candor. "You know me, Linds. I'm indestructible."

In the small townhouse in Toronto, Melanie leaned forward across her partner's shoulders and called out her greeting. "Night-night, Asshole."

"Sleep tight, Cunt," he responded, equally loud.

He hung up and spent a few moments gazing down into his glass of JB. It was still early, and Babylon would be filled with energy and music and bright lights and plenty of firm young bodies, any number of whom would be more than happy to court his favor and suck his cock.

On the other hand, the semi-concealed doorway to the little space which he had come to consider his inner sanctum was slightly ajar, dark and offering no hint of what lay within it, but somehow not the least bit forbidding. The fruit of his own labors. He knew it was a little silly, but he was rather proud of his accomplishment.

He poured himself another drink . . . and went seeking sanctuary.

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tbc
Chapter 2

Melanie came down the stairs, barely stifling a yawn, and paused at the landing to watch her partner/lover/better half (much better, she sometimes admitted, but only to herself) page through the colorful brochure that she and Justin had designed to send to potential buyers and collectors, to whet their interest in his upcoming exposition.

But this was, apparently, not just an idle review, as Lindsey was busily scribbling on a yellow pad, taking notes on something.

"What's up?" asked Melanie, as she descended the last three steps.

"Just jotting down a few points."

Melanie lifted one quizzical eyebrow. "What kind of points?"

Lindsey did not look up to meet her partner's dark eyes. "Just . . . points."

Melanie grabbed the brochure and jerked it from Lindsey's fingers, and thumbed through the bright, glossy pages. She skipped over a brief bio of the artist, and a few reproductions of favorable reviews - skipped over a photo of Justin and a synopsis of the gallery and its history - skipped over a couple of pages displaying a selection of impressionist works, distorted visions of familiar objects rendered from strange perspectives. Compelling and stark and arresting, but impersonal - almost cold. Melanie kept scrolling through, until she came to a portrait - a face barely etched against shadows, a not-quite-profile rendered in dark values. Then she looked up and saw the shadows move in Lindsey's eyes.

"This one," she said, tapping her finger against a distinctive chin.

She turned more pages, until she came across a slender shadow limned against a scintillant light, a silhouette of dark hair against darker gloom.

"And this one."

More paging, more images, and then . . . a face. Pale, unfinished, vague. Unmistakable.

"And this one, most of all." Then she leaned forward and took the tablet from Lindsey's hand and saw immediately that she was right.

Her smile was just slightly smug. "How much is he willing to pay for them?"

Lindsey sighed. "No limits. Only . . ."

Melanie's smile shifted, touched with a wisp of sadness. "No names." It was not a guess.

"Right. No names."

"Any more?"

Lindsey nodded. "Just one, but it's not in the brochure. I'm not even sure he plans to sell it, but he might. Now."

"Why does he always have to be such an asshole?" Melanie demanded. "Why couldn't he just . . ."

Lindsey stood and moved forward to wrap an arm around her partner. "How quickly they forget,"
she quoted with a small smile.

"What do you . . ."

"You stood right there in our old house, just a few days before we left, and you told him that he had to be good to Justin, that he needed to remember how much Justin was giving up to be with him."

"Yeah. So?"

"So," Lindsey looked over toward the mantle where there was a framed snapshot of Brian and his son, "he remembered."

"And what? He gave up what he wanted? For Justin's sake?" Melanie laughed, and it was not a pretty sound. "Brian Kinney? Are you out of your fucking mind?"

Lindsey just smiled. "Am I?"

She dropped a kiss on Melanie's cheek, quickly put her things away and went up to bed, while Melanie just stood and watched, not even bothering to try to conceal her skepticism.

Brian Kinney? Sacrificing his wants and desires for someone else's happiness?

Bullshit!

She looked down then at the image of Justin's face - a semi-profile sketch that graced the front of the pamphlet - a minimalist effort that focused on the huge eyes and the mop of hair and the smile that had earned him the nickname, Sunshine. The smile was beautiful; he looked really happy. And yet - was there really a shadow of sadness in those lovely eyes?

Would Brian have given up everything he wanted, just to be sure that Justin was able to reach for his dreams? Brian Kinney?

Bullshit!

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"Ma-ah-ah!" wailed Michael, stretching the single syllable into three as his palm cradled the cheek his mother had just slapped. "What'd you do that for?"

"Because you're not listening to your mate," she replied smartly.

"And that's your business because?"

"Because he's right," she observed, with a cheeky grin for her son-in-law who was pouring soy milk over his serving of oatmeal (a dish that Debbie usually referred to as 'turds and whey').

"You should listen to your mother, Mikey," said a husky voice as a new arrival slid into the empty spot on Michael's left. "Be a good little wifey and obey your lord and master."

"Shut up, Brian!" Mikey snapped, not particularly in the mood to be teased - or to be addressed as 'Mikey'.

Brian spotted the smirk on Emmett's face as the big Nelly-bottom dumped sugar in his coffee.

"Somebody piss in his Cheerios?" he asked with a wink.

"Piss off!" snapped Michael. "Not that it's any of your business, but I don't see why I should have to
go traipsing off to New York just because the twink has an art show."

Brian ducked just in time to avoid the flash of a spread hand that smacked the side of Michael's head with a sharp snap.

"Ma-ah-ah! Will you stop?"

"Shame on you," retorted Debbie. "That 'twink', as you so charmingly put it, is a member of this family, and we all need to show him our support."

Brian opened his mouth to respond, but wisely subsided when he saw that Debbie was still poised to strike.

"Hey, Brian," said Ted, from his seat in the corner, with his own version of a twink cuddled up beside him, "care to car pool?"

Brian flicked a spec of dust - more imagined than real - from the sleeve of his Armani jacket before fixing his accountant with a frigid stare. "Car pools are like boyfriends," he answered with a snarky smile. "I don't do either."

"So," said Emmett, pursing his lips to blow on his still steaming coffee, "when are you leaving, and where are you staying? The Ritz, maybe? Or the Plaza? Or are the two of you just going to rough it in Justin's little flat?"

"None of the above," Brian replied. "And what does a man have to do around here to get a cup of coffee?"

"Don't get your Prada panties in a twist," snapped Debbie, leaning over to fill his cup. "And stop dodging the question. Where are you staying?"

"Rubens at the Palace," he answered, bending over to inhale the aroma of his coffee. The table went silent until Ben, Michael's partner, spoke up. "That's quite a commute."

Brian said nothing, lifting his cup to take a cautious sip.

"What is that?" asked Michael with a grin. "A hide-away for gay porn kings?"

"It's a beautiful hotel," answered Ben as he studied Brian's face. "In London."

Michael blinked rapidly. "You . . . you're going to London?"

Brian nodded.

"After the show?" said Emmett, suddenly overwhelmed with visions of men in Elizabethan costumes and the changing of the guards at Buckingham Palace.

Brian sipped before answering. "Instead of."

"You little shit!" cried Debbie, getting right down in his face, shoving forward to slosh his coffee, although he was agile enough to avoid the splash.

Brian, unperturbed, looked up at her and smiled. "It's business, Mother."

"Business, my fat ass!" Her eyes narrowed. "How can you do this to him? You know it will break his . . ."
"He," Brian cut in sharply, "is a hell of a lot stronger than you - any of you - give him credit for. He'll be fine."

"But . . ." Michael paused to avoid spluttering. "But we could all go together. Explore the Big Apple. Find their version of Babylon - shit like that. Why would you . . ."

"I told you. It's business."

"Business!" snapped Debbie. "And all the English ass you can fuck."

He grinned. "That too. We're considering expanding our operations 'across the pond'. Good for business . . ." the grin widened and grew slightly venal . . . "and good for me."

Somehow, although everyone at the table heard what he had said with perfect clarity, it was somehow not as loud as what he hadn't - quite - said.

"Debbie?" he said, after a moment of silence.

"Huh?"

"Breakfast?"

"What?"

"You planning to feed me, or . . ."

It was uncertain who was more surprised when she simply straightened up and went to order his omelet.

The question ringing in everyone's mind remained unspoken, but it continued ringing nonetheless.

Brian had a meeting to make - as always - and although he firmly believed in being fashionably late, he never pushed it to the point of rudeness. So he finished his omelet, drained his coffee cup, gave Michael a quick, thorough kiss on the mouth - designed to annoy Ben to no end - and made his exit.

The silence that lingered in his wake was deafening.

Blake left quickly, followed by Ben, both having jobs to attend, leaving behind the crucial core of a friendship that went back almost twenty years - the crucial core, minus one. The critical 'One' - the one who had always been the nucleus around which the others revolved.

Michael had been focused on tearing his napkin to shreds. Once that was done he looked up and stared at Ted. "Is he serious?"

Ted, as Brian's primary accountant, was eminently qualified to answer. "He might be," he admitted. "Some of our big clients have been making noises about expanding into European markets."

"But he could open up a branch over there without actually having to go himself," Emmett pointed out. "He did it in New York. Still hasn't been there, has he?"

Ted shook his head. "Left it all to Cynthia. Bet she never dreamed how lucky it would prove to be when she hitched her wagon to the star of the fag prince of Pittsburgh."

Debbie sat down beside her son, offering coffee refills to the three before serving one for herself.
"And you don't find that the least bit suspicious?" she asked. "The fact that he once was so caught up in going to New York that he was ready to sell his beloved fuck nest, and now he can't be bothered to drop in, even when he owns an office there?"


Ted stared into his coffee. "I think maybe . . . there's nothing left here to hold him."

"It's his home," Michael insisted.

Debbie stirred her coffee while gazing out into bright, liquid sunshine, and was suddenly struck by a memory - the look in Brian's eyes on the day Justin had left for New York. He had been quintessentially himself on that day, brash and sardonic, witty and acerbic, supremely confident. And yet - she had never been sure of what it was that she had glimpsed in those hazel depths from time to time, and she knew he would never tell her.

But it was enough to make her wonder. Michael believed that Pittsburgh was Brian's home.

But she wasn't so sure. She wondered, occasionally, if he had been forced to stand still and watch as every vestige of home had turned and walked away - with his blessing.

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tbc
Chapter 3

Debbie Horvath, nee Debbie Grassi, AKA Debbie Novotny for much of her life, knew a thing or two about secrets and how to keep them. And another thing or two about pain, although no casual acquaintance would ever have entertained such a bizarre notion.

Debbie was belly laughs and crude humor, a foul mouth and an indestructible will, not to mention the Italian equivalent of a Jewish mother - squared, according to her only son.

But for all her brass and sass and superficial willingness to bare her own soul and everybody else's, Debbie knew full well which secrets needed to be aired and discussed and lampooned and exposed to a blast of fresh air, and which ones needed to be kept.

Brian Kinney was the perfect example of the latter.

There were only a handful of people that could lay any claim at all to knowing Brian, in other than a Biblical sense, of course. In that sense, the number of those with intimate knowledge of him was legion, and getting larger every day, or even every hour on some days.

But those numbers didn't count, although Brian would have disputed that premise vigorously.

But beneath all the glitz and the fucking and the raw sex, the number of people who had ever been admitted into the tiny enclosure at the core of his existence was very small: Mikey, of course, who knew him best of all in some ways and, strangely, not at all in others; Justin, who knew him intimately but only through the eyes of love; Lindsey, who would probably have been his wife if they'd been straight, who accepted him for exactly what he was and who knew way more than she was ever willing to tell; Debbie's brother, Vic, who had finally succumbed just two years earlier to his HIV affliction after fighting it off for decades and who had had an uncanny ability to see through the bullshit and understand Brian better than almost anyone else. And Debbie, who believed - rightly or wrongly - that she knew him as no one else ever would or could.

It might have surprised her to learn that Brian sometimes agreed with her, but it would not have surprised her at all to know that he wasn't particularly pleased to acknowledge it. Brian preferred to live beneath the layer of camouflage that he'd created. He preferred to remain unseen and unknown, except for the surface persona that he allowed everyone to see, and, for the most part, Debbie accepted that. Except, of course, for those times when she deemed the horseshit a little too thick and him a little too smug and in need of a subtle (or not) application of ego-busting.

Still, as she set a huge dish of cannelloni on the table and watched her husband and semi-permanent boarder (and the newest addition to her not-quite-adopted family) dig in, she was conscious of a vague disquiet lingering in her mind - a sense of impending gloom, if not doom. Was Brian really considering leaving Pittsburgh, and, if he was, what did it really mean?

Michael had told her once about an episode with his best friend, a quick little moment when Brian had mused about the perfection of those who had lived hard and died early, remaining forever young and beautiful, like Kurt Cobain and James Dean and Jim Morrison.

She realized suddenly that she had never once been able to visualize Brian as an older man: Brian at 40 or 50; Brian as anything but young - and beautiful. And it bothered her, although she had no idea why.
"Yummy," said Emmett, not quite drooling, but coming close as he sniffed at the aroma of his pasta. "Debbie, you are sooo not good for my waistline, but who the fuck cares?"

She favored him with a smile. "You'll work it off later, Sweetie. Isn't it Cowboy night at Babylon?"

Emmett helped himself to a big slab of garlic bread. "It is," he answered with an exaggerated sigh. "Twinks in chaps, oh my God! A veritable parade of forbidden fruit - emphasis on the fruit, of course."

"Why forbidden?" she laughed. "I thought the idea was . . ."

"Oh, it is," he agreed. "It's just that they're all so eager to shake those fabulous little tushies in Brian's face, that the rest of us feel a little . . . left out."

She winked at him. "But it doesn't usually take him long to make up his mind, leaving the field clear for the rest of you. Right?"

"What a wonderful way to look on the bright side!" he laughed. Then he frowned. "But he's not . . ."

"Not what?" she asked, as he hesitated.

"Just not quite . . . himself," he replied. "Not so quick on the uptake. Not so instantly interested, if you know what I mean."

She stared. "If you're trying to tell me that Brian Kinney has lost interest in fucking the latest twink-of-the-day, then I need to start getting ready for the Second Coming."

"No. Nothing like that. He's still the undisputed king of the fast fuck - not to mention the first fuck. He just . . . I don't know. It's like his heart's not in it."

Debbie chuckled. "Honey, his heart was never in it. Only his dick."

He smiled and continued eating, and she wondered, not for the first time, why he wasn't three hundred pounds of blubber.

Across the table, her husband, Carl, folded his newspaper and took a big swig of his beer. "You boys aren't going out cruising by yourselves, are you?" he asked, wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

Emmett sighed theatrically. "Alas and alack, mon amis. There aren't many of us left to cruise, since Ted's found his one true love in Blake and Mikey's wrapped up in wedded bliss with Ben. And Brian - well, Brian doesn't really cruise, does he? Never had to. So that pretty much leaves little ol' fabulous moi. Right?"

"Yeah, whatever," answered Carl who was still, even after all the time he'd spent getting used to Debbie's world, not always comfortable with Emmett's flaming gayness. "But just be careful, OK?"

Debbie fixed her husband with a suspicious glare. "What's up, Carl? What do you know that you haven't shared with us?"

He took a big bite of cannelloni, possibly hoping that Debbie might just let it go if he took long enough to chew and swallow.

No such luck. Her gaze was steely and unwavering.

Carl allowed himself a small sigh of frustration. "I don't really know anything. But there are rumors going around. Seems like Stockwell is making a little noise, trying to get back in the picture, and
gay-bashing would be right up his alley. Let's face it; he tried to downplay his homophobia last time out, and it didn't work, and there are plenty of homophobic assholes out there who would love to see him succeed in his agenda." He paused and studied his plate, obviously not wanting to have to meet his wife's eyes. But he knew she wouldn't be content until she knew it all, so he looked up, and pretended not to see the small flinch when she realized that he was trying to avoid saying something she would not want to hear.

"Let's face it, Honey. Prop 14 only failed by a tiny margin, and its supporters are still around and still itching to put all the queers in their places."

"Or their graves," she snapped.

He didn't bother to argue, taking another sip of beer before going on. "And we all know that his trial was just a big joke. No way was he going to be convicted. Even after all his nasty little secrets were exposed, he still had a lot of supporters, and he's got a long memory. And now, he's got some new financial backing," he continued gently. "You remember Chris Hobbs?"

"How could I forget the little bastard who got a slap on the hand for nearly killing our Sunshine. Why?"

"His father and grandfather are among Stockwell's financial supporters, and that's some big money, and big money still talks around here."

Debbie waited, knowing there was more.

"And . . ." Carl looked as if he could hardly believe it himself, "Justin's father too."

Debbie recoiled as if she'd been slapped. "How . . ." She paused to take a deep breath, and tried again. "How could he do that? After what they did to his son, how could he . . ."

Carl shrugged. "How could Brian's mother celebrate the fact that he got cancer as a 'reward' for his deviant lifestyle?" He reached out to touch his wife's face with gentle fingers. "I don't know how, Honey. I just know that there's trouble brewing. We like to think we've come a long way since Matthew Shepherd, but sometimes I think we're just fooling ourselves. There's been more vandalism in the neighborhood lately, and more street fights. That Casey kid from down on Quinton Street wound up in the hospital when he tried to defend his cousin against a street gang. Neither one of them is gay, but the cousin is small and a little effeminate, and somebody apparently decided that he was close enough to crossing the line to need a little lesson. He got off with a few bruises, but the other one - bigger and stronger - wound up with a broken arm and cracked ribs."

"Jesus, Carl," said Debbie. "You really think . . ."

"Can't prove anything," he replied, "since there were no witnesses. The cousin claims the toughs said they were gonna make sure he was never tempted to turn faggot; they deny it. But I don't think there's much doubt. They wouldn't dare pull shit like that if they didn't think they'd get away with it."

He took a deep breath and dropped the other shoe. "I think he's looking for payback, Honey. He's out for blood."

She went very still and her eyes were suddenly dark with shadow, and he knew immediately what she wanted to ask. But she didn't, and her silence was a major indicator of how frightened she was to hear the answer.

The two of them stared at each other, both having forgotten that they weren't alone at the table until Emmett cleared his throat. Debbie turned to look at him and was momentarily stunned to see that
there were tears in his eyes.

"Did I hear you right?" he asked, barely audible. "Did Brian's mother really . . . really say that to him?"

Debbie frowned at her husband, before leaning forward and putting her arm around Emmett's shoulders. "That she did, Honey. But we shouldn't have mentioned it in front of you. Guess we've just gotten too used to having you around, but you know him well enough to know that Brian wouldn't want you to know about it. So if you ever mention it to him, he'll probably cut off your balls and feed them to you with milk and sugar, for breakfast."

"But . . ."

"But what?" she asked when he seemed reluctant to continue.

"But he's . . . Brian Kinney, for fuck's sake. How could she . . ."

She smiled. "And that makes him a hero, doesn't it? The entire gay world wants to fuck him, or to be him - or both." Her voice hardened. "And his own mother gloated when he was stricken with cancer. What does that tell you?"

Emmett shook his head. "That life sucks?"

She hugged him closer. "Sometimes, even for Brian Kinney."

Emmett was not, somehow, as surprised as he felt he should be.

And Debbie - Debbie played with the food in her plate, falling silent as she drifted back in time, as she allowed her mind to call up old memories and old images: Brian at 14, black and blue and bloody and broken, hanging on to consciousness with the last of his strength and remaining rigidly silent when pressed to explain the injuries. Brian at 15, stumbling to the door at two in the morning with his clothing torn and filthy and his back a mass of bloody welts, in agony but refusing to cry. Brian at 16, pulling himself up onto her porch with his one functioning arm, barely able to stand, with blood pouring from a swollen lip as he held himself at a strange, awkward angle to spare him some measure of the pain from broken ribs.

Brian - hurt and bludgeoned, and yet still - somehow - beautiful.

The physical abuse - or the marks it left at any rate - had ended when he got old enough and big enough to defend himself, but the physical abuse, as bad as it had been, had never been the worst of it. She didn't know when - or if - the emotional and spiritual abuse had ended.

Sometimes - even knowing all she knew about what had made him the man he was - he made her so angry that she wanted to just beat the shit out of him herself. But she never would, because someone, at one time, had done quite enough of that, never managing to make the tiniest dent in the armor he wore around him.

Mikey knew, of course, and she was pretty sure that Brian knew, as well, although she'd never really told him. She was proud of her sons - the one of her blood, and the two of her heart - and she loved them both, even if she didn't always want to. She loved him, and it hurt deep inside her when she remembered how few were the people who understood that he deserved to be loved, and that he was capable of love in return.

He was, after all, Brian Kinney; out and proud - make that double-proud - and as arrogant as a young
god. So, she thought with a rueful smile, what's not to love?

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I love the night life.
I got to boogie . . .

Michael felt the rhythm pound through his bloodstream as arms wrapped around him from the back, and he felt the firmness of a massive dick move against his ass, and he smiled, not stopping to realize that some people might have thought it a little strange that he recognized the touch of that body as easily as if it had belonged to his life partner. Which it didn't.

He turned within the framework of those arms, and gazed into smoky hazel eyes that always seemed to spend a tiny fraction of time staring directly into his soul before glazing over with the warm luster of casual lust and affection.

Michael blinked and wondered if there would ever come a time when the first glimpse of Brian's face didn't make him catch his breath, just a little, and raise a mental fist against whatever gods might be. Nobody deserved to be that beautiful.

Brian offered him that smile - that smile that was only for Mikey, or so he told himself - and took his mouth in a hot, lingering kiss, but only after making sure that Ben was watching. Michael knew, on one level, that he should refuse the honeyed sweetness of those lips; knew that Ben, even though he seldom said anything, didn't much care for the sight of his husband being semi-devoured by the ranking gay stud of Pa. or for the fact that Michael was always Brian's first dance of the evening, whenever the couple visited Babylon. But Michael could not bring himself to break the pattern. Not because he enjoyed the kisses, although he did. And not because he never quite got enough of watching and feeling Brian writhe against him, although he didn't. But those weren't the reasons he was reluctant to change things. His reasons were more simple than that. He didn't resist Brian's kisses because he was the only person who still had an opportunity to do so. Because Brian didn't kiss anybody else, any more. Not like this.

Oh, he might drop a quick smooch on Em or Lindsey or some casual acquaintance who managed to claim his attention for a little while. Or even Cynthia, his girl Friday, on occasion. But real, deep, tongue-filled kisses were reserved for only one person. He only kissed Michael; everybody else he just fucked, one way or another.

They moved to the music for a while, body to body, until another set of arms, surprisingly strong, slipped around them, making Brian the filling of a queer sandwich. He leaned back, turning his head slightly, to brace against a buff shoulder, and fitting himself into the space beneath the brim of the silver spangled cowboy hat worn by the new arrival.

"Why, Grandma," he drawled with a grin, wriggling his hips suggestively, "what a big . . . basket you have!"

Emmett laughed and nuzzled against the dampness of the soft hair at the nape of Brian's neck. "The better to fuck you with, my prince."

Brian laughed. "In your dreams, Queenie." But there was no hostility in words or tone, and he was content to continue dancing, braced in the arms of both his friends. And Michael reflected that this too was something new. There had been a time, not so long ago, when Emmett would have been hesitant to approach Brian, unless specifically invited to do so; when, if he dared join their little duet at all, he would have stepped in to embrace Michael, avoiding intimate contact with Brian's sculpted body. These days, he no longer had such reservations, although he undoubtedly knew that there
were lines drawn in the sand that he would be foolish to cross.

Nevertheless, Michael thought, as he watched how Brian allowed his big Nellie friend to enjoy the closeness of their bodies, there was a sweetness about the image of the two of them together, and neither seemed eager to pull away from the intimacy.

Until the inevitable happened. One moment, the three friends were moving as one; the next a new arrival shoved his way into the tableau, and Brian was suddenly targeted for individual attention.

Emmett watched and smiled as a sweet young thing in fawn-colored suede - chaps, vest, boots, and hat - draped himself against Brian's torso and wrapped well-muscled arms around his neck.

"I been looking all over for you," said the young man.

"Yeah?" Brian's smile was just slightly arch. "For what?"

"They say . . ." Dark, thick-lashed eyes fluttered closed as Brian wrapped an arm around a slender waist.

"They say . . . what?" he asked, pressing close.

"They say you're the best. They say nobody fucks . . . like you."

The smile became a grin. "And you always listen to what 'they' say?"

The lithe body scooted closer. "Shouldn't I?"

Long-fingered hands gripped slender arms, hard enough to bruise. "How the fuck old are you?"

"Eighteen," came the answer breathlessly. Then the young man leaned close enough to whisper. "Legal, and old enough."

Brian smiled, and wrapped both arms around the boy's waist, resting his hands on the ass cheeks left bare by the chaps. Then he began to walk, pushing the firm young body along ahead of him.

"Brian!" Michael called after him. "We need to talk."

Brian didn't pause. He just turned enough to shout out his answer. "Later."

"But . . ."

Then he did pause, to maneuver his young partner around in a quick spin so he could see Michael's face. "Later, Mikey. Right now, I've got a lesson to teach." He smiled into dark eyes, and stroked a soft cheek with the back of his hand. "This won't take long."

Then he continued on his way to the back room.

"Shithead!" Michael muttered, to no one in particular.

Emmett, engrossed in an inspection of a line-up of chaps-clad bare bottoms, getting ready to compete for the title "King of the Babylon Cowboys" heard the note of disgruntlement in his friend's voice, and managed to drag his eyes away from the rosy mounds of flesh long enough to offer up a sympathetic hug.

"Let it go, Michael," he said, leaning close enough to be heard. "You know you're not going to change his mind. Brian Kinney doesn't do changing his mind."
"Yeah, but . . ."

Emmett deliberately looked away, not because he didn't want to see what was in Michael's eyes - he already knew what he would see there - but because he didn't want his young friend to see what might show in his own.

It wouldn't do for Ben's partner to realize that the whole world knew the elemental truth about what was in his heart. He was truly devoted to Ben - truly cared for him, truly loved him.

But his heart belonged to Brian, and always would.

"Where are you going?" Michael demanded as Emmett strode away, adjusting his spangled hat to a rakish angle.

"So many rosebuds," replied Emmett with a sweeping gesture toward the row of chaps-wearers, "so little time."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

*I Love the Nightlife - Alicia Bridges/Susan Hutcheson

tbc
"I didn't do it for you."

Emmett had to bite his lip to suppress the grin that wanted to break out in response to that statement as he wondered how many times Brian had spoken those exact words over the years, with exactly the same intention - to find a way to do a friend a favor and simultaneously perpetuate the image of Brian Kinney, self-serving prick.

"Of course you didn't," he agreed, "but my mama would whup my little ass until it was beet red if I didn't smile and say thank you at the appropriate moment, and that would really cramp my style. Who, after all, would have any interest in a beet red Nellie bottom, hmmm? So thank you anyway, even if it's all just one-hand-washes-the-other business."

Brian did not - quite - roll his eyes, but Emmett knew it was a near thing.

"You just make sure that my client's diva princess slash bitchy-cunt daughter gets the fabulous wedding of her dreams, so I get the fabulous contract of my dreams and make lots of fabulous lovely money."

Emmett adjusted his silver hat with a flourish. "Not to worry, Dahling. An Auntie Em wedding is becoming the newest status symbol for the nouveau riche, so serving your interest also serves mine. Getting in bed together is good for both of us."

Brian blinked. "Leave it to you to phrase it that way."

On impulse, Emmett dropped a quick kiss on Brian's cheek before whispering in his ear. "Not to worry, Hot Stuff. I won't tell a soul."

And Brian laughed out loud - a lovely, liquid, robust sound that Emmett found charming one moment, and melancholy the next, as he realized how long it had been since he'd heard it. He drained his Cosmo for lack of something better to do, and in order to conceal the softness in his eyes - a softness that he knew Brian would not appreciate.

"So," said Michael, sidling up to the bar with Ben draped around him like a cape, "how was your twinkie?"

Brian smiled, ignoring the slightly snarky tone of the question. "Hot, tight, eager, sweet..." The smile became a grin..."and currently cream-filled - metaphorically speaking, of course."

"You're disgusting," snapped Michael.

"And you, little prince, are pathetic," replied Brian, completely unperturbed. "Every time you venture out of your rose-covered cottage, you get your panties in a twist."

"Why do you want to go to London?"

"Because it's there?"

"Stop dodging the question. Why are you . . ."

Brian spun and leaned back against the bar, positioning himself so that he could study the crowd for
potential fuck-candidates, and offered his response with a bit of a throaty growl in his voice. "Because I want to have tea with the queen and check out the arse on the fabulous Prince Harry. Because I want to see what it takes to make the palace guards drop trou and bend over. Because I want to fuck my way across Piccadilly Circus and get sucked off as I float down the Thames. Because I want to hear how sexy that accent is when some Anglo-twinkie begs me to fuck him. Why the fuck do you think I want to go?"

"I think . . ." said Ben.

"Nobody asked you," Brian interrupted.

Once more, Emmett hid a smile, and wondered - as he often did - if Ben ever realized how much amusement he provided for Brian, especially whenever the professor donned his veneer of urbane sophistication - although that was absolutely not what Brian called it - exactly as if he were putting on a clean shirt.

Michael, meanwhile, was rolling his eyes. "Have you thought about this?" he demanded. "Really thought about it, I mean. Just imagine all the stuff we could all do together in New York. Especially considering how much we didn't get to do the last time we were there - also because of Justin. We could go to Times Square and Central Park and the Empire State Building and Radio City Music Hall, and . . . oh, oh, go see The Lion King on Broadway and shop at Bloomingdale's and eat at the Brooklyn Diner and go see Letterman and . . . I mean, I know we'd have to attend Justin's big show first, but we could make it quick, you know. We could pop in and . . ."

"And listen to smug, supercilious, pedantic, cunty little critics with bad comb-overs expound on the social significance of Dadaism and the deliberate negation of traditional artistic values while they surreptitiously check out your charming little ass and try to figure out how to maneuver you into the men's room. Then later maybe we could loiter at the Carnegie Deli to try to catch a glimpse of Liza and her entourage." He paused and regarded Michael with a lifted eyebrow. "Or maybe just cut to the chase and get mugged on the subway. All part of the attractions of the Big Apple."

"You don't have to be so sarcastic," Michael replied, not quite pouting - but coming close.

Brian looked up and spotted the steely spark of anger in Ben's eyes, there and gone in a blink, and he smiled. Then he carefully draped his arms over Michael's shoulders and pulled him close until they were eye to eye.

"Mikey," he said slowly, "listen to me. Are you listening?"

Michael huffed a dramatic sigh. "Of course I'm listening."

"You do not need me to go to New York with you so you can do all those things. You just grab the old ball and chain, strap the kid into his car seat in the rented minivan, and book a suite at the Plaza. Then you proceed to seek out all kinds of famous places to introduce to a little fag PDA and the sight of your fabulous little bum - Yankee Stadium, Broadway, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Guggenheim . . ."

"Jesus, Brian! Is everything about sex to you?"

Brian didn't even bother to try to frame an answer; he simply gave his oldest friend the look he always used when he wanted to say, "Are you fucking kidding me?" without actually saying anything at all.

Even Ben had to laugh.
"But I still don't understand why . . ."

Brian shifted and leaned forward to whisper three words in Michael's ear. "Yes . . . you do."

And Michael had a moment of epiphany, realizing that he did, indeed, understand. Then he had to turn away from his old friend, to conceal the surge of melancholy within him, not so much for what he knew as for what he did not know. He had always believed that no one knew Brian as well as he - that no one else understood him at all. He had only recently come to realize that there were many facets of Brian's personality, his core, that no one knew. Not even him; not even Justin. Maybe not even Brian himself.

But the bottom line was that Brian would not react well to any suggestion of pity, no matter the source, and it was the height of stupidity anyway - for Michael Novotny Bruckner to waste a single moment feeling sorry for Brian Kinney - the model for Rage himself, the super hero with powers like no other.

Except that there was something . . . something only half-formed and still seeking definition. Something that was not quite as it should be. Something not quite . . . Brian.

"Hey, Emmy Lou," Brian drawled, "don't look now but your Southern Comfort just walked in."

Emmett's face lit up as he turned to greet his current love interest who was actually a very old love interest: Calvin Culpepper, of the Hazlehurst, Mississippi, Culpeppers, was striding toward him, sculpted torso bulging in all the right places under a red satin western shirt that looked more poured on than worn.

They had kissed good-bye that morning when Calvin had departed for his new job as a physical therapist at Allegheny Hospital, and they had met up for lunch at the diner, but the intensity of the greeting between them would have been appropriate for soul-mates reuniting after months of separation.

Brian watched, wearing a small, enigmatic smile. Neither Michael nor Ted had yet come to accept Emmett's new obsession, both holding on to their doubts and their skepticism, given their old friend's less than spectacular track record in relationships. But Brian, for no reason that anybody could discern, had welcomed the new arrival with typical sardonic humor, if not exactly open arms, and Calvin had blossomed under the attention, apparently able to see Brian with unambiguous clarity, without the filters created by years of exposure and experience.

And there had been an unexpected benefit from his fresh perspective; Emmett had begun to see things he had not noticed previously - things that initially surprised him, until he realized that these things had been a part of Brian all along, only no one had bothered to try to interpret them. Then he had wept for the loneliness such a realization implied.

It reminded him of the title of an old Star Trek episode (dear to him because he'd always loved the manly physiques of its stars - along with the fledgling but innovative liberalism of its philosophy): Who Mourns for Adonis?

Who indeed - and Adonis would certainly never mourn for himself.

"Rico," called Brian, gesturing to capture the bartender's attention, "cosmos on the house for my friends."

"And for you, Mr. Kinney?"

Brian turned as the sultry, cultured voice fell on his ear, almost like a caress.
"You're not Rico," he said flatly, one quick glance taking in thick dark hair, cobalt blue eyes, lips that curved into a sweet smile that begged for licking and exploring, broad shoulders, muscled arms, and a narrow waist.

"No, sir. I'm Tony. Rico's mom's in the hospital, so he asked me to fill in for him. Hope that's all right with you, Mr. Kinney."

Brian smiled and did not quite succeed in concealing his disappointment. "So . . . you work for me, right?"

The tall, buff young man glanced at his watch. "I do now - but in eleven minutes, I won't any more."

Brian leaned forward. "Maybe you'd like to explore your . . . possibilities," he said softly, thick lashes dropping to camouflage the hungry gleam in hazel eyes. "In the back room." He turned and started walking away, pausing to glance up at the clock above the bar. Nine minutes to midnight. He turned back, and his smile was hot enough to melt steel. "Just . . . walk slow."

"Bryan?" Michael called after him, the insipient whine in his voice threatening to break out into full-fledged frustration.

"Later, Mikey."

Michael was looking slightly bewildered. "What the fuck was that all about?"

"Jesus, Michael," said Ted. "You've known him all your life, and you still don't know that he doesn't fuck the hired help?"

With great deliberation, Tony, the interim bartender, nodded to the young man who had just arrived to relieve him, carefully logged out of his computer access, and removed the western-style vest and spangled hat he'd been given as his costume for the evening. Then he moved around the bar and started toward the back, moving very slowly.

"Shit!" muttered Michael. "Poor fuck doesn't know what he's getting into."

Emmett drained his cosmo as he turned to stare into Michael's eyes. "Don't be silly, Sweetie. Of course he does. Just like everybody else here does. Granted, he's no saint, but one thing Brian Kinney does not do is lie - or make promises he doesn't intend to keep. He just fucks; that's what he does, and that's what most guys want from him. It's what he was born to do. I mean, how many men do you know who can qualify as a walking wet dream - the way he does. You, of all people, should know that."

He paused and caught Ted's eye, and knew that they were both thinking the same exact thing. Michael should certainly be familiar with that effect; he had, after all, spent his whole life studying that trademark strut as Brian walked away from him.

Michael watched until Tony disappeared down the stairs; for a moment, he even debated following him, and trying to make Brian see reason and understand how childish and perverted his actions were, but then he looked up and saw Ben's eyes, dark and shadowed and filled with something he couldn't quite identify.

"Is he ever going to grow up?" he grumbled turning back to the bar.

Emmett and Ted exchanged another look over the top of his bent head, and both of them heard the response that they thought they should offer - but didn't.
Still, in their minds they heard it anyway. It was just two words, unspoken, but loud enough, somehow, to drown out the thumpa-thumpa.

"Are you?"

It wasn't much to look at, day or night, light or dark. It was small, cramped, old, faded; the heating was problematic, at best, and the plumbing only barely functional. The walls were slightly less grimy than when he'd moved in, but only because his mother, on one of her whirlwind visits, had refused to leave him to live in such squalor and dragged two bags full of cleaning supplies up four flights of stairs, before proceeding to scrub everything in sight and resort to the use of caustic cleaners to remove years' worth of crud from the tiny toilet and miniscule sink that were the flat's only concessions to the concept of indoor plumbing.

The bed was narrow and lumpy; the furniture, warped and barely functional, and he'd been there just long enough to figure out that it would be just as miserably hot in high summer as it was freezing cold in dead winter. He had no kitchen, no shower (unless he ventured downstairs and waited his turn in line, inviting the speculative gazes of the two cougars who shared the fairly large apartment in the third floor southern wing or a groping by the elderly old queen who occupied the studio apartment across from the community bathroom). He had only one real window in the flat, and it looked out toward the roof of the adjacent house where he was pretty sure he was an object of great visual interest to the middle-aged bus driver who lived there.

His flat (he couldn't bear calling it a 'loft', even though the term would have been appropriate) had only one thing to recommend it; fully half of the north-facing wall had been replaced by a sloping skylight, exposing the cramped, dingy little room to the most beautiful, pure, natural light that was available within the five burroughs. And that, of course, made everything else unimportant. It didn't matter if he didn't eat here (although he did bring in take-out and his mother had insisted on buying him a tiny fridge for milk and juice and beer) or bathe here (Daphne's cousin never seemed to mind when he borrowed her shower, although she did sometimes stare at him a bit strangely) or even sleep here (although he mostly did). What mattered was that he painted here; he dreamed here; and he remembered here. This was where he lived.

He stood before his skylight and gazed out into the darkness, his left hand lazily rubbing the soft skin beneath his navel. There was little to see at this hour of the night, although there was never real darkness in the City. He looked up and tried to find a star in the night sky, but gave it up quickly. Nothing to wish upon - and no wish worth making.

In two short days, if any small percentage of his agent's customary bullshit could be believed, he would enter the ranks of "Self-Supporting Artists" - those who not only earned critical acclaim, which he'd already achieved in some small measure, but also a living wage, or the beginning of one anyway. Monica was convinced that his exhibition would be successful enough that he might even be able to get out of Bed-Stuy and upgrade to someplace in the Village.

He thought she was probably being overly optimistic and, maybe, just a trifle patronizing.

His stuff was good; even he knew that. But it was also something of an acquired taste. He knew that too. Although the art world was more tolerant and less condemning than other venues, it was still a bit of a stretch for the casual collector to be able to contemplate work that was blatantly homosexual in nature without a tendency to cringe away and turn the eyes elsewhere, resorting to surreptitious glances to satisfy both curiosity and any more prurient interests.

Still, it was good - original, fresh, even riveting in some ways, and completely non-derivative. He
just didn't know if it was good enough.

And he didn't really know if it mattered, for he couldn't quite ignore a tiny little voice whispering deep in his mind, reminding him that the one person for whom it was intended, the one to whom it was meant to speak, would never see it.

Brian was gone - and Justin wasn't stupid enough not to know why. He had even known it from the beginning, though he'd tried to deny it.

This was his dream - his chance to light up the world with his art and his gift - and he would never do that if he insisted on clinging to his past. He knew it; he understood it; he even believed it.

It was what he wanted, and he was poised on the brink of success.

But what would it mean without . . .

He knew that Brian would never come for him, never step up to get between him and his dreams.

Never fit in to the world he wished to conquer.

It infuriated him that Brian had made the choice for him - that he had chosen to remove himself from the equation, to eliminate temptation. In some ways, he wanted to drive to Pittsburgh and storm into that exquisite loft apartment, and tell the prick exactly what he thought of him - before throwing him down and fucking the shit out of him.

He was enraged - and he was grateful, because he knew himself well enough to know that he would not have been able to make the choice on his own - grateful because Brian had chosen for him.

His hand drifted lower, and he slipped his fingers around his engorged cock and sprawled back on the bed, imagining other fingers touching him, working him, invading his body and sending him up into the stratosphere of euphoria. Brian's hands. He had always loved Brian's hands. And Brian's smile. And the sultry fire in those incredible hazel eyes. And the lines of that exquisite body. And Brian's dick. Absolutely like no other.

Shit!

He needed to get up and get dressed if he had any hope of being on time. Steven had scored tickets for Grey Gardens at the Walter Kerr Theater, and he would be very upset if Justin ran late - although he certainly knew by this time that the young artist had been thoroughly infected by a former lover with a love for the drama of arriving late enough to be the center of attention for avid eyes. And Justin still drew 'avid eyes', everywhere he went. He didn't notice it much himself, but he knew it to be true. It had been Brian, of course, who had drawn his attention to it; Brian, who had always bolstered his sense of his own beauty.

Brian - always.

Steven was a lovely man, probably the perfect man for Justin. Bright and educated and sophisticated and elegant. And very eager to introduce his young lover to the cultured, eclectic lifestyle he lived, centered around his recently remodeled brownstone in Soho. Steven was an investment counselor with a prestigious Wall Street firm - a product of old money and impeccable breeding and a family tradition of erudition and political connection. He was also quite beautiful and a skilled and generous lover.

And he loved Justin and wanted to marry him, without reservation and with every intention of allowing Justin to pursue whatever dream he might choose to seek.
Steven was perfect, except for one small fact.

He wasn't Brian.

But Brian was gone, and Justin knew that he wouldn't be coming back, knew that Brian had foreseen what Justin had refused to accept - that Justin Taylor, artist of world-wide renown, would never be able to co-exist with Justin Taylor, husband of Brian Kinney.

It was truly a case of two different worlds in which he could not exist concurrently.

And the rules they had established so long ago no longer applied, of course. To either of them. He was sure that Brian had moved on - that he no longer limited himself to one sampling from any of his multitude of fucks, that he no longer returned to the loft every night, that he no longer withheld the sweetness of his kisses from his trick of the moment.

Strangely, breaking those rules - the ones that he himself had imposed - had proved to be the hardest step to take. But he had managed it, because he knew he must, and because he could hear in his mind the scornful laughter of his ex-fiancé if he had admitted to such sentimentality.

He did love Steven. He really did.

With a deep breath, he pushed himself off the bed, ignoring the half-hearted protest of his semi-hard dick, and went to retrieve his best suit - the Armani that had been selected and tailored for him for . . . but best not to think about that.

Steven was waiting. Maybe it was time to join him - and give him what he wanted, like an answer to the invitation he had delivered just yesterday, an invitation to spend the next two weeks at a fabulous resort in Tahiti, where splendidly appointed guest cottages were built out over the water and one could look down through a transparent floor to watch the magic of ocean life on display in a turquoise-tinted paradise.

Exquisitely romantic - and everything that Brian Kinney would never be.

Maybe . . . it was time.

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tbc
"You scared the shit out of me, Kiddo," said Margo Renton, administrative assistant, social secretary, and Jill-of-all-trades for Maxwell Bates, owner of the Bergerie Gallery, an exclusive little showplace for up and coming, avant garde artists. Like young Justin Taylor. She was fanning her face with a copy of his brochure, her hand clinched at her chest.

"I'm sorry, Margo," Justin answered with an apologetic smile. "When I saw the lights on and realized that someone was still here, I thought I'd just check in, and see . . ." He paused, and rosy spots erupted on his cheeks.

Margo, a painfully thin woman with eyes as dark as Renaissance-era stained glass and cheekbones to die for (he thought he'd like to paint her someday as a stereotypical representative of dykedom, even though she claimed she wasn't) was not given much to sentiment, but she couldn't quite resist favoring him with a tiny smile. "It's okay, Honey. First time out of the gate is always traumatic. So . . . you want to walk around, and take a look?"

"Can I?" he asked, almost afraid to believe.

"You may," she said pointedly, with a glance at her watch. "If you hurry. No time for a leisurely stroll - I do hope to get home in time to actually spend a few hours in my bed - but a quick pass should be okay."

"It's pretty dark," he observed, stepping forward slowly.

"In that case," she answered, stepping back behind the ultra-modern, angular reception desk and reaching for a concealed switch, "let there be light."

She watched with a small smile as Justin walked slowly to the center of the display area and then simply stood, surrounded by his art - the accumulated production of his life. None of it was new to him, of course. And all of it was new to him.

Along the left hand wall, portable display panels featured his impressionist work - abstract and emotional, almost turbulent, even bordering on violence once or twice. Here was his passion: lust, love, terror, rage, his biting need to strike back, to avenge himself and to reach out and grab the things he hungered for, to possess that which he desired; strong shapes and silhouettes, studies of light and shadow rendered mostly in shades of ochre and gold, in earthtones with slashes of crimson and copper, slashed through with blades of obsidian and swirling tempests of brilliance, lurking beneath dark seas under a swollen, bleeding sun. Colors that might have been reflected in eyes that never seemed to be the same color twice, eyes that changed with the seasons and with the passions that touched the heart.

Farther in, a group of haunting sketches and bright portraits and still-life studies had been arranged to compliment each other - faces, bodies, an open hand, a length of rope draped over a fencepost, a lock of hair that curled around a strong jawline, fingers that stroked a swollen penis. Two women, locked in a steamy embrace; a faded jacket draped across a chairback; two men, silhouettes only against a twilight sky; a little boy burying his face against his father's shoulder; a classic Corvette streaking down a rain-swept highway; a child asleep on an old quilt; two hands clasped - man and child; a dirty city street, neon-lit and lurid; broken pottery and tarnished brass; laughing faces, frowning faces, pensive faces - joy and sorrow; hope and despair, certainty and doubt.
On the opposite side, brilliant sprays of color formed the foundation for his graphic efforts - things that had been created in the same place that had given birth to Rage and Zephyr and J.T. - massive bodies and muscles contrasted with slender grace; dark justice tempered by luminous mercy; unswerving purpose touched by whimsy. It was the art of the streets, of the masses - the art of childhood dreams and fantasies and nightmares.

His eyes swept over it all, and he felt his heart start to race with a rare, unexpected sense of accomplishment.

Then he moved forward, his eyes finally finding what he had really come looking for. The art . . . of Brian.

Strangers or casual acquaintances might not have recognized the identity of the model for all of the pieces arranged along the back wall of the gallery, especially since some of the images were shadowed and unclear, and many were only fractured glimpses of a profile or a feature. But anyone who knew Brian Kinney - really knew him - would recognize him at once, needing only the most minimal clues; the sardonic lift of one eyebrow, the sensual half-smile barely touching sculpted lips, the strong lines of a broad back tapering into a slender waist. Brian, walking away, his face only just visible but something in his posture or the cant of his head announcing that he was trying not to laugh; Brian sprawled in an easy chair, illuminated by a pale lamp, lost in thought; Brian at rest, eyes closed, bare and beautiful and totally natural; Brian in the shower, or running on a treadmill, or relaxing in a spa. Brian thinking; Brian laughing; Brian brooding - dancing, drinking, working, smoking . . . grieving. Only one like that. Brian . . . beautiful.

"Fuck," said a cultured voice, close enough to send warm air into the blond strands at the nape of Justin's neck. "I really, really want to hate him, but . . ."

Justin turned to smile up at Steven Fletcher. "But?"

Steven shrugged. "But I can't. Because you make me see him through your eyes." He paused then, and moved closer, studying one particularly bold image, featuring Brian standing at a window with his arms crossed, a cigarette dangling from his lips and smoke curling around his face. "Is he really . . . that beautiful?" he asked finally.

Justin looked away quickly, but not quickly enough to hide the flicker in his eyes. "This," he said with a sweep of his hand, "doesn't even come close. He's the most vital, most intensely alive person I've ever known. Bigger than life; bigger than . . . anything."

"And yet," said Steven, reaching up to brace his hand against Justin's shoulder, "here you are."

Justin nodded. "Yeah. Here I am."

The rest remained unspoken, but Justin didn't have to be a mind-reader to know what Steven was thinking. If Brian Kinney was truly the love of his life, what was Justin doing in New York?

It was a question that he frequently asked himself - and just as frequently could not answer.

"Well?" said Margo, moving forward to adjust the spotlight on a charcoal sketch of Brian, asleep at his desk with his head propped on folded arms. "Does it please you?"

"Oh, yes," Justin answered, his smile more than justifying his nickname, although no one in the city even knew his nickname, which pleased him for some reason he didn't care to explore. "You've done a beautiful job. But . . ." his gaze swept the room.

"Ahhh," she responded, a glint of something ambiguous in her eyes, "you're wondering about the
"piece de resistance, aren't you? Well, it's in the perfect spot, assuming you decide to display it. Have you . . . decided, I mean?"

"Not really," he answered, shoving his hands into his pockets. It was a curiously touching gesture, making him look even younger than his twenty-four years. He had lost no time in shedding the suit coat and the tie he had worn to the theater, and was now completely relaxed in dark pants and a white dress shirt, sleeves rolled up and half unbuttoned. Margo thought his appearance perfectly charming, and achingly young.

"We're getting down to the wire, Hon," she said gently. "You're going to have to decide . . . soon."

"I know."

Steven wandered a little further into the room, absorbing the energy and the beauty of Justin's work, allowing the young artist to follow with his eyes. Classically handsome, with dark hair, gray eyes, a sculpted face that always wore just a trace of stubble, and a tall, beautifully conditioned body, Steven looked perfectly at home in the elegant setting. He looked around the room, obviously savoring the items that caught his eye, but he couldn't quite resist glancing at the shadowed area at the top of the small, spiral staircase in the rear corner of the long, narrow room.

The gallery was not particularly large, but it was quite impressive. It had been converted from an old brownstone, and the contractor had carefully preserved the original lines and classic details of the structure. The main display area took up most of the ground floor, excepting only the shallow vestibule and reception alcove and a small utility area providing space for a tiny kitchenette and a powder room. Upstairs there was a balcony that overlooked the main display room, leading to two offices - one for the owner and the second for Margo herself - and a small, secure area for storage of art work awaiting display or sale. In addition, there was a shallow offset, located directly adjacent to the stair well, and it was in this choice location that the gallery often displayed the primary feature of any exhibition. Featureless walls, covered with charcoal-colored raw silk, formed an octagonal chamber, a simple setting, with nothing to distract the eye of the viewer away from the room's focus. The lighting was dramatic and deliberate. Anyone who stepped into the alcove would see the artwork - and only the artwork.

Such was the case now, pending Justin's decision.

There were two paintings set up on easels in the tiny niche, both covered with soft, dark drapes, with nothing else in the room except some tasteful greenery to soften the angles of the walls and floor. There was no window, no furniture. Nothing but the art.

The best things he had ever done, and he knew it - knew, in fact, that they were the best things he ever would do.

What he didn't know was whether or not he could bear to part with either of the two, or even allow anyone to see them.

One he'd finished only a few days before, using a tiny photograph to refresh the image in his mind, but mostly working from memory, calling up a vision of a powerful moment he knew he would never forget; the other he'd done just before he left Pittsburgh, and had kept completely to himself, except for one person. Lindsey had seen it when she'd come to help him pack up for the trip - seen it and gone to her knees, rendered completely speechless.

She'd never managed to say a word about it, but then, she'd never needed to.

He knew it was a masterpiece, that it had the power, in and of itself, to make him an artist of great
critical acclaim.

If only he could stand to expose it to the world.

"Justin," said Steven, very softly, "I understand that this must be difficult for you, that your art is very . . . personal. God! Is it ever! Anyone could see that, and feel it. You have a huge gift, to be able to reach out and touch people where they live. But if you really want to light up the world, to make people see life as you see it, as you want them to see it, you have to . . ."

"Let it go," Justin supplied, when it was obvious that Steven could not go on.

Steven confined his response to a quick nod.

Justin stood in silence for a moment, eyes closed, his breathing shallow and steady and calm, careful to betray nothing of the massive conflict that arose in his core whenever he tried to resolve this issue. Steven was right; it was difficult, but only Justin truly understood why. It wasn't simply a matter of opening up his past, allowing people to see it through his heart; it was a matter of releasing his hold on it.

To share it was . . . to give it away.

When he opened his eyes, Steven was staring at him, frowning slightly, obviously discomfited by what he read in Justin's face.

"You're right," Justin whispered, stepping forward and starting up the stairs. "You're so right."

"Justin? What are you . . ."

The blond artist paused and turned to look down at the dashing young man who only wanted to give him the world - Paris, Florence, Vienna . . . Tahiti, for God's sake - who offered so much and asked so little.

"It's time," he said, his voice carefully emotionless, "to let it go."

Steven looked away quickly, unwilling to allow his young lover to interpret the flare of emotion in his eyes, but Justin had already resumed his climb and seemed to be focused on nothing but the shadowy alcove where the heart and soul of his work were cached.

Steven, meanwhile, turned back to study the display on the rear wall and moved closer to examine a particularly striking portrait in which hazel eyes, half hooded by a fringe of long lashes, contrasting beautifully with a crimson shirt, looked up at the artist solemnly, without a single nuance of humor or passion or emotion - a portrait of repose which should have been boring, flat, without depth or meaning - but wasn't. It shouldn't have been able to speak at all. Instead, it spoke volumes. It said, "You can look; you can want; you can seek. You can even touch. But you will never own."

Bastard.

Steven was careful to say nothing, to allow nothing to show on his face. But inside, beneath the layers of sophistication and the meticulously crafted public persona, he could not deny the existence of a fleeting urge to reach out and destroy what he knew he could never have. If he was very lucky - and very clever - he would achieve his goal; Justin would be his. But something deep inside him, in a place that he never allowed anyone to see, confronted a truth that he would never be able to change; he might manage to be the last to claim his young lover's heart, but he would never be the first.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~
The executive office of the owner of Babylon was neither large nor lavish, but it was distinctly Brian Kinney. There was very little furniture in the small room, but each item was a gleaming example of Mies van der Rohe's genius. There was only one painting, but it was an original by an artist who was currently unknown, but wouldn't be for long. Only one photograph occupied a place of prominence on the sleek surface of the desk, but it offered a likeness of an exquisite face, captured in a moment of bright laughter, and it was displayed in an antique Tiffany sterling silver frame. A bank of monitors covered one wall, the only visible evidence of a state-of-the-art security system. One decanter - Waterford crystal - containing Brian's favorite whiskey.

Spare. Lean. Elegant.

Like the man leaning back in his executive chair, illuminated only by the single lamp that provided the sole source of light in the room that had no natural light of its own - no windows, no skylights, no reflections. He was more shadow than substance, but it was an elegant shadow - black Armani suit with jacket unbuttoned contrasting perfectly with a shirt of scarlet silk by the same designer, limned only by the lamp's indirect glow.

He wore scarlet often these days, and wondered if anyone ever remembered that Justin had always loved it when he wore that color. He rather hoped that no one would make the connection.

In front of his desk, two men sat in Bauhaus chairs, waiting in comfortable silence as Brian poured out three shots of JB.

"You're looking good, Brian," said the larger of the two.

Brian smiled. "Thanks, Drewsie. You too."

Drew Boyd, star quarterback of the Ironmen and only recently outed, allowed himself a small grin. "Emmett's the only one that's ever called me that."

Brian leaned forward, and there was something almost predatory in his posture. "You're lucky he didn't call you a lot worse."

The quarterback's eyes flared with a brief flash of anger, before he remembered the full circumstances of his final meeting with Emmett. Then he nodded slowly. "Yeah. You're right."

Brian smiled, silently reflecting that there were only a few people who would credit that he could admire a man's willingness to face truth without flinching. Still, he thought Boyd might be one of those who could understand and appreciate his attitude.

"So," he said after distributing the glasses, "what brings you here?"

Boyd leaned back in his chair, savoring the smoky sweetness of the whiskey. "Thought I'd do you a favor."

Brian's smile was just slightly venal. "Do you really think I need your . . . favors?"

Boyd laughed aloud. "Don't be cheeky. Remember, I've seen you in your underwear."

"That's hardly a distinction."

"Anyway, I meant a different kind of favor. I hear you're looking to beef up your security."

For the first time, Brian allowed his gaze to wander, and to drift down and back up the body of the individual seated at Boyd's side. Broad-shouldered, buff, perfect six-pack, flat belly, dark hair and
eyes and a lovely cleft chin (a feature that Brian always found difficult to resist). This time, however, he'd make an exception, because he'd have no choice. This guy was straight - interesting, but straight. What a shame!

He looked the stranger straight (no pun intended) in the eye. "I take it that the beef he's talking about . . . is you."

"It is. My name is Lance Mathis, Mr. Kinney."

"He's my cousin, Brian," said Boyd. "But he's a good man, for all that."

Brian nodded, studying the newcomer's face more intently. "Okay, let's get down to brass tacks, Mr. Mathis. I know queer when I see it, and I know straight. I'm never wrong. So how are you going to feel when - notice I didn't say 'if' - you have to stand up to a group of your fellow breeders in defense of a bunch of fags or a couple of drag queens?"

Lance Mathis smiled. "Do you know where I got my start in security? I grew up in Hyannisport. Near Cape Cod, you know. And my father worked his entire life for a pretty well-known family there. You've probably heard of them. And if there's any family, anywhere in the world, that's more devoted to equal rights for everybody, regardless of race, religion, sexual preference, I can't imagine who they'd be."

Brian smiled. "Which would make you . . .?"

"Extremely well trained."

But Brian was not yet convinced. He leaned forward and braced his chin on his clasped hands. "Maybe we need to be a little clearer here. I frankly don't give a fuck about your political correctness - or lack thereof - or how liberal your family background might be or how much you're into the peace movement or Zen Buddhism. What I want is a strong man who knows how to use his fists when it's necessary, who fights when he needs to - not because he believes in the cause but because it's what he gets paid to do. That's what I'm looking for. Not some do-gooder crusader who'll get carried away in his devotion to truth, justice, and the American way, or some such crap. So can you deal with that, or do I need to look elsewhere?"

Mathis stood up and leaned forward, extending his right hand. "You're a straight shooter, Mr. Kinney. I didn't expect that, so no bullshit about my beliefs or my liberal leanings. Just my assurance that you'll get what you pay for."

Brian took the hand and shook it firmly. "Can't ask for more than that. You can start tomorrow. I assume you're expensive."

"The best always are."

Brian poured another round of drinks before pushing back and propping one Prada-clad foot on the corner of his desk. "I couldn't agree more."

After Boyd and Mathis left his office, Brian spent a few minutes reviewing proposals for upcoming promotions and signing off on those he approved. Then the monitors lining the left-hand wall of the executive office flared to life as the big front doors were opened and regulars began to pour through the entrance, after getting the nod of approval from the over-sized muscle man that Brian had christened the Gatekeeper. Sipping at his whiskey, he sprawled back in his chair, spent a moment gazing at the lovely face looking back at him from the photograph on his desk, before spinning
slowly to check the images on the monitors and gauge the size of the crowd. Then he smiled his satisfaction when he glanced at the exterior scenes to see the thick line wrapped around the block.

Another big night at Babylon; another sizeable chunk of change in his pocket.

He did not move nor turn his head when a discreet knock sounded at the door.

"Brian?"

"Hmmm?"

"Got a minute?"

Lazily, he spun away from the monitors to look up at the tall blonde standing just inside the doorway.

His smile was minimal. "Barely. It's . . . Brett, isn't it?"

The blonde's smile was a trifle slow in forming. "Actually, it's Brandon."

"Oh." Brian let his gaze settle on the computer monitor on his desk, obviously uninterested in continuing the conversation. "Sorry about that. I'm not good with names." He paused then, reaching out to tap in a command on his keyboard and then waiting a moment to check out the data that came up on the screen. Only then did he look back up at his visitor's handsome face. "Was there something you wanted?"

"Not exactly," said the man who had set out to topple Brian's position as the most desired man in Pittsburgh just the previous year - and failed. "Just wondered . . . can I sit down?"

With the regal aplomb of a king of the realm, secure in his arrogance, Brian nodded toward a chair. Privately, he had long since admitted that their little competition had been an exercise in stupidity. Still, it had been a victory, albeit a small one in the grand scheme of things. Nevertheless, in a world where failure was too frequently the norm, he always reminded himself to savor the triumphs. Even the small ones.

The visitor seated himself, and Brian waited, feeling not even a slight compulsion to break the silence.

Brandon braced his elbows against the arms of his chair, and steepled his fingers. "This is a little awkward."

One single lifted eyebrow was the only indication that Brian had even heard him.

Realizing at last that Brian was not going to give him any kind of verbal cue or comfortable opening, the blonde leaned forward abruptly and focused his gaze on Brian's eyes. "I want to know why."

"Why . . . what?"

"Don't fuck with me. You know what."

Brian shrugged. "It's been a long time. Why are you asking . . . now?"

Brandon tilted his head and examined Brian's expression closely. "You're a busy man."

It didn't really qualify as an answer, but Brian let it pass. Then he decided abruptly that he didn't much care for this game. "I am indeed. As for your question, the answer is simple. Sometimes, a man
discovers that having something is not nearly as much fun . . . as wanting it. Your ass is charming enough, but in the end - if you'll excuse the expression - it's just an ass, not really very different from any other."

Brandon blinked. "One might say the same . . . about your cock."

This time the grin was slow and easy and insolent. "One might. One might also say that Everest is just a mountain, or the Pacific is just an ocean. Right?"

He stood then and slowly removed his jacket and dress shirt, revealing the black wife-beater he wore beneath, his actions declaring that this little interview was over. Then he retrieved his new Hugo Boss leather jacket from the tiny closet in the corner and checked his image in the full length mirror on the door, as Brandon Wright watched, the rage that swelled within him betrayed only by the tense lines of his body - rage tempered by an unexpected and unwelcome surge of lust.

He did not want this arrogant prick. He did not.

His dick, however, seemed to disagree.

He got to his feet and moved forward, almost - but not quite - invading Brian's personal space. "You know," he said in a soft husky voice, "if we walk in together, we'll attract every eye in the place."

Brian grinned before leaning forward and dropping a kiss on the blonde's forehead - the kind of kiss a rock star might bestow on a rabid fan - or a maiden aunt. "I already do, and I don't like to share."

Brandon looked down quickly, but not quite quickly enough to prevent Brian from identifying - and ignoring - the flash of fury in his eyes. With a final tug to make sure the leather jacket was perfectly arranged to show off the body beneath it, Brian stepped around the blonde and opened the door, gesturing for his guest to make his exit.

Brandon paused as he turned to leave and stepped close again, to stare directly into Brian's eyes. "You're playing with fire, you know," he whispered, before leaning close and licking at Brian's lower lip.

Brian just smiled. "You're not that hot," he answered, and pushed his visitor out the door, none too gently.

Then he stood and waited while Brandon walked away, dismissing the tall blonde from his thoughts as soon as he was out of sight.

No one would ever be able to say that Brian Kinney didn't live in the moment.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

TBC
Justin stood in a thick pool of light at the head of the stairs, his hair reflecting bright gold under the directional beam of a perfectly-placed spot. Directly ahead of him lay the shadowed alcove that was his destination, the carefully arranged lamps above the arched entrance still dark, controlled by a concealed switch inside the doorframe.

He sometimes thought that it was the most tragic conflict: light, so critical to the creation of great art, was ultimately a weapon that could completely destroy it. Thus the two items that rested upon easels within the alcove remained shrouded in soft covers, protected from the treacherous glare of the spotlights which would paint them in liquid brilliance and draw every eye once switched on. Until that moment, they would remain in the dark. Safe. Protected. Unrisked.

Priceless - to him, anyway.

He paused and turned slightly, to look down to the display floor where Steven was standing motionless in front of one of the smaller, more intimate pieces - an image of Brian at his most inscrutable, perfect face just emerging from shadow, hazel eyes fully shielded, untouchable, unreachable - and irresistible.

Justin watched for a moment, and saw much more than Steven would have been able to credit - saw the tension in the set of broad shoulders, saw the slight hitch in the breathing, saw the involuntary clinching of the jaw. Saw and understood, knowing that, if the situation were reversed, he would be hard pressed to accept that another man was central to his lover's very existence, central in his heart.

He knew it could not go on.

He turned away, leaving Steven the privacy of his thoughts, knowing that he should invite his lover to join him, to share the intimacy of his work. Knowing he should, and knowing he wouldn't.

Not yet. First he had to face it himself - alone.

Moving forward abruptly, allowing himself no room to maneuver, he flipped the switch that filled the room with light and stripped off the covering of the smaller canvas.

Best, he knew, to make this a two-step process.

It was a compact piece, perhaps half life-sized. It was also simple - a head/torso shot of a man napping against brightly colored cushions, with an infant cradled against his shoulder, also sleeping; Brian Kinney with his hand curled protectively around his son's tiny body.

Justin had heard snide remarks made by several of Brian's friends when they'd looked at the snapshot from which the portrait had been painted, and he had been amazed by their indifference and their inability to discern the elemental truth revealed in the image.

He wondered if he was the only one who could see the incredible depth of the love displayed therein.

He thought not - hoped not - and, provided that he could bring himself to share it with the world, he was pretty sure that others, people who did not know Brian - never would know Brian - would see it too, and wish for a moment that they were fortunate enough to know such an extraordinary young
His eyes were soft with luminous memories as he reached out to touch the face on the canvas. He knew that all of Brian's friends and acquaintances - not to mention Brian himself - would have snorted their scorn at the notion that there was anything innocent about Brian Kinney. Honest? Yes - many would say to a fault. Unpretentious? Invariably. Straightforward? Guileless? Unapologetic? Yes, yes, and yes.

But innocent?

Perhaps, thought the young artist, it only existed in the eyes of the beholder. His smile was bittersweet. Was he the only one to see it, because he was the only one who wanted it to be so?

He didn't even pretend to know. Not anymore.

He only knew that the portrait was beautiful. The most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

 Except one.

He let his eyes linger for a moment, tracing the features with the tactile sweetness of memory.

Then he moved further into the enclosure, proceeding to stand before the larger portrait, closing his eyes, taking a deep breath.

Reaching, touching - lost in anticipation.

Lost in fear.

There was nothing graceful or subtle or controlled in his movement as he jerked the drape away from the final canvas. And even then, he did not open his eyes right away.

It wasn't as if he didn't know what he would see. Or did not see it in his mind every hour of every day.

It was just . . .

He opened his eyes, and it was exactly as he'd known it would be.

Instantly, without a moment of transition or a second to prepare, he was there, inside the image, living the moment again. 

*He was still caught up in the look on Brian's face as he'd made his proclamation. It had been quintessential Brian, without the bells and whistles and hearts and flowers, without the embroidery. A statement of fact, without frills.*

*And it had echoed all the way down into Justin's soul.*

"We're not like your parents. And we're not like a pair of dykes marching down the aisle in matching Vera Wangs. We're queers, and if we're together, it's because we want to be - not because there are locks on the doors . . .

"And when I come home, I'll also be doing exactly what I want to do - coming home to you."

Then Justin had summed up his own needs, his own conditions, surprising himself with the scope of his demands and how desperately he wanted Brian's agreement.
The kisses they'd exchanged following their moment of truth in the middle of Babylon's dance floor had been hot enough to draw groans of envy from the surrounding crowd.

They had come home together then, no further words being required, locked up tight in the intimacy of the moment, in the certainty of what had been said and, just as certainly, in what had gone unsaid, but had been heard anyway.

At least for that moment.

Later, Justin would allow himself to forget - to be coaxed and prodded and deluded and lured away, to be enticed and jerked into a place he never wanted to be.

But for that moment, he had felt the rightness of the connection between them.

That had been the night when he was finally able to taste and savor the truth of what had begun to grow in his heart. He had claimed, from the beginning, to love Brian, but he had been lying to himself. He had wanted Brian, needed Brian, lusted after Brian - even wanted to be Brian. But he had not really loved him, had not even known what real love was. Not until that night when he had felt it building inside him, and looked up to see it gazing down at him from Brian's eyes.

Words remained unspoken, unneeded.

They had barely made it to the bed, shedding clothes along the way, bodies straining, clinging, holding, blending, yearning to be one. Brian had taken one little detour - just long enough to hit the play switch on the sound system - before scooping Justin up in strong arms to rush him to the bedroom and toss him across the mattress.

But that was the last thing he'd done in a hurry that night.

They had fucked many times during their months together, in every conceivable configuration - face to face, front to back, spooned, Justin astride Brian's lap - impaled on his massive cock. There had been blow jobs, hand jobs, shower fucks, floor fucks, public fucks in Babylon's back room and all possible variations on the same theme - on the bed, on the sofa, on the kitchen table, on the lounge chair, bent over the sink, against the wall.

But until that night, Justin had never experienced what it was like to be worshipped by Brian Kinney. It would happen again, periodically, but it would never be quite as special, quite as perfect, as the first time.

Brian had started slow, nibbling at his lover's feet, licking and tasting and nuzzling and sucking. Then he'd worked his way slowly northward - ankles, calves, knees. Who knew that a tongue exploring the back of the knee could produce such mind-blowing sensations? It was at this point that Brian had paused to look up and study the look on Justin's face, his smile expressing his delight in his lover's trembling body and hitching breath, in the glow of lust and need that was almost visible beneath alabaster skin. He had moved on then to the thighs, the hips . . . laughing softly as he skipped over the main attraction, except for a quick swipe of his tongue to taste the bittersweetness of the pre-cum dripping from the slit of Justin's cock, and continued the upward journey - belly, navel, chest, underarms, nipples (with special attention to the jeweled ring dangling from the right one.) Further, exploring the valleys and planes of the collarbone, the shoulders, the tender hollows of the throat.

"Brian?" Barely audible, barely breathing - barely even able to breathe, as his lover nuzzled into the velvet softness under his jawline.
"Hmmm?"

Hazel eyes, ablaze with lust - and so much more - had stared down into midnight blue.

"Make love to me."

For the space of one frozen heartbeat, Justin had feared he'd gone too far, as he saw the brief flare of furious resistance threaten to engulf the brilliance of desire, but he hadn't waited to give it a chance to grow. Instead, he'd surged upward, claiming that incredible mouth, driving his tongue into the velvety depths, into the place he most wanted to be.

Into the center of Brian Kinney.

Holding the kiss, refusing to release those lips, or the body that was wrapped around him, Justin had reached out and retrieved a condom and the lube from a bowl on the nightstand, and managed to twist his body just enough to gain sufficient access to sheath his lover's straining cock with the latex. Then it was time to pull back just a little, to invite Brian into his own center.

"Fuck me!" he'd whispered. "I want you to fuck me so hard, so deep, that I can feel you in my fucking throat."

Brian had shifted as if to turn Justin to his stomach, but the younger man had resisted. "No. I want to see your face."

Brian had hesitated briefly, but then he'd simply settled back against the slender body beneath him, and squeezed a generous mound of lube into his palm. He'd taken Justin's lips once more in a searing kiss as he worked his hand down between their bodies, past Justin's throbbing erection, past his perineum to the pucker of his opening. He hadn't wasted much time there, but he'd been thorough. One finger, then two, then three - scissoring to open the tight channel, to provide maximum access.

"You ready, Sunshine?"

"Always."

Another kiss, consuming and being consumed, and then . . .

He had been filled many times before, filled to the point of bursting, but never quite like this. The first time they'd been together - the first time he'd ever been fucked - Brian had told him that it would always hurt a little, that the hurt was a part of it - and Brian Kinney never lied. But understanding had come only gradually, from experience. The pain was a part of it - a necessary part, that fired the nerve endings and opened the pleasure centers of the mind, preparing the way for the incredible sensations yet to come: the blue-hot pain of first entry, a strange blend of heart-stopping hurt and breathless anticipation, quickly morphing into red-hot pleasure as Brian adjusted his angle to make sure his cock stroked across the nub of his lover's sweet spot with every thrust as he pushed deeper and deeper until he was everywhere within Justin's slender body, filling him beyond capacity, beyond comprehension, and finally - finally - blossoming into the white hot ecstasy of an eruption to rival the Big Bang of creation.

Justin, so boneless with pleasure that he could barely retain his grasp of reality, had felt the music swelling around them - the cadence of the song underscoring the grinding beat of their joining, the rasping voice saying everything that they could not manage to voice, the haunting lyrics wrapping them, driving them, caressing them as they held each other, resonating with the breaths they could not quite catch.
"I don't want to miss one smile;  
I don't want to miss one kiss;  
I just want to be with you,  
Right here with you, just like this.  
I just want to hold you close,  
Feel your heart so close to mine,  
And just stay here in this moment,  
For all the rest of time."*

Justin had felt it fill him, as he let himself fall into rapture, into incredible sensation such as he'd never known before, exactly like a collision of stars, exploding into infinity. He flew, soaring on the melody and the euphoria within him.

And there above him, as his body convulsed, consumed in the fire of his own passion, he'd seen the vision - the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, or ever would see through all the years of his life.

Brian Kinney, caught in the mindless bliss of orgasm, mouth open and gasping, and eyes molten with desire and completion, sweat running in rivulets down across the muscle and sinew of a chest heaving for air, looking down and allowing his expression to say what his lips would not be able to whisper for a very long time.

Justin knew at once that he would paint it, because he couldn't not paint it, because he knew he would never see anything or experience anything or touch anything again that would fill his soul so completely.

Because this was his Brian - the center of his universe.

He came back to awareness of the moment slowly and had to force himself to stand still, to allow his racing heart to settle, to pull his consciousness back out of memory and into the now, with the chorus of the song still echoing in his mind.

"I don't want to close my eyes;  
I don't want to fall asleep,  
Cause I'd miss you, baby,  
And I don't want to miss a thing.  
Cause even when I dream of you,  
The sweetest dream will never do.  
I'd still miss you, baby,  
And I don't want to miss a thing."**

It was still - probably always would be - his favorite song, and he could never hear it without remembering that night, and Brian's sardonic, tongue-in-cheek explanation for his fondness for Steven Tyler: lips twisted into a smirk, eyes barely twinkling, and a drawling voice observing that anyone with a mouth like that must be a world-class cocksucker because God, as everybody knew, didn't make mistakes.

"Jesus Christ!"

He had not heard Steven's approach, had not noticed when the older man had come to stand behind him and look over his shoulder, and he had to fight off an urge to turn around and push the man away. This was private; this was only for him; this was . . .

What he had to let go of, if he ever hoped to build a life without Brian. Steven reached out and touched the canvas, his finger trailing down across the image of the hand of the individual who was only seen as the object of the desire in the primary subject's eyes. One hand braced against a
gleaming chest, one leg draped over a bulging shoulder, and one reflection - vague but definitely blonde - revealed in the luminous surface of hazel eyes.

"Jesus Christ!"

It seemed that neither of them could think of anything else to say.

Justin waited until his lungs could once again draw breath, until his heart ceased to hammer in his chest. Then he turned and walked out of the alcove, pausing only to extinguish the lights, leaving Steven standing there in the dark.

At the bottom of the stairs, Margo stood waiting, her face asking the only question for which she needed an answer, and Justin paused, eyes huge but somehow seeing nothing except a huge, gaping darkness that threatened to consume him.

"Well?"

"Yes," he whispered.

"Yes, what?" She could not afford ambiguity. This was too important.

"Yes. Display it."

"And?"

He closed his eyes. "Yes." It was only a whisper. "Sell it."

Then he walked to the street door and made his exit, never looking back, and she watched him go, wondering why she was so sure that he was leaving behind the only part of himself that he cared about.

Brian leaned against the bar, sipping his JB, eyes scanning the crowd, pleased with the numbers and the excitement and the exuberance, less pleased by the visual reminders of the dark time in which they were living. His customers, as always, were a vivid, colorful bunch, running the full gamut of gay society. Drag queens and trannies, bears and twinks, subs and doms, tops and bottoms and every variation in between. And the beautiful people, of course - the ones that defied classification, that seemed to exist in a niche of their own, destined to be desired and watched and hungered for by everyone around them.

Like Brian, although he no longer spent much time reflecting on his place within their ranks.

But there were others in the crowd, unremarkable except for their ability to blend in while still, somehow, remaining separate. Since nothing in the gay community was the 'new' black - in that only the real black would ever do - they were dressed discreetly, black t's and jeans, or black muscle shirts or jackets, black boots. Completely unremarkable. And yet, if one knew what to look for, they were easy enough to distinguish from the exuberant dancers and drinkers and cruisers around them. It wasn't in their clothing or the shape of (hard) bodies; it was in their eyes. Eyes that were never still, never glazed with lust or vacant with drug-or-alcohol-induced euphoria.

The strong, stalwart, generally tall-dark-and-handsomes danced and talked and mingled and flirted; they appeared to party, but they never got lost in the role.

Brian knew a moment of sharp regret. There had always been a small number of security personnel
at Babylon. Like any night club, anywhere, it saw its share of rambunctious patrons or belligerent party animals who didn't know when to quit or how to take 'no' for an answer. But not like this. The world had become an uglier place, and Brian had been forced to take measures to deal with it. He did it because he had to, but he didn't like it.

His budget for security staffing had more than doubled since he'd reopened the club.

"They're very good," said a voice in his ear. "If I didn't know what to look for, I'd never have noticed."

He turned and found himself almost nose to nose with Lance Mathis, and knew another brief moment of regret for things that were simply not meant to be. "Now you know how good you have to be," he replied. "Are you?"

"He won't let you down, Brian," said another voice, from his other side, and he looked around to find Drew Boyd pressed against his back.

Brian laughed. "In this neighborhood, this is called a Manwich, Boys. If you're not careful, you'll be giving people the wrong idea."

But Drew was no longer the shy, semi-virginal, freshly-outed infant he had once been, and he only edged closer, settling against the length of Brian's body, close enough to leave little to the imagination. "You know," he said softly, barely audible, "you're a legend in your own time, Kinney. Every time I hook up, every guy I fuck, tells me that I haven't really been fucked, until I've been fucked by you. Maybe you'd like to demonstrate . . ."

Brian closed his eyes as he felt an agile tongue swirl around his ear.

Then he sighed and pulled away slightly, suppressing an urge to curse fate and the twisted, perverted, obscenely inconvenient sense of loyalty that kept him from taking advantage of an offer almost too perfect to resist. He turned to face the extremely well-endowed, extremely beautiful football player. "You're a real temptation . . ."

"But?" Drew's eyes were dark with lust.

"But you're . . ." Brian looked up and saw Emmett looking down at them from his place in the middle of the overhead catwalk, "off limits."

Boyd followed the direction of Brian's gaze, and his eyes softened for a moment. But they grew hard again, and distant, as Calvin Culpepper emerged from the crowd to claim Emmett's attention.

"Fuck!" It was barely a whisper, and Boyd was quick to look away, but not quick enough to prevent Brian from seeing what he was trying so desperately to conceal.

"Give yourself time," Brian said softly, leaning in to whisper directly into Boyd's ear. "You've still got a lot to learn, but . . ."

"But what?" The big football player was not in the mood for flirting or pleasantries. He desperately wanted to fuck. Even more desperately, he wanted to fuck this beautiful, delectable creature who was murmuring in his ear. And more desperately still, he wanted to . . . but he wouldn't let himself think about that.

Brian smiled. "When you're all grown up, you come back to see us. Something tells me he'll still be around."
"What about his Mississippi belle?"

Brian let his eyes drift down the massive body, and then back up before offering his answer. "You're a fucking football super-star with a dick even a dyke would die for. And you were there first. Right?"

Boyd's smile formed slowly, but brightened quickly to a full grin. "Thanks, Bri. You're a regular ray of sunshine."

Brian went very still, but managed to swallow the caustic response that trembled on his lips.

Meanwhile, Lance Mathis was letting his gaze sweep around the huge room, observing, learning, memorizing details and the lay of the land. "So," he said finally, after taking a generous swallow of his draft beer, "where's yours?"

"My what?" Brian allowed just a trace of annoyance to creep into his tone.

"Your security."

Brian laughed. "Your job will be to protect my customers," he replied, "and my source of income. Not me."

"That's very noble of you," Mathis answered with a doubtful grin. "But don't you think . . ."

"I'll tell you what I think," Brian interrupted, seeing no reason to curb his sarcasm or his annoyance over being questioned. "I think I saw this place go up in flames once before, and I don't intend to have to see it again. I think there's a big, bad, ugly homophobic world out there, full of fag-haters, that gets off on hurting gays, as much as they can, as often as they can. All gays, not any one of us individually. They don't know who we are and they don't give a fuck. They just want to do as much damage to as many of us as possible. And that is what I mean to prevent. That's your job. Got it?"

"Oh, I got it," said Mathis, "but . . ."

"But what?" Annoyance had escalated, now headed into full-blown anger.

Lance looked around again, eyes drifting from one face to another and reading an astonishing variety of emotions directed toward the man at his side: lust, of course - that was a given - fondness, envy, need, admiration, longing, sadness, and in a couple of cases, anger - deep, visceral and pulsing with dark energy. Shifting slowly, drawing closer to his new employer and managing at the same time to insert himself between those angry observers and the object of their rage, he framed his answer.

"But I still think you ought to be careful, Mr. Kinney."

Brian was pleased - but still annoyed - to note that the man displayed not the slightest nuance of being intimidated or bothered by his peevishness.

"After all, it would be a real shame if something happened to a Liberty Avenue Living Legend."

For a moment, Brian looked as if he might be considering taking a swing at something or someone. Then he erupted with bright laughter. "Fuck you," he finally managed to splutter.

Mathis leaned forward with a grin. "In your dreams, Stud-Muffin."

But his eyes remained dark and watchful. He was rather surprised to realize that he was looking forward to his new job, and to getting to know this enigmatic individual who generated such an
extreme range of passions from so many people. He had not expected that, had, in fact, expected to
dislike the man who had been described to him as an arrogant prick - intensely.

Instead, he found that he was marginally intrigued.

It would be interesting, and . . . He frowned as he went back to studying the crowd, watching the
people who watched Brian as he moved off toward the catwalk, drawing attention as irresistibly as a
magnet drew iron filings. Mathis suppressed a sigh and tried to tell himself that he was imagining
things. He didn't really have a bad feeling about this, did he?

It was 80's Hard Rock night, and Pour Some Sugar on Me was blasting from the speakers as bits of
white crystalline glitter fell from the ceiling.

Calvin and Ted were enjoying a dance together as Emmett shifted to allow Brian to squeeze into an
open spot at the railing so they could share the view of the dance floor below. Abruptly, Emmett
moved closer, draping an arm around Brian's shoulders and turning to stare directly into hazel eyes,
pausong for just a moment to notice that the white glitter might look silly on everybody else but, on
Brian, it looked magical - like fairy dust. Of course, he couldn't say as much; somebody might
overhear and give him endless shit about being under the spell of the infamous Kinney mystique.
Instead he leaned close and spoke softly - relatively speaking - for Brian's hearing only. "You could
have fucked him, you know. I wouldn't have been angry."

Brian smiled. "I know."

"It would have been okay."

Again the smile. "I know."

"Asshole!" Emmett tried to swallow his grin, but wasn't completely successful. He knew why Brian
had turned Drew down, and he also knew that he would never succeed in getting Brian to explain
himself. Brian Kinney didn't do explanations, but sometimes, if a person was very lucky and very
persistent, that person might eventually begin to glimpse the nature of the truths that were never
explained.

When Emmett leaned forward suddenly and dropped a kiss on Brian's temple, the younger man
recoiled, shocked in spite of himself, pretending he didn't hear the barely audible "Thank you, Baby"
that was whispered in his ear.

Determined to deflect any suggestion of sentiment, Brian regarded his old friend with a skeptical leer.
"One day, Emmy Lou, you're gonna have to choose . . . between a cock and a hard place. You
know?"

"You never heard of a three-way?" Emmett retorted.

Brian burst out laughing, providing a treat for almost everyone around him. "Ah, Auntie Em," he
said finally, "you restore my faith in the fickleness of fagdom."

"Not to mention my unfailing fetish for fashion focus, Sweetie. I do so love a good alliteration, don't
you? In fact . . ." The tall queen paused and framed Brian's face with his hands, a speculative gleam
rising in his eyes. "I do believe I have the pluperfect latest fashion accessory for you, Hot Stuff."

Brian, never one to ignore any potential new development on the fashion front, simply lifted an
inquisitive eyebrow, prompting Emmett to dart off into the crowd, returning just moments later with
one hand concealed behind his back, to find that Brian was regarding him with blatant suspicion as he approached. "This doesn't involve anything weird, does it?" asked the slightly alarmed club owner. "No shaving my head or tattoos on my ass or anything . . . right?"

"Don't be silly," Emmett retorted. "Avant garde I may be, but even I know better than to tamper with perfection."

Brian blinked - slowly. Had Emmett just called him perfect? Finally acknowledged the painfully obvious?

He had no time to think about it, as Emmett stepped forward quickly, arms raised, and deposited something soft and black on top of his head, pausing to adjust the new accessory to the just-right angle.

Then he just stood for a moment, enjoying the view. "Oh, yes, Baby Boy. It's definitely you."

Brian reached up to touch the very soft, very black, very expensive fedora that sat atop his head, adjusting it to the perfect rakish angle before turning to look into the nearest mirror. He'd never really been into hats, but . . .

"Damn!" he breathed.

Emmett grinned. "Like it?"

"I look . . ."


Brian twisted to check out a different angle. "All of the above?" he asked finally.

"Modest too." The new voice bordered just a bit on grumpiness. "And since when do you wear hats?"

"Since now," Brian answered. "I'm exploring my inner Indiana Jones. And what are you two doing here anyway? If you keep showing up like this, you'll risk losing your membership in the Stepford fags sorority."

"Charming as always, Brian," said Ben easily. "As for what we're doing here, ask Michael. He's the one who insisted that we had to come."

"I did not," Michael retorted indignantly. Then he took a deep breath. "Well, maybe I did, but I couldn't just . . ."

Brian rolled his eyes and finished Michael's sentence. "Couldn't just leave me alone to run my own life?"

Ben and Emmett exchanged indulgent smiles, both knowing what came next. Michael bit his lip, eyes downcast and filled with shadow, before he cocked his head and gave his oldest, best friend the pout that had been manipulating Brian for twenty-odd years. "Dance with me?" he asked finally.

"Fuck!" Brian whispered, obviously aware of what Michael wanted. Nevertheless, when Michael reached for him, he allowed himself to be pulled toward the dance floor, not wasting a single moment wondering if he was ever going to learn how to resist Michael's wiles.

They moved well together, in the manner of partners who have danced together over many years,
and when they approached one of the small elevated platforms that were sprinkled around the floor, the couple who had been dancing there just disappeared, leaving the field clear for them, as if by magic.

They were belly to belly, with Michael's arms looped around Brian's neck, and Brian's hands resting at Michael's waist. They danced wordlessly for a while, forehead to forehead. Then Michael lifted his mouth and invited the kiss he knew Brian would not refuse.

"I don't want you to go to London," Michael said, shouting to be heard above the music. "I want you to go with us, to New York."

"Michael . . ."

"You're going to break his heart," Michael continued. "You know that, don't you?"

"Since when," Brian demanded, "do you give a shit whether or not Justin's heart is broken?"

Michael stared into Brian's eyes and felt compelled to offer up a tiny truth. "It's not his heart I'm worried about."

Brian's smile was lopsided. "You are so pathetic."

"I'm serious," Michael insisted, pulling Brian's head down so that they were virtually nose to nose. "Do you know how long it took me to accept . . ."

"Accept what?" Something in Brian's tone suggested that he might not want to hear whatever his old friend had to say.

Michael took a deep breath. "To accept that he could give you something that I couldn't. I didn't want to believe it, but I did, finally. I had no choice." He paused, and his voice dropped to a level that Brian had to lean close to hear. "I finally saw the truth, saw that he was able to touch you in a way I never could."

Brian shrugged, stepping back and dropping his hands. "So he touched me. Lots of guys have touched me." He waggled his eyebrows suggestively. "And lots more will. That's not a reason . . ."

"Are you going away, Brian?" There was raw desperation in the question. "Are you leaving . . ."

He didn't say the final word, but Brian heard it anyway.

"Not to worry, Mikey," Brian assured him, nuzzling his nose into the hair curling around Michael's ear. "No matter where I am, you're always with me."

"But that's not the same."

Brian leaned forward and kissed his old friend again. "Nothing stays the same, Sweetheart."

Michael sighed. "So when do you leave?"

"First class on flight 2633 to Heathrow, Saturday afternoon at 5:30. A good meal, a few drinks, and a comfortable night's sleep - maybe a little extra-curricular activity in the loo, and I wake up to a brand new Sunday morning in jolly old England."

"But the opening is tomorrow night. You could still go with us. I mean, they do have flights out of LaGuardia to London, don't they?"
There was no smile in Brian's eyes as he went very still and looked down into Michael's face.
"Listen to me, Michael. Are you listening?"

"I'm listening." Reluctant, petulant, but determined to hear whatever truth Brian was ready to share.

"I'm staying away from New York. Not just for him. Not just for me. For both of us. He's not coming back, and I'm not going after him, so neither one of us is going to be forced to sacrifice who we are in order to prove our love. That's not love. That's a fucking certificate of title."

"And when exactly did you figure that out?" Michael demanded.

Brian compressed his lips together, and huffed a small sigh before replying. "I always knew . . . from the beginning."

He turned then and began to move away.

"Brian . . ."

Michael followed, reaching out to try to compel his old friend to turn back, to continue the conversation, but Brian was obviously finished talking. Thus when Michael grabbed his arm, to spin him around to re-engage, Brian twisted and jerked free, causing him to stagger against the individual to his left. As luck would have it, that individual was one of the serving staff, laden with a tray filled with pitchers of frozen strawberry Margaritas. Pitchers and contents went one way, tray and waiter went another, and Brian went a third.

Of those involved in the collision, only Brian escaped unscathed - no doubt due to the luck of the Irish that he always claimed for himself; the waiter and the individuals standing nearby were not so fortunate.

Emmett, who had just cut in on Ted and Calvin while swinging himself directly into the path of the glass deluge, stood rigid, his bright pastel tunic transformed into a soggy, frosted, berry-crusted mess, accented by bright droplets of blood erupting from a cut on his forehead, the result of a flying particle of broken glass. Others were shaken or splashed or pushed aside or disheveled, but only Emmett suffered any injury. Around them, the music, the dancing, the noise went on, flowing on around the little eddy in the river of nightly chaos.

Brian, of course, was the first to recover and the fastest to react. He grabbed a towel from the bar and got to Emmett's side just as the big Nelly bottom scrubbed at his face with his hands, and opened his mouth to scream when he stared down at them and recognized the brilliant scarlet of fresh blood.

"Oh, my God!" he shrieked. "I'm bleeding." Brian caught him as his knees buckled and succeeded in easing him down to the floor, while pressing the towel against the contusion on his forehead as both Michael and Ted babbled incoherently, with Ben and Blake rushing forward to comfort their respective spouses but contribute nothing to resolving the situation.

Brian was too busy trying to clean away the blood from Emmett's wound to offer much in the way of comfort to the victim, confining his comments to a string of curse words, since he was not particularly given to murmuring sweet nothings, and Emmett was in full panic mode anyway, and not in the right frame of mind to listen to reason. Then there came a strange frozen moment as a shadow fell across Brian, just before he was abruptly lifted aside as easily as if he'd been a child, to be replaced by a massive body intent on nothing but getting down to the level of the tall young body bleeding so profusely all over the lime green sequins encrusting the front of a draped, bias-cut shirt.

Emmett continued to shriek without missing a beat, in the manner of a true classical diva. "Oh, my
God! Am I bleeding to death? Oh, my God!"

Strong arms, massive arms, wrapped around the drama queen as a deep voice offered reassurances. "You're gonna be fine, Baby. I promise."

Emmett looked up, mindless fear blazing in his eyes, until he recognized the face bending over him. He fell silent in mid-scream. Then he tentatively lifted one hand to touch the face looking down at him.

"Drewsie?"

"In the flesh, Baby."

"Am I . . ." Emmett paused and tried to swallow the huge lump in his throat. "If I'm . . . dying, will you just . . . hold me?"

Brian rolled his eyes and opened his mouth to respond, but a hard look from Boyd caused him to rethink his smart remark.

"You're going to be fine, Honey," said Drew gently. "It's a nasty wound, but you've had worse. By tomorrow, you'll be as good as new."

"Will I be . . . scarred?"

This time, Brian couldn't completely suppress the urge to laugh, despite Boyd's not-so-subtle warning glance, so he leaned forward, stretching to see around the football player's broad shoulders. "On your feet, Scarlett," he drawled. "Tomorrow . . . is another day."

Emmett allowed himself to be pulled up and set on his feet, but he was unsteady and very pale.

"Jesus, Emmy Lou," Brian muttered, "you really look like shit. Would you please cowboy up, and be a big girl. It's just a scratch."

Emmett sniffed hard and lifted his head in order to look down his nose at his friend. "The sight of blood always makes me lightheaded. It's a family thing, I'll have you know. My Aunt Lula once fainted and fell down a flight of stairs when she had a simple nosebleed."

"Geez, Emmett," said Michael, "you really look awful."

Emmett took advantage of the moment to put on his best Bette Davis hauteur. "And I'm freezing too. Must be in shock."

Brian rolled his eyes again. "You're not in shock. You're cold because you're wearing a pitcherful of frozen Margaritas. Put on your jacket, and you'll be fine."

Emmett grabbed the towel out of Brian's hand and tried to wipe the frozen glop off his chest. "I don't have a jacket," he said coldly. "It would spoil my entrance. And now I'm going to catch my death going out half-drowned into the cold, pitiless night."

Drew Boyd regarded his old flame tenderly before turning to settle an expectant gaze on the club owner.

"Shit!" said Brian. "Just go have a drink, on the house. It'll warm you right up."

"I don't want a drink," snapped Emmett, growing annoyed with the whole situation, with Brian, and
with himself. "I want to go home."

Brian sighed, and, with one more roll of his eyes, slipped out of his brand new Hugo Boss jacket and draped it across Emmett's shoulders, laughing at the stunned look rising in Emmett's eyes. Finally, he took off the fedora and set it at a rakish angle atop Emmett's head. "There now," he said with a pained smile. "You've never looked better." Then he leaned forward and his voice dropped to a harsh whisper. "And if it comes back with a stain, I'm going to cut off your balls and feed them to you on toast."

It was at that moment that Calvin Culpepper apparently decided to reassert his territorial rights. He stepped forward and took Emmett's hand to lead him, following Brian's gesture, toward the private rear entrance, usually only available to employees, leaving Drew Boyd standing on the dance floor wearing a strange, unsettled expression.

Brian nodded to his club manager, signaling him to make sure normal operations continued; then he guided Boyd to the bar where he requested a bottle of JB and a clean glass. "Here," he said, not unkindly. "Drown your sorrows with the good stuff while I go check on Emmie-Queen-of-Scots."

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Deep winter had passed, but there was still a deep chill in the air as Brian stepped out into the alleyway behind the club. It was darker here than in the front, illuminated only by occasional street lights and a single fixture over the door. During the summer, there would be plenty of foot traffic (and fuck traffic) here, but it was still too cold for that. For now. Only employees used this entrance on a regular basis, and only management was allowed to drive through the passageway.

Brian wrapped his arms around his middle, trying to ignore the frigid air against his bare skin. Now where the fuck was Emmett?

He looked left, then right, and finally spotted a dark silhouette leaning against the wall at the end of the alley.

Shivering and muttering curses under his breath, he started forward. He was only half way toward his target when an SUV screeched to a stop at the corner, and three dark, bulked-up figures leapt from the vehicle and raced forward, attacking the lone figure leaning against the wall and dragging him back toward the street.

"Jesus!" Brian shouted, breaking into a run. "Emmett!"

He was only half way there when he saw one massive hand swing a metallic object in a sharp arc that ended with a solid clunk, as the 'something' connected with Emmett's skull.

Brian ran faster, barely aware that there were running footsteps behind him, and that another car had pulled up behind the SUV. He yelled again. "Leave him alone, you bastards!"

Then one of the three shouted something, and they all jumped back into the car and sped away leaving Emmett crumpled motionless on the cold cement.

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*"I Don't Want to Miss a Thing" -- Diane Warren

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In some ways, Brian would never remember the events of those critical moments with any clarity. In other ways, he would never be able to forget them.

He would not remember, for example, that he had hesitated just long enough to shout for help before breaking into an all-out sprint to try to prevent disaster, but he would remember the panic that flashed through his body like an electric charge. He would not remember the flying leap that almost allowed him to grab one of the assailants as they raced away, but he would remember the towering black rage that made him want to smash their faces with his fists. He would not remember the words that one of them shouted at him as he tried to get to them, but he would remember the snarl of hatred that twisted the shouter's face.

On the other hand, Michael, who'd been first to hear Brian's shout for help and first to respond, with Ben at his heels, would never forget a single moment of it, mostly because he had never been more scared in his life and also because it was one of those ultra-rare moments when Brian Kinney lost the ability to maintain the façade that he customarily wore like a second skin. One did not forget such rare occurrences.

He had seen Brian angry on a number of occasions, and it was a small source of pride to him that he was one of the few who would even have noticed, for Brian, above all else, was perpetually in control of his emotions. In anger, he did not rage or roar or get physical; instead, he used the razor-sharp wit and agile tongue that could cut an adversary to ribbons without drawing a single drop of blood. That was Brian, and anyone who had ever been unlucky enough to incur his wrath had almost certainly emerged from the encounter feeling mangled and devastated but without a single bruise to show for it. In point of fact, most would probably have preferred physical wounds.

On the other hand, Michael had also been around on some of the exceedingly rare occasions when the Kinney gift for verbal slicing and dicing and reducing an opponent to a quivering mass of shame or impotence had given way before a fury too intense to swallow. He had even, on one occasion, been the object of that towering wrath. He still remembered vividly the sickening crunch of Brian's fist impacting with his own face at Lindsey and Melanie's anniversary party, after Justin had turned his back on Brian in order to play house with his fiddling twinkie. Of course, he also remembered what he had said to earn that anger.

To this day, he still didn't know if he was more ashamed of having actually made those ugly, outrageous, vindictive remarks or of failing to stand up and admit his culpability when everyone who witnessed the incident did what they always did, what they all seemed to need to do on a regular basis: blame Brian. Blaming Brian - without bothering to learn the pertinent details of any given situation - seemed to be what they all did best. Of course, they would usually learn later - or figure it out for themselves - that the blame was misplaced, one way or another, but such understanding was usually relegated to an offhand random afterthought, mostly unexplored and almost never verbalized.

It was a process not unlike the chain of events when a sensational news story was discovered to be a total fabrication or a blatant mistake; the original headlines would have screamed in huge, bold-face type above the masthead on the front page; the retraction would be buried on page 41, below the obituaries.
Nevertheless, Michael knew that Brian in a rage was not a man to be trifled with, and he held his breath as he watched his oldest friend sprinting down the alley, knowing that Brian was furious enough to take on all three of Emmett's attackers if he could just get to them in time. When Brian leapt forward, and one of the attackers paused to yell some filthy insult at him, Michael shouted out a warning, uncertain of whether he was more afraid for Brian or of Brian.

He was, after all, one of the few people in the world who knew what Brian was capable of, if pushed too far. He remembered the bloody broken hand of a football jock who had believed that he could safely inflict humiliation and injury on a helpless faggot without fear of reprisal. He remembered bloody noses and black eyes resulting from Brian's willingness to defend those who were less able to defend themselves from the homophobes who delighted in terrorizing gay kids.

And he'd often reflected that Chris Hobbs - that piece-of-shit homophobic fuck who had attacked Justin with a baseball bat - was an incredibly lucky bastard. If Justin had not required Brian's total attention as he lay bleeding out his life on that garage floor, Michael was pretty sure that Dobbs would have died that night, and probably in great pain.

Brian Kinney didn't start fights, but he frequently finished them.

Luckily, on this occasion the opportunity for a confrontation did not develop. The three had enough of a head start so that they were able to make it into their vehicle and speed away before Brian was close enough to stop them.

Emmett was curled up on his side, with his arms wrapped tight around his head, when Brian dropped to his knees beside him, face frozen in a grimace of fear as he felt a huge solid block of ice form in his gut. Calvin arrived just a second later, from the opposite direction.

"Where the fuck were you?" Brian demanded, as he laid shaking hands on Emmett's back, desperate to feel the murmur of breath or the pulse of a heartbeat and terrified that he would find neither. His own breath came harshly, and he had to pause for a moment and shake his head, to pull himself back out of the grip of black memory and into the present.

This was now; not five years ago.

This was Emmett; not Justin.

"I went to get the car," Calvin answered, the pitch of his voice suggesting that he was only a heartbeat away from panic. "Is he . . ."

Brian's fingers probed beneath Emmett's jawline and found . . .

"He's alive," he muttered. Then he felt the warm wetness coating his fingers. "But he's bleeding. Here, help me lift . . ."

But it turned out that no help would be needed. For the second time in a matter of minutes, Brian was shunted aside and replaced by a burly body with a single, unyielding purpose - to get to Emmett, to protect Emmett.

Brian, never fond of being manhandled, even under the best of circumstances, swallowed his annoyance and turned to deflect the human tide that was rushing forward, forming a clot of bodies that blocked access to the path that needed to be clear.

"Get the fuck out of the way," he snarled, pushing Michael and Ben and Ted aside as Drew Boyd lifted Emmett and cradled him against his chest.
It was a testimony to the fear that drove them all that the crowd fell back immediately, in complete silence, as Brian raced toward the corner with Drew, carrying Emmett as carefully as if he were a helpless infant, at his side, and Calvin bringing up the rear.

Behind them, Lance Mathis - who knew more than a little about police procedures - did his best to preserve the crime scene, but the central figures in the developing drama had no room for thoughts beyond the immediacy of their need to get help. There was no mention of calling for an ambulance or dialing 911; they all knew it would be faster to take advantage of the silver Audi SUV still idling at the curb than to wait for help to arrive.

Brian was there first and behind the wheel without a single thought of who the rightful owner of the car might be or who should be driving, while Calvin hurried to help Drew slide into the back seat with Emmett still clasped tight against him, before leaping into the front seat as Brian peeled away from the curb.

The hospital was a fifteen-minute drive, even in light traffic.

They made it in nine flat.

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When the silver Audi pulled up in front of the Novotny/Horvath residence, it was almost two in the morning, but the house was as brightly lit as a shopping mall at Christmas time. Brian sighed, wondering briefly if this interminable day was ever going to end, before shoving the gearshift into park, eliciting a sub-vocal throat-clearing from Calvin who was now seated in the back seat, arms wrapped firmly around tonight's hapless victim.

In the passenger seat, Drew Boyd tried to swallow a smile, but without much success. He was so relieved - so overjoyed actually - that Emmett had suffered only minor injuries, that he would have smiled at almost anything. Nevertheless, if asked, he would have admitted that Calvin's irritation over Brian's less than reverent treatment of his trophy-Audi would have brought a smile to his face under any circumstances.

Brian turned to look into the back seat as Emmett stirred himself and sat up and shifted toward the door.

"You okay, Emmy Lou?" Brian asked softly.

Emmett kept his gaze averted, strangely touched by the gentleness he heard in a voice that was more commonly laced with sardonic wit. "Except for having flashbacks, to my Hazelhurst days of infamy, you know, I'm fine as frog's hair, Bri."

Brian glanced toward the house and saw the front door open and a thick knot of bodies emerge.

"Ready to face the inquisition?"

Emmett sighed. "I don't suppose it would do any good if I employed my very best Garbo impression and announced that 'I just vant to be alone'."

Brian grinned. "I count two Novotnys and one Schmidt in that crowd, so . . ."

"Yeah. That's what I thought." Emmett paused for a moment, before reaching for the door handle, tugging his jacket - Brian's very expensive jacket - closer around him and noticing for the first time that the leather had been torn and shredded during the attack. He knew that he should have been horrified, should offer abject apologies, but he couldn’t, and the look in Brian's eyes assured him that
he needn't worry about it any further.

"Hold on there," said Drew, hurrying to climb out of the car to race around to the other side to take Emmett's arm. "Let me . . ."

"No need," said Calvin abruptly, moving to do the same. "I can handle it."

Brian smiled into Emmett's eyes as the two scurried for position. "Don't you just love triangles?" he asked with a smirk. "It's my favorite geometric shape."

"Shut the fuck up," Emmett replied, but a smile was tugging at his lips, even though he was still very pale, almost as white as the bandage that obscured his jawline on the left side of his face, and the smaller one that was stretched above his right eye.

"Enjoy it, Baby Boy," Brian whispered, leaning close. "You sure as hell earned it tonight."

Emmett tilted his head and quirked an eyebrow as he studied Brian's face. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?" Brian was genuinely curious.

"You don't call anybody by pet names. Except Michael, and Justin, of course. But lately, you call me anything but Emmett."

Brian's smile was winsome. "Lately, I think of you as anything but Emmett."

Emmett frowned slightly, not quite sure how to take that answer. So he reverted to the original subject. "So . . . getting bashed qualifies me for membership in some kind of elite club?"

"No," Brian replied, eyes going dark with shades of memory as he looked away. "But surviving does."

Emmett did not bother to offer up a verbal answer, but the gentleness in his eyes spoke volumes. He knew full well what Brian was thinking, and who he was thinking of.

"What are you doing standing out here in the fucking cold?" The voice was shrill and piercing and unmistakable. "Get him into the house before he freezes solid. I've got hot cocoa," said Debbie, marching up and latching on to Emmett's arm as he climbed out of the car. Then her voice dropped to a near-whisper. "With angel's balls, Honey. Just for you."

Few indeed were the individuals who would be brash enough or brave enough to risk the outrage of Debbie Novotny when she was in her smothering mother persona, but she realized quickly that she'd met her match - twice - when Drew Boyd stepped up to take Emmett's arm on one side, and Brian Kinney - the very same Brian Kinney that she'd been attempting to intimidate for twenty years - stepped up on the other.

Neither Debbie nor Calvin Culpepper stood the smallest chance of deflecting either of those two irresistible forces in full protective mode.

Emmett hung between his two primary protectors like a rag doll, propelled along by the sheer force of their momentum, as some small part of him enjoyed being the focus of so much concern, not to mention reveling in the mastery of two decidedly alpha males.

There were a few moments of confusion inside the house as Drew and Brian helped Emmett out of his coat and got him settled on the sofa, as Calvin hovered for a bit before squeezing himself into the cushioned corner at Emmett's side, while Michael, Ted, Blake, and Ben took seats in a semi-circle
facing the object of their concern, as Debbie served up hot chocolate for the crowd and the vanilla pudding laced with maple syrup for Emmett that was his favorite comfort food.

Then she turned and spent a wordless moment (a genuine rarity for Debbie) studying the expression in Brian's eyes, before moving into the kitchen and pouring out two hefty servings of whiskey which she handed to Brian and Drew. Both thanked her with a silent toast, before retreating to separate corners of the room, glad to relinquish the spotlight but still painfully alert. Drew's eyes never left Emmett's face, but Brian pointedly shifted his gaze to stare out the window, seeking solace in the darkness. Still, he said nothing, watched nothing, contributed nothing, but he listened carefully as Emmett tried to answer Ted's typically-phrased no-nonsense question.

"What the fuck happened, Em?"

Emmett paused to take a sip of steaming cocoa before attempting an answer. "I don't really know," he said finally. "To tell you the truth . . ." He hesitated, glancing toward Brian before completing his response, "I don't remember much of it. Except for the crowbar. That made a lasting impression, let me tell you."

"Jesus, Em!" said Michael, eyes going wide and lightless. "That's what they hit you with?"

He nodded. "Think so. That, and a few well-placed kicks. Did it ever occur to anyone that steel-toed boots should be registered as lethal weapons? But their aim was off - with the crowbar, I mean - so it was just a glancing blow." He took another sip of chocolate. "Think it would have been a lot worse, if Brian hadn't come out when he did. They were distracted, so . . ."

All eyes turned to regard Brian, who, of course, ignored them all.

"Everything's a little fuzzy," Emmett continued. "When we were walking to the car, I was still feeling a bit shaky. From the sight of blood, you know. So Calvin told me to just stay there and lean against the wall while he went to fetch the car. I closed my eyes and waited. Then I heard the shriek of breaks, and . . . after that, it's only bits and pieces. I think they were shouting at me . . . but I don't remember what. It's just a . . . blur."

"But the doctor said you're okay, right?" asked Debbie, coming up behind the sofa and laying her hands atop his shoulders. "All set for the Big Apple tomorrow. Right?"

Emmett was slow to answer, his eyes once more seeking Brian's only to find that Brian was still gazing out into the night. "Ahhhh, I don't think so, Deb," he said finally. "There's no permanent damage," he hastened to add, looking up to see the concern on her face. "The worst of it is a couple of cracked ribs, but I'm going to look like one of my Aunt Lula's crazy quilts for a while - all in black and blue - and I've got a mild sprain in my right ankle, so it's probably not a good idea for me to be doing a lot of walking. Plus my ugly purple bruises would only clash with Justin's beautiful primary colors artwork."

Brian was not quite able to suppress a grin. "We can't have that, now can we?" he muttered, but Drew Boyd was the only one who heard him. The brawny football player did not - quite - wink at him.

Debbie was nodding, trying to hide an upsurge of disappointment. It was not often that she got a chance to visit New York for any reason, much less to rub elbows with the city's artistic elite. "Of course, you can't go traipsing around like that. And we're going to stay right here with you, to make sure you're okay and . . ."

"You most certainly will not," Emmett snapped. "Justin is counting on you, especially since some . .
"He hesitated, once again glancing toward Brian. "Since he'll be needing support from family and friends, and you're going."

"But we were all going together," Michael pointed out. "With you and Calvin."

"And you still are," Emmett repeated, "with just one tiny change."

"But, Honey," Calvin said suddenly, "I'm not leaving you here alone."

Brian leaned forward and cleared his throat. "So what am I? Chopped liver? He won't be alone."

Then he looked around and met Drew Boyd's eyes and immediately recognized the flash of gratitude he read there - just before Boyd looked away, deliberately resuming his inscrutable expression.

"You?" laughed Michael. "You're going to look after Emmett? You couldn't take care of a goldfish."

Brian smiled, but there was no warmth in his eyes. "Oh, I don't know," he drawled. "You're still around, aren't you?"

For a moment, no one spoke, as they tried to ignore the elephant in the corner, for they all knew the truth of it, one way or another. Especially Michael and Debbie, who had lived it. Brian Kinney had protected and defended Michael from all comers - bullies and bashers, sadists and sociopaths - since the day they'd first met, when they were only fourteen years old. Because of more recent events, it wasn't a memory they particularly enjoyed recalling, especially Michael, who still wondered, sometimes, how he could possibly have allowed himself to forget so much and toss it away, as if it hadn't mattered at all.

Except that it had mattered - would always matter - no matter how hard he tried to deny it.

"I'll be just fine," said Emmett, overriding the awkwardness. "And you," he added, dropping a kiss on Calvin's cheek, "absolutely must go along. Unless, of course, you want to try to stuff Debbie into Ted's fuck-me-mobile."

"Hey," said Theodore, "how come when Brian buys a vintage 'Vette, nobody says a word? But when I buy a Miata . . ."

Eight pairs of eyes regarded him in complete silence.

"Okay, okay," he mumbled. "I see your point."

"Look," said Debbie firmly. "It's not that big a deal. I'm sure Justin will be just fine, and . . ."

Everybody was a bit surprised when it was Brian who spoke up. "You should go, Deb. You should all . . . go."

"Well, so should . . ." But something in his eyes caused Debbie to fall silent, something that reminded her of why Justin had gone to New York in the first place, and why she sometimes felt the stirring of a vague sense of guilt when she considered how Brian's life had turned out.

They had all believed that convincing Justin to pursue his big dreams in New York would ultimately be in his best interest, would save him from throwing his life away on the Brian Kinney they all professed to know so well - the one who would never be able to commit to anything on a personal level.

None of them, apparently, had spared a single thought of what it would do to Brian, because . . .
well, because Brian could take it - had always taken it, no matter what life decided to dish out to him. And because he could, no one ever spent a lot of time worrying about how he would manage it. He just would, and that was all that mattered. But sometimes, once in a great while, she wondered; sometimes she felt a moment of doubt and uncertainty. But not often, and not for long.

Still . . .

How, she wondered, would the rest of them cope if they were forced to endure . . .

But she didn't want to think about that. Instead, she wanted to concentrate on all the good things in her life, all the things that had worked out exactly as she'd wanted, all the parts of her idyllic existence. Her son and his partner and their cozy home, her grandchildren, her man, her extended family.

She carefully avoided looking toward Brian Kinney.

Debbie wasn't much given to introspection or to reflection on causes and effects or old mistakes, but she did know that some mistakes could never be corrected - and just didn't bear thinking about.

Instead, she managed to swallow the empty feeling that was rising within her, and felt a huge rush of relief when Carl Horvath came through the door. The pundits had it all wrong, she thought; it was distraction that was truly the better part of valor.

Carl had not had a good day and wasn't really in the mood for socializing. Nevertheless, since he'd become a part of Debbie's life, he'd been forced to adapt himself to her lifestyle and her schedule. He knew that she was a good woman, with a big heart and a kind soul, but he also knew that she was prone to see things the way she chose to see them rather than as they really were, and that there were certain things that she would prefer not to know.

Therefore, he knew he had to be careful in choosing his words; he simply wasn't up to dealing with escalating hysteria at the end of such a day.

When he walked into the house, the first person he saw was Brian Kinney, in familiar circumstances. Brian - with the group, but not really of the group, and painfully aware of the distinction. Carl often wondered why none of the rest of them seemed to notice it.

One look into shadowed hazel eyes told him that he need not have worried about any confrontation with Kinney; if such a confrontation were to happen, it would not be tonight, and it would be at the time and place of Kinney's choosing.

The detective often thought that it was amazing how far young Kinney was willing to go to protect the people who orbited around his life, not to mention how unaware of the depth of his protection those same people remained.

But Debbie was an entirely different matter. He sometimes felt like he had developed the skill of walking on egg shells to a new artform.

When everyone turned to look at him, he knew there was no way out of giving them some kind of information. Eggshells, indeed.

He took a moment to hang up his coat before turning to face the questions in their eyes. "I don't have much to tell you," he said quickly, before looking over at Brian. "Except that your new security man would have made a hell of a cop. If you're smart, you'll put him in charge and let him run the whole operation as he sees fit."
Brian nodded, but offered no comment.

"But there wasn't much to be done. We got a broad description of the vehicle - a big, black or dark blue expensive SUV - might be a Caddy or a Lexus but no one was sure, with some kind of logo on a rear glass. Three men who attacked Emmett, all wearing dark clothes and caps, and one or two more waiting in the car. Most of the witnesses thought they were white, but not everyone was sure."

"That's all?" Debbie's voice was almost at screech pitch.

Carl once more glanced toward Brian, and saw what he was looking for in dark eyes.

"So far," he replied to Debbie, before looking down at Emmett. "You okay, Kid?"

Emmett, who was almost as fond of Carl as he was of Debbie, simply smiled and nodded.

"Good. Think you'll be up to coming down to the station tomorrow, and giving us a statement?"

Emmett looked as if he'd rather take a root canal, but he nodded anyway.

Then Carl turned back to look at Brian. "You want to make sure he gets there?"

Brian's smile was diffident, as he reflected that Horvath was skilled at getting what he wanted without divulging more than he had to. It was probable that no one else would comprehend that Emmett wasn't the only one who would face questioning.

"I think that's my cue," said Brian in lieu of a direct answer. "It's late, I'm fucking beat, and I've got meetings in the morning, so . . ."

"But you don't have your car," said Michael. "How will you . . ."

Brian held up a hand to forestall his old friend's protest. "I've been walking Liberty Avenue since I was fourteen, Mikey. I think I can find my way without too much trouble."

Then he proceeded to retrieve his worse-for-the-wear jacket from the coat rack, shot Emmett a quick, slightly venal grin, and headed for the door.

"Hold on a minute," said Horvath, before turning to speak privately to Drew Boyd for a few seconds. The football player listened intently, before nodding and stepping into the kitchen where he took a cell phone from his pocket and made a quick call. Then both he and Horvath crossed the room to join Brian at the entry, where Boyd paused for a moment to look once more toward Emmett, his face softening slightly as he nodded good night.

No words were exchanged between the two, but then again, none were needed.

Calvin Culpepper was sitting very still, eyes fastened on his hands which were folded tight in his lap, and Brian felt a quick pang of sympathy for the southerner, who was truly a very nice guy. Only everyone knew that, sometimes, nice guys really did finish last. It wasn't a particularly pleasant thought, but it was very true.

On the porch, Brian zipped his jacket before turning to face Carl Horvath, only slightly surprised to note that Drew Boyd was still waiting there beside them.

Horvath got right to the point. "We don't know much about what happened tonight, Brian, but we know enough to be alarmed. There's some ugly crap going on right now, and Liberty Avenue is suddenly at the center of the shitstorm. So I want you to be careful. Until we know more, it's best not
to take chances."

"What chances?" Brian replied impatiently. "I'm just . . ."

"Just walking down Liberty Avenue," Horvath interrupted. "Like you've done since you were fourteen. Yeah, I know. But it's a different world today, and not necessarily a better one. Every kid that runs the street now is a potential target."

The grin flashed again. "Well, thanks for the compliment, Detective, but I'm not - quite - a kid any more."

"No. You're a very successful businessman, and someone who's never made any secret of being gay. That could put a big fat bull's eye on your back."

Brian shook his head, still unwilling to concede any concern. But then he looked up and saw something shift in the detective's eyes, something dark and filled with foreboding. "OK," he said softly. "What is it that you're not telling me?"

Horvath drew a deep breath. "So far, there's nothing to tell, except to point out that it's stupid to take unnecessary risks." Then he grinned. "And Brian Kinney might be many things, but stupid ain't one of them."

"So what is it that you want . . ."

He was interrupted by a squeal of brakes as a dark green Range Rover came to a stop at the end of the driveway.

"I want you to get in that car and go home. No going back to Babylon; no stops at Woody's or anywhere else. And . . ."

Brian didn't bother to suppress a sigh. "And?"

"No tricks."

The sigh became a chuckle. "You can't possibly think that a trick could be responsible for this."

But Horvath was not amused. "And you can't possibly know what I'm thinking. So just humor me. OK?"

"For how long? I've got a reputation to maintain, you know."

Horvath nodded toward the car idling at the curb. "Yeah, well, one night without fucking ain't gonna cost you your title, Champ. As for tomorrow, we'll see. But for now, just be a good boy, and let your new chief of security see you home."

"Fuck!" snapped Brian, irritated for no good reason.

"Is that an invitation?" called Drew with a smile, from his place at the bottom of the front steps.

"Fuck you!" Brian retorted, without missing a beat.

Carl then patted him on the shoulder, and made brief eye contact with Boyd, who was still smiling. "Don't worry," said the quarterback. "I'll see that he does as he's told."

"What are you?" Brian snarled. "My daddy?"
But he didn't wait for an answer, choosing instead to stalk down the driveway toward the waiting Rover.

By the time he made it to the car, with Drew just a step behind him, Brian had progressed from mild annoyance to a simmering anger. He had never liked being ordered around or treated like a child in need of protection - even when he was a child in need of protection - which he had almost never received anyway. He had spent his entire life taking care of himself, many times under circumstances that put him in extreme peril, and come through unscathed. Mostly.

And it didn't assuage his ill humor at all when he climbed into the passenger seat to note that Lance Mathis was wearing a smile that clearly acknowledged that he knew that his new boss was on the verge of being royally pissed.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Brian demanded.

"I called him," said Drew as he slid into the back seat.

"For what?"

"To see that we both get home safe."

Brian turned to glare at his newest employee. "I told you. I don't need protection."

Mathis smiled. "Whatever you say."

"And who made you my chief of security? Did I miss something?"

The smile widened to a grin. "You've been a little busy."

"Fuck this!" Brian snapped, and twisted to reach for the door handle, only to find himself immobilized by arms like steel bands that wrapped around him from behind. "What the fuck . . ."

"Brian." Drew Boyd's voice was very soft, but there was a note of iron in it that got Brian's undivided attention. "We can stay here like this all night if you insist on acting like a shithead. I spend my days taking on 300-pound linebackers, so do you really think you're going to manage to get away from me? And besides, it's not like I'm not enjoying the view, if you catch my drift." And he deliberately let one hand slide down inside the leather of his captive's jacket, to caress a patch of bare skin.

"I - don't - need - a - babysitter!" Brian spat through clinched teeth, heaving himself sideways and around and managing to dislodge Drew's wandering hand when he surged up and took the quarterback's mouth in a violent kiss that was more a physical assault than an exercise in foreplay, so he reasoned that it was not - technically - a violation of his self-inflicted rule - mostly.

To his own surprise, Drew pulled back and burst out laughing. "You're one tough little shit," he admitted, "and I really, really would love to fuck you through the floor." But he paused then, and cupped a surprisingly gentle hand around Brian's face. "But I'm guessing that's not going to happen." His voice sank to a whisper. "For more reasons than one." Then he nuzzled for a moment at Brian's ear, dropped a small, chaste kiss on his brow, and loosened his grip. "Now sit down and shut up, and let Lance do what he does best."

"Which is what?" Brian demanded, slightly breathless and not happy about it.

It was Mathis who provided an answer. "Keep you alive, to fuck another day."
Brian chewed a bit on his bottom lip before settling back against the leather headrest and closing his eyes - the closest he was prepared to come to an admission of defeat. He still wasn't pleased with how things were going, but he thought - maybe - he could learn to live with it.

For now.

The delegation from Pittsburgh, along with Melanie Marcus, stood in the middle of the art gallery, eyes wide as they tried to take in everything at once. But it was almost too much to comprehend.

Not the space so much, as the gallery was actually not as large as the one where Lindsey had been employed before taking off to Toronto. But what it lacked in size, it made up for in elegance, and in the stature of its clientele. They had barely entered the building before they'd spotted two internationally acclaimed movie stars and a world famous fashion model whose face had been on every major magazine in the world during the past year. They all recognized those luminaries, of course, but it was left to Ben to identify two best-selling authors, a Grammy-winning composer, a couple of major political movers-and-shakers, and one Pulitzer-winning playwright. On the other hand, it was Ted who attached famous names to a couple of stars of the Metropolitan opera and some members of the elite of New York society. There were also network news people, some familiar actors and actresses from major television programs, and one hugely successful talk show host.

"Wow!" Debbie's normally raucous voice was barely audible. "Sunshine's really hit it out of the ballpark with his first swing, huh?"

"Absolutely," replied Ted. "It's hard to believe he almost gave up everything to be . . . well. He should be grateful that he didn't pass up the chance to be here. That would have been a real tragedy."

Calvin Culpepper, who still didn't feel completely at home among these individuals who were Emmett's family in all but blood, looked around with interest and noted that all the guests seemed to be mesmerized by the quality of the artwork. But Calvin knew the story of Justin and Brian, had listened carefully to the details as Emmett told the tale, and couldn't help but wonder.

This was undoubtedly a triumph for the young artist, but was it enough, he wondered, to make up for what had been sacrificed to achieve it?

Then again, he reminded himself, he didn't know Justin at all, and he knew Brian only slightly, so it certainly wasn't up to him to draw conclusions. And judging from the looks on the faces of his companions - these people who knew both parties extremely well - he was probably way off-base. They looked as if they were certain that this occasion would be everything that Justin had ever wanted in his life.

Although he had seen something in Emmett's eyes when they'd said their good-byes earlier in the day - something that seemed to suggest otherwise.

"And what about the new boyfriend?" asked Debbie. "Jesus! Jennifer must be over the moon. This guy is every PFLAG mother's dream."

"You think?" asked Michael softly. "Because she doesn't exactly look overjoyed."

They all turned then to study Jennifer Taylor as she stood talking to Lindsey and one of the critics who had the artistic clout to make or break a young artist. From the look on his face, he was preparing to do just that, to Justin's advantage. There was no mistaking the look of pride in her eyes as she watched her son conversing with several members of the social elite, explaining a fine point in
one of her favorite examples of his work: a self-portrait of the young blonde standing at a window looking down at a busy street, with a pair of firm, muscled arms wrapped around him from behind. There was no face to identify who the arms belonged to, but then again, there was no need for one. Anyone who knew Justin, knew him as he had been before he abandoned the wilds of Pittsburgh for the rarefied atmosphere of New York, would know immediately.

Jennifer had always loved that painting - had even planned to purchase it, if she could swing the price - but her hopes had been dashed when she saw the discreet but irrefutable tag that was affixed to the frame when the exhibition opened. Sold. She hadn't realized that some of her son's work had been subject to early sales, as a courtesy to other gallery owners.

The show was proving to be a huge success, in part because of the gushing reaction of so many of the visitors to the gallery and the fact that they were among the rich and famous who never had to worry about stretching the budget to cover a luxury purchase, and in part because of the pre-sales, which included the pieces that Jennifer quickly recognized as Justin's genius at work in its most elemental, pristine form.

Including the focal points of the entire exhibition - the two paintings that resided in their special niche at the top of the stairs.

How could anybody look at those two magnificent works of art, she wondered, and fail to see the core truth of her son's existence? Brian Kinney might be physically absent from his life, but he lived still in Justin's heart. She thought it likely that he always would, even though Justin and all his Pittsburgh friends were busy denying it.

Steven was at Justin's side, as he had been all evening, one hand constantly touching the young artist - at the nape of his neck, on his shoulder, stroking the small of his back. Just touching, lightly, almost casually, but with great purpose.

Jennifer had the strangest notion that the hand was the equivalent of the discreet "sold" signs that were affixed to many of the works of art on display.

She was being irrational, and she knew it. If she could have designed a man to partner her son - having finally conceded that there would never be a woman who would set him "straight" - Steven would have been close to perfect to fill the bill. Handsome, sophisticated, intellectual, cultured, socially adept, generous, loving, and blessed with old money and the bluest of blood; what was not to love? She watched as he basked in the glow of Justin's success, as proud of his lover's accomplishments as he would have been of his own, and she smiled when he glanced toward her, undoubtedly having sensed the weight of her regard.

What was not to love indeed? Except . . . but there was no point in going there. The past was dead; there was no going back, and she truly had no idea why she should even want to. It wasn't as if the one her son had left behind had been his perfect match. She knew that; hell, they all knew that. And she turned to exchange smiles with the crew from Pittsburgh to reassure herself. It was there, in all their faces. They knew, as well as she did, that this was where Justin belonged; this was what he was meant to do, and what he never would have done if . . .

She looked once more toward her son and caught him staring at the canvas before him, a strange, winsome little smile touching his perfect lips, as Steven laughed in response to some witty comment from the talk show host who was not known as a huge supporter of the arts.

Jennifer wasn't sure, but she had a fleeting notion that Justin had not heard a word the man had said.

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tbc
Chapter 8

"You gotta give the devil his due." Debbie's comment was meant to be discreet, but it fell into a conversational lull in the gallery, like a stone into still water, sending out ripples in all directions, threaded through the quiet sweetness of the music of a string quartet. "He may be a total shithead, but you can't deny that Brian Kinney makes one drop-dead-gorgeous model."

The Pittsburgh delegation, dressed in their most elegant attire, which ran the sartorial gambit from the formality of the tuxedos worn by Ted, Blake, and Calvin, through the more casual business suits sported by Michael and Ben, to the spangled scarlet of Debbie's satin gown and Melanie's characteristic black, was standing in front of a canvas that was more shadow than light, that displayed a model in profile, definitely not clad in his Sunday best - or anything else, for that matter - emerging from a striated cloud of steam or a swirl of smoke, indistinct, unclear - and unmistakable.

Nearby a tall, slender man with salt and pepper hair, clad in an Armani suit, Prada shoes, mother-of-pearl cuff links from Tiffany's, and a crimson silk scarf, was studying another rendering of Brian, this one a view from the back, showing just a bare shoulder, the nape of the neck caressed by dark, sweaty hair, and a nuance of jawline. "Is that the model's name?" he asked softly. "He permeates the entire exhibit - even in the works that don't focus on him - and forgive me for saying it, but he doesn't look like a total shithead."

"That's because you're seeing him through the artist's eyes," said Melanie quickly, secure in her certainty that Justin had never been able to see Brian as he was, rather than as he wished him to be.

The man turned piercing gray eyes to her and studied what he saw in her face. "Really? I'm not sure I'd agree with that. I find that artists are usually able to see things more clearly than other people. They tend to put aside preconceived notions, and see truth."

Melanie turned to look at the next portrait, a backlit profile of Brian's face, chin balanced against his fist, obviously lost in thought, and even more beautiful than usual. "Trust me," she said firmly. "That's not the true face of Brian Kinney."

"Pity," said the man. "I'd like to meet the man who could inspire such a vision."

Justin and Lindsey approached at that moment, just in time to hear the comment.

"Yes," said Lindsey firmly. "You would. How are you, Gareth?" The soft gallery lighting enhanced her blonde delicacy and the beaded, re-embroidered ivory silk of her bias-cut gown.

"I'm fine, Lindsey. And I want to thank you for sending me a heads up about this exhibition."

"My pleasure. I thought you'd like it. And this is the artist. Justin, this is Gareth Kyle. He writes for the Times."

"I know who he is," said Justin with a diffident smile, stepping forward to shake the columnist's hand. "Thank you for coming, and thank you for recognizing the inspiration for so much of my work."

"Your muse?"

Justin winced, not at all comfortable with the connotations inherent in that word. "No. My first love.
At least, he . . . was." He looked away then, momentarily dismayed and wondering if anyone had noticed his hesitation, or if anyone would understand how hard it was for him to speak of Brian in past tense.

Kyle's smile was slightly wistful. "I'd love to 'recognize' him, in person."

"Yeah," Justin replied softly. "So would I."

"Shit!" Melanie muttered, not quite under her breath. "The asshole's not even here, and he still manages to steal the show."

Of them all, only Calvin, Blake, and the Times columnist noticed the quick frown that touched Justin's face, and the tiny flare of resentment that flashed in the depths of blue-on-blue eyes, but none of them could avoid noticing when the young artist abruptly took Michael's arm and pulled him away from the group. When Debbie stirred as if to intercept them, it was Ben who stepped forward and stopped her, with a murmured comment that she should give the young men a moment of privacy. Her grimace clearly indicated what she thought of his suggestion, but she accepted it anyway, albeit not very graciously.

"How is he?" Justin, speaking very softly, knew full well that he didn't have to specify who "he" was.

Michael did not - quite - squirm. "He's . . . Brian, doing what he always does. Did you expect him to fall apart?"

Justin sighed. "I don't know what I expected, except . . ."

Despite himself, Michael felt a surge of sympathy. "Except that you thought he'd follow you here."

After a brief pause, Justin shifted slightly, eyes unfocused and filled with shadow. "I didn't think he'd just walk away."

Michael looked over at one of the many images of Brian's face that lined the wall in front of him. "He didn't. Remember? You're the one that walked. Not that I blame you," he hastened to add when he identified the flash of anger in Justin's expression. "It was what everybody thought you should do, and I guess your success here proves that everybody was right. Only . . ."

"Only?"

"Forget it. I'm just . . ."

"No. I don't want to forget it. Tell me what you were going to say."

Michael hesitated. Then he took a deep breath. "I just never quite understood why you had to come to New York to paint, especially after Brian . . . " He paused then, reluctant to turn their conversation into a hostile exchange. Justin surely knew, as well as Michael did, that the concessions Brian had been willing to make, for Justin's sake, had been unprecedented, even unimaginable to those who thought they knew him best. "I mean, don't people paint in other places?"

"Yeah. They do." Justin paused to survey the crowds around them, to spend a moment basking in the glow of his success, as he listened in on the appreciative murmurs of the browsers, to grasp for validation of his choices as old, familiar doubts assailed him. "So he's really OK then? I don't need to worry about him?"

Michael's sympathy was immediately replaced by a surge of irritation. "He's Brian Kinney, for fuck's
sake! He's survived more shit than you can even imagine, throughout his whole fucking life, and he'll sure as shit survive you too. In fact, he's on his way to London. Looks like Kinnetik is going to be opening up a new office there."

Justin swallowed his own annoyance, understanding that Michael did not like having to explain Brian's vulnerabilities, or even acknowledge that he had them. "Like the one he opened here?"

Michael flushed. "Yeah. Only, according to Ted, it was Cynthia who did all the work here. I don't think Brian has much stomach for the Big Apple these days."

"Really? I remember a time when it was all he wanted."

"Yeah, so do I. What can I say? Things change."

Justin turned quickly, to give his old frenemy his full attention. "So is that what you're telling me? That he's moved on? Are you saying that he doesn't . . . love me any more?"

It surprised Michael how much he wanted to shout out his response, to confirm Justin's suspicions by denying what he knew to be the truth. But ultimately, he couldn't. "No. I'm not saying that. But you should know him well enough to understand that he's never going to come after you. He's never going to allow his need or his love for you to interfere with the life he thinks you want." He looked up then, and saw Steven making his way toward them. "And it looks like he's right. Your new main squeeze seems to be everything Brian isn't - a perfect candidate for your affections. Your mother - and mine - must be so proud."

There was no way Justin could fail to identify the faintly acidic quality of that statement, but there was also no time to respond to it as Steven was upon them then, eyes full of questions and concerns, with Justin's mother and best friend approaching from another direction. The young artist put on his most dazzling smile, determined to entertain his guests, to sparkle for his audience - to stifle the ugly little voice that insisted on repeating the same phrase over and over in his mind. He could have come here - to be with me - and he's going to London instead. He could have come here.

He looked up at Steven, and saw the love and pride in the eyes that gazed back at him . . . and came to a sudden decision, wondering why it had taken him so long to see the light.

The conversation then turned to introductions and reminiscences and catching up with gossip, old and new, and deliberately ignoring tired, unanswered questions. But there was ultimately no way of hiding from the face that looked down at them from every canvas on the wall behind them; they were all aware of it, though most managed to maintain their silence and maneuver the conversation toward other topics.

Except for Debbie Novotny, of course, who had never maintained her silence about anything, for any reason. She wound up at Jennifer's side, with Daphne standing wide-eyed and flushed nearby, while Steven regaled the rest of the group with a running commentary about the volume and value of Justin's sales and the intensity of the critical acclaim the show was generating. Debbie tried to pay attention, but was quickly lost in the logistics and vagaries of artistic marketing; then she looked up and found herself the focal point of a pair of hazel eyes that almost seemed to follow her as she moved. It was not a particularly comfortable sensation, and she deliberately turned away. Then she concentrated on telling herself that it was just her imagination insisting that she was still being watched.

"Pretty fuckin' impressive, huh?" she asked, speaking more softly than was her wont. "Guess there can't be any doubt any more about him doing the right thing."
Jennifer, elegant in a dark green Dolce & Gabanna frock, looked puzzled. "The right thing?"

"Yeah." Debbie laughed, and heads turned to follow the sound. "It's pretty damned obvious that coming to New York opened all kinds of doors for him. He's a big success story now."

Jennifer turned to look at her son, who was staring up toward the second story, toward the niche that sheltered his two most special paintings - two that the general public never got a chance to purchase as they'd already been sold before the exhibition opened - and she noted that he looked comfortable and relaxed. But not terribly . . .

"Yes," she said softly. "I guess he is."

"And the new boyfriend . . . well, who wouldn't be pleased as punch? Handsome, classy, rich, attentive . . . and treats Justin like he's some kind of precious jewel. Just about perfect, right?"

"Right."

Debbie frowned. "Look, Honey. You might try for a little more enthusiasm. This is every mother's dream, for her kid. Isn't it?"

Once more, Jennifer studied Justin's face; then she turned and saw a flicker of . . . something in Daphne's eyes as the young woman moved away. "Is it?" she asked quietly. "Is it really?"

"What do you . . ."

"Look at him, Debbie." Jennifer's voice was suddenly harsh, like the friction of shifting shards of broken glass. "Really look, and let go of your preconceived notions about what you want to see. What you'd want to see if he were your son. Look at him, and tell me what's really there."

Debbie tried to do as Jennifer asked. Tried to find the right thing to say . . . and wound up choking on her silence.

Jennifer said nothing more; she simply walked away, following Daphne to a small loveseat near a window alcove, for she knew that she would not get the blunt, uncompromising answer she was looking for from Debbie. Although honest to a fault, Debbie had one major shortcoming in any attempt to explore truth; she saw the world through lenses distorted by her own dreams of conventional fairy-tale endings. Debbie loved Ben, whom she had come to accept as her son's permanent partner, although that acceptance had come slowly because of his HIV-positive status. But she had never quite gotten over the fact that Michael had once had a doctor for a lifemate - the ultimate achievement for the scion of a less than affluent family. The pleasure of speaking the phrase "My son-in-law, the professor" would never quite measure up to the joy of being able to utter the words, "My son-in-law, the doctor."

As for Brian . . . Jennifer honestly didn't understand why Debbie's opinions of the young man wavered so drastically. Sometimes she appeared to love him like a surrogate mother would; other times, she seemed eager to condemn and abandon him to whatever fate awaited him. And she had never been reticent in expressing her disapproval for the way he treated Justin, choosing to believe the worst of her son's longtime friend and blame him for every bump in the rocky road of his relationship with Justin.

Jennifer would have liked to believe that everything was Brian's fault; it would have been comforting, but it wouldn't have been fair or accurate. Justin had made his share of mistakes too. She closed her eyes and remembered a scrawny musician with a ridiculous goatee. Debbie and the group she thought of as her extended family had accepted Ethan Gold and welcomed him into the group.
without a second thought, never realizing that he was a pretentious, posturing little cretin who would prove adept at saying the things Justin wanted to hear and meaning none of them.

But Daphne was a different story. Daphne knew Justin like no one else did, not even Brian. And Daphne would not split hairs over truth.

"So," said Jennifer as she took a seat beside her son's best friend since childhood, "what do you think?"

"I think what I've always thought," Daphne answered, taking a tiny sip of champagne from a fluted glass. "Justin's a huge talent, Mrs. Taylor. He deserves every success."

Jennifer turned once more to look at her son, who was now in deep conversation with Lindsey Peterson and a couple of eccentric looking young men in less-than-formal dress. "I agree, but that's not what I meant."

Daphne shifted in her seat, and her eyes moved quickly from one place to another, as if unsure where she wanted to rest them. Finally, she settled for staring into her glass. "Mrs. Taylor, I don't . . ."

"Daphne, please." Jennifer's voice was very soft, just above a whisper, but it was very firm and filled with resolve. "You know what I'm asking. Is he . . ."

"Daphne, please." Jennifer's voice was very soft, just above a whisper, but it was very firm and filled with resolve. "You know what I'm asking. Is he . . ."

"Steven is very good to him," Daphne interrupted. "He's a really nice guy, and he loves Justin. He's even been kind enough to tag along with us while Justin shows me the sights, and you know he has to be bored to tears. We took a carriage ride through Central Park, and I'm sure he just wanted to roll his eyes and look at us as if we'd gone crackers. But he didn't. He was really sweet and caring and . . . He'd do anything for Justin. Anything at all."

"And?"

"He's perfect, isn't he? I can't imagine how he could be more perfect. Can you?"

Jennifer said nothing. She just quirked one eyebrow - and waited.

"Except," said Daphne slowly, "for one thing."

Jennifer sighed. "Which would be what?"

Daphne refused to look up, becoming enthralled in watching the bubbles rise in her goblet. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Taylor. I know what you want to hear, what you want to believe. And if I could give you what you want, I would."

Jennifer sighed. "It's all right, Daphne. I think I have some idea of what you're trying to say."

"I know you don't want to face the truth. I know it goes against everything you've ever wanted for him." Daphne looked up then, and there were tears in her eyes. "But I can't change it, any more than you can. Steven is perfect . . . except that he's not Brian. I don't know what the future holds for Justin; I hope he's able to be happy with whatever lies ahead. And if he chooses Steven, I hope they can make a life together. But the bottom line is never going to change; in this one respect, he is never going to change. Nobody is ever going to replace Brian in his heart." She looked down again, and her voice sank to a whisper. "I'm sorry."

Jennifer took a deep breath; then she rose and moved slowly toward the corner of the room where the largest, most detailed portrait - life-size - of Brian Kinney was framed in a pool of light. She was surprised to find Daphne at her side when she stopped to stand looking up at it.
"Mrs. Taylor . . ."

"Don't you think it's time you called me Jennifer. After all, you're a major force in my son's life."

Daphne smiled. "OK, Jennifer. Would you mind if I gave you some advice?"

Jennifer smiled. "At this stage, I think I could use some."

"You might not like it much."

The smile grew broader. "There are plenty of things that I don't like much, but that doesn't mean I don't need to hear them."

Daphne nodded, and spent a moment considering how to phrase her suggestion in the least offensive way. Then she realized that it wouldn't matter much; if Jennifer wanted to be offended, she would be, no matter how tactfully the idea was presented.

"When you look at Brian," Daphne said softly, with a glance toward the stunning face captured on the canvas, "you still see what you saw the first time you looked at him. Even though you try not to. Even though things have changed drastically over the years, you still see the man who stole your baby boy's innocence. You see the predator, the child molester that your husband accused him of being."

"No, I . . ."

"Yes, you do," Daphne insisted, although her voice was very gentle. "That's the first thing you see. And then, you begin to see all the other versions of Brian Kinney. You see the image he allows others to see. For example, you see him through Debbie's eyes - as the brash, bold, uncompromising, flamboyant rake, who always cast the shadow that kept Michael from the limelight, who loved Michael, but couldn't be in love with him the way Michael (and his mother) wanted. Then you see him through Lindsey's eyes, as the heartbreaker who knew exactly what she wanted from him, but refused to pretend to be someone he wasn't in order to make her dreams come true. You see him as Mel sees him, as the man who was first in Lindsey's heart and might - just might - still hold that title, now and forever, and the person who was able to father Gus, something that she couldn't do. You see him as Ben sees him, as the obstacle to his total happiness with Michael. As Ted sees him, with jealousy and envy and a suppressed rage over the fact that he can strive for it his whole life but he'll never be Brian. Even as those who don't really know him see him. As the maverick, the rogue, the one who dares to challenge everybody's conventions and refuses to compromise what he expects of himself and everybody else. Even what he demands . . . from Justin."

Jennifer stared into the eyes of the portrait, that glowed with so much life yet revealed so little. "OK," she said slowly. "If you're right - and that's a big if - how should I see him? What should I see when I . . ."

Daphne's smile was gentle. "You have to cast off everybody else's perceptions, and forget what they see when they look at him, because here's a fundamental truth. Every one of them sees Brian as they need to see him and as he allows them to see him, to enable them to feel smug and self-satisfied and condescending, or, sometimes, just to survive with ego intact. But the truth is that this guy is the most honest, most upfront, most truthful man I have ever known. And I can say that because I don't see him through the eyes of love, although I admit to spending about an hour in the throes of Brian Kinney infatuation - just like everybody else in the world. But ultimately, I only see him as the man who lives in my best friend's heart, and that's how I judge him. And I honestly don't understand why so few of us see him as he really is - as the most generous, caring person I've ever known, because he not only busts his balls to take care of all the people he cares about, he also makes sure that they
never have to say thank you. Most of the time, in fact, they don't even know about it, because they
don't want to know. It's easier that way. Is he a narcissist, the way Melanie loves to proclaim? Just
take a look at him." She nodded toward the beautiful portrait, and laughed. "Shit! Can you imagine
anybody who looks like that not knowing that he's fucking beautiful? But that's strictly from the
physical perspective. Inside, that's different."

Then she paused and turned to stare directly into Jennifer's eyes. "And one more thing. If you can
put aside all the filters imposed by everybody else's opinion and see him clearly, you'll realize that
he's also the person who'll love Justin as no one else ever will. Every day for the rest of his life. He
was willing to marry him, for God's sake, even though he absolutely does not believe in marriage. I
mean, why should he? Given the state of the institution, why should any of us? But he was willing to
do it. For Justin. And that's the bottom line. For everything he does, for everything he doesn't do. It's
always for Justin, and it always will be. Even if they never see each other again. Even if Justin
chooses to stay away from him forever, to build a new life with a new partner, to put the past behind
him. Brian will allow it - will live with it - and will go on loving Justin as he always has, without
ever once trying to put him in a cage. For Justin. It always bothers me that almost nobody
understands that. It says a lot about the man he is, and it's a shame that there are so few who are able
to hear it."

"But why?" asked Jennifer, stunned by the depth of Daphne's certainty. "Why would he . . ."

But Daphne was turning away, having spotted Justin moving toward them. Still, she paused and
favored his mother with a sympathetic smile. "I think that's a question that I have no right to answer,"
she explained. "One you should put to Brian. And maybe, if you catch him in the right mood and at
the right moment, he might give you an answer. Not necessarily an honest one, but honest enough,
perhaps, for you to be able to figure it out. Because Brian never lies, you know. Not when it matters.
He might sidestep and obfuscate and camouflage and deflect, but he never lies."

With a final smile, she went to find Justin, who was understandably excited about the success of the
night. He had sold eleven of his paintings, for a respectable sum, and he had drunk enough
champagne to be feeling no pain.

Then Daphne noticed the pale specter of old misery in his eyes as he glanced once more toward the
niche at the top of the stairs, and she revised her opinion. The pain was never entirely absent.
Probably never would be. But he was learning to live with it.

She wanted to be happy for him - wanted to believe that it would all turn out for the best. Wanted not
to know that he was learning to close himself off, to turn away from what he had always wanted
most to settle for what he was currently wanting at all.

The evening wore on, and it was late when the crowds began to thin.

It was Steven who proposed that the group of old friends should decamp and resume their reunion at
a small, all-night bistro down the street. Justin and almost everyone else assumed that he was just
tired and looking for a more comfortable spot to loosen his tie, sit back and have a drink and relax,
but Daphne understood his motivation when she spotted Margo Renton going into the display area at
the top of the stairs with a young man at her side, carrying packing materials. It was immediately
obvious that the show was really over, and the two paintings were about to be crated for shipping.

Daphne considered how it might feel to stand by and watch as the products of one's creative genius -
the offspring of one's lifework - were boxed up to be sent away, to a new home in a strange place,
ever to be seen or touched again.

She was glad then that Justin was going to be spared that experience.
"You're looking particularly lovely tonight, Daphne," said Ted as they all settled into an over-sized booth at the dark and sooty old tavern called Nathan's Pub. She smiled as she shrugged out of her jacket, and her silver tunic, bright with beaded embroidery, glistened in the light shed from the frosted globe of the wall sconce behind them.

Justin flashed his friend a mischievous grin. "Yeah. Brian always said that he'd fuck her."


"There are plenty who do," said Ben, and Michael looked at his husband with a surprised smile. Comments issued in defense of Brian were rare in this group; from Ben, they were even rarer, and Michael was pleased. Then his smile faded slightly, as he gave his reaction further thought. Things had been different since the night Babylon had gone up in flames. So had Brian, and so had Ben's attitude toward his husband's oldest and best friend. Michael was glad, he thought. Still, it had always been a tiny source of comfort for him to know that Ben would take his side in any dispute with Brian, no matter what. He realized abruptly that he didn't want to think about the possibility that such an attitude might have changed.

"So," said Melanie quickly, eager to change the subject, "have we decided our itinerary for tomorrow? Anybody up for a tour of Yankee Stadium? Or . . ."

"Jesus, you really are a dyke," laughed Ted. "I was thinking more along the lines of a matinee of Mamma Mia. Or a major shopping spree at Bloomingdale's."

Lindsey laughed. "Ted, you're living proof that fags have replaced diamonds as a girl's best friend."

Debbie turned to Justin, her smile beaming. "What about it, Sunshine? How about you give us a tour of your favorite places?"

Justin smiled and opened his mouth to respond, but paused as Steven wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "I'm afraid that won't be possible, Debbie," said the broker. "We have a plane to catch."

"Really? I didn't know you were planning a trip," said Jennifer. "Where are you going?"

Steven smiled. "We're off for an adventure in paradise. The South Pacific. Specifically, Tahiti."

"Oh-my-God!" said Daphne. "That is sooo romantic. But I thought you were still thinking about it."

Justin did not offer a verbal response. Instead, he simply turned to give her a tiny smile, but she clearly heard the words he didn't bother to speak. Brian was going to London; that was explanation enough.

"Well, he finally made up his mind," explained Steven. "Tomorrow morning, we're off on a flight to the coast. Then on to New Zealand. And from there, we sail to Fiji and surrounding points. We'll be at sea for ten days on a sailing schooner, before debarking at Papeete, where we'll spend another week at a luxury resort."

"Wow!" said Debbie, obviously impressed. "That's some trip. Sounds almost like a honeymoon, doesn't it?"

Jennifer and Lindsey both just happened to be looking straight at Justin at that moment, and both had a momentary urge to recoil from the flash of anger that sparked in his eyes as he turned to look at the woman who had taken him in off the streets, time and time again. In spite of everything, it seemed,
there were some things that he was not prepared to tolerate.

"No," he said quickly. "It doesn't."

"Or maybe you could elope," Debbie went on with gusto, obviously having missed the thunderous expression on Justin's face. "Have the captain of the ship perform the ceremony. Could anything be more romantic than that?"

"Wow!" laughed Steven, raising his glass toward Debbie and totally unaware of the not-so-minor typhoon brewing at his side. "I like your style."

"Do you?" said Justin, staring down at the shot of whiskey - Jim Beam, of course - that the waitress had just set down before him. He lifted the glass and swallowed the liquid in one gulp, never once looking up toward the man who had been so quickly accepted by his old friends as his new boyfriend. When he spoke again, there was a hoarseness in his voice that said much about the depth of his annoyance. "Well, hey, why stop there? Maybe we can get the natives to toss rose petals on the waves for us and play the Wedding March on their ukeleles as the sun goes down over a turquoise sea. Then you can lock me into a chastity belt, to safeguard your conjugal rights, of course, and keep me tucked away on some deserted island, so that I'm forever off-limits to the rest of the world."

He looked up then, and met Daphne's gaze, and she flinched away from the pain and the anger she read in his eyes. He stood abruptly and stared directly into Debbie's face. "I am never going to be part of an... arrangement, that is governed by locks on my door."

Then he turned and strode out of the tavern, leaving a shocked silence behind him.

"Now what the fuck does that mean?" asked Debbie, still stunned by the level of venom she'd heard in the young artist's tone.

Melanie rolled her eyes. "What do you think it means?" she snapped. "It means Brian Fucking Kinney strikes again."

"Melanie," said Ben, very calmly. "For once, could you just shut the fuck up?"

The sudden silence around the table and the look on Ben's face proved that no one was more shocked than Ben himself, except maybe for Michael, who could not quite suppress the smile that trembled on his lips. He had always considered himself Brian's primary defender, but he knew that he'd failed to live up to the title on a few occasions. And now, it was surprisingly comforting to know that he might have a little help, once in a while.

When Steven muttered a hurried good night, and took off after Justin, the group from Pittsburgh lingered at the table, each musing in his own way over what had just happened.

Some were stunned; some were disturbed; some were complacent, and a couple were having trouble controlling an urge to laugh. And Melanie sat frozen and silent, still trying to figure out what the fuck had just happened.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

My house has many rooms; I occupy but a few. The rest go unvisited.

Brian sat at his desk and studied the framed sketch that he had just removed from the shipping carton in which it had arrived. He read the words that circled the drawing, as he idly played with the big swath of bubble wrap which had protected it. He'd always found it surprisingly therapeutic to pop
those bubbles, especially in stressful moments.

This shouldn't be such a moment, or so he told himself. He was here - in his element so to speak - in the place where he "would never grow old". Or so he comforted himself in his more maudlin moods. He didn't allow himself to dwell on the fact that such moods seemed to be coming more frequently of late. At any rate, there was certainly nothing to be concerned about in this solitary sanctuary.

The office was dim, illuminated only by the gooseneck lamp that generated a cone of radiance on one side of the desk, leaving the rest of the room a study in shades of gray. Even the security monitors were dark.

Thus, there was nothing to distract him from his examination of the drawing, except for the dull thumpa-thumpa background of the music in the club - muted by the sound dampening properties of the room's heavy insulation - and the haunting mellow majesty, newly remastered, of John Coltrane's *Blue in Green*, playing on his private sound system.

He told himself that the tightness in his chest was only because he'd picked up a case of sniffles during his midnight adventure of the previous evening. It couldn't possibly have anything to do with the feelings stirring inside him, generated by the artist's rendering of a poignant moment.

It was a detailed sketch: Justin sleeping, face cradled against a pillow with one hand cupped beneath his chin, mouth slightly open, dark lashes emphasizing the smooth expanse of perfect skin. And hovering above him, Brian's face, eyes lowered to gaze at the sleeper, his expression open and vulnerable, yearning . . . and needful.

The words were printed in an oval arc around the image - saying nothing or saying everything, depending on how one looked at it. Bright fleeting images of Justin - a thousand different Justins but all, at heart, the same - flickered in his thoughts, stirred his memories, reminded him of what had been and was no longer.

*My house has many rooms.*

One part of Brian hated the sketch and hated Lindsey for drawing it and sending it to him - for knowing him well enough to pour the essence of his soul into a drawing. Another part of him loved it, and realized that she had known how it would make him feel, and why he would never allow anyone else to see it. He knew exactly where it would hang.

He remembered when she had first recited those words for him, in the process of telling him about her confrontation with Sam Auerbach. He had been careful, at the time, not to react, not to allow her to see how such simple phrases had struck a chord within his own consciousness - but apparently not careful enough. It surprised him sometimes how well she knew him, under certain circumstances. Almost as much as it surprised him when she demonstrated that she didn't know him at all, under others.

*I occupy only a few.*

He thought it ironic that she had uttered the phrase that provided a clue to the man he was, and failed to connect the dots. He himself didn't often allow himself to think about all the parts of him that he had deliberately shut away over the years, parts that would have left him too open, too vulnerable, too accessible.

A very small, smug smile touched perfect, sensual lips. Brian Kinney - Enigma. It was the role he'd been playing all his life; the one he intended to continue to play. It pleased him somehow to realize that most people sought to be understood, to be needed; to know that Brian Kinney was unique, in
The rest go unvisited.

He spent another moment taking in the details of the sketch, illuminated by the palette of reflected memory, as his fingers traced over the contours of that beautiful face.

Unvisited, indeed.

When a discreet knock pulled him out of his momentary reverie, he was grateful for the interruption and quickly tucked the drawing into a desk drawer before pressing the switch that would unlock his office door.

A distraction - any distraction - was preferable to sitting here in the gloom and mourning for what was no longer his to mourn.

Justin was sliding into the back seat of a cab when Steven caught up with him and managed to push his way inside before the vehicle pulled away from the curb with a screech of tires and a pulse of smoke.

"Justin," the broker panted, trying to catch his breath after his mad dash, "what the fuck was that? Why would you . . ."

But Justin was in no mood to be subjected to a third degree. Instead, he found himself eager to strike out, thirsty for blood.

"Why would I what?" he snapped. "Why would I resent my loving companions planning out my life for me? Why would I object to playing a role in some fantasy shit that they - and you - want to write for me? Why would I be sick and tired of hearing the sniping directed at the man who saved my life, the man who could have been here and . . ."

He fell silent abruptly, and turned away, unwilling for Steven to read the depths of the devastation in his heart.

The young broker could not quite suppress a sigh. "Is that why you agreed to go to Tahiti with me? Because he . . . isn't here."

Justin continued to gaze out the window. "Do you want the ugly truth . . . or a pretty, comforting lie?"

Moving slowly, tentatively, Steven wrapped his arms around Justin's shoulders and braced his forehead against a stiff, hunched shoulder. "Justin," he whispered, "I just want you. However I can
have you. Whatever you're willing to . . ."

The young artist turned then, to regard his companion with weary eyes. "Even if I say that you will
never have me entirely? Even if I make you understand that I can never really leave him, and seeing
him or never seeing him again won't change that. Is that really what you want?"

"Not exactly," Steven admitted. "But I'm willing to believe that time will change things. That he'll
one day be a part of your past, instead of the focus of your present." He looked away then, and his
voice sank to a whisper. "Or the promise of your future."

Justin shook his head. "I agreed to go to Tahiti because Michael told me that Brian is on his way to
London. That's the bottom line. Not because I have all these romantic fantasies; not because I want to
be swept away by some Prince Charming on a white charger or sail off to paradise with my knight in
shining armor." His voice was suddenly hard, and cold. "But because I don't want to be here, in this
country, when he's not. Now - you decide if that's a good enough reason for you, because there's
nothing you, or any of my so-called old buddies, can do to change that."

"Justin . . ."

"No," It was almost a snarl. "I've left this unsaid for too long, and I need to say it. For you . . . and
for me."

He paused then and waited, realizing that he was teetering on the brink of a no-return moment, and
willing to allow Steven a chance to back away - to never have to hear what he needed to say. Of
course, refusing to hear it would be tantamount to riding off into the sunset - alone - but it should be
Steven's choice to make, and Justin would not do anything to force the selection.

Finally, after a long pause, Steven shifted and turned to look out the window, obviously unwilling to
meet Justin's gaze or to witness the play or emotions in his companion's eyes. "Go ahead," he said
softly. "Say whatever it is you need to say, Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"When you're done, I get to say my piece. OK?"

Justin just nodded. Then he spent a few moments composing himself and organizing his thoughts.
When he finally began to speak, his voice was surprisingly calm, almost emotionless. "I'm not sure
how to say this so you'll understand, but I'll try. And you need to know that I'm not exaggerating.
This is the way it is. Whatever I am today, I am because of Brian Kinney, no matter how much my
old buddies try to dispute it. He saved my life, and then he gave me everything I needed to become
the man I am. Without him, I'd be dead, but it's more than that. Without him, I'd be lost and
frightened and timid and afraid of my own shadow. He dragged me back into the world, when I was
ready to just crawl into a hole and die. He didn't just give me everything he had to give; he gave me
everything I needed to be able to rejoin my life, instead of just letting time roll along without me. He
was the center of my life, my world, my universe . . . my heart." He paused then and turned to look
at his companion, refusing to say more until Steven shifted to meet his eyes. "And he still is," he said
then, refusing to flinch from the pain he read in Steven's expression. "Will that ever change? Maybe,
but I'm not sure. But I do know one thing, and you need to know it too. I'm here, in New York and
in this place in my life, because he refused to take advantage of the opportunity to tie me to him and
keep me with him. And right now, all he'd have to do to bring me back would be to pick up the
phone and simply say four words. 'Come back to me,' and I'm there."

He reached out then and touched Steven's face with gentle fingers. "And I don't really think that will
ever change. I think some part of me will spend the rest of my life waiting for that call. Not that he'd
ever make it, because he'd always feel like it would put pressure on me to do what he wants me to do, rather than leaving me free to make my own choices."

"He loves you that much?" whispered Steven.

And Justin was surprised by how easily the answer came to him. "Yeah. He loves me that much."

Steven's eyes fell, and he was suddenly fascinated by the clinching of his own hands. "Then, forgive me, but - what the fuck are you doing here? To be loved like that . . . by someone you obviously love just as much, why would you hesitate?"

It was Justin's turn to sigh. "Because . . . I need to be everything that I can be. That's what he expects from me. That's the gift he gave me. If I just run back to him, just turn away from everything that he pushed me to explore, than I . . ." He saw the disbelief in Steven's eyes, and fell silent, offering a rueful smile. "I know it doesn't make sense. Most of the time, it doesn't make sense to me either. But . . . if I don't reach for the stars, if I don't explore all the possibilities that he helped open for me, then he's going to believe that I . . . sacrificed my life - my golden future - to be at his side. And the really bizarre part of all this is that he'd be right. I'd do it without a second thought, and I'd be happy with it. I know I'd never regret it, until the day I'd have to look into his eyes and know that he's blaming himself for taking away the life he thinks I want to live. I have to grow into the man he thinks I am."

"For how long?" The question was barely audible.

Justin did not - quite - shrug. "As long as it takes."

Steven thought about it for a moment, before offering a small smile of his own. "You do realize that's totally fucked up, don't you?"

"Yeah." Justin replied, relaxing into a small laugh. "That's practically a textbook definition of Brian and Justin. Totally fucked up, but . . ."

Neither of them spoke for a while, as the taxi sped toward Bed-Stuy. Then Steven took a deep breath and reached out to take Justin's hands in his own. "Well, I confess that this is all a little disconcerting." Then he smiled. "Actually it's more than that; it's a fucking revelation, and I won't pretend that it's easy to swallow. But I still want you to go with me," he said softly, deliberately not lifting his head to meet Justin's eyes. "I understand that you don't - that you can't love me . . . yet. But I'm not willing to give up on us. I don't expect perfection, and I don't expect you to forget Brian. Just, maybe, you can make a little room in your heart for me, so that, one day, maybe he won't be your everything. I won't pretend that I'm happy with it, but I'm a patient man. And I think you . . . we . . . are worth waiting for."

Justin closed his eyes, and tried not to see the face that always came to him out of the darkness. "You're sure you want to settle for . . ."

"Let's not be too quick to define it," Steven interrupted, with a small, self-conscious laugh. "As for what I want, let's think about it. Times Square and the cold grunge of late winter, or exploring Papeete with your oh-so-charming ass? Bed-Stuy and the smell of garbage trucks, or snorkeling at Moorea? Clinging to a subway strap, or nude sunbathing at Venus Point? Which do you imagine I'd choose?"

Justin grinned, touched and aware that he should probably be ashamed of taking advantage of Steven's feelings. "Well, when you put it that way . . ."

Steven's smile was brilliant, but he was very careful to allow himself not the slightest nuance of
gloating over his small victory. It was certainly not all he hoped for, nor all he was determined to have when all was said and done, but it was a start. The beginning of the end - for Brian Kinney.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~
tbc
"Hey, Boss."

Brian was little more than a dark silhouette against the cone of light beside him. "What's up?" he asked softly.

Alonzo Velez stood framed in the doorway, uncertain if Brian was having one of his intensely private moments. Lately, he seemed to be having them rather frequently. "Can I get you anything?"

Brian looked up at his club manager with a single lifted eyebrow. "Such as?"

Alonzo shrugged and offered up a tentative smile. "Whatever."

The second eyebrow lifted, to join the first. "Since when do I not ask, when I want something?" He sounded more curious than annoyed, for which Alonzo was grateful. Brian was a good boss - even-handed and appreciative and generous to a fault - but he did not suffer fools gladly, or at all, if he could help it.

Alonzo stepped further into the office and closed the door behind him. "Sorry," he said as the tentative smile widened. "The truth is that some of the regulars are asking about you. You know how they are. They just like to know you're around."

"Really?" Brian was obviously skeptical. "How do they even know I'm here? And why does it matter to them anyway?"

"I don't know how they know," Alonzo admitted. "They just do. Maybe they check for your car when they come in or something. As for why it matters, your guess is as good as mine. But it does. So . . . are you planning to spend the whole night up here by yourself?"

"Now you're sounding way too much like a Jewish mother," answered Brian, becoming slightly impatient with the entire conversation. "I'll be down later. Now, unless there's something else . . ."

"As a matter of fact, there is. Emmett is waiting to see you."

Brian sat back in his chair, and an arc of golden light touched his face, exposing a trace of confusion in his eyes. "And?"

"Just wanted to give you a heads up."

Abruptly, Brian stood and came around the desk until he was face to face with his employee. "OK, that's it. What the fuck is going on?"

"Nothing. I just thought you'd like to know."

"Since when," Brian said slowly, eyes never leaving Alonzo's face, "is it your job to screen my visitors? You've never done it before, and . . ."

"Actually," Alonzo interrupted firmly, "I have. I just never thought it was necessary to tell you how many times we intercepted visitors who were . . . um . . . well . . ."

"Who were what?"
The Latino from Trenton fidgeted for a moment. Then he took a deep breath and figured it was time to come clean. "Who were determined to get into your pants, by whatever means they could. We always figured that you preferred to choose your tricks yourself, instead of being chosen. Not," he said quickly as he saw a flicker of anger surge in hazel eyes, "that you couldn't have handled them yourself. We just took it upon ourselves to make sure you didn't have to."

Brian stood unmoving for a moment, obviously deciding how he felt about his employee's admission. Then he smiled, and Alonzo was swept by an intense feeling of relief, only to reflect, moments later, that it shouldn't matter so much. It was just a job, and Brian was just a boss. Although . . . it wasn't, he admitted reluctantly. And he wasn't.

"But," Brian said suddenly, "even though you may have been intercepting my more . . . enthusiastic visitors, you've never before found it necessary to check with me before admitting friends or acquaintances or business appointments. Not even last night. So . . . why now?"

"Well," Alonzo replied slowly, "it's just . . ."

Brian barely managed to swallow a huff of resentment. "Where is he?"

"Ummm . . ."

"Come on," the club owner snapped, patience worn completely through. "Where's Mathis?"

Finally, Alonzo grinned. "Planted at the top of the stairs, like your own personal commando. And you can trust me when I tell you that nobody is getting past him, without your explicit permission."

"Cerberus at the gate? That's not what I hired him for," Brian almost growled. "He's supposed to be protecting my customers. Not me."

"He is protecting your customers," Alonzo replied calmly. "From his vantage point, he's got a view of the entire interior of the club, and his staff is covering the few areas that he can't see from where he is."

Brian frowned. He wasn't quite sure exactly how Mathis, newly hired, had become his chief of security. It had just seemed to be the natural thing to do, especially considering that he had previously had no one in that position. Up to this point, each contracted guard had patrolled his own specific area of the club, without oversight. It was, he guessed, a sign of the times that he had felt compelled to reorganize and upgrade the service.

"Yeah, but . . ." he started, still not pleased with the unexpected ramifications of the arrangement.

"Boss," the club manager said gently, "let him do his job. He knows what he's doing."

"But I don't need a babysitter or a bodyguard."

Alonzo just stared at him for a moment, saying nothing but letting the look in his eyes say it all. Then he decided to speak, but only with an oblique reference to what they'd been discussing. "We live in hateful times, Mr. Kinney. Strange when you consider that so many of the haters identify themselves as Christians, and I was always taught that God is love, but it is what it is."

Brian returned to his desk and sat down, leaning back and propping his feet on the corner of his desk. "No arguing with that," he conceded, "but it still doesn't explain why I need a bodyguard."

"Maybe you don't," Alonzo admitted. "But what if you do? It can't hurt anything if your security chief keeps an eye on you, now can it?"
Brian grinned. "Could cramp my style."

Alonzo laughed outright. "Jesus Christ Himself could be standing over your shoulder watching every move you make, and every trick you fuck, and it wouldn't 'cramp your style' one bit. And you know it."

"Yeah, okay," Brian retorted, reluctantly accepting that this was an argument he was not going to win. "However, I still want to talk to him. But let Emmett in first."

In the semi-darkness, Coltrane's horn launched into *How Deep Is the Ocean*, and Brian pulled a handful of files out of a desk drawer, grateful for something to do, something to focus on, something to get lost in, besides the music.

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By the time Emmett arrived at the door of the executive office, Brian was in full professional mode, examining a contract proposal with a local distillery for establishing a new line of credit for the club. He waved Emmett to a chair as he called up the company's background information on his computer and spent several minutes comparing data between the new vendor and one he'd done business with in the past.

Emmett was content to sit and wait, losing himself in the soft jazz renderings rising from the owner's private music system. The slow, elegant measures of *Naima* seemed to ride the current of the smoke from Brian's cigarette.

When his examination of the vendor's files was complete, Brian was finally ready to talk, but Emmett, by that time, had lapsed into a state of semi-euphoria, drifting within the eddies and currents of the music.

After calling his friend's name twice, Brian chose to simply sit and wait until Emmett settled back into himself. It wasn't as if he had anywhere to be or anything to do that demanded his immediate attention. He had, after all, spent the entire night deliberately *not* thinking about where he might have been, had circumstances been different.

Thus, when Emmett finally shook himself and opened his eyes, it was to focus on an image of a beautiful face - a truth that even the most ardent Brian-hater could not dispute - wrapped in the gentle melancholy of Coltrane's sax and draped in a carefully woven web of forgetfulness.

Emmett sighed and felt a deep abiding sadness stir within him, a sadness that he knew to be little more than a pale reflection of the great gulf that existed in the heart of his companion.

"Brian?"

"Hmmmm?"

A beat of silence before Emmett continued very softly. "Do you need a minute?"

Brian sat up quickly. "Why the fuck would I need a minute?" he snapped.

But Emmett refused to engage. "Because you're having a bad day. Because it has to be eating you alive, even if you refuse to admit it or think about it."

Brian sat back in his chair and compressed his lips, as he always did when he was biting back words
he didn't want to say. "You're pathetic," he said finally, not quite smiling. "How's your booboo?"

Emmett flexed one shoulder with a grimace. "Mending," he admitted, "but manageable, proving, of course, that you can't keep a good queen down."

"You're an inspiration to us all, Little Mary Queen of Scots," Brian laughed. "So, you wanted to see me?" He lifted one sardonic eyebrow. "You're not suing me, are you?"

"Hmmm. I hadn't thought of that." Emmett rolled his eyes. "Let's see now. Could I get used to a life filled with Armani and Versace and Gucci? A Rolex on my wrist, as I sip Dom Perignon and drive around in my Lexus?"

Brian simply waited, certain that Emmett would get to the point, once he'd worked it out for himself.

"I suppose I could, but . . ."

"But?" Brian prompted when Emmett fell silent and looked for a moment as if he were unsure how to proceed.

"But . . . there's something that I want more. Something I think I need."

Once more, Brian leaned back, slouching comfortably. "Such as?"

Uncharacteristically, Emmett refused to meet Brian's eyes, choosing instead to stare off toward the darkened security monitors, as he took his time formulating an answer. "I need," he said finally, "to understand."

"Understand what?" And there was a sudden, definitive coldness in Brian's voice.

Emmett took a deep breath. "Understand why you're here, and, more to the point, why you're not somewhere else, somewhere you really should be."

Brian sat up straight and squared his shoulders. "Does the phrase 'none of your fucking business' mean anything at all to you?"

Emmett nodded. "Yeah. It means what it's always meant. It means you're going into camouflage maintenance mode, in order to stay concealed beneath the layers of distortion you always use to distract anyone who might get a glimpse of who you really are, but . . ."

"I don't have time for this," Brian said abruptly, getting to his feet.

"Yes. You do." For once, there was not even a tiny nuance of uncertainty in Emmett's voice as he raised his eyes to stare directly into that perfect face. "And if you don't, you need to make time. Because I'm not the only one that needs this, Brian. You need it too."

"Now why would you think that I . . ."

"Because nobody should have to walk alone, all the time."

Brian went very still, almost forgetting to breathe. "What the fuck are you talking about, Emmett? I'm never alone, unless I choose to be."

"Sorry, mon ami," Emmett replied softly, "but the truth is that you're always alone, because you always choose to be. And we - the people who are supposed to be your friends - we've allowed it, because it was convenient. Because it gave us what we needed, and it cost us nothing. Because it left us free to take advantage of the situation, without giving anything back."
Brian sat back down, but there was no disguising the anger in his voice when he answered. "In case you didn't hear me the first time, what the fuck are you talking about? I don't . . ."

"Don't what? Don't need anybody? Yeah, we all understand that. You've trained us so well, that we wouldn't dare question your ability to stand alone. And the shame of it is that we let you get away with it. We all bought into your act."

"Look, Emmett, I don't . . ."

"A few years ago," Emmett went on, ignoring Brian's attempt at deflection, "Michael and I were sitting and talking one night, and we both realized how easy it is to assume that we know each other, as friends, until we realize how little we really know. How often we cover ourselves up, and refuse to share who we really are, and how often we don't tell each other the important stuff. That happens to all of us, but it happens even more when one of us is so determined to stay hidden inside the façade that he presents to the world that he blocks everyone who attempts to get close enough to see the truth. We all just assume that we know each other, and it comes as a real shock when we find out that we don't. Not really. Which is why you - especially you - take us all by surprise sometimes. Because we only know the person that you allow us to see - the callous, heartless shit that you profess to be. Because we're never allowed inside, to see who you really are."

Brian's face was a mask of disinterest as he stared into the eyes of a friend who had suddenly transformed himself into a potential menace. "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm an open book."

Emmett grinned. "Yeah. Fuckin' Finnegans Wake."

"Jimmy and I go back a long way," Brian laughed, slightly surprised by the aptness of Emmett's literary reference. "It's the Irish in me."

"It's the bullshit in you."

Brian's eyes went wide. He was totally unaccustomed to being challenged by Emmett Honeycutt, and he had to remind himself that Emmett was a lot sharper than most people could imagine.

"Jesus, Brian! You had cancer, for fuck's sake, and none of us even noticed, until the radiation hit you so hard that you couldn't hide it any more. Don't you think there's something totally fucked about that?"

Brian chose not to respond, still uncomfortable with even the most casual reference to his physical trauma.

"Anyway, here's the thing," Emmett continued. "If I expect you to open up to me, to let down those walls that you've built around yourself, then I have to be willing to do the same, don't I? So here goes.

"Ever since I came to Pittsburgh - lo, those many years ago - I've portrayed myself as an out-and-proud gay man. Reveling in my flame, so to speak."

"Except for your little side-trip into pseudo-heterosexuality," Brian pointed out with a slightly venal smile.

Emmett clasped his hands. "Yes, and leave it to you to remind me of that little episode. But, nevertheless, the reality . . . my foundation, if you will . . . came from a separate place. You see, I never had the option that you have - or Michael or Teddy or Justin or millions of other queer boys. There was never a closet deep enough to hide what I always was. Even if I'd had a closet, which I
didn't mostly. But if I'd had one . . .” He looked up and deliberately allowed Brian to see the misery in his eyes. "If I'd had one, I'd have used it. Out and proud didn't come easy to me, Brian. I had to learn it. When I was growing up, I was the laughing stock of Hazelhurst, Mississippi, and the terrible burden that my family had to bear. My mother loved me, I guess, but she was never able to face the truth about what I was. Not even on her deathbed. I was there when she died, and so were all my brothers and sisters, and she called each one of them by name as they took her hand to say their good-byes. Except me. She looked right through me, and said nothing, and I understood why. She couldn't stand to look at me, to see what I was. Because she considered me to be her failure. Truth is that only my grandmother and my Aunt Lula were ever able to accept me and love me. For the rest, I was the ugly, shameful secret that couldn't be kept. The pervert. The abomination. And I . . . God, I wanted to be straight, Brian. I wanted to be cured, to make them proud of me. Every night, I'd get on my knees and beg God to 'fix me'. And every morning, I'd curse Him for not answering my prayer."

Brian closed his eyes, overwhelmed by the dreadful truth he read in the lines of Emmett's body, in the tightness of his mouth, and the clinching of his fists. But he was still Brian Kinney, he of the hard heart and the sharp tongue. "And you're telling me this because?"

Emmett sighed. "Because I need to know who you are, and I can't expect to do that unless I let you know me as I am. Because I never let you know before. I never let anyone know. But I was wrong to keep it hidden, because it's a part of what made me who I am today. I can never go back to Hazelhurst. I didn't even go back for my father's funeral. Because I wasn't invited - didn't find out about it until he'd been dead and gone for over a year - but I wouldn't have gone even if I'd known. Because I can't be that person any more. But there's a small part of me that's still afraid, that still worries that I could go back to being that silent, terrified child, mortified over who I was. It's still in here, still a part of me."

"You won't," Brian said abruptly. "And none of that was your fault, Emmett. Surely you know that."

Emmett looked up then, not even trying to hide the tears in his eyes. "I do. But do you?"

"Me? Who said anything about me?"

"Maybe that's the problem," Emmett said softly. "It's been far too long since anybody said anything about you."

"Listen to me, Emmett," Brian said sharply. "Are you listening?"

"I'm listening." Gently spoken, accompanied by a tender smile.

"I know . . . I can see that it was hard for you to talk about this. But you didn't have to put yourself through all that. I figured it out a long time ago. Most of it anyway. It doesn't exactly take a rocket scientist. Southern boy, born and bred, and raised in the heart of the Bible Belt, in Baptist Capitol, USA. Who couldn't figure it out? And if you still blame yourself - for any of it - then you're a stupid fucker who needs to get his head out of his ass. So why would you . . ."

"Because I know pain when I see it, Brian. And for too long, I didn't let myself see it. Didn't want to see it, because if I did, if I allowed myself to understand what was standing right in front of me, then I'd have had to admit that you've been walking beside us through all these years - right here, right beside us - and none of us ever bothered to find out who you really are. We say we know you; we think we always know what you'll do next and why you'll do it, when the simple truth is . . . we don't have a fucking clue. And while it's certainly true that this is the way you've wanted it to be, it says more about us than about you. It says we were too complacent, too self-satisfied, to even make a tiny effort to find you amid all the camouflage. And it says something else, too. It says we're stupid and callous and lazy. And I, for one, am sick and tired of not knowing you. I want to know you. I
want to understand you. I want . . . to help you."

"I don't need your fucking help." Clipped - bitter - almost a snarl.

"Yes, you do. Maybe not me, specifically, but somebody, Brian. Somebody needs to be here. To
listen. To let you do . . . whatever it is you need to do, so that you can move forward. Take the next
step to wherever it is you need to go. So just let it out. Just . . . say it."

"Say what?"

But something in Emmett's face made it clear that there was not going to be a way to avoid his
questions, that there would be no room for dodging the issue, unless Brian was prepared to call in his
security people and have them throw Emmett out into the streets, and it was obvious that Emmett
knew that it would never come to that.

"You love Justin," Emmett said softly. "You can laugh about it, scoff at the idea, claim that you don't
believe in love - only in fucking, pontificate about the futility and silliness of commitment, deny it
until hell freezes over. But that changes nothing. You love him, and you just stood there and let him
walk away. More than that, you practically tossed him out on his ass. On top of that, you have to
know that he loves you too. Jesus, how many times does he have to come back to you before you
admit it? Before you understand that he chose you, above all things. So why . . ."

"Because he didn't." Cold, flat, unyielding words, emphasized by eyes gone dark with anger or
despair, and only Brian knew which.

"Didn't . . . what?"

Brian rose then, and moved over to the blank bank of security monitors that allowed him to survey
his domain when he chose to do so. But he didn't touch anything, electing instead to watch the
vague, almost formless outline of his own reflection in the darkened glass. "Didn't choose me." His
tone was flat, completely without emotion, except for a tiny, barely noticeable break in the first word.

"What do you mean?" stammered Emmett. "Of course, he did. He . . ."

"Think it through, Emmett. Think it through."

But Emmett found that he could not wrap his mind around whatever it was that Brian was getting at.
"You're wrong. He always . . ."

"Came back to me?" Brian turned and looked directly into Emmett's eyes, and, for perhaps the first
time in his life, didn't bother to erect the barriers that always kept people from seeing him as he really
was, and Emmett felt as if he were standing at the edge of a precipice, staring out into a cold, dark
chasm of forever. "Justin was meant to fly, Emmett. To spread his wings and reach for the sky. And
he does. Always has. And he only comes back to me when somebody or something clips his wings.
He never came back because he wanted to; he came back because he had no place else to go."

"Brian, he loves you." Emmett couldn't understand why Brian could not see how his young lover
felt.

"I know he loves me," Brian said softly, returning to the desk and resuming his seat. "But loving me
isn't going to give him what he wants. Think about it - clearly, without all the rose-colored romantic
trimmings. The first time he left - when he found his twink fiddler - he only came back because the
twinkie was an idiot. If Ian - or whatever the fuck his name was - had just been smart enough not to
lie to him, Justin would never have left him. They would have flown - together. Then, when he went
to Hollywood, and started living every gay man's dream, he only came back when the project was
shot down. If the movie had taken off and he'd found his own little niche in sunny California, he'd still be there. Still flying. Then, after the bombing . . . that time it was my fault. Because I was so scared by what almost happened that I let him see how much I cared about him, and he felt obligated, because he has this ridiculous idea that he owes me something. But I can't be what he needs me to be. Can't give him what he wants, what he's always wanted. I just don't have it in me. He can't fly with me. In the end, the only thing I've ever managed to do was to keep him dirtbound, to weigh him down. So, while it's undeniably true that I've done plenty of things in my life that I'm not proud of, I will not do that. Not any more."

When he fell silent, Emmett felt as if the air in the room had suddenly thickened, that it was harder to draw breath. "You don't really believe that. You can't. You're Brian Kinney, for fuck's sake."

Brian's smile was brittle. "Yeah. I'm Brian Kinney. I look in the mirror every day to make sure that I'm still young, still beautiful. But that's all I am, Emmett. All I've ever been, and it's all on the surface. Inside . . . inside I'm just . . . empty. All the things that Justin wants and needs, I just don't have them to give."

And Emmett, abruptly, found that he couldn't stand to be in this place, hearing these words, and understanding this man - not for another minute. He had demanded to be allowed to know Brian Kinney, and he almost laughed as he realized how bitterly true certain old adages could be. One really should be careful what one wished for.

When he stood and hurried from the room, he was acutely conscious of the heavy silence behind him, broken only by the haunting strains of Ev'ry Time We Say Good-bye.

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It didn't take long to pack his things. When he'd come to New York, he hadn't brought a lot with him, assuming that he'd soon be back in Pittsburgh. That, of course, had proved to be a misconception, but he'd had very little use for the kind of clothing he'd once worn every day, when he'd been intent on enticing and holding the attention of a man with a sense of style that would have put a GQ editor to shame.

Thus his closet - such as it was - contained very little in the way of haute couture. No Armani or Ralph Lauren or Prada, but plenty of Levis, Nikes, and Tommy Hilfiger casuals - his one concession to fashion. But even the things he thought of as his 'good' clothes were frequently smeared or speckled with paint, as he rarely stopped to think about protecting his garments when artistic inspiration struck.

But there were two items in his closet - tucked carefully into a heavy-duty garment bag - that were as pristine and perfect as on the day they were first lifted out of layers of tissue, from boxes wrapped in bright gold and scarlet paper - while the person who had chosen them and purchased them and wrapped them and tucked them under a fabulously decorated Douglas fir sat back and watched.

Justin closed his eyes and let the memories of that day engulf him. He remembered waking that morning to find Brian leaning over him, to feel the gaze of passion-dark eyes and the silken caress of warm lips nuzzling at his skin. Remembered the amazing sensations as he was stroked and pleasured and finally taken, possessed completely by the man who owned his heart. Remembered the way the two of them had spent the morning playing with the toys they'd bought for Gus, along with the exceedingly private toys they'd bought for each other. Remembered Brian's face, eyes soft with love and joy, and the rich ring of his laughter as his son went wide-eyed, stunned and filled with wonder over the battery-powered bright red Jeep that he would subsequently ride all around the loft, plowing through drifts of bright paper and tissue and tinsel, and ending up crashing into the tree and generating chaos, to his father's delight. Remembered the happy faces of friends and family as they'd
dropped in throughout the day, all of them basking - one way or another - in the reflected glow of the happiness that he and Brian had created together. For a while.

And remembered, finally, the tenderness in Brian's eyes as Justin had lifted the gorgeous Hugo Boss leather jacket from its nest of tissue, and the cashmere sweater from the second box - the wheat-colored sweater that Brian would later assure him was a perfect match for the color of his hair. Romantic moments had never really been Brian's thing, but he had surpassed himself that day, even though he would forever deny it. They had been alone in the loft by then, Brian having waited until their guests departed to present the last of his gifts for his young lover.

Justin would never forget that moment, for it had marked a very special first in their relationship. After he had voiced his protest, claiming that it was too much and too expensive, and received a patented Brian Kinney shut-the-fuck-up look for his trouble, he had laughed and confessed that he loved both gifts. Then he'd hurried to put them on and proceeded to model them for the gift-giver, who had stood watching him, saying nothing for a while, as he'd strutted around the loft, doing his best impression of a runway model. Then Brian had stepped forward, to adjust the way the jacket sat on his shoulders, before dropping a kiss at his temple.

"How do I look?" Justin had asked, thousand-watt smile firmly in place.

Brian had been slow to answer, taking his time before leaning forward to offer his response in a broken whisper. "You're . . . beautiful."

It had been the first time he'd ever said it, although Justin had sometimes glimpsed it in his eyes at certain unguarded moments. Nevertheless, he had never said it before, and Justin was immediately wrapped in a euphoric happiness that was unlike any he had ever known.

Brian Kinney thought he was beautiful. Thus, he was.

He stood at the door of his makeshift closet and reached for the dark-colored bag. He had worn them last on the night before he'd left for the city, when they'd gone to the Diner to make his farewell appearance, to say his good-byes. Then they'd come home, and he'd packed them away in silence, promising himself that he would wear them again - soon, when Brian came to New York so they could renew their commitment to each other.

Then they had spent the hours of darkness making love, each drinking in the other, each dining on their bottomless passion as if they'd never dine again.

Brian would come; he had flown up into the morning believing that.

But it had not happened. Brian had not come, and now, Justin was becoming convinced that he never would.

He unzipped the bag and wrapped his fingers in the downy softness of the beautiful, hand-woven sweater, before lifting it and rubbing it against his face.

He had only worn it for the man he loved, had promised himself that he would never wear it for anyone else.

But perhaps he'd been wrong.

Perhaps the time had come.
"It's possible that it wasn't just a random attack." Lance Mathis didn't allow himself to flinch away from the anger he saw flaring in Brian Kinney's eyes, but it was a near thing, and he was forced to swallow a smile at the realization that this out-and-proud queer boy could step up and intimidate with the best of the macho men. He rather thought he wouldn't enjoy being the target of Kinney's rage.

For his part, Brian sat slouched behind his desk, careful to maintain his façade of rigid control. The flash of anger was quickly suppressed. "Yeah. I figured that out from the way Detective Horvath kept dancing around the issue and coming back to the same point over and over again, hammering away, asking Emmett what he remembered and what his attackers might have said, and if he recognized anybody. Then he asked me pretty much the same thing. I didn't want to upset Emmett so I just let it pass."

Then he sat forward and clasped his hands under his chin. "But you work for me, so no more dancing. What are you getting at?"

Mathis smiled, but there was no warmth in his eyes. "The simple truth is that there were plenty of potential targets on the streets at that hour. So it's possible that it wasn't just a coincidence - that Emmett was singled out deliberately."

Brian's smile was cold. "And why would anybody want to hurt Emmett?"

"Aside from the fact that he's a flamer of the first order," answered Mathis, "that's the question, isn't it?"

Brian said nothing for a while, simply studying his security chief's face. Then his eyes shifted to take in the expression of the brawny individual seated beside Mathis, and he spent another few minutes analyzing the expression he saw on the face of Drew Boyd.

"Sooooo," he said finally, "if you really believe that, why are you both in here, instead of down at the bar watching Emmett's back?"

Drew Boyd flashed a smile that had set hearts aflutter all over the world - both gay and straight worlds - when he'd become the model for Brown Athletics' new line of underwear. "Come on, Brian. You're not that dumb."

With a sigh he couldn't quite swallow, Brian stood and walked to the bank of security monitors and switched the system on, immediately banishing the shadows that had consumed the room and painting everything in a rainbow kaleidoscope of radiance. It took only a moment to pick out Emmett as strobe lights struck glints of ruby and topaz from his brilliantly striped shirt.

"He was wearing my coat," he said softly.

"Yes. And a hat that obscured his hair and face. And given that the two of you are about the same height, and that he exited the building through a doorway usually reserved for employees or management . . ."

Brian's eyes swept the crowd, scanning for familiar faces, for friends old and new (although the former were in shockingly short supply on this evening), for hot bodies and faces, potential problems, potential tricks."Why would anybody . . ."

"At the risk of being repetitive," said Mathis, "you're not that dumb. You've made more than your share of enemies along the way, some of them very powerful, and your determination to be upfront about who you are - what you are - would be more than enough to piss off every homophobe in the country. You repeatedly, consistently, flaunt your lifestyle, and get in the face of anybody who
crosses you. Jesus, Brian! The true miracle is probably that nobody ever went after you before.

Brian was silent for a while, watching the crowd and considering what Mathis had said. "But you don't know for sure."

"No," Mathis admitted, "but chalk everything up to coincidence is just asking for trouble, don't you think?"

Brian's smile was brittle. "You're wrong, by the way."

"Wrong how? You can't just stick your head in the sand and hope this will go away."

But Brian was shaking his head and lifting one hand to forestall the impending lecture. "Not that. You're wrong to assume that nobody ever tried before."

Mathis and Boyd exchanged glances, neither quite sure how to respond.

And Brian's smile became a soft huff of laughter. "I'm a fag, Boys. In Pittsburgh. And I never did see much point in hiding it. I just learned my lessons early. Such as the one that taught me that the only way to survive was to be tougher, faster, angrier, and smarter than any motherfucker who tried to intimidate me or 'put me in my place', as they termed it. Conventional wisdom claims that fags don't use their fists." He flexed his hands as old memories assailed him, and he smiled again. "I trained myself to be the exception to that rule."

"So," said Mathis, drawing the word out as he considered what Brian had said, "you're thinking that you can take care of yourself? That you don't need anyone to look after you?"

Brian pinched the bridge of his nose, fighting back the first twinges of a headache. "It's worked for thirty years."

"Yeah," said Mathis, "but the number and power of your enemies may have increased dramatically. Look, I understand that this . . . offends you. That you're insulted by the idea that you might need a little protection, but it would be stupid to disregard the threat. And, before you get your tits in a real twist, let me assure you that I know how to be discreet. I've had plenty of experience dealing with . . . ."

Brian didn't even try to suppress a grin. "Drama queens?"

A pale flush tinted the security chief's cheeks; he wasn't accustomed to being read so easily. "I was going to say prima donnas," he admitted.

Brian was suddenly distracted by a figure on the security screen, featuring a buff physique bulging out of a black wifebeater, topped by a classic face and a mop of dirty blonde hair. "Yeah, all right," he replied absently, abruptly bored with the entire conversation and turning to make good his escape. "But I don't want to see you, hear you, notice you. You'll give a whole new meaning to the expression, on the down-low. Got it?"

"Understood," Mathis answered, exchanging quick smiles with his cousin. "And just so you know, Drew has agreed to keep an eye on Emmett, just in case we're wrong about their intentions."

Brian paused as he went toward the door, and allowed his eyes to drift down to examine the complete package of Drew Boyd. His smile was suddenly sensual. "Now there's a real hardship," he quipped.

Boyd blushed charmingly.
Brian laughed. "Is this a freebie, or do I have to pay for the queer jock to ogle his favorite Nelly-bottom?"

The big quarterback got to his feet and moved forward so he could look down to study Brian's expression, eyes dwelling on the symmetry of that perfect face and the enticing shape of those sensual lips. "If necessary," he said softly, lifting one hand to trace the strong jawline, "I'd pay you."

Brian's lips compressed suddenly, as he suppressed another bark of laughter. "You can't afford me."

It was Drew's turn to laugh. "You really are an obnoxious little prick . . ."

"Nothing little about it," Brian retorted.

"Yeah, right. I'm an NFL quarterback, you know, and a rich man. But that's beside the point. Charming as your perfect bubble butt may be . . ."

"Let me guess," Brian replied, in his best lesbianic lilt. "It can't compare to your one true love."

Drew simply smiled.

"Now if you boys will excuse me," said Brian, with a glance toward the monitors to make sure his target was still in his sites, "I have bigger fish to fry."

"Just . . . keep your eyes open, OK?" said Lance Mathis.

"Hard to do," Brian called over his shoulder, "when you're getting sucked off, but I'll think about it."

And he was gone, leaving the security chief and the quarterback to exchange rueful smiles. "Come on," said Mathis. "I think I'll send out a couple of guards to patrol outside, and to keep an eye on his car. If last night is any indication, that's a likely spot for trouble."

"Yeah," said Drew. "That's probably a good idea, since it's perfectly obvious that he's not going to waste his time worrying about anything beyond his next blow job."

Mathis nodded. "No doubt he's an arrogant fucker. So why is it that I'm really beginning to like the little shit?"

Drew Boyd smiled. "Maybe because he's . . . one of a kind?"

Mathis laughed. "Well, there's no arguing with that."

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When the buzzer went off, he almost ignored it. Who in the world would be at his door at this hour of the night?

Then he sighed. Who indeed?

When he hit the intercom, the mystery was solved. "Justin? I know it's late, Honey, but let me in. Please."

He didn't offer a verbal response, but he did hit the switch to unlock the door at the first floor entrance.
When Jennifer reached the landing outside his little hole-in-the-wall, Justin was waiting at the door. "Mom, what are you doing here?" he demanded, albeit softly. "It's two in the morning."

"I know," she replied as he backed up to let her in. "But I wanted to make sure everything was . . ." She paused and took a moment to study his face. "You were upset when you went tearing out of the tavern. And I didn't know if you . . ."

"If I what?"

She looked around the room, and spotted the suitcase lying open on his bed, and the clothing laid out around it.

"Guess that answers my question," she said with a gentle smile. "You're really going with Steven?"

"You have some objection?" His voice was very soft, but there was no way of disguising the bright spark of anger swelling within it.

"No, Honey," she said quickly. "No objection. Just a . . . concern."

"About?"

She took off her coat and settled herself on the side of his bed, the only place available for sitting. "Justin, I'm not here to register my objections or voice my doubts. I just want to be sure that you're not rushing into something that you might not be ready for."

He turned away and walked to the window where he stood gazing out into the darkness. "I think," he said finally, "that I've waited long enough. Don't you?"

"What I think doesn't really matter, does it?" she replied. "It's what you think that counts. Are you really ready to . . ."

She fell silent, unable to actually speak the words, but he heard them anyway.

"He's never coming, you know," he whispered. "And I'm tired of watching the door, watching the clock, watching time slipping away from me."

Jennifer took a deep breath, as she noted the rigid lines of his back and the set of his shoulders and recognized the emotion that gripped him so firmly. He could tell himself that it was over, that he was through with waiting and dreaming, but she knew better. Brian Kinney might be relegated to his past, but he was not yet ready to let go of everything they had been to each other. She sometimes wondered if he ever would be.

"You have to do what feels right to you, Honey," she said finally. "But I hope you're not just running away. Because that doesn't work, and I ought to know. I tried running away from the truth about your father, and look where that got us."

"Mom, please . . ."

"Okay," she said briskly, accepting the inevitable. He would talk when he was ready to talk, and not a moment sooner. "If I'm lucky, my cab is still waiting for me, so I should go. Do you need help with your packing? What about this?"

And she lifted the exquisitely soft cashmere sweater from its plastic cover, and started to fold it.

"No," he said quickly, hurrying forward to take the garment from her and place it carefully back in
its protective bag. He offered her a smile, but it was only a pale reflection of his characteristic grin. "That's not exactly suitable for a tropical paradise, is it?"

"But . . ."

"No," he said firmly, picking up the garment bag and putting it back in the closet. "This stays here."

Jennifer did not bother to argue, as it was obvious that there was a great deal he was not saying, and his expression warned her to back off.

She sighed then, realizing that he had actually said very little, and she wondered when her lovely, big-hearted, overly impulsive, achingly candid son had become such a reclusive, closed-off stranger. She left him then, heavy-hearted and wondering if she had missed something, if there was anything she could do to fix what was so obviously broken, whether he admitted it or not.

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It had been a night like most others.

When Brian had descended to the main floor of the club, he had been inundated with warm greetings and innuendos and propositions, gifted with smiles and come-hither looks and caresses that were not nearly as incidental as they seemed, subjected to bold invitations and explicit offers whispered in his ear, and he had taken advantage of a couple of them, allowing the target he'd spotted from his office to give him a most satisfactory blow job, and selecting a second companion - young and brunette with beautiful green eyes - to fuck within an inch of his young life. Then he'd stood at the bar for a while, drinking shot after shot of Jim Beam, watching the crowd, and talking a bit with Emmett and Drew and Alonzo.

Sexually, it had been satisfactory, as most of his nights were.

Beyond that, he didn't allow himself to think about it.

It was almost three when he decided that the night was no longer young, and it was time to seek solace in the oblivion of sleep. Alone. He deliberately ignored the significance of the hour as he retrieved his leather jacket - brand new, of course, and purchased just that day to replace the one damaged in the attack - from his office and headed toward the private exit.

From his vantage point near the stairs, Lance Mathis noted his employer's intention and spoke into his hand-held radio. Then he headed down, still speaking into his hand set and gesturing to get Drew Boyd's attention. Thus, by the time Brian got to the entrance to the exit tunnel, the security guards on patrol outside the building were already alerted to his approach and positioned to watch as he made his way to his car, and Lance, Drew, and Emmett had exited through a different door where they could observe the entrance to the back alley. Lance's car was parked nearby, in a spot he had chosen deliberately on his arrival at the club, to give him this particular vantage point at this juncture in time. In this way, Brian would only be out of sight for a few seconds; it was the perfect plan.

Of course, even the most perfect plan might be flawed if the fundamental information on which it's based is incorrect.

Lance took a deep breath, enjoying the briskness of a chill wind that was swirling odd bits of detritus through the air. After hours spent in the smoky/boozy/God-only-knows-what miasma of Babylon's atmosphere (or, as Brian referred to it, the 'faggot fragrance of freedom') the smell of the night air was invigorating. Drew, meanwhile, was busy adjusting the bright chartreuse scarf that Emmett had
chosen to accent his gold and scarlet ensemble, tucking it tight into the neck of his pale quilted jacket to make sure Emmett didn't catch a chill.

They had been standing there for a few seconds, talking quietly, when they heard the roar of a motor, coming from the alley behind the club, a deep, pulsing, throaty growl that conjured up visions of leather-clad bodies astride powerful machines.

"What is that?" asked Emmett idly, just as Mathis jerked his radio from his belt and began to speak into it.

At that moment, three things happened simultaneously.

From the shadowed aperture of the alley, a dark figure emerged in a burst of speed, leather jacket, gloves, and helmet all a lightless black, contrasting beautifully against the crimson gleam of the classic 2002 Screamin' Eagle Harley Davidson customized Road King, and accelerated off into the night heading away from the individuals who could only stand and watch it go.

At almost the same moment, a huge, black Cadillac Escalade careened around an adjacent corner and raced off in the same direction, a lurid logo affixed to its rear window catching a ray from a passing street light to illuminate its features: a small gay-rights flag, obscured by a scrawled X that was not-quite-shaped like a swastika.

The third thing that happened was triggered by the second. Emmett staggered, and would have fallen if Drew had not grabbed him, as memory came roaring back, cued by the image of the logo. He closed his eyes as he saw it again, heard it again.

*He had rolled himself into a ball as he heard the vile screaming voice that promised him that he would know pain like he couldn't even imagine, that he would never again be young and beautiful, that he would be deformed and ugly like the filthy faggot he was, that the whole world would realize that he was no hero; then he'd felt the brutal blows from heavy boots striking him, heard the crunch of ribs cracking. And then - a beat of silence - and another voice, low-pitched and guttural. "Fuck! It's not him. We gotta get out of here."*

"Oh, my God!" Emmett gasped, clinging to Drew's strong arms. "They weren't after me. It was Brian they wanted. All along, it was Brian."

Lance was already running toward his car, shouting instructions into his handset, and cursing himself for his failure to pay attention. He had taken every contingency into account in his efforts to protect his boss; every contingency, except one. He had made sure that Brian's car was well-guarded and secure. Only . . . Brian hadn't come to the club in his Corvette on this night, because he had not gone home in it the night before. The 'Vette had remained in its niche near the club all day. Instead, he had come on the bike - the bike that was now carrying him out into the darkness, away from those who would protect him, away from safety and into . . .

Lance forced himself to stop thinking that way. He didn't have time to speculate; he only had time to run . . . and hope.

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tbc
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Be warned - this chapter is NOT for the faint of heart. When I say "Here be dragons", we're talking Smaug-level, no nonsense butchery.

Chapter 10

Brian Kinney was a free spirit. In fact, he was almost the poster child for the entire concept - an individual who lived his life according to his own unique principles (even if there were many who chose to believe that he had none). He never pretended to be anything other than what he was - gay (first and foremost), bright, unapologetic, brutally honest, intellectually gifted, ambitious, demanding, adventurous, promiscuous, and impatient with posturing of any kind. Unique, in all things, and unbound by the conventional morality that others might try to apply to him, which was not to say that he didn't have a very explicit moral code of his own, but it was one that he kept to himself, rarely allowing anyone to perceive it.

But the truth was that he never felt freer, or less restricted, or more unconfined, than when he was cruising down the road on his Harley, enjoying the throb of the power between his legs (and no, the deeper meaning of that particular metaphor was not lost on him).

This was especially true in the wee, small hours of the morning, when the streets were virtually deserted and he could safely ignore the limits applied by regulatory laws and traffic congestion. Thus, when he emerged from the alley behind Babylon, he was already close to maximum acceleration, and when he came to the next corner, where the narrow side street intersected a major thoroughfare, he didn't bother to slow down; he simply took the corner at speed by leaning into the left turn at a sharp angle, before roaring down the 4-lane boulevard, ignoring traffic lights and speed limits and even, to some degree, the laws of physics. If there had been a police patrol car around, he'd have been busted - and saved. But there wasn't, so he continued on his way, reveling in the freedom of the ride and the speed of his passage, and ignoring anything that might be lurking behind him, safely submerged beneath the growl of his engine.

He had never bothered to analyze how he felt when he was in this particular zone; it pretty much defied analysis anyway. But he occasionally imagined that the sensation was similar to what an eagle must feel when it soared into the sky, freeing itself from the chains of gravity.

Scraps of poetry always sang within him at such moments, and he understood the poet's musings on a visceral level, knew what it was to "slip the surly bonds of earth, and dance the sky on laughter-silvered wings."*

Flying.

The thought struck him before his rational mind had a chance to rein it in.

Flying. Like Justin.

He was suddenly not quite so enamored of the sensation, or so caught up in the revelry of the moment. So eager to reach for infinity. So free.
Up ahead, at a major intersection, he saw a traffic light shift from green to amber, and spotted the headlights of a bright red 18-wheeler sporting a familiar logo, as the driver began to ease the big rig forward. For a moment - a moment, he knew, of complete madness - he debated making a dash for it, pinning his hopes on being fast enough to roar through the intersection safely (somewhat) with a couple of inches to spare, before the truck could completely block the way.

Even though the rational part of his mind was insisting that there was no way he could make it, he almost gave in to the impulse, almost listened to the tiny little whisper in the back of his mind which occasionally reminded him of how spectacular it would be to risk it all, to take the chance that might result in leaving this dark, dreary world in a blaze of glory. Like Cobain, or Dean, or Hendrix. Forever young. Forever beautiful.

For the space of a heartbeat, he wavered . . . and wondered. The same thing he always wondered: what would it be like? What came next, if, indeed, anything came next? How hard would it be to find out? And how easy would it be to just . . . let everything go. Feel nothing. Know nothing.

As it happened, he was teetering on the verge of a pivotal moment, the confluence of a set of circumstances that would prove to be a major turning point in his life. Of course, he had no way of knowing that, as such moments occur in every life and are almost never recognized in advance. Nevertheless, if he had given in to his impulse, and continued to accelerate, pouring on the speed, he would have cleared the intersection safely, if only by a matter of centimeters, while the truck would have blocked the way for the vehicle coming up behind him.

And he almost did, but survival instincts (flawed but imminently rational) kicked in and prompted him to slow down instead of speeding up; it would prove to be one of the costliest mistakes of his life.

He eased off the accelerator and coasted, biding his time and hoping the light would turn before he was forced to come to a complete stop, thoughts still spinning around his own personal intimations of mortality.

Thus, he did not see the huge, black SUV until it was upon him, until he felt a loop of rope settle over his shoulders and jerk itself tight as a ham-handed fist wrapped itself in the collar of his jacket and yanked him sideways off the bike. He was momentarily suspended in mid-air, then pulled toward the side of the big vehicle, where he was slammed into the door, knocking the wind out of him and banging his head against the frame, before being dragged into the dark interior.

He was still struggling to regain his breath when he was thrown facedown onto the floor, and felt himself grasped by rough hands as a heavy weight settled onto his back, while someone pulled his helmet from his head before shoving his face against the rough carpet.

Then he heard the hoarse laughter.

"Well, look what we got here, Fellas. I think we caught ourselves a real live faggot, and a pretty one too."

Brian had spent his whole life fighting his way out of tight corners while simultaneously making sure that anyone who dared to attack him lived to regret choosing him as a target. It was all he knew, and he saw no reason to change now, but when he tried to buck up and twist away from the weight on his back, he immediately realized that he was heavily outnumbered. There were at least four wide bodies around him, focused, for the moment, on keeping him prone and immobilized.

Nevertheless, it wasn't in his nature to simply settle down and accept whatever fate might have in store for him, so he spent a few seconds gathering himself and mastering his breathing. After a short
time, he realized that his assailants had assumed that he was too overwhelmed to fight back, perhaps even only semi-conscious; then he used the strength of his legs and body to thrust himself upwards, while twisting violently, using fists, arms, and elbows as weapons. Regardless of the gravity of his situation, he felt a surge of adrenaline-fueled glee as his elbow connected solidly with someone's face and he noted the sudden gush of warm blood from a broken nose. At the same time, he sank his fingers into the soft tissue beneath another's jawline and squeezed with all his strength, reducing his target to gasping for breath.

"Son of a bitch!" snarled a guttural voice in his ear, as he was grabbed from behind and immobilized by massive arms. "He sure don't hit like a fuckin' fairy."

For a few seconds, there was pandemonium, as Brian continued to struggle, managing to kick out and catch one of his attackers squarely in the balls and another in his kneecap. Both screamed as they went down.

But in the end, there were simply too many of them, and they were too big and too brutal and too determined. Once more Brian was forced down, and this time his assailants had learned a valuable lesson. This time, they would take no chances. Moving quickly and roughly, they retrieved the rope they'd used to capture him, and bound him tightly so that he could not fight back. Then two of them sat astride his prone body, to make sure he couldn't wriggle free as another jammed a gag in his mouth.

Immobilized by their combined weight, Brian was once more having to fight to breathe, but he was marginally surprised to note that he had yet to succumb to panic or desperation. Then he sensed that someone else had joined the circle around him - someone who had been content thus far to sit back and watch and enjoy the spectacle of his capture.

For a few moments, there was only silence and a slight shift among his attackers as they moved aside to grant the newcomer access.

Up to this point, Brian had been filled with rage, intent only on inflicting as much damage as he could. Then he felt a pressure against his shoulder as the man who had just knelt beside him leaned forward, bracing his weight against Brian's body, and spoke slowly, as if savoring the words, and there was no doubt that everyone inside the vehicle was listening intently.

"Get us out of here," said the voice, a deep, raspy baritone with just a hint of a brogue threading through the rough accent. "Before his fuckin' private army comes along. Take us to the rendezvous, where it's nice and private and dark, where we can take our time and enjoy every second of this special occasion." The man shifted forward suddenly, and Brian almost gagged from the stench of an unwashed body, as the voice dropped to a rough whisper. "I promise you this, Pretty Boy. We're gonna make it a night you'll never forget."

Brian felt the SUV accelerate hard, and turn sharply to the right, and he fought to draw a deep breath, remembering what lay in that direction. The warehouse district, where there were blocks and blocks of decrepit old storage buildings, most of them long-abandoned. A derelict place which was virtually unoccupied even during daylight hours, and ghostly at night, a place where few dared to walk.

A place where people went to lose themselves, or to dispose of things they did not want, things that were used up and broken.

Strangely, it was not until that moment that he actually began to understand the danger he was in. Understand and, with barely a second thought, accept it. He remembered the actions and the demeanors of the men who had attacked Emmett just the night before, and knew immediately that
these were the same people, with the same intentions.

He closed his eyes and let himself drift, for just a moment, realizing that he might very well not survive this encounter, and it struck him suddenly that it was one thing to contemplate relinquishing his hold on life and going out in the proverbial blaze of glory, but was very much another to accept that his life might be taken from him.

But he would face whatever came, as he always had, with few regrets.

He would have liked to have had a chance to say good-bye to the only three people who had ever really mattered to him - his son, his best friend . . . and the only man he would ever love.

He thought about Gus, and felt a deep abiding sadness that his child would have to grow up without a father, but he was pretty sure that Gus would not really remember him any way, and the little boy would be well taken care of by his lesbian mothers.

He thought about Michael, who had always been there for him - almost; who had always loved him, even when he tried not to. But Michael had Ben now, and J.R. and Hunter. Michael no longer needed Brian to run interference, to stand up for him and protect him. He would survive the loss, no matter how much he might mourn.

But Justin . . . Justin would always remember, would never allow himself to forget. Brian could not deny that, knowing that for all the things that kept them apart and kept them from living out their lives together, no one would ever love him as Justin loved him, just as no one would ever love Justin as Brian did. So it was inevitable that Justin would grieve for him and go on grieving - for a while. But eventually, he would recover and go on with his life so, in the end, the world would continue without him, as if he'd never lived at all. And maybe, said an ugly little voice inside him, it would have been better that way. Still, Brian hated to think about the pain his young lover - the only soul mate he would ever know - would endure.

So he would fight to survive, to prevail, to make it through, although he knew the odds were against him. Still, he would not die docile and indifferent, nor for lack of fighting to live. But in truth, he had to admit that he had always known this day might come. Invincibility had always been a cloak he chose to wear, but it had been no more than a convenient illusion, worn for appearances only, to comfort those who depended on him and needed him. No one, after all, was immune to the viciousness of hatred and intolerance and the cruelest cut of all - random chance.

He took another deep breath, and tried to focus, to think, to find a glimmer of light in the darkness.

But as he thought, as he plotted, struggling for breath and desperate to find a way or make a way, he was aware of a small voice buried deep in his consciousness - a voice that whispered only one thing.

"Good-bye, Sunshine."

His respite, and the opportunity to contemplate his fate, was brief.

When he felt himself lifted roughly and slammed into a new position, as brutal hands ripped away his jacket and shirt and tore at his skin, he tried to brace himself, to summon the toughness he knew he would need as he once more became the center of attention for the thugs gathered around him. At that point, he couldn't concentrate on anything except the initial stages of pain which he knew was only going to get worse before it got better - if it ever got better - and his resolve to endure whatever he must in order to survive.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~
"Mother-fucker!" snarled Lance Mathis, careening around the corner in pursuit of the motorcycle that had vanished into the night. "I should have known. It was right in front of my eyes, and I never saw . . ."

"What?" demanded Drew. "What was right in front of your eyes?"

"Boots!" snapped the security chief.

Drew and Emmett exchanged glances, each convinced that their companion had momentarily lost his mind in the urgency of the moment, as Lance floored the accelerator of the Land Rover. "Boots?" they both echoed, obviously confused.

"He was wearing boots," Lance explained impatiently. "A label queen like Brian Kinney doesn't wear biker boots unless there's a reason for it. Versace, maybe, or Prada. But not biker's engineer boots. I saw them. I just didn't put two and two together. So . . . I should have known."

"Ummm, Sweetie," said Emmett gently, "I hate to burst your bubble, but I've seen Brian wear boots lots of times, so there was no way . . ."

Mathis didn't bother to suppress the eye-roll. "Not like this. These were real boots - the kind Harley riders wear. And the jeans were a clue too. Not 7's or True Religion. Real, honest-to-God 501's. Not even close to what you'd expect from a man who probably wears Gucci underwear."

Emmett closed his eyes and visualized Brian as he'd looked when he'd come down from his office, playing his slinky, predatory walk for all it was worth, and realized that the security chief was right. On this night, Brian had forsaken sartorial elegance for street creds, and none of them had picked up on the clues.

"Still," he reasoned, "you shouldn't blame yourself. You've only just met Brian, so how could you know . . ."

Mathis smiled, but there was no warmth or joy in it. "I make it my business to know everything about my clients, and I learn fast. I picked Drew's brain for everything he knew about the man, and I checked him out online. And then I talked with his employees - who tend to see a man more clearly than his friends do. So trust me when I tell you that I know more than you think I do. As for knowing the man behind the mask . . ." He paused and glanced toward his cousin, and there was a nameless shadow in his eyes that neither of his companions could quite identify. "I doubt that anybody - anywhere - really knows that man. Because he surrounds himself with walls - for protection - and never lets anyone inside to see who he really is."

Emmett's mouth gaped. "How did you know that?"

Mathis paused before answering, locked up for a moment in dark memories of another beautiful young man who had been forced to lock his heart away from the world. "I've seen it before," he said finally, his tone making it clear that he would say no more on the subject.

"Did you reach Horvath?" he asked, as Drew shoved his cell phone back into his pocket.

"Yeah. He's bringing the cavalry, but . . ."

"But?"

It was Emmett who dared to ask the question. "Where should he bring them? How do we find him?"

"Well," Lance replied, his voice subdued, "we can start right there."
Emmett turned to follow the direction of the security chief's gaze and gasped as he took in the sight of the big, powerful motorcycle lying half-way on its side, against the curb, with its front wheel jammed against the base of a street light.

Lance slowed and drove past the Harley, glancing at the bike only long enough to determine if it would reveal anything about the condition or location of its rider (it didn't), then coming to a stop as he reached the next intersection, his gaze sweeping left, then right. The only vehicle in sight was a big red 18-wheeler two blocks down on the left, signaling to make a right turn. In the opposite direction, there was nothing but an empty stretch of road disappearing into the darkness, beyond the spectral shape of a rusted-out railroad crossing signal just visible within the meager glow of the last functional streetlight.

"Now what?" asked Emmett, not quite able to suppress the fear that sent his voice into a higher octave.

Lance Mathis watched the truck make its swing onto the thoroughfare that would lead to the entrance ramp of Interstate 279 a few miles to the north and knew that, if the Escalade had managed to make that turn ahead of the big rig, it was probably long gone, and their chances of intercepting it almost non-existent.

Then he turned and looked off to his right, noting the shabby condition of the street and the buildings that stretched off into the darkness.

He had almost nothing to go on, except for the vaguest suspicion of a hunch. From what he'd seen of Kinney, he would not go down easily or without a fight, and his abductors might not have any desire to prolong their time in the vehicle. If Mathis was right about their intentions - and he'd have bet big money that he was - then they wouldn't want to risk drawing attention to themselves or keeping their victim in the car for too long just in case he managed to find a way to upset their plans. Kinney was nothing if not resourceful, and it was fairly certain that his attackers knew that as well as Mathis did.

"What's down there?" he asked abruptly, gesturing to the dark area to his right, wishing that he'd had more time to study the city and familiarize himself with potential trouble spots.

Drew and Emmett exchanged uneasy glances. "It's the old warehouse district," Drew said finally, then hesitated before adding, "They call it the Dead Zone."

Lance nodded. "Yeah. I'm sure they do. So . . . I think that's where we're going."

"What?" Emmett squawked. "Why?"

Lance sighed. "Because it's my best guess. Because it's all we've got. Because, if I'm wrong, then there's nowhere else to go."

"But what if . . ."

Lance spun the wheel to the right, and accelerated sharply. "Look. I don't really know anything. But my instinct tells me that these bastards are too anxious to get on with their fun to waste time driving to some remote place out in the country. Especially when there's a pretty remote place close at hand. And if you're thinking that they could be anywhere by now, blazing up 279 at 100 mph and already out of reach, you're right. They could be, and if you are, the bottom line is that we're not going to find him. Not in time, and, maybe, not ever. So do we just give up and stop looking, or do we take the only chance we've got, and go searching? And hope that we've guessed right."

For a moment, it looked like Emmett wanted to argue, but, in the end, he didn't, opting instead to
settle into the back seat and chew on a ragged cuticle, as Drew once more drew his cell phone from his pocket and hit the button to activate a pre-programmed number.

"The warehouse district," he said without preamble, when his call was answered. "And no sirens. If they hear us coming, there's no way he's coming out of there alive."

Then he paused and listened for a moment. "No, we don't know where exactly. We might even be completely wrong, but it's all we've got." Then he frowned. "Although you might want to send a patrol car to intercept a Coca-Cola truck that's barreling up toward 279. No way of being sure, but the driver might have seen something."

Lance darted a quick look at his cousin, before favoring him with a grin and a sharp thumbs up. Sometimes, out of sheer luck, amateurs spotted things that pros might miss.

He desperately hoped this was one of those times.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

He had promised himself he wouldn't pass out, and he'd succeeded - mostly. But he had drifted a bit, floating on the surface of nothingness after a particularly nasty kick to the groin coinciding with a blow to the diaphragm. But drifting had done nothing to dissuade his attackers; they had simply gone on with the bludgeoning, figuring - correctly - that he would feel it sharply enough once he surfaced from his near-fugue state.

Thus it was that he had no idea how much time had passed when the SUV stopped, and he was dragged from the back of the vehicle and trundled into a dark building, where the only light came from a group of lanterns hanging from hooks on the walls and overhead rails, a couple of handheld torches, and the flicker of a fire burning in a barrel. The concrete floor underfoot was stained and cracked, and the cavernous chamber into which he was dragged echoed in the darkness and was frigidly cold, with a layer of frost on the piles of debris that had accumulated in corners and against rusted metal walls.

Despite the fact that he'd been barely conscious only moments before, he did not go easily, struggling and fighting against his bonds as he was wrestled forward. He managed to drive a knee into the groin of one of his assailants and twist free for just a moment, just long enough to notice that there was a small platform on the other side of the building, with another door, directly across from the one through which he'd been dragged, and that there was a group of figures standing nearby, looking down on his struggle.

He could discern nothing about them, except that there appeared to be four of them and that they were careful to remain in the shadows, removed from the activity taking place below them, but close enough to see it all.

The big boys, he thought. The powers that be. He could not identify a single feature on a single face. And yet, he thought, he knew them. Not perhaps by name. But he knew nonetheless.

They wanted to revel in his pain and his terror - to bathe in his humiliation. They wanted a show.

He actually managed to dredge up a smile. They wanted a show, and he would give them one, but it would not, perhaps, be the one they were expecting.

Then he was driven to his knees under the blow of fists joined together and swung from behind to connect with the base of his skull, forcing him to fight to remain conscious as he was jerked backward and slammed against an iron railing. Two sets of arms wrapped around him from behind to
keep him still as three men scurried to chain him, spread-eagled, to the upright metal supports, securing him at wrists, shoulders, neck, torso and knees. When they were done, he was immobilized completely, with no room for error. A twist too far in one direction or a lunge in another would serve to cut off his air and render him more helpless than he already was.

Yet, he still struggled, unwilling - unable to simply give up and give in, managing, somehow, to head-butt the first of his attackers to step up and come close.

"Son of a bitch!" snarled the luckless assailant, as blood gushed from his nose. "I've had enough of his shit. Somebody give me a knife, and . . ."

"Not yet!" said a voice from the shadows - low-pitched, cultured, almost emotionless. Yet, somehow, everyone in the building sensed the satisfaction that threaded through each word.

"There is yet much to be done," the voice continued. "Much that our guest has to atone for."

Brian lifted his head and stared toward the speaker, and summoned up a rough, bloody smile. "What's the matter, Sport?" he asked. "You jealous because I wouldn't suck your dick?"

No one offered a verbal answer, although there was the faint whoosh of indrawn breath from one of the watchers as the massive individual with the horrendous body odor stepped forward to grasp Brian's left hand and proceeded to break two of his fingers, as nonchalantly as if he were snapping a stick.

Brian drew a hoarse breath, and bit down hard on his bottom lip, but he did not scream.

The finger breaker leaned forward and nuzzled his big nose against Brian's ear and spoke very softly. "You think you're gonna be able to resist all this, and hold your tongue. Think again, Baby Boy. Hold it all you want. Fuck, bite it off. But you're still gonna scream before we're done with you. And we'll see how much you like it when you get to choke on a real man's dick."

Despite the cold sweat that had broken out on his forehead, Brian looked up to meet the cretin's eyes, lips twisting into a smirk. "A real man?" he asked, ignoring the blood in his eyes and the agony in his hand. "Like you? Why don't you untie me, motherfucker, and we'll see who the real man is. Cause it looks to me like you boys are afraid to go one-on-one against this poor, helpless little faggot. And by the way, anything you stick in my mouth, you fucking better be prepared to lose."

"Yeah?" barked one of the others, a big redhead with a beer belly and a fleshy, pock-marked face. "You think you're a real tough guy, don't ya? But how about this, Pretty Boy? How you gonna feel when a real man reams your ass?"

"I'll let you know," Brian snapped, "if I happen to come across one."

"That's enough," said the cultured voice, slightly irritated now, and growing impatient. "Kindly keep your juvenile smack talking to yourselves. Mr. Kinney has more important things to learn tonight."

Brian managed a smile. "So," he said softly, "this is personal."

"Did you ever doubt it?" A new voice this time, higher-pitched. Less refined. "Did you really think that you could just go on flaunting yourself, throwing your depraved lifestyle into the faces of decent people, and never have to answer for it?"

"Decent people," Brian repeated, eyes sweeping the circle of thus around him. "Like this fine crew you've hired to do your dirty work?"
A third voice, muffled slightly, but amused and . . . something more. Hungry? Brian, for the first time, felt his blood run cold. He knew bald, unbridled hatred when he heard it, and he was hearing it now. "Do you really think we would soil our hands . . . with the likes of you? No, Mr. Kinney." The syllables of his name were spoken like a curse, dripping venom. "It's time you learned your place. For too long, you've crossed the wrong people, and believed that you could just walk away from the chaos you've created. You've wrecked homes, torn apart families, and destroyed efforts to take back our streets and our country from abominations like you. So now, you've made yourself a target for people who don't appreciate being betrayed by a swaggering, child-molesting pervert. So let me tell you what's going to happen. You're going to pay the price for not staying in the shadows where your kind belong. When we get through with you, nobody's ever going to mistake you for a pretty boy again. You'll be lucky if anybody can even stand to look at you. Just imagine - the stud of Liberty Avenue, transformed into a freak - a broken, mangled lump of flesh that people will laugh at, and cringe away from. After tonight, no one's ever going to think you're beautiful again."

The voice dropped to a near whisper. "No one's ever going to fuck you again, or let you fuck them. Even if you were able to get it up, which - trust me - you won't be."

Brian stifled a sigh. So that was the plan. He was meant to survive this night, and wish he hadn't.

The hulking thug, the one he'd silently christened Stinky, stepped forward again, and grinned at him, exposing crooked, stained teeth. "Ain't that poetic justice, Sweetheart? And when we're done with all that, when we've reduced that sweet little face to raw hamburger, we've got a little parting gift for you." He paused and pulled an item from his pocket and held it up for Brian to see. The captive managed not to flinch away from the sight . . . but only just.

A syringe, obviously used, dirty, with a huge, bent needle. It didn't require much in the way of intuition to figure out what it meant.

"So how about it, Pretty Boy? Just imagine - the Stud of Liberty Avenue, broken and ugly and unfuckable . . . and wasting away from AIDS. Exactly what you and all of your kind deserve."

And there was suddenly no more time to respond, no more opportunity to defy or resist - no more nothing as the blows began to fall. As the bruisers hefted chains and cables and straps and set to work, using fists and boots and whatever else came to hand. He felt the sickening crunch as a steel-toe connected with his shin and smashed it like kindling; he felt ribs shatter, felt his left femur snap, felt his skin split and shred under the massive assault. And still he did not cry out.

Then there came a pause, as the thugs took a moment to catch their breath, and Brian managed to lift his head and peer through a curtain of blood to stare at them. Waiting. Just waiting.

At that moment, Stinky came close and wrapped his fist in Brian's hair, jerking his head back so that they were virtually nose-to-nose. "Tell you what, Little Faggot," said the big man, with an ugly smile. "I'm feeling merciful tonight. So here's the thing. You're still gonna leave this place, when all's said and done, as a dickless fag. No gettin' away from that. Still gonna be broken and busted up and ugly as a fuckin' troll and infested with disease. But, if you just put on your best manners and beg oh so sweetly, maybe we'll end it all early. Maybe you don't have to take another beating, and another, and another after that, before we turn you loose. So, what do you say, Sweetheart? Want to kiss my ass and ask nicely."

Brian said nothing for a moment, simply staring back at the man who literally held the life of his captive in filthy, massive hands.

Then he slowly gathered himself, pursed his lips, and spat into the troll's face. "Fuck . . . you!" he said softly, not even bothering to raise his voice, knowing it was not necessary. Knowing the words
would burn like acid and drive the man to new heights of rage, but finding that the satisfaction earned in having said them was worth it all.

Stinky recoiled, and hastened to wipe away the spittle that had landed on his lips and nose. He would not, could not, admit to being embarrassed by his victim's defiance. Instead, he let himself ride the crest of the fury rising within him. Then inspiration struck, and he pulled an item from his coat pocket and knew instant gratification as he saw Brian close his eyes for just a second as he recognized it.

The snick of the switchblade was loud in the silence that surrounded the two of them.

"Let's see how long you can stay quiet now," he laughed.

He wasted no time in going to work, slowly and deliberately carving shapes and symbols into his victim's body and face, his face alight with glee as he gloated in the power he had over the mutilated flesh under his hands.

Brian did not scream, but, after a while, he began to moan, only partially conscious by this time. Blood had pooled beneath him, and his attackers were driven to greater frenzy as they realized that they were running out of time. Unless they wanted him dead - and the powers-that-be, watching from their elevated position, had been clear in their insistence that this was not what they wanted - it would be necessary for them to hurry and finish up. Especially since the best was yet to come, from their perspective. Although some among the spectators were beginning to have doubts.

One in particular. The softest of the voices, the one most filled with vitriol, finally spoke up. "If you go ahead with that blade," he called out, "you're going to kill him. And that's not what you're getting paid for. He needs to live - to suffer - to pay for his sins."

Stinky paused then, and looked down at the blade in his hand, still caught up in the vision of what he had intended to do with it. But he knew the man was right. If he went through with what they'd planned - if he castrated the pervert - there would be no extended justice. The little bastard, who had proved far tougher than anyone could have predicted, would simply bleed out and die, without ever even knowing how much damage had been done, without ever even feeling all of the pain he had earned.

And they still hadn't reaped the reward of hearing the motherfucker scream and beg for mercy.

"Shit!" he muttered, growing angrier by the moment. No way was he going to let this little fucker get the best of him. No way . . .

He took a step back then, and looked around, waiting for inspiration to strike. And when it did, the thugs around him, the ones who had been enthusiastic participants in the destruction of their victim up to this second, were suddenly not so sure they wanted to be a part of what came next as they read the cold, monstrous look in his eyes.

Stinky moved to a corner where a rough container of old, rusted tools and pieces of iron spilled its contents across the dirty floor. He dug through the assortment and finally found exactly what he was looking for.

But he didn't immediately come back to resume his assault against his victim's body. Instead, he walked to the barrel where they had built a fire from old broken shards of lumber, and thrust the item he'd found, a yard-long length of angle iron, in to the heart of the flames.

"Strip him," he instructed his gang of thugs after staring into the flames for a few minutes. "Maybe
we can't afford to let him bleed out, but there's more than one way to fuck him up "... his smile was an ugly, twisted thing... "so he can't ever fuck up anybody else again."

Brian, only half conscious by this time, tried to muster enough strength to fight off the hands that reached for him, but, in the end, it wouldn't have mattered anyway. They didn't bother to try to unbutton and remove his jeans the conventional way. They simply grabbed the switchblade and cut them off, not caring how many cuts they inflicted in the process.

He struggled to breathe, to hold on to his determination, his sanity - but he didn't know if he could face this.

Nevertheless, he forced himself to brace himself as straight as possible, trying to ignore the icy touch of the frigid metal against his bare skin and the nasty, hungry gleams of the eyes that watched him, reveling in his helplessness and the damage they had managed to inflict on his body. For his part, he didn't bother to look too closely, knowing what he'd see. He figured he'd see it soon enough, unless these motherfuckers miscalculated and killed him.

A development, he thought, which would not be without certain advantages.

But there was no time now to think about that, for Stinky was starting toward him, and there was no doubt that they had come to the critical moment of the entire fucking night.

The smile on the thug's face was lurid, his eyes glittering with an unholy glee and a compulsion to inflict pain, to dispense his ugly brand of justice, reflecting the orange glow of the object he held in his hand - the length of angle iron fresh from the fire.

"Time's up, Pretty Boy," said Stinky, hefting the piece of metal like a baseball bat. "If you were thinking you'd get through this night without screaming... think again." Then his voice sank to a whisper. "Oh, and when we're done with you, we're gonna take care of your pretty little blond boytoy. You didn't really think we'd forget about him, did you?"

Brian glanced over toward the observation platform and saw one of the watchers step forward and lean into the railing in front of him, eagerness and impatience written in every line of his body. The man spoke then, so softly that his words were barely audible, but there was no mistaking the malice in them.

"Now you learn the most important lesson of your life, Kinney - the wages of sin."

Brian closed his eyes and reached desperately for some kind of control, some kind of strength, but all he could hear was the snide snicker of shared laughter rising from hell's version of a peanut gallery.

"New York never sleeps," said Daphne, hoisting her glass toward her companion. "And it's a fucking miracle."

Michael just smiled, not bothering to offer a verbal response, appreciating the coldness of his vodka-rocks glass as he drew it across his forehead in an effort (probably futile) to ease the headache that was pounding behind his eyes.

The hotel bar was dark and almost deserted, except for a few diehards scattered among the shadows. The two from Pittsburgh were the only ones who were not alone. Even so, neither of them seemed eager to make much effort to communicate.

"I couldn't sleep," Daphne volunteered after a few silent minutes. "Couldn't even bring myself to go
to bed. Don't know why."

Michael offered up a small smile. "Me neither. And it's funny because I'm really tired. And I never have trouble sleeping." He thought about that for a moment, before shaking his head. "Well - almost never."

Daphne nodded, contemplating the dark liquid in her glass. "Something bothering you?" she asked finally.

He shrugged, aware only of a vague sense of unease, of something being . . . off. "I don't think so, but . . ."

"But there must be something," said the voice of a new arrival, leaning in over his shoulder.

Lindsey slid onto the bar stool next to him, and signaled the bartender to bring another round for her friends and one of Daphne's chosen poison for herself.

"You too?" asked Michael. "Where's your . . . other half?"

Lindsey smiled. "Sleeping the sleep of the innocent," she replied. "Mel doesn't do insomnia."

Michael nodded. "Yeah. Ben too. And my mother is probably sawing wood loud enough to keep an entire floor awake."

"I resent that." Debbie took the stool next to Daphne after greeting Michael with her customary head-slap, which did absolutely nothing to assuage his headache.

"Ma," he whined. "What the fuck are you doing up?"

"How do I know?" she complained. "The bed's too soft? The traffic's too loud? The room smells like disinfectant? Something."

"Yeah," said Michael after a while. "Something."

Debbie ordered her drink, and no one was even slightly surprised when Ben showed up a few seconds later, rumpled and sleepy, but obviously concerned. He stood behind Michael, draping his arms around his young mate's shoulders. "I woke up," he explained, "and you were gone. I got . . . worried."

"Sorry," Michael answered, dropping a kiss on his husband's hand. "Didn't mean to worry you."

"So," Ben went on after a pause, "what's this? You guys plotting something or . . ."

It was Lindsey who interrupted. "Actually, we're all pretty much wondering the same thing. We're here, and we have no idea why."

"You don't think there's something wrong, do you?" That was Debbie, ordinarily the most pragmatic of individuals, though occasionally given to leaping blindly to unwarranted conclusions. It seemed, however, that even she was not immune to the macabre fancies arising from the wee small hours of the morning.

"What could be wrong?" asked Ben.

No one answered for a while. Then Daphne voiced her concern. "Well, I don't know about anything else, but . . . Justin could be making the biggest mistake of his life."
"What?" That was Debbie, shrill, almost resentful. "What the fuck does that mean? He just had the
night of his life, and he's off to fucking Tahiti, for Christ's sake. With the man of his dreams, by the
way, so how . . ."

Daphne just stared at her, waiting for reality to kick in. When it didn't, she sighed and offered up a
succinct explanation. "The man of his dreams is in Pittsburgh, Debbie. And always will be."

Debbie made a 'pfft" sound in her throat. "So what? He's supposed to spend his whole life grieving
over the Mighty Kinney?" She drained her drink in one gulp. "Brian had his chance, and blew it.
And Sunshine's moving on, just like he should."

Daphne looked up then and saw that Michael had turned to look at her, understanding exactly what
she was saying. "You know, Ma," he said slowly, "just because Steven is rich and famous and a
member of New York's high society doesn't make him right for Justin. Doesn't mean that he can
make Justin happy."

"And you think Brian can?" she laughed. "Dream on, Michael. Brian is never going to change,
never going to . . ."

"I'll drink to that," said Lindsey suddenly, "and pray to the powers that be that you're right."

She turned then, and met Ben's eyes, and saw something flicker there, a flash of understanding, of
approval, but she was still surprised when the professor lifted the drink the bartender had just handed
him, and said firmly. "To Brian!"

"To Brian!" echoed the others around him, hoisting their glasses, except for Debbie who looked as if
she thought they all needed their heads examined.

Lindsey and Michael exchanged smiles, both suddenly grateful that Melanie was not present to add
her typical acerbic comment.

"You can all think what you want," Debbie observed finally, "but Sunshine's gonna be just fine
without the Stud of Liberty Avenue."

Even though several of them wanted to voice their disagreement, it was Daphne who had the last
word, and she spoke it while staring into her glass, her eyes dark with certainty. "You're wrong,
Debbie. He may survive; he may endure, he may have success beyond his wildest dreams, but he's
never going to be 'just fine' as long as Brian is not by his side. And one more thing," she paused, and
her smile grew wistful, "this was not the 'night of his life'. That happened years ago, on the night he
first 'saw the face of God'."

She rose then and made her way to the door, moving carefully to avoid weaving.

"Now what," said Debbie into the silence that enveloped the group, "is that supposed to mean?"

None of the three men in the car dared to voice it, but they were all keenly aware of the passage of
time.

Emmett, particularly, was having trouble controlling his breathing, and the first tendrils of panic
rising in his mind. It had been too long, and every second that elapsed might very well be Brian's
last.

They had been cruising the warehouse district for half an hour, chasing shadows, seeking some sign,
some indication, that the SUV had been here before them, the difficulty of their task compounded by the need for discretion. They dared not let their prey know that they were nearby, for the thugs would surely make quick work of their victim if they realized they had been discovered.

Emmett's eyes smarted from peering into shadows, trying to see what was hidden, trying to pierce the darkness.

"This is hopeless," muttered Drew as they pulled around a corner, and his voice was loud in the stillness, broken only by the moaning of the wind and the whoosh of the tires on the slushy surface of the streets. Though there was no more ice on the pavement, there was still a wintery residue, and dirty snow was still packed along the edges.

Emmett opened his mouth to voice his own growing concern, when he spotted something as they rolled past the entrance to a tiny alley off to his left.

"Stop!" he said sharply. "Back up."

Lance looked up and met Emmett's eyes in the mirror. "What?"

"In the alley, there was . . . something."

Lance sighed. He doubted that Emmett had managed to note something that both he and Drew had missed, but he was desperate enough by this time to grab for any nuance of a clue.

He backed up slowly, and peered into the yawning blackness at the mouth of the tiny passageway that was barely wide enough to be termed an alley.

"What do you . . ."

"Tire tracks," said Drew suddenly. "Look past the entrance. There are tracks in the snow back there."

Lance paused and tried to see what the others had noticed. Was there something there, or was it merely wishful thinking? He drew a deep breath, realizing that, at this point, it didn't make much difference. They were out of time; Brian was almost certainly out of time, and this was as good a direction as any.

"Make the call," he said tersely, as he eased into the alley before parking the car to block the entrance. Then he got out of the car.

Drew spent a few seconds looking around to get his bearings; then he spoke into his cell phone briefly before making his exit into the frigid night.

When Emmett moved to follow, Drew was standing in his way. "Emmett," he said softly, almost whispering, "you need to wait here, Honey. This is no place for . . ."

"For what?" Emmett demanded. "For a silly little faggot who couldn't possible help to rescue a friend? Get out of my way, Drew."

"But . . ."

"He's my friend, and I'm going."

From the other side of the car, Lance met his cousin's eyes. "I think you better listen to him," he said gently.
Without another word, the three started down the alley.

There were three buildings in the vicinity, all dark and foreboding and on the verge of collapse, and Lance knew that they dared not pass any of them up, assuming that they couldn't possibly be what they were looking for. There was simply no way to be sure.

So they spent a few minutes checking out the first one which opened onto another alley that intersected the one they were on, at right angles. They were just finishing up, hoping they hadn't missed anything, when Drew suddenly stiffened.

"Did you hear that?" he asked, head turning frantically to locate the source of the sound.

"Hear what?" Lance demanded.

"I'm not sure. A rattling, like chains or something. Or . . ."

And then there was no more need for speculation or uncertainty as a scream split the night, a scream, thought Emmett, that he would never forget as long as he lived. The scream of a damned soul, in eternal torment.

"Jesus!" he breathed, but there was no time to gather himself, as Lance and Drew had already taken off at a dead run toward the dark hulk of the next building down.

As they approached, the scream seemed to waver and fall away; and then there was another sound, possibly even more horrible than the scream had been.

There was no mistaking the sound of laughter.

The three rounded the corner and saw the SUV blocking their passage, with another car beyond it, dark and big but only the rear fender was visible as it was parked just around the corner of an intersecting alley. Still, there was no way they could take the time to investigate, all three of them intent on only one thing - to get to Brian, to prevent a repeat of whatever had driven him to that inhuman scream.

Brian Kinney did not scream. It simply did not compute.

Nevertheless, they were only half-way to the doorway on the other side of the SUV when they heard it again.

"Wait," Lance shouted desperately as Emmett threw himself forward, knowing nothing except that he could not endure that sound for another second. "There are guards."

But Emmett was beyond caring, beyond caution. He had to get to Brian, had to . . .

The warning shout came from a thug who had been at the opposite end of the alley when they'd made their approach, and occurred just as Emmett burst through the doorway, with Drew and Lance on his heels.

Then he slammed to a stop, suddenly unable to move a single muscle as he took in the terrible, bloody tableau in front of him.

Brian, chained up like a cut of meat, hanging against a metal railing, naked and bleeding and bludgeoned to the point where he was unrecognizable, with four hulking bruisers gathered around him, and the frigid air was thick with the stench of scorched flesh. Three of the thugs were frozen in shock, the weapons they had used on him still in their hands. But the fourth - the biggest of them all -
was still moving.

"Son of a bitch!" he snarled, still intent on his victim, as he lifted the heavy piece of red-hot angle iron away from its contact with Brian's torso, and swung it upwards, putting all his weight behind it. When it impacted against the side of Brian's head, there was a terrible crunching sound, and the scream was silenced.

Emmett started forward then, frantic to reach his friend, frantic to stop this horror, but he knew he wouldn't get there in time. The ogre seemed to be so caught up in bloodlust that he didn't care that he'd been caught or what might happen next.

He lifted the piece of metal again and aimed it toward Brian's groin, determined to complete his task.

Emmett screamed then and . . .

Three shots rang out.

The thug went down like a broken doll, and the only sound was Emmett's sobbing, and the rising howl of sirens in the distance.

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* High Flight -- John Magee Jr. 

tbc
"Call 911," shouted Lance, as he raced forward with his 9mm Beretta still clasped in his hand, obviously intent on the only thing that really mattered now, getting to Brian and changing the focus of the awful scenario laid out before them. It was no longer about seeking and finding; it was now about saving. "And Horvath. Get them here, now."

Drew Boyd was already dialing, looking around as he did so, and watching as the group of thugs ran for the exit, stumbling over each other in their desperation, perfectly content to leave their fallen comrade behind. He noted too that there was another door on the far side of the decrepit old building, and he thought he'd caught a flicker of motion there as he and his companions had raced into the room, but he couldn't be sure. He didn't waste time worrying about it; there were more important things to do. He had to help Brian; that had to be the primary focus, but he also had to . . . he wasn't even sure how to phrase it. He had to protect Emmett, to rescue him from the hellhole into which he'd fallen, but he wasn't even sure such a rescue was possible, for Emmett was moving through his own version of perdition, so bound up in the perception of horror that he seemed unaware of anything else. He had recoiled away from the staccato sound of the gunshots as Lance fired, and since that time, his face had been white and vacant and terrified - the classic expression of an individual in the first stages of shock - and he had avoided looking at the body crumpled on the dirty concrete beside the metal posts where Brian was chained.

Lance was the first to reach Brian and forced himself to pause and take a deep breath before attempting to release Brian's bonds. Every primal instinct within him was screaming that he must hurry, that any hesitation might be fatal, but another voice - more controlled, less panicked - told him that his employer's life was literally in his hands and haste might be even more lethal than delay. He dared not risk doing more harm than good.

"Emmett," he shouted as he stepped close to wrap his arms around Brian and shift him into a less awkward position, easing the weight off strained arms and shoulders. "Get over here. I need help to get him down without hurting him."

Until that moment, Emmett had remained frozen, almost petrified, but he came to himself quickly, in the necessity of the moment. Then he leapt forward, trying to figure out how best to aid his friend, and, in the extremity of his desperation, he stepped over the body of the dead thug without a second glance.

"See if you can take some of his weight while I loosen these chains," Lance instructed. "We can't let him fall."

Emmett did not hesitate, stepping close and easing his arms under Brian's to hold him close, noticing the slickness of blood and its sweet stench, and managing to avoid the band of charred flesh that stretched across the left side of Brian's chest, from just below the nipple to the lower edge of the rib cage. He was careful to keep his touch as light and gentle as possible, and noted that Lance was doing the same. Nevertheless, there was no avoiding a certain amount of jostling, and they had barely begun the process of freeing him when Brian groaned, a deep, guttural sound that seemed to rise from the bottom of his belly.

Emmett at first did not understand why the sound, ugly and painful as it was, generated a tiny burst of joy within him. Then he realized; it was the first clear indication that Brian was alive. Until that moment, he had not been sure.

When the chains were loosened, he lifted Brian as easily as if he'd been a baby, and laid him across
his own lap, cradling him and wrapping him close. When Lance shucked his own jacket and draped it over Brian's shoulders, Emmett tucked it around him, noticing that Brian was beginning to shiver. Then he looked up at Drew, who was tucking his phone back into his pocket. Without a moment of hesitation, the quarterback slipped out of his suede Hugo Boss and spread it over Brian's lower limbs, completing a small cocoon of warmth around the bruised and battered body.

Brian made no sound, but Emmett thought he felt a tiny movement, not quite a tremor, as if the chilled body were shifting closer, seeking any nuance of comfort it could find.

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It was an ocean, but not like any ocean he'd ever known before. It had currents and undercurrents, surges and tides, ripples and eddies. But there was no real sensation of vastness, no bouyancy, no wetness, just . . . pain, in every conceivable variety, in every possible lurid color, endless and bottomless, ranging from a deep crimson purple throb to fiery, jagged blades of molten gold.

He'd never imagined such pain, and knew he could not tolerate it for long. Knew that if he just let go, just let himself sink into the darkness reaching up from below with greedy fingers, that the pain would end.

Only . . . he couldn't. Not yet.

There was one thing he had to do, one task yet to complete, a task that mattered more than the agony that pierced every inch of his body and flowed like molten glass through his veins. He wasn't even completely certain what the words meant, but he could still hear them just the same, repeating like a broken record, in a voice as intensely frozen and cold as the currents through which he was drifting were boiling hot.

". . . when we're done with you, we're gonna take care of your pretty little blond boytoy. You didn't really think we'd forget about him - did you?"

The pain was coming in waves, each stronger and more fierce than the last, but above it, or below it, or beyond it, there was something else - something that sought to offer solace, even though there was no real solace to be found. Still, there was a glimmer of soft radiance in all the lurid layers of color around him - a beacon amid the technicolor fury of the storm.

A voice that murmured nonsense words - meaningless but rhythmic and compelling.

"Brian, don't you dare die on me, Brian. Are you listening to me? Brian, you better not die on me."

The litany went on and on, and then repeated itself, never pausing, never faltering.

A ray of pure light breaking through bands of lurid color.

He could not - quite - reach it. But he had to reach it. There was no other choice. The price of failure was simply too high to contemplate.

Emmett. The name came to him suddenly. That was the name of his ray of light. Strange. Something inside him insisted that it should have been Michael, although he really couldn't attach faces or memories to either name.

But it wouldn't really matter. The only thing that did was the message, if he could just summon up the strength - and the will - to speak it.

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The ambulance arrived in a garish, brilliant rotation of scarlet lights reflecting on drifts of dirty snow, and the paramedics rushed forward, pushing a gurney ahead of them, focused only on taking whatever steps were necessary to save the life of their patient. Emmett greeted their arrival with a sense of relief, eager to let them take over. His efforts at revival had proven useless, and he was feeling more and more helpless, and less and less confident.

Brian was deathly white, and his breathing had grown progressively more shallow as they'd waited for the arrival of the emergency team. After doing all that he could think of to protect his boss, Lance had gone to meet Horvath and the police and to aid in the search of the area and efforts to learn the identity of the attackers, who had managed to make their escape prior to the arrival of the police.

Meanwhile, Drew hovered nearby, after dragging the fire barrel closer to try to provide a little warmth for Emmett and the figure draped across in his lap.

The body of the man Lance had shot lay ignored, checked by Lance only briefly to determine that the thug was, indeed, dead, although the three holes in his head was a pretty fair indicator.

Emmett shifted his position to give the ambulance attendants better access to Brian's torso, but he was surprised when they attempted to move Brian to the stretcher they had placed nearby, to find that it was not such a simple task as they'd expected. Brian's fist was clinched tight around Emmett's lapel, so tight that it could not be dislodged. Emmett and Drew attempted to pry it loose, but with no luck. Then, to the astonishment of the entire group, the fist clinched tighter and, against all odds, Brian stirred and opened his eyes to stare directly into Emmett's face.

"Brian?" Emmett whispered, suddenly unable to breathe as he was impaled by hazel eyes, as sharp and keen as a blade. "Jesus, you're awake. What are you . . ."

Brian's lips moved, but he hadn't enough breath to create sound.

Emmett gestured to the ambulance personnel, to keep them from lifting their patient away from him; then he leaned close, putting his ear against Brian's lips.

At first, there was only the faint susurration of broken breath. Then he heard it, gasping, barely audible, but definite.

"Justin's . . . next. Don't . . . call him."

The last word barely spoken, riding on a long, slow sigh into oblivion, a languid drift down into a layer of ocean where there was no more pain.

The second time the emergency team attempted to move him to the gurney, he was as limp and unresisting as a rag doll.

"I'm riding with him," Emmett declared to Drew, as the paramedics prepared the patient for transport, "but you have to give Detective Horvath a message for me. It's really important."

"Okay." By this time, Drew would have agreed to anything in order to ease the incipient panic he easily read in Emmett's demeanor. "What do I tell him?"

"Okay." By this time, Drew would have agreed to anything in order to ease the incipient panic he easily read in Emmett's demeanor. "What do I tell him?"

Emmett drew a deep breath. "He said that Justin is in danger. You have to tell Horvath to make sure he stays away. If he comes back here . . ."
Drew sighed. "That's why he regained consciousness, isn't it? To make sure Justin would be protected."

Emmett nodded, tears welling in his eyes. "And I'll be damned if I'm going to take a chance on him surviving this horror, only to wake up to find out that the person he loves more than life itself was taken from him."

Drew stared down at Brian's face and watched as the paramedics wrapped him in insulated blankets. He managed not to cringe away from the sight of the mangled body, but only barely. "You really think," he whispered, "that he's going to... survive this?"

"He's Brian Kinney, for fuck's sake," Emmett snapped, barely able to contemplate the possibility of a world where such a man could be reduced to a broken memory. "He'll survive. You'll see."

Drew did not argue, choosing instead to wrap his arms around Emmett and offer the only comfort he had to give - the warmth of a lover's touch.

"Sir," said one of the paramedics urgently as he adjusted the last strap on the stretcher, "we have to go. We need to get him to a trauma center, right now."

Emmett hastened to follow. "How bad is it?" he asked, as he climbed into the back of the ambulance.

One of the paramedics began to hook the patient up to the medical equipment in the vehicle while another spoke into a radio handset. No one volunteered an answer to Emmett's question, but he didn't really need one.

He had never seen so much blood, he thought. And he would never have imagined that a human body could take so much punishment and... He tucked himself safely into a corner as the ambulance began to move, siren already screaming.

Brian was so still, so limp, so...

But he wouldn't think about that. He would put on his best Scarlet O'Hara persona, and trust that tomorrow would be a better day. A tomorrow, confirmed by a quick glance out the ambulance's rear window, which was already upon them.

As the emergency vehicle went streaking through the dawn-kissed streets of the city, he managed to stay out of the way of the attendants as they worked over Brian with growing urgency, but he got close enough to reach out and enfold Brian's cold fingers in his own hand. It wasn't much, but it was all he could do, his only means of speaking to his old friend, to say, "I'm here, and I'm not going to leave you."

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Carl Horvath stood in the middle of the old warehouse, staring down at the body crumpled at his feet, and was suddenly aware of every one of his years. How, he wondered, had he come to this point? When had he made the transformation from Carl Horvath, good, diligent, competent, run-of-the-mill detective, just a few years shy of retirement, to... he had to stifle a small, weary smile, despite the grimness of the moment... Carl Horvath, defender of Gayopolis? It seemed appropriate, somehow, to think in terms that would be perfectly clear to his not-quite-legitimate stepson.

How had it come to this, he wondered again. And how in God's name had Brian Kinney been transformed from primo badboy/pain in the collective ass of every hypocritical politician and every pulpit-pounding homophobe, to a helpless victim?
One of his not-quite-wife's favorite expressions came to mind. "Don't tell me the world's not going to shit," he muttered, not quite under his breath.

Apparently, he'd spoken more loudly than he'd intended, as Lance Mathis paused in the act of lighting a cigarette, and gave the cop a small, grim smile. "The world is going to shit," he confirmed.

Horvath nodded and took a deep breath. Time to put personal concerns aside, and deal with the business at hand, ugly and tragic as it might be.

"I assume you've got a license for the gun," he said, not quite making it a question.

"I do," replied the security chief, "but if I didn't, I still would have shot him." He paused, taking a deep drag of his Marlboro before continuing. "Though I'd have preferred to have had a chance to dispense a little justice of my own before granting him the peace of the grave."

Horvath glanced over toward the iron bars where the thug's victim had been chained and barely managed not to cringe away from the pools of blood lying black against the broken cement. "That bad, huh?"

Lance shuddered. "Count your blessings that you didn't see what they did to him. It's funny, you know. You always think that you'll get used to it as time goes by, but you never do."

Drew Boyd arrived as his cousin was speaking and reached out to lay a comforting hand on Mathis' shoulder. "If you could get used to that, you wouldn't be human."

Mathis just nodded, before turning to allow his eyes to sweep his surroundings. "Crime scene techs on their way?"

Horvath nodded. "And the coroner," he added. Then he knelt by the body at his feet and studied the thug's face, noting the expression of surprised disbelief with some small measure of satisfaction. He wasn't supposed to allow himself any emotional involvement with his cases, but he thought that Boyd's observation would extend to cover this situation. He would have had to be less than human not to feel some relief that this cretin had died before he could complete his unholy task.

The man was lying on his side with the piece of angle iron he had used as a weapon still clutched in his hand, his arm extended over his head. The sleeve of his jacket had ridden up, revealing the edge of a dark mark on his forearm. Moving carefully, more to avoid the wrath of the coroner for tampering with the body than out of any nuance of respect for the dead, Horvath pushed the sleeve higher and stared at the inked figure he'd exposed.

"Shit!" said Mathis, closing his eyes and rubbing his forehead with thumb and forefinger.

"What?" asked Drew. "What is that?"


He then proceeded to search the dead man's clothing, removing the wallet he found in the rear pocket of dirty jeans.

The driver's license showed an address in northeastern Ohio, and provided the name of the bearer: Andrew O'Malley.

"Off hand," the detective said slowly, "I'd guess we've got ourselves a member of the Order of the Blood."
"Jesus!" whispered Drew. "You think Brian pissed off some white supremacy nut job?"

"No," Horvath said quietly. "This is just a thug-for-hire, with delusions of grandeur. No doubt Brian pissed off a lot of people through the years, but this . . . " He paused to glance once more toward the carnage on the floor around him. "This had to be personal. It wasn't enough to kill him. They wanted to destroy him - break him - before he died."

Mathis nodded his agreement. Then, unexpectedly, he dredged up a tiny smile. "Proving," he drawled, "that they didn't know him very well."

"What do you mean?" asked Drew, who didn't know Brian nearly as well as Emmett did. Not even as well as Mathis did, because the security chief always made it his first priority to get to know his clients intimately.

Mathis sighed. "He'd die first."

"Still might," Horvath pointed out reluctantly.

Mathis nodded. "I know. But still unbroken."

Horvath smiled. "I can't even begin to tell you how many times I had to bite my tongue to keep from biting his head off, or literally sit on my hands to avoid taking a swing at him. God! He could be the most infuriating, demanding, cocksure, in-your-face bastard you can even imagine. But . . ."

"But?" Drew prompted.

"At the end of the day, you had to admit that he had balls the size of melons - and more nerve than sense. He . . . re-educated me, I guess. Until I came face-to-face with him, I never realized that a queer could also be a real man." He smiled again. "Even if he was more concerned with how his ass looked in skin-tight leather than how to defend himself. He was almost fearless, something the rest of the world doesn't expect . . . from a fag."

He flushed as he caught Drew Boyd's eye. "Sorry, Drew. It was just . . . heterosexual ignorance. Until Debbie came into my life, I didn't have a clue."

A bustle at the doorway announced the arrival of the crime scene specialists, and Horvath rose to his feet with a sigh. "Now for the hard part," he said wearily.

"Reports?" asked Mathis. "Paperwork? Facing the press who are probably already on their way as we speak?"

"All of the above," answered the detective. "But first things first. Facing the press and my bosses will be child's play, compared to facing Debbie."

"Wait," said Drew quickly. "You can't. Not until you know the rest."

He then proceeded to relay Emmett's message - and Brian's request - and both Horvath and Mathis understood immediately that Kinney had managed, in the face of insurmountable odds, to confirm their opinions of him.

Balls the size of melons indeed.

The group of Pittsburgh tourists found it difficult to agree on much of anything as they prepared for a
day of sightseeing in the city, but there was absolutely no argument about where to have breakfast. One could not, after all, spend a day in New York without dropping in, at least once, at the Brooklyn Diner.

Thus it was that the group, minus only Jennifer who had caught an early flight to Boston to visit family, found itself wandering down W. 57th Street just after nine A.M., debating the merits of Tony Bennett's Cinnamon-Raisin-Pecan French Toast (Calvin's choice) as opposed to the iconic delights of Smoked Salmon on a Bagel (Melanie's preference).

The morning was cold but dry, and they were looking forward to a busy, enjoyable day. Melanie and Lindsey seemed particularly glad to be present, and happy with the chance to catch up and renew connections. Living in Toronto had proven to be a blessing for them in many ways, but it had not come without certain costs.

They had missed their friends - some more than others - and one of them had missed one particular old friend so intensely that she sometimes wondered if the move had been worth it. But she had never dared to voice that idea, knowing how much emotional turmoil it would generate.

Still, this would be a lovely day, and even if she could not speak face-to-face with the one she missed so much, she could pump their other friends for information and learn all there was to learn about how Brian was faring - without Justin.

Lindsey frowned a bit over that thought. She wondered if she would ever quite be able to cast off the tiny shards of guilt that lingered in her heart, knowing that she had been the primary source of the impulse that had brought Justin to the city, to the center of the art world in search of his professional fulfillment, at the cost of his personal commitment to Brian.

It had been the right thing to do. She still believed that, in her certainty that Warhol would never have become Warhol had he been content to remain in Pittsburgh.

But . . .

Sometimes - usually late at night when she couldn't sleep - she still remembered the look on Brian's face as she and her partner had driven away from the house that had been their home for so long; as they'd taken his son away to a new life while he pretended that it didn't matter, that losing Justin and losing Gus was just another minor example of the general shittiness of daily life. His expression had revealed nothing, unless a person knew what to look for.

And Lindsey had always known how to see some part of what he kept so well hidden.

He would survive; Brian Kinney would always survive. But . . . she wondered if she even wanted to know how much he hurt inside. She wondered if she would even have the strength to endure it if she should ever find out.

Better, she realized, not to know.

"You're awfully quiet," said Melanie, falling back from the group in order to take her partner's arm. "Missing Gus?"

Lindsey smiled, and swallowed a tiny surge of annoyance. Lately, Mel had begun making not-so-subtle little comments, suggesting that Lindsey favored Gus - her son with Brian - over Jenny Rebecca, Melanie's daughter with Michael. The accusation was preposterous; Lindsey could not imagine how she could love their beautiful little girl any more than she did, but she knew the motivation behind it. Just as she'd always understood Melanie's deep, abiding resentment of anything
that was even remotely related to Brian. And she knew it would never end. Melanie would always know that Lindsey loved Brian - had always loved him, would always love him, and had loved him long before she even met Melanie; something Melanie would never be able to accept graciously.

"Missing both of our beautiful babies," she replied, ignoring the intended barb and putting on her brightest smile.

Melanie was right, of course; she was just missing the kids. That was the reason for the tiny hub of uneasiness that she felt in her belly. What else, after all, could it be?

When they reached the diner, they were lucky to find a couple of adjacent booths where they proceeded to study the menus presented by a personable (and gay, according to Ted's supposedly impeccable gay-dar) young waiter, while they accepted lovely, steaming mugs of coffee and chatted about where they should go first.

Of them all, only Michael and Lindsey were somewhat subdued, neither showing much enthusiasm for the items on the menu. Ben finally ordered for Michael, opting for chocolate chip buttermilk pancakes, when Michael seemed unable to make up his mind. Still, Ben put it down to excitement over the prospects of the day, and didn't dwell on it. Especially since Michael simply nodded his agreement to the selection.

The waiter, whose name was Greg, took their orders efficiently, then spent a few minutes making recommendations about places they might like to see. Thus, by the time their food arrived, they had tentatively agreed on where to go first.

Debbie and Ted had agreed to split an order of the Tony Bennett specialty, and were rolling their eyes over the exquisite taste when Debbie's cell phone rang, in the distinctive opening bars of *Can't Help Lovin' that Man of Mine*, and Debbie laughed as she flipped it open. "Hello, Pittsburgh," she crowed. "Wish you were here. You'll never guess what we're . . ."

She paused then, listening intently. "What? Carl, I can't hear . . . what did you . . ."

The group had been chattering among themselves, raving about the quality of the food with Melanie emitting exaggerated moans of pleasure as she bit into her bagel, and still arguing the merits of Radio City as opposed to the appeal of MOMA - except for Michael and Lindsey who had gone silent and wide-eyed with the ringing of the phone.

But all followed suit, shutting up in mid-sentence as they saw Debbie's face blanch pure white as she appeared to gasp for air.

When she closed her eyes and swayed, mouth gaping, it was Ben who grabbed the phone away from her. "What is it, Carl?" he asked.

He listened for a few seconds, before taking a deep shaky breath. "Is he . . ."

At that moment, Michael grabbed his husband's arm and jerked until Ben turned to face him. "It's Brian," said Michael, knowing that he was right, even if he didn't know how he knew. "Isn't it?"

Ben could only nod.

"How bad?"

"Bad," Ben answered, putting his arm around Michael's shoulders, understanding how difficult this was going to be for the man who had been Brian's best friend since childhood. "We have to go home. Now."
The group scrambled then to make their departure, gathering their things quickly, as Ben concluded his conversation with the detective and quickly explained what had happened, deliberately leaving out all the grisly details, most of which existed only in his imagination as Horvath had told him only what he needed to know.

"Wait!" said Daphne, eyes huge and welling with tears, as they left the restaurant. "We have to find Justin. He has to know."

Ben sighed, wishing that he did not have to be the one to tell them. "He can't know," he said firmly.

"What . . . what do you mean?" Michael demanded, his face chalk white around eyes filled with shadow. "He has to know."

"He can't," Ben repeated, knowing that he had no choice but to explain. "He's on a plane on his way to Tahiti, remember? And . . ."

"And?" Michael again, leaving Ben with no alternative but to tell them the whole truth.

"Brian remained conscious long enough to make sure the police knew. This wasn't a random attack. Brian was chosen deliberately, and Justin . . . was next on the list."

Lindsey stumbled as she turned away from Ben, looking around for a taxi, or a subway entrance - anything to focus on, to beat back the terrible yawning blackness that was looming in her mind, threatening to consume her. In desperation, she leaned against a handy lamp post, trying to fight off the terrible nausea in the pit of her stomach, trying not to visualize what her mind insisted on showing her.

"Jesus, Linz!" snapped Melanie as she came up beside her. "Will you please take it easy? Where do you think you're going? There's nothing we can do. Our flight home doesn't leave until . . ."

Lindsey turned then to stare into the face of her partner, eyes wide with disbelief. "You think . . . I'm going home?"

"Well, of course we're . . ."

But Lindsey was not listening, not really even interested. "You do whatever you like," she said quickly, ignoring the typical suspicious sneer forming on her partner's face, "but I'm going to Pittsburgh."

Matthew Keller did not suffer fools gladly, and he regarded the student nurse who stood in the doorway of his cubicle with undisguised contempt. "What do you mean when you say that 'they need me'. Who the fuck needs me, and why?"

"The ambulance just rolled in," she explained, voice all atremble but determined to deliver the message as dispatched, despite the bite of panic rising in her throat.

Everyone knew that Keller could be a monster when he chose, but everybody also knew that, when one got right down to it, he was the absolute best at what he did. There was no more gifted trauma specialist anywhere in Pittsburgh - maybe even anywhere in the world - and Nurse Beck had not minced words.

"Get Keller down here now."
"Nurse Beck sent me to bring you down." She straightened under his glare. "You didn't answer your phone."

He gave her his patented sneer. "That's because I was sleeping," he said coldly. "I've been up all night."

"And you might be up all day," she snapped, surprising herself with her own degree of determination. "You've got a new patient."

Keller wanted to argue, to protest, to deny, but this slip of a girl had zeroed in on his one vulnerability. He had never in his life found a way to resist the drawing power of a "new patient". Especially since no one ever risked generating his considerable rage unless the patient in question was in dire need of his extraordinary skills.

He had spent his life resisting more conventional temptations. He had almost no personal life, confined his sexual experiences to occasional fucks as they came available, had stopped communicating with his dysfunctional family years before, and spent his spare time engaging in the only hobby he'd ever allowed himself - tennis - although these days he was hard-pressed to find suitable opponents. He almost never lost, and he was a terrible winner, so most people avoided him like the plague.

As a consequence, he spent much of his time alone, when he wasn't working. But he was almost always working. He grumbled about it incessantly, but rarely took time off.

He didn't admit it, but it was the love of the challenge that kept him at his desk in the hospital, and a deep-seated need to justify his own existence.

"What's your name?" he demanded abruptly, rising from the poor-excuse-for-a-cot that he'd smuggled into his so-called office.

"Melinda Cowell," she answered sharply, "and you'd better hurry. He's in bad shape."

"Aren't they all?" he muttered, but he was moving more quickly, snagging his lap coat from its peg by the door as he followed her into the hall. "What happened?"

"Somebody beat the bejesus out of him?" she answered. "They're saying it's a hate crime. Apparently, he's gay."

"Shit!" said the doctor. "The world sucks sometimes, Nurse Cowell."

"I'm not a nurse," she explained. "Just a student."

"Yeah? Well, get ready to get a look at the ugly face of reality, Student Cowell. Do we know who our victim is?"

The student glanced down at the chart in her hands, before she handed it to him. "The chart says 'Kinney. Brian Kinney'."

The young doctor managed, just barely, not to stumble or recoil from the sudden realization.

Brian Kinney. Holy shit!

He did pause then to take a look at the chart, to scan the information provided there. But it was woefully inadequate. Blunt trauma. Multiple wounds. Broken bones. Excessive blood loss. And that was just for starters.
Brian Kinney.

Matthew had to struggle not to allow himself to descend into broad sweeps of memory, of the days of his youth, when he had been a pre-med student and Brian Kinney had already been well on his way to becoming the legend of Liberty Avenue, even though he was only a lowly undergraduate. Of course, it had also been undeniably true that Kinney was already stunningly beautiful and filled with the incredible self-assurance that would quickly establish his place in the world.

Brian Kinney - his first love, and the man who had taught him what it was to be out and proud.

Shit!

According to the standards of medical ethics, he should recuse himself from the case, knowing that he would be hard-put to maintain any degree of professional detachment. However, Keller was no fool, and not given to false modesty. For the kind of treatment that Kinney would need, if he were to have any hope of surviving his injuries, only the best trauma specialist would do.

And Matthew Keller was the best in his chosen field; no one would even try to dispute that fact.

He barreled into the elevator with the student nurse at his heels, knowing that there was no other choice.

No one would know about his connection to Kinney; they had parted long years before, each knowing that they would not survive staying together. They would destroy each other if they tried, two super egos competing for dominance.

But now the time had come for Keller to do what he did best - to cheat death and restore life.

In a way, Brian Kinney had saved him, at a time in his life when he had been most vulnerable. Now, he would return the favor.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Emmett had been pacing the floor for two hours, growing more and more distressed, when Drew Boyd joined him and convinced him to sit down and drink a cup of coffee. The coffee was nasty and bitter, but Emmett gulped it gratefully, eager to find something - anything - to distract his mind from the terrible dark thoughts that kept assaulting him.

"They haven't told you anything?" asked Drew after he managed to settle Emmett into the corner of the waiting room.

Emmett shook his head. "They brought some forms for me to fill out. They wanted to know his next of kin, but I . . . couldn't . . ."

"Does he have family?"

Emmett drew a deep breath. "Not that he'd claim. I had to give them his mother's name, but . . . God! I hope she'll have sense enough to stay away. If he thought she was here, I can't even imagine how he'd react."

Drew draped his arm around his companion's shoulders. "It's okay, Honey. I doubt he's going to know anything, for a while."

If Emmett noticed Drew's hesitation before adding that last phrase, he chose to ignore it. "How about you?" he asked. "Did the police find anything?" Then he remembered the message he'd delivered.
"Did you tell them? Is Justin . . ."

"Perfectly safe," Drew assured him. "Detective Horvath got in touch with his agent, and found out that Justin took off on a flight to the South Pacific early this morning. Nobody's going to be able to get to him for now, and, by the time he comes back to the country, hopefully this will all be over and done."

Emmett looked down then, his eyes brimming with tears.

"What is it, Honey?" asked Drew gently.

Emmett tried to put on a little smile, but failed miserably. "It's just . . . I know this is what Brian wanted. For Justin to be safe. I still can't believe that he was able to hold on long enough to tell me. But . . . when Justin does find out, when he learns what's happened, he's going to be so hurt, so devastated that he wasn't here, that Brian had to go through this alone. And if . . . God! . . . if Brian . . ."

"Hush, now!" Boyd whispered. "You know, everybody keeps talking about what a tough little shit he is. He's going to be . . .

"You don't know that," said Emmett sharply. "Nobody knows that."

"You're right," said a new voice.

Emmett and Drew jumped to their feet, and turned to face the new arrival.

"I'm Dr. Keller." The surgeon was young and well-built, with sandy blonde curls and brilliant green eyes. Emmett thought that, under other circumstances, he'd have labeled the man a hottie. But not now.

"Nobody can know what's going to happen to your friend. However, I can make some educated guesses."

Emmett was staring at the man's lab coat, which was smeared with dark stains.

"How is he?" he finally managed to ask.

"Not good," replied Keller. "But you already knew that, didn't you? We've managed to stabilize him, for the moment, but we've got a lot of work to do. He's got more broken bones than I care to list, including a skull fracture. Severe blood loss. A punctured lung. Some organ damage - kidney, liver, spleen - but we're not going to know the full extent until we go in and take a look."

"Jesus!" whispered Emmett.

"Is his next of kin here?" asked Keller, his eyes sweeping the waiting room.

Emmett sighed. "I guess that would be his mother, but . . . I don't even know how to . . ."

"That's all right," said the doctor abruptly, suddenly awash with memories of Brian's comments about his mother. "In an emergency - like this - the hospital won't require permission to treat him. We're prepping him for surgery now, but we have to wait to get in a new blood supply. We've already infused him with all of our RH-negative stock, so . . ."

"Hey," said Drew. "I'm O negative."

The doctor offered up a gentle smile. "But you're gay, Mr. Boyd. The whole world knows that by
now. And gays . . ."

Drew nodded, swallowing his anger. "Yeah, okay. I get it."

"Dr. Keller?" Emmett's voice was very soft, very small. "Is he going to . . ."

"Not," replied the trauma surgeon, "if I can help it." Then he smiled. "And if I can't help it, no one can."

Emmett closed his eyes, visualizing Brian as he'd seen him the previous night - Brian Kinney, perfect, radiant, beautiful. "God!" he whispered. "They wanted to mutilate him, to destroy him, to . . ."

"Yes," confirmed the doctor. "I'm sure you're right. There's nothing as certain to piss off homophobic pricks as a beautiful gay man, is there?"

"Did you know him?" asked Drew, noticing a faint spark of anger in the physician's tone.

Keller evaded the question. "Everybody in Pittsburgh has heard of Brian Kinney, the Stud of Liberty Avenue."

Emmett nodded. "Sometimes he'd make me so mad I'd want to spit, and I've begun to think he did it deliberately. But he was always . . . beautiful."

Drew could only nod, as the doctor tried to find words of reassurance - something he was not very good at, even at the best of times.

"Will he . . . be beautiful again?" Emmett's question was barely audible.

Matthew Keller took a deep breath, and closed his eyes recalling the horrible damage done to his patient's beautiful body. "I don't know," he admitted finally, unable to offer up a lie.

But a tiny little voice inside him would not be silenced, one that insisted that there had to be a way, and he was damned well going to find it.

But first things first. First he had to save a life; then he'd worry about finding the means to restore it.

Nurse Beck made another check of the surgical instruments laid out before her, knowing that it wouldn't do at all for Keller to call for something only to find that it wasn't ready for him.

Then she turned to study the displays on the monitors, noting the patient's vital signs, which were far from optimal. Under ordinary circumstances, the young man would not be here, awaiting the first stroke of the surgeon's blade, but the circumstances were far from ordinary. If they waited for the patient to be adequately stabilized, it was likely that they would never get the chance to save his life.

Brian Kinney would not awaken to face a new day unless Keller was able to repair some of the damage done to his body by the cretins who had attacked him.

Lastly, the nurse took a moment to study the patient's face, as Keller scrubbed up. The doctor had been right in what he'd said to Drew Boyd. Everybody in Pittsburgh had heard of Brian Kinney. His face was almost as well known as Iron Man football heroes, and, from a strictly impersonal perspective, much more beautiful.

Only it wasn't beautiful now. Gloria Beck closed her eyes, suddenly almost overwhelmed with
sorrow. How could anybody have done this, she wondered. And why did it matter where this young man stuck his dick, to the beasts who had taken it upon themselves to destroy this living work of art? She just couldn't understand how the world had become such a dark and violent place.

Then she opened her eyes, and was almost overwhelmed for a second time, but this time it was with shock at the surreal quality of what the scene laid out before her.

Matthew Keller was standing beside the patient, his gloved hands carefully lifted to avoid contamination. But he was not studying the patient's condition or trying to diagnose a problem or looking at the monitors. Instead, the most gifted young trauma surgeon in the northeastern United States - known to medical staffs throughout the region as the Notoriously Egotistical Bastard - was leaning forward, his lips just caressing the patient's temple, whispering words that were only barely audible. "I've got you, Baby," he was saying, "and I'm not going to let you go. You hear me, Brian? It's Matt, and I'm not going to let you go. Just rest now. You're safe - with me."

Then he straightened up, and noticed that Nurse Beck had heard and understood every word.

"You got a problem with that?" he demanded, suddenly all business again.

Gloria Beck smiled beneath her mask, and knew that he had seen it and decided to ignore it.

"Not a one," she answered, her voice deliberately without emotion.

"Then don't just stand there," he snapped. "Hand me a fucking scalpel."

It was almost four when Calvin Culpepper pulled his Audi into the parking lot of Allegheny Memorial Hospital, having shaved almost an hour off the customary five-and-a-half-hour drive. Though some of the occupants of the vehicle had made a valiant attempt to keep the conversation going and pass the time early in the ride, most had finally given up the effort. No one had spoken at all in the final two hours.

They had been more crowded on the trip into New York, with Ted and Blake taking up the third seat, and their luggage piled on the roof rack. But on the return, the two had elected to join Lindsey and Melanie in the car they'd rented for the journey. Melanie had grumbled, but finally relented when she'd realized that Lindsey was going ahead with her determination to come to Pittsburgh, whether or not Melanie decided to accompany her.

Calvin, correctly gauging the mood of his passengers, did not bother to try to find a parking place for the Audi. Instead, he simply pulled up before the front entrance of the hospital, and allowed all his riders to disembark. He was just pulling out to cruise around and search out a place to park when he spotted the rental Toyota pull in behind him, allowing Lindsey, Ted, Melanie, and Daphne to exit, while Blake went to park the car.

Michael had been first out of the car, and was first through the doors, breaking into a sprint once he was inside. Ben and the rest of the group followed more circumspectly. Nobody bothered to stop at the desk to ask directions. They had all been here before, so they knew exactly where to go.

When Michael tore into the waiting room, Emmett leapt to his feet and sprang forward. He had not realized how alone he felt, even with Drew at his side, until he saw Michael burst into the room, even though Lance and Cynthia Whitney, Brian's assistant, had joined them earlier in the day, and were still there waiting.

Emmett reached for his old friend, and they were immediately in each other's arms, giving and
receiving comfort and sharing tears.

"How is he?" Michael demanded, as the rest of the group arrived. "Have you heard . . ."

"Nothing," said Emmett. "He's been in surgery for hours. And nobody's told us anything. Oh, Michael, I'm so scared. He was so . . . broken and . . ."

"Thank God you were there," Michael interrupted. "Thank God you got there in time."

Emmett was shaking his head. "Not in time to save him. I'm so sorry, Michael."

"What the hell happened?" demanded Debbie, speaking more to Drew and Lance and Cynthia than to Emmett who was obviously incapable of providing cogent answers.

But Ben knew that Michael, as well as some of the others, were not ready to face the blunt reality of what Brian had endured. "Not now," he said firmly, his eyes warning Debbie - always hungry for the details - to back off. "I'm sure we'll hear the whole gory story, all in good time."

Lindsey, who had entered the room without speaking to anyone, circled around the group and made her way to the nurse's station where she spoke to the woman on duty. "Excuse me," she said softly, "but can you please check on the condition of Brian Kinney?"

The young nurse looked up from the chart she was working on. "Are you family?"

Lindsey mustered up a smile. "I'm the mother of his child. Does that count?"

The young woman - her badge said "Barbara" - wavered for a moment; then she smiled. "I'll make a call."

"Thanks," said Lindsey, turning back to the crowd, knowing what she would see, and she was right. Melanie was staring at her, eyes gleaming with anger. The reaction, of course, to the 'I'm-the-mother-of-his-child' remark.

On the other hand, Michael and Emmett were looking at her as if she had just qualified for sainthood.

The nurse had just lifted the phone to make her call, when the doors to the surgery suite opened, and Matthew Keller strode into the waiting room.

Although Emmett and Drew were the only ones who were supposed to know who he was, that turned out not to be the case.

Lindsey's eyes were suddenly huge. "Matthew?" she said softly. "You're taking care of him?"

"Hello, Lindsey," replied the physician, suddenly not sure where to look. He had not counted on this, on running into one of the few people who knew everything about his relationship with Brian. "And yes. I am taking care of him."

"Oh, thank God," she said, throwing her arms around him. "I know you won't let anything bad happen to him. Will you?"

He smiled, and whispered into her ear. "Not as long as I've got breath in my body."

"How is he?" asked Emmett, unable to bear another moment of uncertainty.

Keller released Lindsey and turned to face the group. "He's . . . holding his own. For now, that's pretty much all we can expect."
"How bad was it?" asked Ben.

Dr. Keller sighed. "He had quite a bit of internal damage, but I think we’ve managed to repair it all. The most dangerous thing was the pressure on the brain. He was bleeding into his skull, under the fracture. But we were able to relieve that. Had to remove his spleen and repair a tear in his lung. Then there were bones to set, lacerations to stitch up." He offered up a tired smile. "It was a long, complex surgery. And I don't want to give you any false assurance. He's still got a long way to go. But . . ."

"But?" That was Lindsey, staring into his eyes and employing her familiarity with him to gauge his honesty.

"But I think . . . I believe he's going to make it. We've put him into an induced coma, to give him a chance to heal. Now don't misunderstand me. It won't be fast, and it won't be easy, but he'll make it. I intend to make sure of that."

Then Michael and Emmett and Ted were throwing their arms around each other, too relieved to even voice their relief, and Debbie was laughing with Daphne and Ben, as Cynthia collapsed into her seat, covering her eyes with her hands and counting on the confusion of the moment to conceal the tears that were streaming through her fingers.

Only Lindsey was still standing there, still waiting, as Melanie stood by to observe, her face stony and emotionless as Lindsey stepped forward to speak softly into the doctor's ear.

"If you let him die," said the woman who had known the physician since his days as a callow undergraduate, "I will have your balls. Understand me?"

He offered up his first brilliant smile of the day. "I promise."

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TBC
The ICU waiting room was smaller than the one in the ER, but no less forbidding. Institutional gray walls, molded plastic seating units, attached to metal frames, all a nondescript gray that might once have been blue, arranged around Parsons-style coffee tables, scratched and chipped, and covered with months-old editions of *Newsweek* and *People* and *Ladie's Home Journal*. In the corner, ready to dispense its battery-acid grade sludge, an industrial-sized coffee machine was nested among stacks of Styrofoam cups, a remnant of the days when service guild members hovered nearby to offer succor and comfort to anxious family members. The volunteers were long gone (mostly), but the machine remained, old and cranky and barely functional, but vital in its purpose.

When the group of Liberty Avenue denizens (an accurate sobriquet, even if many of its members no longer resided there) made it to the cluttered chamber, Emmett made an effort to show some signs of rekindling his characteristic flame by throwing up his hands in mock horror. "Omigod!" he exclaimed. "Who decorated this place? The Brothers Grimm?"

"It's okay, Honey," said Ted, offering up a weary smile. "Not everybody can have your fabulous sense of style."

"I know, but why must hospitals choose an ambiance that's more suitable for a mausoleum? Don't they understand that a few splashes of magenta against a chartreuse background would do wonders for patients' spirits?"

The words were cheerful enough - vintage Emmett - but the delivery was pallid.

"Or give them a heart attack," laughed Debbie, managing to sound almost normal.

Emmett dredged up a smile, but it was a half-hearted effort.

Though they had not spent much time talking about it, the general demeanor of the entire group was proof enough of their relief in learning that Brian would recover; they were all reaching for normalcy, for the insouciance that acquaintances would have expected of them, and those self-same acquaintances might even have been convinced by their cheerful display. Those who knew them well, however, would have noted the strained quality of their efforts.

Even so, only Ben, Drew, and Calvin recognized the fundamental irony underlying their attitude, realizing - as most of the group did not - that Brian, despite their shared tendency (or perpetual need) to blame him for all the wrongs in their lives, to question his motives and doubt his morals, to resent his successes and revel in his failures and savor his troubles like the taste of fine wine, was the cement that held them all together, the sun around which they all orbited.

Thus there were vague shadows lingering around them all, even as they expressed their relief. They would never acknowledge it, probably never be willing to even consider it - but something inside them knew it, nonetheless. They had come close today to losing the tie that bound them to each other.

And the day was not done yet.

Of them all, only Michael and Lindsey were still wrapped in total silence, feeling no desire to generate a false sense of well-being - content enough with the doctor's assurances, but not yet able to let go of their anxieties. They sat together, somehow taking comfort from the non-verbal sharing of old memories. Melanie loitered nearby, occasionally trying to make casual conversation, but her
efforts were mostly futile, which only added to her growing discontent.

The group had dwindled somewhat in number by this time. Daphne and Blake had gone out to scout for take-out, as it had become obvious that most of them had no inclination to go home. The decision to stay wasn't rational or sensible, as they'd been told that chances were slim to non-existent that they'd be allowed to see the patient any time soon, that visiting hours in the ICU were stringently enforced and only two visitors at a time would be allowed to enter the unit. And, most certain of all, Brian would not be awake any time soon to even be aware of their presence. Yet they lingered, needing to share insights and comments and complaints, needing to be together in their determination to proclaim their independence, to demonstrate to the world that they could sit here in this place and calmly contemplate the nature of his mortality and prove that they did not need Brian around to function as the nucleus of the group. Even if they did.

Lance Mathis had stayed for a while, answering the group's questions as succinctly as possible, saying no more than necessary, but he had departed after a brief conversation with Dr. Keller, informing Drew that he was going to check in with the police to offer his help with the investigation.

Cynthia had also disappeared, after following the trauma surgeon back to the nurse's station when he'd finished addressing the group. They had talked together for a while, very quietly, and Emmett had noticed, at one point, that the surgeon had taken her hand and moved close enough to whisper something in her ear. Then he had escorted her down a nearby corridor, and they had disappeared through a double doorway into another section of the hospital.

Emmett wondered for a moment where she'd gone, uncertain of what she might be doing, but almost certain that she had not left the hospital. She wouldn't. After giving it some thought, he concluded that she was probably handling the paperwork for Brian, just as she always did.

No one among the group of old friends could exactly define the relationship between Brian and his chief assistant - not even Ted, who worked closely with both. But Emmett sometimes speculated that Cynthia might know Brian better than any of them, better even than Michael and Debbie and Lindsey, who had known him longest of all. Still, she was a very private person, and she kept her personal thoughts to herself - including how she felt about her boss. Nevertheless, Emmett had seen the look in her eyes when Keller had made his proclamation, and he had seen the tears she tried to conceal.

It didn't explain everything, but it explained enough. He as pretty sure that Cynthia loved Brian; he just wasn't sure in what way.

He curled himself into a bedraggled old rocking chair by the window, and stared out into the growing gloom of twilight, caught up in a brand new, previously untested realization: they all loved Brian, (although a quick glimpse of Melanie's face forced him to recant the absolute nature of that observation). Okay, almost all, even though there were plenty of times when they didn't like him in the slightest. It was a strange, odd kind of love, unlike any other - but real enough for all that.

He looked down toward the front of the hospital, and watched as a car pulled up to the emergency entrance and a woman jumped out of the front seat and hurried toward the doors with a child in her arms - a little boy with dark hair, a little boy who would one day grow up to be a young man. Would he ever face the kind of horror that Brian had faced on this day? Would people hate him because he was different, because he was not made in an image identical to those around him, because he believed differently or talked differently or worshipped differently - or loved differently? Emmett closed his eyes . . . and was swept into hellish memory, suddenly unable to hold it back for another moment.

Then he felt strong arms close around him, and he was weeping and could not restrain himself, could
not remain silent, as both Drew and Calvin knelt beside him, each determined to offer comfort, with not a single thought of competition.

"Oh, God," he cried, "you can't imagine . . . what they did to him. How could anybody be so vicious, so cruel? And why? Why would they . . . They didn't just want to kill him; they wanted to destroy him, to take this beautiful man and make him into something hideous, something horrible and grotesque. Oh, God!"

And he was suddenly surrounded by the people who loved him, each trying to offer comfort, to ease his pain.

But strangely, it was one pair of arms he longed for particularly - the one who loved Brian - who knew Brian as almost no one else did. For a moment, he realized that it would have been perfect if only he could have reached out and touched Justin, but that could not be, so he leaned into Michael's arms, and allowed himself to be held.

"But he didn't give up, Micheal," he sobbed. "Even after the . . . torture they put him through, he held on. God, he was so broken, so damaged. I don't know how anybody could endure that kind of pain and still hold on, but he did. He did . . . because he knew he had to. He had to hold on, so he could tell us, for Justin."

"Tell us what, Em?" asked Michael, his hands stroking his friend's back.

"That . . . Justin was in danger. That Justin was next."

They all felt it then - a pale cold veil of dread, settling over them like a shroud, although only some recognized its meaning. Most were too caught up in the desperation of the moment and the need to offer comfort to their distraught companion to explore the deeper meaning of his words. But a few saw it immediately.

Ben looked up and watched as Melanie experienced her moment of epiphany, as she got her first glimpse at the full picture of the horror that had stalked the young man who had been her nemesis for so many years. Behind her, standing silent and gazing out into the growing darkness, Ted was trying to deal with the same kind of rising awareness.

In the shock of the moment, Melanie opened her mouth to give voice to her realization, to express her consternation, only to be silenced by the look in Ben's eyes. Bad enough, he reasoned, for the group of old friends to have to cope with the ordeal of Brian's trauma; the full realization that he had been a chosen victim rather than a random target could wait until later, until they were better prepared to face it.

He lifted his hands to rub his temples as he tried to figure out how he was going to tell Michael without sending him into a full-fledged panic.

Closing his eyes against the onset of a massive headache, he took a seat near the window and slumped forward, covering his face with his hands. He thought longingly of his lovely, comfortable bed in their lovely comfortable home, of their son, Hunter, who had spent the week-end with a friend, who had once had a huge crush on Brian, during the period before he'd discovered that he was actually straight, and Ben wondered how the teen-ager - who had been through so much - would react to the realization that the hot-and-mighty Kinney was not truly invincible after all.

Jesus! Was there no end to the complications that might arise from this endless, incomprehensible day?
The headache was getting worse.

He sat back in the chair, turning his head so he could look up through the window to watch the light draining out of the evening sky. It was, he thought, akin to the manner in which joy could drain from the human heart. He knew plenty about the loss of joy, and realized that there was no way to avoid the gloom that was rising in his mind. It was a familiar mood, although he experienced it only rarely. Most of the time he was able to concentrate on the things in his life that were beautiful and right, but today was not comprised of such things. Today he had tasted potential tragedy and sorrow, and it mattered very little that it would be anguish once removed, so to speak. He looked into his own heart and understood that he had come to care about Brian during the years since Michael had come into his life - care quite a lot, in spite of his initial misgivings. It had surprised him when he had come to understand that there were hidden levels in his husband's best friend, levels that only a few individuals had ever been allowed to see, levels that explained why Michael loved Brian so much, even though Ben had never actually been able to define the truth of those levels. But it didn't really matter. It only mattered that Michael loved Brian, truly, deeply, without reservation, and would never be able to recover fully should Brian be taken from him.

As for the rest of it - the never-discussed, deep-seated truths about Michael's feelings for Brian - they would remain undiscussed. Ben had come to full acceptance a long time before, understanding that there was no way of changing the reality. He would live out his life knowing that, had Brian been able and willing to do so, Michael would have been claimed many years before he and Ben ever met, forever off-limits to anyone except the man who would always be first in his heart.

It had not been an easy pill to swallow, but doing so had been the only way for Ben and Michael to build a life together.

Thus, he thought, some tiny, ugly part of him should have been tantalized by the notion of an existence free from Brian's influence. He hoped it was a measure of his maturity and his selfless love for his husband that he had resisted such an impulse.

He smiled, reflecting on how extremely fucked up life could become.

Ben felt a heavy weight settle in his chest. He could not bear to think about how Michael would have fared if Brian had died at the hands of his attackers.

He recalled the bad times of his own life - both the ones he had already shared with Michael, and the ones he had not yet chosen to reveal. He didn't think it was because he was deliberately avoiding full disclosure; it was just that he knew how hard it was for Michael, a natural optimist, to face the uglier truths of life. It wasn't, he realized, an ideal time for reflections like this, but ultimately, he had no choice but to let the memories come, let the sensations of loss wash through him. He remembered losing his father to heart failure, and his younger brother to a rare blood disease; he remembered watching his mother's slow, miserable, relentless slide into the mindless landscape of Alzheimer's, culminating in the unavoidable decision to confine her to a sanitarium when she could no longer care for herself; he remembered Paul, the gentle, soft-spoken young man who had taught him so much about the art and power of love, who had changed his life forever, who had ultimately infected him with HIV, and who had died just a couple of years earlier. And he remembered the day that he always thought of as the last day of his youth: the day he'd learned that he was HIV positive.

He sometimes wondered how he'd managed . . . to survive.

"Because," drawled a sardonic voice that called up an image of a droll smile, "you're a tough motherfucker. Like me."
He opened his eyes and was, somehow, not surprised to see who was sitting beside him.

"I thought you were at death's door," he observed.

The familiar face - unblemished, unbroken, and yes, Goddamn! beautiful - was giving him that patented Brian-Kinney smirk. "Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated."

Ben wanted to frown, but couldn't. "You like using that line, don't you?"

The image shrugged. "When the shoe fits . . ."

Ben sighed, reflecting that he really must be tired, if his psychotic delusions were choosing to speak in clichés.

Still, it would be rude to proclaim that he knew a dream sequence when he saw one, just in case he was wrong, and it was this horrible day that had been the nightmare and this surrealistic moment was the reality. "Not so exaggerated," he observed. "You nearly died, you know."

"Yeah. I know. And if I had . . ."

"If you had," Ben interrupted, loathe to say it but realizing it needed to be said, "I don't know how Michael . . . how he could have . . ."

"That," snapped the image of Brian, "is your responsibility. If I can't be there for him, you have to. Understand?"

"Of course, I understand." Ben knew instinctively that one of Brian's primary purposes in life was to annoy the people around him, to get under their skin enough to force them to re-examine their lives and their philosophies and see things in a new light, but that didn't prevent him from feeling the irritation. "I just don't know if I can, not like you do."

The image of Brian chuckled. "You remember when your Stepford fag neighbor opened up his little couturier shop? What was his name again?"

Ben struggled not to grin. "Eli Gruber."

"Right. Gruber, seems appropriate somehow," replied Brian's image, his tongue tucked firmly in his cheek. "And remember how excited Michael was, so eager to believe that his good friend was going to let him buy Armani and Prada - disguised under different labels, of course - at knock-off prices, and how he didn't want to hear that you can only pay knock-off prices for designer items if the items are knock-offs to begin with?"

"Oh, I remember," Ben admitted. "And I also recall how upset he was with you when you referred to the shop as 'Fags Are Us'."

Brian shrugged. "I believe in telling the truth."

Ben couldn't really argue with that. "But it's not always necessary to use a broadsword when a paring knife would do the job just as well, with a lot less pain."

"Whose pain?" demanded the image of Brian. "Michael's? I'm thinking it would have been a lot more painful if I'd stood by and said nothing while he paid $200.00 for that pseudo-Gucci shirt only to find out later that it was a polyester fraud."

"Yeah, well, Eli certainly wasn't overjoyed with your comments."
"Are you kidding me? Are you saying it would have been okay for Eli to run his little crap emporium, ripping off friends and neighbors, but it wasn't okay for me to call him on his bullshit?"

Ben paused, remembering how angry Eli and Monty had been with Brian, how they had denied his assertions and been cold and distant to both Ben and Michael for weeks thereafter. Until the day when Ben had decided to make an attempt to mend fences, by stopping by the store to speak to Eli, only to find it closed and shuttered.

Apparently, Brian had not been the only one to recognize the shoddy nature of the merchandise. A few days later, Eli and Monty had apparently managed to swallow their resentment and resume their easy friendship with their neighbors - almost.

Ben frowned at the realization that there were, occasionally, still some awkward exchanges between the two couples, but that was not germane to this moment. "What does all of this have to do with what Michael would need from me, if you . . ."

"Bought the farm?" Brian's image appeared to be enjoying the conversation. "You can say it, you know. Dying has never scared me all that much."

"Okay. If you died. I still don't see . . ."

"I know, Zen Ben." The smart little smirk had become a tender smile. "But listen to me. Are you listening?"

"Yes. I'm listening."

"Do you want to know why I love Michael so much, always have and always will? It's not because he follows me around like a faithful little pup, or because he accepts me when no one else will, or believes in me when everybody else doubts. It's because he has the purest heart of anybody I've ever known. Michael wants to believe the best of everybody. Wants to trust people, wants to show everyone who he really is, and be accepted, just as he's willing to accept everyone else."

"So you're saying he's gullible?" Ben didn't much like the sound of that.

"Fuck, no!" Obviously, Brian didn't like it either. "It's not that he's gullible. It's that he wants to believe that the people he cares about are all as honest as he is. He's so eager to trust that he buys into the fantasies that people use to disguise realities they can't deal with. The sweetness in Michael isn't just a show or a sham. It's real; it's who he is. It's the best part of him, but it's also the worst part of him - the part that leaves him open and vulnerable. So that's what you have to do for him, Ben, if I'm not around to take care of the problem. You have to prevent him from letting himself be used and manipulated by the people he loves."

"And how exactly am I supposed to do that?"

The smirk was back. "Sometimes, by acting like a total shit."

"But I'm . . ."

"What? Too spiritual? Too well-adjusted? Too rational? All of the above?"

"Well . . ."

The look on that beautiful face was suddenly pensive, suddenly difficult to decipher. "If you love him enough . . . you'll find a way."
"Hey, Ben! You awake?"

The professor managed, barely, not to jerk upright, resurfacing from his dream with a soft grunt.

Looking down at him with a guarded expression was just about the last person he would have expected to see here, under the circumstances, although a moment's consideration made him realize that he really shouldn't be surprised.

Monty Peabody, after all, was employed here in this hospital, as a lab technician.

"Hey, Monty," he replied, rolling his head from side to side in an attempt to relieve the kink in his neck. "Must have dozed off."

Monty was pushing a cart loaded with blood sampling tubes and needles and similar supplies, but he pushed it aside and took a seat beside Ben, saying nothing for a moment as he watched the interaction between Michael and his friends.

"You guys must have had a rough day," he said finally. "It's all over the news, but you know how the press exaggerates everything. I'm sure it's not as bad as they're saying."

"Actually," answered Ben wearily, "it'sprobably worse. Although I haven't seen the reports."

Monty shook his head. "What a shame! We live in evil times, Ben."

"Yeah. We do."

"Well, listen!" Monty said as he stood and reached for his cart. "I'm going to go in there and get the real scoop. Find out what's really going on."

"Thanks, Monty," Ben replied, not quite sure why he was feeling a vague sense of alarm, "but that's not necessary. We talked to the doctor, and . . ."

"Yeah. I heard that Keller is the attending. He's got quite a reputation around here."

"For what?" asked Michael, suddenly appearing at Ben's side.

Monty frowned. "For being a first class prima donna and a royal pain in the rear. But . . ."

"But?" Ben read the concern in Michael's eyes and wished he could figure out a way to warn Monty to gauge his words carefully.

The lab technician sighed. "But for this kind of trauma case, he's probably the best there is. It's just that nobody knows why he has to be so . . ."

"Kinney-like?" That was Ted, having just wandered over to join the conversation.

"Exactly," said Monty, relieved that someone else had said what he was thinking, although he was pretty sure that he'd noted a faint trace of fondness in Schmidt's voice that he thought totally unwarranted. Everybody - everybody who counted anyway - knew that Kinney was a loose cannon of the first order, as he and his partner had good cause to know, and it was certainly not surprising that the Stud of Liberty Avenue had wound up as a target for gay bashers. The only real surprise was that it hadn't happened sooner. The man had practically begged for it.

But one look at the faces of the people around him convinced him that he would do well to keep that
thought to himself.

Still, he couldn't wait to talk to Eli, who would understand exactly how he felt and share his ambivalence. It was, of course, a tragedy that such hatred and violence existed, and that the homophobic cretins would probably get away with it, but . . .

"I'll be back in a few minutes," he said smoothly, "with all the inside information."

"Monty," Ben said uneasily, "you don't have to do that."

Monty merely grinned. "Hey. What are friends for?"

He hurried toward the ICU doors, pausing to punch in the code that would open them, as he perused the documents on his clipboard and straightened his tie.

"Apparently," said Melanie not quite below her breath, "they're for ignoring HIPAA restrictions."

"What's that?" asked Michael.

Ben and Ted exchanged glances. "That's what he'll be violating," Ben explained, "if he comes out here spouting confidential patient information to anyone who wants to listen."

"Hey!" said Debbie, eager to learn anything that could be learned, and not very concerned with how she learned it. "We're not just 'anyone' you know. We're all family here. Why shouldn't we be told whatever . . . ."

"Because," said Melanie, who looked as if she couldn't believe that she was about to speak up on Brian's behalf, "it's privileged information, and Brian is the only person who has the right to determine who should be allowed to hear it."

"Well, he's hardly in any condition to say anything, is he?" Debbie snapped, sure that she had come up with a perfect response to end the debate.

But Melanie, despite the fact that she had resented him with every breath for longer than she could remember, knew Brian well enough to figure out that he would not leave such questions unresolved. She knew, for example, that he had both a will and a living will, though she knew nothing about the details of either document. Her smile was slightly venal as she realized that what she had to say would not please those who heard it. "Granted. He can't speak now. But do you really think he would have left something like this to chance?"

"No," said Lindsey, eyes dark and haunted. "He wouldn't."

"So," said Debbie uncertainly, "do we have any idea who he might have . . . ."

At that moment, with perfect timing that no one would bother to notice, the elevator doors opened with a ding, and three people exited into the hallway, walking rapidly toward the nurse's station, as Lindsey, Michael, and Debbie spoke in perfect unison.

"Well, it sure as fuck isn't her."

"Why?" asked Ben. "Who is that?"

It was Lindsey who answered, sounding unutterably weary. "His mother, his sister, and - unless I'm mistaken - the fucking priest."

"The . . . fucking priest?" Ben echoed.
"Literally," said Melanie, good humor somewhat restored.

Ben tried to think of something appropriate to say, but quickly recognized the futility of the effort. How in the world could one respond to that?

It was amazing, he thought, that a person could actually be bored cruising at 30,000 feet and sitting in the lap of luxury. First class seating - plush and contoured and reclinable though it was - was still no more than a cushioned cocoon inside a metal framework, and all the in-flight movies, video games, trays of canapés, delectably prepared entrees, and a constant flow of pricey wines and spirits couldn't compensate for the fact that one was locked up inside a steel cylinder, hurtling along at supersonic speeds and defying the laws of gravity.

He nestled into the plush blanket the attendant had provided for him and watched the television screen in front of him as Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal, in cowboy persona, tried to devour each other in the reunion scene of *Brokeback Mountain*. This was the second time he'd watched it during the flight, and he was now lamenting the fact that he'd never taken the time to see it when it was still in theaters.

Who would have believed, he wondered, that a film about Wyoming cowboys could have provided a relevant and beautiful look at homosexuality in its purest form? He was pretty sure that even Brian would have liked it.

And where the fuck did that thought come from anyway, and why did it matter?

When the scene ended, he closed his eyes for a while, and felt the full weight of the day settle upon him. His body was already feeling the effects of extreme jet lag, the kind that resulted from following the sun across the surface of the globe, and he kept glancing out the window, expecting to find the leading edge of twilight, only to discover the perpetual presence of relentless extended afternoon. He was beginning to yearn for the soothing fall of evening, which did not bode well for the hours ahead, as the sun would continue to keep pace with them for a time while his body would insist that it was he who was out of sync with reality.

It would be early morning when they arrived in Wellington, and he would somehow have lost an entire day, which he would recover, of course, on the return journey, although his internal clock would contend that the day should be edging toward late afternoon. He knew the geography and the physics of it perfectly well, but intellectual certainty was ineffectual in adapting one's senses to the vagaries of time. He was more tired than he'd expected, perhaps because of the emotional roller coaster lingering from the previous night, but he was afraid that if he allowed himself to doze now he would find it impossible to sleep when the time was right.

Steven, of course, had no such dilemma. He was busily conducting business as usual via computer, monitoring a corporate merger between three pharmaceutical companies with a combined annual income of five billion dollars and participating in a conference call with associates from Barnes, Fletcher, and Corrigan. All in a day's work for Steven, of course, who was completely submerged in corporate consciousness when he was in his professional zone, shutting out everything else. It was a world of which Justin knew nothing, and he occasionally wondered why he wasn't jealous of his boyfriend's fascination with it. But then he remembered how he had always been aroused by Brian's compulsion to be the best advertising exec in the business, and thought he might be beginning to understand his own motives. He had a thing for power - not for the phenomenon itself but for the men who wielded it. He knew, of course, that he could intrude if he really wanted to, and distract his companion with a seductive offer of a bit of slap-and-tickle in the lavatory, but he found that he really wasn't all that interested. He had joined the ranks of the mile-high club long ago, courtesy of
one Brian Kinney on a flight to San Antonio for a white party in 2004, but he'd never been tempted
to duplicate the performance with somebody else. Probably because he knew that any such attempt
would only serve to call up old memories.

Always old memories, as it was becoming more obvious with each passing day that there would be
no more new ones.

He knew the time was fast approaching when he would have to open his fingers and let those
memories slip through, like grains of sand, and turn away to build new memories, new castles in new
sands.

But not quite yet.

He picked up the phone, provided for all first class travelers courtesy of Qantas, and dialed his
mother's cell phone, suddenly anxious to share a family moment and hear a familiar voice, but the
call went straight to voice mail. Next, he went down the line, attempting to reach various friends and
acquaintances, starting with Daphne and ending with Lindsey, but without success.

What the fuck? Was everybody in Pittsburgh too busy to answer the phone?

The last number he dialed was the most familiar of all, the one that was still first in his contact list,
but the only response was the same terse three words that he'd heard every time he'd dialed it of late.

"Leave a message."

He was struck with the realization that these might be the last words he ever heard spoken by that
voice - remote, detached, distant - and he was astonished by the depth of the pain generated by that
thought.

Abruptly, he signaled to the flight attendant to bring him another drink - a double - which he tossed
back in one big gulp. Then he started dialing again. On his second attempt, he got lucky.

"Daphne?" he said sharply. "Where the fuck are you?"

"Justin?" Her response was broken and garbled. "Is that you?"

"Who else?" he laughed. "Where've you been? I've been calling you guys all day?"

There was a noticeable pause, and the line was filled with sporadic static. "Daphne?"

". . . breaking up . . . been a long day . . ."

"But where are you?" Justin repeated.

Another pause, and he had the strangest sensation that it had nothing to do with the quality of the
connection.

"Picking . . . dinner," she said finally.

"Oh, yeah? Where? If you're going to the Stage Deli, be sure to try the Derek Jeter with a
cappuccino shake. It's my favorite."

Again the pause.

"Sounds great. I'll make sure to . . . rybody. How's . . . trip going?"
"Oh, fine," he answered, "Still flying. I was wondering . . . has anybody talked . . . to Brian? Did he go to . . ."

". . . breaking up, Justin. Why don't you ca . . . later?"

"No, wait," he said sharply. "Is Michael there, or Lindsey or . . ."

"Gotta go." That part was clear at least. "Hope you have . . . ulous time. Bye now."

"Daphne . . ."

But the line went dead, with another burst of static. For a moment, he held on to the handset, debating whether he should try someone else in the group. But finally, reluctantly, he placed it back in its cradle, before reaching out to pull the shade down over the window and arranging his pillow to cushion his head.

It had been a silly question to ask anyway. Of course, Brian had gone to London. Why wouldn't he? Which meant that for every mile the Qantas jet traveled, the 767 that was carrying Brian toward Europe was covering the same distance, in the opposite direction. They were soon going to be as far away from each other as it was possible to be on planet Earth.

He closed his eyes, and tried to ignore the voice screaming in his mind - the one that kept insisting that he . . . that they were both making the biggest mistake of their lives. Only . . . he knew that there was nothing he could do to make it right, to turn it around, to turn them around. Brian had taken that option away from him.

Fuck this! Fuck the endless afternoon, jet lag, the international dateline. Fuck it all. And, finally, fuck Brian, who had not asked, had not bothered to talk to Justin to find out what he really wanted, who had, as always, taken it upon himself to decide what was best!

Fuck it all! He burrowed into his pillow and decided that he didn't really give a shit what the clock said or whether or not he would be able to sleep on schedule when they reached their destination. It was time for a nap.

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"Congratulations, Boss," said Liz Ethridge, Steven Fletcher's executive secretary. "Your father is going to be over the moon when he hears this."

Steven paused to check on his companion and was glad to see that Justin had nodded off. The young artist had been testy and moody all day, and obviously needed to get some rest. "Thank you, Girl Friday," he said finally, softly. "Although if you think he doesn't already know about it, you're delusional. He probably knew before I did."

Liz smiled, and he was struck, for probably the millionth time, by how much she resembled the ideal image of a society grandmother, with her elaborately coifed silver hair, her pale skin, and perfectly manicured nails; it was even more remarkable because she was actually a childless Lesbian who had no maternal instincts and no interest in developing any. Except, of course, for her feelings for Steven. She had been his assistant since the day he'd emerged triumphant and summa cum laude from his degree program at Harvard and made his debut in his father's company, and her loyalty was complete and without boundaries. She took care of Steven, no matter what.

"Can you speak freely?" she asked softly, as the last of her fellow conference participants made their exit from the dark-paneled boardroom.
Steven glanced once more toward Justin, confirming that he was sleeping soundly. "Within reason," he answered quietly, as he adjusted his headphones to make sure that anything she might say would remain private between the two of them.

She frowned and pulled a notepad out from beneath the stack of documents in front of her. "You had a call earlier," she said. "I would have told you about it sooner but I was pretty sure you wouldn't want it to become public knowledge."

"What's wrong, Liz?" he said quickly, sensing that this was something extraordinary enough to cause her some concern.

"It was Justin's agent. Olivia Ruiz."

"Calling me?" He couldn't quite conceal his surprise. "Why on earth would she call . . ."

"Because," she answered with a sigh, "she was apparently instructed not to call Justin."

"Instructed by whom?" He was growing impatient with her vagueness.

"By the Pittsburgh police department," she replied. "There's been . . . an incident."

"What kind of incident?"

She took a deep breath. "I assume you know who Brian Kinney is?"

Steven closed his eyes, suddenly certain that he was not going to like what he was about to hear. "What about him?"

She proceeded to answer his question, to provide the stark, unembellished details, concluding the account with two bald statements. No one was sure whether or not Kinney would live, and everybody was sure that it was incredibly important that Justin stay away, until the culprits could be caught and put away. His safety depended upon it.

When she fell silent, Steven said nothing for a while, reflecting only that he'd been right on target. He didn't like it at all. And he liked his choices even less.

"So I'm supposed to . . . what? Pretend I don't know?"

Her eyes were soft with sympathy. "You're the one who knows him best, Dear. If you tell him, what will he do?"

He huffed a bitter chuckle. "Probably try to hi-jack the plane. Or go looking for a parachute. Anything he has to . . . to get there. To be with . . ."

She nodded. "And put himself in terrible danger in the process. So I guess you have to ask yourself how much you love him. Tell him the truth, and be prepared to see him at risk. Or keep quiet, and risk losing him when he finds out. I'm sorry, Honey. I know it's a question of damned if you do, and damned if you don't."

He nodded and rubbed his eyes with his fingers. "I can't take a chance on anything happening to him," he said softly.

Her smile was gentle. "Well, if it's any consolation, apparently you're not the only one who feels that way. It seems that Kinney managed to hold on just long enough to pass along the warning. Looks like this is one special young man to inspire that kind of devotion."
"Yes," he replied. "Very special."

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked, determined to appear unruffled and unaffected, and never mind the big lump in her throat.

He took a moment to consider, as he turned once more to gaze at Justin, to bask in his beauty and an indefinable quality of innocence that the young man always wore, no matter that he had not been truly innocent for many years. "Yes," he said finally. "You can call his mother, and tell her I'll do what I must to protect him. No matter what it might cost me later."

"Michael!" Debbie's voice was as sharp as a scalpel. "She's his mother. Don't you dare . . ."

"Stay out of this, Ma," said Michael, in a tone he had used only rarely in his life - hard and determined and unyielding.

"You can't interfere in this," she insisted.

"Oh, yeah? Watch me!"

Thus when Joan Kinney and her daughter arrived at the nurses' station, Michael was there to meet them, with Lindsey just a half-step behind him.

In truth, neither of Brian's old friends had any notion of how they might be able to run any kind of interference on Brian's behalf, but both were determined to try. Michael understood why his mother felt the way she did; Debbie had always believed that a mother knew best for her child. She had even believed that - for a while - about the skanky bitch who'd tried to take Hunter away from him and Ben, although she'd finally been forced to concede that she was wrong in that instance.

But Debbie didn't know the whole truth about Brian's relationship with Joan. Hell! For that matter neither did Michael or Lindsey. Because Brian had never been willing to tell them all the gory details. But they knew enough to be certain that his mother would be the very last person Brian would want at his bedside while he lay helpless and comatose, and they were determined to do anything they could to assure that his wishes were carried out.

Joan regarded Michael and Lindsey coldly as she approached the desk, and Clair, Brian's sister, looked at them with obvious dislike. "Michael," said Joan with a barely-there nod. "Miss Peterson." Lindsey, who had been an acknowledged Lesbian while still a teen-ager, had always been Joan's least favorite of her son's questionable acquaintances. "I can't understand why you didn't call me. Why I had to learn that my son is at death's door on the noon news. As you can imagine, I've been frantic to see for myself."

Lindsey and Michael exchanged glances and silently agreed not to point out that it had been several hours since that report had aired, and that Joan, had she been truly frantic, would have arrived much earlier.

"He's not at death's door, Mrs. Kinney," said Lindsey. "The doctor assured us that . . ."

"If you don't mind," snapped Clair, "we'd rather hear it for ourselves. And we want to see him. Right now."

The nurse behind the desk was on the phone, speaking softly, when Joan leaned on the counter and cleared her throat. "My name is Joan Kinney, and I want to see my son, Brian, immediately."
Laura Van Deere had only been on duty for a couple of hours, but she already had a feeling that this was not going to be one of her better days. An excellent judge of character and skilled in evaluating people's body language and attitudes, she knew at once that there was a lot going on under the surface between these new arrivals and the individuals who had been here all day, waiting for news about their friend.

The priest, silent until this time, stepped closer and appeared to be trying to calm the two women, but neither seemed in the right frame of mind to listen.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Kinney," said the nurse. "But only Dr. Keller can authorize anyone to see your son, and he . . ."

Joan Kinney's eyes were suddenly huge. "Keller? Did you say Keller? You don't mean . . . Matthew Keller, do you?"

The doors to the ICU sprang open suddenly, and it was no longer necessary for the nurse to provide an answer, for the doctor was suddenly there, in the flesh, and regarding Brian's mother and sister with a smile that spoke volumes - none of it repeatable.

"I'm so touched that you remember me, dear St. Joan."

Brian's mother drew herself up and put on her best disdainful sneer. "You are not going to oversee my son's care, I can promise you that," she snapped. "I want to see the medical director. I want to see . . ."

Matthew Keller held up one hand. He was still smiling. "And I don't give a fuck what you want. Brian is under my care, as authorized by the individual he entrusted with his power of attorney, and - surprise, surprise - that person is not you." He glanced over at Clair, and the smile got uglier. "Now, take your troll offspring out of here, and don't bother coming back. You won't be allowed to see him, unless and until he invites you himself."

"You have no right," insisted Joan, "to come between a mother and her son. No right."

"I have every right," he retorted. Then he looked over and saw Debbie watching him with wide, unbelieving eyes. "It's just too bad that nobody ever stepped up to do it when it might have done some good. When they might have saved him . . . from you."

"Doctor . . . Keller, is it?" That was the priest, obviously hoping to play peacemaker. "Don't you think you're being a bit harsh? She just wants . . ."

The physician was quick to interrupt. "Forgive me, Father . . ." His smile became sardonie, "but I know exactly what she wants. And luckily, so did Brian - well enough, at least, to make sure that she never gets a shot at getting it."

"Nevertheless," said Tom Butterfield, "she is his next of kin, and she's got a right to know . . ."

"A right?" Matt laughed. "You think she's got a right to know anything about Brian?"

He reached out and touched the cross the priest was wearing, and a strange, manic light flared in his eyes. "Tell you what, Rev. Why don't you get St. Joan here into the confessional, and ask her a few pointed questions - ask her about how she learned not to see what her son endured at her husband's hands. Ask her about how she expected him to stand up and step in, when his old man was looking for someone to take his drunken rages out on. Ask her how she saved her cunty daughter and herself, by providing an alternative target for the old bastard."
"Matt," said Lindsey uneasily, "I'm not sure . . ."

The doctor offered her a gentle smile, in deliberate contrast to the sneer he'd directed at the Kinney women. "Well, I am sure, Sweetheart. I promised you I'd save Brian, and I will. And that includes making sure he's safe from the people who should have protected him when he was too young to do it himself."

Joan and Clair looked at each other, and realized that they had no choice but to accept the inevitable. They would seek alternatives; possibly even legal redress. There were always ways, if people were determined. And they were both determined and motivated, just in case. After all, if Brian did not survive this trauma - this punishment for his evil lifestyle - there was plenty of incentive to try to step in and be in the right place at the right time. He was a huge success - financially - and they were, after all, his only living relatives. So . . .

But today, they would not win this little battle, and Joan was a bit concerned at a shadow she spotted in the eyes of the young priest who had been her solace for so long. She was furious at Matthew Keller for daring to speak of private family matters that did not concern him, but she was even more furious at her son, for revealing things best kept concealed, things that he had seen from his own distorted perspective and interpreted in his typical, selfish manner. He knew that she had had no choice but to allow things to happen as they had, because Brian had been strong enough to take what his father dished out, while she and Clair would have been destroyed by it. There had been no other way, and Brian had known it.

Then he had grown up and betrayed her, turning his back on her needs and his sister's vulnerability, like the selfish traitor he was.

But there was no point in going into those things here. Brian had obviously poisoned the minds of these people, these low-life sinners and fornicators who were staring at her as if they had a right to judge her. So she and her daughter would withdraw, conceding the battle, but biding their time before attempting to win the war.

Michael and Lindsey stood with Matt Keller and watched as the group walked away. None of them drew an easy breath until the two women and the priest stepped into the elevator.

At that point, Michael turned to look up at the doctor and offered a tiny, tentative smile. "Remind me," he said quietly, "never to piss you off."

Matt Keller laughed. "If you ask anybody around here, they'll be glad to tell you that I'm a self-absorbed, cock-sucking bastard who doesn't give much of a shit about anybody. And mostly, they'd be right. But I do have one saving grace." He paused, and something dark and heavy moved in his eyes. "I take care of my friends. Always."

Then he turned and walked away, and Lindsey took Michael's arm in a proprietary gesture, before leaning in to whisper in his ear. "I think that Brian is going to prove - once more - that he's the luckiest fag in the world. That self-absorbed, cock-sucking bastard is going to turn out to be the Kinney guardian angel, and he's not going to let his patient get away with defying him. So Brian will have no choice but to get well."

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"Dear God!" Debbie's voice was little more than a whisper, for possibly the first time in recorded history. "Do you think he's right? That she really . . ."

They all stared for a moment at the double doors through which Dr. Keller had disappeared after delivering his ultimatum.

"I think he's exactly right," said Lindsey finally, her eyes huge and filled with shadow.

"Then why didn't he ever tell us? Why would he keep quiet? To protect her?"

Michael turned to stare at his mother, startled by the note of resentment in her tone. "Why does that surprise you? That's what she expected him to do, trained him to do, wasn't it? Are you really all that shocked? How could you forget . . ." His voice broke, and he buried his face in his hands, suddenly swept into lurid memory.

"Michael?" Ben was there - of course - to take his hand and offer comfort. Only there was no real comfort to be had.

"I remember all of it," said Michael, barely audible. "Sometimes I wish I didn't remember so well. I can't even begin to count how many times he showed up at our house. Sometimes in the middle of the night. Bleeding and bruised and battered. With cracked ribs and black eyes and busted lips and God knows what else. Jesus, you'd think I'd have gotten used to it after a while, but I never did. But . . . he never would explain what happened. Other than to say that Jack was in one of his moods. Which meant that the old bastard had been drinking again. That was all he'd ever say, but I knew what it meant. There never was a meaner drunk than Jack Kinney."

Ben felt a heaviness settle into his chest, and wondered if these people, this group that depended for its very existence on the young man lying comatose now in an ICU bed, had any idea how lucky they were that Brian had not grown up to use his natural charm and beauty and cunning to seek revenge on a callous, uncaring world. "Didn't anyone ever try to stop it?" he asked finally, deliberately not looking toward his lover's mother.

Michael sighed. "Uncle Vic did - once. Tried to convince Brian to go to the cops. Even offered to go with him. But Brian . . . he refused. He wouldn't say why, but I always figured it was because he knew it wouldn't do any good. Hell, half the guys on his dad's bowling team were cops. I think he'd already figured out that they wouldn't make much of an effort to protect him. Because his old man was one of the 'good old boys'. And because he already knew that he was different, even way back then."

His smile was wistful - almost painful. "Brian . . . blossomed early."

Debbie settled into the chair beside him and clasped her hands in her lap. "You have to realize," she said slowly, to no one in particular. "It was a different world back then. You just didn't go around interfering in family matters."

"Jesus!" said Ben softly, shaking his head in disbelief. "And it surprises you that he has problems with trusting people? It's a fucking miracle he's not a raging psychopath."

Lindsey stepped close and favored Michael with a gentle smile. "I don't think it was his mother, that
he was protecting."

And it was suddenly just too much for Michael to bear - the uncertainty that surrounded him, the fear that filled him, the loneliness that no one could assuage... the beautiful, beloved face that might never again be as he remembered it, as he loved it, so he jumped up and tore off down the corridor, not knowing where he was going or why, only knowing that he could no longer stand to be there, in that place, in that moment.

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There was always an aura of solemnity in the ICU; it seemed somehow more silent, more separated from reality and cushioned against the intrusion of ordinary sounds than other areas of the hospital, even though the constant hum of the medical machinery and the beeps and blips of vital signs monitors made true silence impossible. Still, the large chamber felt different from its counterparts, more filled with solitude and an awareness of the frailty of life, which, was, of course, blatantly ridiculous since it was exactly the same as every other unit in the hospital, except that it was more controlled and more carefully monitored.

There were sixteen cubicles in all, arranged in a broken oval around a central command post - the bailiwick of the specialized nurses and nurse practitioners who ruled the roost from their seat of power and watched lesser beings tiptoe through their domain. Monty Peabody had never been particularly fond of RNs in general, and these arrogant, overbearing, ICU-trained RNs in particular, believing that they gave themselves airs they had not earned. The lab tech had long ago come to the conclusion that only the doctors - the demigods of surgical suites and trauma centers - were fully deserving of the homage of the masses, and even then, only some of them.

Present company definitely excluded, he thought to himself, as he went about his business of drawing blood from the port embedded in the patient's left shoulder, while Matthew Keller sat on an exam stool, studying the displays on various computer screens and jotting entries into a bulging medical chart.

Since the physician appeared to be paying no attention to anything but the data he was perusing, Monty took advantage of the opportunity to study Kinney's injuries, although there wasn't much that he could actually see. Bandages covered face, throat, and chest, arms and both hands, leaving only the left shoulder bare and mostly intact, except for a line of stitching across the bicep. Dark hair, freshly washed, spiked above snowy bandages on one side of the patient's head, but bare skin was visible on the other, just peeking out from beneath white gauze. Nothing at all could be seen of the face, and he could not tell anything about the lower body as it was covered with several layers of blankets, provided by caring nurses who knew full well that their patients were almost always hyper-sensitive to the chill of the unit. Of course, thought Monty, if the attending physician would simply finish up and take himself elsewhere, it might be possible to get a quick look - just to learn if any vital organs might have suffered some terrible retribution for the dissolute life Kinney had...

"Any reason you're loitering here?" said Matt Keller suddenly, rising and moving forward to stand beside the bed. "Unless you're planning to check his catheter - or administer a blow job to try to revive him - you should...

"That's ridiculous," Monty replied, stumbling over the syllables. "I was just..."

"Hoping to get a look at his cock?" Keller's gaze was hard as flint and flecked with ice. "Well, you certainly wouldn't be the first, would you?"

"Why should I care about his cock?" Monty drew himself to his full (such as it was) height and tried to stare the doctor down, but Keller remained unruffled, barely able to stifle a smile as he realized
that the lab tech had almost choked rather than utter such a nasty profanity, but had realized that substituting an anatomical term would sound ridiculously prissy.

"You're queer, aren't you?" asked the doctor dismissively, as if that explained everything.

"So what?" the lab tech snapped.

Keller offered a little eye-roll. "So is there a fag in Pittsburgh that wouldn't sell his left nut for a chance to check out the legendary Kinney package?"

Monty sniffed. "There certainly is."

The doctor actually grinned. "Well, that's good then, because you'd be wasting your time standing around here, waiting for an opportunity that's never going to come. However, just for the sake of preventing mass panic, you and all of gay PA will be relieved to know that the Stud of Liberty Avenue remains as studly as ever."

Matt Keller was glad that he was staring straight at the snoopy lab tech at that moment. Otherwise he might have missed the fleeting glimmer of disappointment that flared in the man's eyes as he considered his response. "Well, I'm sure all the thousands of tricks he's slept with will be delighted."

Keller nodded. "And all the ones who haven't had the privilege will go on wondering what they've missed."

The doctor smiled then, gratified to note a quickly-suppressed glint of resentment in the lab tech's eyes.

For his part, Monty gathered his supplies and headed for the door, fuming but knowing that it would not be wise to say what he was thinking. Best to just make his escape while he could, allowing the doctor to concentrate once more on his notations in the medical chart.

But it was immediately obvious that Keller was not quite done with the subject. "By the way," he called, not bothering to look up, "when I said that gay PA would be relieved to hear the news, that did not constitute permission for you to spread it."

Monty tried to look offended, but failed miserably, realizing that the doctor had sensed his intentions with alarming accuracy.

"Of course not. I would never . . ."

"Oh, I know you wouldn't." The interruption was immediate, and very cold. "Not if you value your job."

When the lab tech made his exit, moving, Keller noted with some satisfaction, with all the grace of a scalded cat, the doctor put aside the medical chart and hoisted himself to sit on the side of the bed in a spot where he could look down into his patient's face. Though he could not see any more than the cunty lab tech had seen, memory kicked in and supplied what was missing. The physician in him saw the wounds, but the man in him saw only the beauty.

When he spoke, his voice was very soft and achingly tender. "Flat on your back and out like a light, and you're still stirring the shit, Sonny Boy. Must be why I always loved you so much.

"You know, I have no idea if you can hear me or not. Even though I'm the great, incredibly gifted, all-knowing Dr. Keller, I don't know that - and neither does anybody else. So maybe I'm just sitting here talking to myself. But, just in case I'm not, I want you to listen to me. Are you listening?
Actually, it's kind of nice to be able to say whatever I want without having to put up with your mouthing off and arguing with me. But there's no arguing with this. You just have to shut up and understand me. I will make you well again. And not only that.

He leaned forward then and touched his lips to the tiny little spot of bare skin just above Brian's left ear, just an inch below the site of the skull fracture which had almost proved fatal, while he reached up and stroked his fingers through a lock of dark hair. "I won't only make you well, Sonny Boy. I'll make you perfect again, one way or another. I promise you that. Those motherfuckers who did this to you are not going to win this war. You will be Brian Kinney again. I swear it."

He sat back then and spent a few seconds just listening to the rhythmic sound of his patient's breathing. Then he looked up, recalling, for just a moment, the catechism he had spent many years of his youth learning.

"And You," he said firmly, showing not the slightest nuance of reverence or humility, "better not make a liar out of me."

God, according to the stern old Daughter of St. Vincent de Paul who had presided over his schooling, always listened, even if the person doing the praying was an arrogant prick.

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"Son of a bitch!" Police Chief Phillip Mitchum had very little in common with his predecessor. He was not handsome, did not have a buff body, exhibited very little personal charm, and was intensely apolitical. He was, however, a very good cop - honest and dedicated and forthright, and not given to mincing words. "Do you have any idea how much I don't need this right now."

Carl Horvath took a deep breath, and offered up a little silent prayer before opening his mouth to respond. He was walking a very thin line here, and he knew it, but he also knew he had no other choice.

"Yes, Sir," he said slowly, "I think I do. But I also know that this is something you can't afford to ignore. Whether we like it or not, we're sitting on a powder keg here. And it's not going to just go away. It's been building up for a long time, and this thing with Kinney . . . well, it just might be the last straw."

Mitchum rubbed his hands through thinning, dirty blonde hair. "You know, none of this would have happened, if these people would just stop making such an issue of everything, and learn to keep their heads down."

"These . . . people?" Lance Mathis steepled his fingers in front of his face. "By that, I suppose you mean homosexuals. Gays and Lesbians and . . ."

"Well, of course that's what I mean," snapped the police chief. "Why can't they just . . ."

"Go away?" Horvath took a deep breath. "Sorry to tell you this, Chief, but I know from first hand experience; they're not going anywhere. And they're not going to back down." His tone was reasonable, even sympathetic, but very firm. "Those days - the days of 'don't ask, don't tell' - they're gone. It took decades for many of them to develop the courage to come out of the closet. And they're not going back in. Not for anybody."

Mitchum's eyes narrowed as he stared at the man who was on a short list to make chief detective in the homicide division. "You almost sound like you approve, Carl."
And there it was. The issue he'd spent the last couple of years avoiding - in public anyway - but there was no longer any way of evading the question; not if he wanted to be able to live with his conscience, not to mention the woman whose house he shared. "Actually, Chief, I do. It wasn't something that came easily to me. In fact, up until a few years ago, I was a lot like you, I suspect. I didn't hate homosexuals; I just didn't understand them. And in some ways, I still don't. But I've learned a lot recently, from the woman who is the most important person in my life. And from her son, who happens to be gay, and their friends. It's not necessary for me to understand why they are the way they are; it's only necessary for me to know that I don't have to right to judge them, or to deny them the same rights that the rest of us enjoy.

"You may not approve of Brian Kinney and his lifestyle. And you might wish that he'd just keep his face out of the papers and his name out of the news. But that's not going to happen. And your approval - or mine - isn't going to change the fact that his notoriety doesn't give anybody the right to do what they did to him. I know it might be hard for you to accept, but I can tell you, from firsthand experience, that it's true; he is, no doubt, what most heterosexual people would call a raging fag, but he's also as gutsy and honest as any man I've ever known. So maybe we all need to rethink how we define manhood.

"Ever since the whole ugly truth surfaced about your predecessor and Kinney's involvement in that, there's been trouble brewing. You've got extremists that are ready to start a war to try to enforce their version of 'What America Ought To Be', and you've got the minorities - of every persuasion - ready to stand up and fight to defend themselves. Plus, you have to remember that Kinney has a lot of friends - some of them very powerful - who don't seem to care one way or another where he sticks his dick. The bottom line here is, that if we don't do something PDQ, we could be looking at war in the streets."

Carl leaned forward, hands clasped tight in a desperate attempt to open his superior's eyes. "It's not the way it used to be, Chief. Things that you and I could never have imagined have opened doors that a lot of people would have preferred to leave closed. But there's no going back. People like Harvey Milk and Barbara Gittings, John Aravosis and Elaine Noble - they've changed the world. And people like Brian Kinney and his friends aren't going to just sit back and let the homophobes and bigots change it back. We have to deal with that."

Mitchum's eyes were cold, but, at least, thought Carl, he had listened. The detective found, to his annoyance, that he was barely breathing, waiting to learn what would come next, which would determine the direction they would all have to take for the future.

"So," said the chief slowly, reluctantly, "what do you propose?"

Carl barely managed not to sigh with relief. "We've been trying to sort this thing out since the bombing at Babylon. That's more than a year of busting our butts to follow up every clue, check out every lead. But we're still no closer to knowing who's responsible. We don't have the resources, the manpower, or the clout necessary to do a thorough investigation. And frankly, I think we have to consider that there are certain elements within the department who aren't exactly enthusiastic about seeing this thing solved. Seems like every step we take forward, something seems to . . . slip through the cracks and send us back to the starting line. So the logical thing to do is to get somebody who has the means to get the job done."

"Namely?"

Carl and Lance Mathis exchanged glances. "Chief Mitchum," said Mathis, "what happened at Babylon and what happened to Brian Kinney have one thing in common." He drew a deep breath. "They're both hate crimes."
Mitchum suddenly looked older than his 53 years. "That's what I thought you were going to say." He took a moment to light his pipe, blatantly ignoring the No Smoking sign on the wall just outside his glass door. Inhaling deeply and savoring the special blend of tobacco which was one of his very few personal perks, he stared at Mathis through a curtain of smoke. "I assume there's a specific reason for your presence here."

Mathis smiled. "I happen to be well acquainted with a member of an elite FBI team, someone who's very interested in the developments in this case. Her name is Alexandra Corey - Special Agent Alexandra Corey - and she can be here tomorrow."

Mitchum's eyebrows climbed toward his receding hairline. "You've already spoken to her?"

"I have," Mathis confirmed. "But only unofficially. Nothing happens until you give the word."

Horvath elected to remain silent, knowing that he had done all he could.

The police chief rose and went to stand at his window, staring down into the heart of the city that looked to him to preserve civility and administer justice.

"All right," he said abruptly.

"All right what?" Horvath did not dare assume.

"The word," he said with a sigh, "is given."

Lance Mathis closed his eyes, allowing himself a sigh of relief and acknowledging a reluctant but heartfelt surge of admiration for the police chief, recognizing the difficulty of a man caught between two cultures and struggling to do the right thing. It was, he thought, long past time to get the big boys - even if the big boy in this case happened to be a big girl - involved and put an end to the horror that hovered over this city.

Both Ben and Debbie were quick to leap to their feet to rush off in pursuit of Michael, but, as it happened, Lindsey was just a trifle faster as she stepped forward to intercept them both.

"Let me," she said firmly.

"Why you?" said mother and partner in unison, both slightly annoyed by her intervention.

"Because," she said firmly, "this isn't about you and Michael. This is about Brian and Michael, and neither one of you can really know what this is doing to him, much as you might want to."

"But you can," said Melanie, unable to control the strident note of bitter resentment in her voice.

"Yes," Lindsey replied, turning to regard her partner with steady eyes. "I can. I know that probably makes you angry; I guess I even understand why it would. But Michael and I have ties to Brian that we trace back to our childhood, ties that words can't begin to describe. And now is not the time to be playing petty little games of jealousy and one-upmanship. Now, I'm going to Michael, and I'd appreciate it if the rest of you would just . . . back off."

She turned then to walk away, but not before she caught a glimpse of the pleased smile on Emmett's
"And just how do you think you'll find him?" Debbie yelled after her.

Lindsey smiled. "I don't have to find him," she called without bothering to turn around. "I know exactly where he is."

As she pushed through the door into the stairwell she sent up a tiny, silent prayer of thanks for Brian's habit of regaling her with his more outrageous stunts and urges, like the one that had struck him on the night of Gus' birth, a temporary temptation to defy gravity and leap from the roof of the hospital. Another possible means, of course, of going out in a blaze of glory.

She smiled gently, knowing that he wouldn't really have gone through with it. If Brian Kinney ever did decide to devise his own exit from existence, it would not be in a way that left him crushed and mangled and grotesque; it would be arranged, rather, so that he would remain as beautiful in death as he had been in life, forever to linger in the memories of his friends as "Brian Kinney, for fuck's sake".

But not today, she thought grimly. And not ever, if she had anything to say about it.

Of course, she wasn't really fooling herself. She knew full well that she had never had any real control over what Brian might choose to do, although she had, on occasion, applied the screws to try to force him to bend to her will. She sighed as she took her first steps up toward the roof, realizing that she was a little bit ashamed of herself for sometimes using the guilt card to keep him from doing things he might really have wanted to do.

Struck by a sudden thought, she paused in mid-step and felt her breath catch in her throat. Did Brian ever have dreams - things that he had wanted with his whole heart but never reached for, because he was restrained by ties to those around him? Had she and Michael and Debbie and . . .

She resumed her climb more slowly, with a dull ache in her heart, trying to convince herself that she was being silly - that Brian Kinney did not deal in fantasies or dreams, that he was all about reality and living in the moment. She was still trying as she approached the final landing that would lead her to the roof exit, and she took a deep breath, offering up a whispered promise, just in case. "No more, Love. Never again."

She pushed through the door and saw exactly what she'd expected to see and forced herself to proceed slowly, to refrain from giving voice to a flash of panic.

Michael was sitting on the ledge at the edge of the roof, his feet dangling in space as he shivered and stared down into the shadows below, hands tucked under his arms and his face awash with tears.

She spent a few seconds trying to find the right words, before realizing that there weren't any, and that she didn't need them anyway. Ultimately, she simply stepped up and sank down beside him, before wrapping her arms around him; then they cried together.

For a time neither of them spoke at all, but it was Michael who finally found himself unable to remain silent. "I can't lose him, Lindsey," he whispered. "I thought . . . after everything that went so wrong between us over the last couple of years, I thought I'd . . . outgrown him, you know? I thought I'd proved that I didn't need him any more. But . . . oh, God! . . . how could I have done the things I did, said the things I said to him? How could I have let myself forget what he meant to me, what he did for me? How could I? He was always there for me - always, and I just . . . I let myself get so caught up in all the bullshit." He drew a deep shaky breath. "He was right. I did betray him."
"No, you didn't," she soothed. "You got a little distracted, maybe." She paused then and drew back so she could look up into his eyes. "From time to time, I think we all did. I mean, think about it, Michael. During that whole stupidity over Jenny Rebecca's custody, we all went a little psycho, and I think Brian served as a distraction for us through it all. It was always easier to blame him and yell at him about every little thing than to figure out what was really going on, and I think that's been the story for a lot of our lives. Hell, I sometimes think he let us do it on purpose, because it was easier for us that way. But in the end, you found your way back to him."

"But why? Why did I let myself turn into this pretentious prick, so eager to impress people that I didn't really give a shit about, while I just . . . walked away from him, from everything that mattered to me? When all that crap was going on, I once told Ben that I didn't even know who Brian was any more. But the truth was that he was the same person he'd always been. It was me who'd changed, and all I wanted to do was strike out at him. Why did I have to hurt him like that?"

"You weren't trying to . . ."

But Michael was not going to allow himself to avoid speaking truths he knew he should have spoken long ago. "Yes," he said sternly. "I was. Do you know what I said to him? When he tried to apologize to me, I said that just because we'd been friends all our lives didn't mean that we had to stay friends. I wanted to hurt him. And I did. I saw it in his eyes, and . . . I was glad, Lindsey. I was glad that I could hurt him, because . . ."

"Because?"

He could not bring himself to meet her eyes. "Because he always knew the truth, even though he almost never said it. Just . . . once in a while, it would slip out, when he'd let his guard down a little bit, or when he was high - or drunk."

His smile was rueful. "He called it 'my secret identity'."

Then he did meet her gaze and knew that it wasn't necessary for him to say it; she obviously already knew. "I think you know," she said gently, "that he would have, if he could."

He nodded. "Yeah. I know you're right. And I guess that's why I . . . did what I did. I'd managed to convince myself that . . ."

"That it wasn't you," she finished for him. "You convinced yourself that he could never love anybody, until . . ."

"Justin," he breathed. "God! I didn't want it to be true. So what kind of friend does that make me, that I was so jealous that I'd rather he'd spent his whole life alone, fucking everything in sight but never loving anybody, than to have him find it with someone else?"

Her smile was gentle. "I'd say it makes you human, and . . ." She forced herself not to look away, "one of the crowd. You're not the only one, you know."

Michael pulled back quickly and stared at her in disbelief. "You?" he gasped. "But you're . . ."

She managed a tiny laugh. "Which just goes to prove that none of us is immune to the Kinney charm." Then she laughed again. "Except Melanie, of course."

He dredged up a smile. "Yeah. If she starts drooling over him, it's the Apocalypse, for sure."

"Now," she said gently, with an exaggerated shiver, "don't you think it's time we climb down from this glacier and go find ourselves a nice hot cup of coffee?"
He nodded, but still made no move to depart. "I don't know how to explain it to Ben," he murmured. "I mean, how can I expect him to accept..."

"Ben loves you, Michael," she interrupted, "and I think he might surprise you. You know, it's not exactly easy for people to understand the relationship between you and Brian. Neither one of you has ever been willing to explain it or to help people figure it out, and God knows it's not a typical friendship, by any means. Still, I'm pretty sure Ben understands it. He knows how much Brian means to you, so I don't think you need to worry." Her smile was suddenly a little brittle. "He's not Melanie, you know."

Michael suddenly leaned forward and touched his lips to her forehead. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

She didn't ask what he meant. She didn't need to.

But still he turned for a minute to look out across the city. "We came up here the night Gus was born," he said. "He wanted to fly. Like Superman." His voice broke a little before he continued. "I always wondered if..."

"If he meant it?" she asked.

He could only nod.

She tucked her hand through his arm and urged him up from the ledge, while considering her response. "In a way," she said finally, "I think he always means it."

They made their way then toward the stairwell, and Michael couldn't quite figure out why he found her words comforting. Then he stopped trying to understand it, and simply accepted the comfort for what it was - a gesture between friends.

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It was full dark by the time Lindsey and Michael made their way downstairs to navigate the labyrinthine corridors of the huge hospital in search of the public cafeteria. But the growing lateness of the hour seemed to have no effect on the number of individuals packed into waiting rooms or standing around in hallways or coming and going through the big front entrance.

A quick conversation with a med tech near the ER revealed that there'd been a major pile-up on the turnpike involving a school bus transporting a college basketball team and a group of supporters, and it didn't look there would be any respite from the pandemonium for quite a while.

Michael nervously glanced down one particular corridor, stark and cold and featureless, and was caught up once more in a rush of devastating memory: Brian's face, as white as porcelain and as rigid as granite, absolutely still and chiseled and awash with silent tears, his hands and clothing dark with bloodstains he couldn't bring himself to wash off. Michael couldn't be positive, of course, but he was pretty sure that nobody else had ever been allowed to see Brian Kinney in such a state. For three days, they had sat there together, while friends and acquaintances of Justin and his family had come and gone, moving around them as if they'd been rocks buried in a stream, and during that time, Brian had not spoken at all, except to answer direct questions from hospital staff members and police officers. He had not slept, had not eaten, had hardly moved from his place there against the wall, and had barely even spoken to Michael. And yet, even without words, Michael had known how important it was for him to be there, especially at those moments when Brian would look up to find Jennifer Taylor staring at him, obviously struggling to maintain her silence, biding her time until she felt freer to speak her mind.
Michael had never talked about it to anyone, but he knew nonetheless; he had saved Brian's life that night - had anchored him to the bedrock of reality and refused to let him slip away, consumed by guilt and remorse. Later, after his misadventure in Portland had ended and he’d come back to Pittsburgh, he’d heard the scoffers saying that Brian had simply walked away from the trauma of that night, uncaring, and hurried to replace his broken boytoy with a newer, shinier model, but Michael knew better - knew that that event had cost his best friend. He had tried, once or twice, to make people understand the horror of what Brian had endured then, but he knew that his efforts had been futile. People generally saw only what they wanted to see, he knew, and most of the people who lived in the periphery of Brian's life did not want to acknowledge that someone like him was not quite as invincible as he seemed. It was simply easier to classify him as a heartless shit.

Sometimes, Michael was amazed at how little people actually knew about the phenomenon who was Brian Kinney.

A few months later, it had been Brian's turn to step up and repay Michael's kindness. New memories swept in to dislodge the old, and now he dwelt on the dark days when it was he who had been lost in fear and despair, frightened of being alone, terrified of losing Ben, and it had been Brian who had been there for him, offering reassurance and strength and comfort, and asking nothing in return. All the more reason, he thought, why he should be ashamed of what came later.

"Hush now," said Lindsey with a sad little smile, the softness in her eyes saying that she'd watched the play of emotions on his face and knew where his thoughts had led him. "There've been good times here too. This is where Gus and J.R. came into our lives. And where Ted and Justin and Ben - and you . . . recovered and came back to us. And it's where Brian will come back to us too. Just you wait and see."

The cafeteria was crowded at this hour, mostly with evening shift members or day staffers just ending their rotation.

"You hungry?" asked Michael, looking askance toward a crowded buffet table, adjacent to a salad bar offering slightly wilted produce.

She shook her head. "There are only a few universal truths, Michael," she said with a lopsided smile, "but the fact that hospital food sucks - and not in a positive, life-affirming way - is one of them."

"Still at the head of the class, I see." Matt Keller appeared at her side and wrapped an arm around her shoulder, greeting her with a brilliant smile.

She laughed softly. "After you," she replied. "And Brian, of course."

"Of course," he agreed. "If you want my advice, stick to the coffee. And the cinnamon rolls won't kill you. They bring them in from a local bakery, so they're actually edible."

Lindsey looked up then and spotted a strange look on the physician's face as he stole surreptitious glances toward Michael while they placed their orders at the coffee bar. Her breath caught in her throat then, as she realized why.

"Oh, God!" she said suddenly. "What was I thinking? You two have never actually met, have you? Matt, this is . . ."

"It's okay, Linz," said Keller. "I know who he is"

Michael frowned. "How? How do you know me?"
The physician's voice was suddenly very soft. "The famous Michael Novotny? Even if I'd never seen a photo of you - which I have, ad nauseum - I'd have known you anywhere."

He then turned and led the way to a table by a narrow corner window and sank into a chair, every line of his body announcing a bone-deep weariness.

Michael followed more slowly, wondering if he was imagining the tiny note of resentment he'd heard in Keller's voice.

"Long day?" asked Lindsey as she studied the physician's face.

He dredged up a smile - barely. "You have no idea."

Michael took a sip of coffee, still lost in thought, while Lindsey considered how best to approach her old college acquaintance, to convince him to answer questions she had not dared pose when they'd spoken before.

"Matt, I . . ."

"He's going to be all right, Linz," he interrupted, staring down into his own cup. "You can stop . . . obsessing."

"I do not obsess," she said, with just a nuance of irritation.

"Of course, you don't." He didn't bother to try to hide his indulgent smile.

"What did you mean?" said Michael suddenly, having decided that the best approach, as usual, was to simply spit out the question without preamble.

"About?" Keller propped his elbows on the table and braced his chin against clasped fingers.

"The 'famous Michael Novotny'?" Michael raised his hands to make quotation marks with his fingers.

Keller's smile was a barely-there effort. "Brian used to talk about you all the time."

"He did?" Michael sounded as if he thought he might be the butt of some kind of joke.

"He did."

When Michael glanced at Lindsey, he was somewhat surprised to see her nodding her agreement.

The three fell silent for a time, content to sit and drink their coffee, which was surprisingly tasty and satisfying.

But Michael, as all his friends knew, was not one to leave well enough alone while questions went unanswered. His voice was very soft and his eyes somewhat unfocused when he spoke again. "All that stuff you said earlier . . . to his mother . . . how did you know all that?"

Keller did not look up. "How do you think? From Brian, of course. How else would I know it?"

"He told you." Michael tried not to sound as if he did not believe the physician, but he wasn't particularly successful in the attempt. "Why would he . . ."

The doctor's gaze softened as he lifted his eyes to study Michael's face. "Why would he tell me when he didn't tell you? Is that what you're wondering?"
Michael nodded. "I always thought he told me everything."

Keller took a moment to consider his choice of words before offering an answer. "Michael, you were - probably still are - the kid brother he never had."

"Only one thing wrong with that picture," replied Michael sharply. "I'm older than he is."

"In some ways, maybe," answered Keller softly. "But that doesn't mean he didn't want to protect you, when he could."

Michael was suddenly intent on gazing into his coffee cup. "So you were at Penn together," he said softly. "Roommates?"

"Christ, no!" laughed Keller. "We'd have probably beat each other to a bloody pulp if we'd tried to live together. In fact, that's how we met."

"What?"

"I made a pass at him, and he decked me."

Michael and Lindsey exchanged grins. "Brian?" Michael tried to picture it - and couldn't. Keller, after all, was the kind of guy that the gang had always classified as 'hot', so why would . . .

"His mother had just dropped him off after a week-end at home," Keller explained, "and he wasn't in the mood."

"Brian is always in the mood," Michael laughed.

But the laughter was forgotten when Keller regarded him with somber eyes and said, "Is he now?"

And Michael remembered then how his best friend always behaved after spending any length of time with either of his parents. "No," he admitted. "I guess he's not. But I still don't understand why he would tell you things that he never talked about - to us."

Keller did not answer immediately, turning instead to gaze out into the darkness beyond the window, while Michael and Lindsey looked at each other and wondered if he would answer at all.

"Probably," he said finally, "because he knew that there was nothing he could tell me that I wouldn't understand."

He paused then, obviously debating whether or not to continue, and when he did, there was a cold detachment in his tone that was chilling to his listeners. "When I was eleven years old, my father almost killed me because I stepped in to try to keep him from beating my mother. The only reason he didn't succeed was that I grabbed a steak knife off the table and stabbed the fucker in the gut."

The silence around the table was thick with horror as Michael and Lindsey stared at him, having no idea how to respond to such a confession.

Keller continued, his voice completely emotionless. "One of the neighbors called the cops, and when they came . . ." He paused to take a deep breath and, perhaps, to compose himself before going on, "my father told them that I'd attacked him, and that he'd only hit me to defend himself. They didn't believe him . . . at first."

Another pause, and a deeper sigh.

"Until my mother backed him up."
Michael's eyes were huge as he contemplated how it must feel to be betrayed by both parents. "What happened?" he asked, unwilling to hear it but unable to resist asking.

"I wound up in juvy hall, until they sorted it out. Then they shuffled me into foster care. I won't bore you with the details."

"Jesus!" breathed Lindsey. Then she looked at him with wounded eyes. "I never knew any of that. Why didn't you . . ."

"I never told anybody," he answered, "except . . ."

"Brian." It was not a question.

He nodded and paused for a moment to take a sip of his rapidly cooling coffee. "But that should explain why he felt he could tell me things that he couldn't say to you."

Michael frowned. "But he's my best friend. I still don't understand why . . ."

"Michael," said the doctor sternly, "he didn't want you to have to know what he endured."

Michael turned to study Lindsey's face. "That's what you meant, isn't it? When you said it wasn't his mother that he was protecting."

She nodded. "He always protected us, Michael. Even when we didn't realize that we needed protecting."

Keller's smile was gentle. "And, as far as I know, he still does."

Lindsey turned then to peer into his eyes, hearing something in the tone of his voice that said there was still more that they didn't know, and she hesitated for a moment, not sure that she wanted to hear whatever else there might be.

"You haven't seen him in a long time," she mused.

"No," he agreed. Then he smiled, but the weariness was still heavy upon him. "Not in several years."

"Why is that?" asked Michael. "If you care about him like you said, why would you stay away?"

Keller sighed. "Because we're too much alike. We always wind up hurting each other. Fighting like pit bulls. With words - or worse. But we do keep in touch, when we need to." He paused for a while, once more lost in thought. "I don't think you ever met Daniel, Lindsey. You and Brian had already graduated when he and I met."

She shook her head, and flashed him a gentle smile. "No. I never did, but Brian told me about him. He said - let me see if I can remember his exact words - that Daniel was 'the pretty boy you settled for when you couldn't have him'. Does that sound about right?"

The doctor's smirk was indulgent. "Yeah, that sounds like Brian." He sighed then, and crossed his arms on the table, bracing his chin against his forearms. "And maybe he was even right, to some degree. In the beginning any way. Daniel was a geneticist, researching birth defects when we met, doing important work. He was brilliant and beautiful - well, you get the idea. I can't even begin to tell you what he was to me. Let's just say I thought he was God's way of making up for the shit I went through as a kid. Anyway, we went through a shitload of trouble before we finally managed to make a life together, and I thought - we both thought - it would be forever."
"Daniel had a twin sister - the only other person in his life who was important to him, who loved him as much as I did. Anyway, we'd been together about a year when she came to us with an incredible idea - a gift she wanted to give us. She had decided that she wanted to become a nun, but, before she did, she wanted to offer herself as a surrogate for us. To carry my child - a baby for us to raise."

He closed his eyes. "It was just . . . perfect. Our child would carry genes from both of us, would be as much our biological child as possible, for two men. Even Brian was impressed. After he got through laughing his head off at the idea of me as a father, not to mention verbally exploring the idea of 'incest, once removed', as he called it. Anyway, about a year later, Matthew Daniel Griggs-Keller came into the world. We called him M.D. And when I held him in my arms the first time, I realized something. I realized that Brian was right, at least a little bit, in claiming that I loved Daniel because he reminded me of Brian. Because my son not only resembled Daniel; he looked a little like Brian too. God, he was beautiful."

"So where is he . . . now?" asked Lindsey, sure that she was not going to like his answer - and she was right.

Keller was slow to respond, apparently looking for an easy way to say it but realizing finally that there wasn't any. "He's dead. He was just two when he contracted meningitis. We caught it early, of course, and rushed him to the hospital, but he was allergic to the antibiotics, and . . . there was nothing we could do. We put him to bed that night, happy and healthy and perfect. And fourteen hours later, he was gone. If it hadn't been so tragic, it would have been ludicrous. With all our knowledge and medical skill combined, we couldn't even save our own son"

He paused then, obviously struggling for words to express the rest. "It felt as if the profession that I'd served for my whole life had betrayed me."

"Oh, God, Matt," whispered Lindsey, grasping his hand. "I'm so sorry. I can't even imagine what you must have suffered."

He didn't bother to look at her, still lost in dark memory. "I called Brian, and he came, just like I knew he would. He didn't say very much, because he knew what most people never figure out. That there's nothing that one can say that'll make a fucking bit of difference. But he came and he stood there with me and he cried with me, and that meant more to me than all the words and all the flowers and the speeches. Just because he was there, to hold my hand. Daniel and I, we couldn't . . . nothing was ever the same again, and he . . . he didn't have a Brian to save him. A month later, Daniel was gone. I don't know where he went, or where he is now. I only know that Brian saved me. Not because he knew how to make it better - nobody could have done that - but because he just refused to let me go. He held on and forced me to put one foot in front of the other, one step at a time. Even when all I wanted was to die too. He just kept holding on, refusing to listen when I yelled at him to fuck off."

He fell silent for a time, obviously still lost in thought. Then he smiled. "I'd have died then, if he hadn't forced me to keep going, and sometimes I hated him for it. Then, a couple of years later, it was my turn to force him to do the same, when he called me, after . . . after Justin got bashed. I was in the middle of my second residency then, at Johns Hopkins, on a neurosurgical rotation that was so Goddamned exhausting that I couldn't get away. But I called him every night, talked him through it, so he knew what to expect and how to cope. Did you know that he came here every night while Justin was here? Just to watch over him, to make sure he was safe."

Michael looked devastated. "No. I didn't know. Something else . . . he never told me."

Keller sighed, his exhaustion growing deeper with every breath. "Because he didn't want you to feel compelled to help him cope with his guilt. He didn't want to cope with it at all." He raised his eyes
then, looking first at Michael and then at Lindsey. "He didn't want to survive it. It nearly killed him, because he believed that it should have been him, not Justin. He still does. I think that's one reason he was ready to . . ."

He paused in mid-sentence, and Lindsey and Michael looked at each other, both sensing that he had something else to say, something that was important, that they needed to know. But they also sensed that it was something that Keller was reluctant to reveal.

"What, Matt?" asked Lindsey gently. "He was ready to what?"

"I think," he replied slowly, "that I've said enough."

"No," said Michael, his voice steady, filled with certainty. "You haven't. He called you . . . when he found out he had cancer. Didn't he?"

Keller hesitated before nodding.

Michael closed his eyes and cast his thoughts back to a bitterly cold day, a dark day in his family history - the day they had buried his beloved Uncle Vic. He remembered the vivid scarlet of the roses against the mahogany gloss of the coffin and the numbness of his fingers as he'd shoved them into his pockets vainly seeking warmth, and the crunch of the frozen ground under their shoes as they'd walked away from the service.

And Brian's face. He'd never been quite sure just why it was the look on Brian's face that had lingered in his memory - the look on his face and the words he'd spoken as they'd all left the cemetery, even though what he'd said had gone almost unnoticed at the time, had been no more than barely audible words against background noise.

"He planned to just . . . die, didn't he?"

Lindsey gasped as she turned to peer into Michael's eyes, not wanting to believe that he could possibly be right.

But Keller, after a moment of hesitation, confirmed it. "Yes. He did. Initially, he planned to reject the treatment the doctors proposed. As he phrased it, he wanted to take a fast trip to Ibiza, party til he dropped, and then discreetly disappear. He claimed that it was the tasteful thing to do."

Michael nodded. "I remember when he talked about that. We all thought he was just being the Brian that we all know and . . ." He turned to study Keller's face. "You were the one who changed his mind."

Keller smiled. "Ordinarily, I'm glad to take the credit for miracle cures, but, in this case, all I did was yell at him to tell him that he was a stupid shit. I've never been entirely sure, but I think it was Gus that changed his mind." He then turned a speculative gaze toward Michael. "And maybe you, to some extent. At any rate, he experienced some kind of epiphany that made him decide to have the surgery. Until then, he'd pretty much decided that he was going to be the new James Dean - remaining forever young and beautiful."

He smiled again, and there was a glow of affection in his eyes. "I don't suppose it comes as a shock that he's obsessed with his own physical perfection."

It was Lindsey's turn to smile, but there was little joy in her expression. "Which brings us to a pertinent point," she said softly. "Namely, what happens now? Will he ever . . ."

Keller's eyes narrowed, and his face went rigid and harsh. "I've given my whole life to the practice of
medicine," he said. "It's time now for it to give something back. I will not lose him." Then he remembered that these two people loved his old friend even more than he did. "And neither will you."

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The other side of the world. Literally the other side.

Justin sipped at his Cosmo and wandered out through the French doors, to lean against the balcony railing and gaze out across the breathtaking panorama of Oriental Bay. The water, beautifully pure and crystalline, was a natural version of an abstract painting, comprised of hundreds of variations of colors, like the facets of carefully cut emeralds and sapphires and aquamarines stroked and polished by fingers of sunlight, framed by the broken crescent of the beach road that seemed to contain the city of Wellington in its narrow band of stylish structures reaching for the sky, gleaming white and coral against the verdant green of the hillsides beyond. On the bay itself, various types of sea-going vessels rode the combined forces of time and tide, sails billowing in graceful arcs before the wind.

The quality of the light was incredible, as pure and unfiltered as any he’d ever seen, painting everything in strokes of exquisite liquid brilliance, and he felt an almost uncontrollable urge to grab a canvas and his brushes and capture it all.

It would be easy enough. His art supplies were carefully packed into a canvas carry-all, stowed in the closet of the luxury suite behind him.

He could already see it developing under his hands, growing and stretching across the canvas, transcending the physical dimensions of the scene, incorporating fragments of images that were rising in his mind. He closed his eyes and could still see it, but with enhancements uniquely his own. In actuality, the view was sharp and flawless, each element as crisp and perfect as the symmetry of a snowflake, but in his mind, he saw it filtered by a veil of rain, storm-washed and windblown and battened down. Surviving, with beauty intact, just waiting to reclaim its place in the sun.

His fingers twitched as he visualized the process of bringing his vision to life, building it layer upon layer, capturing the beauty, the infinity, the microcosmic clarity of the image, and wrapping it all around a distinctive silhouette.

But he just stood there, not acting on the impulse. His mind was engaged; even his fingers were eager to begin. But his heart wasn’t in it.

It was, quite literally, a different world, in more ways than one. He sighed. But it still incorporated the part of him that he could not quite manage to leave behind.

Would he forever see that one, unforgettable face every time he closed his eyes?

Steven had been wonderful all through the journey, had gone to extraordinary lengths to detach Justin from the melancholy that had gripped him since the night of his exhibition, which now seemed lost in some alternative timeline.

So . . . what the fuck was he thinking, to be here in this fantastic, incredibly beautiful place, preparing for the greatest adventure of his life, exploring a culture rich beyond his wildest imaginings in the company of a gorgeous, loving companion - and all he could think about was what was missing.

Well - almost all.

There was the guy standing on the adjacent balcony, smoking a Gauloise, wearing nothing but a
towel that left little to the imagination. And Steven was meeting with an important client, a multi-billionaire who had risen to the peak of his profession at age 50, before retiring to his private paradise in the hills above the city, leaving his investments in the capable hands of Steven's father.

So he did have several hours to kill and . . .

The beautiful brunette with the awesome six-pack and the glorious tan and eyes of a surprisingly vivid green turned toward him with a smile that could only be described as come-hither (and no, he shouldn't stop to consider that such a descriptive term was much more Brian Kinney than J.T. standard) and waited for his response.

And he opened his mouth to offer it, but . . . He realized, not quite too late, that it would be in really questionable taste to spend his leisure hours fucking some gorgeous stranger while the man who was picking up the tab for this whole trip was - figuratively, at least - slaving away to pay for it. And the fact that the 'slaving' was probably occurring in a 5-star restaurant over a bottle of Veuve Clicquot and a Kobe steak didn't mitigate the facts.

With an apologetic smile, Justin retreated from the balcony and looked around for something to fill his time until Steven's return. He could, of course, set off to explore the city, but he was still a bit jet-lagged, and he knew that Steven would be disappointed if he chose to go off by himself, so he decided to hold off.

His laptop was lying on the inlaid surface of the Queen Anne desk that occupied its own little alcove in the sitting room of the suite, and it occurred to him that he'd had virtually no contact with the outside world since he'd boarded the plane in New York. Time, perhaps, to do some catching up.

It was no surprise when he booted up that a discreet chime announced that he had mail. Did anyone in the world who had an email account ever boot up without getting that message? It was one of the new constants of modern living.

But when he glanced at his Outlook Express screen, he was surprised to see that one of the 43 messages awaiting his attention was marked as "high priority" - an unusual enough circumstance to prompt him to click on the item without bothering to notice the identity of the sender.

There was a brief delay before the screen began to fill with a sharp, indelible image.

Justin stared for a moment, unwilling, unable to process what he was seeing. Then he went to his knees, suddenly unable to breathe, as his mind receded into blind panic.

There was no mistaking the subject of the photograph staring up at him, or the meaning of the six-word message scrawled in bright red all caps below it.

"Not so beautiful now, is he?"

Later, he would wonder how long he knelt there, staring at what he would have given his life to avoid seeing: Brian's face - there was no mistaking those features that he knew so intimately - but no longer Brian's face. Bloodied and torn, distorted and mangled. Mutilated.

After a long time - minutes, hours . . . months, how the fuck could he be sure . . . he blinked, and managed to search for the name of the sender.

Virtuoso-Uno.

Of course. Who else? He had heard from Ethan Gold a few times since their ill-fated affair had ended - a few long, rambling letters trying to justify the violinist's behavior or attempting to impress
Justin with the degree of his professional success. Mostly, he'd deleted them without bothering to read the rambling exhibitions of massive ego.

He wished he'd noticed who'd sent this one, and deleted it unseen.

Only, if he had, he wouldn't know . . .

Fuck! He still didn't know. But he was about to find out.

He used the hotel phone to place his call, realizing that a signal from his cell would register his identity on the phone he was trying to contact. And he didn't want that, because he was pretty sure that the call would go unanswered if the recipient knew it was from him.

It took a while for him to get through as he imagined the signal bouncing from satellite to satellite to land lines to cell tower to . . . who knew what? He paced as he waited, barely able to contain an urge to scream. But finally, thankfully, the connection was made, and he heard what he'd hoped to hear.

"Hello."

Justin drew a deep breath, prepared to speak fast. "If you fucking hang up on me, Daphne, I'm never going to speak to you again. Now you tell me, is he all right, or . . ."

He heard her sigh, and even felt a twinge of pity, realizing that he was probably putting her in an awkward position. But that couldn't be helped. "Justin, I can't . . ."

"Don't you fucking tell me that," he yelled. "I know he's hurt. I have to know he's not . . ."

"No," she said quickly, recognizing the futility of trying to keep up the pretense. "He's not . . . dead. He's . . . they put him in an induced coma, to help him heal, but he's . . ."

"What? He's what?"

"Oh, God, Justin," she said, not quite able to swallow the sobs that were rising within her. "They almost killed him. How could anybody . . ."

He closed his eyes, wondering if he could endure the truths that she had to tell him, knowing that he had no choice. "Tell me he's going to be all right," he begged.

It took a moment for her to compose herself. "The doctor says . . . he'll live."

Justin took a deep breath, knowing that there was more - so much more - but nothing that couldn't wait until he could find it out for himself.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Daphne tried not to flinch away from the fury she heard in his voice, realizing that she couldn't really blame him. If he had kept something this important from her, she wondered if she would ever have been able to forgive him.

"He didn't want you to know," she said finally, knowing it was not good enough, but not knowing what else she could say.

"Fuck!" She winced away from the volume of the expletive, and the degree of rage it contained. "What kind of fucking lame excuse is that?"

"Justin, I'm . . ."
"Don't say it," he snapped. "There's nothing you can say that will . . . Fuck! It doesn't matter. I'm on my way, and if he wakes up before I get there, you tell him he's a fucking son of a bitch for trying to . . ."

"Justin," she shouted, as the people around her turned toward her, their faces twisted with alarm as they realized what was going on, "he doesn't want you here. He . . ."

"I don't give a flying fuck," he said in a voice filled with deadly calm, "what he wants."

"Justin, no . . ." But she knew that her protest was futile. Justin was already gone.

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tbc
Chapter 14

The concierge of the Copthorne Oriental Bay Hotel was normally a serene, virtually unflappable individual, polished and self-assured and confidant of his abilities to meet and exceed the expectations of the guests who called on him for extensive personal services - even when those guests turned out to be the most outrageous, demanding, unreasonable prima donnas imaginable. In almost twenty years of providing these services at the premium hotel, the Brisbane native had never once had cause to doubt his ability to function and fulfill his purpose with admirable aplomb. Until, that is, he was forced to go head-to-head with one fuming, nearly demented, barely-in-control Justin Taylor, who might look like a kid who belonged in a remake of The Brady Bunch, but behaved more like a Panzer-division storm trooper.

The blonde youth was standing in Adam Cargill's office, having rejected the offer of a seat with nothing more than a disdainful sneer; he was almost vibrating with impatience.

"Mr. Taylor, please," said the concierge, not - quite - wringing his hands. "If I could help you, I would, but I . . ."

"Fine," snapped Justin, bending over to pick up a nondescript duffle bag and a canvas carry-all. "You can deal with explaining to Mr. Fletcher why I'm not here, when he returns to the land of the living." He paused long enough to flash the older man a snide smile. "And you should assume that he's not going to be pleased."

"But . . ."

"Don't bother! I have no time to discuss . . ."

"But Mr. Taylor, the airline was very specific. They can't accommodate your . . ."

"You let me worry about the airline," Justin retorted. "You just worry about explaining yourself to Steven."

"But if you'll just give me ten minutes, I'm sure . . ."

"I don't have ten minutes," Justin replied, with what he considered admirable restraint. Just what part of "I have to go now" did this pussy-whipped sycophant not understand?

In truth, Cargill was neither pussy-whipped nor sycophantic; he was just an employee trying to do his job, caught between corporate policy and the determination of a young man who had not the slightest interest in company rules.

The concierge, recognizing true desperation gleaming in blue-on-blue eyes, really wanted to help the kid. Only he dared not disobey the hotel's most stringent regulation: one did not, under penalty of dismissal, interrupt a closed-door, security-guarded, private meeting between VIP clients, for anything less than a terrorist attack or a raging fire. When such clients paid for absolute discretion and a guarantee of non-interruption, they weren't kidding.

Finally, Justin simply nodded and turned for the door.

"Wait!" Cargill drew a deep breath and wondered if he would forever be doomed to be putty in the hands of adorable little blonds with huge blue eyes and perfect bubble butts.
With an impatient grunt, he depressed a button on his telephone and waited for a response. "Send Jonathon in here," he snapped when the call was answered.

"What am I waiting for?" demanded Justin, in no mood for game playing.

Cargill grabbed a pad from his desk and tossed it on the counter. "Write a note," he said quickly, "and I'll see he gets it. And, for God's sake, don't tell anybody. I could lose my job for this, you know."

Justin didn't stop to consider; he simply wrote the first thing that came to mind.

"I have to go. If you already know what happened, no explanation is needed. If you don't, none would be enough. I'm sorry."

He hesitated then for a fraction of a second, before scrawling Love, Justin at the bottom.

"The limo is waiting, Mr. Taylor," said Cargill, "but . . ."

Justin didn't wait to hear the rest. He was gone before the concierge could voice his certainty that there really was no need to rush because the airline had been very specific. Cargill sighed; he had no idea what might have happened to send the young blond on a mad dash to the airport, where he was almost certainly destined to spend many frustrating hours fidgeting and worrying and pacing, on stand-by while waiting for a seat to become available on a flight - any flight - headed east. The kid would have a very long day.

Cargill made sure that Jonathon - the waiter currently attending to the needs of the very special guests in the very private dining room - knew which of them to approach with the note; then he returned to his regular tasks, relieved to be able to do so, believing the crisis averted. But in assuming that the worst was over, he was destined to be proven wrong. When Steven Fletcher stormed into his office less than five minutes later, he knew immediately that he had been ridiculously optimistic.

"Get me a car - right now!"

"Of course, Mr. Fletcher," Cargill replied smoothly, in the mistaken belief that a serene response might serve to pour oil on troubled waters. "However, let me assure you that there's no cause for alarm, or need to hurry, for that matter. The young man is unlikely to be able to get a flight out any time soon. He's . . ."

Steven glanced at the man's ID tag with cold eyes. "It's obvious to me, Mr. Cargill," he almost snarled, "that you don't know the first thing about Justin Taylor. He may look like a sweet, unassuming little cherub, but, when the need arises, he can move mountains. Or airlines, as the case may be. So, if you have no desire to find yourself standing in the unemployment line - get me a car . . . now!"

At that moment, it would have astonished Adam Cargill, as he struggled to control an almost irresistible urge to tell this obstreperous, overbearing, pompous ass what he could do with his threats and his demands, to discover that Fletcher was ordinarily the most laid-back, mild-mannered, and courteous of men, completely opposed to any notion of using the power of his name, his money, or his position to demand special favors. But this was different; this was Justin, for God's sake.

And it struck him in mid-stride as he headed for the door at a near run that there was still something he could do - something Justin would not expect. Something that might very well put the young man he loved beyond all reason directly in harm's way. But something that would - at the same time - give his young lover the thing he wanted most in the world.
Steven paused, more torn than he had ever been in his life.

Then he sighed and walked back toward the private dining room where he had just left one of his company's most important clients to watch, open-mouthed and outraged, as his broker deserted him without explanation.

This was going to be a tricky moment, and he knew he was going to have a hell of a lot to answer for. His father, in fact, might never forgive him. But he would do as he must. For Justin - even though he was almost certain that what he was doing would be the last thing he ever had an opportunity to do for the young artist.

He should resist; he should pretend ignorance. He paused in the doorway to touch fingertips to his temple, hoping to ease the headache that was rising there. He should look after his own best interests, which did not, not, not, include providing a means for Justin to realize the desire that was driving him now. Steven knew that he should take his seat at the table, offer up some excuse about a momentary lapse, and resume his meeting. He knew he should . . .

But . . .

Andrew Ellis was sitting exactly where Steven had left him, champagne glass still in hand, eyebrows still raised, mouth still open, undoubtedly wondering what the hell had just happened to send the representative of his brokerage house racing from the room as if pursued by an army of screaming demons. He didn't appear outraged - not yet - but he was obviously working on it. Steven took a deep breath, mentally girded his loins . . . and jumped in with both feet.

"Andrew," he said abruptly, allowing himself no more opportunity to dither, "you deserve an explanation and an apology, and I will gladly offer both, ad nauseum. On my knees, if necessary. But first, I must ask you, beg you, to trust me. Because I need a really, really big favor . . . and the explanation will have to wait until later."

Ellis lifted his head, arching one eyebrow even higher, and stared up into the face of the handsome young man who was so like his venerable father in so many ways and so unlike him in others. Steven Fletcher was the younger generation, the new wave who would one day soon remake the shape of Wall Street and global markets, always providing he learned to keep his eye fixed firmly on target, and avoid unnecessary distractions.

Still . . . Andrew was quiet for a moment, swept back suddenly into memories he had not examined for a very long time. Memories of a young life, a different life, lived before he had taken up residence in the heartland of respectability, leaving behind a youth that was a far cry from the world he occupied now. He was quiet for a moment, taking time to light a cigarette and enjoy a sip of champagne before looking up and regarding young Fletcher with a faint smile.

"What kind of favor?"

Funny - he couldn't remember anything about where he'd been before or how he'd gotten here, although there was not the slightest doubt about where he was. Babylon was like no place else in the world; it had its own smell, its own ambiance, its own rhythm, its own pattern of sound and silence. Still, he should know where he'd been before - shouldn't he? Unless he was drunker than he thought. Or maybe that pig, Anita, had finally done it, had finally cooked up a batch of shit in her bathtub to pass off as "E" when it was really some kind of toxic soup that would send him on a horrible trip to rival the very worst LSD experience any child of the 60's had ever endured.
Still, even then, he should recall something . . . shouldn't he?

But nothing came to mind, beyond a few faded images - a glimpse of dancing in a ballroom, a few random drawings of a comic book hero, an infant looking up at him with beautiful solemn hazel eyes - and a few words that seemed to have dribbled into his consciousness - words that didn't make much sense.

Was there a voice - male, he thought - that denied any desire to get a look at the cock of the Stud of Liberty Avenue?

Was the fucker crazy?

And had someone mentioned that he would be Brian Kinney again? Well, of course, he would. Who the fuck else would he be? He was . . .

He lifted his eyes, somehow already knowing what he would see, although he knew that didn't make any sense. How could he know?

He managed not to flinch, not to frown. He managed not to allow anything to show on his face; it wasn't such an impressive trick, since he'd been doing the same thing his whole life - although not quite like this. It was not quite as simple this time, while he was intensely conscious of a blade of frozen steel slicing through his heart. He wanted to be angry, wanted to feel betrayal as he watched Justin break the rule that he himself had imposed. Words swirled in his memory, underscored by the thumpa-thumpa rhythm around and through them. "You don't kiss anybody on the mouth . . . but me."

The rule, apparently, no longer applied.

He tried to be angry - tried to hate the two young men who turned to look at him as they made their exit. But he couldn't find it within him. He couldn't hate Justin, couldn't resent him for needing what Brian could not give him, could never give him.

He had known it was coming; known that Justin would walk away, pursuing a dream of romance and a fairy-tale ending; a dream that Brian could never allow himself to provide.

He wanted to scream, to cry, to hurl himself forward and let rage take him as he refused to relinquish the only thing that mattered, the thing his heart insisted he must fight for, must win back.

But he couldn't, because he understood, on some sub-primal level, that Justin would be happier without him, happier with someone who could give him the things that Brian couldn't and wouldn't, and that was all that really mattered.

So he did none of the things his heart told him to do. He just stood there and watched, carefully preserving the Brian Kinney image he'd spent his life building.

Untouched and untouchable.

Only . . . deep down, in a private place that no one would ever see, some small part of him curled in upon itself, turning away from a pain too deep to endure, and died. Leaving behind a small, intense core of icy cold that would never thaw, never be warm again.

Then, it was on to the next trick, the next drink, the next hit . . . and he had an incredible urge to laugh as a bizarre thought erupted in his mind - a tag line from an old movie: "In space, no one can hear you scream."
The space around him expanded abruptly, reaching out toward infinity, and just like that, Babylon was gone; Justin and the fiddler were gone; the only thing that remained . . . was the cold. Somehow he knew it would never leave him.

He drifted then, his mind in free fall, only occasionally touching down to brush against reality: footsteps coming and going, gentle hands that touched him with a cool but not uncaring professional detachment, strange electronic sounds, not unlike a world constructed inside a video game, soft voices uttering words unconnected with the images in his mind. Once in a while, a voice he thought he should know . . .

"You scared us to death, you little shit . . ."

". . . hang on, Brian. Gus needs you . . ."

". . . Brian Kinney, for fuck's sake . . ."

But none of them grabbed him or inspired him to try to formulate an answer . . . or touched the coldness inside him.

Until . . .

Babylon again. Was he only alive there now? Was everything else just . . . gone? His back braced against the wall and some anonymous trick with a beautiful face worshipping his cock with tongue and suckling as he listened to the beloved voice on the phone.

"You're not mad, are you?"

The automatic response fell from his lips without thought. "Why would I be mad?" Why indeed? Of course, he wasn't mad. How could he be mad when he knew that Justin was doing exactly what he should be doing? When his young lover was living a life every young person dreamed of - making a movie, for God's sake, and fucking movie stars - flying in his element, while the rest of the world remained dirt-bound.

He hastened to reassure Justin, to let him know that he should not concern himself with how Brian might feel about his decision to extend his visit to the fantastic world that was Hollywood. And he resisted the urge to reply in kind when his young lover ended their conversation with a tender confession. "I miss you."

Brian disconnected quickly and stroked his fingers through the hair of the young man kneeling before him, but he was careful not to look down, not to see the dark hair and the buffed-up body that was definitely not Justin.

Instead, he leaned back and closed his eyes and saw a truth that he'd been doing his best to ignore. Justin had come back to him once, after the debacle of the fiddling twink; he had been lucky that time. He wouldn't be that lucky again. What, after all, could he offer to compete with the incredible adventure the young man was living now?

Justin was gone, and it was time to face it. He would not be coming back. It was time to let him go.

He felt a quick compression in his chest, as if his heart had somehow skipped a beat, and then he felt the first rush of orgasm take him and pull him out of his thoughts, out of his awareness, and he had never been more grateful for the distraction.

And yet, as molten heat exploded in his groin and through his body, he was suddenly aware of something that rejected the distraction and the heat: deep inside, in a place where he almost never
allowed himself to go, a core of ice flexed . . . and grew colder.


". . . to wake up. Please . . ." Slightly whiny, even needy.

"They all . . . for you, you know. We can't . . ."

"Temperature slightly elevated . . . swelling in . . ."

". . . give'em all the big 'fuck you'. I know you can . . ."

But none of that really concerned him or grabbed his attention.

He was too busy drifting, until . . .

Babylon. Again. But different this time. Darker somehow, twisted into a moment he knew he didn't want to endure. But it was futile to resist, even when he knew . . . Ted and Emmett, both wearing an expression he was all too familiar with - the one that announced that they were smug in the certainty that they'd found a way to get through his defenses, to hurt the person who dwelt within the fortress, and he wondered how they could really believe that he'd never figured it out, that he didn't know how gleeful they were when they managed to inflict pain on a person who never allowed himself to show it.

But this time . . . this time he wasn't sure he could hold it together, for this time, it was not just a betrayal from one of the people closest to his heart. This time, it was a conspiracy - a joint effort to mock everything he was. Justin . . . and Michael, joined together in their disdain for his life and his choices. He believed in liberty, in never holding on to someone who wanted to be free, in giving his heart without demanding a certificate of title in return.

Justin had rejected all that. Rejected him and embraced the philosophy that Michael and Ben had adopted. And there was really nothing he could do but accept it. But perhaps, this time, he would not completely resist the urge to acknowledge the betrayal, to speak out.

So he would vent the anger, the sense of betrayal. But . . . only once. And then the mask would fall firmly back in place, and he would concentrate on constructing higher walls to guard his heart. It was a harsh lesson, but he would learn it.

What other choice did he have? His whole life had been spent learning to endure things that would have destroyed those without his strength and his determination. He would endure, and he would make sure no one would ever understand the degree of the hurt it cost him.

He was Brian Kinney, for fuck's sake! They all needed to believe that there was nothing he could not withstand, nothing that could pierce the fortress built around his heart.

He would make sure they could go on believing that.

And if the dark core within him - the one filled with relentless ice - grew darker and colder, it was not necessary for anyone else to know it. The cold, by this time, was an old, familiar companion. Unlike other companions, it would never leave him.

He would endure. He would always . . .

Drifting again, everything dissolving into a strange, surrealistic landscape of pain and blackness, whispers and detached voices, and . . .
Quick images of dancers and writhing bodies, of familiar faces in unfamiliar settings, of fire and blood and death, and then . . .


He stretched like a cat, reveling in the feel of creamy bare skin beneath him, in the intimacy of two bodies irrevocably joined, connected physically, but more than that. Connected heart-to-heat, soul-to-soul.

Justin, finally and totally, a part of him. Their kisses were slow and tender and spoke of having all the time in the world to explore each other, to rediscover each other, to . . .

Shrill, electronic beeping, loud and insistent . . .

". . . temperature spiking . . ."

". . . blood pressure dropping. Heartbeat erratic . . ."

"Justin," he whispered, gazing down into eyes that were now growing wide, reflecting something more than firelight, reflecting the rising voltage of pure panic. "Justin . . . I'm . . . sorry I . . ."

"Sorry's bullshit . . . Brian, don't you lea . . ."

It was the cold, of course. The cold, just as he had always known it would be. In spite of the blessed warmth of the fire against his skin, and the precious warmth of the body pressed close against him, it was the cold that would finally triumph and take away all that he'd managed to claim. It was the cold . . .

". . . call a code, STAT. And get Keller . . ."

It was early morning now, and only Michael and Ben were present in the waiting room, having dropped in before work, in the hope of getting a chance to have just a moment with the patient, even though, forty-eight hours after the fact, he had still not wakened from his coma, although Dr. Keller assured them that it would not be much longer. Still, it was comforting, somehow, to stand beside his bed and watch the rise and fall of his breath and note the occasional tremor that they chose to interpret as Brian's efforts to return to the land of the living.

Thus they were the only ones there to hear the clipped, cold announcement on the PA system: "Code blue, ICU. Code blue, ICU. Dr. Keller, 6117 STAT."

Ben was quick with easy reassurance. "It could be anybody, Michael. There are lots of other patients in ICU, and Dr. Keller is probably the primary physician on call. Don't jump to conclusions."

But Michael remained unconsolled. Ben meant well, meant to offer comfort and ease his husband's mind. Only . . . he didn't know Brian, the world's foremost drama queen.

Michael just nodded and continued to gnaw on the cuticle that he'd already reduced to bloody shreds - knowing, and wishing he didn't.

Airports were a lot like hospitals, he thought. Pretty much the same the world over, even if one
qualified for admission to the VIP lounge. Which he did, courtesy of Steven, of course, and the first class ticket he was trying to exchange for an earlier flight.

Today. That was his only stipulation. It had to be today.

The real problem was that the stupid airline had no flights headed for the US mainland until the regular daily departure at 9:45 PM. Six and a half hours away. Six and a half useless hours, separating him from where he needed to be.

Justin sat in a booth in the discreet darkness of the bar, nursing his Beam and muttering under his breath. Of course, there was also the slight difficulty posed by the fact that the flight was fully booked, with no available seats - first class or otherwise - but he would deal with that problem when the time came. There would be someone willing to negotiate; there had to be. In the immortal words of someone who was currently much too far away, "Money talks". He would just have to make sure that it said the right thing to allow him to prevail. Meanwhile, here he sat, nursing his drink, firmly ensconced on the stand-by list, and staring at his watch, knowing that he needed to eat, that he would probably be sick if he didn't, but unable to bear the thought of food.

The bartender was giving him another come-hither look, and he reflected that it was really too bad that he was gay, as she was quite pretty and obviously interested. But he confined his response to a pale smile, before going wide-eyed as he noticed the commercial that was playing on the TV behind the bar. Endovir - The AIDS drug - the ads which had been the first to be produced by Kinnetic Corp, the product of the advertising genius of Brian Kinney.

It was truly a small world, he thought, allowing himself a tiny sigh. Only not quite small enough - today.

Justin closed his eyes and knew that it was time. He could put it off no longer. He wasn't even sure why he had done so up until now, for the knowing or not knowing would change nothing.

But it was time to know.

He retrieved his laptop from his carry-all, and attached it to the Internet outlet beside the table, then waited while it booted up. Allowing himself no chance to procrastinate, he clicked on Google and typed in Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, waited for a moment, and managed - barely - not to flinch as the front page of the largest of Pittsburgh's dailies appeared on the screen.

The article was just a small piece at the bottom of the front page, bearing the headline "Kinney Attack Under Investigation."

Justin took a deep breath, trying to ignore the hard thump of his heartbeat and the huge lump in his throat, and began to read.

"According to a statement issued by the Pittsburgh Police Department, the attack on local businessman, Brian Kinney, is being treated as a hate crime and federal involvement in the investigation is pending. Mr. Kinney, owner and president of the advertising firm, Kinnetic Corp, and of the gay nightclub, Babylon, which was the target of a terrorist-style attack last year, remains hospitalized at press time, still listed in critical condition.

Detective Carl Horvath confirms that a number of leads are being pursued and interviews with potential witnesses continue. The attack occurred last Friday evening, as Mr. Kinney was abducted by his attackers after leaving his nightclub prior to closing. No official statement concerning the severity of the attack has been issued, but unconfirmed reports suggest that he was badly beaten, and his injuries were extensive; however, an unidentified source reports that the doctor overseeing his
care indicates that he is 'cautiously optimistic' concerning his patient's chances for recovery.

The individual who was killed during the police rescue has been identified as George McCormick, a resident of Chicago and ex-convict allegedly affiliated with the Aryan Brotherhood prison gang.

No further details have been released at this time. The police department is urging anyone who might have information concerning this attack to call the TIPS hotline as soon as possible."

Justin leaned his head against the back of the booth and closed his eyes. There was a picture, of course. He had known there would be. Who, after all, would resist the urge to publish a photograph of that face? Brian, not quite smiling, not quite smirking, but something in between. Just quintessentially Brian - and quintessentially beautiful.

There would be more - much more - he was certain, if he called up an earlier edition: the front page article from the day after the event. He just wasn't sure he was ready to know it all.

Still, there was no point in delay. He lifted his hand to initiate the search, but had not completed the gesture when he became conscious of a presence standing over him.

"Hello, Steven."

The young broker did not offer a response until he'd made himself comfortable on the opposite seat, bracing his hands against the table and signaling for the bartender to bring him a drink along with a refill for his companion.

"Justin." Just that. Just his name and no more.

And Justin took a moment to draw a deep breath. "You knew," he said, without a trace of uncertainty, his voice admirably steady despite the anger erupting like a flame in his chest.

Steven sighed. "Yes."

"Why . . ." Another deep breath, obviously struggling to remain calm. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Steven reached forward and touched his finger to the photograph still centered on the computer screen. "Because he didn't want you to know. If I understand it correctly, he fought like a son of a bitch to remain conscious long enough to make sure the powers that be knew to keep you away."

"Because?"

Steven wanted to look away, wanted not to see the fury rising in those incredibly blue eyes, but couldn't. "No one knows for sure, but it's only logical to assume that they . . . threatened you. That they told him they'd be going after you next."

Justin's eyes were drawn once more to the photograph on the screen. "And that was enough - for you and for him - to decide to keep me in the dark?"

Steven sighed. "It should be pretty obvious that both of us only had one thing in mind. To keep you safe."

"Yeah, well . . ."

"Justin, think about it. Please. If he manages to come through this, how do you think he'd feel to discover that he survived, and you didn't?"

Justin's eyes narrowed, becoming cold, dark slits. "Now you think about it, Steven. Suppose I
survive it, and he doesn't. Do you really think my life would mean anything to me? That I could just . . . go on, without him?"

"You've been without him," Steven pointed out, "for the past year."

Justin's smile was tentative, sweet, wistful. "I've never been without him, although I admit that, for a while, I thought so too. But the truth is he's always with me."

Steven felt the pain bolt through him. "Then . . ."

"I'm sorry, Steven," Justin interrupted quickly. "I owe you a huge apology. I used you to try to cover up the hurt I felt when I thought I'd lost him, and that was completely unfair to you. Because I've only just now realized something. I can't lose him; he's a part of me, whether he admits it or not. Whether we're together or not. He'll always be a part of me, and me of him. That's not going to change."

"But he sent you away." It was a desperate protest, a last ditch effort to point out the obvious.

"Yeah, he did," answered Justin. "And I, like a stupid twat, let him do it, because I let myself buy into the bullshit." Then he looked deep into Steven's eyes, obviously sorry for the pain he knew he was causing, but unable to maintain his silence. "Even though I knew better. I even said it once, when Lindsey was spouting all her bullshit about why I needed to go to New York, why I could only grow into the artist I was supposed to be if I answered the call. I told her then that New York wasn't my opportunity of a lifetime, that Brian was. And then - like an idiot - I let myself forget it. Because he was determined not to stand in my way. To let me go find myself. But . . ."

"But?" Steven suddenly sounded much older than his 36 years.

"But I will never be the man I want to be without Brian. I don't know how we'll do it, how we'll pull it off, but, whatever we do, whatever we're meant to be, it will only work . . . together."

Steven could not find a single word with which to form an answer,

"I'm truly sorry."

And what was there, after all, to say to that? The young broker found no response sufficient. Still, there was something he needed to say, even though it would serve no useful purpose.

"I know," he said finally. "So am I."

"It wasn't meant . . ."

But Steven waved him off. "Please don't offer me platitudes, Justin. It won't help. And it's not like I hadn't already figured it out, you know. I think I always knew. But I . . . I just couldn't turn around and walk away. Even though I knew it was the best thing I could do. But I . . . I really loved you, you know. I wanted to give you the world."

Justin's pale skin made the flush that touched his face seem almost garish. "I'm . . ."

"I know," Steven said quickly. "You're sorry. And so am I." He smiled then, with a sweeping gesture that seemed to encompass the island around them. "This was meant to be the trip of a lifetime, a trip that would make you . . ."

"Forget everything?"
"Not everything. Just him."

Justin could only sigh, and offer his ultimate truth. "If I never saw him again, never heard his name, never touched him - and spent the rest of my life traveling to every beautiful place in the world - he would still be here." He touched his heart with his thumb. "Right here.

"I'm just sorry that it took something like this . . ." he nodded toward the article on the computer, "to make me realize it."

"I know."

Steven stood up then, and spent a moment staring down into the beautiful eyes that were looking back at him. Then he leaned forward and dropped a quick kiss on Justin's forehead.

"Good-bye, Baby," he whispered. Then he turned and walked away, and Justin watched him go, feeling a sense of shame when he couldn't muster up a single ounce of regret for what might have been.

So he had not been lying when he'd said that it had always been Brian, even when he'd tried to believe that it wasn't.

He glanced once more at his watch. Six hours and twenty minutes.

He pulled his laptop toward him, looking for a way to pass the time. Looking for the whole story. Only . . .

"Mr. Taylor?"

He looked up to find a young man in a dark suit standing over him.

"Yes?"

"Your flight is ready, Sir."

Justin blinked. "My . . . flight?"

"Yes, sir."

Justin cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, but I thought there were no flights out . . . until tonight."

"That's correct. There are no commercial flights out, until this evening."

"So what are you talking about?"

The young man smiled. "I'm sorry. I thought you knew."

"Knew what?"

"Mr. Ellis' Gulfstream is waiting on Runway 3, fueled and ready to go. We'll have you in Pittsburgh in no time."

"Mr. Ellis?" Justin echoed. "But I don't even know Mr. Ellis."

"No, but you do know Mr. Fletcher. He's the one who called in a . . . favor."

Justin felt a pang of guilt. He had not even offered his thanks for everything Steven had done for him
- was still doing for him, and, knowing the corporate world as he did, he doubted that such a 'favor' would come without strings attached.

He really should take the time to express his gratitude, for both the favor and the generous spirit that was the driving force behind it. He really should, only . . .

The jet was waiting. Pittsburgh was waiting. Brian . . . was waiting.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Though it was very early, Lindsey had been up and about for several hours. She was finding it difficult to sleep these days. Sleeping in a hotel; sleeping in Pittsburgh again. Sleeping while Brian was locked away in a sleep from which he might not awaken. She missed her children; she missed her home; and she missed the man who had been such an integral part of her life, for such a long time. What she didn't miss, in the least, was the shitty attitude her partner had been displaying since they had arrived here. She had tried to be understanding, to accept how difficult it must be for Melanie to be here, in this place, under these circumstances - to know, as there was no denying, that her partner had always been at least a bit in love with Brian Kinney.

But that did not excuse the pissy attitude, while Brian lay suspended between life and death.

Lindsey had, after all, left him here when she and Melanie relocated to Toronto. Left him here, conveniently forgetting how distraught she'd been on the occasion of his thirtieth birthday, when he'd been the one threatening to move away, to build a new life in New York.

Why was it, she wondered suddenly, that all of Brian's friends took it upon themselves to determine what was or was not acceptable in his life, but felt free to pursue their own interests, no matter what their actions might do to him?

Especially when he did so much for them.

Like now.

She had not spent a lot of time at Kinnetic since Brian had opened it, and she felt a little like an interloper when she followed Cynthia into the inner sanctum - his office. It was just as she remembered it, of course - elegant, streamlined, beautiful. Like its owner.

"Cynthia, I really appreciate your . . ."

"No need to thank me," said Brian's assistant. "I didn't do anything. It was all Brian. Did you really think he'd made no provisions for Gus?"

Lindsey sighed. "I know he's always sent a check every month. But that was before he . . ."

"It's a trust fund, Lindsey. He set it up years ago, and the income is still there. It won't change just because he's not available to write the checks."

"I have to admit," said Gus' mother, "that it would have been really tough . . ." She laughed gently. "Okay, it would have been impossible without the money he sent."

Cynthia regarded her solemnly. "You know, Linz, I have to tell you that I was always a little surprised that Melanie was willing to accept his help, given how she feels about him."

"We-ell!" Lindsey drawled. "As to that . . ."
"She doesn't know." Cynthia's tone made it obvious that it was not a question.

"No. She doesn't."

Cynthia gave a tiny, tight little smile. "You guys have an interesting arrangement," she said. She was careful to guard against any nuance of disapproval that might color her tone, no matter what her private opinion might be. This was the mother of Brian's son, and if he had no problem with the way she lived her life, then his administrative assistant would certainly abide by his decision.

Nevertheless, Lindsey felt a chill anyway. She did not like feeling as if she had to lie to her partner, especially when she was sure that Cynthia was comparing her deceitful behavior to Brian's brutal, unrelenting honesty - and finding her wanting.

"Do you need it now?" Cynthia continued.

Lindsey nodded. "Especially with all the added expenses of the hotel, the trip to New York, and the car rental. It all adds up, you know. I even wondered if it might be possible for us to use Brian's . . ."

"Not a good idea." There was no uncertainty in Cynthia's voice. "One thing that he would not want violated is his privacy. The loft is off-limits. However, if you like, I'm sure he'd want me to arrange for Kinnetic to pick up the tab for the hotel. And I'll make a stop at the ATM on my way to the hospital. Will that do?"

"That'll be fine."

"A thousand," said Cynthia. "Right?"

Lindsey nodded and took a moment to study the décor of the office. Minimalist, with lots of space, and clean, uncluttered lines - exactly the kind of spare elegance Brian had always preferred in his surroundings, the kind of ambiance that served as a perfect setting to emphasize the beauty of the individual at its center.

"One more thing," said Cynthia suddenly, and Lindsey spun to study her face, hearing something strange and slightly disconcerting in her tone of voice.

"I don't know if you do much Internet surfing," said Brian's executive assistant, "but for the time being, you should avoid it like the plague."

Lindsey opened her mouth to deny any interest in web browsing, but then it occurred to her that this was not a non sequitur; this was an issue with a very specific point.

"Why?" she asked abruptly. "What is it that I shouldn't see?"

Cynthia stood up and walked to the window to look out into watery morning light, and took her time choosing her words - something that was so out of character for her that Lindsey felt the first flush of true alarm. Though she could be discreet to a fault when acting on Brian's behalf, Cynthia was not exactly renowned for her tact. "There was apparently someone at the hospital the night they brought him in. Someone with . . . a camera. There are photos posted all over the Web, especially on certain homophobic sites."

Suddenly, Lindsey's knees buckled, and she dropped into a chair that was just close enough to catch her. "Oh, my God!" she whispered. "It's not enough that they almost destroyed him. Now they have to flash pictures of what they did to him all over the fucking world. What did he ever do to make these people hate him so?"
Cynthia's face was like a mask, absolutely without expression, cold and distant but in striking contrast to the strange current of dark emotion threading through her voice. "He's queer, Lindsey. That's all it is, no matter how much they might claim that it's because he's too bold, or too flashy, or too defiant. It's really not any of those things. He fucks guys. That's the first reason, the primary reason. And . . . he's not afraid of them. Reason number two. Put them together, and he becomes their version of the Anti-Christ."

Lindsey nodded, slightly surprised by the veiled layer of passion she heard beneath the words. Cynthia was not much given to emotional extremes; in point of fact, Brian had often referred to her as his "voice of reason".

"You know," she said slowly, "you should feel very proud of what you've accomplished here. With Brian, I mean."

Cynthia turned away from her contemplation of the uninspiring vista beyond the window and regarded the other woman with cool detachment. "Meaning?"

"Meaning that Brian isn't much given to trusting straight people. Yet, he trusts you implicitly. Doesn't he?"

Cynthia smiled. "Maybe that's because he and I don't see each other as examples of our sexual orientation. He's Brian. I'm Cynthia. And we're a damned good team, so why would it make any difference who we fuck?"

Lindsey dredged up an indulgent smile. "That sounds like an example of a very mature attitude - something I wouldn't ordinarily associate with Brian Kinney."

Cynthia abruptly moved to Brian's desk, ostensibly to check something on his calendar, but Lindsey thought it rather strange that the other woman was careful to avoid direct eye contact. "Maybe," she said slowly, "you don't know him quite as well as you think you do."

Lindsey opened her mouth to laugh off the suggestion, slightly outraged at the notion that anybody could possibly know Brian Kinney better than she did, but she was forestalled by the sudden buzz of the office phone.

It was still very early in the day - too early for business as usual.

Nevertheless, Cynthia picked up the receiver and answered with cool professionalism.

Then she said nothing, merely listening, her face very still and pale. When she sank into Brian's executive chair, Lindsey knew that something must be very wrong, knew - somehow - that Brian's desk was a place that was almost a shrine to his place in this company. Nobody would just sit in Brian's chair, not unless there was suddenly no alternative.

"When?" Cynthia's voice did not break, but it was very soft.

"Of course," she said a few seconds later. "I'm on my way. And Lindsey Peterson is here with me."

She hung up then, and hesitated for a moment, the only indication of her concern being the way she clamped her teeth on her bottom lip.

"What is it?" asked Lindsey, a surge of cold fear flooding through her body.

"We have to go. Now."
"Why?"

"Brian. They're rushing him back to surgery. Something's . . . wrong."

Cold fear morphed immediately into blind panic. "What? What's wrong?"

Cynthia took a deep breath. "They don't know. Keller's doing an exploratory procedure, to try to find
the problem."

Lindsey confined her response to a nod, grabbing her purse and heading for the door, the terror
inside her now making it hard to breathe, to think, to remember how to put one foot in front of the
other.

The two women left the office together, sharing the same compulsion. They had to get to Brian, to be
there, to be close by, just in case he should . . .

But the thought stopped there, just short of stepping off into a void that neither of them was willing to
explore.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Justin sprawled on the plush sofa and allowed himself to savor the comforts usually afforded only to
the very rich. This, he thought as his eyes swept the cabin of the Gulfstream 550, noting the soft
lighting, the designer signature of the décor, the state-of-the-art communications system, the whole
luxury package, was an entirely new definition of living the good life.

Then he frowned. Good life or not, there was no way to defy the laws of physics. He was still many
hours away from Pittsburgh, and a series of calls placed to various individuals there had failed to
yield the results he'd sought. The hospital had provided no answers to his questions, just as he'd
expected. He was not, officially, a next of kin, or even family, and the Patient Relations staffer who
had taken his call had been polite but firm. Mr. Kinney's condition was still listed as critical. For
anything more, the caller would have to contact a family member.

Only there weren't any; at least, none that Brian would tolerate being anywhere near him during such
a difficult time. And since the Brian Kinney manual on how to live life as he saw fit did not rely on
random chance to insure that things turned out the way he wanted, Justin was certain that the
necessary arrangements had been made to keep Joan and Claire Kinney at a safe distance.

There was Michael, of course, and Ben. And Debbie. All of whom Brian loved deeply. But . . .
Justin tried to imagine either of the Novotnys - mother or son - having to handle the critical decisions
concerning Brian's care in a life-or-death situation - and couldn't begin to visualize it. No. That
would inflict a burden on them, a sense of responsibility. Brian would never allow that. Ben, of
course, could probably handle the weight of choices that might have to be made, but as Michael's
husband, he would not be acting alone.

Lindsey? She was, after all, the mother of Brian's only child, and they shared a long, complex
history. But it was a well known though seldom verbalized fact among the extended family that
Lindsey loved Brian. Sometimes excessively, or even compulsively. Added to that was the whole
hate/more hate dynamic between Brian and Melanie, and it seemed unlikely that Brian would
compound the problems that he inevitably caused between the two Lesbians by giving Lindsey the
authority to decide his fate.

So, no. Not Michael, not Debbie, not Lindsey. But there had to be someone, someone who . . .

Justin smiled, and the flight attendant who was approaching with his dinner was momentarily
dazzled. Too bad, she thought, that this one so far beyond the pale - gay as blazes and completely unapologetic about it.

Justin stood and moved to take a seat at the bar, and took a deep breath, enjoying the delicate fragrance of lobster newburg as the attendant filled his wine glass with a fine sauvignon blanc. He was not really hungry - had not had any interest in food or drink since he'd opened that horrible email. But he knew he would need his strength if he were to have any hope of out-maneuvering the ranks of Kinney's Army. For he did not fool himself. Brian was nothing if not resourceful, even if he was lying comatose in the ICU. He would have made his preparations carefully, a long time before such arrangements were needed.

But he knew now where to begin - the only logical place.

So he ate. Sparingly, but sufficient to the needs of the moment.

Then he settled back into his seat on the suede-covered sofa, savoring his second glass of wine and pulling a small, leather-bound book from his carry-all.

He wondered, as he stroked the soft cover, if he was the only person who'd ever gotten close enough to Brian Kinney to discover one of his closely guarded secrets - something that Brian would undoubtedly classify as a weakness. Yet, after a bit of fumbling and completely uncharacteristic embarrassment, the Stud of Liberty Avenue had admitted a surprising truth. He had a fondness for certain works of a few of the poets ordinarily classified as - Romantic.

Byron, in particular. Justin thought it entirely appropriate.

The book fell open at a bookmarked page, as Justin had known it would. He had no idea why this particular verse had always seemed to speak to him, as it had somehow spoken to Brian before him.

The book was old and worn. It had resided in a drawer in Brian's desk for many years before he had one day placed it in Justin's hand, saying nothing with his mouth, but saying everything with his eyes. Since that day, through good and bad, thick and thin, being with Brian or without Brian - loving him or hating him - it had never been beyond Justin's reach.

He looked down at the page, and the verse was waiting for him. He didn't really have to read it. It sang in his mind, as it always did.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{In secret we met--} \\
\text{In silence I grieve,} \\
\text{That thy heart could forget,} \\
\text{Thy spirit deceive.} \\
\text{If I should meet thee} \\
\text{After long years,} \\
\text{How should I greet thee?} \\
\text{With silence and tears.*}
\end{align*}
\]

He felt the sting in his eyes, and could almost hear that sardonic voice whispering in his ear, that it really wasn't worth crying over. Only it was. He was. And it was time to recognize the truth, and to move heaven and earth to make sure that Brian, finally, recognized it too. There had been entirely too much silence, too many tears.

It was time to shout it from the rooftops.

Brian Kinney belonged to him; they belonged together - and fuck anybody who tried to stand
between them.

* When We Two Parted -- George Gordon, Lord Byron

tbc
OR # 7 had certainly seen its share of crises over the years: trauma victims clinging to life by a thread, some saved and some not; patients rushed in from the intensive care unit or the emergency room or the OB suite, crashing, convulsing, bleeding out, in cardiac arrest, flat-lining, or exhibiting any of a dozen other varieties of extreme distress, all requiring the implementation of desperate measures in striving to reach a single goal - the prolongation of life. Sometimes the prolongation was brief: a matter of minutes or hours or days. Some times, there was no prolongation, and even the most heroic measures proved futile.

And sometimes, remarkably, the measures taken proved so effective and the intervention so successful that the result could no longer be termed just a prolongation; sometimes it became a matter of a life saved, of death averted and sent packing.

In effect, the surgical suite was regularly and repeatedly transformed into a battleground, a site of bloody confrontation between the powers of death and destruction and the skills of the individuals who fought to push back the night and rekindle the radiance of life renewed. Those who fought that battle invariably faced the conflict with a cool pragmatism, refusing to be awed by the power of the opposition. It was the only way to achieve the necessary cool professionalism required to function with any hope of success.

When victory was won and the dark invaders finally repelled, the room - only recently christened Keller's Lair by the hospital incrowd - was sometimes filled, temporarily, with a strange sense of dissociation, a weary lethargy that was the complete antithesis of the urgency and near-panic prevalent only a short time before. It was as if the successful effort had drained the entire group of surgical personnel - the assault force of medical intervention - of every ounce of energy and resilience, leaving them boneless and empty although very happy.

First among the exhausted soldiers in that army of very special forces would be the surgical prodigy himself. Matthew Keller frequently emerged from the frontlines of the battle barely able to stand, limp and pale and listless and wanting nothing more than his bed and the bliss of consciousness released.

But not today.

When the surgical procedure was finished and the crisis averted; when the shrill alarms of vital signs monitors went silent, no longer signaling catastrophe; when the patient resumed breathing on his own, without requiring a ventilator to inflate his lungs, Matt Keller was still in his element, still strong and vital and eager and flush with victory. Not because he hadn't poured heart and soul into his work - as he always did; not because he'd held back any particle of strength or power that might be the last little deciding factor in whether or not a patient lived or died. He'd done all that - and more.

But this was no ordinary patient, and his efforts, no matter how exhaustive, were too intimately tied to the fate of the man whose life was literally in his hands to allow him to pull back and release his hold on the ties that bound them together. He would pour his life force - every ounce of it if necessary - into this body. But he would also get something back, a constant reinforcement of his own strength. The contact between them was more of a loop than a one-way passage, and the benefit and energy that circulated there would either benefit both - or neither.

The surgical staff, well accustomed to the eccentricities and habits of their young prodigy, watched...
with growing disbelief as Keller prepared to close and complete the procedure. Matthew Keller never closed. That was, in his own parlance, what assistants were for.

When RN Gloria Beck lifted her eyes and looked as if she might open her mouth to question him, he simply stared at her. Daring her to make the comment or the suggestion.

Luckily, she knew him well enough to take the hint.

"Nice call, Doctor," she said finally, understanding, as only a well-trained trauma nurse would, that the patient had been very fortunate that it was Keller who had been the man in charge. Another doctor - possibly even a very good one - might have missed the diagnosis, and the only explanation for young Mr. Kinney's failure to survive the surgery would have come from the autopsy performed to determine cause of death.

Luckily, that had not happened. Keller, acting on a combination of medical expertise and gut instinct, had called it correctly and acted accordingly. Even more luckily, the young surgeon's skill in performing emergency exploratory procedures was almost legendary among his peers, enabling him to find and eliminate the problem when many others might have failed to do so. Virtually undetectable and skulking beneath the trauma inflicted on other major organs, the patient's badly lacerated gallbladder had begun to hemorrhage into surrounding tissues, its condition deteriorating rapidly, compounding other problems and making diagnosis even more difficult.

If there had been any delay or if the physician had hesitated even slightly, it might well have been too late. Damage to the gallbladder from blunt force trauma was a rare occurrence and thus not always recognized in such cases, and the organ had been on the verge of rupture by the time Keller found the source of the problem.

Young Mr. Kinney had been very lucky indeed.

He would live. And that was all that Matt Keller cared about. There might be consequences. Side-effects. A price to pay.

But Brian Kinney would live, and . . . Matthew allowed himself a weary smile . . . he would undoubtedly do so beautifully. The smile faded a bit, but only for a moment. It was time to call in the cavalry, thought the physician. He had known from the beginning, from the moment he'd walked into the room and come face to face with the degree of his patient's injuries, that he would eventually get to this point, although he had to admit, if only to himself, that he had not been thrilled with the prospect.

Still, the moment was at hand. He would not allow his own reluctance to jeopardize his patient's chances for a complete recovery. Even had the patient been anyone other than the man who was, in so many ways, the love of his life.

Time to face the music.

"Beck," he said sharply, as he administered a tiny, almost invisible stitch to close the last of the laparoscopic incisions, "I need you to locate someone for me."

The nurse looked up, slightly uneasy with the note of uncertainty she detected in his voice. Matt Keller was never uncertain of anything.

"Who?"

He turned then and spent a moment looking down into his patient's face, inspecting every mark, every bruise, every laceration, the image before him overlaid in his mind with the image called up
from memory. The contrast almost took his breath away, and reinforced his resolve.

"Find Rick Turnage. I need to talk to him."

"When?" she asked, mind already reeling. How the hell was she supposed to . . .

"Yesterday," he replied.

She was too much a professional to display any misgivings she might experience, but she knew both Matt and Dr. Richard Turnage well enough to justify experiencing more than a few. "Now there's a name I haven't heard you speak in . . . what? Three years?"

He hugged a tiny laugh. "At least. And I'd have been more than happy to never speak it again. But . . ."

"But?" she prompted when it appeared he would not continue.

"Sometimes," he said softly, "only the best will do, and a man's gotta swallow his fucking pride and do what's necessary."

Beck smiled behind her mask. "Well, who would have dreamed that this ordinary, run-of-the-mill day would spawn a miracle? For you - of all people - to admit that he . . ."

"He's an arrogant, self-serving prick and a canker sore on the arse of mankind." Then he paused to draw a deep breath. "But he's also the best at what he does, and, in this case, only the best will do."

The nurse was silent for a moment, observing the gentleness of his hands as he continued his task.

"Jesus!" she whispered finally. "You must really love him."

He merely looked at her, a hard glitter in his eyes daring her to say more.

Then he shifted his focus, forgetting everyone and everything except the man lying supine and helpless under his hands, and leaned forward so that he was almost nose to nose with his patient. His lips moved gently, generating only the faintest whisper of sound. "I made you a promise, Baby. And I aim to keep it, even if I have to eat a shitload of humble pie in the process."

He stepped back then, peeling off mask and gown and gloves, his mind already turning to the next task at hand. To wit - facing Michael.

He had not allowed himself to dwell too much on the facial expression worn by young Novotny (and why in hell was he thinking of him in that way when Michael was actually older than Brian and the same age as Matthew himself?) when the trauma team had wheeled their patient out of ICU and raced off down to corridor to the staff elevator, which was waiting to take them down to the surgical suites on a lower floor. There had been no time for explanations or assurances, only a hurried statement that Brian had developed complications and needed more surgery. But Matt had not quite managed to forget that look either. He had seen enough blind panic in the course of his life to recognize it, especially when it was couched within a framework of despair.

Michael had been terrified, had been forced, for the first time in his life, to contemplate the possibility that Brian might never come back to him.

Matt knew that feeling, had felt it himself on more than one occasion, and knew that he had to take steps to relieve it. Not for Michael; he frankly didn't give a shit about Michael. But Brian loved the little nerd - always had and always would. So it was time to ease Michael's pain, for Brian's sake.
He was only three steps into the waiting room when he found himself surrounded by avid faces, barely able to contain the panic that sparked in their eyes. He looked around, recognizing Michael, of course, and his partner; his mother, Debbie; Lindsey and her 'husband'; Brian's friends, Emmett and Ted, and his assistant, Cynthia. Other faces were familiar, but he could not put names to them. But it didn't matter anyway. It was Michael who was front and center, and who was not going to relinquish his place, no matter who tried to remove him.

"Is he . . ." Huge brown eyes were glossy with tears that could not be denied.

"He's all right, Michael."

The tears spilled over, then, far beyond control, and Michael, obviously not knowing what else to do, wrapped his hands in the collar of Keller's lab coat and just let them flow. "What was wrong?" he managed to whisper.

Keller debated whether or not to go into the technicalities of what had happened, but realized immediately that there was little point. Even if some of these individuals were able to grasp the medical jargon, it would make no real difference. They didn't need to be able to understand the terminology or define a cholecystectomy or comprehend why it had been necessary; they only needed to know the result.

"Complications from the original injuries," he said smoothly. "When there's so much damage, it's easy to miss something."

The group was quiet, eyes haunted and filled with shadow, until Cynthia spoke up - pragmatic and rational. As always.

"And how can you be sure you haven't 'missed' something else?"

He summoned up a weary smile for her, recalling how Brian always referred to her as his "good right hand". "Medicine isn't nearly as exact a science as most doctors would have you believe, so there's no such thing as 'sure' in a situation like this. But I've exhausted every possibility I can think of, and, if I did miss something, I promise you that I'm going to be close enough to step in and fix any other problem that might arise." The smile faded, to be replaced by grim resolve. "He will survive this."

As he spoke, his eyes moved from face to face, gauging the reactions of the various members of the group. It was not surprising, he supposed, that there would be such marked variations in how the individuals responded to his words. Brian's relationships with these people ran the gamut, after all, from the kind of friendship that defined lifelong commitment to a barely-controlled hostility that masked an even deeper resentment. Thus, Michael's expression was almost incandescent with relief and hope restored while Lindsey's partner (Melissa? Melinda? Something like that?) looked as if she couldn't decide whether or not she dared display annoyance at the degree of Lindsey's concern. Lindsey, however, merely looked exhausted, and Keller knew exactly how she felt.

"When can we see him?" demanded Michael's mother. "We haven't even had a good look at him yet, you know. We need . . ."

Matthew raised a hand to stop her in mid-tirade. "You'll see him when it's safe to do so, and . . ." He paused and let his tone of voice shift to emphasize his meaning, "when he wants to see you."

"He'll be waking up soon then?" That was Emmett, the shadows in his eyes reminding the doctor that it had been this young man who'd participated in Brian's rescue and who, as a result, had
actually seen the worst of what had been done to him, rather than just imagining it, like the rest of the people in this room.

"Soon enough," he answered gently. "We'll keep him sedated for a while, to give him a chance to begin to heal. And to control his pain. In fact, he'll probably sleep all day today. But I see no reason to extend the induced coma, especially since the swelling in his brain has begun to subside. He'll wake up when he's ready."

With that said, Keller dredged up a tired smile and turned away, to hurry down the corridor, disappearing around a nearby corner and leaving many of the group frustrated with the terse quality of his responses.

"I don't get it," snapped Debbie. "Isn't the family supposed to be kept in the loop, to know . . ."

"Debbie," said Lindsey softly, "much as we'd like to think so, we're not."

"Not what?"

"Not family."

The redhead's eyes grew huge. "Well, if we're not, who the hell . . ."

"I don't know," said Melanie slowly, eyes dark with speculation, "but we could probably find out. At least, some of us could." She looked up then and regarded her partner solemnly. "You're the mother of his only child, so . . ."

"No," said Lindsey sharply. "I won't use that, and I won't invade his privacy."

"But you have a right . . ."

"The only rights that matter in this," replied the blonde, "are Brian's rights."

"As usual." That was Melanie again, not quite inaudible and not quite able to conceal her impatience with the thrust of the conversation.

Most of the group trailed back to their seats, each lost in his own thoughts, while Emmett took his leave, hurrying off down the corridor and disappearing around the same corner where Dr. Keller had vanished only moments earlier. Seconds later, Cynthia also made her exit, with no more than a silent nod to Lindsey to signal her departure.

Emmett did not - quite - break into a run once he was out of sight of his friends, but it was a near thing. He needed to speak with Matt Keller privately, and he needed to do so right now. But he had taken only a few strides down the hallway when he realized that it was not to be. Whatever conversation he could manage to have with the surgeon, it would have to be with an audience, for Drew was coming out of the elevator just a few feet away, and Lance Mathis was with him, and neither of them looked to be in a mood to be shunted aside.

But Emmett was determined that he would not spend another minute living with the horrible uncertainty that had stuck in his mind with painful persistence since the moment he had first looked down into Brian's mangled face. He would endure it no longer. So he pushed past his one-time lover and his companion and hurried toward the doorway at the end of the hall. It was one of a half-dozen just like it, virtually indistinguishable each from the others, except for a small, discreet metal sign affixed to the wall beside it, with the words "Doctor's Lounge" engraved on the surface.

Emmett did not hesitate, nor take any notice of the fact that he was no longer alone. He did spare a
quick thought to observe that most of the people who knew him well - or thought they did - would have been shocked to see him now, to comprehend the intensity of his determination to get an answer to the question that was driving him. Forceful was simply not an adjective that anyone would ordinarily use to describe him.

But fear, he thought, can turn the most mild-mannered pussy boy into a raging lunatic, and this particular pussy-boy had reached his limit.

Matt Keller had just poured a cup of black coffee almost caustic enough to etch glass when he found himself under intense scrutiny from three pairs of eyes. Two of his observers appeared to have simply tagged along for the ride, uncertain of where the road would lead them, but there was no mistaking the intense focus of the third. Emmett Honeycutt had come for answers, and would not be turned away until he got them.

So much, then, thought Keller, for his intention to close his eyes for a few minutes before entering his latest observations into the medical chart that he carried under his arm.

The doctor felt a sudden, intense surge of sympathy for the young man standing before him, along with a quick swell of gratitude that Brian had managed to inspire such loyalty from someone who did not appear to be infatuated/intoxicated or otherwise in love with him. For Brian, true friendship, offered up without traces of lust or romantic fantasy, was a rare blessing.

"You're not supposed to be in here," Keller pointed out with a sardonic smile.

"Sorry," replied Emmett, in a tone that clearly belied the word, "but I need to talk to you. Alone."

The doctor's eyes flicked to Emmett's companions.

"They don't count," Emmett explained. "They're not emotionally invested in . . ."

Keller spotted a shadow moving in Drew Boyd's eyes, and was quick to realize that Emmett was not entirely correct in his assumption. It was not, however, anything that needed to be addressed, and he let it pass. "Honeycutt, I . . ."

"Emmett," said the young man quickly. A strange melancholy touched his face then, and his next remark seemed to be a non-sequitur, but the doctor was somehow certain that it wasn't. "Nobody gets to call me . . . that."

Keller nodded. "Emmett, then. Look, I appreciate that you're concerned, that you think you have a right to . . ."

"No," said Emmett quickly. "Not a right. I have no rights here. Except . . ."

When he fell silent, it was obvious that he was struggling to find the right words to express his concerns, and Keller forced himself to be patient, to give the young man the time he needed.

"We saw," he said finally, with a nod of his head to include the two men at his side, "what they did to him. The others - the rest of the Brian Kinney fan club that's assembled out in the waiting room - they came later. After he'd been cleaned up and bathed and bandaged, so they didn't see how bad it was." He shuddered then and closed his eyes. "And I think I'll always be grateful for that. For some of them, anyway." Then he dredged up a tiny smile. "If Michael had seen him like that . . . it doesn't even bear thinking about.

"But here's the thing, Doc. The first thing - for all of us - was to be sure that he would survive this, and now you've told us that he will. But if you know Brian as well as you seem to think, then you
know that simple survival is not going to be enough, for him."

Emmett's eyes were suddenly huge and very liquid as memory raced through him like a raging tide. "I remember the first time I ever saw him. He was away at college when I first came to the Pitts, and Michael and I became friends while he was gone. Then, when Michael found out that he was coming home, that was all he could talk about, for weeks on end. It was Brian will love this, or Brian won't want that, or Brian will do that better than anybody, so, by the time he actually arrived, I was heartily sick of hearing his name. And prepared to dislike him intensely because I figured that nobody could live up to all that hype." His smile was self-deprecating. "What the fuck did I know?

"And then . . ." he closed his eyes as if reliving the moment. "It was a Saturday morning in the spring, one of those fabulous, brilliant mornings when the whole world feels new and reborn, and he came walking into the diner with his arm slung around Michael's shoulders, and I . . . I could barely catch my breath. I never admitted it to anybody. Certainly not to him. But he knew it anyway. Brian always knew, I think. He was twenty-two years old, and he was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. He walked in, and it was like he lit up the room, brighter than any ray of sunlight, and everybody there just basked in it."

He sighed and took a moment to compose himself. "I need to know . . . if that Brian Kinney is going to survive. I need to know that you can . . ."

The physician did not answer immediately, choosing instead to take a seat beside a narrow window and stare out into an overcast afternoon.

"Please, Dr. Keller," Emmett continued. "I know you can't divulge confidential information, but please, can you just tell me if . . ."

"I remember too," Keller interrupted, as he watched a helicopter approaching from the South and descending toward the helipad on the roof. "That's how most people react on first meeting Brian." Abruptly, he turned away from the window and looked up to meet Emmett's gaze. "I can't fix him," he said flatly. "The damage that was done to him was . . . horrendous. All I could do - can do - is to save his life. But . . ." He smiled, but there was no joy in the expression. "Knowing Brian, I doubt he'll thank me for that, all things considered. You know, as well as I do, that 'being Brian Kinney' - in all his glory - has always been the primary focus of his existence, so . . ." He stood up then and stepped forward until he and Emmett were face to face, with no room for subterfuge between them. "While I, personally, cannot give back what they took from him, I do know someone who can."

"Meaning?" Emmett wanted to believe, wanted to hope, but dared not allow himself to accept meaningless placebos and empty platitudes.

Keller lifted one hand to rub his eyes with thumb and forefinger. "My med school graduating class was truly outstanding," he said, apparently apropos of nothing in particular. He looked back at Emmett then, and his smile was diffident. "It produced a number of brilliant physicians, including, if I say so myself, the preeminent trauma specialist in the eastern United States, and . . ."

"And?" Emmett did not know why the doctor seemed loathe to continue, but he had run out of patience.

"And the best fucking plastic surgeon in the world."

"Wow!" said Lance Mathis, observing the physician with a shrewd gaze. "Bet that hurt, didn't it?"

Keller's grin was sardonic. "You have no idea."
"So who is this genius?" demanded Emmett. "Is he here?"

"No."

"On his way, perhaps?"
The doctor sighed. "No. Not yet, anyway."

Emmett was not comforted by the note of ambiguity he heard in Keller's voice. "And why is that?"

"Because I haven't asked him ... yet."

"Because?" Emmett's friends would undoubtedly have been surprised by the relentless nature of his interrogation of the physician, but he was beyond caring.

Keller took a deep breath. "Because he's a narcissistic prick who wouldn't bother to spit on me if I was going up in flames. Because we can't stand each other, and I'd rather slit my throat than ask him for a favor. Because he'll almost certainly hang up on me when I call, after telling me in no uncertain terms to fuck off. But mostly because I haven't yet figured out how to beg piteously enough or to prostrate myself sufficiently or to manipulate the situation into such an irresistible challenge to his superiority that he'll have no choice but to agree to come."

Emmett's smile was suddenly very gentle. "Wow! You really do love him, don't you?"

Keller thought that he'd be perfectly content if everyone would just stop saying that, no matter how true it might be.

God help him! He really did love Brian Kinney, and the little fucker was going to owe him - big time - when this was all over.

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"We're about thirty-five minutes from touchdown, Mr. Taylor," said Jill McCain, the flight attendant who had been seeing to his needs throughout the long wearisome flight. He had dozed fitfully from time to time, but he wondered if she had managed to sleep at all. Since she'd been constantly available whenever he'd looked around for her, he rather doubted it.

"I've prepared a light lunch for you," she explained, "although I'm sure that the time difference has you completely uncertain of what you should be eating or when. Still it's mid afternoon here, and you haven't eaten all day."

"I'm not hungry," he replied, suddenly irritated at being the center of so much attention. Then he realized that he'd spoken sharply and was instantly ashamed of himself.

"I'm sorry," he continued. "You've been nothing but kind to me, and I'm acting like a shit."

Her smile was gentle. "You're acting like a young man who wants nothing more than to get to the person he loves in his hour of need. Don't apologize."

"Don't apologize," he echoed. "My boyfriend would agree."

"Then he's a very wise man, isn't he? Now come along and eat. It's just shrimp scampi, and a tiny Banoffee Pavlova."

"A what?"
"If I understand correctly," she replied, "you were in and out of New Zealand so quickly that you never even got the chance to experience our most delectable confectionary masterpiece. And we can't have that, now can we? A Pavlova is a meringue. In this case, one that is combined with banana slices and caramel sauce. And you absolutely cannot have visited New Zealand without ever having sampled a Pavlova. It would be a national disgrace."

"I'm really . . . :

"Not hungry. I know. But perhaps you'll be so enchanted by the taste that you'll want to take a sample to your boyfriend. He might love it."

He laughed to imagine the look of horror on Brian's face on being presented with such a concoction. Then he paused to reconsider. Perhaps it was time to tempt Brian to rethink his priorities. Perhaps this . . . incident would encourage him to do so.

Always provided . . . but no. He wouldn't explore that thought, wouldn't let himself wander into that dark, dreadful realm of possibility.

Instead, he would eat. Hungry or not. To gird his strength.

The intercom buzzed discreetly. "Mr. Taylor," said the pilot's voice, "we've just been advised that an escort will be meeting you when we land. And you're not to leave the plane until they arrive."

"Escort?" Justin snapped. "What kind of escort?"

There was a tiny pause before the pilot replied. "Pittsburgh PD. A Lieutenant Horvath, I believe."

"Shit!" said Justin, rising and walking to the window to gaze out on the cloud bank below, suddenly feeling the first faint rise of panic. Horvath. So it was real; there would be no more eluding the truth.

Jill McCain looked on with sympathy. She knew virtually nothing about what was happening in this young man's life, beyond the barest bones of fact. But she knew distress when she saw it, and fear, even if he was remarkably good at concealing it.

She stood by in silence, as the young man made a quick call on the plane's sat-phone. Well trained in the practice of discretion, she carefully avoided listening to his conversation, noting only that he appeared satisfied with what he'd heard when he put the phone down.

"Can I get you something?" she asked.

"No," he started, then hesitated. "Yes. You wouldn't happen to have any cigarettes on board, would you?"

She laughed. "French, English, or American?"

So he smoked - chain-smoked - for the remainder of the trip. Brian's brand. Marlboros. And the Pavlova remained unsampled.

"I'm not a prisoner," Justin said coldly, his eyes staring out through the rear window of the squad car. "You can't hold me."

"Justin, please." Horvath pretended not to hear the note of desperation in the young man's voice, pretended not to know how terribly afraid he was. "Please try to understand me. We have no idea
where the threat comes from, but we do know that it's real. Brian . . . for him to have clung to consciousness in spite of everything, just to pass on the message. It has to be real."

"I don't care. I'm not going into hiding because of some homophobic pricks that might be stalking me."

"What happened to Brian makes it a lot more than a threat, Justin. This is serious."

"I know that. Brian's lying in a hospital bed, so . . ."

"With all due respect, you don't." Horvath's certainty left no room for argument. "You haven't seen him yet. And I gotta be honest with you. I'm not sure you should. Not until he's . . . stronger."

"Stronger," said Justin flatly. "What does that mean? What is it that you don't want me to see?"

Horvath sighed. "Justin, he's . . . it was really bad. He may not want you . . . to see him this way."

"I know what to expect," Justin insisted. "Some helpful soul couldn't wait to send me the photo."

The detective winced. He too had seen the photographs that were turning up all over the internet - photographs he hoped would go unnoticed by Debbie and Brian's friends. Still, he knew that nothing would prepare Justin for the real thing. "You only think you know, Son. No photograph is going to prepare you."

Justin sat back and returned to staring out the window where a slow, iron gray rain had begun to fall. Appropriate, he thought, for the city of steel.

Horvath was still talking, but Justin's mind had begun to wander when the car came to a stop and someone slid into the passenger-side front seat.

"Justin," said the detective firmly, "I want you to meet someone - someone who is going to stick very close to you during the next few days."

The young artist looked up to stare into sable eyes that were studying him intensely, without a single spark of sexual interest. "This is Lance Mathis," Horvath continued.

"I do not need a bodyguard."

Horvath opened his mouth to respond, but Mathis beat him to the punch. "On the contrary. You do need a bodyguard, whether you want one or not."

"Yeah, well, I don't see that you get a say," Justin snapped.

Mathis smiled. "Oh, it's not me who's saying it. It's Brian Kinney. Unless you want to argue with him."

Justin turned to look at Horvath. "Who the fuck is this?" he demanded.

"Meet Brian's new chief of security." Horvath's smile was slightly venal. "And just in case you're considering throwing one of your drama queen-outs, consider this. If something happens to you on my watch, I only have to answer to my superiors - and Debbie, God help me! But if something happens to you on his watch, he'll have to answer to Brian Kinney. Would you wish that on anybody? Even your worst enemy?"

"No, but . . .."
"Why not just give it a chance?" said Mathis. "I promise to be discreet."

"Shouldn't you be protecting Brian?" Justin snapped. "Shouldn't he be at the top of your list?"

"Who says he's not?"

"Then you won't have time for me." Justin's retort was triumphant, as if he'd come up with a point that was irrefutable.

Mathis smiled. "You let me worry about that. Mr. Kinney's reach is greater than you think."

_Fuck! Walked right into that one._

Justin opened his mouth to try again, but closed it quickly when he read the determination in the security chief's eyes and realized that this was an argument he was not going to win. Even if he refused to give in and insisted on getting his way, Mathis would simply fall back just far enough to carry out his mission and avoid any direct confrontation.

He was quiet for a while, considering options. "Do you have any idea... who..." And he was amazed to find that he could not even summon up the breath to finish the sentence.

"Not yet," replied the detective. "But we're going to get them, Justin. It just takes time."

But the younger man was not reassured. "You guys said the same thing a year ago, and you still don't have any idea who planted that bomb at Babylon."

Horvath nodded, conceding the point. "However," he said slowly, "this time we're going to get some help. Some very powerful help. But that doesn't change the fact that you're at risk, and..."

"All right," Justin said abruptly, wanting to hear no more about his own need for protection. "On one condition."

"And that would be what?"

"That you take me straight to the hospital. No more of this 'he wouldn't want you to see him' bullshit. OK?"

Horvath sighed, understanding that further argument would be futile. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out an object that was wrapped up in a handkerchief. "There's one more thing," he said softly, his voice reflecting a tiny glimmer of uncertainty. "Something that - well - that I thought you might want to return to him."

"Like what?"

It was Horvath's turn to look away, and Justin was astonished to realize that the detective was slightly embarrassed. "All of his personal effects - everything he was wearing that night, such as it was, is in police custody now. As evidence. Most of it is probably beyond salvaging anyway, and plenty is missing, I'm sure. His wallet was gone, and his watch. Which suggests that, even though this was undoubtedly a carefully planned attack, there was also an element of opportunism in it. The criminals that arranged it were only out to teach him a lesson, or to kill him in the most painful, gruesome way possible, but the thugs that carried it out weren't above stuffing their pockets with whatever extra loot they could lay their hands on. But this... they didn't touch this. Probably didn't consider it worth taking. But I remembered it. From another time, and it occurred to me that I couldn't recall ever seeing him without it. So..."
He opened the handkerchief and reached out to drop the object into Justin's hand.

Justin stared for a moment, and could not suppress the rise of tears in his eyes as he recognized the shell bracelet that Brian always wore.

For a time, there was only silence in the car, except for the sound of breath roughly drawn, as Justin fought to control a sudden, almost irresistible urge to weep. Beyond that, there was only the soft voice of the patrolman/driver as he answered a radio call.

"Thank you, Karl," Justin stammered finally. "I can't... this will mean so much..."

Horvath sighed. "Just keep it to yourself. Nobody needs to know."

Justin nodded. "If he was wearing his watch -- and that's a big IF, by the way -- it's a Patek Phillipe. He bought it to celebrate the grand opening of Kinnetic. It's engraved with his initials, and the date of the opening."

Justin spent a moment more staring down at the bracelet and tracing his fingertips across the shells before tucking it into his pocket. Then he turned to stare at Lance Mathis with cold eyes and a no-nonsense expression. "As for you, you do what you have to do, but keep your distance. OK?"

Mathis nodded. "I promise. You won't even know we're there."

Justin sighed, resigned to his fate. That was exactly what he was afraid of.

"Assuming that you're not yet ready to face the thundering herd," said Lance Mathis, "I thought we'd go in the back way. Also assuming that you have permission to see him at all, that is."

Justin nodded. "Oh, I have permission all right. Although, it wouldn't make any difference if I didn't." His eyes were suddenly hard and cold. "One way or another, I'm going in to see him. Right now."

Mathis flashed him an insolent grin. "Somehow, I think I detect the teachings of the master, don't I?"

Justin had the grace to flush. Mathis was right. In many ways, he had become more and more like Brian in the years since they'd first met - a development for which he had cause to be extremely grateful. He had always had a healthy level of self-confidence, but Brian had taught him to exercise it without apology or regret.

Not a bad legacy, he thought.

Instead of driving up to the hospital's main entrance, they took a little detour and turned, instead, into a narrow enclosed parking area, a spot reserved for medical directors and VIP staff members, where a uniformed parking attendant waved the patrol vehicle through the gate with a smart salute.

Justin got out of the car quickly, sparing no thought to his luggage that was tucked in the trunk of the patrol car, sparing no real thought for anything, except the only thing that mattered.

From this angle, there was only one visible entrance into the building, and the door was swinging open before he was half-way across the lot. Later, he would pause to wonder why he had not been surprised to recognize the man who appeared in the opening; he was, after all, a famous individual, instantly recognizable anywhere in America and especially in Pittsburgh. But, at the moment, it seemed only natural that Drew Boyd should be standing there waiting for him.
"Thanks, Cuz," said Lance Mathis, closing in behind Justin. "Anything new going on here?"

Boyd smiled. "He's still unconscious, but they just brought him back to ICU."

"And the doctor?" asked Justin.

"Waiting to see you," replied the quarterback, "and not too thrilled about it."

Justin muttered something and barreled through the door, leaving the football player to cock his head and lift one eyebrow at his cousin, obviously perplexed. "Did I hear him correctly? Did he just say, 'Tough shit'?"

Mathis grinned. "You did, and he did. So let's get a move on. This is one show I definitely don't want to miss. This is going to be the classic example of an irresistible force clashing with an immovable object, and neither one of them has a goddamned clue what they're up against. We could be on the verge of witnessing the creation of a Black Hole."

They moved up the stairs together, quickly enough to keep young Taylor in sight, but maintaining enough distance to allow them to speak without being overheard.

"He really OK?" Mathis asked, not entirely sure why he was somewhat reluctant to hear the answer. There wasn't a gay bone in his body, so he didn't know why it should matter so much, why he cared what Kinney might look like when all this was behind him.

Only - somehow - it did.

"Doctor says he'll live."

The security chief favored his cousin with an inquisitive glance. "That's not exactly what I asked, is it?"

Boyd sighed. "Jacob needed to take a piss, so I relieved him for a few minutes, and that's when they brought Kinney back into the ICU."

"And?"

"And they hadn't finished replacing all his bandages - on his face - before they moved him back into his bed."

Mathis closed his eyes for a moment. "Bad, huh?"

"Bad enough. When I think about how he looked before, I just . . ."

"What? Just what?"

Boyd took a deep breath. "I just want to kill somebody, to get my hands on one of those fuckers that did this to him and rip him apart."

Then he shook his head, and started moving more quickly up the stairs.

"What's your hurry all of a sudden?" asked Mathis.

The quarterback did not slow down. "If it hits me like that - and I barely knew the man - what do you think it's going to do to that kid?"

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Drew Boyd was both right . . . and wrong.

Justin was about to get hit with something that no amount of warning or foreboding or experience could have prepared him for, but it was many years since he had been a kid, and the man who stepped forward to intercept him as he plunged through the rear entrance - actually a service entrance - to the Intensive Care Unit, seemed to be aware of both facts instinctively. Radiating belligerence, Justin was immediately ready to take on the world and move it, if necessary, in order to get to Brian, but Matt Keller was equally determined to stop him, and he had help.

Both Boyd and Mathis, along with a third, muscular young man who moved forward from a small alcove located within a pod of patient rooms, stepped forward to end the confrontation before it could actually happen.

"Get out of my way," Justin snarled, still struggling against the multiple sets of arms that restrained him.

Keller could not quite swallow a quick smile, regardless of the gravity of the situation. "I take it this is Justin," he said to no one in particular, noting in passing that the kid was fucking gorgeous, and realizing that he had expected no less of the individual who had managed to do what no one else had ever done in capturing the heart of Brian Kinney.

It was doubtful that Justin, totally focused on reaching his goal, knew or cared who was blocking his way. "I said, get out of . . ."

"Not," said Keller sternly, "until you listen to me."

"But I need . . ."

"Better listen up, Kid." The doctor's voice was diamond-hard and offered no quarter. "I don't give a flying fuck what you need. This is about what Brian needs. Understand me?"

Justin went very still and rigid, but he was not ready to concede defeat. "You think you know what he needs?" he demanded. "Better than me? You don't . . ."

Keller stared at the young man, struggling not to laugh in his face. So earnest. So beautiful. So confidant. And so unprepared for what he would have to endure. "Look, little shit," he said firmly. "I know you think that nobody could possibly know Brian Kinney better than you do. Because he loves you. Right? And you love him. Because you're soul mates, or some kind of romantic bullshit like that, so how could anybody possibly know him better? Right?"

Justin's eyes were huge by this time, and flashing with anger. "Right," he snapped.

"Wrong." Keller wasn't in the mood to tolerate any romantic drivel. "Because, in this one instance, you don't know him half as well as I do. I've known him longer, through more crap and trouble and shitty history than you can even imagine. And I have one more advantage that all the fucking and dick-sucking and rimming you two might have shared can't come close to."

"And what's that?" Justin's temper was growing harder to control with each passing moment.

The doctor leaned forward until he was virtually nose to nose with the love of Brian's life. "Maybe," he said softly, "you've had your dick inside him." Then he paused and realized that he wasn't even sure that much was true. "Maybe. But I've been up to my elbows in his guts, trying to put him back together and keep him from bleeding out all over the fucking floor. So right now, as much as you might think he needs you and your tender loving care, he needs me more. Which means that I'm the one who calls the shots here. Every step of the way. Until he's well enough to call them himself. So . . ."
"...are we clear on that?"

"Crystal!" snapped Justin. "Now get out of my way."

Keller shook his head and finally gave in to the smile that would no longer be denied. "God damn!" he almost laughed. "Brain Kinney, twisted around the finger of a gorgeous little twink. Who'd a thunk it?"

"I'm not a twink."

"Of course, you're not. So... do you want a full report on his condition or..."

"That depends."

"On?"

"On whether you can talk and walk at the same time."

Drew Boyd and Lance Mathis very deliberately did not look at each other as the young blond strode across the room toward a particular cubicle, as unerring as a guided missile, leaving the surgeon to pursue or not, as he chose.

In the end, with a tiny self-deprecating chuckle, he chose to give in and proceeded to provide a crisp, concise summary of Brian's condition and treatment.

But he fell silent as Justin stepped through the door and got his first glimpse of the patient. Luckily, Drew had followed and was close enough to be able to lean forward and catch the younger man as his knees buckled, and he lost his balance.

"Fuck!" he gasped, closing his eyes for a moment as he reached for composure and struggled to breathe. He had believed himself to be adequately prepared, and sufficiently girded against whatever he might see. He could not believe how wrong he'd been, for nothing could have prepared him for this. The acute awareness of his own helplessness, his own vulnerability to the cruel indifference of fate left him reeling. "Fuck!"

Matt Keller said nothing, understanding that, at such a moment, there was nothing he could say that would make any difference. But he studied Justin's face with an unexpected surge of tenderness, realizing that he had been uncertain of how he would feel about this kid; this callow young man who was - God, he could barely even credit it - the love of Brian's life. But he saw immediately that he could lay to rest the one concern that he hadn't previously dared to contemplate. Whatever else the young man might think or feel or do, whatever problems he might cause, one thing was immediately obvious: Justin Taylor loved Brian Kinney with his whole heart.

And that was enough to make everything else unimportant.

He also understood something else - that the entire population of the state of Pennsylvania could have come trooping through the ICU at that moment, and Justin would have seen, heard, or noticed nothing but the man who lay silent and still before him.

He moved forward inch by inch, his body stiff and graceless like a flawed marionette, until he was pressed against the side of the bed, his eyes huge and empty somehow.

"Brian." Just a whisper, but broken for all that. "Brian... please."

Keller was compelled to step forward then, to shrug off a strange inertia and try to offer some kind of
consolation. "I don't think he can hear you."

Justin, ever perceptive, noticed the slight hesitation and raised his eyes, filled with tears he made no attempt to hide, to study the physician's face. "But you're not sure, are you?"

Keller offered a tiny, reluctant smile. "No. I'm not sure."

And Justin went back to staring down into Brian's face, of which he could see little beneath layers of fresh bandages. "Can I . . ." The young man paused to draw a trembling breath. "I want to see him. I want to see what they . . ."

"No." There was absolutely no uncertainty in Keller's immediate response. "You don't."

But Justin was not one to give up anything without a fight. "I have a right . . ."

"Don't go there." Brisk, stern, cold. "I told you before. This is about his rights. Not yours."

"But he's my . . ." He fell silent then, unable to find words that would say enough to express the need rising inside him.

"I understand," said the doctor gently, surprised - and a little annoyed - at his own desire to offer comfort to the young man. "Better than you think. But you're not ready for this. And neither is he. You're just going to have to trust me on this."

That got Justin's attention, and his eyes were suddenly ablaze with renewed determination. "And exactly why should I trust you?" he demanded. "I don't even know you, so . . ."

"No, you don't," Keller admitted. "But Brian does. He knows me, and he trusts me, and that's going to have to be enough. For now."

Finally, after a whirlwind of conflicting emotions spun through his mind, Justin was forced to concede the point. For the moment.

"Can I have a few moments with him - alone?"

The doctor hesitated, obviously doubtful.

"I promise not to rip his gown off and fuck him raw."

Keller grinned and nodded. The kid might be under control - for the moment - but he was certainly not intimidated or defeated.

"Spunky little shit, isn't he?" he muttered to Boyd as the two of them left the cubicle.

The quarterback chuckled. "Does that surprise you?"

Keller glanced back toward the two occupants of the room, remembering all that he knew of Brian Kinney. "Not in the least."

Justin didn't notice when they left; he was too wrapped up in the physical presence of the man laid out before him.

How could it have been a year since he'd seen him? How could he have stayed away for so long? Because it was what Brian wanted, was that it? That was bullshit, and he knew it. He sighed as the epiphany struck him; he'd always known it. What would he have done if . . .
He flinched as he was assaulted by a sudden, piercing pain in his core, huge and black and devastating. He had always managed to believe that Brian would always be here, waiting for him - a rock that could stand in the face of any battering, a Gibraltar that neither time nor tide could take from him, a deathless certainty. But this - this was the reality. Brian had almost died. Brian was not immune to the cruelties of fate or random chance. And what would Justin have done - how would he have lived - if Brian had not.

The realization struck him with mind-bending force. Brian could have been lost to him forever.

It was followed immediately by a second one, just as strong and just as real as the first. Being Andy Warhol would have meant nothing to him, without having Brian to share it.

Carefully, gently, in full knowledge that he must be breaking a hundred rules and not caring in the least, he lowered the railing on the side of the bed and hoisted himself up, threading his way through IV lines and plastic tubing and electronic wires until he was able to press himself against Brian's side and tuck his face into the hollow beneath that beloved jawline.

Only then did he begin to talk, to speak what was in his heart.

"Fuck this shit, Brain. Do you hear me? Because, if you do, you better fucking listen to me. Are you listening? This shit ends - now. Because guess what. I do not want to be Warhol, or Pollock, or fucking Picasso. What I want . . . is you, is us. Brian and Justin. And I know that's what you want too. Us, together. Natural and real and free. No fucking rings, no fucking ceremonies, no fucking locks on the doors, and - listen to this, because this is the really important thing - nobody's fucking business but ours. I can't believe that we both bought into the bullshit and let other people decide what was right for us? Well, no more, Brian. Nobody is ever - ever - going to pull us apart again."

With exquisite gentleness, he touched his fingertips to a tiny patch of bare skin at the base of Brian's throat. "So you better get well, and come back to me. Because I'm not leaving you again. I'm never leaving you again. No matter how hard you try to push me away. Understand? I'm - not - going."

Then he remembered the bracelet in his pocket, and he dug it out, careful to avoid jostling the motionless figure at his side.

"If you can hear me, you'll know what this is. You must be missing it; you've worn it as long as I've known you. So here. Let me just put it on you."

He eased the blanket down to expose Brian's arm and fastened the bracelet around his right wrist, taking great care to do so gently. "This is me," he whispered, "holding your hand. Holding you close to me. Binding us to each other. I will never again be further from you than this."

He adjusted the bracelet to his satisfaction before pulling the blanket back up and tucking it close against the faintly metallic chill in the air. Then he touched his lips to the small patch of skin behind Brian's ear. "I love you," he whispered, unable and unwilling to control the tears welling in his eyes. "More than my life, more than anything, and I can't, I won't live without you any more. Don't you leave me, Brian. Please. Come back to me."

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tbc
Chapter 16

A slate gray sea. Everywhere. Only . . . it wasn't really wet. But it was cold and slick against his skin. Except . . . it wasn't really his skin. There was something in the way, something between his skin and the water that wasn't - quite - water. And the water was not quite as silent as it should have been.

There were strange sounds, that might have been of the sea, but weren't. He wasn't sure how he knew that, or even that he knew it at all. How, after all, could he say for sure, when he had to concede that he didn't know anything - for sure.

He wanted to open his eyes, to see if everything was as gray as he thought it was. Only he wasn't really sure why he thought it was gray since he could see nothing but darkness.

Thus he did not know if his eyes were already open and seeing only a darkness that was everywhere, that had consumed everything. Or if his eyes were closed, and the darkness was confined to his own thoughts, his own mind.

And in the end, did it really matter?

He was floating; of that much, he was reasonably sure. But on what, or in what he could not say.

In fact he could not say much of anything, except that he understood, in a primal way, that to stay here, to remain in this darkness and perpetual emptiness was to turn away from everything in his life that he'd ever cared about; it was to surrender, to give up, to concede defeat. There was no rational thought process involved in knowing this: rational thought processes were not accessible in this dark abyss. But he knew it just the same. So, something insisted, he should struggle; he should reach . . .

But something else inside him knew better - knew what lay there waiting for him, daring him to try.

Here, all was dark and empty . . . and safe. Here, there would be no more pain, no more despair, no more wanting what he could never have. Here was the absence of all the old, familiar hurts that had lived in his heart for as long as he could remember.

Here . . . was peace. The end of striving for what he could never touch, the end of needing, the end, he supposed, of all things.

Except for the cold. There would, apparently, be no end to that.

Was this, then, the true definition of hell? Not the raging flames or the blistering heat or the eternal molten corruption of flesh and bone, as propounded by the old fundamentalist preachers and the Bible thumpers, after all, but the exact opposite - the relentless cold of being completely, irrevocably, eternally alone, untouched and untouchable.

He had spent his entire life trying to touch someone, trying to find the right someone to touch, only to find himself, ultimately, alone.

Time, perhaps, to accept what he could not change. A memory stirred, words spoken by him? To him?

He couldn't remember the circumstances, but he remembered the words.

"That's how we all came in. That's how we're all going out."
Alone. Did anything in between the two extremes really matter at all?

He decided that he didn’t want to know.

In fact, he wanted not to know. Anything. Ever again.

Only . . . he was really, really tired of the cold, and found, to his own amusement, that he had a sudden overwhelming need to feel the warmth, just once more. For just one moment. But, in order to touch that warmth, to put aside the bitter frost, even for that micro-burst of time, he would have to navigate back through all the barriers and the darkness and the monsters that inhabited the night.

The pain. He had endured it when he had to, had withstood it long enough to do what he knew he must, to put up the only wall that mattered, the one that would protect what must be protected at all costs.

But now, could he really bring himself to step back into that tempest, to open himself up again, to feel again?

No, he . . .

"You back again?" The voice was close, almost in his ear, and he didn't even pause to think about the whys and wherefores. He simply opened his eyes.

"Aren't you tired of hanging around in a place you don't want to be?"

The cold was still there, as bitter and biting as before, but the face looking back at him was warm and pleasant and wreathed with a smile. Vic Grassi hadn't aged at all since the last time they'd seen each other, but then . . . he wouldn't, would he? Not in this place.

"Not my choice," he answered, and wondered why his face felt so stiff, as if cast in stone.

"Yeah. Sucks, doesn't it?"

He thought he nodded, but he wasn’t entirely sure. "So," he said softly, "did I really do it this time? Am I . . ."

"Not yet." Vic's smile was exactly what one would expect from the old queen, smug and slightly sardonic. "But it's still do-able, if you decide that's what you want."

Brian felt his breath catch in his throat. "Why . . . why would I want that?"

Vic's eyes were suddenly very gentle. "Because you're tired of all the bullshit, Kiddo. And you're tired of being alone."

"I've never been alone."

Vic didn't bother to argue; he just let the sadness in his eyes speak for him.

Brian thought about it - thought about what he remembered of what had happened to him and felt something old and primal shift within his consciousness. "But I will be . . . now. Won't I?"

The older man smiled. "Who is Brian Kinney? Isn't that the real question?"

"Not who he was before." The answer was harsh, guttural, bitter.

"Maybe," said Vic, "but maybe that's good thing."
To his own surprise, Brian dredged up a smile, and was instantly conscious of the tightness in his face and the pull of muscles too long unused. "What? Some kind of poetic justice? Beauty . . . and the beast?"

"The person you were," Vic replied slowly, "is still there. Inside you."

The smile grew wider. "Nobody ever gave a shit about what might be inside me, Vic. It was only what was on the surface that they wanted."

The older man shrugged. "Some of them, maybe. Are those the ones you really care about?"

And it was suddenly too much. Brian found that he didn't want to see any more, hear any more, feel any more. So he closed his eyes.

But Vic was persistent, if nothing else. "So that's it? You're just going to walk away. What about him?"

The sigh seemed to rise from the very bottom of his soul. "It's the best gift I can give him."

Vic was silent for a while, and Brian dared to hope he might have given up and gone looking for fresher, rarer game. But no such luck.

"If you choose to leave him behind, he'll find a way to go on. You're right about that much. He's learned everything you ever tried to teach him. He's strong and bright and as beautiful in his way as you are in yours. But if you go, make no mistake about it. You take his heart with you. He'll never love again, Brian. Never. Is that what you want for him? Is it . . ."

"Better not to love at all, than to be locked up in a cage, behind bars of pity and duty - and commitment." He pronounced the word as if it were the vilest curse. "Because of some dumb notion that he owes me his life because I'm damaged."

"Did you?"

Unable to resist trying to fathom the strange tone in the older man's voice, Brian opened his eyes again to confront his nemesis. "Did I what?"

"Did you take him in, take care of him, watch out for him . . . did you owe him your life, because he was damaged? Because he was too weak or foolish or stupid to fend for himself?"

"No, but . . ."

"So what makes you think . . ."

"Because he did it before." The words came swiftly, without forethought, and it was only after they were spoken that he realized how true they were, how much he had always believed them, even if he'd never quite dared to confront the issue. His voice sank to a whisper. "And I - shit - I let him do it. Because I was too weak to fight him off, to stand up and make him understand that I could manage on my own."

The older man's smile turned venal. "Oh, that's right. The great and powerful Kinney can handle anything, can't he? All by himself. Even cancer." Then he sighed. "Jesus, Brian! Don't you understand that nobody - nobody - should have to endure something like that alone? Once in a while, we all need somebody. Even you."

Brian looked away. "Yeah, well, considering how I've lived my life, I think it would be pretty fucking
stupid to expect anybody to be there for me."

Vic reached out and laid a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Why? Because you think you've never been there for them? Is that really what you think?"

Brian didn't offer an answer - just a look that spoke volumes about truth as he perceived it.

"So . . . you want to watch them while they grieve over you? That can be arranged, you know. The laws of physics don't apply here. Only metaphysics." Vic grinned, obviously pleased with his pun. "You can pretty much do anything you . . ."

"No." Not even a tiny little nuance of uncertainty. "I don't want to see."

"You sure? Not even for old time's sake? One last look . . . at his face?"

"No. I just want . . ."

"To be left alone." The old man sighed. "Forever is longer than you can imagine, Brian."

The smile came then, bittersweet and haunted. "It's only time."

For a while, silence reigned. And the cold, of course. And Brian, settling once more into the chill of night, thought that maybe he should ask Vic; maybe Vic would know if it would just continue to get colder and darker. Maybe . . .

"He's here, you know."

Though Vic was speaking softly, the effect was like a shout in the stillness around them.

"Who's here?" Not bothering to open his eyes and hoping that failing to do so would encourage the other man to wander off in search of a new target.

A tiny little snicker of sound told him that he was shit out of luck.

"Justin. He's here."

"Fuck!" Hazel eyes were suddenly wide, and seeing entirely too much.

'Sorry, but that's one thing you can't do. Not right now anyway."

"Fuck!" His mind was reeling, trying not to remember, trying not to know why it mattered so much, why it was so vital that Justin not be here. "I asked them to do one little one thing. Just one fucking thing, and they can't even do that right."

Then he paused and his eyes filled with suspicion. "How the fuck do you know he's here?"

"I know," answered Vic, "because you know."

"Me? How do I . . ."

"Close your eyes, and reach out with your mind. Concentrate. You've been too busy blocking the signals your body is trying to send you to let yourself notice."

Brian's face twisted into a snarl. "That's because the signals from my fucking body hurt like a motherfucker."
"I know. But that's the only way. Concentrate on your right hand. Just that one little area, so it won't be too . . . unbearable. Just let it come to you."

"Easy for you to say," Brian grumbled. "You're dead, so nothing can ever hurt you again."

He ignored the quick smile he saw on the older man's face.

Fuck! If Justin was really here, if the pricks had let him come despite the extreme measures Brian had taken to keep him away, then somebody was going to pay - and pay dearly - once he was strong enough to . . .

"So," the voice was not - quite - laughing at him, seeming to come to him now from a distance. "I guess this means you won't be keeping me company any longer."

Fuck!

But there was no resisting any further. Except for one tiny question that still needed an answer.

"You're not . . . really here," he called out, no longer able to see the figure he was addressing. "Are you?"

The fact that no response was forthcoming told him all he needed to know.

Concentrate on just the hand, huh? Think about moving just the one finger, just one . . .

Oh, fuck, that hurt like a son of a bitch!

But beyond the hurt there was - just barely - the faintest trace of warmth, of tender fingers stroking, touching, and a voice - gentle on the surface, but not so gentle underneath. Rough and uneven, driven by strong emotions that were not composed only of sweetness and light. There was anger there as well, grim and struggling with fear and need.

"Don't you leave me, Brian. Please. Come back to me."

Fuck!

He knew there was no resisting it now.

So he reached, and, for the barest fraction of a moment, he felt it - the warmth, the solidity, the sweet breath of life. Then the pain hit, and he reeled back, knowing that he could not touch the one without enduring the other. So he let go, sinking back into the bliss of nothingness, of no pain, but . . . not forever. It was inevitable now; he could not let himself take the easy way out, could not embrace forgetfulness.

Could not endure the cold.

He would wait, because he had no choice; his body had betrayed him by leaving him too weak, at this moment, to resist the sweet seduction of limbo. But he would heal. Quickly.

He knew it was futile, knew he would not be heard, but found that he could not resist the urge to try to speak, to transmit the thought that sang in his mind.

"Wait for me, Sunshine. I'll be back."

Then he managed a mental smile, as consciousness faded. No choice any more. He would be back. Like the Terminator, and he planned to more than live up to the name when he returned. His friends
By the time Nurse Beck bustled into the room, Justin had disentangled himself from the plethora of tubes, wires, and sundries attached to Brian's body and settled on the physician's stool beside the bed, reluctantly relinquishing his full-length body contact in favor of clasping Brian's right hand. And he was smiling, brightly enough that the nurse - jaded by too many years of watching people in dire moments, sometimes at their worst and other times at their best - was slightly taken aback. She wanted to be intensely annoyed at the boy and his temerity - he was, after all, where he absolutely should not be - but she couldn't quite reach the level of irritation that should have come so easily.

"What are you doing in here?" she asked, less gruffly than she'd intended.

"Dr. Keller brought me in."

She glared. "Yes, well, Dr. Keller has a tendency to ignore the rules, when it suits him. But I . . . what are you smiling at?" She hadn't intended to ask that, but found herself completely unable to resist when his smile had broadened into a grin.

Justin, to her chagrin, appeared completely immune to her tone of voice and the level of impatience it should have conveyed. "He smiled at me," he answered, never looking away from the patient's face, "and he squeezed my hand."

"How the hell could you tell?" she demanded, examining Brian's bandages to make sure they were still in place and doing the job they were meant to do.

But Justin was not in the mood for pragmatism. "I just know."

Beck glanced quickly at the various indicators that measured every aspect of the patient's physical condition, and found them showing pretty much the same thing they'd been showing since he'd been brought in after his first surgery. The patient was unconscious, albeit no longer comatose.

She wanted to be abrupt and stoic, so it surprised her when her voice and manner took on an unexpected gentleness. "Honey, I know you want to believe that, but . . ."

Justin didn't bother hearing her out. "I know what I know," he said.

Thinking that she should disabuse him of his flight of fancy, she opened her mouth to do exactly that but realized, suddenly, that there was no harm in allowing him to indulge in his little daydream. If it gave him hope, what did it matter that it was all a figment of his imagination?

"Beck!"

There was nothing remotely gentle or diffident in Matt Keller's voice as he barked her name.

"Yes, Doctor?"

He barreled into the room, exuding his characteristic aura of barely-controlled energy, before coming to an abrupt halt.

"What the fuck is he doing in here?" he demanded, barely looking up from his perusal of a printout in the bulging chart he held in his hands.
"He says you let him in," she replied calmly.

"Oh. Yeah. Right. But ... get him out of here. I need to ..."

"I'm going," interrupted Justin, still totally focused on the patient, leaning forward and touching his lips to a patch of bare skin below Brian's bicep. Oddly, though both the physician and the nurse were completely focused on their respective tasks, both paused and watched in complete silence, frozen in place and not understanding why. Then the moment was past, and Justin stood and walked out of the room.

"Shit!" That was Keller, and it elicited a quizzical stare from the woman who had become his most trusted assistant during his tour of duty at Allegheny General.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said quickly, determined not to display the upsurge of tenderness that was rising inside him. "Just . . ."

Beck didn't smile often, but when she did, her face was filled with warmth and understanding. "Yes," she said softly. "I know."

He closed his eyes for a moment, pinching the bridge of his nose to ward off the headache that was threatening to engulf him. "Did you find him?"

She managed - barely - not to roll her eyes. "Finding him wasn't the problem."

"So what did he say?"

"Before or after the 'Tell Keller to fuck off' part of the conversation?"

He flashed her a roguish grin. "Since I'm hoping that wasn't the end of it, let's say after."

"You should be careful what you wish for," she replied. "After that rather rude remark, he continued - and this is a direct quote - 'Never mind. I'll tell the motherfucker myself. Tonight. He should wait for my call.' Then he hung up on me."

Keller moved to the side of the bed, and spent a moment gazing down at his patient, looking in vain for any signs of consciousness returning. "Wake up, Fucker!" he whispered. "If you only knew what I'm going to put up with - for your sake - you'd be on your knees giving me a blow job as we speak."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

So far, he had been really lucky, he thought, as he quickly made his way toward the elevator just down the hall from the ICU waiting room. Now, if his luck would only hold for . . .

"Justin!" It was as much a screech as a shout. "Where the fuck do you think you're going?"

Not lucky enough.

If anyone else had noticed him, he might still have managed to steal away, if he was fast enough and sneaky enough.

But with Debbie?
"Hey, Deb," he managed to gasp as he found himself wrapped tight in her embrace. "Sorry, I didn't see you there."

"Of course, you didn't," said Michael with a grin, stepping up to lay a gentle hand on the young man's shoulder, brown eyes meeting blue and saying more about shared concerns and mutual understanding than any words could have conveyed.

"Where else would we be?" demanded Debbie as she stepped away to get a better look at him.

"Christ, Sunshine. You look like shit."

He shrugged. "I did just fly half way around the world, you know. Literally. So I'm a little jet-lagged."

"Right," she crowed. "Tahiti, huh? That Steven is really something, isn't he? What was it like? Did he come with you? How'd you get here so fast? When are you going back? Where is . . ."

Justin took a deep breath and rattled off his response. "Not Tahiti. New Zealand, Yes, he is something. It was great - what little I saw of it. No, he didn't. I came on a private jet, a Gulfstream. And I'm not."

"Not what?"

He sighed, not eager to have this discussion but knowing that Debbie would not just drop it, no matter how reluctant he was. "Not going back. Now, if you don't mind, I'm a little tired, and . . ."

"Well," she interrupted, not particularly pleased with what she heard in his voice or saw in his eyes, but knowing better than to make an issue of it now, "you shouldn't have hurried. You won't be allowed to see him anyway. Not until . . ."

"I already did," he interrupted.

"You already did . . . what?" she demanded.

"See him."

Debbie's eyes were huge, as were those of some others in the group. "Well, how the fuck did you manage that? Some of us are still waiting to get our first look at him."

The blonde answered her with a wink. "Just lucky, I guess."

The look on her face said clearly that she didn't believe a word of it, but couldn't figure out how to get the answer she really wanted. With good reason, Debbie considered herself a master at extracting information from the members of her extended family, but had learned, long ago, that both Brian and Justin were immune to her methods, when they chose to be.

"So, how does he look?" she asked.

The only answer he offered was a half shrug.

Instead he looked around, dredging up a gentle smile for Ben and Lindsey, and a cool nod for Ted and Melanie and he couldn't remember the name of the guy who was sitting across from Ben - a guy who lived near the Novotny-Bruckners, he thought, but he couldn't quite place him. Then he realized that he didn't much care. The sight of the man's face - long and pale and vaguely bovine - conjured
old memories that he didn't care to examine, like the one of a smug voice observing, "Of course he went to Australia, since he's already slept with everyone on this continent."

And yet here the man sat, obviously pleased to be included in the group, as if he had a right to be here among those whose hearts were tied irrevocably to the fate of the man lying unconscious within the ICU, even if they didn't all realize it.

And then Justin realized that it wasn't so much the memory of the man's snarkiness that disturbed him; it was rather the fact that no one who had been there to hear the remark had bothered to offer a single word in Brian's defense, despite the fact that it was only due to Brian's generosity that the fundraiser had been possible at all, and he was struck with a dawning recognition of how often such things had happened, and how many times Brian's so-called friends - himself included - had just accepted whatever comments petty little cretins chose to make without ever once speaking out.

*Some friends we are.* Even though the very idea of Brian wanting or needing anyone to defend him was ludicrous.

Sensing that he was being watched, Justin looked around, and found himself the object of scrutiny by a pair of shrewd, knowing eyes, and realized immediately that his thoughts were being monitored and approved.

Cynthia was studying his face from her spot in the far corner of the room, late afternoon sunlight catching in the curls piled atop her head. The hairstyle was a dead give-away. She only swept her hair up and pinned it when she didn't have any time to spend fussing with it. Obviously, she had been a very busy young woman, and Justin knew he had cause to be enormously grateful for her efficiency, her intelligence, and her dedication to her employer. She smiled a greeting for him, but did not break off her conversation with the well-built, casually-dressed young black man at her side, who was speaking softly to her, while Lance Mathis and Drew Boyd stood relaxed and at ease nearby, obviously following every word and occasionally nodding their agreement.

Justin would speak to her later, but that could wait. It wasn't Cynthia, after all, who had the answers he needed. It wasn't Cynthia who had been there, had seen it all go down, had witnessed what had been done to Brian. It was Emmett who had experienced all that; thus, it was Emmett he needed to see. And, judging by the look of dread on that young man's face as he turned to face Justin, he knew it perfectly well.

He had been standing at the window, staring out into the rapidly falling twilight, before turning to smile a weary welcome to the new arrival, and Justin felt his breath catch in his throat as he realized that he was seeing something unprecedented in his friend's eyes, something that spoke of things known that could never again be unknown - of innocence irrevocably lost.

When Michael would have pulled him aside, obviously wanting to tap into the intimate understanding that only Brian's closest friends could attain together, Justin favored him with a gentle smile, but pushed past him. He knew what Michael wanted and needed, and he hoped that he would be able to provide it in time. But not now. What he needed now, he needed from someone else, and it was something that he knew Michael would not be able to tolerate.

"Welcome home, Baby," said Emmett as he enfolded Justin in a warm embrace. "Can't tell you how good it is to see you, except . . ."

"Except what?" Justin replied, content to rest briefly within the circle of his friend's arms.

"Except," said Emmett, allowing just a trace of disapproval to taint his words, "that he didn't want you here. The fact that he managed to remain conscious to say that . . ."
"Did you really think I'd stay away?" Justin understood that Emmett felt that he had failed to accomplish the mission that Brian had set for him, but he also needed to make it clear that neither of the co-conspirators should have appropriated the right to make decisions for Justin.

"What I thought," Emmett replied, without a note of apology, "was that maybe you wouldn't find out, until . . ."

"Until what? Until it was all over? Until the danger was past? Until what?"

"Justin, I . . ."

But Justin was not going to back down on this; it mattered too much. For this time, of course, but also for any other times that might arise in the future. He needed to make himself perfectly clear.

"I know you felt that you had to do as he asked," he said softly. "I really do understand that. But you need to understand this. If I . . . if he had . . ." To his intense annoyance, he found that he couldn't bring himself to say the words. "If I'd been too late, I would never have forgiven you. Any of you. Can you understand that?"

But he was not the only one who was determined to be understood. "If it kept you safe - the way he wanted - then I'd have learned to deal with it. You could hate me for it, but, at least, you'd still be alive, to remember him. To mourn for him."

"Emmett, I . . ."

"No, Justin." Emmett's eyes were dark with shadows that would remain with him for the rest of his life. "You don't know - can't know - how hard he fought, how much it meant to him. As glad as I am to see you, and as much as I know you want to be here, there's still a part of me that just wants to beat the snot out of you for ignoring his wishes." He paused then, and tried to swallow around the huge knot in his throat. "You can't imagine what he went through to try to keep you safe."

Justin simply stared for a moment, realizing that the room around them had gone silent as everyone tried to listen in on their conversation. "No," he agreed finally, "I can't. But you're going to tell me."

"No, I . . ."

"Emmett." Justin waited, watching as his big Nellie-bottom friend almost cringed away from the idea of talking about what he'd seen, what Brian had endured. "Emmett, you . . ."

"I can't, Justin. I just . . ."

"Listen to me, Emmett. Are you listening?"

For a tiny moment, something flickered in Emmett's dark eyes, a reflection of gentle memory. "Yes. I'm listening."

"If he endured it for me," Justin whispered, "then I can endure it for him. Don't you see, Em. He had to watch what happened to me, had to kneel at my side while I lay there on the cold cement, suspended between life and death, had to sit there, helpless and lost and scared, not knowing if each breath would be my last. And to this day, he still has nightmares about it. I know he does, even though he's never said it. Now, if he could stand it, so can I. So you're going to tell me." Then he looked around, reading the looks on the faces of his friends and the intense interest in the faces of those who were not his friends. "But not here," he said quickly. "Let's take a walk. I need a cigarette anyway."
Emmett summoned up a sardonic smile. "Another graduate of Father Kinney's school for wayward boys."

There was a faint snicker of laughter from somewhere in the room, but it definitely did not come from Justin. "Why do you do that?" he said firmly, clearly. "Why do you all do that? You all blame him for every bad habit I have. What am I - some kind of mindless brat who can't be held responsible for any choice he makes, who can't think for himself? In case you've forgotten, I was smoking the first time we ever met. And, just so you know, just so you all know, everything I ever learned that helped me grow into the man I wanted to be - every lesson that mattered - I learned from Brian Kinney."

He turned then to head for the door, pulling Emmett with him and waving Michael off when he looked as if he wanted to accompany them. But he paused at the entrance and looked back at the circle of faces that were regarding him with huge, shadowed eyes. "You know what? You should all take some time to stop and think about it, and ask yourselves what lessons he might have taught you. You might be surprised."

Then he was gone, Emmett at his side and the young black man who'd been talking to Cynthia trailing behind them, eyes moving constantly, sweeping in a continuous arc to cover every angle of approach. Drew Boyd and Lance Mathis stood together, watching them go, appearing satisfied with the circumstances, but Cynthia, from her spot near the corner, was less sanguine. "You sure about this?" she said softly, looking up to meet the security chief's eyes.

"Yeah. I'm sure."

She pursed her lips and studied his face with narrowed eyes. "For your sake," she replied, "you better be right."

"You trying to scare me, Princess?" asked Mathis, biting his lip to keep from smiling.

But she wasn't kidding, and her expression told him he'd better be listening. "Scare you? Why would I do that? You're certainly smart enough to figure it out for yourself."

"Figure what out?"

Then she smiled, but it was not the least bit comforting. "What your life would be worth if something should happen to that kid on your watch. You know the old saying about the fury of a woman scorned? Well, remember this. No shrew that ever lived could hold a candle to Brian Kinney in a rage."

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When the elevator doors opened to admit Justin and Emmett, they came face to face with a slender young man with dirty blonde hair and a narrow face, whom Justin did not immediately recognize. Hunter Novotny-Bruckner had changed quite a lot in the year since Justin had moved to the city. He was taller and brawnier; his skin was no longer deathly pale, and his face had filled out, eliminating the hollow gauntness leftover from the days when he had been forced to live on the streets and barter his body to survive. His eyes were different too, no longer filled with shadows of desperation and a cynical disregard for all the things in life he had been denied.

Justin greeted him with a nod. Despite their shared youth, they had never been close, since they'd had nothing else in common. Justin, despite his final alienation from his father and the entire Taylor side of his family tree, had lived a life of privilege prior to his coming out, while Hunter had known
nothing but hardship and betrayal from the time of his birth until stumbling into the opportunity of a lifetime with Michael and Ben. Thus, Justin assumed at this time, that he had nothing to say which might interest the younger man. So he simply stood aside and waited for Hunter to make his exit from the elevator, but it was quickly obvious that Hunter had a different idea. After studying Justin's face during an awkward moment of silence, he turned to focus on Emmett's; then he moved further back into the elevator car to allow them room to enter with their discreet shadow bringing up the rear.

"Aren't you . . ." Justin began.

"I'm going with you," the boy replied, in a tone that seemed to leave no room for debate.

"I don't think that's a good idea," said Emmett quickly. "Justin and I have some things that . . ."


He did not bother to complete his statement, but his eyes were filled with anguish, and Justin finally nodded his agreement, although he wasn't sure why he felt compelled to do so.

The four rode in silence for a while, as the car descended, but Emmett was still perturbed by the idea of having to speak of what he knew to even one young man - much less two.

"Hunter," he said gently, watching the numbers flit by on the floor indicator, "I think you should turn around and go back up. Ben and Michael will be so glad to see you. Since you started spending so much time in Penn Hills - with Natalie's family - they don't see as much of you as they'd like, and I'm sure . . ."

"Emmett, please," said the young man, raising a hand to stop the flow of words. "I really need this."

But Emmett was not going to be so easily persuaded. "Why? Why would you need this? I understand, if only barely, why Justin might feel the need to hear all the gory details, from some perverted sense of indebtedness. But you don't really even know Brian, so why would you . . ."

"But I need to know him, to understand the man he is, so I can . . ."

Though the words were addressed to Emmett, it was Justin who was struck with a sudden epiphany. "So you can move past him," he said softly, sympathetically.

The boy nodded.

But Emmett was still confused. "Hold it! Just hold on here. Why would you give a shit - beyond the fact that he's like a brother to one of your dads - what Brian Kinney is really like, or how he dealt with what was done to him? You're not even gay."

Hunter took a deep breath, as if preparing to confess something horrible, something unspeakable. "It's not that simple," he said very softly. "Yeah, after I was able to put an end to my life as a hustler . . ." He paused and flushed, took a deep breath and seemed to summon up a new resolve before he started again. "As a whore, I found out that I really didn't enjoy taking it up the ass. That it was pussy I wanted. And I looked back on every one of my tricks, and hated them for using me and hated myself for letting them do it, for selling myself so cheap and telling myself that it was something I wanted. Something I enjoyed.

"But I never did enjoy it. I was just fooling myself, because I knew I didn't have any other choices. I never once met a man that I really wanted. Not until . . ."
Emmett's eyes were suddenly huge, and dark with understanding. "Until Brian," he said gently.

The boy nodded. "Until Brian. He was so beautiful, so perfect, and so much more than all those bastards who used me and then threw me away, like yesterday's garbage. He refused to use me, to take what I was so eager to give him. For the first time in my life, I really wanted a man, and he wouldn't even give me the time of day. Until all that shit with the cop. I let myself get fucked by a murderer and swiped the condom full of his jizz, and I did it for one reason. I didn't give a shit about Jason Kemp or justice or any of that shit. I just wanted Brian to see me - really see me. Not as this pesky kid who kept hanging around; not as Michael and Ben's stray foundling. But as Hunter, as a person who wanted him, and who was worth wanting."

"But he didn't," said Justin, remembering what it was like to want Brian so badly and realize that the desire was futile.

Hunter shrugged. "Not the way I wanted. But that night, when he took me back home, he tried to stick up for me when Michael and Ben went ballistic. And I realized something in the middle of that whole fucked up mess. Ben and Michael loved me; that went without saying. But Brian - somehow - understood me, and tried, in his own strange way, to defend me. That was something no one had ever done for me. I didn't know how to feel or what to think, and I never got a chance to figure it out.

"I never got the chance to get to know him, and I see now that it was something I needed to do. To understand him, and how he looked at life, how he was able to accept things that would have destroyed anybody else, and how he was able to see through my big act and accept me, without judging me."

"But you moved on," Emmett pointed out. "You're doing well in school, well on your way to becoming the next F. Lee Bailey, according to Michael. And you're with Natalie now." He looked over at Justin. "And she's really lovely, Sunshine. They're adorable together, just you wait and see."

Hunter smiled. "Yes. She really is. But I just feel . . ."

"Like you have unfinished business with Brian?" That was Justin, not quite sure how he felt about Hunter harboring feelings for Brian, but knowing in his heart that the younger man was not a threat. In fact, he realized that he believed - had believed for a long time - that there were no threats to jeopardize his place in Brian's heart.

The younger man smiled. "It may be silly, but I feel like I need to get to know him and to tell him how much it meant to me. How much it still means to me. And how sorry I am about all the shit that came after. Because I never let myself forget what he did for us, for me, what he was willing to give up to help Michael protect me. Even if everybody else did forget it."

By this time, they had reached the lobby, and their silent escort gestured toward a courtyard off to the left, a quiet, shady place with free-form benches arranged around a quiet reflecting pool and only one exterior entrance - ideal for security purposes.

It was a perfect spot for their discussion, as it was currently deserted, and filled with shadows - a place where they could speak freely and not worry about being interrupted or overheard.

Emmett chose his position carefully, opting for a shadowed nook with the only light source behind him. Justin and Hunter took their places side by side in front of him, as their bodyguard blended into the gloom near the exterior doorway.

When Emmett began to talk, his voice very soft, almost monotone in his effort to say everything that needed saying without breaking down into emotional excess, it was as if the three of them were
enclosed inside a sphere of silence, where no sound could penetrate from beyond the circle as the rest of the world fell away into shadow and timeless stillness. It was not a magical time, not an occasion for joy or fulfillment or enlightenment. Instead, it was dark and frightening and filled with regret and remorse, and none of them would walk away from it unchanged.

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Matt Keller had intended to spend the evening in his tiny little cubicle, dozing when he could, or playing Tetris, perhaps, which somehow helped him to focus his mind and order his thoughts. Maybe he would have phoned for Thai take-out - a fondness he had developed in the company of one Brian Kinney - or, in desperation, tackled the Times crossword puzzle. Anything - anything at all - to keep from watching the clock and trying to figure out what he would do if Rick Turnage refused to be persuaded to work his magic on Keller's VIP - very important patient.

But he had quickly realized that he could not bear to sit still and just wait, so he had gone for a walk, strolling around the park that was situated down the street from the hospital, his cell phone tucked into his pocket. He needed to clear his mind of all the extraneous crap that seemed to accumulate there every day and concentrate on how to do his best for his patient - and his patients. It wasn't, after all, as if he only had one.

As he walked, he forced himself to think about the others: the five-year-old boy with severe abdominal damage inflicted by his psychotic mother wielding a meat cleaver in her determination to cut the devil out of his body; the twenty-one year old soccer player struck by a car and sent plunging through a plate glass window; the autistic teen-aged girl suffering from severe congestive heart failure resulting from a genetic defect; the young black woman with multiple skull fractures inflicted in a beating administered by a jealous boyfriend.

And those were only the most critical of the group for which he was responsible.

And Brian Kinney, of course, who had been as badly injured as any of the others, but appeared to have pulled back toward life before reaching the point of no return. Physically, at least. Mentally and emotionally - well, that might prove to be a different matter altogether. He believed in Brian - in his strength and his courage and his ability to survive whatever life might throw at him, but this . . . this was not going to be a walk in the park, by anyone's definition.

Matt walked and smoked - another habit he usually blamed on Brian Kinney, although, in his more honest, lucid moments, he admitted to himself that it was something he would almost certainly have resorted to on his own, as a result of the extreme stress he endured in the practice of his profession.

A glance at his watch revealed that it was later than he'd thought - past time for Turnage to have called. So he would return to the hospital, and make the call himself, if he could only figure out what to say.

As he left the park, he looked up, and paused, transfixed by the image that caught his eye. In a small square located at the center of the major intersection across from the park entrance, a small sign was situated in such a way that it caught the attention of everyone who passed by, either walking or in a car. Low floodlights focused on the image, and every line, every angle in the arrangement led the eye of any observer to the center of the display.

It was ingenious. It was also indisputably the work of one Brian Kinney, another confirmation, as if any were needed, of how well the man knew his business.
The image was of a small child strapped onto a gurney being bundled toward a waiting medical helicopter, small arms reaching back for someone left behind. The caption was simple. "Is this how you'd want to say good-bye?"

Beneath the image, the sub-text was stark and black. "Your donation makes sure Allegheny General is all he'll ever need."

Shit! The man was a fucking genius. Every parent/grandparent/godparent or foster parent within a hundred miles had dug deep to pony up funding for the new transplant clinic the hospital was trying to build as a direct result of this advertising campaign.

Keller sighed and turned toward the hospital, his mind still focused on the ad campaign and the power of the photograph. He froze in mid-stride. The power of the photograph.

He was smiling when he resumed walking, when his cell phone rang.

"Keller."

"Where the hell are you?" That was Beck, tactful as always. "I've been paging for ten minutes."

"I needed some air."

"Since when does cigarette smoke count as air?"

"Yeah, well . . ."

"Never mind. I thought you might like to know."

"Know what?"

"That someone - some very special someone - seems to be waking up."

"Fuck me. I'll be right there."

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The waiting room was almost empty by that time, visiting hours having ended over an hour earlier. After Justin, Emmett, and Hunter had returned from their little expedition - solemn and pensive and subdued - the extended family, two by two, had trouped into the ICU and stood looking down at Brian's bandaged face and studying the monitors that surrounded him, hoping that the indicators blinking in green were all signs of good news. To everyone's surprise, Justin had gestured for Hunter to accompany him as he'd stepped forward to be first in line, and the two had spent several minutes within the inner sanctum, speaking to Brian and to each other and sharing things they never bothered to disclose to anyone else, not even Ben or Michael. The rest had waited impatiently for their turns, but no one had quite dared to voice their irritation when the young men lingered, ignoring the fact that the minutes were ticking away. When they'd finally made their exit, the others had divided the time remaining between them, all speaking to the patient in soft, muted voices and taking advantage of the opportunity to touch him - his hands or his hair or any bare spot of skin they could find. Debbie and Michael had each touched his forehead with their lips. Lindsey had lifted his hand and dropped a kiss on his fingertips while Melanie looked on in silence, and Emmett had spent a couple of minutes whispering in his ear.

Then they had all said their good nights, and Justin and Emmett had gone off together, with a new security guard accompanying them under orders to drive them to the destination of their choice and remain there to watch over Justin until his relief arrived. Ben and Michael had also departed, with
Hunter and Debbie in tow, and Theodore, Lindsey, and Melanie in their wake.

It had been a long day.

In the end, only Cynthia remained in the waiting room, filling out a new set of insurance forms and waiting to speak with Matt Keller, providing he returned to the hospital before she decided to retire. In addition, Lance Mathis was still somewhere around, and one of his hired guns was standing guard near the ICU entrance while another prowled the halls.

Cynthia was grateful to notice that Mathis was taking no chances, although she was beginning to wonder if the man ever slept; both Brian and Justin would be safe under his oversight.

She finished up the paperwork and delivered it to the duty nurse before gathering her belongings and preparing to depart. That was when Matt Keller came barreling through the ICU door, pausing at the nurse's station to hand the RN a sheaf of documents and instructing her to dispatch them by fax to the number written at the top of the first page. Then he turned toward Cynthia, and she rose quickly, noting the brightness in his eyes and hoping that she was not wrong in thinking it promised good news. She had not, up until this moment, allowed herself to consider the alternative, to suppose that Brian might not make a full recovery; she did not know how she would handle that.

Then he dropped into the chair at her side and offered her a weary grin. "Damn, I'm good."

To her own surprise, her knees were suddenly too weak to support her, and she collapsed back into her chair. "Please don't be cryptic," she said sharply. "I'm not in the mood."

"He's waking up."

She closed her eyes for a moment, and bit her bottom lip to keep it from trembling. "Can I see him?"

"Not tonight," he replied, correctly interpreting the relief in her eyes and reaching out to take her hand. "He's still mostly out of it, but he's stable enough for us to move him out of ICU in the morning, and put him in a private room. You'll be able to see him then, although he still may not be awake. For the next few days, he'll be in and out of consciousness, and the more he sleeps, the better off he is. He's still going to be in a lot of pain, so the painkillers are going to make it difficult for him to stay awake for any length of time. So, for tonight, go home. Get some rest." To her surprise, he leaned forward and kissed her forehead. "He's going to be fine, and he's very lucky to have you."

She nodded, suddenly more exhausted than she had ever been in her life.

When she left, after taking a few moments to collect herself and re-establish the mask of indifference she wore so well, Keller rose quickly and hurried back into the ICU, pausing at the desk to check on the condition of his other patients before returning to Brian's bedside just in time to see lashes fluttering and one hand lifting from the bed as if reaching for something.

The doctor enfolded it within both of his own, and leaned forward until he was sure his patient could see him - providing he chose to focus.

"Brian? Can you hear me?"

After a beat of silence, the answer came, and the tone was undeniably, quintessentially Brian Kinney. "Why? Did you think I'd be deaf?" It was weak and halting, but there was no mistaking the sarcasm laced through it.

Keller grinned. Whatever else might be damaged - and he didn't bother to try to deny that there would be plenty - the wicked intellect was intact, and demanding a response in kind. "Actually, I
thought you might be dead, but it seems that, once again, those reports have been greatly exaggerated. How do you . . ."

"Like I lost a round with Godzilla. Any more stupid questions?"

Keller was quiet for a moment, checking vital signs and considering how much he should say at this juncture. He finally decided on keeping it simple, for now. "Do you know where you are?"

Because of the bandages covering his face, only the irises of Brian's eyes were actually visible to the doctor, so how was it, he wondered, that they could still convey so much contempt. "Ibiza? South Beach? St. Tropez?"

"Smart ass! Would you just . . ."

Eyes clinched briefly, and a tremor acknowledged a fresh wave of pain rushing through the battered body, but Brian was not about to slip back into the comfort of drug-induced sleep until he got answers to the questions he'd awakened to ask.

"Where . . . is . . . he?"

Keller sighed, realizing that he should have known, should have been prepared for this particular interrogation. "He's nearby, Brian. He . . ."

"Fuck! I'm . . . tell Honeycutt . . . I'm going . . . to kill him when I . . . get out of this fucking . . . bed."

The doctor chuckled. "Yeah, I'm sure he's quaking in his boots. But you shouldn't be angry at him. He did convey your message. But your little blond . . . he has a mind of his own, you know. I don't think a brigade of Ninjas could have kept him away from you, so Honeycutt never had a prayer."

A twitch in the bandages around the patient's mouth made Keller wonder if he was trying to smile. "Yeah. Stubborn little shit."

Keller nodded. "Stubborn, but not reckless. He's being well looked after, I promise."

Then he placed a gentle hand on Brian's forehead and regarded him with a warm affectionate smile that would have astonished most of the people who thought they knew the physician well. Neither warmth nor affection were ordinarily part of his repertoire of expressions. "Why don't you get some rest now? And - in case you're wondering - you're going to be just fine."

And those eyes were looking at him again, already knowing more than they should. Never once, in all the years they'd known each other, had he been able to lie to Brian, and he would not start now. There had always been only truth between them, and he could offer nothing less now.

But not tonight. Tonight he would simply kiss his old friend good night and wish him sweet dreams, even though he was pretty sure it would be a long time before such dreams were possible again for Brian Kinney.

For now, all he could do was find a way to survive the nightmare.

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"tbc"
He leaned against the wooden railing on his deck to stare out into the starlit mass of the Atlantic and watch brilliant white breakers accost not-quite-so-brilliant white sands, as he listened to the thunder of the surf and noted the pale tracery of lightning that flickered far out to sea, while a fitful wind swirled around him, molding his linen shirt to his body and tousling thick, dark hair until it stood on end. Master of all he surveyed; the phrase was particularly appropriate, he thought, as he gazed out upon the crescent of beach that comprised the border of his private reserve, stretching from the promontory on the left where the tall spire of a lighthouse perched at the edge of a steep drop-off that plunged straight down into turbulent water, to the row of dunes far off to the right that marched away from the broken shoreline. It was beautiful and pristine, and it all belonged to him.

Then he was reminded of another minimalist phrase which had become his mantra of late.

Rank hath its privileges.

He was living proof of that. It was definitely good to be the best in his field. And if that was a slight exaggeration - there was, after all, the rest of the world which might dispute the claim - it really didn’t make much difference. He was the best in this country, and nothing else really mattered, for this was the place where it mattered most - the place where the demand for his services generated incredible profits and allowed him to indulge himself in any lifestyle he might choose.

Being the best had provided him with the wherewithal to live the life he'd always wanted, and to surpass the standards established by his father. The old man, after all, had been one of the best - a member of an elite group - and had achieved an astonishing level of professional and financial success while inspiring his only son to aspire to even greater heights.

Thus, Joseph Richard Turnage was still renowned worldwide as an accomplished plastic surgeon, even though he'd been retired for almost a decade, but J. Richard Turnage - he had dispensed with the despised "Jr." when he'd hung up his first shingle - had established himself at a remarkably young age as the premier plastic surgeon of his generation; perhaps of any generation to date. At this point, he was only thirty-seven years old, and his reputation for incredible skill and mastery of his art was surpassed only by his notoriety as a pompous, arrogant prick who not only refused to suffer fools gladly, but actually refused to suffer them at all. Thus, he was almost impossible to work for or live with, and the only people who could tolerate him were those who profited enormously by the association. Because of his expertise and an intuitive feel for artistry and beauty, his services were constantly in demand among the so-called 'beautiful people' - the movie stars and models and trophy wives who depended on the perfection of their faces in order to live their glamorous lives.

Rick Turnage was the man who created and/or maintained that perfection. It had made him very rich and enabled him to pick and choose which patients he would accept and which he would reject, and he was the only person in the world who understood the criteria he used for determining which was which.

Except - maybe - for one annoying bastard. He closed his eyes and visualized the documents that were currently sitting in the center of the blotter on the massive teakwood desk in his private office. Son of a bitch! This was not something he had expected to deal with at this time. He had other things on his mind, other priorities that needed addressing.

Like the voluptuous redheaded journalist who had come to interview him just ten days earlier, and agreed, several hours later, to join him for a week on his yacht, for a Caribbean cruise. As a man who sought to create beauty out of ugliness, he was always fascinated by loveliness that occurred
naturally, without his intervention, and the journalist was one of a miniscule number of individuals who had needed no enhancement from him to qualify as the 'real thing'. Thus, he was enchanted and intrigued and eager to explore the depth of her charms.

He had reached the zenith of his profession, but, strangely, that achievement had coincided with reaching the nadir of his personal life. He and his father hated each other; his mother had gone missing on a trip to the Far East six years earlier and was presumed dead; his third wife was in the process of learning to hate him as much as her predecessors; his twin sister resented his success and his fame and his failure to display what she considered "proper family devotion"; and he could not remember the last time he had seen or spoken to either of his two sons.

He consoled himself by believing that it was simply the price of greatness. And by taking advantage of the attentions of the string of exquisite individuals - mostly women - who were eager to fill the empty places in his life, for their own ulterior motives. Primarily, they enjoyed the fact that those places were invariably filled with all the trappings of his life of luxury, but they also were pleased to be seen in the company of the man who created such beauty for others while needing no such service for himself, for Rick Turnage was as beautiful in his own way as any product of his skill.

Physically.

And he relished the rewards of his skill and his looks - rewards like the idylls he envisioned in the company of his newest passing fancy.

And now . . . this.

Shit! And even more annoying than the timing was the nagging suspicion that the fucker who had interrupted his plans had known exactly what he was doing.

It wasn't the first time he'd had good cause to despise Matthew Keller, and he was sure it wouldn't be the last.

He turned away from the spectacle of the sea and went back inside, pausing at the bar just within the entry to pour himself a hefty shot of Chivas Regal before continuing into his office where his desk was set into a bay window with a panoramic view of the ocean. The office was dark except for the golden cone of light falling from the vintage Tiffany lamp that sat on the corner of his desk, and it was no more than an element of random chance that the illumination fell directly on the grainy portrait that was sitting atop a sheaf of documents he had tossed there earlier, in a display of temper.

He didn't want to look at that face. And yet . . . in truth, he did want to look at it. But not like this. Not at this grainy, imperfect image that was about as clear as one could expect of something expelled from a fax machine.

With a disdainful snort, he sank into his high back leather executive chair, and swung to face his computer monitor as he tapped out a series of commands on his keyboard. It was only a matter of seconds before the screen lit up with the image he'd selected, and he sat back to stare at it.

He'd been right (as usual). The image provided by the fax machine was a poor substitute for the full-color perfection of the photograph culled from the pages of an article in a professional magazine.

Hazel eyes stared back at him from a face that was decidedly not smiling, but the gleam in those eyes clearly indicated that the man behind the face found something amusing.

Smart, bright, and blessed with brilliant sardonic wit; that was patently obvious in a perfectly proportioned face.
A perfect face - almost.

And that, of course, was the secret that Turnage had never revealed to anyone. True perfection, in symmetry and design and proportion, was beautiful to behold, but was, ultimately, boring. To make it truly stand out - truly pop - such a face needed some small detail that was a departure from the predictable lines of perfection.

And here it was, staring back at him, and forcing him to acknowledge, as he did only rarely, that nature, when it chose to do so, was still better at designing the ideal human form than he was.

The man's chin was not - quite - as large as it would have to be to reach true perfection, and the not-quite-smile touching those incredibly sensual lips seemed to say that the man knew it perfectly well, and dared anyone to point it out. There was no doubt at all that this man knew he was beautiful, and reveled in it; knew that anyone who looked at him would be consumed with either lust or envy.

Turnage stared for a while, sitting back and allowing his eyes to study each feature, wondering if there was a way to improve any one of them, to make the whole more beautiful than it already was. Then he leaned forward and generated another command, and the head shot vanished, to be replaced by a casual pose: Kinney, in impeccable Armani, standing with two stunning blonde women at his left, and another blond - an exquisitely beautiful young man - at his right, and the doctor's eyes narrowed. The caption indicated that this was a moment, caught on film, of the opening of the man's advertising agency, but the story told by the photograph was much more interesting than the one conveyed by the copy. While both of the women were staring up at Kinney as if he were the center of the world, he, in turn, was staring down at the blond young man beside him, one arm wrapped firmly around the youth's waist, and it was obvious that the women - and the rest of the world - could have faded into oblivion, and the two men would never have noticed, so lost were they in each other's eyes.

Gay, then! And that much more intriguing for it. Gay, and bold enough to make no secret of it.

Turnage wanted to snarl his rage as he felt the hook, dangled before him by that motherfucking Matt Keller, embed itself more deeply in his tenderest tissues.

Fuck! He didn't want to do this. He wanted to go to Barbabos, and to St. Thomas - to Paradise Revisited - while fucking the redhead every hour on the hour. He wanted sin and surf and frozen margaritas as the sun sank over tropical waters. He sure as shit didn't want to go to Pittsburgh.

But there was one thing - only one thing - that he wanted even more than his sensual pleasure; it was the thing that kept him perpetually seeking out new cases and accepting new patients, when he could have simply rested on his laurels. He wanted . . . his Mona Lisa; his Starry Night; his Sistine Chapel.

His masterpiece - the one he'd been seeking all his life; the one case which would prove to be his ultimate accomplishment, his greatest work of art.

Still, he really, really didn't want to go to Pittsburgh, of all places.

But, if he took the bait Keller had set for him, there would be no help for it. Yes, his clinic was here, just a couple of miles away from his beautiful seaside home, and yes, he would be free to insist, as he always did, that the patient come to him, treatment and surgery to be scheduled at the convenience of the physician. But even he could not - quite - get away with demanding that this young man, now so badly damaged and clinging to life by a thread, according to the chart information Keller had provided, travel half-way across the country for treatment that might not be feasible, or even possible. In order to determine whether or not he could do the job that Keller was asking him to do, he had to accept the bait - and go see for himself.
When he picked up the phone and dialed, he promised himself that he would allow only three rings; thereafter, all bets were off.

He almost snarled when the dreaded response came after only two.

"Keller."

"How bad is the damage?"

"I sent you . . ."

"Yeah. Which is about as revealing as a kid's finger painting. So . . . how bad?"

A sharp huff of breath, quickly suppressed. "As bad as I've ever seen. They did a hell of a job on him."

Silence then. "Is he as . . . was he really . . ."

"The most beautiful man I've ever seen." There was no uncertainty in Keller's words. "And that's not just my opinion. Ask anybody. Ask . . ."

"I don't want to ask anybody. I want you to tell me the truth. If you're lying to me . . ."

"Look, Turnage." All patience exhausted now, but fury still held in check, if only barely. "No matter what we may think of each other - you and me - the one thing you can't accuse me of is lying to you. Not ever. And you're smart enough to know that if there was anybody else - anywhere in the world - I could trust to do this job, I'd have called them. You're the last person, literally, that I'd ask for this kind of favor. But . . . this time, it matters. Only the best will do."

More silence, punctuated by a distant roar that was the constant growl of the sea while Turnage mused. "If you're wasting my time, you're going to pay for it."

"OK."

"And if I do this, you're going to owe me."

"We'll see about that."

"Look, motherfucker," snarled the plastic surgeon, huge blue eyes gone icy with resentment, "who do you think . . ."

"I think," Keller interrupted, "that I'm the man who just gave you something you've spent your whole life looking for."

"What the fuck do you . . ."

"Your masterpiece." Sharp, flat, unapologetic - and holding not a trace of uncertainty. "It's what you've always wanted, isn't it?"

The only answer was a beat of silence, followed by the sharp sound of a disconnect.

But it was enough to make Keller smile. The hook was set; the bait, taken.
The silence between the two women was neither comfortable nor easy; it was, instead, heavy with words not yet said but lingering unspoken. Waiting.

The room was spacious and well-appointed, a great improvement over the tiny one they'd taken when they'd first arrived in Pittsburgh; the upgrade was, of course, courtesy of Kinnetic Corp, a fact that they both knew, but neither had actually acknowledged.

Lindsey was the first to break the silence, although she could have thought of at least a million things she would have preferred to do.

"I want him here, Mel. Surely you can understand why . . ."

"Oh, I understand all right." Melanie's voice was harsh, almost strident, and bordering on shrill, threaded as it was with bitter resentment. "I understand that it's taken us a whole year away from this place - away from him- to finally get him out of our lives so we can be a real family. And now, first chance you get, you want to drag Gus back here, so Brian can play daddy again. At his convenience, of course. Never mind how it might screw things up for us. And for Gus."

Harsh words of accusation rose to Lindsey's lips, but she forced herself to swallow them, to pause and think carefully before saying something she would regret.

Instead of blurting out the bitter recriminations that were screaming in her mind, she chose to walk to the window and stare out into the darkness, watching a spring wind play among the branches of a red maple just budding with the promise of warm weather to come. "That's not fair, Melanie," she said slowly. Gently. "When we took Gus away to Toronto, I promised Brian that he would still be a part of Gus's life, that I would make sure his son didn't forget him. And since then, I've allowed you to systematically try to dismantle every link that connects them to each other - to do everything you could to get Gus to forget his father ever existed, despite the fact that it's never seemed to bother you too much to take advantage of Brian's generosity and his love for his son, when it's convenient for you. Because of everything we endured . . . before, I didn't want to make an issue of it. I thought it would just blow over, with time. But it's not fair, Mel. It's not what I promised in order to get him to give us his blessing."

"Don't you dare talk to me about what's fair," Melanie snapped. "It's my salary that's always provided for us. It's my hard work that enables me to keep you in style and allow you to dabble in your precious art and keep Gus in the best private schools while my daughter has to make do in a crappy daycare center that . . ."

Lindsey spun quickly, her eyes wide and filled with shadow. "Excuse me. Did I just hear you refer to J.R. as your daughter? Is that what you just said to me? That's odd, because I always thought she was our . . ."


But Melanie's voice trailed away into silence as she realized what she had said - and what she had almost said - and she experienced a moment of bitter regret, for she knew in her heart that the accusation was unfair. Lindsey loved J.R. every bit as much as she loved Gus. But . . . why did it have to be this way? Why was it that, every time she looked at the little boy who was supposed to belong to her and her partner, all she could see was the beautiful face of Brian Kinney?

Fuck!

When Lindsey sank into the overstuffed chair near the window and spent a few moments fighting to
regain her composure, Melanie was suddenly conscious of a specter rising in the room, a ghost of old pains and not-quite-forgotten anguish, and she felt a lump forming in her throat that felt like a chunk of dirty ice. Thus, when Lindsey began to speak again, Melanie recognized a deadly coldness in her voice that seemed perfectly suited for the moment. "Is that the real reason you wanted to move to Toronto, Mel? Was all that rationalizing about keeping our kids safe and building a new life in a place where we'd have the right to be a real married couple just . . . an excuse?"

"Of course not. Why . . ."

"Because I'm not quite as stupid as you seem to think I am." There was a terrible, new resolve in the blonde's tone, a determination that Melanie had never heard before. "For years, I allowed you to paint Brian as the villain of this piece. Even when I knew better. And let's just clear the air here, shall we? You and I - together - chose the daycare that J.R. attends, because we both agreed that the staff there was the most loving, most nurturing, most dedicated of all the places we visited. The fact that it was not the most expensive one we investigated was just a bonus, not a criteria for judgment. As for my 'dabbling' and your 'keeping' me - I am well aware that my job doesn't establish groundbreaking legal precedents, or change the world, but it does allow me to encourage artistic efforts and help young people develop their talent, so it feels worthwhile, to me. And I happen to be very good at it, so it allows me to earn a decent salary. Not, of course, on a par with yours, but if you've convinced yourself that I couldn't survive on it, maybe you should think again. Particularly since neither one of us has ever survived without a little help from a very special friend. And you may claim that you were unaware of Brian's contributions over the years, but we both know that would be a lie. Just because I didn't rub your face in it doesn't mean that you didn't figure it out. As you're so eager to remind me, you're not that stupid."

Melanie's cheeks flushed hot and red as she rose and crossed her arms across her chest. "As if you've ever passed up a chance to force me to remember how much he's always been a part of our lives. And now you want to bring our son back here, simply because . . ."

"Because it's what he would want," Lindsey interrupted. "And because he has a right to expect it. Have you really managed to forget that the only reason you have parental rights to Gus at all, is because Brian gave them up to save our marriage? Is it possible that you've convinced yourself that never happened?"

"I - don't - care!" Melanie snarled. "I don't want him in our lives; I don't want to have to put up with his bullshit, or with you making excuses for him, or with how you feel about him."

"He almost died, Mel."

Melanie opened her mouth and managed, by the thinnest of margins, to close it again without uttering the toxic words that were trembling on her lips, but it was immediately obvious that her effort was in vain. Spoken or not, Lindsey had heard them anyway, and could only stand and stare at her partner, eyes full of a terrible certainty.

When there was a discreet knock on the door, it was debatable which of them was more relieved at the interruption.

Or more surprised when the identity of their visitor was revealed.

"Daddy," said Lindsey, her voice faint with disbelief as she opened the door. "What are you doing here? How did you find me?"

Ron Peterson stood motionless and stared in silence for several seconds at the daughter he had not seen in more than a year. Then he glanced toward Melanie, and was quick to identify the glitter of
anger in her eyes, confirming his suspicion that he was interrupting a confrontation of some sort, based on the muffled words he'd overheard as he'd come down the hall.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I've come at a bad time."

"Actually," replied Lindsey, deliberately avoiding looking toward her partner, "your timing was perfect. But I still don't understand how . . ."

"The news has been full of the story about Brian's attack," he answered, "so I figured you had to be in town."

Then he reached out, moving slowly so as to allow his daughter the opportunity to resist should she choose to do so, and wrapped his arms around her shoulders. "I know how much he always meant to you, and I . . . well, he is the father of my grandson. So I called his assistant; and she was kind enough to tell me where to find you. You know, I'm not sure why but . . ." He leaned back and favored her with a tentative smile, "I always kind of . . . liked him. Although your mother . . ."

Lindsey looked up at him, studying the gentleness in his eyes and hearing something almost unprecedented in his voice. "Where is Mom?" she asked, knowing without asking that her mother was not waiting somewhere in the corridor.

Mr. Peterson sighed. "Corfu, I think. Or Kalamos, maybe. What day is it?"

"She's in Greece? What in the world . . ."

"She and Lynette went to see Mamma Mia on Broadway a couple of months ago, and got inspired. So they're island-hopping in the Aegean."

Melanie cleared her throat, obviously weary of being ignored, but Lindsey forestalled the comment she was about to make by grabbing her handbag and taking her father's arm. "Why don't you buy your daughter a nightcap?" she suggested with a smile.

The Petersons - father and daughter - departed quickly, leaving Melanie to brood and simmer and look for a suitable outlet for the rage building inside her.

Lindsey ordinarily confined her consumption of alcohol to an occasional glass of wine or, at celebratory moments, a champagne cocktail. But she didn't hesitate when she seated herself at the hotel bar beside her father. "JB," she said to the bartender. "A double."

"Make it two," said Ron Peterson as he regarded her with one raised eyebrow. "Are we celebrating?" he asked with a tiny smile.

"We are," she replied firmly as the bartender poured their drinks. She lifted her glass to touch it to the one her father was holding. "Brian's going to live. That's cause enough, don't you think?"

He nodded, and they drank together. Then he chose to stare into the mirror behind the bar, rather than look at her directly. "I have to confess, Daughter Mine, that I've never completely understood your relationship with him - given your sexual orientation, I mean."

She surprised herself with a tiny laugh. "Join the crowd," she replied. "I don't think anybody understands it exactly - including me and Brian. But however we might try to explain it or define it, it's real and it's precious. To both of us - and to our son."
Ron shifted his gaze and sat for a while staring down into his drink. "He's not here with you, is he?"

"Not yet," she answered hesitantly. "I assume you heard some of the conversation Melanie and I were having when you knocked on the door. That was the subject of our discussion. I want Gus here. Immediately. And Melanie . . . disagrees."

"Has Brian asked for him?"

She shook her head. "Brian hasn't regained consciousness yet. But when he does, I think he'll want to see his son." She sneaked a quick glance at her father's face and surprised something in his eyes that she couldn't quite identify. "I know you and Mom don't think much of my . . . life choices, Dad. Or of the people I've chosen to include in my life, but Brian - no matter what you might have heard about him - loves Gus very much and, in his own admittedly oddball way, he's been a good father. For one thing, he's always been there to provide for Gus - and for me - when I've needed him, even though Melanie has not always been very . . ."

"Hospitable?" Mr. Peterson did not appear to be surprised by how easily the right word came to him.

Lindsey smiled and nodded and drained her glass. Then she turned to regard him directly. "Why are you here, Dad? The real reason. I don't think it's just that you got tired of being on your own while Mom's globetrotting."

Since her father had always been gifted with a facile tongue and a quick wit, Lindsey was marginally surprised - and slightly alarmed - when he was slow to respond and when, as he began to speak, he still refused to meet her eyes.

"I've missed you, Linz. More than you know; more than your mother knows, and I . . . lately, I've begun to realize that I don't want this to go on. I want . . ." He sighed, and drained his drink. "I want to get to know my grandson. And I want my daughter back. It's time to mend fences, before it's . . ."

"Before it's what?" she asked, not quite able to control the tremor in her voice.

"Before I get too old to enjoy the reunion," he replied, with a bright smile. But Lindsey was almost certain that this was not what he'd originally intended to say.

"But why now?" she demanded.

He shrugged. "Maybe because of this whole debacle with Brian. I mean, he's a young man, strong and capable and healthy, and yet . . ."

"And yet, he almost died."

"Right."

Lindsey sipped and thought. "What else?" she said finally, knowing there was more.

His smile was slightly self-deprecating. "It looks like Lynette is not going to be able to have children," he admitted. "They're not sure yet, but . . ."

"Oh, Daddy, I'm sorry," she said gently as she thought about her sister and the extended family that loved her so much. "Mom must be devastated."

He simply nodded, his eyes suspiciously bright in the gloom of the bar. "Well, you know your mother. She'll . . . survive."
Lindsey was quiet for a time, playing with her glass, watching her father out of the corner of her eye and hearing something... else. Something he wasn't saying. Something, she finally realized, he was not going to say - not yet. Not tonight.

So it would be left to her to make the next gesture. He had come to her, had trusted her with the few comments he was able to make.

"Dad," she said slowly, tentatively, "I'd really like for Gus to be here when Brian wakes up. But I'm not comfortable with leaving. If something should... go wrong, and I wasn't here, I don't think I could ever forgive myself. And I don't want to hire some stranger to bring him to me. I think it would frighten him. I thought maybe Melanie would go, but I don't think that's going to happen. So, if you're available...

If she hadn't been staring at his face in the mirror, she doubted she would have noticed the bright, crystalline blaze of pure joy that lit up his eyes, and then, of course, she had to pretend not to have seen it because she had a feeling that he would be embarrassed to admit how much it meant to him.

"You know," she continued, "I have a daughter too. You've never met her, but I know you'd be as enchanted with her as everyone else is. Only I don't know if Melanie would allow..."

He nodded. "I understand, Honey. I don't want to cause you any trouble, but I'd be glad to bring them both back, if all parties agree. Whatever you wish. And I'll leave first thing in the morning." He fell silent for a moment before reaching out to touch her face with gentle fingers. "And... thank you, Lindsey. I can't tell you how much it means to me."

When he reached for his coat, apparently ready to depart, she grabbed his hand and gave him a genuine bright smile which reminded him of the relationship the two of them had shared when she was much younger. "You don't have to run off right now," she laughed. "Let me write down the address for you, and directions."

His smile was gentle. "I know the address, Honey. I made certain of that, and I even got directions on MapQuest - months ago. Just in case."

She looked down quickly, not sure she wanted him to see the luster of tears rising in her eyes. "I never dreamed you'd... care enough to do that."

"Lindsey," he said softly, "I never stopped caring. It was just..."

"Mom," she said firmly, knowing she was right, but also knowing he would almost certainly never admit to it.

He frowned. "You have to keep in mind that she grew up in a different world, and she never learned how to adapt to the way it changed around her. I know it's been hard for you to accept, and I wish I could have figured out a way to fix it. I wish I'd been there for you, when you needed me."

"You're here now," she said, touching his hand once more. "And that means more than I can tell you. Thank you, Daddy. But she won't be happy with you, will she? Maybe we should just keep this..."

"No." If he had been tentative and uncertain before, that was no longer true. "I've kept things too much to myself over the years. And it certainly won't be the first time your mother has been less than happy with me." He leaned forward and covered her hand with his own. "It's time to settle this. You're my daughter, Lindsey, and that's not going to change. I don't want to waste what time... any more time."
With a small sob, quickly swallowed, Lindsey put her arms around her father, and rested her forehead against his shoulder, briefly amazed at how comforting it was to be able to do so. So she snuggled a bit closer, and enjoyed the familiar scent of his aftershave and the faint residue of the special blend of pipe tobacco he had used for as long as she could remember.

Thus she did not see the quick grimace that touched his face or the flicker of pain that flashed in his eyes as he let himself understand how much he had lost that he would never be able to regain.

But this much he could do for his beloved daughter, too long estranged and pushed away because of the demands of convention - this and a few other things he needed to arrange, even though he knew it would never be enough.

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Kinnetic had never been so quiet, she thought. Even late at night, there was almost always someone working against a deadline or scrambling to capture an image or an idea before it faded with the moment or feverishly attempting to transcribe vision into reality - to create something so perfect for its purpose that it would impress the man who was the heart and soul of the company, even though the man himself would have laughed at such a romantic notion. Many times, regardless of the hour, Brian could be found in his office, having lost track of time in the grip of inspiration. At such times, he frequently did his best work, tapping into something inside himself, some wellspring of intuition that produced unique methods for capturing imagination or generating interest.

Cynthia had often watched him work at such moments, marveling at his degree of concentration and the depth of his perceptions, always being very careful to avoid attracting his attention. One did not, after all, interrupt genius in full creative mode, and she occasionally allowed herself a moment of smug satisfaction in the knowledge that she was one of the few who understood the depth of his talents. Though his education had been intensive and extensive, it had only provided the polish, to put the finishing touches on his abilities; the ability itself had come naturally. No one - including Brian - could ever quite define how he always found the perfect way to present the messages he was charged to deliver; he just did it.

But he wasn't doing it now, and neither was anyone else.

Cynthia entered his office slowly, her eyes sweeping the room to make sure it was as immaculate as he preferred before proceeding to his desk where she touched a fingertip to a sensor concealed beneath a carved molding; a quick pulse of light scanned her fingerprint and dispatched an electronic signal to a mechanism that opened a hidden panel in the wall between Brian's office and his private bath.

The safe was small but state of the art, accessible only to Brian himself and to Cynthia. Inside were a number of files containing data vital to the company operation, details from his investment portfolio and copyright certificates and Gus's trust fund, certain enormously valuable contracts, certified copies of Brian's will and other legal instruments, insurance policies, and his personal documents, including his copies of Gus's ID and custody papers.

It was these final items Cynthia withdrew from the safe, glancing at her watch to confirm that Lindsey and her father would be arriving shortly. Since Ron Peterson was ready to depart for Toronto to fetch his grandson and bring him back to Pittsburgh, Cynthia had agreed to provide the necessary documents to make sure that there was no difficulty at the border in bringing the little boy into the country. Since Brian had not yet recovered sufficiently to tell her what he wanted her to do in this instance, she was operating on sheer instinct, but she couldn't imagine that, once he was
awake, he would not want to find his beloved son at his side.

She retrieved the items she needed and relocked the safe, before turning to make her exit. But she had only taken a few steps when she hesitated in mid-stride, glancing toward the big desk that dominated the room. She went very still and found, to her amazement, that she was trembling and barely able to stand.

She had almost lost him; he had almost died, and this was the very first time she had allowed herself to consider all of the ramifications of losing him and how it would have impacted on her life.

Cynthia did not love Brian - not, at least, in the way that other people loved Brian. Not like Justin loved Brian, or Michael loved Brian, or Lindsey loved Brian - even though the latter two would never have admitted that the love they had for him was not so very different from the love that Justin had for him. They had long ago managed to adjust their perceptions to convince themselves that their feelings for him had no romantic connotations.

Cynthia had never bothered to voice her opinions on the matter; not even to Brian himself. But she knew the truth, just as he did, though he had never verbalized his certainty either. But he knew, just the same.

But she wondered if he understood how she felt about him. Probably not, since she didn't entirely understand it herself. She was not in love with Brian Kinney; she did not worship him or sit at his feet and allow him to guide her through life. She did not believe him perfect or infallible; in truth, they argued and fought at least as often as they co-operated and agreed.

But she did love him, in her own way, for she knew something that only a very few individuals were privileged to know. Brian was the most honest individual she had ever known, and while she would never be naïve enough to believe him incapable of lying, she did know, without a single doubt, that he would never make a promise he didn't intend to keep.

He was the brother she had never had and the best friend she ever would have, and their relationship had grown and deepened during the year since Justin had decamped to New York. She was now a member of a very elite fraternity, and yes, that was the right word, despite its gender bias. This fraternity only had two members: her and Michael Novotny, and the criteria for membership was very narrow. To wit - they were the only two people in the world who had ever been allowed to see Brian Kinney cry.

That simple truth said as much about the two of them as it did about Brian; he did not trust easily but, when he did, he trusted with his whole heart. And it left him unexpectedly vulnerable.

She had come to understand that only slowly as their friendship had grown and deepened, and she resolved that she would never, never betray that trust. Not the way Michael had.

She was constantly amazed that Michael had never realized how deeply he had hurt Brian, but she had gradually come to understand the reason for his ignorance. Obviously, Brian had never told him, had never allowed him to see the hurt he'd inflicted. Any more than he had ever allowed the rest of the people who made up his extended family to recognize how often and how thoroughly each of them had betrayed him over the years.

Sometimes, in moments of frustration or anger, she thought that she'd really enjoy having a chance to confront all of them, and force them to see the truths that none of them had ever been willing to acknowledge or examine.

But no. She sighed, as she heard the discreet chime that announced the arrival of her visitors. She
would remain silent, no matter how much she longed to make them understand the depth of their betrayal. She would remain silent, because that was what Brian would expect from her. Unless, of course, they ever came to her, to question the whys and wherefores.

She smiled as she moved toward the door. If that should happen, unlikely though it was, then all bets were off.

She hurried to the lobby, inspecting the contents of the file she was carrying to make sure it contained everything Mr. Peterson would need, glancing once more at her watch to gauge how long it would take her to finish up here and get to the hospital.

Today would be the day, she thought. Today Brian would open his eyes and return to the land of the living, and she intended to be there when . . .

She rounded the corner and stepped into the lobby, expecting to be greeted by a smiling Lindsey and her father, but the tableau awaiting her was not at all what she'd anticipated.

She found Lindsey crouched on her knees, eyes huge and welling with tears with one hand clamped tight over her mouth while the other was clinched against her chest, clutching a rolled-up document. She seemed to be gasping for breath while her father knelt beside her, stroking her hair and murmuring soothing, nonsense words in her ear.

"What . . . what's wrong?" Cynthia asked, suddenly finding her own breath difficult to draw. "It's not . . . he's not . . ."

Mr. Peterson stared at her for a moment, confused and uncertain, before he realized what she was asking. "No, no," he assured her. "He's . . . fine, as far as we know. It's not that. It's . . ."

Cynthia forced herself to center, closing her eyes and managing a deep cleansing breath. It took a moment, but she was finally able to regain her composure and summon up the ability to deal with whatever new crisis had arisen. "What's wrong?" Her voice was steady this time, and cool, almost without inflection.

But Lindsey could not find any words to convey her horror, so she simply extended her hand and dropped the item she'd been clutching to the floor. It was a rolled up tabloid sheet that opened as it fell, revealing the garish images that covered the entire page.

Brian Kinney - before and after.

Cynthia managed, barely, not to stagger as she forced herself to lean forward and pick up the paper. It wasn't as if she hadn't already seen the images, as these were the very same photos that had been flooding the Internet ever since Brian had been attacked. But it was different somehow - more immediate, more deliberate, more intense - to see it printed on news stock and hold it in one's hands.

She stared for a moment, unable to utter a single word. She recognized the photograph on the left side of the page; it had been taken during the party to celebrate the launch of Kinnetic Corp, and showed Brian looking down at someone, wearing a soft smile. Although there was nothing in the photo itself to indicate who he was looking at, Cynthia knew that it had been Justin at his side, Justin who had put that smile on his face. The second image, adjacent to the first, was not quite as crisp or focused - snapped, no doubt, in haste, by someone who just happened to have a digital camera handy, and recognized a golden opportunity when it presented itself.

She had seen the picture before, but she had not allowed herself to really look at it, until now.

It was Brian's face, all right, but a face distorted and mangled, torn and sliced and mutilated and, in a
few places, laid open to the bone - swollen and lurid and robbed of all its beauty, though still, somehow, recognizable.

The headlines were huge and printed in brilliant scarlet. At the top of the page, the line read, "Beauty . . . and the Beast."

And at the bottom, equally large and vivid, "The Wages of Sin."

There was no logo, no masthead - nothing to indicate who might have produced the page. And on the reverse, there was only a vitriolic outpouring of homophobic nastiness, identifying Brian as a "notorious homosexual with a record of depraved behavior and accusations of child molestation" and claiming that he had gotten what he deserved for choosing to indulge his filthy perversion and flaunt himself in the faces of the God-fearing Christian community of Pittsburgh.

Lindsey continued to weep, rocking herself now in a jerky rhythm, still breathing erratically.

"Where did you get this?" Cynthia was finally able to ask.

Ron Peterson sighed. "They're all over the place. Stacks of them on top of every newspaper stand, and beside the doorways of every building on Liberty Avenue."

"Jesus!" she whispered. "How could anyone . . ."

Ron Peterson stood abruptly and walked to the window where he stood looking out into the soft pastel brightness of a spring morning. "I don't know," he said softly. "I feel like I should apologize. Even though I would never . . ." He paused and tried to swallow around the huge lump in his throat. "I never thought that something like this could happen here."

Lindsey turned to study him, disbelief rising in her eyes. "Daddy, don't be deliberately stupid. It's only a little over a year since some cretin planted a bomb at Babylon, and killed eight people. Simply because they were gay, and happened to believe they should have the same rights as everybody else. This . . ." She gestured toward the lurid tabloid page without really looking at it . . . "This is exactly the same thing. They wanted to kill him - to destroy him - and now they're gloating because they think they've succeeded."

Cynthia looked up then, and the two women stared at each other, sharing the same thought. It was Cynthia, however, who gave it voice. "If they think that, they're in for one fucking big surprise."

At that moment, Cynthia's cell phone rang, and a glance at the screen indicated that it was Matt Keller calling.

She had to pause to take a deep breath, struggling to believe that it could not be bad news. The tabloid sheet had shaken her, and made her doubt her determination and certainty, but she would not let it take away her faith.

"Hello."

"Good morning, Number One." Keller's voice was bright and strong and gave no indication that he had spent the better part of the night fighting to save the life of an accident victim. "I think you might want to get your ass over here."

"Is he . . ."

"Not yet," he replied, "but he did regain consciousness last night, for a few minutes."
"And," she paused to take a deep breath, "was he . . . all right?"

She could almost hear the smile in his voice when he replied. "He was exactly as you'd expect him to be. So I think your wait is almost over."

She closed her eyes and took a moment to whisper a two word prayer.

"I'll be there in a half-hour," she assured him.

"No big rush," he answered, "but you might as well be prepared. The herd is already gathering. And we've moved him to a private room, so they won't have to wait for ICU visiting hours to see him."

She swallowed hard, not entirely sure that Brian would be pleased to waken to a chorus of babbling voices, but not bothering to voice a protest. Once she was on the scene, she would make sure he would not be troubled by unwanted visitors.

She quickly thrust the documents for Gus into Ron Peterson's hands, and gestured for Lindsey to accompany her. "You," she said to the man, "go get Gus and bring him back here so he can see his father."

Then she grabbed Lindsey's arm and pulled her to her feet. "And you come with me. He's out of danger, and they think he'll be waking up soon."

Lindsey huffed a deep breath and managed to stand up, her face taking on an expression of grim resolve. Then she leaned forward and plucked the tabloid from Cynthia's hand, rolling it up so the images were no longer visible, and tucking it under her arm. "There are some people," she explained in a faint whisper, "who ought to see this."

Cynthia regarded her solemnly. "Yes. There are," she said finally. "Now let's go."

Michael had arrived first, except for Lance Mathis of course, who had been there all night, and proceeded to call everybody else, and they had all hurried to the hospital, but hesitated to barge into the room en masse. Thus, they had decided to drift in gradually - two by two - to avoid the unwelcome attention of the duty nurse. The hospital's policy on visitation was not terribly strict, except in the critical care areas, but nobody wanted to push their luck. So they'd strolled in, trying to look as if they had every right to be there, and taken their places, making sure to keep their voices down and avoid attracting attention.

Thus the posse was fully assembled before the dietary staff had finished serving breakfast, except for Justin, who was picking his mother and sister up from the airport on their return from their visit to Jennifer's family, and Lindsey and Cynthia, who'd had a task to perform at the Kinnetic office. Everybody - except Melanie, of course - had been curious about the nature of that errand, but no one had quite dared to question since Melanie's relentless frown had discouraged any expression of curiosity.

As they'd entered, each of them had moved to Brian's bedside and spent a moment staring down at him, looking in vain for some sign that he was conscious of their presence. Both Michael and Emmett had leaned forward to whisper something in his ear, and everyone else - except Melanie - had gotten close enough to touch him briefly, clasping his hand or stroking his face or his arm. Then they'd all settled themselves to wait, taking up chairs around the room or leaning against the wall, all positioned so that they could watch for any indication that the patient might be waking up.

Ben and Hunter had engaged Ted and Blake in quiet conversation, discussing the upcoming
publication of Ben's latest story in *The New Yorker*, while Drew Boyd had retired to the hallway to talk with his cousin as Mathis took his turn at standing guard, both of them turning to greet the latest arrivals as they stepped out of the elevator. Michael and Emmett remained mostly silent, content to watch Brian, barely aware of the others in the room, while Debbie had settled herself in a chair by the window, suddenly caught up in a feeling of *déjà vu*. It had not been so long ago, after all, that she had sat in just such a room, waiting to learn if her only child would awaken from injuries inflicted by the same kind of homophobic bastards who had tried to kill Brian.

Michael had survived, and so would Brian. She could not allow herself to consider any other possibility. But . . . no, she would not think about that. Not now.

Eli Gruber had been the last to arrive, entering when his partner had come bustling in, in scrubs and lab coat, carrying his supplies for drawing blood. At that moment, Emmett had glanced at Michael, looking as if he wanted to question the man's right to be present at such a moment, but, in the end, he chose to remain silent, not wanting to cause a fuss over something that wouldn't matter anyway. Eli had then gravitated toward Melanie who seemed to welcome his presence and his interest in her opinion on a new version of Proposition 14 that was being sponsored by a local right-wing group.

For his part, Monty Peabody rather enjoyed being the center of attention as he went about his task of drawing blood from the port attached to Brian's shoulder. Thus, when he was done, he spent a few extra minutes making sure that the specimen tubes were correctly labeled, and then proceeded to reposition IV lines and check out the display on the monitors. In truth, he knew little of what all the data meant, since he was simply a lab tech who had taken a couple of courses in phlebotomy to qualify for a slightly higher pay grade. But it seemed a very professional thing to do, and he didn't want to miss out on any opportunity to impress his neighbors, the Novotny-Bruckners, and their friends.

Still, he was usually competent in the performance of his duties. But this particular patient had certainly done nothing to earn either his concern or his compassion, and he couldn't quite suppress a sense of satisfaction in seeing the mighty Kinney brought so low; thus he was not as gentle as he ordinarily would have been as he tugged the blanket up to cover the patient's arms and noticed a slight tremor through torso and shoulders, a response that was almost a flinch and that might indicate some measure of discomfort. The medical staff had noted on Kinney's chart - which Monty had made a point of inspecting just as if he knew what all the cryptic notations and abbreviations meant - that the patient would soon begin to regain consciousness for short periods of time, and Monty wondered if the moment might be at hand.

But he decided it would be inappropriate for him to make such an announcement. In fact, it might be amusing to . . .

"My, my, my!" he said with a quick glance around the room. "How the mighty have fallen, hmmm? Have you guys heard about the article in the tabloid that's all over the streets? I hear it's quite . . . graphic."

"Yeah, I heard about it. Beauty and the Beast, huh?" Ted's voice sounded strange, as if he wanted to say more, but didn't quite dare.

"Homophobic pricks!" observed Mel. "What kind of shitheads would do something like that? Still . . ."

Ted looked up, picking up on a strange jarring note in her tone, and met her eyes, immediately reading the expression there with perfect clarity. "Still," she repeated, "there is some tiny little nuance of poetic justice in all this. If you know what I mean."
Debbie turned away from the window where she'd been watching passing traffic, and spotted the tentative smiles that neither Ted nor Mel could quite conceal and closed her eyes quickly, not wanting to see or understand the meaning. "Like finding out that the idol has feet of clay after all?" she asked. Then her eyes went wide as she wondered how she could have allowed herself to say such a thing. Brian had almost...but no. She preferred not to think about that. In truth, she would have preferred to not even know it. If the invincible Brian Kinney was not immune to the fickleness of cruel fate, then what chance did the rest of them have?

The complete, total silence in the room was broken by a small, quickly stifled titter, and no one was exactly sure where it had originated. Nor did anyone really want to know.

Except for Emmett, who was definitely not laughing as he got to his feet, staring at the faces of the individuals around him. "I don't believe you people," he said softly. "I can't believe that any of you - no matter how much you might resent Brian - could find anything even remotely funny in this."

"Oh, come on, Em," said Ted. "Surely even you can understand a peon's interest in seeing the mighty Kinney taken down a peg or two."

Emmett stared at his old friend, and had the strangest sensation that he was looking at someone he didn't know at all. "Would that be the same interest that the savages who did this had - in seeing a fag cut down to size?"

"Aren't you giving him a little too much credit?" said Eli Gruber, not bothering to suppress the snoot in his voice. "He wasn't anything special to them. They just wanted to kill a fag - any fag. And this one came along at the right time, and just happened to be the perfect target, seeing as how he's forever all over the newspapers, rubbing people's faces in his decadent lifestyle."

As it happened, Ben was the only one who was looking in Emmett's direction at that moment, and he was startled when Emmett flinched away from Eli's words, flinched as if to evade a physical blow. What in the world would account for that, he wondered. But he didn't get a chance to ask.

"Did they now?" said Emmett, very softly. "I wonder. Or maybe they intended to get exactly this reaction. Maybe what they wanted was to destroy someone who was a walking work of art - to take away the man he was and make him into something else. Something that people could cringe away from - and feel superior to, or laugh at. And if that's what they meant to do, then you're giving them exactly what they wanted, aren't you?"

The silence that fell this time was neither easy nor comfortable. Nor did it last long as Lindsey and Cynthia chose that moment to step into the room from the corridor, where they had been talking quietly with Lance Mathis when they'd overheard the comments made concerning the tabloid article.

"Bravo, Emmett," Lindsey said gently, stepping forward and reaching up to drop a kiss on his cheek. Then she moved to the bed where Brian lay silent and motionless, with only the gentle inhale and exhale of breath indicating that there was life yet within his body. She nudged Monty aside none too gently so she could edge closer and spend a moment staring down at the bandages that covered the patient's face, her fingers clenched around the newspaper rolled up in her hands.

It took several moments for her to compose herself, before she turned back to survey the faces of the group, and she was not surprised to find that none among them was quite brave enough to meet her eyes. Except Cynthia, of course, who looked as if she was ready to take on an army.

"I'm with Emmett," said Lindsey, so softly that all of them had to concentrate to hear her. And maybe that was her intention. "I can't believe it either."
First she looked at Ted. "How many times has Brian Kinney saved your ass, Teddie?" Then she turned to look at Debbie, then Michael. "How many times has he saved us all? How many times has he stepped up, to protect us, to rescue us? How many fights has he fought for us? How many that we know about - and how many more that we don't? I mean, never mind the wedding that never would have happened without him, or the jobs that never would have been there if he hadn't seen to it, or the prison sentence that was avoided because he intervened. Or the homophobic bastard who would have been mayor if Brian hadn't stepped up and risked everything to make sure it didn't happen. Or how about saving Justin's life? We know about those things, because there wasn't much he could do to hide them. But there's plenty that none of us know - because he never told us. For example, did any of you ever stop to wonder how Justin managed to stay in school after he decided to run off with his fiddler? I mean, he obviously had no money, and his rat-bastard father wouldn't support him, and he couldn't qualify for financial aid because his family was too well off. Well, let me enlighten you. Brian paid his tuition. Paid it without saying a word, even to Justin, and when Justin went to him, to tell him that he didn't have to do that in light of all that had happened, Brian's only response was, 'A deal's a deal.' He had promised to pay for Justin's schooling, and he would do so. No matter what, and it had nothing to do with who was fucking whom."

She paused and waited, but no one said anything. Then she looked at Debbie. "And if you're thinking that he might have bragged about it later, let me set you straight. The only reason I know about it is because Justin told me, on the day he came to me and confessed that he'd figured out that he'd made the biggest mistake of his life - that he was terrified that Brian would never take him back. But that's not Brian, is it? Brian always takes us back, even when we act like total dickheads."

She turned away then, and looked out into the brilliance of the morning. "I know a few other things too. Things I'm not supposed to know, because Brian never told me any of it, never wanted anybody to know. For example, I was in his office one day - several years ago - waiting for him to finish a meeting so we could go to lunch, when I noticed that his checkbook was lying on his desk, and, being just as nosy about Brian's life as the rest of you, I couldn't resist taking a peek. It didn't take long for me to understand what I was seeing because it answered a question I'd been wondering about. You see, I knew that big corporations aren't known for acting out of the goodness of their hearts. Like mortgage companies, for example. If anyone really spent any time thinking about it, they'd figure out that no commercial lender is going to allow a homeowner to suspend payments on their mortgage for almost two years, without penalties or interest or threats of foreclosure, simply because the homeowner has a sick brother who requires total care 24/7, and there's no way the owner can go to work to earn money to pay the mortgage. And yet, that's exactly what a certain mortgage company did. Isn't it, Debbie?"

Debbie Novotny's face went stark white as she rose slowly to her feet. "What are you saying? They agreed to . . ."

"Yeah," Lindsey interrupted sharply. "Sure they did."

"I went to them myself," said Michael. "They said they'd allow it because my mom had been a loyal customer for so many years. They said . . ."

She regarded him with raised eyebrows. "Uh, huh!"

Debbie's eyes were suddenly huge. "Brian," she whispered.

"Brian," Lindsey echoed. "And that's just one time that I happen to know about - not because he told me, but because I stumbled across the evidence. Anyway, it always made me wonder how many other times such things happened, and nobody ever knew. I figure that Cynthia probably knows more than any of us, only she's too loyal to give him up, but I'm pretty damned sure that there's a lot
more that we'll never know. But apparently, when it comes to Brian, he can never do enough. For us - who are supposed to be his friends - it's always a case of 'What have you done for me lately?'."

She sighed. "I always thought that we all made him the target of our snotty little snipes because he was so much tougher and brighter and braver and more beautiful than the rest of us, and I guess I was right, as far as it goes. But I think it was also because he was always stronger and able to take whatever we dished out, without caving in or folding up. But do we really believe that he was never hurt by it? That he didn't notice how often we assumed that he was guilty, only to find out later that we'd been wrong? And I'd bet that none of us ever bothered to step up and apologize for misjudging him."

She paused then and turned to stare at the silent occupant of the hospital bed. "Of course, he'd have just laughed it off if we'd tried, because that's how he is, isn't it? But there's no denying that all of us - including me - acted like a bunch of shitheads."

"Oh, come on, Linz," said Melanie, eyes sparking with anger and the jealousy that she was never completely able to conceal. She would never quite find it in her heart to forgive Brian for being Gus' father - or Lindsey for deciding that he should be. "Even you have to admit that he usually asked for it."

Lindsey, who had known Brian even longer than Michael had, and loved him through all that time, although not the way a woman usually loves a man, turned to regard her significant other with a cold stare. "You know what?" she said softly. "He was right. Sometimes, you really are a cunt."

"What do you . . ."

"Before you go patting yourselves on the back - for your witty repartee and your cleverness, perhaps you should take a look at the article that has you all so amused, so you can get a really good laugh at his expense." She flung the rolled-up newspaper at Ted, who had to grab it to keep it from hitting him in the face. It fell open in his hand, and he stared at the images - side by side, full page images - of Brian as he had been, at the height of his beauty, and Brian as he'd been when brought in to the hospital that fateful night, as he lay close to death. In livid, full color, the contrast was devastating.

No matter how much they had heard about what the article depicted, there was no way they could have been prepared for the horror of it.

"Oh, God!" Ted's voice broke as he stared at the photographs, as the vile, vicious images assaulted him, assaulted them all, making them struggle to breathe, to understand how anyone - no matter how homophobic or vindictive - could have done such a thing.

No one else seemed able to speak. Not even Melanie.

"Get out!" said Lindsey coldly. "Everyone except Em."

"What?" snapped Michael, leaping to his feet in outrage. "I didn't say anything."

She turned cold eyes to glare at him. "No. You didn't."

"But . . ."

"He spent his whole life looking after you, and you couldn't muster up a single fucking word in his defense."

"Now wait a minute," said Ben, obviously uncomfortable with the confrontation but unwilling to allow Michael to be singled out or targeted.
"No, you wait a minute," Lindsey snapped. "All of you can take your sanctimonious, pseudo-flower child, supercilious, oh-so-superior attitudes and go enjoy your own inflated opinion of yourselves, because sitting here gloating over what those motherfuckers did to him is sure as shit not doing him a God-dammed bit of good, although I'm sure it's making all of you feel much better. So get out!"

"You have no right . . ." said Debbie in a pallid imitation of her customary bluster, obviously still shaken.

"No, she doesn't," said Cynthia, speaking up for the first time as she fished a document out of her over-sized Gucci handbag. "But I do. If you knew Brian at all - which, by the way, most of you do not - you'd know that he doesn't leave things to chance. This is his power of attorney. Signed, sealed, notarized, and delivered, authorizing me to make decisions concerning his care, his life . . . whatever decisions need to be made while he's incapacitated. And right now, I'm making this one. Lindsey is dead right. Get - the fuck - out!"

No one moved for a moment, until the door opened and two figures stepped into the room - Drew Boyd and Lance Mathis - and the security chief moved to stand at Cynthia's elbow, his eyes moving to meet those of everyone else in the room. Only Emmett had enough presence of mind to notice that the young man they had all met within the last few days - diffident and friendly and unassuming - had suddenly been transformed into someone who was a force to be reckoned with. If any of them had thought to resist Cynthia's instructions, they immediately realized the folly of the notion. There was no doubt that Mathis was ready and willing to do whatever he had to do to fulfill his duty, to defend and protect the young man who was the only reason for his presence here, and God help anyone who might try to interfere.

The group rose quickly then, stumbling as if in shock and too stunned to offer up any coherent protest, and headed for the door, with Eli, pale and all atremble, in their midst and Monty, who had enjoyed the little uproar he'd generated until the two blonde bimbos had stepped in to spoil the fun, bringing up the rear.

"Oh, and speaking of cunts," said Cynthia, her eyes cold and her face set in the mode that had terrified subordinates for as long as she'd been Brian Kinney's good right hand, "there's one more thing." She moved forward and stood nose to nose (or rather nose to non-existent hairline, since she was several inches taller) with Monty Peabody, and her voice dropped to a sinister near-whisper. "If either you or your cunty, pretentious, self-important, sycophantic, puffed-up, pathetic little pussy-partner ever come near him again, then you're going to find out just how vindictive this pissed-off non-lesbian feminist bitch can be. Because I'm not Brian; I'm not nearly as forgiving or as laid-back as Brian, and you might be surprised to find out that, for such a worthless, immoral, promiscuous fuck-up, a man so richly deserving of your contempt and condemnation, he has an astonishing number of friends - and contacts - in some very high places - friends who can actually appreciate the fact that he's the most honest, unhypocritical man they've ever known. Contacts that he would probably never use, because he doesn't think that way. But I do, and I'd be perfectly happy to use them all. In short, by the time I'm done with you, you might just wake up from your little Stepford fag, pseudo-intellectual existence to learn that it's an extremely bad idea to fuck with Brian Kinney."

"You can't threaten me," whined Eli. "Who do you think you . . ."

She smiled, and Emmett was glad he was not the object of her scorn. "I'll tell you who I am," she said softly. "I'm the personal assistant of the man who single-handedly devised the advertising campaign that has raised over eight million dollars for this hospital's new transplant clinic. Now . . . who - the fuck - are you?"

She turned her back on him, and treated Emmett and Lindsey to a big smile as she heard him scurry
Thus, the group found themselves standing around in the hallway, slightly disoriented and not altogether certain of how they'd come to be there and still stunned by the sudden change of direction of their day. They all paused to exchange glances, none of them quite sure of what to say, as Monty and Eli made a hasty retreat, neither of them comfortable under the cold unflinching gazes turned upon them. Then Ted held up the tabloid article that had sparked the confrontation, and they all crowded in to take a closer look at the lurid item and to inspect the grisly photographs. By the time they had seen it all and read it all and absorbed the ugliness and the vitriol from its cruel rhetoric, there wasn't a smile in sight - only the horror of having, even for one moment, lowered themselves to the level of those who'd written it and spread it around like the disease it was, and Lindsey and Cynthia, watching from the doorway, knew a moment of powerful vindication.

"You go, Girls," said Emmett with a gentle smile, as he draped an arm around each of them. "Remind me never to piss either one of you off."

"Fuckers!" Lindsey snapped, before turning to look up into his face. "You OK, Honey? You haven't exactly had it easy lately yourself."

He nodded. "I'm all right. A few bumps and bruises in places best left unmentioned, but nothing to worry about."

She turned toward the bed, sparing a small smile for Drew and Lance. "If you three hadn't gone after him . . ." she whispered.

"You know," said Cynthia, as she moved around the bed to study her boss's face - what little of it she could actually see, "I have to confess that I'm glad I wasn't there. I don't know if I could have stood . . . seeing him like that."

Emmett's smile was gentle. "I imagine that you've seen him at his worst. Maybe even more than we have."

She nodded. "I guess - in some ways. I've seen him drunk and drugged out and sick and scared and desperate and . . ." She paused to draw a deep, hoarse breath, remembering how he'd looked in the days following Justin's departure, "lost. But I've never seen him helpless. Brian Kinney . . . doesn't do helpless." Her smile was tremulous. "It just upsets the natural order of things."

Emmett didn't know Cynthia nearly as well as he knew Lindsey, and he was a little hesitant about approaching her, but, in the end, he just stepped up and wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her back against his chest. "Don't think about that. We have to believe that it's only temporary and just thank God that we were in the right place at the right time to see those guys take off after him, and that Lance was right there, with his car."

"They'd have killed him," said Lindsey, and this time the tears would not be denied although she did not give in to the urge to sob out her anger and her frustrations.

"One way . . . or another," Emmett admitted, remembering his discussion with the police and with Lance and Drew and the conclusions they'd all drawn, and closing his eyes against the images that rose in his mind - the vicious snarls on the faces of Brian's attackers, the hatred and the lust for violence, and the power of the blows they struck at him, and the terrible sound of the impacts of fists and boots and unyielding metal against defenseless flesh. Between those memories and the equally vivid ones of his own experience as a victim, he didn't sleep much these days, and wondered if he ever would again, without having to endure those graphic images playing out in his mind. He sighed as a gentle hand touched his shoulder and he felt soft lips just brush the nape of his neck.
"Hush now," he said gently, his eyes rising to acknowledge Drew’s caress as he took Lindsey’s hand and enclosed it with his own. "You know he wouldn't want you to cry."

"No," said a strained voice, barely audible, "he wouldn't."

Cynthia, of course, was quickest to recover, except for Mathis, who managed to look completely unsurprised, and first to react, as both Emmett and Lindsey dissolved in fresh tears. She leaned forward and took Brian's hand, touching him as gently as if he were fragile and breakable, which, in a sense, he was at that particular moment, although he would quickly demonstrate that he was still Brian Kinney, still invincible, still undefeated. "Welcome back, Boss man," she said firmly, allowing not the slightest hint of a tremor to affect her voice. Still, she couldn't quite resist a compulsion to bend down and drop a fleeting kiss near his ear - one of the few places on his head that was not swathed in bandages.

When he whispered something that she could not quite catch, she moved to place her ear near his mouth so he could repeat it.

Then she smiled.

Two words from him, and she was on cloud nine. How ridiculous was that? But still, Brian Kinney did not pass out praise like sticks of gum. To get it, one had to earn it.

Two words in a broken whisper. "Good girl."

And it was enough.

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TBC
Chapter 18

Fuck!

He didn't want to be here, but he'd had no choice.

Fuck!

And now the fucking plane was late, so he'd have to wait around even longer, and he had a momentary urge - almost a compulsion - to run out of the airport and hail a cab and leave his 'escort' in the dust. Only, if he did that, he would not only have to answer to Lance Mathis and his staff, along with half of the Pittsburgh PD; he'd also have to answer to Brian Kinney, once Brian had sufficiently recovered to voice his displeasure, and one thing Brian Kinney had never been loathe to do was use that voice, loudly, vehemently, repeatedly. It was silly of him to worry about it, Justin knew, as they had rarely managed to go more than an hour at a time without getting into some kind of argument over one thing or another, but he was hoping that his first contact with an awake, alert, conscious Brian would involve lots of tongue action - albeit carefully administered due to the patient's condition - and sweet nothings and admissions of regrets for lost time, and not so much of recriminations and accusations.

So he was stuck, in more ways than one.

Fuck!

All he had wanted when he'd dragged himself to bed the previous night, tucked up safe in his mother's townhouse with his fucking bodyguards prowling the premises like hungry tigers, had been to grab a couple of hours of shut-eye to help him shrug off the remnants of jet lag, and rise in the wee hours of the morning to haul himself back to the hospital and wait for Brian to open his eyes. At that point, that had been the sum of all his desires - for Brian to open his eyes and look at him and recognize him.

And yell at him. He knew that was on the menu, without having to be told. He didn't bother speculating on which emotion would be dominant when the moment came - anger or elation. But it didn't matter. He was prepared for either one; the only thing that mattered was that Brian would wake up. Nothing else was relevant.

He had not let himself think beyond that point.

Earlier, when he'd left the hospital, he had intended to go to the loft - to the only place in the world that felt like a real home to him. But he had realized, in route, that the place would be too "Brian", that he would be inundated by memories and flashbacks and visions, and that sleep would never find him there; that, in the final analysis, it wasn't the loft that was his home; it was Brian, and, without him, the loft was just four walls and a floor - beautiful, but empty.

So, after he and Emmett (and their eternally vigilant bodyguards) had shared a quiet drink and a brief conversation at Woody's, he had directed his driver to veer off so he could return to his old home and crawl into his old bed, a remnant of his old life, pre-Brian, seeking nothing but unconsciousness. Still, sleep had not come easily, and he had tossed and turned until physical exhaustion had finally claimed him and pulled him to the brink of oblivion.

Unfortunately, that strange, timeless moment between awareness and slumber had provided the cue for Carl Horvath to enter, stage left, and present his soliloquy.
Justin had known, of course, that his mother was due to fly in early in the morning, had known that she had no idea of what had happened in her absence. Though the local news had been full of it, the attack on Brian had not made the headlines of the national press or the network broadcasts, primarily because it had not happened in New York or LA or Washington; Pittsburgh was still provincial enough to go unnoticed - mostly - by the national media. Thus, Jennifer was flying in without having any idea of what she would learn on her return or even that her son had returned from his adventure in paradise.

And that, he had believed, would be all right. Jennifer was nothing if not adaptable. She would hear it all soon enough, and she would cope, as she always did. But Horvath had insisted on forcing him to see another side of the equation, at the direction of a new player who had not yet made her appearance on the scene.

FBI Special Agent Alexandra Corey - despite the fact that she had yet to set foot in Pittsburgh - apparently had a very long reach and a mind keen enough to see things that others might overlook. According to Detective Horvath, anyway.

It had been pushing two AM when he'd called, and Justin had grabbed for the phone on its first ring, his heart hammering in his chest as he leaped to an erroneous conclusion.

His relief to learn that he'd been wrong had been immediate, but short-lived.

In less than two minutes, he'd decided that Special Agent Alexandra Corey had earned herself a permanent spot at the top of his shit list and that he did not like the way her mind worked, although he could not - in good conscience - dismiss her concerns.

She had certainly done her preliminary homework, coming to conclusions that he would rather not be forced to consider, especially when wrapped up tight in the spectral shadows inherent in the darkest hours of the night. Only, he couldn't refuse.

If she was right, there was simply too much at stake for him to ignore her.

Thus, here he sat in a hard plastic chair, staring with weary, bloodshot eyes at the arrivals/departure board, noting that Flight 1611 was shown as due to arrive in ten minutes. That meant another half-hour, by the time it landed and passengers disembarked, and he wished, for the hundredth time, that he had simply insisted that Horvath dispatch someone else to meet Jennifer and Molly on their arrival and give his mother the bad news. But the detective had pointed out - with annoyingly irrefutable logic - that Jennifer might very well refuse to accept the information provided to her unless it came from someone she could trust, and that, regardless of the source, she would be devastated and bordering on panic when confronted with the possibility that she and her daughter might be in danger from some unknown, vicious assailant, or that her son might be in even greater peril.

That had been the scenario posited by Alexandra Corey, who had examined all the evidence and concluded that the primary target - going all the way back to the attack on Babylon, and maybe even beyond - might well have been Brian Kinney and, if so, that those who were close to him - those he loved and cared about - might well be in extreme danger. Especially in the case of the young man who was widely recognized as his lover, along with anyone who might have family ties or close relationships to either of them.

Even the surviving Kinney family members - mother and daughter - were under discreet surveillance pending resolution of the investigation, which, Justin was certain, would not come soon.

He sighed and sat back, bracing his neck against hard plastic and allowing his mind to drift, watching idly as two birds - wrens, maybe, or sparrows, and how should he know since, in his estimation, one
bird was much like another - flitted around through the exposed metal rafters overhead. There were, he thought, plenty of places in Pittsburgh that could be described as uninspiring, but few more so than this very drab, very utilitarian airport. He felt sorry for the birds.

He closed his eyes and tried to think of something else - something bright and warm and pleasant and filled with color. Like Liberty Avenue. His smile was tentative, reflecting the fact that he really, really didn't want to be here. He wanted to be with Brian, holding his hand, touching his face, breathing his scent. Savoring his essence - the thing that made him Brian Kinney, that distinguished him from everyone else on the planet.

And even more than that, he wanted to be walking down Liberty Avenue at Brian's side, waving to friends and acquaintances, enjoying the color and the raucous atmosphere around them, laughing at the antics of Emmett and Ted, or exchanging eye-rolls over Michael and Ben's latest exhibition of pseudo-hetero-convention, noticing but pretending not to see all the lustful looks and envious glances directed toward them from the people who watched them pass by, engaging in the verbal sparring that was the life-breath of their relationship - taunting, teasing, squabbling . . . wanting. Christ! He had never wanted anything or anyone more than he had wanted Brian Kinney - every minute of every day. How the fuck had he let himself forget that, or let someone else convince him that anything was more important than the feeling that engulfed him when he was in Brian's arms? A feeling of perfect belonging, of rightness, of destiny fulfilled.

Justin loved Lindsey - he really did - and he knew that Brian also loved her, in his own rather oddball way. But sometimes - like now - he just wanted to smack her and sneer at all of her artistic pretentions. He had gone to New York because he'd allowed her fantasies to infect him with a hunger for recognition which he'd never experienced before, a hunger that made him forget what he would have to give up in order to reach for the brass ring she had dangled in front of him.

Fuck!

With an impatient shrug, he stood and moved toward the arrival area where his mother would soon (please God!) make her appearance, as he suppressed a grimace of irritation when his 'escort' took up his customary position behind him, strolling along and projecting an easy nonchalance that betrayed nothing of the man's skill and professionalism. Justin had definitely not wanted to like the man, nor to admire his abilities, but he'd reluctantly come to realize that Jared Hilliard was probably exactly the kind of individual you'd want to have around in a moment of dire need.

Tall, well-built, strong and graceful, the light-skinned black man had incredible eyes of a color somewhere between green and blue and managed, somehow, to fade into the background and achieve a level of obscurity despite startling good looks and a brooding physical presence. In addition, he had an easy, self-deprecating humor that Justin found appealing, and he caught himself speculating on how Brian would react to the man, for whom the phrase 'smoldering good looks' might have been coined.

Then he frowned, realizing abruptly that he didn't like where his thoughts were leading.

He and Brian had never had a monogamous relationship, unless one took into account those strange, surreal weeks following the bombing of Babylon, when neither of them had been themselves. He had never admitted to anyone - except Brian himself, of course - that he had not much cared for the people they had become during that period. They had both tried to walk the straight and narrow, and become strangers with little or nothing in common, and that, as much as anything else, had laid waste to their plans for building a life together.

Bottom line? Brian would be all over this guy, if he got a good look. And if Hilliard was amenable. Justin wasn't yet sure, but Brian would be. That much was certain; the Kinney Gay-dar was virtually
infallible.

Now all Justin had to do was figure out how he felt about the prospect. He closed his eyes and let his mind drift. Brian - fully recovered and restored and beautiful, smoldering hazel eyes undressing the delectable bodyguard and sending an unmistakable message in the process; Brian, shucking out of his clothes, never bothering with buttons - just pulling the shirt off over his head, along with the tie and anything else that might be in his way; Brian, sprawled on the bed, perfect body on display and perfect lips smiling an invitation; Brian . . . irresistible. And . . . what the fuck was the matter with him? He had just returned from a year in which he'd been denied the man, the body, the person who meant most to him, and here he was fantasizing about that same man, enticing someone else into his bed.

What the fuck?

_He_ wanted Brian - exclusively, permanently, privately - with no outside intervention or interference. Didn't he?

He opened his eyes and found Jared Hilliard staring at him, with brows arched and beautiful eyes alight with speculation and a tiny smile.

What the fuck?

"Justin?"

Thank God, and never mind why.

"Justin, what are you doing here?"

"Hi, Mom. Welcome home, and let's get your luggage while I tell you all about it."

He really hated admitting that he was wrong about something, but it was immediately obvious that Horvath - and that smart-ass FBI bitch - had been right.

He'd barely begun to tell her what she needed to know, when Jennifer stopped walking, hands clasped to her chest as if fighting to breathe. He was forced to pause and wrap his arms around her, with Molly gathered close to his side, and simply hold her, to give her time to adjust, to absorb what no mother should have to endure. She needed him now, and he could not just walk away, even though he didn't want to be here; he wanted to be with Brian, holding his hand and waiting for the moment of his awakening. But Brian, no matter how wounded, was strong - was always capable of surviving, of facing whatever life might throw at him and facing it alone if necessary, even when others could not.

It was one of the things he loved most about the man - and also one of the things he loved least - an intimate part of the enigma that was Brian Kinney.

Fuck!

Jennifer's eyes grew wider and darker as Justin talked, and by the time he was done, her face was haunted and haggard as she contemplated the possibility of danger to her beloved son and daughter at the hands of some unknown cretin hiding out there in the darkness of his own evil, plotting his sick revenge against Brian Kinney individually, or against those who inhabited his world. She had known such fear before, but she was no better equipped to handle it this time than last. Memories blended with dread, and she flinched from the thought of Justin, bloodied and bludgeoned and
suspended between life and death - past or future.

And one thing more.

When, she wondered, had this happened? When had the brash, brutally candid young scoundrel who had stolen her son's heart managed, somehow, without her knowledge or consent, to work his way into her own? When had it begun to matter to her what fate might hold in store for Brian Kinney, who certainly neither wanted nor needed her concern or her care but . . . had earned them anyway?

She closed her eyes and thought about Brian, hearing pale whispers of everything that Justin was not saying. Then she deliberately allowed herself to remember the first time she had ever seen him, fighting down the pangs of resentment that always rose in her when she thought about that moment. The memory was still vivid and harsh and heavy in her chest, stealing her breath away, as she retasted the bitterness of the sight of this man, this grown man, and the knowledge of what he had done to her innocent son.

And yet . . . she could admit now what she could never have faced back then. Even at that moment - hating him, resenting him, loathing him - she had seen it, and the voice had whispered in her mind.

*Christ! He's beautiful. And together, they're breathtaking.*

She had known it, even then, years before Kinney had finally faced his own truth, had finally admitted that he had fallen in love with her son; she had known that Justin's life would be irrevocably intertwined with that of Brian Kinney.

And now . . . dear God! What would happen to them now?

Emmett stood silently, hands clasped tightly behind his back, awaiting his turn to welcome Brian back to the land of the living.

Well, not exactly. More like waiting his turn for execution, for he knew that Brian was not going to be pleased with him. He had, after all, been charged with one task, and one task only, and he had managed to fail spectacularly.

Brian Kinney was not the kind of man who tolerated failure or fools, and Emmett's first instinct, on realizing that Brian had awakened during the ugly exchange between the members of the group who were supposed to be his friends, had been to hit the door running and not look back.

But the lapse had been brief. He always thought it ironic that he - the ultimate drag queen - should have such an unswerving sense of what it meant to be a real man, a definition that had nothing to do with sexual identity and everything to do with honor and decency. He had acquired it not from his father or his other male relatives, but from his beloved Aunt Lula and the grandmother who had died when he was still living in Hazlehurst, Mississippi - the only members of his family who had ever really loved him and accepted him for what he was. It would be a shameful thing to run away from the consequences of his own actions.

So he would stay here and await Brian's displeasure, no matter how much he dreaded the lash of that sultry voice and the ice that could flash in those beautiful eyes so much better suited to seduction.

He deeply regretted that Brian had wakened in time to overhear the ugly commentary from his so-called bosom buddies. And there was little doubt that he had heard it, even though he'd said almost nothing about it. But it was there to see, should anyone care to look for it - not in his words, but in the tone of voice and the shadows in his eyes, barely visible within the frame of snowy bandages.
He had spoken to Cynthia first, their words barely audible and very brief, and almost entirely professional, except for an initial emotional exchange, demonstrated by the quick brush of a kiss and hands clasped gently. Then Lindsey had pushed forward, barely able to restrain a desire to throw herself into his arms and obviously determined to distract him from what he had overheard, carefully phrasing questions about his injuries and avoiding any reference to the attack, and babbling about Gus and how eager he was to see his dad.

At that point, Emmett and Drew had exchanged glances, wondering if they were the only ones who noticed how much Brian was striving *not* to say, dismissing her concerns with typical Kinney aplomb.

Emmett had turned away then, finding it too painful to watch the tears welling in Lindsey's eyes and the extraordinary gentleness with which Brian managed to lift a hand to wipe them away. Instead, he chose to stare out into the growing brightness of the morning and wonder how many times the exact same thing had happened in Brian's life - how many times he had simply stood tall and firm, shrugging off the pettiness and the jealousy and letting it fall away, never allowing himself to react or respond to the hurt. Probably, never even allowing himself to feel it, although Emmett wasn't exactly sure how one could achieve that level of stoicism. Unless it had become necessary for survival. Unless one had endured so much thoughtless cruelty and withstood so much pain at the hands of those who purported to be friends that it became automatic to raise new layers of insulation, new walls to deflect new hurts, so that, eventually, one became invulnerable, untouchable.

Alone.

Reluctantly, he allowed his mind to drift back, to sift through years of random memories, of nasty little barbed comments dropped deliberately into lulls in the conversation and intended to be overheard, of snide observations uttered to compensate for feelings of petty jealousy and inadequacy and the gay equivalent of penis envy, of gleeful responses to every occurrence that could be twisted to reflect badly on Brian or might result in some kind of discomfort for him, even though he never once displayed such a reaction, of the cruel smiles and venal laughter at his expense whenever anything happened that might prove painful or inconvenient or costly for him, as if he'd deserved their scorn and ill will.

And how - exactly - had he done that?

Emmett was appalled to realize that he couldn't come up with a single rational response, except for the one truly unforgivable sin; Brian had earned their contempt and enmity by having the flair and the intelligence and the moxie and the courage to be the man they all wanted to be - and couldn't.

"Will you kindly stop dripping all over me."

Emmett grinned. Now *there* was the Brian Kinney they all knew and . . .

*Christ! We really do love him, although I don't think any of us have ever realized how much, or stopped to consider how often we turn to him or how much we need him. Or what we would do . . . Christ!"

"Sorry.” Lindsey managed an awkward little laugh, obviously grateful for something to cover up the silences that were dwelling all around them, filled with words none of them dared say, as her eyes remained fixed on a patch of bare skin just above Brian's ear, as if she couldn't bear to look anywhere else.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~
Brian watched as the mother of his child tried not to stare, not to see and comprehend what she was seeing, and he took a deep breath, understanding that this was the first hurdle - the first instance of people trying to be kind, trying not to flinch away from the sight of him. He would get used to it - in time - just as he'd managed to get used to other things over the years. It was amazing what one could learn to endure when one had no other choice.

"Why are you still here?" he asked, in a soft, strained voice.

"Where else would I be?" she replied, reaching out to take his hand.

"With Gus," he answered, managing to convey his impatience in two clipped syllables.

"Gus will be here soon," she said, thinking to reassure him.

"Why?" Even more clipped and more impatient.

"Because he wants to see his daddy."

"Lindsey." He managed, barely, to avoid snapping at her. "He won't even recognize me, and, if he does figure out who I am, it's going to scare the shit out of him. Don't even think about . . ."

"Don't you even want to see him?" Typical Lindsey - all sentiment, no sense.

"Why? So I can watch him scream and try to run? All he's going to see is Frankenstein's monster. Don't you get that?"

"But . . ."

"No buts," he said, his voice sinking to a whisper. "I'm not going to subject him to that."

"But what do I tell him when he asks to . . ."

"Tell him I love him. For now, that's all he needs to know. He shouldn't have to think about the rest."

He lifted his hand and smoothed a lock of hair back from her face. "Now, go make peace with your husband who is bound to be majorly pissed off because you're here with me instead of . . . wherever with her. I need to talk to Emmett."

For a moment, she hesitated, and he could see that some small part of her wanted to argue, or, more accurately, felt that she should argue, should insist on remaining at his side, even while a larger part of her was grateful for the reprieve. He debated whether or not to comment on it, but decided that it was better to ignore it and allow her to escape with dignity. He was sure it was a reaction that would become more and more familiar with time.

He also noted the sympathetic glance she directed toward Emmett and almost opened his mouth to offer reassurance. But that would have been completely out of character, and he wasn't quite ready to face the questions that would undoubtedly arise too soon for his liking. So he just waited until she made good her escape before shifting his gaze to the big Nelly-bottom. When Emmett stepped toward him, obviously nervous but managing to maintain eye contact in spite of it, Brian felt a twinge of conscience over what he felt compelled to do, but he was caught off guard when his old friend began to speak without waiting to be addressed.

"Brian, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

"For what? For not doing the one thing I asked of you?"
He was caught even more off guard when Emmett shook his head. "No. Not that. I'm sorry that you had to hear all that bullshit. I know you've always understood why they all . . . why we all treat you like . . ."

"The black sheep of the family?" If he could have smiled, he would have. It was unfair, perhaps, to enjoy Emmett's squirming, since he had been one of those least guilty of multiple offenses, but even tiny nuances of vengeance should be savored when offered up so sweetly.

Emmett nodded. "You didn't deserve it."

This time, he did smile, and felt the burn of abused muscles and tissue around his mouth urge him to avoid doing so again. "After all these years," he said softly, "do you really think I give a shit?"

Emmett's smile was very gentle. "Of course you don't."

Brian closed his eyes, and was grateful that his injuries and the bandages that covered them made it unnecessary for him to guard his expressions. He was, of course, a master of doing so as he'd had years and years of practice, but he was pretty sure it was an art he would no longer need to depend on. He doubted anyone would be looking close enough to notice from here on out. "I assume he refused to listen to reason."

"I did try, Brian. Honest to God. I told the cops, and I made sure that nobody in the family called him. But . . . somebody did. I don't know who, and there was just no way to stop him. You know how determined he can be when . . ."

"When duty calls." And even though the face was completely obscured, there was no way to avoid hearing the caustic wit erupting in those three simple words.

"Duty?"

"Yeah. What else?"

"Haven't you figured it out yet?" Emmett did not mean to sound quite so irritated; God knew Brian had enough to deal with without having to fend off verbal jabs, but this was really too much.

"Figured out what? That he's here because we're 'committed'? Because it's the 'right thing' to do?"

"Brian, you can't . . ."

"Get out!"

"What?" Emmett's eyes were suddenly huge, and dark with tears unshed. "Why would you . . ."

"Because," thick with acrid sarcasm, "I don't want you here."

"But . . ."

"Mathis!"

"Yeah, Boss?"

Brian turned to meet the steady gaze of his chief of security. "You still work for me?"

"Unless you're firing me." Mathis was not - quite - smiling.

"Then get him out of here."
Emmett watched in disbelief as the security chief turned toward him, eyes cold and determined, and knew that, if he chose to turn this into a confrontation, he would inevitably lose.

"I don't understand you," he said slowly, looking back at Brian and trying to determine what it was he was seeing in those hazel eyes.

"Few do." Was that a glint of humor, of smug satisfaction he saw there? Or was it something else - something darker and heavier?

Emmett took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. He really didn't want to allow himself to express anger or frustration at such a moment, and he didn't want to fall back on Lana-Turner theatrics to save his dignity, but there were times when a drag-queen just had to do what a drag-queen had to do. Thus, he spun toward the door and made his exit with a flourish, pausing only to direct a smoldering glance toward Drew Boyd. "Are you coming?"

Boyd's smile was achingly tender. "In a minute. Wait for me in the hall."

When Emmett was gone, there was a moment of expectant silence, before all four occupants of the room shared a moment of awkward laughter. Then Boyd stepped forward so that he could look directly down into Brian's face. "Under other circumstance," he said, with a diffident smile, "I'd beat the shit out of you for treating him like that."

"That would be redundant," replied Brian, completely deadpan.

"But, for the moment, I think I'll let it pass."

"That's big of you. Now why don't you toddle along and go console your boyfriend. There are things I need to discuss with . . . my people."

Boyd nodded and started to turn away, but was held in place by Brian's hand clasping his sleeve with a surprising amount of strength for a man who had just awakened from a coma. The big quarterback allowed himself to be pulled forward until he was close enough to hear the words that the patient whispered. It was only one sentence and, when he pulled back to try to read the eyes within the bandages, Boyd could almost believe that he'd imagined it.

Then he smiled and straightened up, confining his response to a quick nod, eyes filled with a soft glow of understanding and, perhaps, something more - something that recognized and mourned the textured layers of tragedy and unavoidable destiny.

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Cynthia had been glad to be given tasks that required her to focus on the minutia of the situation, to handle pending business decisions and practical problems, to address the needs of clients and work assignments, to find Matt Keller and advise him that Brian wanted to see him.

Thus, she left the room feeling relieved and feeling guilty for feeling relieved, knowing that Brian had seen and understood what she was feeling - and why.

It had never mattered to her that her boss was a creature of rare beauty, except for the fact that it was a source of pride for him and a formidable weapon in his ongoing assault against the narrow minds of the advertising establishment. After an initial hormonal stir - something she was sure every woman experienced on first sight of Brian Kinney - she had shaken off any latent feelings of attraction and determined that it was more important, from a professional standpoint, that she get to know the man beneath the façade rather than the luminary who lived on the surface.
And she had never regretted that decision; nor did she regret it now.

But being one of the few individuals ever allowed to get close to the inner Brian had never prevented her from enjoying the gorgeousness of the package or his ability to use it to his advantage.

And now - Matt Keller's promises notwithstanding - that gift, that package, might be gone forever, irrevocably damaged. It would not impact how she saw him or how she felt about him; she would make sure of that. But it might very well impact how he saw himself, and that could create fundamental changes in the man he was.

That was something she wasn't sure she could deal with.

So she set about her errands with firm resolve and a degree of satisfaction in having enough to do to allow her to avoid thinking too much.

Only she'd failed to anticipate one thing.

Michael.

When she rounded the corner to approach the nurses' station, she realized that she should not have been surprised that he had waited. The only real surprise was that he had done so alone, that there was no sign of his mother or his lover or any of the rest of his customary entourage.

She ignored him at first, taking her time in addressing the charge nurse and arranging for Dr. Keller to be paged to Brian's room, but if she'd hoped that Michael might take the hint and take his leave, she was doomed to disappointment.

When she had finished her conversation and carefully reviewed some insurance release forms, she turned to face the young man, schooling her features to show no emotion beyond mild curiosity.

"Michael," she said firmly, "I don't have a lot of time, so . . ."

"Cynthia," he interrupted, his eyes downcast and bruised, somehow, as if battered by the emotions raging inside him, "please. Just . . . give me a minute."

She wanted to say no; more than that, she wanted to shout at him, to tell him to stand up straight and stop acting like a pussy, or to get down on his knees and beg for forgiveness he didn't deserve. Either way would be an improvement over this timid, self-effacing demeanor. Still, this was Michael, who was beloved of Brian Kinney, whether or not he deserved it.

"Come with me," she said finally, leading him into an unoccupied consultation room and closing the door to give them some privacy.

"Michael," she began . . .

"Wait!" he replied sharply, his voice breaking as he struggled to find the right words. "I know what you're thinking. I know that I've . . ."

"Sit down, Michael," she said abruptly, accepting that this was a conversation she was not going to be able to avoid. "Maybe it's time we had a little talk, whether I've got time for it or not."

"I know what you're going to say," Michael answered.

"Do you? Somehow I doubt that," she replied. "Because, if you did, you probably would have run out of here screaming before coming anywhere near me."
"What do you mean?"

"What I mean," she said, her voice steady and flat, "is that you should have been the one to stand up and tell your so-called friends and family where to stick their fucking attitudes. Instead, Emmett had to do it, while you sat there with your thumb up your ass, letting them do what they always do - vent their anger and petty jealousy at Brian's expense. Would it interest you in the least to know that . . . he heard it all? He was awake the whole time. Doesn't that make you want to run out and tell them? It'll probably make their day, and yours."

He sat heavily, dropping into the nearest chair and rubbing his face with his hands. "Shit!"

"I'm always amazed that you guys never seem to figure it out," she observed, "that you always get caught. Do you really think he doesn't know what all of you think of him?"

"But I always speak up for him. You should know that."

"I know you make a token attempt," she retorted. "Occasionally. But I also know something else - something no one else knows, but you. Which makes it even harder to understand how you can just stand by and let it happen. He trusts you, Michael. And he loves you. The only person he ever loved more was Justin, but that was a different kind of love. Which might explain everything, I guess, if you're like your mother, and can't forgive the fact that he was never able to give you the kind of love you wanted from him. He loves you like a brother - like you were blood - but maybe that wasn't good enough. It certainly wasn't good enough for your mom. But . . . Christ, Michael! How could you have turned your back on him the way you did? How could you forget all the times he was there for you? Even when Ben wound up in the hospital, and you were scared shitless that he might die, who came through for you? Who bolstered you up and gave you the strength to face it? Who dropped everything to be there when you needed him? He spent years and years taking care of you, and when I think about how you betrayed him, how it was more important to you to impress your cunty new neighbors than return the loyalty that he showed you every day of his life, I wish . . . Shit! I wish I was big enough to punch your lights out. And it's pretty obvious to me - hell, to everybody if they only had the balls to admit it - that you only decided to treat him like shit when you'd found somebody else to watch out for you, when you thought you didn't need him any more. So you figured you'd get even, since he wouldn't lie and pretend to feel something he didn't. You decided you'd do everything you could to pay him back for not giving you the one thing you wanted from him - the lie that he wouldn't tell."

"No, I . . ."

"Do you have any idea," she said coldly, "how many people have ever - ever - seen Brian Kinney cry? No, I can see that you don't, so let me enlighten you, dear, sweet, innocent Michael. There are exactly two of us. That's how much he trusted you, how much he believed in you. You and I know things about him that no one else knows. Not even Justin. We know what his parents, his family did to him, how much they hurt him, how strong he had to be to survive. Things he's never said to anyone else, things no one else would even believe. So how do we come to this - this unbelievable bullshit, which is just another example of how you repay him? And now . . . what? You want me to run interference, to clear the way for you to take your place at his side again? Until the next time it's not convenient for you to remember what he should mean to you?"

"He told you all this?" he asked, appalled at how much she knew, and just slightly angry although he couldn't have said exactly why.

She stared at him. "What? You're insulted because he talked to me? Well, let me remind you of something, Michael. Everybody - even the mighty Brian Kinney - needs someone to talk to, sometimes. Although, in my case, it was usually when he was drunk as a lord or high as a kite, or so
Goddamned hurt that he just couldn't manage to keep it to himself."

He flushed and looked down, flinching away from the contempt he read in her eyes.

"Jesus! Don't you people ever think beyond the end of your noses? Don't any of you ever try to understand how he feels or why he does the things he does? Or is it just easier, not to mention more comfortable, to assume the worst? Even when you should know better."

He continued to stare down at his hands, hardly daring to look up to meet her gaze. She was right, and he knew it, but it was something he didn't want to think about. He had never wanted to think about it, because it was easier not to know. "So . . . are you going to help me? Or not?"

She sighed, obviously considering her options. "If I do," she said finally, "it's not for you. Whether you deserve it or not, Brian loves you."

"So you'll talk to him for me?"

"I'll talk to him," she replied, "but not for you. The choice is his, and I'll expect you to abide by it."

He nodded and leaned forward impulsively to give her a hug, assuming immediately that everything would work out as he wanted, since Lindsey had been completely right in one of her observations: Brian really did always forgive them. It was only logical to expect him to do so again.

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After Cynthia's departure, Lance Mathis moved to the window to gaze down into the park across the street, watching a group of elderly men sitting on park benches, enjoying the growing warmth of the spring morning. He was careful not to look directly at his boss, sensing that Brian needed a few moments to organize his thoughts and figure out how to express them most efficiently. Mathis understood that there weren't many people who would go to such lengths to make sure their words would be understood so completely, and he admired both the ability and the determination.

But he knew, instinctively, that he was not going to enjoy this discussion. Kinney was entirely too perceptive - too bright to have failed to ferret out the truth of the situation.

When the first comment came, it was exactly as he had foreseen - straightforward, to the point, and unassailable.

"This was no random act of violence." It was not a question. "This was personal."

Mathis confined his response to a nod, knowing that Brian had more to say.

"If you're as smart as you think you are, you've already figured that out. So where's Horvath?"

"He'll be here later," Mathis answered. "He's waiting for the big boys to make an appearance."

Brian nodded. "FBI?"

"Yes."

"A hate crime then."

"Yes. And these people are extremely good at their jobs. Just so you know. I've worked with them before."

Brian nodded, but did not appear overly impressed. "And have you - or they - come up with a theory
about how far it goes, or what it means?"

Mathis moved forward and stood looking down at his boss, trying - without much success - to read the expression in those shadowed eyes. "Only the obvious - that you were the primary target. You've made a lot of enemies, Brian. Possibly very powerful enemies. It might have started out as a political issue, but you said it yourself. At the end, it was personal."

Brian was silent for a while, his eyes turning toward the light streaming in through the window, but Mathis was certain that whatever he was seeing had nothing to do with what was really there. "It's not over. Is it?"

The security chief could not quite suppress a sigh. "No way to know. But you've already figured that out."

"Yeah. I have."

Mathis was surprised to realize that he didn't want to hear the rest, although he knew he had no choice. "So . . . what have you decided to do?"

The answer was little more than a whisper. "What I have to."

"Brian, I'm very good at what I do, and I can . . ."

"Can what? " Brian's voice was suddenly strong and steady, without a nuance of uncertainty. "Guarantee that nothing else will happen, that no one else will get hurt?"

Mathis hesitated, and it was obvious that he wanted to give the reassurance that Brian was asking for; it was equally obvious that he couldn't, in good conscience.

Instead, he settled for taking Brian's hand, as if to shake it. "So tell me what you want me to do."

"Whatever you can to repair what's broken," Brian answered. "But this is my fuck up. Mine to fix. Just . . . try to be in the right place to pick up the pieces, if I screw it up."

"All right, but . . ."

"And one more thing. The main thing, which has two parts."

Mathis understood, somehow, that this was the crucial moment - the point of this entire conversation - as he watched Brian awkwardly shift his arm - cast and all - to allow him to touch the fingers of his left hand to the bracelet that circled his right wrist; the meaning of the gesture was not lost on the security chief. Then the young father turned his head slightly, just enough to be able to see the photograph of Gus that Lindsey had left on the table beside his bed. "You work for me," he said softly, voice barely above a whisper, "and I'm telling you that you have one job that supercedes everything else. You use whatever resources you might need to try to prevent further trouble. Money is no object; you do what's necessary. But this one thing is your personal responsibility, and I want your word on it."

Mathis nodded. "You have it."

"Then you understand what I'm saying? If it comes down to a choice . . ." Brian's eyes were suddenly filled with a terrible, steely resolve. "There is no choice. And no bullshit excuses. Got it?"

The security chief wanted to pretend that he did not comprehend, that he could hedge his bets and claim a simple misunderstanding should the need arise. But he couldn't. One did not play word
games with such a request. It meant too much; it asked too much. He would follow Brian's orders if there were no alternative, even though he wasn't entirely sure how he would ever learn to live with it.

"Got it," he answered finally.

But Brian was not quite ready to let it go. "You understand that this is the only thing that matters to me. If anything happens to . . ."

"It won't." Mathis met Brian's gaze squarely, his eyes clear and filled with resolve. "I swear it."

Brian spent a moment studying the man's face. "Fuck this up - either part of it," he said finally, "and you're a dead man. That's a promise."

Mathis did not smile, for, in truth, he wasn't entirely sure that the man wasn't dead serious.

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Sometimes, she thought, you learned more from what a person didn't say. Like now.

Cynthia did not allow herself the luxury of a sigh. She had been playing this role for many years, and now was certainly not the time to start regretting it. It was what she was expected to do. She was Brian Kinney's good right hand, and if that sometimes meant acting as the palace guard, then it was just another part of the job description. Even when it went against the grain.

He had not explained his reasoning; he frequently didn't.

But she knew the whys and wherefores. She only wished she didn't, as she walked into the waiting room, knowing that the next few minutes would not be pleasant. But it wasn't really the next few minutes that concerned her. After all, she didn't get paid (and paid extremely well, incidentally) to waste time worrying about Michael Novotny or any of the members of his pseudo-family.

But there was very little she could do for the man to whom she did owe her loyalty, and that was the really hard part of all of this. She knew, better than anyone, what this day would cost him, even as she realized that, this time, he would never speak of it. There were still some things too personal, too intimate, to be put into words. He had told her what he needed her to do, expecting her to follow his instructions and ask no questions, but that didn't mean he didn't understand how difficult her tasks would be, or appreciate the fact that she would do them, no matter how much she might prefer not to. The day wouldn't be easy for her either.

Michael was no longer alone when she found him. Ben and Hunter were with him, and Debbie had obviously had time to regroup and reassess and make up her mind to reassert her place in the ensemble of Kinney manipulators.

Cynthia felt a twinge of sympathy as she recognized the flare of joy in Michael's eyes when he saw her coming toward him. It was obvious that he'd already leapt to a conclusion about how he expected things to go.

"So," he said by way of greeting, "is it safe to go in?"

She took a deep breath and put on her most professional demeanor. "I'm sorry, Michael. He's not seeing anyone today."

It was truly amazing, she thought, how quickly that boyish countenance could morph into crushed martyrdom, complete with puppy-dog eyes and trembling lower lip.
It was Debbie, of course, who stepped forward to speak for them all.

"Now just wait a minute here. You have no right to keep him from us. We're family, after all. His only real family, and . . ."

"Mrs. Novotny." The voice was firm and unyielding, and Debbie faltered, unaccustomed to being addressed so sternly. "Please don't make this any harder than it has to be. Cynthia is simply following Mr. Kinney's instructions. It would be a shame if hospital security had to be called in to reinforce them."

But Debbie was not one to give up without a fight. "And just who the fuck do you think you are?" she demanded.

Lance Mathis smiled, and the entire group who had turned to stare at him felt a distinct chill as they noted the ice in his eyes. "I'm the man who gets paid to see that he gets what he wants. And what he wants, right now, is to not have to deal with his . . . 'friends.'" Though the inflection on the final word was slight, they all heard it and knew exactly what it meant.

Ben shifted slightly, and, for a moment, seemed to debate the wisdom of challenging Mathis on Michael's behalf. But he quickly abandoned that notion as he saw the security chief turn to study him, dark eyes filled with steely resolve. The professor immediately relaxed his posture as he realized that his size advantage would mean nothing in a confrontation with someone with advanced combat skills and the will to use them.

Finally, reluctantly accepting the futility of further protest, the group gathered their things and headed for the elevators, as Cynthia and Mathis turned away. But Hunter had lingered for a moment after the rest of them departed, and laid his hand on Cynthia's arm to delay her.

"Just do me a favor," he said quickly. "Just tell him . . . he's still Brian Kinney - to me."

Then he was gone, and Cynthia busied herself with digging for something in her handbag, refusing to meet the solemn gaze Mathis turned on her. He was not, of course, the least bit fooled, but he decided to let her think she'd managed to conceal the shimmer in her eyes. She was a spunky, resourceful woman, with the tenacity of a bulldog, and he admired her tremendously, and had no desire to embarrass her.

"Nice kid," he observed, deliberately walking away to return to Brian's room and prepare for the next task at hand, the one he would rather have avoided if he could.

Cynthia, with exactly the same thought in mind, followed reluctantly.

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Britin! Perhaps the name had not - quite - been brilliant, but it had grown on him. Briefly, anyway. For as long as the dream had lasted.

The last night there had been magical, although he had been the only one to understand that it would be the last night. He had chosen not to mention it to Justin, realizing that there was no point in underscoring the inevitability of the truth he had discovered.

He would allow Justin to hold on to his fantasy, for as long as he could, knowing that he would awaken to the starkness of reality soon enough.

And now, it was only a memory, fading slowly into the tapestry of his life.
But he could still go back, still recall enough details to bring it vividly to life.

The crackle of the fire generating showers of sparks to rise into the darkness of the chimney and dropping reflections of brilliance on the hardwood floors; the velvety crimson of the duvet and the way it provided perfect contrast for the pale luster of Justin's hair, and the luxurious texture of silk sheets against warm skin; a tray of appetizers sitting on a low table by the bed, offering foie gras, turkey Galantine with truffles, mousse de Saumon Fumé, and mushroom quiches, along with a fine bottle of cognac, and a separate platter of the tiramisu that was Justin's favorite; the soft glow spreading out from clusters of candles scattered around the room, painting the shadows with traces of golden radiance; the blended fragrance of the gardenias, rubrium lilies, and eucalyptus that filled the huge porcelain vases flanking the full windows; the mellow drift of soft romantic voices from the speakers - Melissa Manchester and la Streisand and the Isley Brothers; the sound track from Moulin Rouge.

And, if he concentrated, he could still call up the lyrics rendered in Patti LaBelle's dulcet contralto:

"Give me the world,
And I'll give you heaven.
Love will set us free
As long as we believe
The best is yet to come."*

He had tried not to listen, not to recognize the irony of hearing that song in those circumstances.

Most of all, he could remember Justin, in all his perfection: skin like pale satin, face flushed with need, exquisite lips rough and swollen with passion, pupils dilated and rimmed with sapphire, warm breath tasting uniquely Justin, body trembling with anticipation.

He had knelt at the foot of the bed and found it almost impossible to catch his breath as he surveyed the feast laid out before him, his cock steel-hard and twitching as he tried to resist an overwhelming urge to simply leap forward and plunder that soft, yielding body. Justin had smiled, knowing exactly what was in store for him, reading Brian as easily as a printed page, and biting his lip, barely able to contain his desire.

Brian had crawled forward, and draped himself over that supple body, easing himself down and fitting himself into the v between his lover's legs, hardness meeting hardness. He had closed his eyes then, indulging a need to memorize the sensation, to store it up so that he would be able to call it up. When it was gone.

For he had known the truth, even then, even when he'd determined that he would not speak of it. In just two days, Justin would be gone, and the 'For Sale' signs would go up in front of the house. 'Britin' would revert to what it had been before - just another big country house, with a tennis court and swimming pool and stables - and no one would ever realize what it might have become.

For a while, they had simply gazed into each other's eyes, neither quite sure what to say. After a time, Brian had leaned in and begun exploring the face, the mouth, the body that he loved so well, saying with actions what he chose not to say with words. Then Justin had turned the tables, and pushed Brian over onto his back so that he could proceed to initiate his own exploration of the exquisite body beneath him.

They had taken their time, stretching out the experience until finally, unable to hold off any longer, Justin had slipped a condom over Brian's leaking cock, greased it with a liberal portion of lube, and then lifted his body until he was in position to push down and impale himself, gasping as he felt the rigid hardness breach the first ring of muscle. Then he had pressed down, until he was filled,
ignoring the initial pain until it gave way before the first wave of euphoria, when he began to ride, leaning forward periodically to explore Brian's mouth with lips and tongue, until desperate need compelled him to move faster and push harder. At that point, Brian had gripped him with bruising hands and held him firm while he thrust up into molten tightness, thrusting harder and harder still until they had both fallen over the edge of rapture, into a star-struck landscape of mindless oblivion.

Afterwards, they had lain together in silence, neither knowing what to say, both sensing that it was a good-bye of one sort or another.

The house would survive perfectly well without them. The only question - unasked - was whether they would survive without the house.

In the end, it had been Brian who extinguished the fire and doused the lights and locked the door behind them as they walked out of the house for the last time.

It had been Brian who never looked back. Not even once.

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Brian wasn't sleeping - exactly. Instead, he was drifting between planes of existence, floating on a layer of intravenous painkiller and exploring a painfully reconstructed memory. It was preferable, for the moment, to inhabiting reality, but he knew it couldn't last.

When he gradually became aware of muted words and whispered exchanges in the room around him, he felt a momentary urge to sink deeper within himself and allow sleep to take him, to avoid the necessity of re-entering the moment.

Only he couldn't quite convince himself. It was a matter of taking the coward's way out and postponing the inevitable, so he took a moment to reinforce his resolve before reaching for full consciousness, bracing for what lay ahead.

But he would allow himself one tiny indulgence, one infinite moment of time suspended before stepping into the next phase of his life. He was careful not to move a single muscle, to allow his eyes to open only slightly. Just enough to see the face of the individual who was standing at his bedside, eyes moving down the length of his body. Just enough to revel in the gentle stroke of fingers trailing across a patch of bare skin on his bicep - a touch he was pretty sure he would never experience again.

God! Why must the little twat always be so beautiful? Why couldn't that beauty at least begin to fade, so that it would not be quite so painful to behold? He was frowning, of course, blue eyes dark with concern, undoubtedly distressed by what he saw, but there was no mistaking the faint smile just touching those perfect lips. A smile that said he was glad to be home, glad to be in this place, glad to be at the side of the man he still loved, regardless of the circumstances.

Brian knew that Justin did love him, only not - quite - enough. Not even close to enough to compensate for everything it would cost to indulge it. That was what had sent him to New York, and to Hollywood before that, and to his twink fiddler even before that. The love was real. But it had never been enough, and it sure as hell wasn't enough now to justify risking life and limb.

It was time, he knew; the only course of action open to him was to close the door on the past and lock it tight enough to assure that it could never be re-opened.

He opened his eyes and waited to see how long it would take before anyone noticed; he took advantage of the short-lived chance to look his fill.
It didn't take long at all.

"You're awake." There wasn't a trace of uncertainty in Justin's comment. "Are you . . ."

"What the fuck are you doing here?" His voice was scratchy, slightly hoarse, but steady enough.

"Nice to see you too," the blonde replied with a smirk, leaning forward as if to drop a kiss on the patient's forehead.

But Brian managed to flinch away from contact, and spoke again, voice cold and distant. "Why aren't you in Pago Pago, or wherever the fuck you're supposed to be?"

Justin's smirk morphed into a smile that spoke volumes, that said that he didn't give a shit how annoyed Brian might be that he'd ignored the warnings and the prohibition and come anyway. "This is where I'm supposed to be."

Brian moved his head slightly, his eyes sweeping once around the room to see who was present, stopping briefly on the faces of Justin's mother and his best friend, before moving on to read the sadness in Cynthia's eyes. She appeared to be the only one who had any idea what lay ahead, and he was sorry that he'd felt compelled to make her a part of this.

"Why?" he snapped.

"Why what?" Justin was still smiling.

"Why do you think you should be here?"

"Because we're . . ."

"What? Committed?" Cold, clipped, sneering. "You've said that to me before, you know. Only, it didn't last very long, did it? It was only a couple of months before you were jetting off to Hollywood to grab your share of the good life there. And then, when they tossed you out on your ass, you came crawling back . . . for a while. But that didn't last either, because you got your little heart broken again, so you decided to run off to live with the Stepford fags. And then, after I went temporarily insane and let myself be suckered into offering to marry you, you had to go chase your dream to seek fame and fortune in New York. Did it ever occur to you that I might eventually get tired of your shit and find myself a new blond boy-ass to fill my bed and suck my cock?" He paused and closed his eyes, knowing it was a cowardly thing to do, but unable to stop himself. "It wasn't all that hard to do, you know."

"I know what you're doing," Justin said quickly. "We go through this every time something happens to you, when you don't want me to . . ."

"How about if I just don't want you . . . period. Fuck you, you little shit. I don't need you. I never did. The only reason I kept you around was because you were a hell of a fuck. That's all."

"Brian," said Jennifer Taylor, obviously confused and reluctant to interfere, but unwilling to see her son treated so, "stop this. You don't mean this, and . . ."

"Why does everyone assume that I'm incapable of speaking for myself? I'm tired of this shit. I was right from the very beginning. I never should have let myself buy into the whole 'love and marriage' bullshit." He turned and looked straight into Justin's eyes, steeling himself against the misery rising there. "I don't love you, and I don't want you here. I decided to cut you loose the last time you turned tail and ran. Now get out. Go back to your rich, sugar-daddy, Wall Street banker and your Greenwich Village-Boho lifestyle. You should never have come back."
But it still wasn't enough. Even though there were tears in his eyes, Justin was still shaking his head. "Being mean to me has never worked," he whispered. "You're not getting rid of me."

"I already did. Yesterday's fuck. Does that ring a bell for you at all?"

"You're just saying this," Justin said slowly, fighting hard to hold on to his composure, "because you're scared for me. And you don't want to be a burden for me. It's what you always do. I know you too well."

"You don't know me at all." There wasn't a single nuance of warmth in Brian's tone. "I've moved on, Justin. I've done what I should have done a long time ago. You should have done the same."

"I don't believe you."

Brian was momentarily grateful that his face was swathed in bandages, for he wasn't sure he could have managed to conceal how much it hurt to proceed to the next step. He lifted his hand and beckoned Cynthia to come forward. "Tell him," he snapped.

Cynthia had watched the exchange between the two former lovers with growing dread, hoping against hope that her participation would not be required, that Brian would be proven wrong in his assumption that he knew how Justin would react in this situation. But she sighed as she prepared to recite the lines she'd been given, realizing that she should have known better. Nobody knew Justin better than Brian, and if he hadn't been completely sure, he never would have asked her in the first place.

"Justin," she said slowly, looking down at her hands and obviously unwilling to meet his eyes.

"I said, 'tell him',' Brian snapped.

Cynthia nodded. "He . . . found someone new. After you left."

"So?" Justin retorted, his jaw set in stubborn resistance. "Isn't there always someone new? Every fucking day?"

"Not like this one," she answered gently. "This one . . . he keeps this one around."

"What? What do you mean?"

"Jesus Christ!" Brian snapped. "What did you expect? That I'd spend the rest of my life grieving over you? That I'd go into mourning and wind up alone and heartbroken? Don't fucking flatter yourself. I'm Brian Kinney, for fuck's sake. I don't do heartbroken. I picked myself up, dusted myself off, and went out and found the perfect man for me - the perfect fuck who knows how lucky he is to have me. That's something you never managed to learn. Now - for the last time - get the fuck out of my sight."

"So where is he?" Even now, even reeling under the emotional assault, the young man still had the courage to fight back, to demand, and Brian could barely breathe around the pain in his heart. "If he loves you so much, where is he?"

"Where I want him to be. Where he's safe," he snapped. "Where nobody can get to him. Unlike you. So, if you're smart, you'll haul ass out of here, before you get mistaken for somebody who matters to me."

It was at that moment that Matt Keller walked into the room, just in time to hear the end of the conversation. His eyes, very green and glinting with understanding, locked with those of his patient
and conveyed that Brian was going to owe him - big time - for his timely intervention.

"What's going on here?" he asked sternly. "He doesn't need anyone upsetting him, you know. So I suggest you all leave."

Brian deliberately turned his head toward the window, away from the young man who was still staring down at him. He didn't want to see any more, didn't want to say any more. Didn't want to be any more. But there was no avoiding hearing the last thing Justin would say before accepting defeat and turning to walk away.

"I love you, Brian," said the young blonde, barely audible voice thick with unshed tears. "I'll always love you."

That was all, except for the flurry of footsteps and a quick whisper from Daphne. "Fuck you, Brian!"

Then they were gone, and the silence in the room after their departure was profound and heavy. Matt Keller busied himself for a moment with studying the patient's chart, while Lance Mathis made a quick call on his cell phone, before taking up his post at the doorway to make sure no one else could gain entrance.

Only Cynthia dared to approach the bed and stare down at her boss, saying nothing, but waiting until he decided to acknowledge her presence. When he did, with nothing more than a shift to allow him to meet her eyes, she did not flinch away from the misery she read in his gaze.

"Sometimes," she said softly, "I really, really hate you."

He could only sigh and touch her hand with trembling fingers, knowing exactly how she felt. "Yeah. Me too."

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*The Best Is Yet to Come - Cynthia Di Mari Biggs, Dexter Wansel
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tbc
Chapter 19

It was not yet noon, but the diner was already filling up with the early lunch crowd, and all the usual suspects were ensconced in all the usual places.

As usual.

Emmett was struck with a not-so-silly notion that this tacky little diner with its ever-changing array of tacky little seasonal decorations was more home to 'the gang' than any residence would ever be.

Debbie was behind the counter, dishing out pea soup and lemon bars and cheeky, down-and-dirty wisdom in equal portions between bouts of an ongoing gossip session with her friend Ida and one of the diner regulars, a beat cop who was studying the lunch menu scrawled on the chalk board near the serving window.

In their regular booth, Ben, Michael, and Hunter were seated across from Lindsey and Melanie, with the professor and the lawyer exchanging enthusiastic comments about the latest pro-gay legislation in Canada while lamenting the newest efforts by anti-gay fundamentalist Christians in Pennsylvania to compel inclusion of a rewritten Prop 14 on the next election ballot. The back-and-forth between the two was almost - but not quite - enough to compensate for the brooding silence of the remaining three, and the hard glint in Melanie's eyes suggested that she was close to reaching the end of her emotional rope and erupting into one of her customary take-no-prisoners assaults.

Nevertheless, neither Michael nor Lindsey seemed to be paying much attention, and Hunter appeared lost in thoughts of his own.

In the next booth, Blake was regarding Ted with an indulgent semi-smile, schooling himself to overlook the faint but undeniable notes of cattiness that threaded through the accountant's current rant about his employer. The abuse counselor knew that it was just Ted's method for coping with things he could not yet comprehend or accept - a self-defense mechanism that would subside once the current crisis was past - but he hoped the passing would come sooner rather than later as the refrain had become increasingly abrasive throughout the morning. Still, he assumed that the tirade would end quickly, once Ted worked his way through his resentment of feeling relegated to secondary status while Cynthia had been Brian's primary spokesperson throughout this entire debacle.

Meanwhile, across the table, hunched into the corner of the booth, Emmett was stirring his coffee and savoring its warmth. It might be spring outside, but there was still a chunk of raw ice residing in his chest that showed no signs of thawing. He would have preferred to pretend that it was nothing more than a facet of the climate - but he knew better.

And so did Calvin, who was concentrating on ignoring Ted's continuous monolog and regarding his old friend with a sweet, tentative smile.

"You look tired, Honey."

Emmett frowned. "I am, I guess. A little bit, anyway."

Calvin nodded, but continued to study Emmett's face, trying without success to read the expression that was lurking in those dark, hooded eyes. "But that's not what's bothering you. Is it?"

Emmett dredged up a smile. "Of course, it is. What else would it be?"

That was a cue for Ted to pause in mid-tirade and turn his attention to the individual he would
always consider his best friend. "Why don't you tell us?" he asked, not bothering to try to conceal his testy attitude. "You've been moping over something, ever since you got ..."

"Bashed?" Emmett provided the word that Ted apparently could not say. "You call it moping; I call it something else."

"Such as?" There was only a faint nuance of a sneer in Ted's tone, but Emmett heard it as clearly as a clarion call.

His eyes darkened, shadows reforming and growing denser. "Re-thinking things," he replied evenly. "It's amazing what a little near-death experience can do to a person's perspective."

Ted did not - quite - resort to rolling his eyes. "Very profound. Don't think too hard or you might strain something."

Emmett blinked, as both Michael and Ben turned around to listen and to check out the look on Emmett's face, in response to Ted's snarky remark. It was immediately obvious that the young man understood the motivations behind Ted's caustic commentary, and was striving to retain his composure. He knew Ted - better than almost anyone else did - and he realized that the snarkiness was just a means to avoid a loss of control and an emotional meltdown. But that didn't make putting up with it any easier.

"Hey!" said Ben, raising his voice to be heard over the babble in the diner while Emmett remained silent. "Something like this should give us all cause to think twice."

"About what?" Ted snapped, and only Blake was watching closely enough to note that his hands were trembling. "What's really changed? Homophobes have been around forever, and going after somebody like Brian . . . well, it's just miraculous that nobody ever nailed him before. After all, it could have been any of us."

"Could it?" asked Emmett finally, staring down into ink-black coffee. "I wonder."

"Meaning what?" The conversations around them had begun to fall silent as Ted's level of annoyance - and his volume - had grown, while Blake seemed increasingly distressed.

"Meaning," Emmett said softly, apparently once more intent on defining the exact color of the semi-sludge in his cup, "that he's not like the rest of us. Not really."

"Oh, puh-leeze!" At this point, everyone in the group understood that Ted had lost whatever small degree of patience he'd had left. "Don't tell me you're going to buy into this whole 'Brian Kinney Mystique' crap. You're just getting your knickers in a twist over that photo-shopped bullshit in the tabloids."

Emmett's gaze was steady as he studied Ted's face, and, once more, he fell silent for a while, debating whether or not to point out what he knew to be true - that the images in the tabloid had been accurate and unretouched. Ultimately, he decided to leave that issue unaddressed and allow the group to seek solace in their illusions should they choose to do so. At the same time, he refused to be intimidated by Ted's petty malice. "Did you hear the things that Cynthia said to us yesterday? Did any of it register, or did everyone just decide to ignore it? Like always?"

"What the fuck . . ."

"She said," Emmett continued, "that none of us knew Brian. I've been wondering . . ."

"Wondering what?" asked Michael, very quietly.
"If she was right. Or if she might become right from this day forward." He took a sip of his coffee.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" demanded Melanie, lips twisted into a sneer. "If anybody was ever more of a fucking open book than Brian Kinney, I can't imagine who it might be."

Emmett and Ben both turned to stare at her, while Michael and Lindsey looked at each other.

"He's different," said Emmett slowly. "I can't explain it . . . exactly. But I know it's true. He's not the same. Something is off."

"What's off?" asked Debbie, delivering a pink plate special to the next table before turning to join in the conversation.

"Brian," answered Ben, worried eyes resting on Michael's face. "Emmett thinks . . ."

"Since when has Brian not been off?" laughed the Liberty Diner diva.

But Michael understood exactly what Emmett meant. "I don't know, Ma," he said softly. "It feels different this time. Everything could . . . change."

Debbie paused for a moment, something pale and formless rising in her eyes, before wading in with her customary determination to dismiss any suggestion that she might not know Brian Kinney as well as she thought she did. She had, after all, made a semi-career of trying to cut him down to size - even if he'd always refused to stay cut - and she had no intention of looking at him from a different perspective now. So she huffed a half-laugh before offering up her rebuttal. "He hasn't changed since he was fourteen years old, and he's not about to . . ."

To everyone's surprise, it was Hunter who spoke up, cutting off the observation she'd been repeating, in one form or another, for more than a decade. "You know something? You people really are amazing. Some of you have known him for longer than I've been alive; I've known him for - what, three years max? - and I've seen huge changes in him, just in that short time. But you - you all manage to see exactly what you expect to see, what you've always seen. Makes me wonder if any of you ever really saw him at all. And now, the only one of you who's actually talked to him since all this shit started, is trying to tell you that something's different. And you don't want to hear it."

It was Ben who turned to study the look in his son's eyes, while Michael's gaze shifted out into the brilliance of the midday vista beyond the windows, but it was anybody's guess what he was really seeing. Meanwhile, Ben lifted a gentle hand to touch Hunter's face. "When did you get so smart?" he asked with a smile.

"If Emmett's right," the boy continued, "then it could make a big difference, in all your lives."

When the entire group - except Emmett - turned to stare at him, he easily read the denial in their eyes, and he laughed. "Christ! You don't even know, do you? He's the center that holds you all together. Whether you like him, or you love him, or you resent him, or you hate him" - a quick look at Melanie punctuated that observation - "without him, you've lost the tie that binds you all together."

Most of them were instantly ready to dispute his words, to deny the possibility, to disbelieve, and a couple of them, of course, were incensed at the very idea.

Except . . .

Inside, beneath the bravado and the scoffing and the need to deny, every one of them was aware of a tiny core of uncertainty. A tiny little voice that could only whisper two words.
"You don't have to stay." Brian's voice was rough, tremulous, barely audible.

Both Cynthia and Lance Mathis stood at the foot of his bed and regarded him with steady, unflinching eyes. "Maybe she doesn't," Mathis replied calmly, "but I'm not budging."

He carefully avoided noticing the poisonous glance Cynthia directed toward him, while observing that it was amazing that a man swathed almost head to toe in bandages could manage to convey simmering rage through nothing more than the flash of hooded eyes.

"Didn't we just have a detailed discussion about your primary responsibilities?" Brian snapped, voice suddenly full and firm, with only the faintest indication of the pain it cost him to speak so forcefully.

"We did, and I've got it covered. I'm not going anywhere."

Matt Keller looked up from his study of the data displayed on a cardiac monitor array. "Unless," he said, "he says otherwise."

"Doctor," Mathis began, "you can't . . ."

Keller's smile was cold. "Want to bet?" He stepped forward and laid a gentle hand atop Brian's shoulder. "Whatever you may think, Mr. Mathis, in this realm, the patient is the crown prince."

Brian turned slightly to stare up into the face of his old friend. "And what does that make you?"

Keller grinned. "King of the hill, and the only one who can over-rule you."

"I'm not leaving," Mathis repeated, crossing his arms and regarding the doctor with a defiant gaze.

Brian took a deep, painful breath. "It's all right, Matt," he said finally. "In the end, there's no way to hide this . . . mess. Is there?"

Keller hiked himself onto the edge of the bed and promptly forgot about everything and everyone in the room, except his patient.

"How bad?" Faint or not, there was no mistaking the determination underlying those two simple syllables.

"Bad enough. But not . . . irreparable."

Brian sniffed. "Bullshit! You might be the snow-job master, Old Friend, but you've never once managed to snow me. Don't even think about trying now. I want . . ."

"The truth," Matt interrupted. "You think I'd try to give you anything less?"

Brian's eyes were dark, but his gaze was steady. "I think you might, if you weren't sure I could handle it."

Matt sighed. "That's one thing I've never wondered about. Brian Kinney always handles the truth."

Brian closed his eyes. "Even when it's ugly," he said softly. "So just spill it."

Keller nodded. "No point in me giving you chapter and verse of the damage. You can take a look at
the chart, if you like. Suffice to say the list is long and complicated: skull fracture with concussion, punctured lung, plenty of broken bones - ribs, clavicle, arm, hand, ankle, jaw, cheekbone. Multiple lacerations to your gallbladder, so we had to remove it. Major blood loss, torn ligaments, severe bruising to internal organs. Any or all of that could be considered major damage, but it's all begun to heal, largely because you were in fantastic physical condition to begin with. If you hadn't been, you'd be dead today. And there is some good news. You have some strained muscles and a dislocated shoulder, but there's no discernible damage to your spine. You're going to need some extensive physical therapy but should regain full motion eventually in your hand and wrist. And, although there's no way to be sure yet, I don't see any indications of major nerve damage. In time, everything can be fixed."

Brian didn't say anything for a while; he just continued to stare at his old college friend and waited. Then he sighed, and phrased his question with utmost efficiency. "Except?"

Keller drew a deep breath. "I won't lie to you, Brian. The bastards did a hell of a number on you. The damage to your face - your appearance - it's extensive. You've got a long road ahead of you."

Brian turned away then, and looked out the window, his eyes caught by a jetstream slowly dissipating across the blue vault of heaven. "A long road," he repeated. "To where? To reach a point where the mother of my child can stand to look at me without flinching? Or where my good friends can congratulate themselves on tolerating my appearance so they can indulge a chance to gloat over - what was the phrase - 'how the mighty have fallen'?"

Keller folded his arms and waited until Brian decided to look up once more and meet his gaze. "You know me better than that," said the doctor. "Do you really think I'm going to let that happen?"

Brian felt the quick twinge of the smile he could not quite muster. "Despite your own inflated opinion of yourself, you're not God! You can't fix this."

The physician frowned. "You're right. I can't."

Brian looked down quickly, but not quite quickly enough to prevent the doctor from noting the icy glint of despair forming in his eyes. He was quiet for a while, his breathing jerky and rough. Then he looked up again, and Matt felt a heaviness around his heart as the despair was replaced by grim resolve. "Thanks, Doc. Anyone else would have tried to soften the blow. I appreciate that you didn't. So now I just have to figure out what to do next. Maybe I can find myself a stylish mask and scout out a basement under the local opera house. But whatever I do, I need some time to think, so, if you don't mind . . ."

"But I do mind," Keller interrupted. "Because I'm not done. I admitted that I can't fix this. But I didn't say that it can't be fixed. And if you're going to accept this - just sit there and feel sorry for yourself - then I only have one question. Who the fuck are you, and what have you done with Brian Kinney?"

"What the hell can I do?" It was not quite a snarl, but close enough to put a smile on the doctor's face.

"You can do what you always do, what you've been doing all your life. You can give 'em all the big 'Fuck you!' You can refuse to quit. You can fight."

Brian closed his eyes. "Matt," he whispered, barely audible, "I'm tired."

"I know," replied the physician, his fingers closing around Brian's hand. "And I'm sorry, because it's not going to get any better. Not anytime soon. But . . ."
Brian opened his eyes then, and found Matt's face just inches away, beautiful green eyes bright with promise. "But what?"

"You're not going to have to do it alone, this time. And I'm not going to let you give up. I promise you. You will be Brian Kinney again. And, in the process, maybe you'll learn something you should have learned a long time ago."

"Like what?"

Keller smiled; the note of suspicion in the clipped response was very faint, but it was enough to confirm what he'd been hoping to find in his old friend. The body was damaged; the flesh was weak, but the spirit was still there, waiting to resurge.

"Like being 'Brian Kinney' doesn't have a fucking thing to do with how you look."

"Of course." That couldn't possibly be a pale hint of laughter in that hoarse whisper - could it? "It's what's inside that counts. Right?"

After a beat of silence, Matt Keller burst out laughing. "Okay," he admitted, after taking a moment to regain control of himself, "so that's a pretty stupid comment, all things considered. But that's not really what I meant, anyway. I hope you know how hard it was for me to admit that I, personally, can't 'fix you', as you put it. But I do know who can. He's an arrogant bastard, and a first class prick with delusions of godhood, and, if he stepped in front of my car in the express lane on the freeway, I wouldn't even slow down. But he has one saving grace. For this - for what you need - he's the very best, and he can do what I can't." He leaned forward then, and touched his forehead to Brian's shoulder. "He can restore what they took from you. He can make sure that the bastards don't win."

Brian turned his head, brushing his brow against his old friend's cheek, before pulling back to regard him steadily, refusing to flinch away from the dark truth reflected in green eyes. "How long?" he asked finally.

The doctor huffed a sigh and managed a tiny, lopsided smile. "I don't really know. I can tell you that you're looking at several months before your injuries are healed. Probably several more before the therapy is completed. But the only one who can make an educated guess about the rest is Rick Turnage. He's flying in tomorrow."

"He's really that good?"

Keller grinned. "He's almost as good as he thinks he is. Reminds me of somebody else I know."

"Does that mean . . ."

The grin became a chuckle. "Yep. You're probably going to hate each other's guts."

"So why should I trust him? And why do you?"

"Because he's a driven man. The only thing that means anything to him - anything at all - is to be the best, the most skilled plastic surgeon in the world, and he's spent his whole life looking for the one challenge that will prove that he is. And I think . . . I really believe it's going to be you."

Brian's eyes were suddenly filled with uncertainty, but he did not verbalize his misgivings. In truth, he wasn't sure he could, because he wasn't sure what it was about the whole scenario of Rick Turnage as savior that bothered him.

Keller lingered for a moment, trying to determine if Brian understood what he'd been told, but, in the
end, he just got to his feet and moved off. He had provided all the information he could; the rest would be up to Turnage. And Brian. The physician allowed himself a tiny smile as it occurred to him that the plastic surgeon was about to find out that one never realized one's dearest ambition without paying a hell of a price.

The room was quiet for a while, while Brian pondered what he'd heard. Then he looked up and noticed that Cynthia was watching him carefully, glints of renewed hope flickering in her eyes. He looked away quickly, but could not quite suppress the surge of anger that engulfed him. False hope was something he would not encourage.

He did manage, however, to conceal his disquiet quickly - to camouflage it as something else. "Cynthia," he said, lifting a hand to summon her closer, "I need you to do something for me. I forgot to ask Lindsey something. Would you see if you can locate her?"

Cynthia frowned, and regarded him with some small degree of suspicion. "Why don't you just call her cell phone?"

He didn't miss a beat. "Because this is something private, something about Gus that we need to discuss, face to face. Please?"

She moved around to the left side of the bed, ignoring Matt Keller, ignoring Lance Mathis, ignoring everyone and everything except the man who was the primary mover and shaker in her world.

"I'm not leaving," she whispered, bending forward so no one else could hear. "Do you really think there is anything - anything - that would make me turn my back on you? Do you think your looks make any difference to me? After what you did for me? Do you really think I'm that shallow, Brian?"

He stared up at her, and knew that it was time to concede defeat. It had been almost two years since the event - the 'what you did for me' - had happened, and he could count the number of times either of them had ever referred to it on the fingers of one hand, so he knew that this was her way of pulling out the big guns. He might be able to fool the rest of his extended family, to bully them, or manipulate them, or deceive them. But it wouldn't work with her; she knew him too well, knew the man beneath the façade as almost no one else did. Still, he'd give it one more shot. "You don't have anything to prove to me," he said solemnly. "And there's no need for you to have to see . . ."

"Shut - up. And do what you have to."

He hesitated; then he nodded before turning his head to regard Matt Keller with a steady gaze. "Show me."

There was no room for argument in either words or manner, but the doctor did not move to obey.

"Brian, I don't think this is a good idea."

"I know you don't, but do it anyway."

"Why?"

"Because I need to see what they did to me. I need to know how much they hated me. So you either take the bandages off now, or I do it myself. Which is it?"

Keller didn't bother trying to conceal his irritation. "Fuck, Brian!"

"In your dreams," replied Brian, and Keller had no trouble visualizing the smirk hidden beneath the
bandages. "Now are you going to . . ."

"All right, all right. Keep your pants on."

Lance Mathis grinned. "Bet that's not something you hear too often."

"Fuck!" said Brian. "Everybody's a God-damned comedian."

Woody's - pool hall, barroom, and gay watering hole par excellence - was never really empty, but, in mid-afternoon, it was relatively deserted and a pretty good place for sharing a quiet - or not-so-quiet - conversation. And, in this case, it would allow Emmett to kill two birds with one stone, so to speak. If one could wrap one's mind around the notion of identifying two very different but equally awkward confrontations as 'birds'.

Drew Boyd had called first, requesting a face-to-face sit-down, and Emmett had only hesitated for a moment. Caleb had patients scheduled all afternoon, and Darren had persuaded his cousin to fill in for Emmett for a few days in their party-planning partnership, to allow Emmett time to heal, physically and emotionally. So his time was his own, until the middle of the following week when he would have to climb back on the proverbial horse and finish planning the Berlinger/Rabelais wedding that was to be the social event of the spring season. Weddings by Auntie Em had become the new haute status symbol for Pittsburgh society, but he did not spare the time to reflect on how satisfying it was to have become the premier social event planner of the area. In spite of his success, he never really thought of himself as anything other than a little piece of hick/trash from Hazlehurst, Mississippi.

It was an opinion that would stay with him throughout his life, despite the fact that he would be loved deeply and wholeheartedly by people who knew better.

He had agreed to meet with Drew at mid-afternoon. The quarterback had been diffident during their conversation, requesting rather than demanding, determined but prepared to accept 'no' for an answer, if necessary, which, of course, insured that Emmett could not possibly deny him.

The second call had been far less subdued or polite.

Justin had been loud and abrasive and almost rude. And panic-stricken. He had not said much beyond, "I need to see you. Right now." But what he had not said had conveyed much more than the words he did speak. His voice had been raw and hoarse, as if he'd been screaming. Or crying.

Emmett was no fool; he knew immediately what had happened and why Justin was so devastated. What he didn't know was whether or not he could figure out how to fix the problem, or if, indeed, he should even try. Brian's motives for the actions he was taking were complex and not easily explained, and more was at stake here than protecting someone from the rage and outrage of homophobic monsters.

He thought back to the conversation they'd shared in the waning hours before this current nightmare had begun, and understood that it wasn't only bodies that were at risk; it was hearts. Souls perhaps. Lives, to be lost or gained on the whim of a moment.

Emmett wondered if he could get away with faking a sudden bout of appendicitis. But Drew - damn him - was right on time, and the opportunity died aborning.

When they were seated at one of the tables at the rear of the room, Emmett with his signature Cosmo and the quarterback with a shot glass and a bottle of Chivas, neither seemed to know how to open
the conversation. Emmett sipped at his drink, unaccountably nervous, before taking a deep breath and looking directly into sable-dark eyes.

"Not to be a stickler for protocol," he said with a smile, "but you called me, Honey Chile. So what was so urgent?"

For a moment, it appeared that Drew might be content with just gazing into Emmett's eyes, as he was suddenly swept into memories that he had kept under lock and key for over a year. "I wanted you to be the first to know," he said finally, lifting his shot glass as if to propose a toast.

"Know what?"

Drew leaned forward, his eyes fixed on Emmett's mouth. "It's my birthday," he whispered.

Emmett sighed. "Yes, well, unfortunately, we all have one of those every year, you know. So . . ."

"Not like this. If you stop and think, you'll remember that you were the one who told me to call you . . . for this one."

Emmett, in the process of taking a sip from his Cosmo, gulped as he grasped the deeper meaning beneath Drew's supposedly casual announcement, and choked on the sweet liquid, turning rose red, and gasping to catch his breath.

As a diversion from the intensity of the moment, spluttering around a vodka and cranberry juice cocktail left a lot to be desired, thought Emmett, but it had done the trick well enough. When he managed to regain his composure, they were both able to smile and ease back a bit from the brink of emotional overload.

"You mean it?" Emmett asked finally, dabbing at his chin with a napkin. Though entirely focused on whatever answer Drew might provide, he found that he could not - quite - bring himself to look directly into the athlete's eyes.

Drew leaned forward and folded Emmett's left hand into both of his own. "I have never meant anything more," he replied. "You know me, Em. I'm not good with words. I don't have a clue how to make you understand how much it means to me that you were willing to give me the time to get to know myself, as a gay man. To explore and learn about the new world that opened up to me once I was finally able to come out.

"But I have explored it now. And I have learned. And I won't lie to you and claim that I didn't enjoy the hell out of the experience. Only . . ."

"Only what?" Emmett was surprised to find that he was almost holding his breath, barely able to contain his need to hear the rest.

"Only, after a while, you begin to understand that all the gorgeous guys in the world don't make up for the one you really want, the one you can't stop thinking about, the one that means more than any fuck." He paused and dropped a quick kiss on the tips of Emmett's fingers. "The one that makes you feel whole."

Emmett closed his eyes, not yet willing to be overwhelmed by the emotional surge that was rising within him. He could not afford to be swept away, only to find that he had allowed himself to hear what he wanted to hear, rather than what his one-time lover was actually saying. "And that would be . . . who?"

Drew grinned. "You gonna make me say it?"
Emmett tilted his head and put on his very best Lana-Turner arch expression. "I think I've earned the right to hear it."

The grin became a rough chuckle. "Yeah. You have. So here goes. After sampling all the joys that the gay world has to offer, I've finally come to my senses and realized that all I want . . . is you, Emmett." Then he frowned. "But I understand that you might not feel the same. You gave me the freedom to find out what I really wanted, and I'd be a piss-poor excuse for a man if I didn't do the same for you. I know you're with Calvin now. He seems like a nice guy, even though he's not nearly good enough for you. But then, I don't think anybody is good enough for you. Including me. But I just felt like telling you was the right thing to do. You don't owe me anything. Not even an answer, if you don't want to give one. I just . . . wanted you to know."

And, having said his piece, the big athlete pushed back from the table and stood up.

Emmett looked up at him, at a loss for words, perhaps for the first time in his life. "Wait!" he managed finally, as Drew turned to move away.

The football player froze, but remained silent. He had said everything there was to say; it was up to Emmett to decide if anything more was needed.

"What did Brian tell you?"

Drew couldn't quite conceal his surprise at what he perceived as an off-the-wall change of subject. "What?"

"What-did-Brian-say-to-you?" Each word was distinct and bitten off, crisp and to the point.

"Why does that matter?" The quarterback was obviously uncertain about the meaning of this turn in the conversation, but he did settle back into his chair, intrigued in spite of himself.

"It matters," said Emmett slowly, "because I need to be sure that this declaration isn't just a ruse to allow you to stay close to me and make sure I don't get bashed again. I know Brian blames himself for what happened to me. Hell, I'm beginning to think he always blames himself for everything, all the way back to original sin. So much so that I think it's entirely possible that he threatened your life if you don't take it upon yourself to watch over me."

Drew's smile almost - but not quite - camouflaged the flash of annoyance in night-dark eyes. "Do you really think I'd be scared of anything Brian Kinney might say to me?"

Emmett shrugged, unintimidated. "I don't know. He scares the shit out of me sometimes."

The quarterback was startled into a snort of laughter. "Okay," he admitted. "I see your point."

"So, what did he say to you?"

Drew hesitated, choosing to look down at the hands he was clasping on the table rather than to meet Emmett's questioning gaze. Then he sighed. "He told me that it was time to get my head out of my ass and reach out for what I really want, before it's too late."

Emmett's initial response was a slow blink. He remained silent for a while, and when he did choose to speak, he was careful to avoid any inflection in tone or voice. "And was he right?"

Drew smiled. "He's a smart little fucker. Too smart, sometimes."

"Sooooo, you're . . ."
"Emmett, do you love Calvin?"

Again, Emmett blinked. "And if I do?"

"Then this conversation is over," Drew replied gently. "I didn't bring this up to cause you pain or to make you feel obligated, or guilty. I just wanted you to know how I feel, so . . ."

He rose again, and this time he wasted no time in starting to walk away.

"I don't, you know."

Drew paused in mid-stride, uncertain of whether to stay or go, uncertain of anything except how much depended on what Emmett might say next. "Don't what?"

Emmett stood up and moved around the table, stepping forward and deliberately invading the big man's personal space. "I don't know how you feel, and I don't . . . love Calvin." He paused and was forced to look away for a moment, to pretend that he couldn't read the bright flicker of relief in Drew's dark eyes. "And, just to be totally upfront about it, he doesn't love me either. He's a good friend - and a great fuck - but we both knew from the start that this was never meant to be a forever-thing."

Drew smiled, and slowly slipped his arms around Emmett's waist, stifling an impulse to disagree with his lover's assessment of Calvin's feelings. He was pretty sure that Emmett was wrong; he had seen and recognized the emotion in the southerner's face while watching the two old friends sharing an intimate moment. But he figured it was best to let this particular sleeping dog lie. "So, if you don't love him . . ."

Emmett's smile was slightly coy. "I'm feeling a little uncertain here. Things have been really weird lately, and I'm just a little . . ."

"I love you, Emmett." Drew's voice was steady, filled with certainly. "I think I knew it from the beginning, but I wasn't ready to deal with it. Now, I am. But only if it's what you want." He smiled and lifted a hand to cup Emmett's cheek. "I think I've learned something from a . . ." the smile grew slightly sardonic "mutual acquaintance, about what love is - and isn't. I know now that it shouldn't be a prison cell. That's not love; that's possession. I love you, and all I want is to make you happy. And safe, and, just incidentally, to fuck you into next week. At your convenience, of course."

Emmett grinned. "Would right now be too soon?"

Drew sobered abruptly, as he gazed into Emmett's eyes, searching for reassurance, for confirmation, for an end to loneliness. "Then . . ."

There was no more uncertainty when Emmett responded. "I think I loved you the moment I first saw you. Even when you pissed me off by acting like a homophobic prick. And I think I always will."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

Emmett could not quite suppress a sigh. "That," he replied, looking up to watch as two new arrivals walked through the front door.

The big Nelly-bottom had to fight off an urge to grab his old/new lover and go racing out the rear exit. Judging by the look on the face of the young man who was charging toward him, wide-eyed best friend in tow, it was obvious that his second meeting was not going to be nearly so satisfying as his first.
The silence inside the hospital room was so intense that noises from the street below barely penetrated air that felt as thick as a blanket as Brian stared at his reflection in the large hand mirror that Nurse Beck held at the proper angle and distance for him to be able to examine the condition of his face.

To their credit, neither Cynthia nor Lance Mathis had uttered a single sound nor allowed the tiniest flicker of expression to touch their faces when Dr. Keller had removed the last of the bandages and stepped away to allow the nurse access to the patient. Exhibiting an admirable degree of professionalism, Beck had gently and efficiently cleaned the wounds before taking the mirror from Keller’s hand and positioning it for Brian’s convenience.

The four observers all experienced exactly the same reaction to watching the patient's first glimpse of his own appearance; they all wished to be elsewhere, to not have to see the dark shadow of despair rising in hazel eyes - the only reaction Brian allowed himself. He did not flinch, did not gasp, did not look away. Did not speak or sigh or weep. He just looked, turning his face slightly, from side to side, to get a better view.

Then he nodded to the nurse and turned away.

"I need to speak to Dr. Keller," he said, his voice very soft but completely steady. "Alone."

"Brian," Cynthia began, the spontaneous clinching of her hands the only indication of the level of her distress, "you don't . . ."

"Alone," he repeated - still softly, but with greater determination.

Though it was obvious that both Mathis and Cynthia wanted to protest, in the end both simply nodded and walked out into the hall, with Nurse Beck bringing up the rear.

Matt Keller closed the door behind them, took a moment to take a deep breath and make sure his demeanor was entirely professional, and only then turned to regard his patient with an appropriate degree of composure.

He didn't have long to wait. "Nobody can fix this." It was not a question; it was a statement of perceived fact.

Keller moved forward slowly, his eyes noting all the damage to a face that had once been perfectly beautiful, but was now only a ruin, a broken reminder of what had been destroyed. Battered, distorted, torn, mutilated. "Brian, I . . ."

"No bullshit!" The mangled features contorted into a twisted smile, and, for the first time, Keller could not quite suppress a grimace of pain. "I'm an ad man, Matt - a master of bullshit, so don't waste my time or yours. This . . ." He lifted a bandaged hand and touched his knuckles to his chin, none too gently. "This isn't going away. It's not going to get better; it's not a temporary condition; it's not a fucking boo-boo that's going to heal." He paused and swallowed hard, not quite successful in dislodging the lump in his throat. "This is who I'm going to be. From now on. And your boy-genius surgeon should find better ways to occupy his time."

When he jerked his hand away from his face and clinched it into a fist, Keller had no choice but to move quickly to grab it; he couldn't be certain of Brian's intentions but he was pretty sure he recognized a deadly anger and desperation in his patient's eyes. He had never doubted that Brian could and would handle whatever shit life might throw at him, but he was struck by a flash of
memory, a scrap of conversation between the two of them after Brian's cancer recovery.

"I didn't want to live, diseased and damaged and imperfect. I wanted to die," Brian's voice over the phone was strangely hollow, as if his mind was wandering through a bleak, empty landscape. "To leave everything and everyone behind, and party til I was ready to drop and then just disappear. No good-byes, no grief, no tears, no weeping over might-have-beens. Forever young, forever beautiful."

"So . . . why didn't you?"

Matt closed his eyes and visualized Brian's shrug. "Debts to pay. Promises to keep."

The physician had chosen not to express his own sense of relief over what Brian had ultimately decided, or his profound sadness in the realization that his old friend had truly wanted to die, had never realized how much he meant to the people who loved him. Had, in truth, never understood how much he was loved.

Keller sat beside his patient, and regarded him with weary resolve. "Do you trust me?"

"With this?" The scorn in Brian's voice was as sharp as a blade. "You really are having delusions of godhood."

Keller leaned forward until his face was only inches away from his patient's, and braced his hands against the bed on either side of Brian's shoulders. "Shut up, and listen to me. If this had happened just a few years ago, then you'd have been right to doubt. You'd have been fucked, and not in a positive, life-affirming way. But we live in an age of miracles, Brian. Medicine has become an art, as well as a science, and the man who's going to work his magic on you is a fucking Michelangelo. And, by the way, you have no idea how hard it is for me to say that."

"So that's what I'm going to be? His fucking Sistine Chapel?"

"If that's what it takes to fix you," Keller replied with a shrug, "who gives a shit?"

Brian managed, somehow, to narrow his eyes, despite the swelling around them. "I don't know if I like the idea of being somebody's masterpiece. Is he queer?"

Keller shook his head and smirked. "I never cared enough to wonder where he puts his dick, though I do seem to recall an entourage of nubile young things with IQs down to here and boobs out to there. Maybe he's bi. You're the one with the infallible gay-dar, so you can figure it out for yourself."

Brian settled back against his pillow and stared up at the ceiling, focusing on nothing more than the tiny flicker of the fluorescent light fixture and concentrating only on breathing, ignoring everything but the in-and-out process of filling and emptying his lungs. Then he looked down and met Keller's eyes, peering deep into jade green depths to search for intimations of truth. "You really think he can do this? Turning Quasimodo into Casanova would be easier, I think."

"I really do. I wouldn't lie to you."

"But you don't know for sure?"

The fact that Keller's gaze faltered briefly spoke volumes before he had a chance to find the right words to cover up his misgivings. "Brian, you can't just . . ."

"Listen to me, Matt," Brian interrupted, reaching out to wrap his fingers in Keller's lapel. "Are you listening?"
"I'm listening, Asshole. When have I ever not listened?"

Brian swallowed, closing his eyes for a moment, searching for the right words, but without much success. "I don't know how to deal with this. I don't know how to . . ."

"You're still Brian Kinney."

The patient could not quite suppress a sigh, and his attempt at a smile was painful to watch. "Brian Kinney," he said softly, "is beautiful. Always was. That's what Michael always said to me, whenever I had doubts about what I should do or . . . whatever. It's the only thing I ever had, to make me different, special. Without that, I don't know who I am."

"Oh, Baby," Keller whispered, "one day, I hope you'll begin to understand how beautiful, how special you really are, and always will be." Then he deliberately leaned forward and kissed Brian's lips, with excruciating gentleness, to offer comfort, without pain.

When he sat back, he was careful to avoid staring at Brian too intently, understanding instinctively that his old friend needed a few moments to regain his composure and rebuild the defensive walls that allowed him to function in spite of the pandemonium around him.

It was a delicate moment, potentially destructive, but the awkwardness was quickly eliminated when the doctor summoned Nurse Beck back into the room to apply fresh bandages to Brian's injuries, and Cynthia and Lance Mathis re-entered together. Cynthia was talking on her cell phone, eyes narrowed in concentration while Mathis was studying a photocopy of a police report, and Brian, in his attempt to ignore what the nurse was doing, found it reassuring, somehow, that both seemed focused on business as usual rather than caught up in the livid trauma of the situation.

Normalcy had never seemed so sweet.

Until, that is, the door opened again, and he knew that any semblance of normalcy within this framework was the illusion rather than the reality - that the drama surrounding this particular situation had only just begun.

Detective Horvath was first through the door, arriving in time to get a detailed look at the damage done to Brian's face. He had, of course, seen extremely graphic photos of what the attackers had done, but it was different, somehow, seeing it in the flesh. He came forward, nevertheless, without hesitating, and reached out to lay a hand on the patient's shoulder, refusing to flinch or allow himself to look away.

Brian took a deep breath, understanding how difficult the detective must find it to bury his natural reaction to such carnage and present a façade of detachment. "Hey, Carl," he said. "If you'll give me a minute - to finish getting my face on, as it were - I'll be right with you."

He was pleased when he noted that Horvath had to struggle to suppress a surprised grin. It seemed that his adoring public - as well as those who were not so adoring - was expecting to see him chastened and wallowing in self-pity and seeking sympathy. Well, fuck that!

His gaze was steady as he regarded the cop, sensing that Horvath might have pertinent information for him. Then he noticed that someone else had entered the room, someone who was standing just inside the door, apparently waiting for permission to come closer, someone whose features were indistinct, backlit by the reflected glare from the hallway.

"Hello, Brian," said the detective. "It's good to see you."

Brian managed a small chuckle. "Yeah. You too. So what can I do for Pittsburgh's finest?"
Nurse Beck finished with her task and ignored the cop as she checked the patient's IV. "How's the pain?" she asked softly.

"Thriving," Brian replied, with typical snark.

She glanced toward Keller who confined his response to a nod, authorizing another dose of narcotic painkiller.

"Could we hold off on that for a bit?" asked Horvath. "I really need to get a statement from him, while he's fully alert."

Both doctor and nurse looked as if they were going to object, but they were over-ruled by the patient. "It's okay," Brian assured them, before turning to confront Horvath with a level gaze. "If you make it fast."

Horvath nodded. "Short and sweet, I promise. Only there's someone you need to meet first. Someone you're going to get to know very well, before this case is over."

Brian sighed. "The Feds?"

"So far," said the stranger standing in the doorway, "just one Fed."

"So," drawled Brian, "where's the task force?"

A pleasant baritone laugh provided accompaniment as the individual came forward, right hand extended. "You shouldn't believe everything you see on TV. The task force - for now - is me."

Brian looked up and had the strangest sensation, as if the young man coming toward him was someone he had known before, although he was dead certain the two of them had never met. He would have remembered.

"My name is Chris McClaren, Mr. Kinney," said the newcomer, his fingers closing around the hand that Brian had lifted, just as if they'd met in a board room or at a social event, totally discounting the fact that the hand he took was swathed in bandages. "I'd say that it's good to meet you, but I'm sure you wouldn't agree, under the circumstances, so I'll spare you the pleasantries."

As it happened, Cynthia was staring at Brian's face at that moment, and she would always wonder how it was that she was the only one to notice the spontaneous flash of insatiable curiosity - and something even more elemental - that struck him as McClaren took his hand. Then she shifted her focus to the FBI agent, and saw the same exact response reflected in his expression.

Both were masters of self-control - and masks - so the reactions were quickly suppressed, so quickly that no one else even noticed. But Cynthia continued to stare at the two of them for a while - wondering what she had just seen, and then wondering if maybe she had just imagined it all. Especially when Brain immediately demonstrated his customary brass.

"How refreshing!" he replied. "Someone with the guts to mention that I have a right to feel like shit. Now can we get on with this? I need my beauty rest."

Chris McClaren took up a position behind Horvath, apparently willing to let the local constabulary lead the questioning, but Brian wasn't fooled. The man was totally focused, prepared to ignore everything and everyone around them to concentrate on whatever Brian had to say. Of course, the fact that the agent was built like - what was that disgusting expression that Emmett was so fond of? Oh, yes. A brick shit house - was something of a distraction for the patient. And the rest of the features - Jesus! Ash blonde hair framing a perfect face, featuring sculpted cheekbones, sensual,
molded lips, dimpled chin, strong, symmetrical nose, and large beautiful eyes, the color of a summer sky surrounded by a ring of twilight blue, rich as sapphires, and fringed with thick, dark lashes. Shit!

As beautiful as any man he'd ever met, and, being Brian Kinney, he'd met more than his fair share. Only now . . . shit!

"Agent McLaren is a profiler, Brian," said Horvath. "And, coincidentally, a specialist in undercover work. He's going to be your . . ."

Brian did not - quite - roll his eyes as he was struck with the irony of the situation. "Beard?" he supplied.

"Just call me 'Whiskers'," drawled McClaren.

Brian looked up at the agent and saw something indefinable flash in those blue eyes. "Like Magritte's pipe?" he asked, his voice conveying a tiny, barely there nuance of amusement.

McClaren was not - quite - successful in concealing a surprised smile. "Precisely."

"Are you good at your job?" Brian didn't have time for bullshit, although he was gratified to realize that his instincts were as keen and true as ever.

"Extremely."

The patient sighed, his thoughts turning - as they did so frequently - to a lovely young face, a perfect young body, and the more lovely and more perfect heart and soul behind the exquisite physical image. "You'd better be," he observed, realizing that he alone knew how hard the task would prove to be. Justin was nobody's fool, and he would be expecting some kind of ruse, some kind of trick to undercut his stubborn determination to resume his place at Brian's side. He had been hurt by the things Brian had said to him, but he had not been convinced.

It would take more than the cruelty that Brian had wielded so wickedly. It would take hard evidence.

Brian spared a glance at McClaren's body. Hard evidence, indeed.

"This is bullshit!" Justice had entered the pool hall in a state of high dudgeon, and he hadn't yet managed to calm down, despite the efforts of Daphne and Drew Boyd to encourage him to do so.

Emmett, strangely enough, had said very little, apparently content to wait, to allow the younger man to vent his feelings of frustration and betrayal before attempting to reason with him. In addition, while he listened carefully to everything Justin had to say, he was also still caught up in the memory of his conversation with Brian, and found himself, for the first time, looking at events through new lenses, from a new direction.

It was amazing, he thought, how none of the group of people he considered his closest, best friends had ever once managed to step outside the box they all occupied and move around the emotional barriers that had been constructed for them. They had never seen the real Brian Kinney, because the real Brian Kinney had never allowed himself to be seen.

Only now, perhaps he had grown weary of the game, or perhaps he had simply assumed that his task was done, that no one would ever be sufficiently interested or motivated to look for the deeper meanings behind the mask.
Perhaps he had simply decided to stop hiding.

So caught up was Emmett in his thoughts that he did not at first notice when Justin retreated into a sullen silence, eyes locked on Emmett's face.

"Did you hear anything I said?" demanded the young blonde in a tone thick with acid. "Or am I keeping you from something more important?"

Emmett's eyes were soft with sympathy, but his voice was remarkably steady when he started to speak. "You're assuming that I have the answers you want. But I don't. On the surface, Brian seemed much the same as he always did, after you left. But underneath... he changed, Justin. He allowed all of us to go on as always, assuming that he would revert to the life he'd always lived. And we did, just as he planned. Only it wasn't real. Whatever Brian became once you were gone, he became... alone. None of us really knew him any more."

Justin barely managed not to flinch away from a truth he did not want to hear. "He says he found someone else. That he found someone who would give him what I couldn't. Surely, if that had happened, you would have known. All of you would have known."

"Would we?" Emmett sighed. "I've begun to wonder if any of us ever really knew him at all. In thinking back, I've remembered time after time after time when we all assumed that we understood why Brian did the things he did and how he would react to whatever we threw at him. But we didn't really. And at those times when we did finally figure out what he'd done, we almost never understood why."

"Brian has never been one to hide who he is, what he is, so why..."

Emmett nodded. "That's what he trained us all to believe. But he's a little older now; he's lived through a lot, so maybe he's not quite so contained. Maybe it's not quite so easy to lock out the world."

"What the hell do you..."

Emmett reached out and touched Justin's cheek, sorry that he felt compelled to speak what was in his heart, but knowing he had no choice. "He believes," he said gently, "that he was never what you really needed, or wanted. He believes that you left him - time and time again - because he couldn't be the person you needed him to be."

"Why on earth would he think such a thing?" Justin was outraged, furious. "I always came back. Every single time..."

"But only," said Emmett, "when you had no other option. At least, that's how he sees it. When you needed him to help you find your way back after the bashing, when the fiddler proved to be a pretentious, backstabbing cretin; when you felt obligated to take care of him when he had cancer; when Hollywood turned its back on you; when he was so devastated with guilt and fear after the bombing that he tried to become something he's not - something he thought you wanted him to be. From his perspective, it was never because he was your sole reason for living." He sighed and was surprised to feel tears rise in his eyes. "Like you were - for him."

"And you know this... how?" Justin demanded. "He wouldn't tell you that. Brian Kinney doesn't admit things like that."

"Ordinarily, I'd agree with you," Emmett replied softly. "But he's... I don't know how to explain it except to repeat what I said before. He's different. He still lives his life on the surface just like he
always did. Still indulges and enjoys all his addictions; still has any trick he wants and fucks everybody who catches his fancy; still works as hard as he plays and sets the world on fire professionally. Shit, he's up for a Clio award this year, and he's landed some really big name, international accounts. He's still Brian Kinney - the Stud of Liberty Avenue. Except... something inside me insists that's it's all just a false veneer. Underneath, he's not the same.

"But you admit that he still loves me? Right? You said that I was his reason for living. Right?"

Emmett nodded. "You always were, once he got over the initial shock. I don't think Brian ever intended to let himself love anybody, because he never believed he was... well, let's not go there. That would just be speculation on my part. Anyway, I think it says plenty that he cared enough to refuse to lock you up behind closed doors, to always make sure that you had the option to decide where you wanted to be. That much hasn't changed. But I think... look, I don't know anything about a new guy. But I do think he might have reached a point where he doesn't believe any more."

"Believe what?"

Emmett took a deep breath. "In the two of you. I think he might have just given up."

Justin suddenly seemed to find it hard to breathe. "He... really told you that? He really believed that I only came back because..." He closed his eyes, and tried to swallow the lump in his throat. "How could he think that? Why would he..."

He opened his eyes then, to find his oldest, best friend staring at him, her lovely dark eyes filled with pity - and something more. "Daph?" he murmured, needing reassurance, needing to hear someone tell him that Brian had no right to believe such a thing. Only, that wasn't what he saw in her eyes.

"I love you, Justin," she said gently. "You're my best friend, and you always will be. But you've always been the one to walk away. I think the reason Brian always stood back and let you go was that he didn't believe he was the one you needed or loved. I think he always expected that you would leave him, sooner or later, and you made it pretty clear, you know. Over and over again. I guess he might have finally found a way to accept it."

Justin stood up abruptly, his mind reeling as he spun and walked to the bar where he sank down on a stool and buried his face in his hands. He had listened to everything Emmett had said, everything Daphne had said, and he had wanted to scream out his denial, to dispute every word.

But he couldn't. He couldn't because... they were right. He had always been the one to walk away. But not for the reasons Brian thought.

Oh, God! How could he have been so blind, so stupid? He had walked away, time and time again, because he was hungry to taste everything that life could offer, because he was curious, because he wanted to see and experience the entire world. But only if he could be sure that, once he had sampled it all, tasted it all, experienced it all, he would be able to come home.

To the only home he'd ever wanted.

To Brian.

So why, he wondered, had it never occurred to him that he might find, when he was finally ready to return, that what he'd left behind might not be waiting for him?

His heart had insisted that Brian would always be there. But now...

No. He wouldn't accept this. He couldn't believe this. He rose and moved back to the table to study
Emmett's face, and his eyes were filled with grim resolve. "You said that he was only able to hang
on, to endure what they did to him, because he wanted to make sure I was safe. A person wouldn't
do that if... if not for love. He still loves me. I know he does."

"I don't doubt that, Justin," Emmett admitted. "But loving you is one thing; waiting for you -
believing in you - could be another. He might just be tired of watching you walk away."

Once again, Justin buried his face in his hands, suddenly swept into a cold awareness that he wanted
to push away, to resist. How could he have fucked up so badly? And why had he never considered
the consequences of his actions, without the fucking rose-colored glasses? "What have I done, Em?"
he whispered. "I love him so much. I don't know how to live without him."

Emmett exchanged glances with Drew - soft, loving glances filled with sympathy for the young
blond's obvious anguish - and moved to the bar to drape his arm across Justin's shoulders. "It's funny,
you know," he said softly. "All of us - his so-called friends - wanted nothing more than to make sure
he never changed, that he'd always be the Brian Kinney that we expected him to be. And you, who
claimed to love him, seemed to want nothing more than for him to become someone else - the man of
your dreams. And, in the end, we all screwed ourselves over. He changed, while all of us stayed the
same. We're all still here, in the same place, and he's..." He paused as he felt Justin shudder under
his arm. "I'm sorry, Sweetie, but I think he's just... gone."

Justin went very still then, as he felt Daphne step close and lay her head against his shoulder, offering
the solace of a gentle touch. But it was not enough. Nothing, he thought, would ever be enough.

He wanted to scream, to yell at his companions to leave him alone, to break things and rage against
the unfairness of it all. He wanted to push them all away, to strike out blindly, to hurt someone or
something, so maybe he would feel his own hurt a little less. He wanted to blame somebody, but he
couldn't, for there was ultimately nobody left to blame. Nobody except... What had he done?

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tbc
Chapter 20

The tall, thin redhead hunched his shoulders against the chill in the air, pulling his windbreaker more tightly around him and wondering when spring would finally arrive and chase away the last remnants of winter. Though the sun was bright and the sky incredibly blue overhead, the temperature hovered still around the fifty-degree mark, and the fitful breeze that gusted through the streets and swirled bits of debris along the sidewalks still carried a hint of frost.

He leaned against the faded brickwork of the barber shop on the corner, ignoring the occasional glare of the wizened and aproned old man who was slowly pushing a broom around the interior of the front room, a man who appeared to be even older than his shop. The redhead kept pale gray eyes trained on the entrance of the building opposite, its flight of steps shaded by a garish red awning. He squinted to peer through the big front window, jamming his hands deep into his jacket pockets to warm them while focusing on the young man silhouetted against the mirror over the bar. He could have gone into Woody's, of course, and enjoyed both the coziness of the interior and a drink to warm his gut, but he knew he had to be prepared to move quickly should the need arise. And he also had to try to preserve his anonymity, according to the instructions he'd received from his boss, following a recommendation from his predecessor.

Jared Hilliard had passed the torch at the end of his shift with a wry smile and several well chosen words of wisdom, primary among them his conclusion that the subject of their surveillance - the young man whose safety was of paramount importance to them all - was chafing under the restraints imposed by his need for a bodyguard. Thus, it was pretty obvious that doubling the security, as Lance Mathis had decided to do, would disturb him even more.

So there had been no introductions, no public transfer of responsibility, no speech from Mathis to instruct the young man about how to make their job easier. Instead, there had been a quick, friendly good-bye from Hilliard, leaving Justin Taylor to breathe a big sigh of relief, in the belief that the powers-that-be had decided that he was no longer in danger.

Thus, the tall, thin redhead, AKA Tommy Boyles, and his partner - a short, stocky Hispanic youth with the unlikely name Angel Diablo - had not yet had much time for getting to know each other or their subject, since they had never worked together as a team before, although they had known each other - casually - for many years. They were still getting acquainted on a professional level, still not able to interact instinctively, but Boyles thought they would be all right, given a little time. Only, in a situation like this one, there was no guarantee that they would be granted the time they might need. Still, they had both developed good street smarts over the years, and, more importantly, they both understood what was at stake here.

Liberty Avenue and its environs had been home to them both for most of their lives, and one did not remain long in the neighborhood without learning about the tour de force known as Brian Kinney. It was common knowledge that a smart person - a person who wanted to survive and thrive in this environment - did not risk pissing off that particular individual. Not if the person in question wanted to keep his balls intact and functional.

Kinney could be an exceptionally good friend and an exceptionally bad enemy, or so it was rumored, or he could be completely indifferent to those who never happened to cross his path. The fainthearted of the area usually preferred to take up residence among the latter group, rather than risk the extremes of the former, but Boyles didn't yet know enough about the man to be ready to make a final decision. He needed more data - a chance to fill in the blanks.

He did know, however, that Kinney was so movie-star gorgeous, in a strictly physical sense, that he
generated rumors by simply walking down a street, although Boyles was quick to admit that such knowledge did not require much in the way of deductive reasoning. The man was a legend in his own time, and the legend had it that he had been known to create spikes of sexual tension in men who had never before exhibited the slightest overt tendency toward homosexuality, although no one was quite willing to suggest that he had the power to turn straight men gay; only to expose tendencies previously denied. It was also said, with great accuracy, that he could have had almost any woman he might want, except for those of the lesbian persuasion, and even a few of those were considered not completely off limits. The fact that he'd never wanted one - mostly - apparently did nothing to dissuade the distaff legions of his fans.

In short, Kinney was everything that every gay boy wanted to grow up to be, from a certain point of view.

Except that now, if common gossip and the tabloids were to be believed, the idol had been twisted into a mutilated caricature of itself, and Boyles was not quite sure how to feel about that. He, himself, was not gay, but he was the son of a Lesbian couple, and he had always admired Kinney for his in-your-face honesty, as did both of his mothers, even though they sometimes lambasted him for his renowned disdain for romantic commitments. Still, even when they'd disagreed vehemently with his attitudes, they'd never denied taking pride in his refusal to pretend to be anything other than what he was. There was no denying that he was stubborn and arrogant, impatient and willful, and completely unrepentant - but neither could it be denied that he had not a single ounce of pretentiousness or dishonesty in him, and most of the denizens of Liberty Avenue found those lacks sufficient to compensate for the intensity of the less desirable traits he did possess.

But whatever else he might be, the one thing that no one would even consider disputing was his relentless sense of commitment which would drive him to exact retribution from those who did not perform up to his expectations in the framework of professional services. And that was exactly what this situation was, regardless of its genesis. His grim determination to protect Justin Taylor might have more to do with how hot the boy's ass was or how proficient he was in giving a blow job than any innate sense of responsibility for protecting the innocent, but the arrangement with the security people was strictly professional, and they would all rue the day they fucked up if they blew their assignments.

Thus, Boyles was quick to turn his face away, ostensibly to shield himself from the wind in order to light a cigarette, as young Taylor came stumbling out the front door of Woody's, with his best friend at his heels. The girl looked distraught, but Taylor just seemed focused - or determined, maybe. Like a man on a mission.

Boyles hesitated for a moment, just long enough to note that his partner had emerged from the shadows of the alleyway in the middle of the block, and taken a right angle into the sparse traffic on the sidewalk, with Justin and Daphne moving along at a good clip some twenty yards behind him. Boyles, on the other hand, hesitated just long enough to exchange quick glances with Drew Boyd, through Woody's front window, confidant in the big football player's ability to see to the safety of Emmett Honeycutt. Lance Mathis, after an intense discussion with the local constabulary, had agreed that the threat to Honeycutt was minimal, that the attack on him had been a case of mistaken identity rather than a deliberate assault; nevertheless, he had made sure that Boyd understood that no one could be 100% confidant in such a conclusion, so that the big quarterback would keep his eyes open and his focus where it needed to be to protect the man who was so vitally important to him.

The redhead spared a quick glance for Honeycutt and suppressed a quirky smile; it was undoubtedly true that Boyd - football hero, super athlete, and steaming hot hunk - could have had anyone he wanted, male or female. The fact that he had chosen this young man, who gave a whole new meaning to the phrase 'drama queen', was proof positive that there was no accounting for how Cupid
aimed his arrows. Boyles didn't really understand it, but then again, there were plenty of hetero matches that were just as mysterious and beyond his ken. Such as the marriage between his tomboy, tennis-ace sister and a music teacher ten years her senior, a quiet man with a fondness for hot-house orchids. Not just polar opposites - no. Originating in alternative universes, and proving . . . what? The farcical nature of fate?

No one in either family understood it, but none could deny that the two seemed tremendously happy and content in their joining. Perhaps Boyd and Honeycutt would prove to be cut from the same patchwork.

None of which had anything to do with his assignment, so he put such thoughts aside and strolled off down the street, maintaining a casual demeanor while never taking his eyes off his quarry.

When the two friends hurried toward the Liberty Diner, he allowed himself to relax a bit. There were probably few places in the neighborhood that could be considered completely secure, but this one came as close as any. Anybody who might have it in for one of the diner's patrons would have to be seriously psychotic to risk confronting the extended family dynamic of the clientele in this place. There were virtually no strangers in the diner, because any who might wander in had only two options: to make a quick exit, or join the clan wholeheartedly in order to earn a welcome.

Both Boyles and Diablo had known Debbie Novotny since they'd been school boys, and both decided spontaneously that they could get away with dropping in - separately - for a quick cup and a lemon bar. Plus it would give them a chance for a bit of eavesdropping, to find out what young Taylor might be up to, always a bonus in clandestine surveillance circumstances.

And - a bigger plus - it would be warm and welcoming.

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Michael had mentioned - at least five times since lunch - that he should get moving and go open up his shop. Though his hours of operation were often erratic and subject to the whim of the moment, he usually did try to open for a few hours every day except for the Sundays, when he paid lip service to his Catholic upbringing. So he had continued to talk about it sporadically, as he watched Ben and Hunter depart for afternoon classes, both yielding to the need to adhere to prior commitments, but neither really comfortable leaving Michael to his own devices. Nobody had addressed the issue in depth, but all of them knew that this situation with Brian was harder on some than on others, and might well be completely devastating for Michael. Despite the rocky road the two had navigated over the past couple of years, their love for each other had endured somehow, in that they had both been reminded of what they stood to lose if they allowed the past to slip away and their differences to strand them on either side of an ever-widening gulf of petty misunderstandings.

Brian had been first to recognize the tragedy of the loss they were facing and try to close the gap, but Michael, in a pique of jealousy and old resentments and pettiness, had turned his back on the relationship they'd once shared and immersed himself in a new life with new loyalties, and told himself that he was content and happy and better off free of old bonds. It had been a lie, of course, but comfortable enough to allow him to ignore the emotional bruises he still carried.

It had taken the trauma and tragedy of the Babylon bombing to close the rift, to remind them both of what they had been to each other - to bring them back together, to repair what had been broken.

Except . . .

Michael wasn't entirely sure why he had always felt that something - some tiny, nameless, anonymous little something - remained unmended. Things had gone back to the way they had been
before - before the bombing, before the rift, before the confrontations. Even, to some degree, before Justin and Ben and Hunter.

Except . . .

He had nodded as his partner and his adopted son had said their good-byes with hugs and kisses, assured him that they would be back as soon as possible, to be with him if he chose to stand vigil again, and made their departures, not entirely successful in concealing the degree of their concern. Michael was fragile right now, but they both knew that there was nothing they could do to strengthen him. If anyone could prop him up and restore his balance . . . that task would fall to someone else - someone who might no longer be willing or interested.

Ted and Blake had been next to depart - Blake to get back to the Rehab center and his afternoon session, and Ted, grumbling in one breath about having to be the pack horse to bear the weight of the absence of both Brian and Cynthia at Kinnetik, and observing in the next that he would take advantage of the opportunity to straighten out a few things while he had the chance to exert his own authority. That comment had elicited a raised eyebrow from Emmett, a frown from Blake, and a look of intense interest from Melanie, who had gathered her belongings and made her exit next, murmuring something about researching some legal precedents in the local law library.

Emmett had been next to go, after receiving a call on his cell phone and explaining that he'd been summoned to a meeting. He too had lingered for a moment after rising, watching Michael with traces of misgivings darkening his eyes to opaque jade. In some ways, he thought, he knew Michael better than almost anybody; better even than Ben; better even than Debbie, though not - quite - better than Brian, and he understood, instinctively, what Michael was being very careful not to say. Indeed, might never be able to say, no matter how painful the silence might prove to be.

But he left, finally, acutely conscious that he could not ignore the desperation of the voice that had spoken to him on the phone, begging his assistance. He made good his departure, but he wasn't particularly sanguine about it.

Still, in the end, there were only Michael and Lindsey, sitting across from each other and staring down into cold cups of coffee, both wishing they could go, wanting to go. But neither actually moving, both finding ways to avoid looking at each other.

Thus, when the front door banged open, propelled on a gust of chill wind, they both looked up and noted the entrance of a young Hispanic who slid into the booth behind theirs. Michael nodded to him, knowing that he had seen him before - at Babylon, perhaps, or out on the street, or here in the diner - but not recalling any specifics. Debbie, however, called out a friendly greeting, complete with name, but Michael was not sufficiently interested to pay much attention.

"So," he said finally, "I'm guessing we both have something else to do, but . . ."

Lindsey's smile was weary as she nodded. "Yeah, I guess. But I'm just waiting."

"For what?"

She braced her elbows on the table and clasped her hands. "My father is bringing Gus to me. He always liked it here, so I thought it would be easier - for him - to come here first."

Neither of them paid any attention when the young man in the booth behind them stood up and went to the door, quickly pulling a cell phone out of his pocket.

"Does he know?"
She shook her head. "How do I . . . I don't know how to tell him."

He nodded. "Maybe it won't come to that."

But she was not comforted. "He's going to ask for his father," she said softly. "You know how they are . . . together. I just don't know . . ."

"What about Justin?" he asked. "Do you think he could . . ."

She smiled. "Gus loves Justin. Like a big brother, I guess. But Justin isn't . . ."

"His daddy."

"Right."

They fell silent then, still avoiding each other's eyes. Until Michael could no longer contain himself. Until he felt compelled to speak.

"I talked to Cynthia," he said softly, his hands clinching around his coffee cup. "Or - more accurately - she talked to me. She doesn't exactly mince words."

She nodded. "Yeah. And I'm pretty sure she's not done yet. With any of us."

"Do you think . . . she's right?"

"About what?"

He sighed. "I don't really know. I think there was plenty that she wanted to say, but didn't. But I think she was right about one thing, which she didn't actually say, come to think of it. But she didn't have to. He's changed, Linz. Changed right in front of our eyes, and we didn't even see it. I think we might have finally let it go too far. I think we might have lost him."

He looked up then, and had no trouble identifying the panic rising in her eyes. But she didn't get a chance to voice it, as a blond tornado swept through the entrance at that moment, and shot toward them with all the purpose and intent of a guided missile, equal parts anger and determination gleaming in hard, blue eyes.

Justin did not bother with greetings. "You," he said, jabbing a finger toward Michael, as he slid into the seat at Lindsey's side. "If anyone can tell me the truth, it's you. So tell me."

Michael's eyes were suddenly huge and dark and not entirely happy with the role assigned to him, and he looked away quickly, desperate to find something else to look at, someone else on whom to focus his attention. When a lanky redhead in an Ironmen jacket came through the door and moved toward the counter, he wasted a minute trying to figure out if he was supposed to know the guy's name. But then he sighed, realizing that he could not simply continue to ignore Justin's demand. "Tell you what?" he asked roughly. "How the fuck should I know what . . ."

But Justin was not in any mood to be dissuaded or distracted, and appeared to focus even more tightly on Michael's face as Daphne slipped into the booth, slightly out of breath and red of face.

"He says . . ." Justin had to pause then, to take a moment to try to swallow around the lump in his throat. "He says that he finally wised up. That he realized I was never going to be happy just to be with him, and that he got tired of waiting." He hesitated briefly, and swallowed again, an audible gulp that was painful to hear. "He says he moved on, and found somebody new. Somebody who won't always be looking for something else or somebody else. Someone who'll accept him for what
he is, instead of always pushing him to change into someone he's not."

Michael and Lindsey found that they could not bear to see the anguish building in those blue eyes. Instead, they looked at each other and tried not to remember what Michael had been saying before Justin's arrival. Was it all part and parcel of the same circumstance? Had they lost Brian? Had all of them lost Brian?

"So you answer me," Justin insisted. "You know him better than anybody. Or you used to. So if he has moved on, if he really found somebody else, you'd know it."

But Michael was shaking his head, still avoiding Justin's eyes. "That might have been true before," he said gently, "but I'm not sure it's still true now." He forced himself to look up then, and meet the younger man's desperate gaze. "He's changed, Justin. And I don't think any of us realized how much. I don't think we know him any more."

"But why would he . . ."

"Because," said Lindsey, strangely reluctant to give voice to the words rising within her, but unable to suppress them, or the tremor in her voice. "Because maybe . . . maybe he got tired of having to be what we needed him to be. Instead of what he is."

"I don't understand," whispered Justin. "I never left him. I never could leave him, except when he pushed me away. Why would he think . . ."

But Lindsey was not prepared to deal with empty assurances or specious claims. "Yes, you did, Justin." Then she took a deep breath, as the truth tore through her like an Arctic blast. "Jesus Christ! We all did."

Justin just stared at her, his face a mask of denial. "No," he said finally. "No, that's wrong. He could have stopped us. All he had to do - all he ever had to do was just say the word."

And they all saw it then - the truth that none of them had ever been willing to confront before, but only Lindsey found the courage to say it. "But he wouldn't. That's what none of us ever understood. He wouldn't say anything or take any action, to keep us from doing what he believed we really wanted to do. He wouldn't hold us, when he thought we didn't want to be held." She closed her eyes, and felt something cold and heavy seize and shatter inside her. "Brian Kinney doesn't believe in locking people in. He gave us all our freedom, and we took it, never once stopping to think of what it cost him to let us just walk away. Or what it might cost us, in the end."

She drew a deep, shaky breath and touched her fingertips to her temples to ward off the beginning of a headache. "He even told us - I can't begin to count how many times he said it - and none of us ever once stopped to ask ourselves what it meant."

"What?" snapped Justin. "What did he tell us?"

"That he wouldn't expect anyone to stay with him, to be tied to him, out of love. That that wasn't love; it was sacrifice." Her eyes were huge and dark now, and filled with old shadows. "And we just . . . we let him believe that. Because it was easier. Because it let us do whatever we chose to do, without having to stop and think about what it might do to him."

Justin found, suddenly, that he couldn't bear to look at her and read the truth in her eyes, so he turned to Michael instead. "So you're saying you don't know if he was telling the truth, if he actually found somebody else?"

Michael decided to ignore the sad, knowing smile on Lindsey's face and address the question
directly. "If you're asking if he's told me - about anyone - the answer is no. I know he's still tricking. Hot and heavy and enjoying it, but that's Brian, isn't it? In some ways, he's gone right back to who he used to be, but . . ."

"But?"

Michael shrugged. "In some ways, he's different. But I can't really explain how. It's just a feeling. I'm not even sure . . ."

"Of what?" Justin asked quickly, when Michael looked as if he didn't know how to continue.

Michael took a deep breath. "Whether it's him who's changed . . . or me."

Justin's hands were clinched in front of him as he lowered his head to brace his chin against his fingers and closed his eyes. "So you think it's possible that he doesn't want me any more." It was not a question.

"Maybe," said Lindsey slowly, a note of speculation in her voice, "we're all asking the wrong question."

"What do you mean?" asked Justin wearily, realizing suddenly that he had never felt so tired in his life.

"Maybe we should stop asking whether or not he wants us, and ask instead just how much - how desperately - we want him."

"Meaning?" That was Michael, obviously confused.

"We all assumed he would always be there, for us to come back to, whenever we wanted. But now, if we finally recognize how much we need him, how much he means to us, maybe we have to fight for him. Maybe it's time we stopped insisting that he prove himself to us, and finally prove ourselves - to him."

Justin closed his eyes, unable - unwilling - to see what was being laid out for him. "But if he . . . if he's really moved on, really stopped . . . loving me . . ."

"Then you have a big decision to make," said Daphne firmly, pragmatic as always. She waited until he opened his eyes and turned to face her before continuing. "No matter what he feels now - or says he feels - you have to know that he did love you. God! It was like this blinding light that blazed around the two of you. It was there, for anybody who wanted to see it." Then she spared a sympathetic little smile for Michael. "Although there were some who chose not to. So here's the thing. Even if he has moved on and decided to put you behind him, that doesn't change how he felt about you, and . . . well, call me a romantic fool if you like, but I don't think a love like that ever really dies. So here's your question, Blondie. Do you love him enough . . . to fight to win him back? Or . . ." Again she paused, and this time the sardonic smirk was aimed directly at Justin. "Is it easier to just let him go? Because he will, you know. He'll go; he'll accept whatever you decide, just like he always did. He won't try to lock you up in a place you don't want to be."

"But why should I have to fight . . ."

Lindsey and Daphne exchanged sad smiles. "Why do you think?" asked the blonde, reaching out to lay a gentle hand on his arm.

And he saw it then, as he had not before; saw the destination toward which he was being led - the place he had to go, unless he was willing to simply accept defeat and walk away.
"Because," he admitted softly, barely audible, "I never did before."

Nobody with a soupcon of taste could have found fault with the interior design of Kinnetic Corp. It reflected Brian’s sense of style, of course, which was impeccable, not to mention unique and definitive. Anyone who had ever visited his loft would have recognized the ambiance immediately: spare and elegant and classic - Brian Kinney interpreted in form and function.

But the exterior of the building was something else again, something more in keeping with the neighborhood in which it stood. It had been structurally restored, of course, and thoroughly cleaned when Brian bought it, but nothing could really make it look like anything other than what it was: a former bath-house. All the polish in the world would not make it possible for it to disguise its humble beginnings.

Ted had voiced his misgivings about the place several times, patiently pointing out that it was an affront to affluent clients to expect them to navigate the byways and back alleys in the vicinity of Liberty Avenue in order to reach the company’s main office, but Brian - being Brian - had steadfastly rejected Ted's conclusions, pointing out that Kinnetic was not like Vanguard or any of the two dozen other successful - or not - ad agencies in the greater Pittsburgh area; he and his staff did not think in a box, did not work in a box, did not function in a box - and would not be housed or confined in a box.

All of which, thought Ted, was just Brian being Brian, insisting on marching to the beat of a different drummer. There was no disputing the fact that he was the heart and inspirational soul of the firm, but he was, in Ted's professional opinion, a little too caught up in preserving his own mystique to pay sufficient attention to the process of growing his company.

Ted knew about growing things financially, and he often chafed under his employer's singularly unconventional corporate philosophy. Brian saw things from a fairly unique perspective, which had, up until this point, paid off handsomely, but Ted was quick to realize that a large part of Kinnetic’s success had more to do with luck than skill. Flair and intuition, after all, no matter how intense, could not make up for solid practical management policies.

But the bottom line, for the moment, was that Brian still held all the reins and made all the executive decisions; thus, the headquarters of an increasingly successful company - currently on the verge of international acclaim - still looked like a slightly modernized example of urban blight, in an area where one hesitated to walk alone at night.

Of course, there was security; Brian might be obstinate but he was never foolish, and he had hired professionals to assure the safety of his staff and his clients. Thus, there were two visible uniformed guards on duty in front of the building during business hours, and constant electronic surveillance - inside and out - that was closely monitored by Kinnetic’s chief of security and his staff.

Ted had often suggested that such expensive security arrangements would be unnecessary if the firm were located in a more upscale area, but his suggestions were greeted with nothing more than a smirk and an eye-roll from his employer. Brian seldom resorted to stating the obvious, but everyone who worked for him knew the elemental truth: it was his way or the highway. There was no in-between with Brian Kinney.

Still, Ted thought, as he strolled into the Kinnetic lobby, things might change. Even Brian might change. He had, after all, never been a victim before, and being forced into such a position might encourage him to rethink his life and his philosophy. He might be a little less sanguine, or a little more biddable.
He paused in mid-stride. Biddable? Brian Kinney? What the fuck was he thinking?

The receptionist - a comely young man with huge gray eyes and a swimmer's build - greeted him with a smile and handed him his messages. The kid's name was Garrett Delaney, and he had been Brian's personal choice for the job. When Ted had objected, recommending a young blonde woman with big tits and long legs as more suitable for a 'public face' for the company, Brian had simply laughed at him and gone ahead to do exactly as he pleased.

As always.

But now . . .

Ted made his way back to his office, stopping to speak to a couple of his assistants along the way, and looking in at the art department where two of Brian's pet graphic artists were working on a new Liberty Air campaign. The airline, which had once been a small, local company, had grown by leaps and bounds in the period since Brian had begun to handle their advertising, having expanded into Europe and the Middle East in recent years and currently expanding operations yet again, planning new routes to South America and the Pacific. Brian had planned the theme of the campaign with his usual meticulous attention to detail and then turned the project over to the two young artists who worked directly under his supervision, his most trusted assistants. Both Chelsea Archer and Jerry Glynn seemed to be excited and happy with the ideas they'd developed to carry out the campaign Brian had planned, but Ted was less enthusiastic. According to Brian's fundamental advertising philosophy, it was always all about sex, in the end, but Ted thought that maybe it was time to expand the company's horizons and reach out to a more mature, more conservative audience.

He even mentioned that thought to Chelsea and Jerry, and found himself thoroughly annoyed when they looked at him with studied nonchalance before exchanging smug, secretive smiles. They undoubtedly thought that the wise course would be to appear to agree, and then go around him to get to Brian for his approval, since his was, ultimately, the only approval that really mattered at Kinnetic.

As always.

For now.

But things could change, Ted thought, as he continued on to his office, pausing for a moment to reflect that it was a little strange - given the man's obsession with preserving his own youth and beauty - that all of Brian's employees were physically quite lovely. Wouldn't it make more sense to surround himself with less attractive individuals in order to provide a greater contrast to his own stunning good looks? One day, when he had more time for philosophical musing, he would explore that train of thought to help him better understand the man who ultimately controlled his professional destiny.

He went into his office and closed the door, enjoying the elegance of the setting. Though most of the firm's executive offices were decorated in the same style as Brian's suite, if not quite so lavishly, Ted had been allowed to indulge himself in the décor of his own personal space, and chosen to go with softer, more muted tones - mocha and taupe and cream with occasional touches of dark amber - to blend with the warm finish of his hand-rubbed maple desk. It was a retreat for him, a place to get away from the sleekness and chrome and pale leather, and he felt that he functioned better here, thought more clearly here. It felt like a sanctuary.

He lowered himself into his buckskin colored suede chair and sat back to survey his domain. His. All his. He closed his eyes, and . . .

Suddenly the soft, comforting warmth around him faded and he was surrounded with black walls and film props and slick bodies gleaming under strobe lights, and he was inundated with the sounds
of flesh slapping flesh and guttural moans and . . .

He sat up quickly. What the fuck? Why would he have slipped like that, back into a time he had long since put away in the darkest cupboards of his past?

He had been Ted Schmidt - Porn king. A rich man. A successful man. A man who lived a life other gay men could only dream of. Until it had all come crashing down around his ears, leaving him broken and destitute and dependent. All because of something that was not his fault. He had been reduced to depending on the charity of people who had once depended on him. Reduced to a shadow of himself, needy, drugged out, drowning in self-pity, and blaming everyone for his fall.

Everyone. Everyone except . . . but he quickly buried that thought in a place he didn't want to see.

Ted clinched his hands in front of his face and braced his forehead against them. And he would have stayed there, mawkish and needy and pathetic. Except for . . .

Oh, God! Could it really be that he had never completely understood how much he had needed what Brian had provided? And was he only seeing it now because . . . because he might actually lose Brian?

He did not often let his thoughts drift in this direction, for, if he did, he would be forced to try to analyze the relationship he shared with his employer, and that was a place he would prefer not to go. If he allowed himself to think about it, to study it, to explore it, he might find that everything he'd ever let himself believe, every opinion he'd ever held about the man that Brian was might be wrong. Dreadfully, totally, dynamically wrong.

For years, he had cloistered himself in the sedate, unapproachable realm of his ivory tower, constructed on his own private patch of the moral high ground, and observed the phenomenon that was Brian Kinney through the eyes of moral superiority. Brian Kinney - vain, promiscuous, vapid, shallow, narcissistic, unprincipled, unapologetic.

Unapologetic.

And what, when one got right down to it, did the man have to apologize for? For living the life that Ted and all of his buddies hungered for, even though they would have denied it with their last breath? For being the person they all secretly wanted to be, but couldn't? For never pretending to be anything except what he really was and for laughing in the face of others' pretensions?

And now someone, some vicious, vindictive, nameless someone, had struck Brian down, trying to destroy the private individual behind the public persona. Someone compelled by spite and contempt and undoubtedly convinced that they were acting on a moral imperative.

Someone not so awfully different . . . from me.

"Oh, God!" he whispered, burying his face in his hands. "What do we do if . . ."

He was so immersed in the first stage of raw panic that he did not hear his door open or notice the person who entered and stood looking down at him, until she spoke.

"I was wondering how long it would take," said Cynthia, not unkindly.

Ted jerked upright, trying vainly to wipe away the evidence of his tears. "What? How long what would take?"

But Cynthia knew Ted quite well, much better than he had ever realized. "For you to remember what
he really means to you."

"Don't be ridiculous," he snapped, eyes going cold and distant. "He's my boss, for God's sake. And we need to figure out how to manage in his absence. That's my only concern."

"Of course," she agreed, tacitly accepting the restriction he was placing on the conversation. "I'll set up a staff meeting. First thing in the morning, I think, if that's all right with you."

Ted, being Ted, was determined to project an attitude of disinterest. "As you wish, of course. You are, after all, his 'good, right hand', as he so often points out."

Cynthia had turned to go, but something in his tone caused her to hesitate and look back at him. "This is going to be a difficult time," she said softly. "For all of us. But it'll also be a good opportunity for us to prove ourselves, to show that we can be what he needs us to be, to protect what he's built."

"Of course," he agreed, swallowing his annoyance that she seemed to think he needed to be reminded of how to do his job.

But still she lingered. "Ted," she said slowly, "there might be complications. Problems that arise from unexpected directions. We'll need to be very careful."

"I," he retorted, "am always careful."

She managed - barely - to suppress a sigh. Life, she thought, was never simple, and she was pretty sure that it was going to grow more complicated by the hour, from this point on. She wanted to say more, to discuss the deeper issues that might arise, but it was obvious that Ted was already resenting her assumption of authority in Brian's absence, and the fact that it had been Brian himself who designated her to take control only seemed to compound the problem.

Complicated indeed.

When Ted's phone rang - his cell phone - she made good her escape, still wondering how to begin to mend a fence she had not realized was broken.

For his part, Ted was relieved to see her go and answered the call, grateful for the interruption. He was not, however, quite so grateful when he realized who was calling, and was even less so as the conversation proceeded. By the end of the caller's opening paragraph, he was wondering what else could possibly happen in the course of this godforsaken day.

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The level of pain was rising in fits and starts now, at times growing at a regular pace and at other times, progressing in leaps and bounds. But he forged ahead with his statement, pushing the pain away with the power of his mind and dredging up every fragment of memory, every scrap of perception, and every nuance of intuition in order to flesh out his story. He was successful, mostly, in resisting the urge to give in to the pain, but by the time he was finished, he was pale and shaking and slick with sweat, and everyone else in the room was staring at him, amazed by the degree of his determination and the depth of his courage.

Detective Horvath, Agent McClaren, Dr. Keller, and Lance Mathis were all forced to take a minute, to struggle to regain their composure after listening to the full account of the attack. Only Cynthia had been spared, when Brian had insisted that she get back to the office to assume the oversight of his company. She, of course, had not been fooled; she had known exactly why she was being dismissed and had come very close to refusing to go. But then she had realized the truth; there were
truly some things that she preferred not to know. She had made her exit then, after getting some last minute instructions on various business matters from her boss and assuring him that she would be back in the evening.

Only after she was gone, with Nurse Beck following her out, had he begun to tell his story, his voice mostly steady, only occasionally faltering as he worked his way around a particularly vile, difficult moment.

"Anything else?" asked Horvath finally, clearing his throat and speaking very distinctly.

Brian shook his head. "If I think of anything else, I'll let you know."

"And you're sure," said McClaren, "that there were at least four individuals among the observers? And you didn't recognize any of them?"

"They never stepped out of the shadows," Brian replied, "and they didn't talk much. One of them never said anything at all, and the others kept their voices down. Barely above a whisper."

"So there's nothing you can tell us about them." That was Horvath, obviously discouraged.

"Not much," Brian admitted. "Except that they weren't street toughs." He dredged up a painful smile. "They were obviously vicious, homophobic cunts, but they were educated cunts."

McClaren nodded. "Yet - in spite of their precautions - you're sure that they knew you. That you were targeted for a reason."

Brian gasped as a particularly sharp bolt of pain thrust through his torso. "You don't hate like that," he managed to reply, "unless it's personal."

"Is there anything you need?" asked Horvath, frustrated by his own sense of helplessness.

"Morphine," retorted Brian through clinched teeth. "With a bourbon chaser."

"Your wish is my command," said Matt Keller, syringe in hand.

But Brian was not quite done. "One minute," he said softly to his old friend. "I need just a minute. With my beard."

"Brian," Matt said softly, "you're running on sheer adrenaline. And pure Kinney stubbornness. And it can't last. Let me . . ."

"Soon. Just give me one more minute."

When Keller, Horvath, and Mathis simply folded their hands and continued to regard the patient with steady resolve, he actually managed to roll his eyes to express his frustration.

"In private, please," he growled.

None of the three looked pleased with his request, but they all took a couple of steps back, granting some small illusion of privacy in lieu of the real thing.

McClaren, on the other hand, stepped closer and leaned forward, apparently content to wait for whatever Brian might throw at him.

"Are you gay?"
McClaren smiled, relieved to see that his first impression of Kinney was correct. The man would not tolerate bullshit or evasions.

On the other hand, he had not developed his reputation for matchless undercover work without developing certain invaluable skills. "Does it matter?"

"It could." Clipped and dry, and the FBI agent got the distinct impression that Kinney didn't really care if he was gay, bi-sexual, or devoted to bestiality. It was the impression that would count.

"Explain."

Brian sighed. "Look. I have no interest in getting myself killed. Or mangled again. And I'll do whatever it takes to avoid that. But when it gets right down to it, everybody has something that means more to him than his own life. In my case, there are actually two somethings. One is my son, but there's not much that you can do about keeping him safe. Except to understand that if anything happens to him, I'm going to hold all of you assholes personally responsible. But the other thing . . ." He paused and McClaren found himself mesmerized by the sheer power radiating from deep-set hazel eyes. "The other thing that matters to me is only safe if he and everybody else can be convinced that I no longer care about him. That I've found myself a new boytoy to obsess over. So this is the bottom line. I don't give a shit if you fuck girls, guys, grandmothers, sheep, or Persian melons, just as long as you can convince the world that you're getting fucked by me. Capiche?"

McClaren grinned. "If I'm that shallow, wouldn't I run from the newest version of Quasimodo?"

Brian actually managed a tiny laugh, which he had immediate cause to regret as bruised and bludgeoned abdominal muscles protested their abuse. "You'd be in love with the old me, and I was . . . irresistible," he said, tongue definitely in cheek.

"Yeah. I know."

"You know what?"

McClaren smiled. "I didn't get to be the best in my chosen field by going into situations without doing my homework. I know all about the notorious Brian Kinney."

Brian was silent for a moment, studying the man's face. "And do you return the favor? Do I get to know all about you?"

The FBI agent was not entirely successful in suppressing a smirk. "What do your instincts tell you?"

Brian sighed. "Right now, they only tell me that I'm past due for my morphine cocktail. But later . . ."

"Later?" accompanied by the quirk of an eyebrow.

"I'm never wrong," Brian replied softly.

McClaren laughed. "We'll see about that."

Matt Keller decided, at this point, that he had waited long enough, and stepped forward with syringe in hand. "Time for your candy, Lover Boy," he announced, "and no more procrastination."

Brian sighed, more ready for pain relief than he cared to admit. But still he held McClaren's eyes. "Talk to Cynthia," he said as the doctor administered the drug and it quickly began to work its magic. "She can tell you what you need to know. To be convincing."
"I'm always convincing," McClaren replied, but his tone was strangely gentle as he watched Brian's eyes begin to close.

"If you know what's good for you," the patient whispered, "you better be."

"Is he always like that?" McClaren asked as Brian finally allowed himself to settle into the welcoming arms of slumber.

Matt Keller huffed a tiny laugh and regarded the federal agent with exaggerated sympathy. "You have no idea," he answered, "and I'm not about to spoil the fun."

"His or mine?" McClaren looked genuinely interested.

But Keller's only answer was a smile.

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It wasn't often that Ted lamented the fact that he no longer had recourse to the blissful oblivion of an alcohol-induced haze, but he thought that, right at this moment, he'd have bartered his eternal soul for a couple of shots of Grey Goose and tonic. He didn't like what he was hearing; he didn't like being forced to shift his perspective and examine things from a new point of view. But he couldn't quite convince himself to ignore the possibilities being laid out for him.

Melanie Marcus was certainly not a perfect human being; she had her share of flaws, and some (such as, for example, the man who paid Ted's salary) would contend that she had a lot more than that. But whatever flaws she might have did not prevent her from being an extremely skilled attorney with a remarkable ability to organize her facts and use them to support her always rational arguments.

Exactly like the one she was making now.

Ted had listened for a while, interrupting only twice - once to voice his initial discomfort with the general topic and once to register the de rigueur protest of the direction her monologue was taking. But mostly, he'd just listened, cringing away from the stridency of her tone and the harshness of her language, but not quite able to dismiss the points she was making.

When she finally fell silent, apparently convinced that she had said enough to give him food for thought, he found that the words to express his misgivings did not come easily. Ted knew that he had not led a blameless life; on the contrary, he was to blame for plenty of things, many, or even most, of which he had never publicly owned. But he was not given to betraying loyalty that had been hard-won in the first place.

Finally, very cautiously, he expressed his first line of defense. "It won't be up to me," he said. "I'm an accountant, and that's the beginning and end of my territory."

"But it's a business," Melanie pointed out, once more entirely rational. "Isn't the money - the finances - the foundation for any business?"

"That's true, of course. But Kinnetic is a lot more than a balance sheet. It requires . . ."

"What?" This time, a faint vein of impatience erupted on the surface of the clipped response. "Creativity? Artistic integrity? Finesse? It's a fucking ad agency, Teddie. And it belongs to the biggest whore in Pittsburgh. Do you really want to use the word 'integrity' in any sentence remotely involving Brian Kinney?"
"Mel," he said quickly, "I know you and Brian have issues, but . . ."

"Issues?" she snapped. "You think we have issues? Do you have any idea what he's done to my life, how he's ruined everything that's important to me? He's fucked up my relationship with Lindsey, and with Gus, and it just never ends. Even when we're in Canada, he still manages to screw me over, every chance he gets. So don't talk to me about issues."

But Ted knew a lot about Brian's relationship with Lindsey and with his son; more, he suspected, than Melanie did, for it seemed unlikely that Lindsey had been completely up front about the support that Brian provided, given the depth of Melanie's resentment of anything remotely related to Gus' father. "Even if that's true, do you really think this is the time to think about payback? You're talking like he engineered this whole thing to lure Lindsey and Gus back to Pittsburgh, and you know that's not true. Whatever resentment you may have toward him, even you have to admit that he didn't deserve this."

Melanie confined her response to a sigh, but Ted got the message loud and clear. She didn't quite dare to speak it aloud, but Melanie could not summon up an ounce of genuine sympathy or concern for Brian's plight.

"But to get back to the point I was trying to make," he continued, "Cynthia will be the one making the day-to-day operational decisions, until he recovers."

"And if he doesn't?"

"What do you mean? The doctor said . . ."

"I know what he said," she interrupted, "but let me ask you this. Do you really think that a man who's based his whole life on being the hottest Stud of Liberty Avenue - on being able to fuck whoever, whenever, wherever - is going to simply accept that he's been transformed into an ugly, mutilated troll, to just pick himself up, dust himself off, and get on with his life? Or even that it would be possible to go on like before? Let's face it, Teddie; to reach the level of success he's had, the first thing he had to sell to his rich clients was himself. Are they going to be willing or able to continue their professional relationship with the lump of twisted flesh he's become?"

"I don't see why it should affect his work," he replied slowly.

"You don't?" she laughed. "Everything Brian does is bigger than life - his job, his lifestyle, his sexuality. Every fucking thing. Do you really think there's anything that won't change after this?"

Ted took a deep breath. "But you're still missing the main point," he insisted. "Kinnetic is wholly owned by Brian Kinney. No partners, no stockholders, no board of directors. In short, no one with any authority to interfere. And Cynthia is the person he will entrust it to, for as long as it takes for him to . . . to do whatever he decides to do."

"And what about the people who depend on him? What about his loyal staff, and I'm pretty damned sure they're loyal because he'd have fired their asses a long time ago if they weren't. And what about my son? Don't his interests need protecting too?"

Ted, being Brian's personal accountant as well as the firm's financial officer, had full knowledge of the trust fund that had been set up for Gus, but he was pretty sure that Melanie did not know of its existence. And he did not feel comfortable in giving her the particulars, considering such knowledge to be privileged information. Nevertheless, he felt compelled to defend Brian's intentions toward his son. "I'm sure Gus will be well provided for. No matter what. And it's all moot anyway. You're still not understanding that there is no one who can intervene in how he chooses to run his company, or
who he chooses to take over on his behalf."

She was silent for a moment, obviously weighing options. Thus, when she spoke again, she seemed to shift her focus. "And what about Cynthia? Do you trust her?"

He sighed. "Whether or not I trust her is beside the point. Brian trusts her. That's all that matters."

"Because she's so eager to kiss his ass." The observation was laced with verbal acid. "And I notice that you didn't really answer my question."

"Actually," said Ted, recalling certain confrontations he'd witnessed between Brian and his assistant, "she doesn't. She's very quick to speak her mind, even when he doesn't like what she has to say. I think that's why he trusts her so much, because she never lies to him, or says what she thinks he wants to hear."

"Jesus!" she almost snarled. "He's got all of you brainwashed."

"Mel," he began, growing increasingly weary of the venom in her words.

"Okay," she retorted. "I get what you're saying. But I'd be ignoring my responsibilities to my son if I didn't at least suggest that someone needs to keep an eye on how the business is run. Someone with the acumen to focus on the profit margin and the company's financial stability, and not get caught up in the Kinney Mystique bullshit."

Ted relaxed back into his chair, recognizing that he was being schmoozed, but grateful for it nonetheless. His ego had taken a bit of battering in the last few days, because he did believe that he, rather than Cynthia, would have been a more logical, more prudent choice for running the firm in Brian's absence. He had, after all, proved himself repeatedly during the years he'd worked for Kinnetic, stepping in for Brian on many occasions and holding his own pretty damned well.

Of course, he had never been involved in the actual development of campaigns or exercised any artistic oversight, but how hard could that be?

Still, it was Brian's right to make the choice, and he had made it. Now Ted just had to live with it. Unless . . .

"You don't really think he'd just walk away, do you?" he said finally, barely able to articulate the thought.

Melanie replied without taking the time to censor her words, and thus spoke without artifice for the first time since the beginning of the conversation. "We should only be so lucky."

It was late by the time Cynthia made it back to the hospital - much later than she would have liked. But it couldn't be avoided. She had spent several hours on the phone with Kinnetic's most important clients, offering assurances, easing nerves, soothing anxieties . . . doing all the things that Brian usually did, in times of crisis.

She didn't fool herself; she wasn't Brian Kinney, and she didn't have his gift for juggling fifteen accounts at once and making them all squeal with delight in the process. But she had learned a lot from him over the years, enough to know that what they all wanted to hear was that they would get Brian back - in time.
So she had given them the reassurances they needed, all the while praying that she was telling the truth.

She believed in Brian, but she understood that everything could dissipate like smoke on the wind if it should happen that he could no longer believe in himself.

The hospital room was silent and deep in shadow when she entered, after having a quick but concise conversation with Matt Keller, getting the latest on Brian's condition and an update on the impending arrival of the great and mysterious Dr. Turnage.

Tomorrow would be an interesting day, she thought.

She was relieved to see that Brian was resting, and that he seemed more relaxed tonight than earlier in the day. He was not tossing in his sleep, or struggling for breath. And yet, as she approached the bed, she noticed something that only a very few people had ever been privileged to see. The faint glow of a lamp in the corner illuminated the track of a tear as it traced its way down his cheek.

So intent was she on watching him that she did not notice the figure that was sitting motionless in the alcove by the window.

"Why?" The voice was soft, almost silken, but it still startled her enough to make her drop her Dooney & Burke.

"Shit!" she muttered, bending to retrieve her handbag. "Why what?"

"Why is he crying in his sleep?"

Chris McClaren rose from his place by the window and stepped forward, pausing a couple of feet away from the bed with his eyes fixed on Brian's face.

"In case you haven't noticed," she retorted, "somebody beat the bejesus out of him."

He ignored the snarkiness of her response, and favored her with an understanding smile. "I noticed, but that's not why he's crying."

"How do you know that?"

The smile grew wider. "Because I always get to know everything I can about the people I'm charged with protecting. And physical pain, no matter how extreme, is not going to make this one cry."

She turned to stare at him, noticing for the first time that he had changed his clothes - and his persona - since she'd seen him last. Gone was the business suit, the dress shirt, silk tie and cuff links, the Prada shoes, along with the professional demeanor. The FBI agent had been replaced by a young, hip, playboy type - relaxed and cool, clad in jeans, boots, and black leather, and still drop-dead gorgeous.

"Wow!" she said as she got her first clear look at him. "You look wonderful and different."

He shrugged. "It's work."

She nodded. "OK. So who are you supposed to be?"

"We'll work that out in a minute," he answered. "After you answer my question."

She turned back to study Brian's face. "It's complicated."
He smiled. "Yeah. I figured. But I still need to know whatever you can tell me."

She sank into a chair beside the bed, and reached out to adjust the blanket that had slipped down to expose Brian's left shoulder. "I've worked for him for almost eight years, and I still learn something new every day. But the short version is that what you see on the surface is hardly even the beginning of the story."

"Deep then?"

"Deeply scarred, and coming from as far back as he can remember I think. That's something that almost nobody has ever been allowed to see. So . . ." She turned to examine McClaren's face with a hard, demanding gaze "whatever insider info you may have, you'd do well to keep to yourself."

"But this - these tears - they aren't for old scars. This is about the kid, isn't it? The reason he's so willing to accept my intrusion in his life. It's not to save his life. It's to save Justin Taylor. Isn't it?"

"You have done your homework, haven't you?"

He nodded. "But all the preliminary data in the world can't provide the intimate details. That's what I need from you."

She sighed. "It's fairly simple, actually. Brian Kinney never - never - believed in love. He believed in fucking, and he was the first to admit it. Until Justin Taylor came along, and kept coming back, no matter how many times Brian pushed him away. He just kept coming back, and one day - to his own astonishment - Brian woke up to find out that he loved Justin. Against his will, against his better judgment. He even proposed marriage, bought a big country house for them, planned a wedding. Until . . ."

"Until what?"

She hesitated. "Well, that's the real mystery, isn't it? According to Brian, they both decided that marriage wasn't for them, that neither of them was willing to let the other sacrifice the life they were meant to live, in order to be together. So Justin took off to New York to become the new Andy Warhol, and Brian went back to his old life. Only . . ."

"Only?"

Once more, she studied Brian's face. "He never explained it. Never even mentioned it much, but I always thought that he came to believe that Justin needed more than he could ever give him. I think he pushed Justin away one last time - hard enough this time to be sure that he would never come back. Not because he didn't love Justin enough, but because he loved him too much."

"And Justin?"

Her smile was gentle. "Needed Brian's love, like you or I might need air to breathe. Only, once he had it, he always seemed to find other things to grab his attention. I always thought it was because he was so young, that he still needed to explore everything that life might have in store for him. Only, I think he might have overlooked the fact that Brian would eventually come to believe that he wasn't what Justin needed at all."

The FBI agent reached into a slim leather case on the bedside table and extracted a photograph of Brian Kinney, taken at a recent awards banquet. He spent a moment examining the man's perfect features and elegant body, and noting that the smile he wore seemed just slightly out of character. "Would Brian be right to assume that?"
She sighed. "I don't think so. I think that, ultimately, Justin will come to see that nothing could ever be enough to compensate for losing Brian. Only by then . . ."

"By then?"

"You have to understand who Brian really is to understand what it would mean if he finally came to that conclusion. Once he believes that Justin will never be happy with him, there is nothing that Justin can do to change his mind. He's truly the ultimate immovable object."

McClaren huffed a small sigh. "Nothing's ever simple. So, do you think I'm his type? Will young Taylor buy into our little ruse?"

She let her eyes drift once more down his buff body. "Oh, you're definitely his type, from a strictly physical perspective. But who else are you supposed to be?"

"The name's the same," he answered, "but the identity is different, though it's one I use on occasion. I'm set up as a freelance photographer, working on a documentary about the impact of the outsourcing of jobs by American corporations on the working classes in places like Pittsburgh. All the records are in place to document my story. And I really am a trained photographer, so the studio that's been set up for me is supplied with a wealth of examples of my work."

"Interesting," she observed.

He grinned. "Like I said before, I do my homework. And I was pretty sure Kinney wouldn't waist his time on a postal worker or a violin teacher or a mama's boy from Newport Beach."

"Unless," said a hoarse voice from the bed, "he had a great ass."

Cynthia grinned, noting that McClaren seemed annoyed - for just a second - that Brian had regained consciousness without attracting the attention of the well trained agent.

But there was no time for discussion or repartee as they were interrupted by a soft, steady knock at the door.

"Brian? Can I come in?"

Brian and Cynthia breathed the name in tandem. "Emmett!"

"Didn't I throw him out earlier?" asked Brian, slightly confused over what day it might be, and where he was in the framework of time.

Cynthia's smile was gentle. "It's Emmett, Brian. Do you really expect him to give up without mounting a new attack - or six?"

Brian turned to look up at McClaren, noting the change in the man's appearance and approving of the look. Black leather might have been invented for just such an individual. "You ready for your debut, Friend?"

McClaren stepped forward and very deliberately, very gently leaned over and covered Brian's mouth with his own. "Action, Baby," he whispered.

His timing was perfect, as Emmett, obviously impatient and tired of waiting, came barreling through the door just in time to witness the end of the kiss.

The big Nelly-bottom did not - quite - voice the question that trembled on his lips, but he might as
well have, as they all heard it anyway. It fairly reverberated in the silent room, as it flashed in his eyes.

Who in the hell are you?

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Chapter 21

Twilight was slipping toward true darkness by the time the front door of the diner sprang open before
the determined assault of an excited six-year-old decked out in artfully faded jeans, an Ironmen t-
shirt, miniature biker boots, and a horrendously expensive black leather jacket (horrendously
expensive for a six-year-old anyway.) It was his favorite jacket, because it had been a gift from a
very special someone, and because it allowed him to act as if he looked like that same special
someone. Which he did, by the way.

His name was Gus Marcus-Peterson, but he sometimes introduced himself to new friends as Gus
Marcus-Peterson-Kinney, not actually minding that it was a real mouthful, although he was very
careful not to do so when his Mama was around. It was okay, though, when it was Mommie who
was present.

He didn't pretend to understand why it should matter which name he used, but he had learned early
on in life how to read his mothers' moods - when to indulge his urge to exercise his free spirit, and
when to rein it in. He did not mention his daddy to Mama any more, because she always got this
really pinched-up, squinty look on her face when he did, with lines like trenches forming around her
mouth and eyes, and her voice getting all hoarse and rough. And sometimes she'd snap at him too,
and get upset over stuff that wouldn't bother her at all at other times.

So he'd learned.

But right now, the diner was bright and filled with light, and there was only his mommie and Uncle
Michael and Granny Deb present, so he felt free to race across the room and throw himself into his
mommie's arms and shout out his demands.

"I love you, Mommie, and I missed you, and where's my Daddy?"

Granny Deb greeted him with a huge smile, but he did wonder why her lips were trembling - just a
little - and why there seemed to be water dripping from her eyes. She was not really his granny, of
course; he knew that. But she was J.R.'s granny, and she seemed to like it well enough when he
joined his baby sister in calling her that. He didn't quite understand why he didn't have a
real
granny,
but it was enough for him that he was loved, deeply and completely, by his moms and his daddy and
so many other people.

And now, of course, he had a new Grandpa (new to him, anyway) to add to the group. He had been
a little uneasy at first, when Leona - his babysitter - had introduced the gray-haired man as his
grandfather and informed him that they would be traveling together - that 'Mr. Peterson' was going to
take him to his mommie in Pittsburgh. But 'Mr. Peterson' had quickly knelt beside him and
announced that his real name - to Gus - was 'Grandpa' and that he had been waiting a very long time
for the chance to meet his grandson. After that, Grandpa had been very kind to him and smiled at
him a lot, and he had quickly gotten comfortable enough to enjoy their drive down from Toronto.
Plus his grandfather had stopped off repeatedly during the trip to buy him lots of cool things - egg
McMuffins and hamburgers and French fries and Cokes (which Mama never let him drink) and ice
cream sundaes and a bunch of Hot Wheels cars and a big bag of Oreos and chicken nuggets and
even a DVD player to use in the car, with copies of Toy Story and Finding Nemo for him to watch
from the comfort of his brand new car seat. Thus, the man's eagerness to please, along with some
remarkably candid and precocious observations from the boy that had his grandfather choking with
laughter, had provided the final impetus for them to form a new bond, and by the time they arrived
on the outskirts of Pittsburgh, they'd become bosom buddies.
"Jesus Christ!" whispered Granny Deb. "He looks more like Brian every time I see him."

Gus' smile was brilliant. He loved it when people said he looked like his daddy.

Ron Peterson raced through the door in pursuit of his grandson, slightly red-faced to have been outpaced by an exuberant six-year-old, obviously intending to apologize.

"It's all right, Daddy," Lindsey assured him. "I spend half my life racing around to try to keep up with him."

"He's a real live wire," he replied, pausing to dab his forehead with a handkerchief. "I haven't had a work-out like this since you were that age."

Lindsey swept Gus up into her arms and covered his face with kisses, much to his chagrin. He had reached that age where getting lipstick by his mother was at the bottom of his wish list.

"Debbie, Michael," said his mom, after another round of kisses, "this is my father."

"Mr. Peterson," said Michael, rising and extending his hand.

But Debbie, as usual, was more concerned with substance than style. "Well," she said drily, studying the man's face sharply as he shook Michael's hand, "it's about fucking time."

A quick grimace suggested that he didn't much care for her choice of language, but the flush that immediately flared in his cheeks acknowledged the accuracy of her observation. "Yes," he agreed, "it is."

She nodded and turned to take Gus from his mother's arms. "No matter how homophobic you are, how could you possibly resist Gorgeous Gus?"

The flush deepened, as he met his daughter's eyes. "I'm not, you know," he said softly. "Not really. I just . . . I guess I just don't understand, given what it costs, why a person would make that choice."

"It's not a choice, Daddy," she replied. "It's just . . . who I am."

He nodded, but still looked slightly confused.

"Want some advice?" asked Debbie, still cuddling Gus to her shoulder. "Stop trying to diagnose it or analyze it or understand it. Just deal with it, and get on with the task of living." Gus giggled as she tickled him gently. "And enjoy what you've been given."

"Where's J. R.?" asked Michael, trying not to sound resentful over the fact that Brian's son was here and getting all of Debbie's attention while his daughter was, apparently, still stuck in Toronto.

Lindsey did not exactly meet his gaze. "Mel thought it best for her to stay with Leona."

Mr. Peterson sighed. "I don't think she was able to put aside her distrust of me, to allow me to bring her daughter here."

"But she's my daughter too," Michael protested. "And Lindsey's."

Lindsey bit her lip and turned to regard him with a slight frown. "Thank you, Michael. And, in my heart, you're right, but, according to the law, she's not. I don't have any legal rights to J.R. I always think it's a little ironic - that Brian cared enough about Gus' future to give up his parental rights so Melanie could adopt him, and we could build a good life together, but somehow, that was never an issue with you. Or Melanie, for that matter. As far as J.R. is concerned, I'm just the wicked
"Why would you think that?" he asked, genuinely concerned over the hurt he heard in her tone and the shadows he saw in her eyes.

But she chose not to respond, struggling to forget all the harsh words and the accusations she had endured from Melanie in recent months - harsh words almost always engendered by some contact with or disagreement over Brian. Lindsey had hoped that putting physical distance between their little family and the man who was Gus' father would serve to defuse Melanie's growing resentment of him, but it had not worked. Perhaps it might have if Brian had been willing to simply fade into the woodwork and turn his back on his only son, but that had not happened, and she was virtually certain now that it never would. Brian Kinney had not expected to fall in love with his son - had not wanted to become so involved in the boy's life - but it had happened anyway, without his consent. And it wasn't going to change.

Unless . . . given what he had endured here, there was no way of knowing what would happen from this day forward. Brian might choose to back away from Gus, but not for the reasons Melanie would have preferred. If he chose to do so, it would be because of his deep and abiding love for his son - not in spite of it. It was strange, Lindsey thought, that none of them had ever picked up on how fiercely protective the man could be, or realized how much he was willing to sacrifice to preserve the safety of those he loved.

And that was the other thing, she realized with a smile. They had also never realized how much, how deeply, he loved. Because, of course, he'd never said it. And never would.

"You know," Ron Peterson observed, as he slid into the booth beside his daughter, "there was a time, when you and Brian were so close, that I thought . . ." 

"Christ!" laughed Debbie. "Not you too. Makes you wonder how many people got their hearts broken when they fooled themselves into thinking they might snag the mighty Kinney for a son-in-law."

She did not immediately recognize the revealing nature of what she'd said, until Michael turned to look at her with a sad, unflinching certainty in his eyes. "Present company excluded, Ma?"

The involuntary bloom of bright spots of color on Debbie's cheeks were the only answer she'd provide, but they were enough. "Come on, Gus," she said firmly. "Let Granny fix you a hot fudge sundae."

But Gus, in his own way, could be as single-minded and focused as his father. "Don't want a sundae. Want my daddy."

The jangle of the bell over the front door drew Lindsey's attention briefly, and, if she had not been so distracted by trying to figure out how to explain the situation to her son, she might have stopped to wonder why the two individuals who were strolling up to the counter had been in and out of the diner at least three times during the afternoon. But she wasn't really paying attention, and the couple was not unlike dozens of others who had wandered in during the day, so she didn't spare them a second thought.

Chuck Valentia and Ricky Domingue took their places at the counter and pretended to study the menu on the wall while their actual focus was concentrated on one obstreperous little boy who was beginning to tire under the stress of a long, eventful day.

"Gus, you can't see Daddy tonight," Lindsey tried to explain, being careful to project only serene
thoughts and warm comfort. "He's not at home, and . . ."

"Then where is he?" he demanded, not really interested in excuses. He wanted his daddy, and he wanted him now.

Lindsey was still scrambling for an answer when deliverance - from a certain point of view - walked through the front door, and none of the principal players in this particular little drama noticed when four different individuals - two inside the diner and two outside the window - all swore under their breath.

Tommy Boyles pretty much summed it up for all of them. *Fuck! If Kinney's enemies happened to walk into this scene right now, achieving their goal of destroying everything the man cared about would be as easy as shooting fish in a barrel.*

But Justin, who had spent the late afternoon wandering the streets around Liberty Avenue and figuring out what he wanted to do, was only focused on Gus as they ran toward each other and came together when the little boy leaped into Justin's arms, chanting his demands as an unbroken litany. "Want Daddy, want Daddy, want Daddy."

Justin simply clasped the child close to his chest and whispered his response directly in the boy's ear. "Then it's Daddy you'll get."

As it happened, Michael was the only one close enough to hear the exchange. "Justin, you can't just . . ."

"No?" Justin was almost snarling. "Who's gonna stop me?"

"Oh, I don't know," Michael answered. "Brian's army, maybe?"

But Justin was undeterred as he looked around to meet Lindsey's gaze and flash her a smile that was not quite the one that had earned him his nickname, but came close. "If it's really time to fight for him," he said softly, "then the war starts right now."

He turned then to face Michael, knowing instinctively that it was time for the two of them to finally put aside their differences and join ranks if they were to have any hope of success. "What about you? Want to enlist?"

Michael did not hesitate. "Hell, yes."

The entire group rose then, and made a rapid exit from the building, leaving only Debbie to stare after them, mouth gaping, as four young toughs scattered at various points around and within the diner scrambled to figure out just what the hell was going on and how best to cope with it.

In the end, they could only roll their eyes, hope they were lucky enough to go unnoticed, and take off at a dead run to keep pace with the individuals they'd been charged to protect and defend.

"Shit! Is the woman completely brainless? Why on earth would she risk the kid's safety by bringing him back here?" Lance Mathis was obviously, thoroughly disgusted.

Drew Boyd was sympathetic to his cousin's dilemma, but he kept his eyes trained on the door to Brian's private room where Emmett was currently trying to work his way back into his old friend's good graces. Or, at least, to convince Kinney to tolerate his presence.
Boyd had stayed at Emmett's side throughout the afternoon, and watched fondly as the big Nelly-bottom analyzed his way through an interpretation of Brian's behavior so that, by the time darkness was imminent, he'd managed (he thought) to figure it out and decide that he was not about to allow himself to be manipulated. If Brian thought he was going to be able to bluff his way through this particular head-to-head, he'd better think again.

"Settle down, Lance," Boyd urged. "She's not used to having to think in terms of defending her kid against lunatics like these. And if you're right to think that the perps haven't tumbled to the fact that Brian has a son, or figured out how to find him if they do know about him, then it's a fairly simple matter to keep the kid isolated from his old man."

"Yeah? Well, any hope of 'simple anything' in this mess just went out the window. Young Taylor just hooked up with the kid and seems to be on his way here, to bring the boy to his father."

"Shit!"

"Exactly. Looks like we're going to have to rethink our options. I really thought that Jared was right - that it would be better for Taylor to believe we'd eliminated him as a target. But now I don't think that's going to work."

"Even with Brian putting on his big rejection act?"

Mathis turned around and peered into his cousin's face. "Did you believe him?"

"No," he admitted, "but I have something of an inside track. Emmett knows Brian very, very well."

"Better than Taylor?"

Boyd had to concede that it was unlikely that anybody knew Brian better than his young lover. Which led him to believe that Brian would have to take his performance to the next level if he were to have any hope of convincing his target audience.

Which raised an interesting question; what would the puppet-master try next?

As Emmett made his way into the room, eyes wide and filled with questions, Chris McClaren leaned back in once more, touching his lips to Brian's ear and breathing a quick message. "By the way, Stud, I don't speak 'boytoy', and, if I did, you'd be bored stiff in thirty seconds."

Brian barely managed not to laugh and had to suppress a groan as his abdominal muscles protested the contraction necessary for that control, as he turned to regard Emmett with cold eyes. "What part of 'Fuck off' do you not understand?"

Emmett continued forward, unfazed. "Charming, as always, I see. But just . . . get over yourself, Brian. I've known you too long, and - regretfully - too well."

Brian blinked and ignored the quickly suppressed snicker of Cynthia's laughter. "You've been spending too much time around Debbie."

"Umhmm," Emmett agreed, not even trying to conceal his curiosity as he gazed at McClaren. "So aren't you going to introduce me to . . . Jesus, he's Goddamn gorgeous, isn't he?"

"Let me guess," laughed McClaren, as he stepped forward and extended his hand. "You're Emmett Honeycutt."
"How'd you know?" asked Emmett, accepting the handshake.

"Brian's told me all about you."

Emmett's eyes, bright with icy daggers, darted toward the bed. "Too bad I can't say the same. Who exactly are you?"

"More to the point," snapped Brian, "how is that your business?"

"Grumpy, isn't he?" said McClaren, without missing a beat. "He's had a rough day. I'm Chris McClaren."

"Grumpy is his middle name," replied Emmett, "but that still doesn't tell me who you are."

"He's a friend," said Brian, suddenly sounding weary and exasperated. "Anything else you'd like to know?"

"Actually," Emmett drawled, "there is. Such as . . . how come we've never met before, if he's such a good friend?"

McClaren smiled and opened his mouth to respond, but it was Brian who answered. "Because my life is not an open book. Some parts of it are private, and nobody's business but my own."

McClaren seemed, at that moment, to forget all about Emmett and his questions as he moved back to the bedside and clasped Brian's hand with gentle fingers. "If you're not careful," he said softly, "your friend's going to think you're ashamed of me."

"He's not that stupid," Brian answered, his voice gone soft and gentle as he pulled McClaren down and lifted his lips to receive another kiss.

A bit of nuzzling and another whisper in the ear. "How'm I doing?"

This time Brian did allow himself a bit of a chuckle with his murmured response. "Surprisingly well."

"Okay," snapped Emmett, not even bothering to try to conceal his frustration. "I get the point. But I still want to know . . ."

McClaren straightened up and produced an exaggerated sigh. "My name is Chris McClaren, and Brian and I are . . . old friends. We met in New York a couple of years ago, when we worked together on an ad campaign. But we've only gotten to know each other better . . . recently, when I got sent here on assignment. I'm a photographer, you see, so we move in the same circles. Professionally."

Emmett allowed his eyes to sweep down the photographer's sculpted body, taking note of pecs and abs and gluts to die for, not to mention the bubble butt and the discreet yet distinct swell of a healthy package, all remarkable beneath the stunning clarity of those blue eyes accented by the bright blue collar peeking out from beneath the black leather jacket. When he answered, his voice was just slightly breathless. "I'll just bet you do. Well, let me be the first . . ." He glanced toward Brian and decided to ignore the gleam of annoyance flashing in the man's eyes, "or the second, perhaps, to welcome you to beautiful downtown Pittsburgh. I'd love a chance to get to know you better, and to show you the sights."

Brian actually grinned beneath the cover of his bandages, thinking that he couldn't have asked for a better opportunity to further develop his plot, even if he'd written the script himself. God bless
Emmett Honeycutt! "Down, Boy," he said sweetly, noting that Cynthia had turned toward the window, undoubtedly to hide her own smirk. "He's already seen the only sight that matters. Namely . . . me!"

Then the room went totally silent as everyone in it recognized the irony of what he'd said - Brian, perhaps, most of all - and he couldn't quite suppress the little gasp that escaped from his mouth as Emmett fought to maintain his composure and not flinch away from the raw, ugly truth swirling through the room like a cyclonic dust storm. Cynthia continued to stare out the window, absolutely motionless.

McClaren was the only one who managed to maneuver around the awkward moment and continue the conversation. "Actually," he said quietly, "there's no need. I was born and raised right here in the Pitts, although I've been gone a long time."

No one - except McClaren perhaps - would ever realize how difficult it was for Brian to formulate and verbalize a reply. "You picked a good time to come back," he managed to murmur.

The FBI agent - in perfect character - made no attempt to touch Kinney or offer any kind of physical soothing, but he did move closer to the bed and prop his hip against it in a proprietary manner. "Good timing is one of my better traits," he replied, with a playful waggle of eyebrows. But his eyes were soft with understanding as he met Brian's gaze.

Brian found, to his surprise, that it was difficult to look away.

Shit!

Why was he suddenly so sure that things were about to get even more complicated than before?

Then there was a disturbance in the corridor outside the door, and Brian closed his eyes, realizing that his little mental observation had barely scratched the surface of how complicated life could get.

Fuck!

But there was abruptly no time to worry about that, no time to even consider it as the door flew open, and everything happened so quickly that there was virtually no time to react or prevent anything.

"Daaad-deeee!"

Logically, rationally, he should have recoiled from the small figure racing toward him - should have turned away, refused to allow himself any kind of emotional response. But there was no way he could do that. No way he could refuse to welcome Gus into his arms, even if the assault of the small body generated excruciating pain in all the wrong places, all the places that were so badly battered and damaged. And yet, he still held on to the writhing torso and the flailing arms and legs, and clasped them tight against him, ridiculously grateful for small gifts; for the fact that he could actually smell the unique, little-boy aroma of his son - traces of the French fry grease on his fingers and chocolate syrup on his breath, of the sweat of a childish body and the special toothpaste Lindsey always bought for him, of the baby shampoo that she still used on his hair and the peppermint liquid soap that created the froth in his bubble bath. The scent was distinctive, and served to completely erase the lingering stench of bloody bandages and the sharp tang of antiseptics.

And, remarkably, for the fact that Gus knew instinctively where to find his daddy, not deterred for a moment by bandages or the physical distortions created by the beating his father had sustained.

And for the fact that the boy's penchant for non-stop chatter seemed to be in full operational mode, as he recounted the details of his journey and his day and his new grandfather and everything he'd eaten.
since he'd left school yesterday, and how he'd decided that he'd love to be a spaceman like Buzz Lightyear and . . .

Brian laughed, and to hell with how much it hurt. "Hey, Sonny Boy," he almost shouted, borne up on the tide of his little boy's enthusiasm and forgetting everything else - almost.

Until the child went suddenly silent, and reached out with tiny fingers to stroke the bandages obscuring his father's face. "Does it hurt, Daddy?"

"Not so much," Brian replied gently, "now that you're here. Does it scare you?"

Gus simply smiled and shook his head. "You're still you, under there."

"Out of the mouths of babes," said Cynthia softly, her face touched by a gentle smile.

The room was suddenly very full, and the new arrivals quickly arranged themselves around the perimeter, shifting into a vaguely us-versus-them dynamic, with Emmett standing astride the only neutral ground.

Brian appeared not to notice, still caught up in the warm delight of being the focus of his little boy's interest, but everyone else was intensely aware of the stirring of adversarial attitudes. Especially between two particular members of the crowd.

Chris McClaren's smile was steady, but his eyes were wary as he studied the new arrivals - one in particular. He recognized them all, of course; he had reviewed photos and profiles of all the people who were important fixtures in Brian Kinney's life. But he was pretty sure he would have known them all anyway, Their expressions and their eyes and - most of all - the way they looked at Brian would have identified them at first glance, except for the older man who brought up the rear as they all stumbled in.

Dark hair and dark eyes, filled with a furtive, naïve hunger, laced with a deep, albeit hopeless need - that was obviously the old friend, Michael, longing for something he could never have. And the smartly-dressed blonde sophisticate who attempted to conceal the depth of her feelings by focusing on the little boy in Brian's arms instead of the man himself - that was Lindsey, suppressing the very same yearning but slightly more successful in her effort than Michael.

But the one who mattered most - the one for whom Kinney was apparently willing to give up his life - would have been unmistakable, under any circumstances. Justin Taylor was as beautiful as anyone McClaren had ever seen - exactly as he would have expected of the man who had managed to steal Kinney's heart - and the fire in the young artist's eyes only served to enhance his beauty, and to underscore the intensity of his intimate connection with his former lover.

The two just stared at each other for a while, while Lindsey and Michael chose to focus on the central figure in this drama.

Brian, meanwhile, was doing a masterful job of ignoring them all, looking past them instead to focus on the only individual in the group that McClaren did not recognize.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he demanded, his eyes sharp and clear as he stared at Ron Peterson, knowing as he said it that his choice of words would annoy the man.

But Peterson surprised him.

"Getting to know my grandson," he replied, "and . . . checking on his father."
Brian managed to convey a grin in spite of the bandages obscuring his face. "Well, fuck me, Freddie! I never thought I'd see the day when you'd refer to me as anything except 'that asshole who should have married my daughter'."

Peterson smiled. "I was kind of hoping you'd forgotten about that."

"Not likely."

The elderly man nodded. "I see your point." Then he moved forward and extended his hand to Brian. "You think we could . . . start over?"

No one else in the room was paying much attention, but Brian heard something odd in the man's tone, something that made him wonder what he was really being asked. "I don't know," he answered. "Can we?"

But he did extend his hand, and allow Peterson to grasp it. It wasn't much of a truce, but it would do, for the present. Brian thought he had enough drama going on his life at the moment; thus, any truce was better than none.

Meanwhile, Gus was going on with his soliloquy, while Lindsey was trying to convince him to relinquish his hold on his daddy and get down off the bed with Michael lending moral support, but with absolutely no hope for success as Brian was holding on to Gus every bit as avidly as Gus was holding on to him. Cynthia, meanwhile, had moved to stand by the head of the bed, her posture suggesting she was preparing to defend the castle walls, if necessary, and McClaren and Justin were continuing to stare at each other while Emmett stood by, so nervous that he actually resorted to wringing his hands.

Then everyone fell silent, coincidentally just as Justin stepped forward and looked directly down into Brian's eyes. "Is this him?"

"What are you doing here?" Brian's voice was cold - detached.

"Asking you a question." Justin snapped. "Is this him?"

Brian looked up at McClaren, hoping that the agent was as good an actor as he apparently thought he was. Then he took a deep breath before replying. "Justin, this is Chris McClaren."


The twitch of Justin's lips was more smirk than smile. "So you've heard of me?"

"Actually, I read your reviews. I understand you're the new darling of the New York gallery set."

"I do all right," Justin retorted, "but that's surely not all you know of me."

"No," admitted McClaren. "We have . . . mutual friends, and I've seen your work."

"At the loft," Justin said, obviously pleased.

"Uhhh, no. At Kinnetic, actually. It's very impressive."

Justin turned to look at Brian, shadows rising in his eyes. "At Kinnetic? You . . . moved my painting?"

"It's an investment," said Brian, without inflection. "One that I expect to pay off handsomely some day, when you become the new Warhol, so I couldn't very well just discard it, could I?"
"But it was a gift - my gift, to you."

Brian took a deep breath as Gus twisted against him and managed to jab an elbow into a particularly painful spot on his torso. "More like a partial payment for the money I invested in your aborted education."

Brian was surprised that McClaren knew about the painting that had once hung in his loft - a painting Justin had done when they were still together, which was so filled with personal meaning that it had gotten more and more difficult for him to look at it, an abstract work filled with promise and hope and belief in the brightness of a golden future. After a while, it had become a reminder - almost tactile and certainly visceral - of all he had lost, and he had hired someone to pack it up and transport it to Kinnetic, where it hung now in the lobby. He had originally intended to put it in his office, but even that had proved to be too personal, too problematic.

Of course, the image of it was still with him - would always be with him. He had only to close his eyes to see it. And there were other reminders as well, of which Justin knew nothing. Reminders which absolutely no one knew about, although a quick look into the vivid blue of McClaren's eyes made him wonder. But those reminiscences he only indulged on occasion. When the mood struck him. In his mind, he termed such moments his lesbianic lapses.

"He's not your type," Justin said coldly, forcing Brian to look up and meet his gaze.

Brian shifted Gus to a more comfortable position before offering a response. "How the hell do you figure that?" he asked, genuinely curious.

"He's nothing like me." Abruptly, the coldness was gone, and there was only a smug certainty, laced with humor, in the younger man's tone.

McClaren said nothing, but he did step closer to Brian, understanding that it was not his place to confront the young artist now, but sensing that this moment would be terribly difficult for Brian.

"Well, you're definitely right about that," Brian answered finally, sounding unutterably weary. "He's nothing like you. He knows how to figure out what he really wants, and how to fight for it. And then, when he gets it, he knows how to hold on to it - how to be loyal."

The hurt that bloomed in Justin's eyes was like a dagger in Brian's heart, but he knew that he must not yield to his own weakness. He must stay the course. And he was tremendously relieved when the hurt was quickly submerged beneath something that approximated contempt.

"Loyal? You think he's so loyal? To him - to all your pretty little tricks that fight for the chance to get fucked by the mighty Kinney - you're just the Stud of Liberty Avenue. Just a notch on their belts. Or, at least, you used to be, but let's see how loyal he is, now that what's on the outside is . . ."

And he stopped cold, his face going stark white as he realized what he'd almost said and prayed desperately that no one - especially Brian - would be able to finish the sentence for him.

But one look at Brian's face, as well as the faces of those around him, told him that he should have known better.

"Now that what's on the outside," said Brian in a soft, emotionless voice, "is as ugly as what's on the inside."

Justin opened his mouth to take it back, to do whatever it took to erase it, but, in the end, he knew it was too late. It hung between them like an oily shadow, and nothing would ever completely dissipate it.
He found that he couldn't think of a word to say, so he turned and ran.

"Daddy," said Gus, snuggling against his father's shoulder, "why Jus-sin crying?"

Brian turned to drop a kiss - slightly awkward due to the bandages - on his son's forehead. "Don't worry, Sonny Boy. Jus-sin will be just fine. He just swallowed something he didn't like, but he'll get over it."

"Maybe he will," snapped Lindsey, stepping forward to remove her son from his father's arms. "But will you?"

To her surprise, it was not Brian who answered, but Chris McClaren who moved to intercept her, preventing her from taking Gus from Brian; he stared at her, with eyes flecked with ice, and seemed to challenge her right to speak. "Maybe," he said firmly, stepping closer to Brian and helping him adjust his grip on his son, "you need to stop and figure out just where your loyalties lie, Ms. Peterson."

She glared at him. "I don't need anyone to remind me . . ."

"You don't? Tell me then; did you hear what the boytoy just said - or rather, almost said? Did that register at all, or do you just automatically dismiss anything that doesn't fit in with your preconceptions? Do you always cast him as the poor little victim?" Then he snickered. "Jesus! No wonder he ran away."

"Now wait a minute," said Michael. "You can't just . . ."

"I'm having a really hard time believing this bullshit," McClaren continued, with a sardonic smile. "You're getting your knickers in a twist because the twink got his feelings hurt. Is that what you want to focus on, in spite of everything that's happened here? Jesus Christ! Do you really expect Brian to agonize and weep over the fact that Blondie is going into queen-out mode - something that he does pretty often, according to what I've heard. Is that really what matters to you?"

"He was really hurt," Michael said quickly.

"He'll get over it," McClaren retorted, "and maybe, in the process, he'll even figure out that weeping and wailing aren't going to change anything. You either sit and cry over things that are wrong, or you set out to make them right. One or the other. Not both."

Throughout the exchange, Emmett looked from face to face, trying to read the emotions concealed behind shifting expressions - sensing anger and resentment and uncertainty - and something else, something he could not identify, something that made him want to run from the room and find a quiet hole to crawl into. Things were . . . different. Things felt different, and he wasn't even sure that the change was necessarily a bad thing. But it was enough to scare him, to make him wonder what would come next and whether or not their lives - all their lives - might be on the verge of a major transition, in a world which might never be quite the same.

Abruptly, Michael turned to face Brian, to stare at him with hard, accusing eyes. "Are you just gonna sit there, and let him shoot his mouth off like this? It's Justin, for God's sake. Your Justin."

Brian did not blink and did not flinch away from the smoldering anger he read in Michael's expression. He simply looked back, his eyes dark and unreadable. "That's the thing, Mikey," he said slowly. "He was never really mine . . . was he?"

"He could have been," said Lindsey, stepping forward and refusing to be intimidated or dissuaded this time, as she pushed past McClaren to pick up her son. Her voice was hoarse and rough with
suppressed tears. "If you hadn't finally succeeded in pushing him away."

And they all went silent as time seemed to suspend itself, as the world seemed to hold its breath, waiting for Brian's answer. But time and the world - and everyone in the room - were doomed to disappointment, it seemed, for Brian said nothing, simply turning away and closing his eyes, apparently accepting Lindsey's final words as fundamental truth.

They all left then, except for McClaren and Cynthia, and Gus, wailing and begging to stay with his daddy, was the only one making a sound. Lindsey was enormously grateful that her son, in his exhaustion, required all her focus and attention, to comfort him for having to be separated from his father.

Otherwise, she knew, Justin would not have been the only one to exit crying. She didn't know which thing she found more difficult to process - that Brian had actually admitted that Justin had never truly been his, or that he had accepted her accusation without offering a word in his own defense.

In either case, it seemed that the man lying there in that hospital bed, wrapped up in a barrier of silence that nothing seemed to penetrate, had become a mystery, an enigma - someone none of them seemed to know.

Someone who was not Brian Kinney.

For a while, no one spoke at all.

Chris McClaren dragged an ugly easy chair to a spot near the door, positioning it so that his body would restrict easy access, before settling in and closing his eyes.

And Brian remained motionless, barely breathing, so that the only sounds in the room were the occasional beeps and blips of the medical monitors.

Finally, Cynthia could endure the heaviness around them no longer. "That was quite a performance," she observed. "Oscar-worthy, at least."

"Really?" answered McClaren, not bothering to open his eyes. "I'm holding out for a Tony myself."

Her smile was slightly venal. "No wonder you two hit it off so well, one snob to another."

She returned then to her post by the window, noting that the stars were quickly disappearing behind an approaching cloud bank. "Do you ever have trouble remembering who you really are?" she asked, not quite sure why she was feeling an unexpected sympathy for the FBI agent, but unable to resist an urge to probe beneath that glib surface.

"No." Short, sweet . . . and slightly irritated?

The sharp chime of McClaren's cell phone served to defuse a strangely awkward moment.

As the agent rose and stepped into the corridor to take his call privately, Cynthia moved to stand beside the bed and gaze down at her boss who had not moved at all since the mass exodus had emptied the room.

"Brian?" she said softly, hoping that he might actually have drifted into a peaceful sleep - but somehow knowing better.
"What?" he muttered, after a while.

"Are you . . ." She paused, recognizing the blatant stupidity of the question. Of course, he wasn't all right. "What are you thinking?" Better - though still not great.

Again, he was slow to answer, and when he did, it took her a moment to realize what he was doing.

"If there is a limit to all things and a measure
And a last time and nothing more and forgetfulness,
Who will tell us to whom in this house
We without knowing it have said farewell?"*

"That's . . . beautiful," she said slowly. "What is it?"

He turned in the bed to look up at her. "Just a scrap of verse that I always found interesting."

"You never cease to amaze me," she replied, a vague, unfocused anger sharpening her tone. "Here you sit, in the eye of a storm so fucking huge I can't even begin to take it all in, and you're waxing poetic - and philosophical."

He almost provided a knee-jerk response that she would have understood perfectly. He almost said, "Pain management." But, in the end, he didn't. He just closed his eyes, wanting this infernal, eternal day to be over. And if, within that thought - and within the lines of verse that kept repeating in his head - there was also the specter of a deeper yearning, a desire to have an end to all the drama that had become his life, he would just . . . worry about that later.

And in that thought, he was suddenly conscious of the upsurge of the awful, invariably inappropriate gallows humor that had both saved him and doomed him throughout his life.

What better time to indulge my Scarlet O'Hara?

He almost smiled, but remembered - just in time - how painful that might be.

"The inevitable byproduct of a liberal arts education," he explained with a characteristic eye-roll, effectively dodging the question, and conceding that she knew what he was doing as well as he did.

"You and the fed," she observed, watching his face carefully - but in vain - for any sign of what he might be feeling, "could be the new Bogey and Bacall. That was a hell of an act."

"Gotta make it convincing," he replied, barely audible. Then he opened his eyes wide and looked up at her, and she felt the full force of the personality that allowed him to control so many things and people in his life. "So don't you go having second thoughts about your part in it. You don't want to fuck this up."

"I know where my loyalties lie," she replied sharply. "But you . . . Jesus, Brian, you really cut him up and left him bleeding. He didn't deserve that. Not just for being too young to know what he really wants."

He paused then, and his eyes narrowed, and she braced herself for what she knew was coming.

Brian didn't like being crossed - not even by the people he trusted, especially under circumstances when he was dead certain that he was right. Like now. "It's not about what he deserves. What he deserves is to live, to be safe. To build himself a new, full, rich life, with someone who can . . . be what he needs them to be. What - you'd rather it was him lying here like this, beaten and bludgeoned and mutilated? Fighting for his life. Think about that, Cynthia. What they did to me . . . he wouldn't have survived it, even if they'd stopped short of actually killing him. Which they wouldn't have,
because they'd have known what it would do to me if he . . . " Deep ragged breath then, before he
continued in a smaller voice. "And if, by some miracle, he did manage to live through it, how would
he endure becoming . . . " He lifted one hand and made an all-encompassing gesture at the battered
mass of his body, and there was no mistaking his meaning, "this?"

"And you?" she asked finally, reaching out to take his hand and refusing to relinquish it even when
he tried to pull free. "What happens to you?"

He looked up at her then, and she could hardly bear to meet his gaze, to read the raw despair and
wretchedness in his eyes. "If these bastards succeeded in taking his life - or my son's - do you really
think I'd want to survive it? If they died, because of me . . ."

"Brian," she said urgently, "it's not your fault. None of this is . . ."

But she fell silent abruptly as she saw the steady, uncompromising gleam of certainty in his eyes. It
didn't matter what she said, or what she believed. All that mattered was what he knew.

Like everything else in his life, it was his fault. It had always been his fault.

Chris McClaren chose that moment to re-enter the room, and Cynthia had to admit that she was
grateful for the interruption. Her devotion and loyalty to Brian were a central part of her life, and she
would stand by him no matter what the consequences, but he wasn't the easiest person to deal with
sometimes. Like now.

"Good news?" asked Brian, deliberately turning his back on his assistant, and giving her a chance to
regain her composure.

"Maybe," the FBI agent replied. "Looks like we might have caught a break in the case. Thanks to
the detailed information provided by your good right hand there."

"Me - what did I do?" Cynthia asked.

McClaren grinned. "You provided the receipt from the jeweler for his Patek Phillipe watch,
including the date and initials engraved on the back of the case. And these thugs who enjoyed
beating the bejesus out of a 'pretty little fag' when they got the chance, might have been
philosophically sympathetic to the purpose of the cretins who hired them, but when you get right
down to it, they were just hired muscle who weren't going to pass up a chance to hock a $30,000.00
watch."

"So you caught one of them?"

"Not quite yet, but we got an ID. Not just on one, but two of them. For the moment, they're under
surveillance, in the hopes that they'll lead us to bigger fish."

"And if they manage to slip out the back door while you guys are twiddling your dicks?" Brian's
tone was sharp, almost acidic.

McClaren refused to rise to the bait. "You really don't have a very good opinion of law enforcement,
do you?"

Brian and Cynthia exchanged rueful smiles, both remembering Brian's previous brushes with the
law, not to mention his interactions with a certain highly-placed member of the Pittsburgh PD.

"You have no idea," observed Cynthia, still smiling.
But again, McLaren needed no explanation. "In actual fact," he answered, "I do. Your exploits are the stuff of legend, Mr. Kinney. Even in the ivory towers in D.C., we heard about the fall of Chief Stockwell, and the 'concerned citizen' who managed to take him down. In fact, I even assisted in the FBI investigation that got him convicted, so I'm fully aware of your contributions."

Brian shrugged - and quickly resolved not to do so again as pain exploded across his back and shoulders. "Sometimes, a gay man's gotta do . . ." Then he paused and took a deep breath, realizing abruptly that there were certain things - certain places in his past that he preferred not to revisit. "Anyway, shouldn't you avoid calling me 'Mr. Kinney'? Just in case. You never know who . . ."

And his point was immediately proven when a visitor from earlier in the day made a return appearance, moving into the room very slowly, timidly. Ron Peterson obviously understood that it would be wise to move cautiously, all things considered.

"Could I speak with you, Brian?" he asked quietly, his eyes moving from person to person within the room. "In private?"

McClaren sensed that Brian was about to agree to the man's request, but he acted quickly to contain the situation. "Mr. . . . Peterson, is it?" he said softly. "I understand that you might have some private issues to explore here, but you need to understand this. Brian was brutalized and beaten and damn near killed by - forgive me, but - people who very likely share your general attitude toward queers like us. So if he wants to listen to whatever you have to say, that's up to him, but there is no way I'm leaving you alone with him."

"That's preposterous," Peterson protested. "You can't possibly believe that I would do such a thing."

McClaren shrugged. "In point of fact, I don't, but I'd be willing to bet that the men who did might well be respected members of your social set. In case you didn't know, homophobia is one of the last socially acceptable prejudices in our great free country."

"This," said the older man with a sweeping gesture toward Brian's injuries, "can't possibly be acceptable behavior, for anybody."

McClaren nodded. "Glad to hear you feel that way, but I'm still not leaving him alone. No matter what."

Brian spoke up for the first time. "It's all right, Mr. Peterson. Chris and I, we have no secrets from each other. And he knows how to keep his mouth shut. I promise."

Ron Peterson hesitated, but then he realized that this was a battle he was not going to win, so he just nodded. But then he turned to look at Cynthia and waited.

Brian sighed. "Cynthia," he said slowly, "why don't you go home? Feels like you've been here for weeks, and your mother is probably in a panic, wondering what's happened to you. So go home." He reached out then, and touched her hand. "And don't worry. The palace guard is on alert. I'll be fine."

She started to protest, started to insist that she was not tired, did not need to rest, would not dream of leaving. But then she realized that she really was almost exhausted - so exhausted that she was probably not doing Brian any good anyway. So she nodded, gathered her belongings, and said her good nights, touching Brian's shoulder as she went, and watching as McClaren settled in at his side.

Still, she was watchful as she went down the corridor, and was relieved to note that two of Mathis' security people were patrolling the hallway, and that Mathis himself was seated at a desk in a nearby
alcove, studying a spreadsheet on a laptop computer. From what she could see, Brian was in good hands - not to mention what she couldn't see, and she was pretty sure there was plenty of that. She was certain that McClaren was not at all the type to put his trust in random chance, and it was a good bet that his particular brand of security would not be obvious to the casual observer.

Brian would be fine. Brian had to be fine.

Despite the fact that Ron Peterson had tacitly agreed to McClaren's presence during the conversation he planned to have with Brian, he was markedly reluctant to begin to speak, and Brian gestured for McClaren to come closer.

"Hey, Baby," he said softly, struggling not to laugh when he identified the annoyance in the agent's eyes, "why don't you see if you can find us some coffee?"

"I don't think you're allowed to have coffee, Lover," McClaren replied.

"Shit! But you are," said Brian, very reasonably, "and I think our guest could use some caffeine. Plus I might be grateful - very grateful - if someone found a way to help me . . . break the rules."

The FBI agent almost refused, though he was impressed with Kinney's ability to manipulate the moment. But then he reconsidered. "OK," he said finally, "but the door stays open."

Peterson nodded, and turned to look at Brian, obviously grateful for the intervention.

"He's very determined, you know," Brian volunteered as McClaren hurried out of the room, "so you better talk fast."

Peterson took a deep breath. "So be it," he said. "And I guess there's no need to sugar-coat anything. For you. The truth is . . . I'm dying, Kinney, and I don't want . . ." He took a deep breath. "I don't want to leave my daughter without resources when I'm gone."

He stopped then, apparently gathering his thoughts in order to continue, and Brian took a deep breath. "Are you sure? I mean, doctors make mistakes . . ."

"It's pancreatic cancer," Peterson stated, and Brian took a moment to admire the man's courage and calm. "And they don't generally make mistakes - about that."

Brian nodded. "I'm sorry, Mr. Peterson," he said softly. "What can I . . . what do you want from me?"

Peterson walked to the window to gaze out into the darkness. "I suppose it would be too much to ask for your trust - given our history - but I hope that I can count on your discretion, at least."

"Within reason," Brian replied cautiously. "I won't lie to Lindsey, but . . ."

"And I wouldn't ask you to. But keeping something to yourself isn't the same as lying . . . is it?"

"Some people would disagree," Brian replied. "Some - and your daughter would probably be among them - would consider it a sin of omission. Why haven't you told her?"

"Because I haven't quite figured out how to do it. It's a hard thing, to hear that your father is dying."

At that moment, McClaren came back into the room carrying a tray bearing three steaming mugs, along with packets of creamer and sugar and plastic spoons.
"For me?" asked Brian, not quite able to suppress a surge of gratitude. He was pretty certain Matt Keller would have McClaren's balls if he found out about the contraband coffee, but he couldn't think of anything - within the realm of the possible - that he wanted more right that moment than a cup of freshly-brewed, aromatic blend.

"Just keep your mouth shut, if you're questioned," McClaren retorted, and proceeded to prepare Brian's coffee, exactly the way he liked it, prompting Brian to wonder - again - just how the agent could know so much about him, right down to the smallest details.

"So," said McClaren as he passed the tray to Ron Peterson, "how long do you have?"

Peterson managed, barely, not to drop his cup. "How did you know?" he demanded.

"I'm very perceptive," the agent replied.

"And he eavesdropped from the hall," Brian suggested.

"That too."

Peterson settled into the armchair by the bed, and sipped his coffee, relaxing for the first time in hours. Which was surprising, since Brian Kinney was probably the very last person he'd ever have considered a source of comfort. Nevertheless . . .

"They're saying six months - maximum. I think it will be less. There's a family history with this disease, and I'm not inclined to optimism."

Brian regarded him patiently, but it was soon obvious that the man was having trouble finding the words with which to explain himself. "So what can I do for you, Mr. Peterson. If you're wanting reassurance that Lindsey will be taken care of, you don't even have to ask. She will be. Not only is she one of my oldest friends, she's the mother of my only child. So I'll make sure . . ."

Peterson nodded. "I never doubted that. No matter how I might have felt about you, in the past, I always believed that you cared for her - and for Gus. And I've taken steps to make sure that she'll be provided for - financially. As will Gus."

"You don't need to concern yourself about Gus," Brian said quickly. "My son is already well provided for and . . ."

"Please," Peterson interjected. "Please, just . . . indulge me. It appears likely now that Gus is the only grandson I'll ever have. Or, at the very least, the only one I'll ever have a chance to know. So this is not because he needs anything from me. I guess, in a way, it's because I need something . . . from him. I hope . . ." He paused then, and Brian saw that he was not quite as composed as he'd seemed, as his hands were trembling so violently that he had to set his coffee cup down in order to prevent spilling it. "I hope you'll allow me a chance to get to know him. Before . . ."

"I won't interfere," Brian assured him, but something in his tone said that the older man better mind his manners in the process, and put Gus' well-being above all else. "But that's still not what you wanted from me. Is it?"


"Except that your youngest daughter is a dyke," Brian interrupted, his voice suddenly cold, without a nuance of sympathy. "Bummer, huh?"
Peterson sighed. "I know what you must think of me, and I wish I could explain it so that you'd understand things from my point of view. The lady at the diner - Debbie, is it? - called me homophobic, but, if I understand that term, it's not accurate. I don't hate homosexuals, Kinney. I just don't understand them. But I've come to believe that, in the end, it doesn't matter. I've finally realized that I don't give a damn who my daughter loves, or why. The only thing that matters is that I love Lindsey . . . and I can't resign myself to all the time I've wasted before reaching that conclusion."

He stood up then and moved back to the window. "And now I'm never going to be able to make up for lost time. It's ironic, isn't it? I'm going to die, and never be allowed to get to know that beautiful little boy . . . because I was a stupid shit."

Brian could not quite suppress a quick chuckle. Mr. Peterson, unlike his daughter who could, when she chose, swear like a drill sergeant, did not ordinarily indulge in cuss words. "What else?" He was sure there was more the older man needed to say, and that the hardest part was yet to come.

Peterson took a deep breath and turned to meet Brian's gaze. "I honestly don't believe that I'm a homophobe, Kinney. For example, I don't hate you. I don't pretend to understand you, and I'd prefer not to think about the things you do . . . sexually . . . but I don't hate you. I don't really hate anybody; it's just not in my nature. But . . ."

Brian and McClaren exchanged glances, knowing that the crux of the matter was at hand.

Again, Peterson inhaled deeply, before just spitting it out. "But I really, really can't stand that bitch that my daughter chose to marry." Then he slumped back into his chair and seemed to hunch over, prepared to ward off the attack he was sure was coming.

Thus, he was completely caught off guard when Brian laughed. "You say that as if you expect me to be outraged and come charging to her defense." Then he chuckled again.

"Well . . . yes, I suppose that's exactly what I expected. I mean, you're both gay, and . . ."

"Mr. Peterson," said McClaren with a smile, "do you like every straight person in the world? Is that your only criteria for deciding whether or not you like someone?"

Peterson actually blushed. "I guess I never thought about it like that. Pretty stupid, huh?"

"No. Just typical," said Brian. "So, what exactly is it that you want from me?"

"I just want to be sure that Lindsey has someone she can turn to, if she needs help or advice . . . or even a shoulder to cry on. She doesn't share her personal feelings with me any more. Why would she, after all, since I haven't been there for her, in far too long? And her mother - well - there are some bridges that just can't be rebuilt once they're burned. At any rate, I don't think things are going all that well in her . . . partnership, and I don't trust Melanie Marcus to be there for my daughter. I may be wrong, of course, but I don't really think so. I think she's a petty, vindictive, self-absorbed . . ."

He fell silent for a while, and Brian resisted a thoroughly venal impulse to encourage him to continue.

"Anyway, that's what I want from you, Kinney. I want you to promise to be there for her, when no one else will. To take care of her, if she can't take care of herself. And - just coincidentally - to be the father that my grandson needs."

Brian nodded. "And," he said slowly, "you don't want me to tell her that you asked."
The older man grinned. "You know Lindsey - maybe even better than I do. Think about how she'd react if she knew."

"No, thanks," Brian retorted. "I'd rather not."

Peterson nodded and moved toward the bed, right hand extended. "Thank you, Brian. If I . . . may call you that. If you'd rather I didn't, I'll certainly understand."

Brian simply stared at him for a moment, before slowly lifting his hand. "You didn't have to ask, you know," he said softly. "I'd have looked after her anyway."

Peterson smiled. "I think I understand that . . . now."

"I wish you the best, Brian. I know this has been a nightmare for you, but I hope it all turns out well."

Brian nodded, and started to turn away. Then he paused, and glanced up to meet McClaren's eyes as a new thought occurred to him.

"Let me ask you something, Mr. Peterson," he said suddenly. "Did you mean it when you said you wanted a chance to get to know your grandson?"

He was watching the older man's face as he broached the question, waiting for the response. When it came, when a warm spark of undiluted joy flared in the man's dark eyes, Brian sighed and felt a strange compulsion. He was not ordinarily a praying man, but he felt a strange urge to offer up devout thanks for a perfect resolution to a prickly problem.

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Chris McClaren wondered - idly - how many cups of coffee he'd drunk since his arrival at the hospital. Then he decided he was better off not knowing.

He had managed to grab a few hours of sleep, stretched out on the plastic instrument of torture that masqueraded as a daybed in corner of Brian's private room, but he never rested well when he was on assignment. Especially when he was not quite able to believe that all possible scenarios had been anticipated and prepared for. He was relatively certain that Brian was safe and his son was safe and his . . . whatever Justin Taylor was to him . . . was safe, but 'relatively certain' was never quite enough to grant him a peaceful night's sleep. Something was still nagging at him, although he couldn't put his finger on what it was.

At any rate, it was not quite dawn when he rose and checked on his charge (reminding himself that it would be equivalent to taking his life in his hands to refer to Kinney as a "victim") and found him still floating in a drug-induced haze. He had wakened twice during the night, rigid and trembling in pain, but the nurses had been quick to administer fresh doses of Demerol, and he was currently resting easily.

McClaren spent a minute gazing down at his bandaged face, visualizing how he had looked before and trying not to visualize how he would look now.

 Fuck! 

He had not expected to like Kinney, and he had schooled himself many years ago to remain uninvolved in the traumas of the people he was charged to protect. But Kinney was unlike anyone he had ever met - completely unique. An individual who refused to take refuge in apologies or regrets or excuses, who insisted on facing life without embroidery or embellishment. That kind of bold, bare-
faced honesty was something completely new in his experience. It didn't exactly make him like Kinney, but it did make him insatiably curious to know what lay beneath the surface of such a complex personality, and rendered him uncertain that he could predict what the man might do next. Thus, it had been a long time since anyone managed to intrigue him so intensely.

The FBI agent took a minute to splash water on his face and wandered out of the room, nodding to the private security guard who was patrolling the hallway before continuing down the hall to the waiting room where the coffee maker was waiting. Along with a rumpled, sleepy-looking young man.

McClaren sighed, hoping he'd get a chance to swallow a few hits of caffeine before having to face the wrath of an incensed, blond drama queen.

Shit!

Justin Taylor was sprawled in a corner chair, his legs extended across a plastic bench, his head braced against a wadded-up jacket, still wearing the same clothes he'd worn the night before, only slightly the worse for wear. And he was staring at Chris McClaren with undisguised hostility.

McClaren swallowed a sigh, and poured himself a hefty dose of freshly-brewed battery acid which he preferred black and bitter. Then he sat down and regarded Justin Taylor with a steady frown.

"Are we going to have to fight this out," he asked finally, "or are you prepared to be reasonable?"

"I don't think there's anything reasonable in this whole mess," Justin retorted, his tone cold and churlish.

McClaren nodded. "Okay, then. You obviously have something to tell me. Or something to ask me. So let's just get it over with."

"Are you . . . for real? Is this thing between you and Brian - is it real?"

McClaren sipped and studied that beautiful face, noting that the incredible blue eyes were red-rimmed and swollen. "Why is that so hard for you to accept?" he asked, in lieu of a direct response.

Justin sat forward, and braced his forearms against his thighs. "It took me fucking forever to get through his guard, to get inside his walls. And I can't believe . . ."

"So you got in," the FBI agent said quickly. "But once you were in, you decided not to stay. So why should it matter to you if I . . ."

"I never left him. I never could."

McClaren met the blonde's gaze, and didn't bother to try to conceal the pity in his eyes. "Who are you trying to convince . . . me or yourself? Look, Kid . . ."

"I'm not a kid," snapped Justin, jumping to his feet. "And if you think he's ever going to forget me, you're just fooling yourself. He loves me. He's always loved me. You'll never mean as much to him as I do. Never."

McClaren rose slowly, and squared his shoulders, carefully guarding his expression so that it would not reveal how much he sometimes hated the things his job required him to do. "I'm not going to argue with you, Taylor. The bottom line is that he doesn't want to see you. You believe whatever you like - whatever makes you feel better - but you stay away from him."
"You're going to make sure he goes on feeling that way, aren't you?" Justin accused.

"You've done a pretty fair job of making sure of that yourself, you know. But Brian is a grown man. Nobody tells him what to feel or how to think, and maybe it's time you learned that."

"I'm not giving up," Justin almost snarled. "You keep that in mind." Then - unaccountably - he smiled. "You tell him I still love him - I'll always love him - and I don't give a shit what he looks like, on the outside. He'll always be beautiful to me. So you just watch your back - or your front - or whatever. Because I will come for him. If you really want him, you're going to have to prove it."

McClaren barely managed to suppress a grin, admiring the young man's spunk, even as he regretted the necessity for continuing the confrontation between them. He rather thought he could grow to like this stubborn, determined, hard-headed little fucker. "I'll remember."

He turned then and hurried back toward Brian's room, resisting the urge to turn around to check on the young man's reaction, and noting as he went that the individuals charged with protecting Taylor were exactly where they were supposed to be. Justin Taylor was not his responsibility, and driving a wedge between him and Kinney was the very best thing he could do for both of them right now. So why did it make him feel like such a miserable shit?

He slowed as he moved down the corridor on his way to a conference with Lance Mathis and a morning briefing from his boss, suddenly caught up in thoughts of how these two - Kinney as he had been and Taylor as he still was - how magnificent they must have been together, what a vision of beauty and grace they must have formed - light and dark, ingénue and sophisticate, positive and negative. Yin and yang. Perfect compliments.

All destroyed now, by the slash of assassins' blades and blows of molten iron and the vicious hatred of people who could neither understand nor tolerate such beauty.

_Fuck!_

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He came awake quickly, roused by the murmur of voices and the singularly unpleasant sensation of having someone peel the skin from his face, inch by inch. Okay - not really. But that's how it felt, nonetheless.

Brian opened his eyes and looked up into the steady eyes of Nurse Beck, and wondered for a moment if the woman even existed outside the hospital setting, for it appeared that she was always around when he required attention. But he was grateful, nevertheless, for her hands were flawlessly sure and gentle, and he knew instinctively that the process of removing the bandages that covered his face would have been far worse had someone else undertaken the task.

"Good morning, Gorgeous," she said gently. "Glad to see me?"

"Not unless you come bearing an eighth of chronic," he muttered.

"Not quite," she grinned.

"How about a nicotine fix?"

"Fond of our addictions, are we?" This time, she actually laughed.

"You have no idea," he replied with a huff of exasperation, but his tone held nothing of hostility or resentment. He was just Brian - being Brian - and both Nurse Beck, and the doctor who was looking
over her shoulder, knew it.

Unlike the other person in the room, who was standing at the foot of the bed, looking on in silence.

"How's the pain, Brian?" asked Matt Keller, his eyes fixed on the monitor screens, noting elevations in blood pressure and pulse rate - readings which suggested that the patient was far from comfortable. "We need to hold off on the meds for a bit, if you can handle it."

Brian closed his eyes. "I can handle anything you can dish out."

"Of course, you can." That was Beck again, obviously immune to his snarky attitude.

He elected to remain silent as she finished her task, discarded the soiled bandages, and spent a few minutes gently cleaning away the residue from his face. It was only when she stepped back that he got his first clear look at the individual who stepped up to take her place.

"Brian," said Matt Keller, "this is Rick Turnage."

The patient was quiet for a moment, studying the surgeon's face, and noting idly that he really must be in bad shape if he couldn't work up much interest in a man who almost defined masculine beauty. Then he dredged up a sardonic smile. "The miracle worker," he muttered. "Nice to . . . ."

"Don't speak!" Turnage snapped, eyes tracing the patterns of injury on the newly-exposed face. "I need to assess the damage."

Unperturbed, Brian turned slightly to meet Matt Keller's eyes. "Why do I feel like a BMW with a crushed fender?"

"I said . . . " Turnage began.

"I heard you," Brian retorted. "But, unless I'm mistaken, I'm the patient here, and you're the doctor, and that makes me the paying customer. So you might try asking for my co-operation instead of barking out orders like a fucking drill sergeant."

Matt Keller tried not to chuckle - and failed. "Dr. Turnage," he said, still grinning, "meet Brian Kinney. AKA - your nemesis."

But Turnage barely appeared to notice the words of either his patient or his fellow physician. Instead, he was busy retrieving a large tablet from the portfolio he had brought with him. He then proceeded to extract a charcoal pencil from a zipper bag, and adjust the lamp on the bedside table to shed light directly on the patient's face.

"What are you . . . " Keller demanded, preparing to step forward and intervene, if necessary.

"Shut up!" Turnage muttered as he began to move the charcoal across the paper with sure, bold strokes.

"What are you doing?" asked Brian, in a tone of voice that promised a complete lack of co-operation if he did not get an answer that was to his liking.

Turnage huffed an exaggerated sigh. "I'm drawing your face."

Brian's eyes were suddenly huge, and even Turnage, normally as sensitive and intuitive as granite, could not help but note the despair rising within them.

"Not as you are," he said firmly, without a nuance of either empathy or sympathy in the tone, "but as
you should be. Will be, when I'm done with you."

"Wouldn't a photograph suffice?" Brian demanded.

"No, and would you please just . . . stop talking."

Matt Keller leaned forward, grinning. "He did say please."

"Fuck off!" Brian retorted, but the spark of humor in his eyes served to dissipate the shadows of despair, so Keller was content.

For the next few minutes, the silence in the room was broken only by the rough rasp of the charcoal against the textured sketch pad, but it didn't last long. In a surprisingly short period of time, Turnage paused, took another minute to study the ruin of Brian's face, before nodding and laying his pencil aside.

"Are you done?" Brian asked, not bothering to try to conceal his annoyance. "Am I allowed to see it?"

Turnage stared at the patient for a moment before answering. "You're allowed. In fact, you'll need to approve it, before we proceed."

Then he lifted the pad, took another moment to examine it to make sure it met with his satisfaction before turning it around for the patient's inspection.

Brian just looked at it, saying nothing. Then he reached out and extended one finger, just touching the rough surface and tracing the line of the subject's jaw. "How . . . how did you do that?" he asked finally, his voice barely rising above a whisper.

Turnage did not smile, did not offer vapid assurances. He simply explained it as he saw it. "It's still there. Your face, I mean. The bone structure, the foundation, in spite of the swelling and the fractures and the distortions. It's still there. It just needs . . . restoring."

Brian was staring, looking directly into his own eyes, seeing the face he had seen in the mirror every day of his life. The likeness was uncanny, since he knew perfectly well that it bore almost no resemblance to what he would see if he were to look into that same mirror at this very moment.

"And you can do that?" he asked, the tremor in his voice expressing his doubts. "You really think you can . . ."

"I don't think, Mr. Kinney," Turnage answered sharply. "I know. But it won't be quick, and it won't be easy. We've got a lot of work to do, you and I, and you're going to have to trust me."

Brian quickly shifted his eyes to meet the gaze of Matt Keller, relying on their intimate connection to convey what he did not want to verbalize. Keller smiled and nodded. "I told you, didn't I? He really can undo what they did to you." Then he glanced at Turnage, and his eyes went hard and cold. "And if he fucks it up, I'm going to make sure the whole world knows about it."

Brian smiled, and closed his eyes, content with his old friend's assurances. Reflecting that the old adage, "It takes one to know one", had been proven accurate once again, he recognized that Turnage was a prima donna of the first order, who would rather walk naked through an inferno than be forced to acknowledge failure.

There were no guarantees, but he found, for the first time since the beginning of this debacle, that he was able to allow himself a tiny inkling of hope.
Maybe - just maybe - life, as he knew it, was not quite over, after all.

"So," said Turnage gruffly, "when can we leave?"

"Leave?" echoed Keller.

"Leave?" asked Nurse Beck.

"Leave?" That was Chris McClaren, just returning to the room from his morning briefing with his boss and Lance Mathis.

"Leave?" Brian opened his eyes to stare at the surgeon. "Where the fuck am I going?"

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*Limits - Jorge Luis Borges

tbc
Ben had fully intended to join Michael at the hospital after the conclusion of his last class of the day, but he’d been summoned to the dean’s office to deal with a couple of disciplinary issues concerning a group of his students who’d been targeted by gay-bashers, and it had been late when he’d finished.

He was slightly ashamed to realize that he was marginally grateful for the . . . alibi. Okay. For the excuse.

Thus, he was already at home, seated at the kitchen table working on a study plan and waiting for a pot of curried tofu with spinach and tomatoes to finish simmering on the stove. He was generally the cook of the family, and he usually endeavored to convince Michael and Hunter to share his enthusiasm for ultra-healthy, vegan cuisine, but, given how the last few days had gone, it wouldn't surprise him at all if Michael walked in with a Pizza Hut Meat Lovers’ Special. And if it provided any comfort for his young husband, then he would gladly put aside his aversion to America's favorite fast food. And Hunter, of course, would be delighted, if he decided to show up at home tonight.

But Michael was the issue; Michael, who needed comforting right now, and if pizza could provide it, Ben would be happy to grant his enthusiastic approval. He felt it was the least he could do, since he found himself seeking ever more rationalizable reasons to avoid what was becoming a more and more onerous obligation.

It wasn't, after all, like he hadn't spent almost every evening over the past ten days (Weeks? Months?) sitting around in various spots at Allegheny General - in waiting rooms and hallways and conference rooms and cafeterias and coffee shops and - on the rare occasions when it had been permitted - in Brian's room. But episodes in that last location had been few and far between - and even fewer and farther between as the days had passed, and it had become more and more obvious that their presence there, along with that of other members of the unofficial, extended Novotny family, was becoming problematic - for the hospital staff, the security people, for the police . . . and for Brian.

All of that, Ben was pretty sure Michael could have dealt with. Except for the last. That final straw had almost broken the back of a friendship born in the angst-ridden years of adolescence and enduring through a series of trials and tribulations that would have destroyed most relationships. Enduring - that was probably the term that best described what Michael and Brian had shared. Except, perhaps, for "magical", but that was a place where Ben was not yet prepared to go, still occasionally struggling with ambivalence in his feelings about a relationship that, try as he might, he could not quite comprehend. So "enduring" would remain the term of choice.

Except that there now seemed to be reason to doubt that it would continue to endure.

The last week had been exceptionally difficult. And there was hardly any chance that the next one would be any better.

Of course, there was some good news; Brian, despite the severity of his injuries and the original gloomy prognosis from the medical staff, was on the road to recovery. From a certain point of view. Damaged and bludgeoned organs were healing and beginning to function within normal parameters;
bruises and contusions were fading; lacerations had been cleaned and closed and sutured; bones were re-knitting themselves, and the initiation of a stunning variety of physical therapy programs was laying the groundwork to re-establish the functions of muscles and sinews and nerves. His strength was beginning to return - hand in hand with his temperament. Never one to suffer fools willingly, he was rendered even more impatient and less forgiving than usual by the pain, weakness, and frustrations generated by his wounds. At the best of times, he would have been a demanding, infuriating patient, and these were far from the best of times.

In one sense - the most negative sense - Brian Kinney was making a comeback. But so far, that only seemed to apply to the hospital staff members and security people who had to deal with him directly.

For others, for the people who had known him for most of his life, it had begun to seem as if the man they had known might be gone forever. And the glaring omission - from every medical briefing, every doctor's statement - of any mention of his appearance and what might be done to repair it only served to emphasize the degree of the problem. No one spoke of it; no one asked, and the unmistakable conclusion was that no one really wanted to know.

During the first few days after his release from the ICU, virtually all the members of the 'gang', as Michael called them, had been in, around, and about the hospital every day, waiting for the doctors' briefings, available for running errands or handling day-to-day tasks as needed, and loitering near Brian's room in hope of being allowed in for a visit or - better yet - being summoned by the man himself. Even Melanie had lingered nearby, despite her unrelenting disdain for Brian and his lifestyle. She claimed that it was only because she wanted to offer her support to her partner, who was, in turn, only involved because Kinney was the biological parent of their son, Gus; no one bothered to challenge her contention, having no wish to incur her wrath. But, beneath their reticence, everyone knew the truth of the matter. Melanie hated Brian, not in spite of her partner's devotion to him, but because of it, and she would not risk leaving Lindsey alone and unsupervised within the sphere of Brian's influence, because she was so jealous of their relationship that she could not abide the thought of them interacting beyond the limits of her oversight.

However, in this case, she needn't have worried. Any visits or interactions between Brian and any members of the group - including Lindsey - were extremely sporadic, unfailingly brief, and thoroughly upsetting from the group's perspective. Whenever any of them managed to gain access to the room, Brian rarely spoke, barely seemed to listen, and appeared to recoil from any suggestion of intimate contact. The only facet of his familiar personality which he exhibited regularly and relentlessly, was the razor-sharp wit which enabled him to slice and dice his acquaintances with a minimum of words and a maximum of efficiency.

Except for the medical staff, chief members of his security team, and the police, only Cynthia and Chris McClaren had unrestricted access to him, and neither was shy about stepping up to bar the way when anyone else tried to intrude where they were obviously neither wanted nor needed.

Each of the extended family members had reacted differently, of course, according to his nature.

Melanie and Ted were initially annoyed by being excluded, but, as the days passed, their annoyance grew and morphed into smoldering resentment.

Melanie found it particularly difficult to accept that not only were she and her partner denied regular access to Gus' father, but that the little boy - the legal offspring of Melanie Marcus and Lindsey Peterson-Marcus, according to the marriage documents issued by the province of Ontario - had been spirited away in the company of his biological (as opposed to legal/official) maternal grandfather to some secret location deemed "safe" by the powers-that-be . . . and Brian Kinney. And Lindsey. The complicity of her partner in this little conspiracy rankled most of all. In short, by the end of the week,
Melanie was fuming.

As for Ted, his emotional pique was a binary blend, an expression of both personal and professional perception. Since he had assumed oversight of the financial aspects of Kinnetic Corp, he had come to think of himself as a colleague of Brian's, rather than an employee. And most of the time, that was how Brian had treated him. But there were limits to how far that relationship could take him, especially within the realm of Brian's personal life. He had always understood that, even though it had never actually been spelled out. But now he had smashed face first into the impenetrable transparent wall of that limit, and his frustration was compounded by the fact that he had to stand by and watch others walk through it, apparently at will. Having spent much of his life denying an almost bottomless capacity for envy, he found it difficult now to admit and confront the reality of his weakness.

Debbie, of course, had reacted predictably - and loudly - being quick to question every restriction placed on the group's access to Brian, and then to denounce any explanation offered for said restrictions. And, when her denunciations failed to produce the desired effect - namely the lifting of said restrictions - she had proceeded to blame Brian, his doctors, the hospital staff, the individuals chosen to speak on his behalf, and the Almighty - not necessarily in that order - for interfering with 'family matters' which should not concern them. But the volume of her protests, over the course of the week, had begun to lessen, as the quantity gradually decreased, and the intensity of her emotional frenzy slowly settled to a level that was barely detectable. Silence did not sit well on Debbie, and the shadows in her eyes had grown in inverse proportion to the frequency of her verbal harangues. For one of very few times in her life, it appeared that Debbie did not know what to say or how to use her legendary 'big mouth' to manipulate people and circumstances to achieve what she wanted. In truth, it seemed that she might not even know what that might be.

Then there was Emmett, who had lurked around the edges of the family dynamic - of it but yet, somehow, separate, standing on the other side of a pale stream of dissension that had grown wider and deeper with every hour that passed. Separate - as he had never been before. Growing closer by the day to Drew Boyd and his solid, slightly brooding presence, as he simultaneously began to withdraw from his connection to Calvin Culpepper and from other old familiar supports. Calvin was terribly fond of Emmett, but had always understood that they were not meant to spend their lives together, so he accepted Emmett's secession with good grace and a smile. Emmett, however, was less sanguine, still not sure of what he really wanted. His flame, ordinarily brilliant as a signal beacon, had dimmed considerably during the same time frame, and Ben had noted a tendency on the part of the big Nelly-bottom, to sit back and observe his fellow family members, with a growing sense of uncertainty. It was as if he were seeing them all in a different light and from a different perspective and wasn't entirely sure he liked what he saw, although he'd been careful to avoid verbalizing his misgivings. Mostly, Emmett had kept himself to himself - a radical departure from his characteristic garrulous nature.

At first, Ben had thought that he was the only one to notice the difference in the young southerner, but apparently, he'd been wrong. Despite being wrapped in an almost seamless layer of introspection, Michael had seen it too and, eventually, remarked on it. But only to Ben and Hunter, and only within the privacy of their own little cottage, his demeanor akin to that of a small child confounded and confused by a deluge of strange, incomprehensible sensations.

Michael, Lindsey, and Justin formed the inner core of the cult of Kinney, even though none of the three would ever actually admit to that. They were all so intent on proving their strength and their independence and their lack of need for Brian or his approval or his support or his understanding that they were unable to face the truth - that it was all, fundamentally, a lie. The need existed; the need had, in point of fact, ruled their lives, even though Brian himself would never have made any conscious attempt to control them.
The control wasn't conscious, wasn't deliberate. And wasn't acknowledged by any one of them. But that didn't make it any less real.

They were floundering now, all without a rudder, without direction. All lost, and all virtually silent about the one vital question that occupied their minds.

What would happen next?

Lindsey and Michael had spent most of their time of late, seated in molded plastic chairs in the hospital waiting room. Waiting. Thinking. Dozing occasionally with faces braced against hands propped on hard arm-rests. Ingesting massive volumes of coffee and soda and vending machine sandwiches and stale doughnuts. Eyes fixed on a flickering television mounted up in the corner of the ceiling. But mostly just waiting. As the others chattered and gossiped and complained, the two of them spoke hardly at all.

As for Justin, he was a ghost that flitted in on occasion, just long enough to listen to the latest medical briefing, to ask pointed and pertinent questions about the patient's condition and prognosis. Then he would disappear again; no one really knew where he went or what he was doing, but it was obvious that he wasn't going far, as he was instantly present when there was any significant change in Brian's condition.

They were all there, at various times during the course of each day. They exchanged idle gossip and spoke of mutual acquaintances, of what they were having for dinner and the cannoli that had been added to the Liberty Diner menu, of what new film was playing downtown and the latest plots of favorite television programs and the new pianist down at the Rainbow Lounge, of how intensely they disliked Brian's new boytoy (even if he was drop-dead gorgeous) and how none of them had ever realized what a bitch Cynthia could be. Ted raved about the new production of *La Boheme* at the opera house, and Deb voiced her doubts that Meryl Streep could actually pull off playing the lead in the *Mamma Mia* movie that was coming out soon, and they all talked about things Oscar had gotten wrong in the past (*Crash* over *Brokeback Mountain*? Puh-leeze) and right more recently (*The Departed* as opposed to *Babel*, which nobody understood anyway) and about the new act that Shanda Leer was premiering for the next G&LC fundraiser, and the new house that Ted and Blake were looking to buy, and the upcoming production of *Guys and Dolls* at the local little theater.

Small talk, intended only to fill the empty hours.

They talked about everything and nothing, except what they pointedly did not talk about: Brian Kinney and the impact that the changes in his life would have on each of them. They were, in fact, so determined to ignore that subject that the silence around it grew and swelled and eventually threatened to consume them all.

Ben took a sip of his beer and realized that he had read the same paragraph in an interpretive treatise on the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald three times and still didn't remember what he'd read. So he gave it up and sat back in his chair, flexing shoulders and back to relieve muscle strain, and gazing out the window into a cold, heavy rainfall. That was when he heard the front door open, and he was up and moving before there was time for it to close again.

Michael was still shucking out of his raingear when Ben reached him, his hair and face dripping with rainwater, his skin pale and bloodless, and his teeth chattering.

"Hey, Baby," said Ben gently, quickly wrapping his arms around his young lover, disregarding the dampness of Michael's clothes. "You're freezing. Come on into the kitchen where it's warmer. And get out of those wet things."
Michael's only response was a nod as he stumbled forward, unzipping his jacket as he went, with Ben following close behind.

No pizza then. And no six-pack of the locally-brewed beer that he usually picked up every night from the little tavern down the street. No newspaper from the corner newsstand either, and no mail retrieved from the mailbox - all of which he usually brought in. No nothing.

Just Michael, hollow-eyed and shivering and wet.

And crying, without sound or sobs. Just waves of tears welling in his eyes and rolling down his cheeks.


"I saw his face," said Michael, in a rough, broken voice,

"What?" said Ben slowly, sure that he must have misheard. "You saw what?"

Michael turned in his arms and looked up into Ben's face, his eyes filled with despair.
"He let me in. Called me in, and wanted to know why I was hanging around there. Why I didn't go home, to you and Hunter. To my life."

He turned again, and went to the window, and the rivulets of rainwater running down the glass was reflected on his face, emulating the tears still streaming from his eyes.

"I was so fucking stupid," he continued, talking as much to himself as to Ben. "When he called for me, I thought . . . I was so happy because I thought it meant . . ."

He fell silent then, obviously unable to continue.

Ben stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Michael's torso, pulling gently to brace his young partner against his chest. "Come sit down," he murmured. "You're exhausted, and there's no need for you to stand here shivering. You can talk just as well sitting down. Come on, and I'll fix you some hot chocolate."

Michael roused a little then, his face thawing just a bit as he mustered up a weary smile for his husband. "That sounds . . . surprisingly good."

He dropped into a chair at the table and sat for a while in silence, content to watch as Ben zapped a cup of milk in the microwave before stirring in some Nestle's chocolate mix and topping the concoction with a mound of miniature marshmallows. Angels' balls, according to Emmett. The thought made Michael smile, until it occurred to him that Emmett might no longer be capable of such sweet whimsy once this debacle was over. Then he allowed the thought to expand to include them all, in the realization that whimsy might be in very short supply for a very long time.

He accepted the mug of cocoa from Ben and was grateful for its warmth against his frigid hands as he allowed himself to fantasize that it might also manage to banish the chill that gripped his heart.

But that fantasy was short-lived. He knew instinctively that nothing would accomplish that purpose, except time. Maybe, with a bit of luck.

"Take your time," said Ben, his eyes soft with concern and a desire to comfort, to soothe, to console, and - beneath everything else - to punish whoever had inflicted undeserved pain on the young man who had become the light of his life.
Even in the extremes of his distress, Michael saw it and was touched by it. And even comforted, to some small degree. He took a swallow of his cocoa, savoring the warmth and using the process as a delaying tactic to allow him to find the right words with which to tell the story.

Only . . . there were no right words. There was only the memory, expanding to fill his thoughts and pulling him back into a dark chamber filled only with the echoes of despair.

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He was standing at the window, watching rain lashing across the front of the hospital and reflecting that the first wave of spring had come and gone and been buried under the resurgence of winter. It was not an unusual event in Pittsburgh, and a faint, sporadic clicking suggested that there might even be a few ice pellets mixed in with the spates of raindrops. The lowering clouds had already blocked out any lingering remnants of the day, even though the clock on the wall claimed that it was still afternoon.

It would be a long, nasty walk to the bus stop, and an even longer, nastier one to get home.

So maybe he'd splurge, and grab a taxi.

When he backed away from the window, pulling his jacket tighter around him to ward off a chill that was more a reaction to the vista beyond the glass than to any actual change in temperature, he was surprised to find that he was alone in the waiting room, except for a shabbily-dressed young black woman who seemed to always be there (prompting some in their group to speculate that she might simply be a vagrant who had no place else to go). Her name was Yolanda, he thought. Or Solana, maybe. He wasn't really sure, because he had hardly spoken to her at all during this ordeal of waiting for the disaster to be over and because she wore an air of aloofness, in spite of the shabbiness of her appearance, an air that stated that she did not wish to share conversation or confidences.

It was strange, he thought, that they had occupied the same space and time over an extended period of days and yet seemed to know virtually nothing of each other. He was vaguely startled to realize that he didn't even know who she was here to see. And he wasn't sure how any of them had come to know her name (conceding, of course, that he didn't actually know it at all). Neither he nor any of his extended group had ever bothered to ask about her purpose here, and she had never volunteered the information.

Suddenly, that bothered him. Someone should have asked, he thought. Wasn't shared tragedy supposed to bring people closer together? And perhaps this was the right time. He wasn't sure where Lindsey and Mel had gone, or why his mother and Ted had not appeared yet this afternoon, or where Emmett might have drifted off to, but the fact that there were only the two of them in the room seemed to demand some effort to communicate.

He cleared his throat then, and moved toward her . . . but it was at that moment that Cynthia leaned through the doorway and gestured for Michael to accompany her.

All else was immediately forgotten, as he turned away, but he did notice a strange look in the young black woman's eyes as he changed direction.

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Sharon Briggs, AKA Shoshona Jackson, allowed herself a quick sigh of relief as she watched the young man follow Kinney's assistant out into the hallway. She had realized early on that, if any of Brian Kinney's support group ever decided to approach her and try to figure out who she really was
and what she was doing here, she had to make sure that it would be neither Michael Novotny nor Emmett Honeycutt. The others were either much too self-absorbed or much too distracted to be perceptive enough to discern anything beyond the ordinary, but these two could pose a problem if they got too close. Thus, she had been careful to avoid situations in which she would attract the undivided attention of either or both. Only sometimes, fate took a hand. She had not realized until too late that everyone else had departed, leaving her alone in the waiting room with Michael, and she had been contemplating a quick dash toward the lady's room to avoid any attempt he might make at opening up a dialogue when Cynthia had appeared.

She was very good at her job, possessing a singular ability to fade into the background, a skill much to be desired in undercover cops. But she also knew her limits. She had been watching this group for days now, not as part of Kinney's protection detail, but as a general observer. Watching for anything out of the ordinary, any details that might provide a clue to the identity of his attackers or the motivations behind the assault. In this aspect, she was alone in her task, completely separate from the other police/security people and from the FBI personnel who were undoubtedly assigned to the case, although she had failed to identify any of them. That was only to be expected, since, presumably, they were as good at their job as she was at hers. She was anonymous, as she preferred to be.

Thus far, she had learned nothing that might help to identify the assailants, but she had learned a lot about Kinney himself and the people who were a part of his life - enough to begin to understand the complexity of the relationships and to realize which of them were impacted most by the circumstances of the assault.

And to develop a reluctant, but abiding sympathy for a few of them. For young Taylor, with his huge blue eyes that tried so hard to conceal the depth of his love, and failed miserably. For Lindsey Peterson, who so obviously did not want to love Kinney, but couldn't help herself. For Emmett Honeycutt, who seemed to have lost his moorings as a result of this drama and was floundering for a direction. And for Michael, who, in some ways, loved most deeply of all, and had schooled himself to live with what he could never hope to change.

Sharon/Shoshona sighed again and tried to shift into a more comfortable position in her molded plastic chair. Yes, she definitely had to be on her guard. She could not afford to let Novotny get too close, to be able to look into her eyes and see more there than she was willing to reveal. It was not her job to get involved, to offer support or sympathy or comfort to the victims. Her only purpose was to solve the crime, to identify those responsible.

That was what she had to keep telling herself. Next time, she would be more careful.

"He wants to see you," said Cynthia as they walked toward Brian's room. "But . . ." She paused and Michael noticed that she seemed to be deliberately avoiding meeting his eyes. "But don't expect too much. He's tired, Michael. Very tired."

"I won't," he replied, but there was no disguising the glints of joy in his eyes. "But I'm just glad he . . ." He fell silent, obviously looking for words to express what he was feeling. "I missed him so much, and I was afraid - I thought he might still be angry with me."

She nodded, but could not quite suppress a sigh. "Just don't expect too much."

Michael felt a sudden nuance of unease, sensing somehow that she wanted to say more - much more - but was deliberately restraining the impulse.

As he entered the room, he saw that a nurse was positioned nearby, adjusting settings on a
monitoring instrument. He also noted that Chris McClaren was standing in the shadows near a corner window, but he was staring out into the growing darkness rather than facing Brian. Cynthia moved to join him as Michael went toward the bed, and the two of them began to speak quietly, providing some small illusion of privacy for the two old friends.

Michael took a moment to compose himself as he approached the bed. He knew it would still be tremendously difficult to look into Brian's eyes and not flinch away from the evidence of his injuries, even though snowy bandages still concealed the extent of the damages. And he would never quite be able to forget what he'd seen in his old friend's eyes the first time they had come face to face after their initial confrontation when Brian had turned Justin away. He had waited for days for the chance to see his best friend again, to try to express his regrets for not speaking up when he should have, and, alternatively, for speaking when he should have remained silent. But when the opportunity had come, he had been filled with misgivings he could neither explain nor suppress. Still, he told himself that there had been no pity in his expression as he'd met Brian's gaze, that he'd been successful in hiding an impulse to look away, to refuse to see, but the dimming of the light in those beautiful hazel eyes had said differently. He had wanted to speak up then, to explain himself and to deny the sentiment that Brian would reject and despise above all things, but he hadn't known how to phrase it, how to make Brian believe it. So he had remained silent.

He was determined not to do so again. He would make Brian understand, make him see the truth.

Lightening was forking across the sky as he arrived at Brian's bedside, and he flinched slightly as thunder rumbled nearby. Then he looked down and found Brian's eyes studying him, very still and filled with shadow.

"Hey," he said softly, wanting to reach for his old friend's hand, wanting to lean forward and drop a kiss on any available bare skin, but uncertain how such a gesture might be received.

"Hey, Mikey." The voice was without inflection, but the use of the nickname was encouraging, he thought.

"How are you . . ."

"I'm fabulous." Not so good that, since the voice was laced now with irony. "How about you?"

Michael took a deep breath, and resolved to forge ahead, to say what needed saying. "Better now, since I can see you. I've . . ."

"Well," Brian drawled, "you're not exactly seeing 'me', are you? I mean, the real me is buried somewhere inside the mummy suit - right?"

"For now," Michael answered with a grin. "But you'll be back, good as new."

Brian blinked, and the murmur of voices in the corner ceased abruptly, as Cynthia noticed the faintest hitch in his breathing. She barely managed to suppress a sigh, sensing that this was not good.

"I will?" Brian said.

"Of course, you will."

"Of course, I will," echoed Brian, the sardonic note back in his voice. "So, did you and your wifey win the lottery? Or maybe Ben's novel - rejected at last count by thirty-odd publishers - suddenly became a bestseller?"
"No such luck," Michael admitted, not quite sure where Brian was going with this. "Still living day to day."

"Then why are you spending all your time sitting around here? Don't you have vintage comics to sell, or new issues of Rage to write? You should go home, Michael. I don't need you here."

Michael hesitated before replying. "Well, maybe I need to be here. Ever consider that?"

Brian's eyes were suddenly cold. "You managed quite well without me, for a long time, you know. While you and the Zen-Master and the littlest hustler were busy constructing your perfect, conventional, little Stepford-fag existence, so I fail to see . . ."

"That was wrong," Michael whispered. "I was wrong. I don't know why things went so bad for us. Or why I let myself forget what you meant to me. But . . ."

"Because it was time to move on," Brian interrupted. "Maybe that's why. It happens to all of us, sooner or later."

Michael sighed. "But we were lucky. We found our way back to each other."

"Lucky," whispered Brian. "You think we were lucky?"

Michael closed his eyes for a moment, almost overwhelmed with the upsurge of a pain too raw to process, and Brian, safely concealed within his gauze cocoon, saw it and recognized it, recalling similar ordeals he'd endured after Justin's bashing. But he was careful to suppress those memories and any indication of his understanding. "We were fucking lucky," Michael insisted. "I could have died. You could have died. But we didn't. We're still here. Brian and Mikey. Together. Invincible."

Brian took a moment, struggling to swallow around the lump in his throat, before responding. "You think we're invincible?"

"Of course, we are. You'll be back on your feet in no time."

"Yeah. Life is beautiful, right? Everything's gonna be right as rain?"

"Right, Dude. You're Brian Kinney, for fuck's sake! You'll always be young. You'll always be beautiful."

If he'd been listening then, he'd have heard Cynthia's hoarse inhalation and, perhaps, understood what it meant. But he wasn't listening. He was deep into his fondest fantasy - the notion that his were the magic words that would always renew Brian's courage and fuel his ability to reclaim his life.

He was smiling as he gazed down into Brian's eyes, until he noticed that it was not joy or confidence or contentment he was reading in those hazel depths. It was rage. And when Brian decided to speak, after several moments of painful silence, there was not an ounce of warmth or affection in his voice.

"Have you looked at me, Michael? Have you bothered to look and see what's really here, instead of what you want to see?"

The smile forgotten, Michael could only shake his head and whisper, "I can't see anything, Brian. I can't . . ."

"Then maybe it's time you did."

"Brian, please . . ."
"Please what?" No gentleness now. No irony. No compassion. Just hard, bitter anger, and blatant impatience. "Please say what you want to hear. Please smile and be grateful for your little cheerleader routine? Tell you what, Mikey. Let me show you something, and then we'll see if you still feel like cheering."

He gestured then toward Nurse Beck who was waiting nearby, and she stepped close and leaned over to whisper in his ear. "Are you sure?" she asked, obviously uncomfortable in the role he'd assigned her to play.

"Gotta be done," he answered, without a trace of uncertainty.

She only hesitated for a moment; then she methodically and efficiently cut away the bandages that covered his face. And Michael found himself rooted to the spot, wanting to turn and run, wanting to refuse to see, but unable to move a muscle.

Then it was done. The bandages were gone, and Brian's face was bare, and Michael wanted to look away. Wanted to refuse to see the ruin of the face that he had loved for more than half his life. Wanted to be anywhere - but here.

To everyone's astonishment, Brian managed to dredge up a small chuckle. "Do you have any idea how pathetic you are? Do you realize that it's not me who needs reassurance? That it's you who needs someone to prop you up? To let you believe in your silly daydreams"

"Brian, I . . ."

"Say it!" Hard and sharp and unforgiving, and demanding obedience.

"I . . ."

"Say it, Michael! Recite your little litany. Shout it out to the world, like always."

"You'll always be . . ."

"Oh, no, no, no." Taunting now, and cruel, as he had never been cruel before. "You have to say it all. Every word."

Michael could barely draw breath, and when he did manage to speak, his voice was only a whisper. "You're . . . Brian Kinney . . . for fuck's sake. You'll always be . . . young. You'll always . . . be . . ."

Then he fell silent, unable to continue, and Brian's face - a wretched reminder of what it had once been - twisted into a macabre smile. "Yeah. That's what I thought. Go home, Michael. Your silly fantasies are not going to fix this, and there's no need for you to hang around any more. I don't want you here. That part of my life is over. We are over."

Michael hesitated for a moment, his face as pale and still as frost, before turning to make his escape. But he stopped as he reached the door and spoke once more, pointedly avoiding looking back at his old friend's ruined face. "You always told me that . . . you loved me."

And Brian tried, with every ounce of his strength, to resist the urge to reply, but, in the end, could not quite manage it. "Always have," he whispered. "Always will."

But it was barely a breath, far too softly spoken for Michael to hear.

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"You know," drawled Chris McClaren, after Michael's departure, "I'm really fucking glad I'm not your best friend."

"Me, too," said Nurse Beck, who knew plenty about suffering and found it easy to recognize when she saw it, but not so easy to explain or rationalize.

"Thanks."

If the FBI agent had hoped to provoke Brian into explaining his reasons for his treatment of his old friend, he realized he was doomed to failure. So he elected to try a more direct approach. "Why'd you do that?"

For a while, Brian was silent, lying still as Nurse Beck replaced his bandages. Then, when he did choose to answer, he started with a question. "What does your dossier say about me, about the people who are closest to me?"

McClaren, Brian noted with approval, did not respond quickly, taking time to consider his answer. "It mentions that you have almost no contact with your blood relatives. It mentions young Taylor, of course, and Ms. Peterson. And your son, of course, although your ties to him are not exactly common knowledge."

"And?"

McClaren sighed. "And your lifelong friendship with Novotny and his family."

"So it's a pretty fair bet that anyone who really wanted to harm me might choose to go after them. Right?"

The FBI agent thought about it for a moment before answering. "Possible, but not likely. What are they going to do - go after anybody in Pittsburgh who ever smiled at you? Or sucked your dick?"

Brian managed a grin. "Better hope not, or you're going to run out of cops for guard duty."

"Still, that was pretty fucking cruel."

Brian huffed an exaggerated sigh. "Yeah, well, Michael is like a fucking pitt bull. Once he sinks his teeth in, the only way to get rid of him is with a fucking taser gun."

"Okay, but you didn't tell him that they're going to be able to repair the damage to your face. You could have at least . . ."

Brian turned then and fixed McClaren with a cold glare. "You really trust that Dr. Pygmalion can deliver on his promises? What if he can't? Am I supposed to tell my friends - the only people that I really give a shit about - that everything is going to be OK, when I don't have any way of knowing if he can really do what he says?" He turned away then and closed his eyes. "I don't make promises unless I know I can keep them."

McClaren simply stared at him for a while before offering a wry response. "Of course, you don't."

Nurse Beck continued her task, keeping her opinions to herself, but communicating her feelings through the gentleness of her touch. "Ready for your candy, Sport?" she asked finally, affixing the last bit of adhesive to his bandages.

"A Dilaudid cocktail?" he asked hopefully. "Or maybe a joint - for medicinal purposes only, of course?"
Her smile would have surprised a lot of people who thought of her as drill-sergeant material. "Dream on, Stud. Now - or later?"

"Not quite yet," he replied, the look in his eyes saying what he could never bring himself to verbalize, mainly because he sensed that she would be uncomfortable should he speak it. She would not like having anyone know that she had a soft spot for this particular patient - or any patient, for that matter.

"Brian," said Cynthia, a faint but unmistakable note of urgency in her tone, "this was hard on you. You need to . . ."

"I will," he answered. "But I need to see Emmett first." He looked toward McClaren. "Want to see if you can find him for me?"

The FBI agent moved toward the door. "Sure. I've spent my whole life training to be your errand boy."

"Smart ass," Brian muttered, as the door closed behind the agent.

"Reminds me of someone else I know," observed Nurse Beck, startling a short, painful burst of laughter from her patient. Then she paused to smile down at him. "I'll make sure they're waiting for your call. Just buzz when you're ready."

"You're too good to me," he replied, a wicked gleam in his eyes.

"Only because I'm so charmed by that hot little ass," she retorted, eliciting another laugh.

"Shame on you, Beck. Your grandchildren would be so disappointed."

"My grandchildren," she answered with a smirk, "are all teen-aged girls, and they'd think that their granny has excellent taste."

When she was gone, Cynthia moved close and regarded him with a sardonic smile. "Another convert to the Kinney fan club. For someone who professes to despise all straight people, you're developing quite a following among the members of the opposing team."

Instead of offering his customary snarky response, he took a moment to think about what she'd said, his tone pensive and contemplative. "Do you suppose the world is really changing?" he asked, as if the thought was strange, almost incomprehensible, to him.

"One homophobe at a time?" she replied, her smile twisting into a slight smirk.

He shrugged slightly, before remembering that shrugging was among those movements best left unpracticed in his current state. "Shit!" he muttered.

"Do you really care?" she asked then, surprised to realize that she was actually curious.

He only paused for a micro-moment before looking up at her with a sparkle in his eyes. "Not in the least."

Her face relaxed into a broad grin, as she realized that the resilient, irrepressible Brian Kinney that she knew and loved - or hated, depending on the moment - was actually enjoying a comeback. It felt a little like coming home after a long, unpleasant journey.

She hesitated then, knowing what she wanted to say, but uncertain of how he would react. Still, she
had never developed a habit of curbing her tongue in their conversations, and she was not planning to start now.

"You know, of course, that Michael may never be able to recover from this."

He nodded. "I know."

"Then why . . ."

"Because he already has what he needs. Because there's nothing more that I can do for him, except . . ."

"Except?"

He took a deep breath. "Except make sure that he doesn't lose it, because of me."

"And when you've managed to push them all away? What then?"

"Then they'll be safe."

And then, for perhaps the first time in her life, Cynthia did curb her tongue, did refuse to speak the next thing that popped into her head. Because she was virtually certain that it would elicit no response except for a deep, almost empty silence.

But oh, she wanted to say it. Wanted to toss it out there, to try to spur a reaction. But she didn't, and it went unspoken. But then, as she looked into his eyes, she was almost certain that he heard it anyway, and responded exactly as she'd known he would.

*And you'll be alone.* In her mind, she almost screamed it.

And the only answer was a whisper in the darkness, a pale shadow moving deep in his eyes.

*I know.*

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Ben stayed up long past his regular bedtime, ostensibly working on his lesson plan, but mostly just sitting and listening to the rain.

Michael had gone to bed early, after managing - in fits and starts - to give an account of his confrontation with Brian, initially inspiring Ben to want nothing more than to go tearing down to Allegheny General and administer a thorough tongue-lashing to the young man who had once claimed to be Michael's best friend.

Only he knew it wouldn't do any good. Brian would simply sit there in his bed, and take it, and probably say nothing in his own defense, accepting the fact that he had it coming. Which, of course, raised a pertinent question. If he knew that he was being cruel and vindictive and malicious when he'd delivered his verbal diatribe, then why had he done it?

And the answer - like the question - was unavoidable.

*Fuck!*
Ben had heard the story - from several different sources - of the catastrophic birthday party that Brian had thrown for Michael when he'd turned thirty. When Ted and Melanie and Emmett had recited their versions of the events of that night, Ben's response had been to wonder how Michael had ever managed to forgive such treachery. But then, he'd heard the rest of the story from Debbie, and later, from Justin, and realized what Brian had really done.

Despite his own misgivings - which, in time, had proved to be entirely correct - he had given Michael what everyone else believed to be the opportunity of a lifetime; the chance to build a life with the sophisticated and well-heeled physician. It was only later, when the entire group had begun to see the changes wrought in Michael by his relationship with the good doctor, that most of them had begun to question their original perceptions.

Ben couldn't actually imagine a pretentious, affected, self-important Michael, but he had no choice but to believe that he had existed, as he'd heard it from Michael himself. And from others who were quick to agree, although never - not even via innuendo - from Brian.

But nothing that happened later changed the fact that Brian had sacrificed the relationship that had been a vitally important part of his life since he'd been just a kid, along with the (tenuous) good will of the entire extended family, for one single purpose - to give Michael a chance to reach for what he wanted; to be happy.

Ben had learned a lot in recent years - a lot about himself and a lot about Michael and even, in some small, remote way, a lot about Brian. Some of it he'd been grateful to learn; some - he reluctantly recalled the debacle when Hollywood had come calling in an aborted desire to make a movie out of Michael and Justin's comic book, when he had been almost consumed by a jealousy that had come close to destroying his partnership - he'd have preferred not to know. But one thing had become increasingly clear to him over the years.

He had learned to recognize love when he saw it.

Brian loved Michael, and Ben knew that. Had, in point of fact, always known it, even when he'd have preferred not to know. But the problem was that now, apparently Michael had lost the capacity to know it himself, and maybe that was for the best. Maybe being able to walk away from Brian - forever - was the thing that Michael needed most, to keep him safe and protect his future. He was, after all, so hurt right now, so overwhelmed with the pain of loss and betrayal, that he might never regain his equilibrium, never be able to look beneath the surface of Brian's actions to expose the meaning of it all. In addition, it seemed that Brian's enemies might be legion, as well as very well connected, so there was no way to predict how long the current precarious situation might endure.

And it was a certainty that, if Ben did nothing to help Michael find his way through this darkness, that Brian would simply maintain his silence. He would just let go, and, as a result, Michael would be safe and protected.

Ben felt as if he'd stumbled into a maze and was floundering for a way out. How was he to keep this truth - this enormous, life-changing truth - to himself? And if he did, if he succeeded in burying his certainty and allowed Michael to complete the process of turning his back on the man who had been a major focus of his life, was Ben really doing him a favor? Or was he condemning his beloved young partner to a life of unspoken mourning from which he would never be free, trapped for all time in a spectral grief that he would never be able to express or put aside?

Fuck!

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Emmett had still not been able to decide how he felt about Brian's new main squeeze, except, of course, for realizing that the man was molten-lava hot. He had watched and listened as McClaren had taken their entire group to task in Brian's defense on the occasion of their first meeting, and he had felt an unexpected stirring of admiration. Not because he didn't understand the anger and resentment expressed by his friends when Brian had hurt Justin so terribly; he had felt Justin's pain like a knife in his own gut. But he'd also realized the bitter truth of McClaren's words.

No matter how much Justin had been hurt by Brian's accusations, the simple truth was that Brian had fabricated nothing, had not varied one micron from the realm of fact, although one might have argued with his interpretation of those self-same facts.

Emmett had been as uneasy and disconcerted at the conclusion of that entire ugly confrontation as any of the rest of the group. However, it was only later - in retrospect - that he had come to a startling realization. Except for Michael's customary half-hearted attempts, no one had ever made a genuine effort to defend Brian from the slings and arrows hurled by friends, enemies, or acquaintances on any number of occasions.

Brian either stood alone to defend himself or - much more commonly - simply accepted the consequences of being targeted, ignoring whatever ugliness might be thrown at him. And Emmett was amazed to recognize how frequently that had happened in the past.

It was food for extensive thought and gave him a new perspective from which to form an opinion about Chris McClaren.

Still, there was no denying that, in spite of his willingness to step forward to shield Brian from attacks - reasonable or otherwise - the man was extremely arrogant and brutally frank, impatient and relentless and sarcastic and possessed of a wicked, blade-sharp sense of humor; he was, in fact, a study in contrasts that left Emmett uncertain of whether to resent him or admire him. Or simply avoid him.

But that wasn't really a viable choice at the moment, since Brian had dispatched McClaren to summon Emmett to an audience in the master's presence.

OK, that wasn't really fair, even if Brian did frequently behave as if he were a member of the peerage, forced to deal regularly with commoners.

Still, it never really occurred to Emmett to refuse to answer the call, and he accompanied McClaren to Brian's room without protest, noting, out of the corner of his eye, that the man cut such an elegant figure that he managed to make 501's and a Notre Dame sweatshirt look as haute monde as Armani casuals.

Not unlike a certain ad exec/club owner who was, of course, deep in discussion and too busy to be disturbed when the two arrived at their destination.

The foot of Brian's bed had been converted into a display space during McClaren's absence, and Cynthia was exhibiting a sample of a promotional board for Brian's evaluation as they entered.

"This is the one that Andrew prefers," she was explaining, balancing a colorful poster against the bed frame. "And Ted agrees with him, but I . . ."

"Looks like a public service promotion for Breeders Central," Brian interrupted, studying the central image of the mock-up - a slightly impressionistic watercolor of a group of families tailgating outside some anonymous sports stadium, obviously caught up in pre-game excitement and expressing their delight in the subject of the ad - First Class, a new light beer being marketed by the Scofield
Brewery. It had the advantage of being bright and eye-catching, and the artwork was quite good. Except that the object of the campaign was to sell beer, not win praise for the artist.

"Yeah," agreed Cynthia with a tiny smile. "Andrew feels that it's past time for us to 'expand our horizons'." The smile widened, and Brian could almost see the quotation marks around the words she was quoting. "To broaden our appeal and stress more traditional values, so that we're not locked inside confining parameters."

Brian blinked. "He really used those words. He actually said, 'Confining parameters'? Who the fuck talks like that?"

"Howard Bellweather?" Emmett suggested, and was gratified when even the bandages obscuring Brian's face were not sufficient to conceal the man's smile.

Cynthia's grin was also an approbation. "And, apparently, the second assistant to the art director at Kinnetic Corp. So what do you . . ."

"Show me what Heath came up with."

Cynthia pulled another board out of the canvas portfolio that she'd propped against the bed. "You should probably know that Andrew was not at all pleased that you requested Heath's input, especially on such an important project. He felt that you 'undermined his authority' by going around him to his subordinate."

Brian reached out and took the new board from her hands and braced it against his knees so he could get a good look at it. It only took a moment for him to make up his mind. Then he looked up at Cynthia and said, "Did you really have to ask?"

"Nope," she answered with a smug smile, "but if I hadn't shown it to you, they'd have argued that I have no right to make such a big decision."

He was quiet for a moment, apparently considering what she'd said. Then he turned the board around to display it to the new arrivals. "What do you think?" he asked, his tone suggesting that he expected only truth.

But they both took one look and understood that this image - this campaign - practically screamed its origin.

A tall, sophisticated, beautiful man, standing at a bar and lifting an icy bottle of the new beer, as if in a toast. And - across the bar - a beautiful, red-headed woman, exquisitely dressed and displaying splendid décolleté, responding in kind. Which, in and of itself, was a startling image, unlikely to be forgotten by the target audience. But that was not the end of it. Behind the woman, just emerging from the shadows in a corner, stood another man, equally beautiful and wearing an enigmatic smile - a man who was also lifting his bottle in an identical gesture.

It would be left to the audience to decide for themselves who was toasting whom, and the slogan scrawled in script across the bottom of the poster reflected that philosophy perfectly.

*It's all about choice. First Class - or coach*

Emmett grinned. "Edgy, sexy, and with the hand of the master all over it."

McClaren was more succinct. "It's Kinnetic."

Cynthia gathered up the samples and was preparing to pack them away, when Brian grabbed her
hand and tugged to bring her close to his side. "I need you to do a couple of things for me," he explained, something in his voice telling her that this was a serious moment. "I need to see Andrew - like right now - and I need you to get Ted in here, so I can explain a few things."

She took a deep breath. "Brian, I am perfectly capable of doing what has to be done."

"I know that," he replied easily. "Otherwise, I'd have made other arrangements, wouldn't I?"

"I suppose, but . . ."

"It's about avoiding unnecessary friction," he explained. "If you fire him, then you're going to have to deal with the flak and the backlash. If I do it, they can't very well question me or blame you, now can they?"

"You do realize," she said slowly, "that logic has very little to do with how they're going to react." She smiled then, and her voice grew very gentle. "They're scared, Brian. Whether they'd ever admit it or not, they all know that you are the heart and soul of Kinnetic; that without you, it's just another ad agency."

He nodded. If he were prone to false modesty, he'd probably argue with her conclusions, but he wasn't, so he didn't. "In that case, we just have to make sure they understand that your voice is my voice. That you speak on my behalf, and that they'd best listen, if they know what's good for them."

Cynthia glanced uneasily toward the two men still standing in the doorway. "This is going to be especially hard . . . on certain people."

Brian turned to note the shadows forming in Emmett's eyes and knew that she was right, and that Emmett knew it too. But it couldn't be helped. He would do what he could to try to cushion the blow for those who would disagree - vehemently - with his choices, but, in the end, nothing would change. In the end, there were no other choices.

And what he was about to do was only going to serve to compound the problem. But - again - he had always trusted his own instincts, and now was definitely not the right time to start second-guessing himself.

"You just let me worry about that," he said finally, squeezing Cynthia's hand. "And give Heath a raise. That campaign is going to make me a very rich man."

"You're already a very rich man," she retorted.

"In the immortal words of . . . whoever the fuck said it, 'You can never be too rich, or too thin'."

"The Duchess of Windsor," said Emmett.

"Gloria Vanderbilt," said Cynthia.

"Babe Paley," said McClaren.

"See?" said Brian. "Experts all."

"So I'll see you tomorrow," said Cynthia as she finished packing up her portfolio. "And I'll send Andrew in first thing in the morning. When do you want Ted here?"

"Tonight," answered Brian absently, "but hold on a second. I need you to hear what I have to say to Emmett. This will impact you as well."
She paused then, a speculative gleam rising in her eye, and Brian almost smiled as he realized how well he knew her and how easily he could read her mind. She did not - quite - say, "What now?" But she might as well have done so.

"Brian?" said Emmett slowly, as he came toward the bed. "You're making me nervous. What's going on? Why would . . ."

Brian lifted a hand to silence the big Nelly bottom, and took a moment to choose his words. But, after a few seconds of silence, he simply took a deep breath and said what needed saying, apparently realizing that there was no way to cushion the blow.

"I'm not going to be here, Emmett," he announced. "And I need you to fill in for me."

Emmett gaped, and it was immediately obvious that he could not figure out which detail of Brian's statement to question first. So he went with the obvious.

"What do you mean, you're not going to be here?" Then his eyes widened, as a new, terrible thought occurred to him. "They haven't . . . found something else wrong, have they? You're not . . ."

"No," replied Brian quickly. "No, I'm not dying. But I am severely damaged. And I need time to adjust. And to heal. And to figure out where I go from here and how I . . . how I'm going to deal with everything. So I'm going to be away for a while."


"You don't need to know that, Emmett."

Emmett just stared at him for a while, obviously trying to get his mind around this new, unexpected development. When he spoke again, he sounded uncertain, almost frightened. "You're not going to be . . . alone, are you? I mean, this is not some Phantom of the Opera scenario, where you disappear into your own dark little abyss and spy on us from the rafters or something. Is it?"

"He won't be alone," said Chris McClaren, moving up to stand on the other side of the bed, his eyes almost opaque, revealing nothing beyond a glint of impatience.

Emmett nodded. "Well. That's good then.' Then he smiled. "Guess I've been around Teddie too much. Too much La Traviata and not enough Seinfeld. But . . . what did you mean? About me - filling in for you? How could I possibly . . ."

"Actually," said Cynthia slowly, realization dawning in her eyes, "it's a splendid idea. You'd be perfect."

"For what? Dancing on the bar at Babylon? I mean, not that I wouldn't love to, but . . ."

"To run Babylon for me," Brian's words were clipped and sharp, and filled with absolute certainty. Emmett blinked, and he actually gulped for air before stammering a response. "Are you . . . you can't . . . you've lost your fucking mind."

Brian shifted and leaned forward enough to lay his hand on Emmett's shoulder. "Listen to me, Honeycutt. Are you listening?"

Emmett was still fighting for breath. "I'm listening," he finally managed to reply. "And don't call me Honeycutt."
"Think about it, Emmett. I've got Ted to handle the financial end of things, and I've got a club manager to take care of stocking and inventory and staffing. But what - when you get right down to bedrock - is Babylon? When you eliminate everything else, Babylon is just a big, expensive party. Only it happens every night. Not just once in a while. And who, after all, is the pre-eminent party planner in the Pitts?"

But Emmett was shaking his head. "But, Brian, I know zero - zilch - absolutely nothing about running a business. This is . . . crazy."

"Actually," Brian replied calmly, "you know plenty about it. You just call it by a different name. The expertise you have isn't something that a person learns. It's something you either know, or you don't know - something you're born with. It's about making people happy, giving them a chance to enjoy themselves. To have fun." His voice was suddenly filled with undeniable humor. "And to fuck, of course."

Emmett grinned. "Can't forget that, can we? But I'm . . . Brian, Babylon is your baby. What if I . . . fuck it up? And how do I find the time anyway? I'm . . ."

Brian gave a half shrug. "This isn't a 9-to-5 thing, you know. There's plenty of staff to handle the day to day running of the business. What I need from you is inspiration, for lack of a better term. Someone to come up with ideas for the special events, the promotions, the contests. The fun stuff. And I can't think of anyone better suited . . ."

"You know," said Emmett suddenly, his voice taking on a speculative tone, "I have always thought about things I'd do, if it were up to me, that is. Like a Barbra impersonation night. And a Scarlet O'Hara ball theme. And a Cabaret celebration. And . . ."

"And," said Brian, sounding very self-satisfied, "you'd be making a good living while you're at it. A very good living."

"How good?" Emmett asked quickly. As a product of a very poor Mississippi family, he had never lost his penchant for focusing on the money.

Cynthia considered for a moment, then scrawled a figure on the message pad beside the bed. She showed it to Brian first, who nodded; then she handed it to Emmett, who blinked. Twice.

"Well?" said Brian.

Emmett looked up then, and focused on Brian's eyes. "But you . . . you're coming back, right? This is just temporary. Right?"

"Does that make a difference in whether or not you accept the offer?" Brian asked quickly.


"Then it's immaterial," Brian continued. "So - what do you say?"

"I say yes," answered Emmett finally, unable to suppress a delighted smile. "Yes. Absolutely, yes."

He leaned forward then, and dropped a kiss on a bare spot of skin above Brian's ear.

"All right, all right. Don't get moist."

"Thank you, Brian. I'm honored. To know that you trust me, I mean. And I won't do anything without your approval. I promise."
Brian looked up again to meet his eyes. "Yes, you will. You'll have to, because you won't be able to reach me. If you need guidance, or help in making decisions, then Cynthia will be available. I . . . won't."

Emmett saw it then, saw the dark truth lurking within those beautiful hazel eyes.

Brian believed that he was never coming back, that this goodbye was forever. Emmett wanted to deny it, to offer reassurance. But he couldn't, because he just didn't know.

Perhaps Brian was right.

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TBC
The only light in the vast room came from the fire burning brightly in the massive fireplace and a couple of vintage Tiffany floor lamps specifically placed to shed illumination on a group of antique wingback chairs located adjacent to the towering bookcase that stretched across one entire wall. As a result, though there were deep areas of shadow within the chamber, it was not really dark, as the brilliant flames were reflected and enhanced by the rich veneer of hand-rubbed paneling and wainscoting, the gleaming expanse of hardwood floors, the lustrous surface of polished brass fireplace tools, the deep patina of heavy, oak furniture, and the liquid amber of fine brandy sipped from crystal snifters.

It was a room that spoke of power, but only in a whisper. A shout would have been too crass, too plebian for such a rarefied atmosphere.

It also spoke of money - of the antique variety - and culture and family; the kind that could trace ancestries back to places like Kent and Knightsbridge and Harrow, and then on to Jamestown or Boston or the oldest sections of Philadelphia. And probably Salem, as well - although nobody was too quick to claim that, publicly.

Voices were never raised in this room, and no patron's slightest wish ever went ungranted.

The venue did not have a formal name; it was simply 'The Club'. And if one was welcome there, one had no need to question the lack of a proper name. On the other hand, if one wasn't, there was no point in asking, as one would never need to know the answer.

It was not a place to which one aspired to belong; it was, instead, a place to which one was born . . . or not. There was almost no middle ground.

The sprawling French colonial house had begun its life in the mid-nineteenth century, as the country estate of a powerful political leader who was, himself, the grandson of one of the city's founding fathers, but the 'country' aspect had dwindled away long ago, as the city limits had expanded, and expanded again and yet again. But the 'estate' part still applied, as political and financial pressure had been applied with great precision to keep the area a focus of upscale social standards and to preserve the ambiance of elegance and good taste. Thus the gardens were still expansive and immaculately maintained, the house had been modernized with great attention to detail and historical authenticity under the oversight of architectural specialists, and the staff charged with maintenance and service were exquisitely trained, products of a multi-generational tradition in that jobs had been passed down from grandfather to father to son, for decades.

Aaron Van Meider III was more than a century dead - no denying that - and his line had ended with a spinster great-granddaughter who had not lived to see the rise of the Hippie generation or the beginning of the Vietnam War, but his legacy assured that he would never be forgotten. His portrait - sternly posed in his military uniform - still hung above the heavily carved mantle in the main club room, and discreet markers throughout the house identified areas specifically designed according to his directions. A family heirloom collection of Towle silver, Waterford crystal, and Philippe Deshoulières china was still displayed in a breakfront in the carefully preserved dining room, and the kitchen staff still prepared recipes favored by his mother and his wife, producing gourmet cuisine that was served now in the elegant club dining room, carved out of one section of the house's original...
The rooms of the mansion were rarely crowded, which was one of the more attractive features of the house, and membership was both much desired and extremely limited, available only by family legacy, passing from father to son, etc., or - very, very rarely - by invitation.

It was a sanctuary for the elite of Pittsburgh's society; it was also one of the last bastions of sexism in that its membership was exclusively male, and women were not permitted within its walls except for those rare social occasions when ladies were required as escorts - flesh and blood accessories for the men of the hour. And, of course, as cleaning and kitchen staff. The glass ceiling did not exist below stairs.

On this night, there were only five individuals in the library, enjoying the luxurious comfort of the room which was particularly pleasant in contrast to the heavy rain driving against the French windows and the cold wind whistling around the eaves. Four lounged in deep-cushioned leather easy chairs, and the fifth was browsing through an eclectic selection of first editions, ranging from Dickens to Austen to Proust (which would surely have led any knowledgeable observer to conclude that it was the leather bindings and the antiquity of the books, rather than their content, that was so highly valued by the club members) to Sinclair Lewis to William Faulkner. The air was redolent of expensive cigars and aged brandy, and conversation was desultory as the evening wore on. They had all enjoyed a gourmet meal earlier in the evening, and were now contemplating taking their leave and making their way home.

Yet, they lingered, accepting droughts of brandy from the young waiter who had been assigned to see to their needs, and enjoying postprandial smokes. Though tobacco bans were becoming more and more common in public restaurants and bars all across the country, no one had ever dared to suggest such a thing in this last bastion of privilege . . . and no one ever would.

The waiter - a grandson of the man who had served as butler to Amelia Van Meiden before she died - poured out the last of the Hennessey cognac and took himself off to fetch another bottle. Just in case. The gentlemen might not require additional servings, but it would not do to leave anything to chance, as club members were unaccustomed to waiting for service. Young Nicholas, as he was called by the clientele, did not require instruction in how to perform his duties; it was a job he'd been groomed for since childhood.

The eldest of the group, a tall, elegant figure with thick, silver hair, lifted his glass and watched the refraction of flames within his goblet, as he took a deep drag from his imported Cuban cigar. Then he looked around, maintaining his silence until he was sure he had the undivided attention of his companions.

"What's the latest report?" he asked, as he watched swirls of smoke rise toward the coffered ceiling.

"No real change," said another of the men, dark-haired, with flecks of silver glinting in the reflected firelight. "Except for the rumors, which appear to be growing daily."

"So," said the questioner, "his condition is stable?"

"Yes."

"And his appearance?"

There was a faint but unmistakable vein of satisfaction in the tone of the slender man standing at the bookshelf who turned to offer a response. "Top secret, according to our source, but it's far too late for such precautions. The tabloid photos were all over the Internet before the sun rose the next
morning. By now, the whole world has had a chance to get a good look at the ruin of Brian Kinney."

The older man smiled. "And you can be sure that most of them wanted to pin medals on those who inflicted the damage, even if they don't dare say so in public."

Another voice was raised then - softer, less forceful, slightly accented. "Can we be sure of that? There's a lot of talk in the media these days, about people becoming accustomed to ideas like gay marriage and legal rights for same-sex partners. Do you suppose it'll really come to that?"

The man at the bookcase snorted. "Not if we have anything to say about it. All of that is just the liberal press, trying to promote the queer agenda. Decent people - real Americans, like us - understand that accepting abominations like homosexuality is a major step toward the collapse of our society. People like Kinney and his kind - they're sub-human. They should all be exterminated, like the vermin they are."

"Still," said another man, stocky and balding, stretching his legs out toward the fire and slumping against the leather back of his chair, "we have to be careful. Even though we know we're morally right in what we're trying to do, the law - as enacted by the bleeding hearts - doesn't agree. And if we get careless, it might be difficult to defend our actions to the great unwashed, who care about nothing beyond who's playing in the Super Bowl, when the next Harry Potter movie comes out, and how they're going to afford their next smart phone."

The questioner chuckled. "Then we'd best make sure our fate doesn't wind up in the hands of the rabble. Now, about these rumors . . ."

"Nothing substantial yet," replied the dark-haired speaker, voice threaded with a delicious irony, "but our oh, so eager-to-cooperate source has been pretty accurate thus far. For example, the description of the reactions of Kinney's freaky friends to the tabloid article has been substantiated by a couple of different observers. Also, some of the data we've been able to verify seems to be confidential in nature, so it seems logical to trust the information. Especially since we've received corroboration from a second source, who also has no idea what's really going on." He paused and flashed a venal smile. "Which really says a lot about the level of intelligence - or lack thereof - among these cretins."

"So what, specifically, does the rumor say?"

"Supposedly, he's going away somewhere. To recuperate."

"And where would that be?"

The dark-haired man sighed. "We don't know yet. But we will. If the sources we've already tapped can't provide the information, we'll get if from others who will come into play as needed. Preliminary arrangements have already been made."

The older man nodded, clasping gnarled hands in front of his face as he turned to look out into the storm. "I'm still not satisfied that we did enough to get our message across."

"With all due respect, Sir," the softer voice again, slightly raspy now and lower pitched, "you weren't there. Even knowing what he is, it was . . . hard to watch."

"Hard to watch?" snapped the elderly man. "Do you have any idea what that . . . that piece of filth cost me? How much I invested, and how much it should have paid off, and, even more than that, what his interference cost us all. What we lost because of . . . " He paused and took a deep, uneven breath. "Don't you dare suggest that he didn't have it coming. All of it. In fact, he got off easy. He
was supposed to wind up dying of AIDS. So no matter how much damage was done to him, it wasn't enough. He still deserves more."

"Of course, he does," agreed the dark-haired man, voice shifting into a soothing cadence. "And he'll get it, sooner or later. Meanwhile, there are other options." He paused and seemed to be considering his next words carefully. "We could still go after someone close to him, you know - someone who has special significance for him."

The older man was silent for a time, obviously lost in thought, ignoring the heaviness of the silence around him, as the others waited. In the end, there was no viable doubt about who wielded the real power in this group. Thus, there were a couple of faint but unmistakable sighs of relief when he resumed speaking, shaking his head. "No. Despite everything, blood still counts for something. There must be something else. Someone else."

"He's a fag, Sir." Back to the accented, low-pitched voice, now filled with venom and contempt. "He doesn't know a damned thing about loyalty or honor. He only cares about himself, and the only reason he would care about the other one is because he's got a perverted craving to claim ownership of that particular ass. No. You could condemn all of his so-called friends to the seventh level of hell, and it wouldn't change a thing. He's made it abundantly clear over the years that everything he does, he does for himself. And the only loyalty he has from the people around him is what he buys."

The older man grew thoughtful again, before speaking up to propose a new idea. "Still, he's always had a lust for material things. I met him once, and - before I knew what he was, of course - I admired his taste and his style. So, even if people don't mean anything to him, it's certain that material things do. His possessions, and his business. So, until we get a chance to reach our primary objective and complete what we set out to do, maybe we should shift our attention to something a bit more . . . accessible. And perhaps we also need to shift our tactics a bit. Find a different source for the hired help. After all, it wouldn't do to become too predictable, now would it?"

The dark-haired member of the group was shaking his head. "If you're thinking about any kind of direct action against his business location, best think again. Kinney is, without doubt, a revolting faggot and a pederast, but he's not stupid enough to risk the well-being of his big-money, low-class clients. Thus, the security for Kinetik was always virtually airtight due to the questionable reputation of the area, and it's even more so now, since the attack. Besides, there are other ways of handling matters on that front. Infiltration will serve as well as open warfare, with a lot less risk entailed."

Their young waiter made his return just as the speaker fell silent, and proceeded to offer a freshly-opened bottle of cognac, to the delight of the elderly man. He was approaching his eighth decade, and had never known any life other than one of privilege, but he never tired of enjoying his rank and the perks it provided.

"Thank you, Nicholas," he said with a smile, extending his snifter for a refill, and noting - just in passing - that the young man had beautiful gray eyes with thick, spiky lashes. Then he returned his attention to the group around him, as the waiter made his rounds. "Very well then. Perhaps something simpler. I seem to recall something about a . . . loft?"

So much, thought Ted, for a quiet evening at home, cuddling with his mate.

He had allowed himself a bit of a queen-out when Cynthia had delivered Brian's summons, but Blake had taken it in stride with characteristic aplomb. With, in fact, a little too much aplomp, from Ted's perspective. It bothered him sometimes that Blake seemed so seamlessly capable of adapting to
the variables of random chance. Although such an ability was probably one of the traits that made him an extremely effective drug-abuse counselor, it was slightly annoying when one was craving an emotional echo of one's own feelings and gotten a voice of reason instead.

After all, he grumped silently, his work schedule frequently exceeded forty hours per week by a substantial margin, and it was presumptuous of Brian to assume that he could expect his employees to be at his beck and call at any hour. Ted had a life of his own, and Brian needed to respect that.

Of course, there was the inconvenient little truth that - without Brian - the life that Ted was leading, extremely comfortable, intellectually rewarding, and financially stable, would not exist at all. Once in a while, though rarely, he wondered what would have happened to him had Brian not come seeking his help in finding a way out of a financial crisis, had not interrupted his moment of sharing his plight with his therapy group, had not forced him to re-evaluate what he wanted to do with his life, and where his true forte lay.

But he never pursued the thought very far, because he realized that he almost certainly didn't want to know the answer to that question. He suspected, however, that the path he would have followed, in that event, would have eventually ended in a place where he would not have wished to be.

OK, so he owed Brian a lot.

Ted took a moment to look in the mirror as he washed his hands before exiting the men's room. It was silly, he knew; even presumptuous to assume that Brian would notice, one way or another, but, somehow, Ted always took the time to straighten his clothing and make sure that nothing was stuck in his teeth and that his hair was not standing on end before coming face to face with his boss.

Brian wouldn't care; that was an unavoidable truth. But, somehow, Ted did. He couldn't really explain it, but he had accepted it as a natural expression of who he was. Brian, he knew, would never look at him the way he looked at other men - as a potential partner for sharing a quick fuck, or a visit to Babylon's backroom or even a turn on the dance floor.

That was something reserved for others, for those who were not members of the Brian Kinney Friends' Club.

Which should have been a source of pride, he thought, as he stared at his own face in the mirror - that he was important enough, necessary enough, close enough to Brian to be permanently stricken from the list of potential tricks. And most of the time, it was.

Most of the time.

Except . . . sometimes he wondered if he was the only one of their little group who speculated, who hungered for an answer to a question he never quite dared to ask aloud. Did Emmett, for example, ever wonder? Or Calvin, or Drew? Or Ben - no, on second thought, Ben didn't have to wonder; Ben knew, but maintained a deliberate silence on the subject. But did Blake, even ever faithful, ever stalwart, unfailingly upfront-in-all-things Blake . . . wonder?

Then, of course, there was Michael, and, in his case, the question didn't need asking at all. Michael had always wondered, would always wonder, but would never know, for a very specific reason. No matter how he might shrug off the possibility, or what he might do to prove otherwise, Brian loved Michael in a very unique, very specific way - a way which would never allow the complications of a sexual encounter to come between them. So Michael, despite whatever longings he might still carry hidden deep beneath his surface, would never be a part of the circle that might have some hope of seducing the mighty Kinney.
And neither, for the most part, did any of the rest of them, although not for the same reason. The very suggestion was mind-boggling. And yet . . .

What would it be like, he wondered, to be singled out for just one night, to draw those hazel eyes and know, for a few hours, that they would see no one else? To be fucked - just once - by the legend? To be able to lay aside all the posturing of disinterest and snideness and admit to the temptation? And why was it so hard to determine what he might be willing to give up in order to find out?

Of course, all those secret longings and private fantasies involved the Brian who . . . used to be. The Brian who existed now only in memory.

Ted gasped, as he realized what he was thinking, ashamed of the thought, but not quite able to dismiss it, or the ugly little speculation over how it would feel to have lived that life and to know, beyond all doubt, that it was all over, that what had been would be no more.

He found himself staring, unblinking, at his own reflection, eyes wide with pupils dilated. He then shook off the reverie that had gripped him, and felt a moment of disorientation, wondering if this kind of fixation had been common for him during the dark days of his addiction - days of which he had no clear memory. He had been lost then, attracted to a dark place inside himself. Did Brian represent that same ugly hunger to experience what he could never really hope to achieve? And, if he had the chance, would he take by force what he could never hope to be given?

No! He was a decent, God-fearing man. An honest man, loyal to a fault. A decent, angry man, although, if pressed, he could not have explained exactly what he was angry about.

When he walked into Brian's room, Chris McClaren was there - of course - sprawled in an easy chair, his head pillowed by a wadded up sweatshirt, apparently deeply engrossed in a battered trade paperback copy of *The Kite Runner*, with Daughtry's *It's Not Over* playing softly on the iPod Classic sitting on the bedside table. Ted deliberately chose not to notice the pleasant bulge of muscles beneath the tight, black wifebeater (the kind made notorious by the infamous Brian Kinney) or the other, equally pleasant bulge beneath the 501's, as the photographer nodded a quick, disinterested greeting.

Brian appeared to be asleep, and Ted took a moment to appreciate the view. Apparently, the patient was making good progress, since some of the bandages which had obscured his upper torso had been removed, and there was a patch of bare skin visible now below his clavicle and above the gauze band that still braced the lower rib cage - a patch which happened to encompass the dark nubs of nipples and the clean declivity of the breast bone between them. Bare and beautiful golden tan skin, sufficiently perfect to provide a distraction from the memory of what still lay beneath the bandages that concealed that broken, distorted face.

"Enjoying the view?"

The sardonic voice jarred him from his momentary lapse, and Ted was grateful for both the dim lighting in the room and for his own swarthy complexion which did not display the flush of embarrassment easily. "Thought you were asleep," he mumbled.

"Obviously." Brian's tone remained slightly acerbic, but there was no real malice in it.

Ted dredged up a shaky smile. "An increase in the snark level is an excellent indication that you're getting better," he observed.

Brian shifted slightly, and could not quite conceal a gasp of discomfort as he did so. As luck would
have it, a lyric from the song playing on the iPod served to underscore the moment, and Ted could not quite conceal an urge to flinch away from it.

... a part of me is dead and in the ground . . .*

And Brian, of course, heard it and recognized his employee's discomfort. "How prophetic!" he observed.

Ted was not often at a loss for words, but found that he suddenly couldn't think of a thing to say.

"Don't sweat it, Theodore," Brian said, after a beat of silence, and McClaren - still pretending complete absorption in his book - had to struggle to conceal a smile, wondering why so many of Brian's visitors failed to note the irony of the patient being the one to offer comfort to them.

"You wanted to see me?" Ted thought it best to dispense with the small talk and get down to the heart of the matter. He was certain that his tone of voice and manner conveyed nothing but a business-like attitude, but something in Brian's posture seemed to suggest otherwise.

"Sorry to interfere with your social life," replied the man who signed Ted's paycheck, his sardonic tone revealing exactly how 'sorry' he was, "but I think we need to clear the air and get a couple of things straight - business-wise."

"Okay." Ted was immediately relieved that this would be a job-related discussion. Almost as much as he was disappointed that it was not something more.

"I'm going to be away for a while, Theodore," Brian announced without preamble. "Maybe for a long while. And . . ."

"Away where?" Under ordinary circumstances, Ted would have guarded his tongue more carefully, to avoid revealing unseemly curiosity or concern. But Brian had caught him by surprise, and, incidentally, scared the shit out of him in the process. "Where are you going?"

But if he was hoping for an in-depth explanation, he was doomed to disappointment. "Just . . . away. You don't need to know where."

"But why? Why would you . . ."

"It's for my recuperation. Doctor's orders, and all that shit. But that's not why I called you here. I need you to . . ."

But Ted was shaking his head, and holding up his hands to indicate his understanding. "You needn't be concerned, Bri. I'll take care of everything while you're gone. You know I will, so you can just concentrate on . . ."

"Theodore." The voice was flat, unemotional.

"What?"

"Please stop interrupting, and listen to me. Are you listening?"

Ted knew the ritual, just as well as any of Brian's friends or associates did. "Yes. I'm listening."

Brian regarded his financial adviser solemnly. "You've been a valuable addition to Kinnetic, Theodore. And I trust that you feel that you've been adequately compensated for your efforts."

Ted nodded, understanding that they both knew that "adequately compensated" was a huge
understatement, but he remained silent, sensing that there was more to come. And that it might not all
be to his liking.

"While I'm away, I trust that you'll look after my financial interests. Safeguard my investments,
monitor the trust funds, make sure that the money flows smoothly at Kinnetic. Just as you always do.
And exercise appropriate fiscal oversight. That's what I pay you for."

Again, Ted nodded, but with growing unease, as he waited for the proverbial other shoe to drop.

"However." It was truly amazing, thought Ted, that eyes almost completely obscured by swaths of
gauze could still be so completely filled with firm resolve and determination and so easily readable -
by design. "You're not an ad man. You've filled in for me on a number of occasions, when there was
no alternative, and I appreciate your efforts. But it's not your forte. It's not what I expect from you,
and it's not what you're going to do now. You're my accountant. Cynthia, on the other hand, is both
my personal assistant and a skilled ad person as well. She knows the market; she knows my clients;
and, most important of all from my perspective, she knows me. She understands how I want things
done. So, while I'm away, you'll have full control of Kinnetic's finances, but the business will be
under her control. Understand?"

Ted could only stare at his boss, mouth gaping. Surely, he must have misunderstood. Surely . .

"Theodore? Do you understand me?"

Ted managed - finally - to draw a deep breath. "Frankly . . . no. I don't understand. You think that
Cynthia knows you better than I do? That she can . . ."

But Brian was shaking his head. "I don't just think it, Theodore. I know it. She does know me better.
And more to the point, she will do exactly what I want her to do. Even when she disagrees with me,
which she often does. She'll keep one thing in mind. It's my business. And it runs my way, or not at
all."

"And why would you . . ."

"Don't make this about you and me," Brian said quickly, "or a question about trust. Because it's not.
It's business. And she won't exactly be operating independently. She knows me well enough to
understand when she can act on my behalf, without having to consult with me, and when she can't.
And that's what's needed here."

"Oh, I see," Ted snapped, unable to suppress his resentment. "You don't want a business associate
who might have a clue about how a business should be run. All you really want is a talking head -
someone who'll be your mouthpiece and come running to you with every little question, and never
dispute the wisdom of the Mighty Kinney."

Brian was silent for a moment, simply staring at his employee and waiting for him to recognize the
folly of his outburst. The epiphany wasn't long in coming.

"Brian, I . . ." Ted fell silent, when he realized that he had no idea what to say, or how to apologize
for words spoken in haste.

"If that's how you choose to look at it," said Brian, his voice almost gentle, but with a core of pure
steel running beneath the deceptive softness, "there's nothing I can do to change your mind. I trust
you'll continue to look after my financial interests in a professional manner, and to remember that
there is a bottom line here. Whether you agree with me or not, it's still my business, and it will
continue to operate as I choose. If you can't abide by that, you'll have to decide what you want to do
about it. But whatever action you might elect to take, it won't change my decision. Are we clear?"

"Brian, I'm sorry. I didn't mean . . ."

"Are - we - clear?" The tone was hard now, without a nuance of tolerance for any kind of vacillation.

Ted huffed a deep breath. "Crystal clear. And I . . . I won't let you down. Although I do hope you'll reconsider, and tell me how to reach you. In case I . . ."

"Cynthia will know how to reach me. She'll relay anything I might need to know."

Ted hesitated, obviously debating whether to say more or simply crawl away into the night, licking his wounds and realizing that they could have been much worse. But Ted, for all his conservative nature, was not particularly good at knowing when to concede defeat.

Brian sighed, wondering - again - if this interminable day was ever going to end.

"I know . . ." Ted started, then paused, rethinking his approach. "I do understand why you feel that Cynthia is the logical person to handle the operational facets of the business. I mean, she's the one who's been with you from the very beginning, although I could point out . . ." A hard gleam rising in the depths of hazel eyes made him stumble - and rephrase. "But this is about something more than business, Brian. This is about you, and those of us who care about you. Your friends. Your family. You can't just run away, and leave us all to wonder, every day, if you're . . ."

"If I'm what?" And this time, there was no denying the sharp vein of anger that coursed through the words. "Dead? If I die, I'll make sure someone informs you guys, OK?"

"I didn't mean . . ."

"Let's get one thing straight here, Theodore. I've never run away from anything in my life. Never. If I'm going away for a while, it's because it's necessary, in order for me to complete the healing process. That's it. That's all. I don't run, and I don't hide. And I'm not about to start now."

The final words were spoken in a harsh, guttural whisper, and the look in those hazel eyes dared Ted to speak the thought that was so obviously running through his mind. Brian Kinney had never once tried to hide before, but the undeniable, if unspoken, truth was that he'd never before had anything that he wanted to hide from. Ted wasn't sure if that would still be true when all was said and done. The images from the tabloid flashed in his mind, and he flinched. And knew that Brian saw and understood.

"Now, thank you for coming," Brian continued, his voice suddenly devoid of all emotion, "but I'm sure your wifey is awaiting your return with bated breath, so run along. Oh, and by the way, you'll need to prepare a severance package for Andrew, and prepare yourself for a tearful farewell scene when he comes to pick it up."

"You're . . . you're firing Andrew? But . . ."

"I'm firing Andrew," Brian said flatly. "You have a problem with that?"

"No, but . . ."

"But?"

Ted took a deep breath. "Nothing. No problem."
"Anything else?" There was a strange, unusual note of something in Brian's tone, something that only rarely succeeded in escaping the iron restraint he usually practiced so effortlessly. It took a moment for the accountant to recognize it for what it was; the man was in pain, and was struggling to contain it.

"No, I guess that's everything." But the flicker of something in his eyes gave the lie to the easy assurance.

Brian paused for a moment, his gaze steady as he studied his employee's face. "Take good care of yourself, Theodore," he said finally, his voice suddenly very gentle. But it sharpened again in the space of a heartbeat. "And of my money. I'm sure you remember what happens if you fuck it up."

Ted nodded, startled into a small, reluctant smile, and turned to make his exit, but found that he couldn't just leave it like this, with so much unresolved. "Brian," he said softly, forcing himself to look back to meet his employer's eyes, "I hope it doesn't offend you for me to say this, but I'm praying for you. Praying that you'll come through this okay - that everything will be all right in the end."

And he found then that he was glad he'd held that stern gaze, for he spotted just the faintest gleam of warmth flicker in the depths of those expressive eyes, followed immediately by the spark of that unmistakable sardonic wit. "From your mouth to the gay God's ear," came the response, and there was definitely a smile in the tone. "Thank you, Theodore."

When the accountant was gone, Brian closed his eyes and spent a few moments trying to ignore the keen regard of the young man who was staring at him so steadily.

"What?" he snapped finally, without bothering to return the gaze.

"On second thought," came the laconic reply, "let me amend my original observation. Not only do I not want to be your best friend, I don't want to be your friend - at all."

"Excellent, since you're not likely to make the cut either way."

McClaren grinned, and turned to gaze out into the storm that was still battering at the windows. "Just so you know," he said finally, careful to allow not a scintilla of emotion to creep into his tone. "If there's someone else you'd like to insult - by way of saying good-bye, I mean - it would be easy to arrange."

Brian gave up any pretense at sleep and turned his head to study the FBI agent's deliberately expressionless face. "Meaning what - exactly?"

"Meaning that he's nearby. Just in case you want to take another crack at beating him to a bloody pulp."

"Will you please stop talking in fucking riddles and just tell me what you mean."

McClaren stood up and walked to the bed so he could look directly into Brian's face - and read whatever might register there. "I'm talking about your boytoy-wonder. Seems it doesn't matter how hard you try to send him away, he just refuses to go."

Brian sighed and closed his eyes, and told himself that he had revealed nothing of the competing emotions of anguish and anger that had erupted in his mind. "Where is he?"

The FBI agent took his time answering. "You ready for your meds?"
"Later. Where's Justin?"

McClaren glanced at his watch. "At this hour, he's probably down in the rehab rec room. That's where he spends his evenings, playing cards with some of the regulars, or watching tv. Daytime, he's up on the pediatric wards. He's been teaching the kids up there to draw, while he waits for news about you. His network is impressive, by the way. None of us can figure out exactly how he finds out, but he always knows what's going on with you, almost before we do. I'm thinking maybe I should recruit him."

"Shit!" Brian managed to work his fingers under the bandages on his face to rub his eyes. "What part of 'Fuck off' does he not understand?"

"The part that you don't mean," McClaren replied dryly.

"What the fuck do you . . ."

"Give it a rest, Mr. Kinney." It had only taken a day or two for Brian to learn to resent that smart-ass tone of voice. "He knows you too well. You're not going to convince him, unless you work a lot harder at it. And that might not be a bad idea, all things considered. But first, you have to admit what it is you really want and why you keep pushing it away."

Brian's gaze was cold and steady. "You've known me for what? A week? And you think you have any clue about what I want? You don't. You . . ."

"Save your breath, Prince Charming. The effort is wasted on me."

By this time, Brian's resentment was beginning to subside to be replaced by a growing curiosity. "Just for the sake of argument," he said slowly, "what is it you think you know about me? And how do you think you know it?"

McClaren took a moment to walk to the door and check out the perimeter. One of Lance Mathis' watchdogs was exactly where he was supposed to be, sprawled in a plastic chair in the hallway and pretending to doze.

"I'm a profiler, Brian," he said finally, as he walked back into the room. "In order to do my job, I have to be able to read people. In depth. And not just the sociopaths I'm trying to catch either. It's just as important to understand the individuals they target. You point out that I've only known you for a short time, and you're absolutely right. But I already know things about you that your life-long friends have never figured out. Not because I'm smarter, or more sensitive. But because I watch more closely, and because I'm not blinded by feelings or desires."

"And what is it that you think you've discovered?" There was no disguising the note of challenge in Brian's tone, and McClaren was mightily tempted to speak up, to show off his expertise.

So tempted that he gave in to the urge, but only for a moment. "I know," he said softly, "why you keep trying to send him away."

Brian's eyes were flecked with ice as he studied the agent's expression. "Then, by all means, enlighten me."

But McClaren had regained his composure, already regretting his momentary lapse and wondering why this cocky, arrogant bastard seemed to be able to get under his skin so easily when others - smarter, brighter, slyer, and sharper - had never managed to do so.

"Not yet," he finally replied with a diffident smile. "When the time's right, you should expect to be
blown away by my uncanny insights. But, for now, do you want to see him or not?"

"Not."

"It's not going to work, you know."

Brian closed his eyes, trying to ignore the certainty he heard in McClaren's tone of voice. "It's got to," he said finally, barely audible.

The FBI agent moved back to his easy chair to retrieve his novel. "Maybe," he said finally, "you need to rethink your strategy. Maybe you need to figure out how to keep him, instead of how to throw him away."

The silence in the room lasted for several minutes, and McClaren resumed reading, assuming that his last suggestion was going to go unacknowledged. Thus he was slightly startled when Brian did decide to speak.

"Keeping him is not an option."

The FBI agent sighed. He was almost certain that he had figured out why Kinney was so determined to sever his relationship with Justin Taylor, but knowing didn't make it any easier to ignore the man's pain - a pain, he was sure, that almost no one else was ever allowed to see.

"Meds?" he asked finally, realizing that nothing he could say was going to provide any solace for the lonely ache that Brian was enduring.

"Yes." Only a sharp inhalation, accompanied by a slight tremor that gripped his upper torso, indicated the degree of his discomfort.

A quick call to the nurses' station coincided with Gnarls Barkley, on the iPod, opining that maybe he was crazy*, and McClaren couldn't help but think the lyrics entirely appropriate to the moment.

"You want me to shut off the music?" he asked, as a young, Hispanic nurse with beautiful sable eyes came in to administer Brian's dose of painkiller. Like all of the medical staff members involved in Brian's care, she had been vetted and approved by an FBI security team. And, also like all the rest, she was somewhat enamored of their mysterious patient, and her touch was extremely gentle, eliciting a murmur of thanks.

"No. It's kinda soothing. Only, let's keep Three 6 Mafia and T-Pain to a minimum, OK?"

McClaren grinned, and made an adjustment on the iPod. After a brief silence, a new voice rose, and Brian allowed himself a sigh of satisfaction.

He drifted quickly into the arms of a blessed, drug-enhanced sleep, as Carly Simon sang about standing on a star and blazing a trail of desire through the darkening dawn.* For the moment, he found that he was perfectly willing to just let the river run.

Chris McClaren lowered the lights, and stood for a moment looking down at the shrouded face of the man whose life he was sworn to protect, remembering the photographs he'd seen, the pictures of this man in his prime, possessing a physical beauty that even the most ardent homophobe would have been hard-pressed to deny. He had heard the assurances offered by Rick Turnage, had listened to the practical observations from Matt Keller, and had considered the pragmatic statements from Nurse Beck, and he knew that they all spoke truth, as they knew it. But he also knew that Brian - in exercising his rational, no-nonsense attitude - was right; there were no guarantees, and it was, perhaps, kinder to offer no hope at all than to hand out empty promises.
Still, he reached down and touched a patch of bare skin just below Brian's shoulder and found himself smiling. No matter how much everyone insisted that Turnage could work miracles, that time would heal all wounds, and that Brian would be 'good as new', it was pretty obvious that most of them believed otherwise, that they all understood that the odds were stacked firmly against the rebirth of the Stud of Liberty Avenue.

It surprised him to realize just how vehemently he hoped that they were all wrong.

He wasn't entirely sure what holiday it was, but he knew it must be something, because Debbie only indulged her most outrageous decorating urges when she had some kind of valid cause to celebrate. Thus the diner was particularly garish on this occasion, decked out in bright, glittery foil doodads of brass and purple and crimson, in Mylar balloons and rainbow-hued baubles. It definitely wasn't Christmas, since there was not a snowflake or a reindeer to be found amid the glitter, but almost anything else was possible. Pride, maybe. Or May Day. Or Mardi Gras. Or RuPaul's fucking birthday. Something.

But it didn't really matter, because all the glitter, all the glitz, all the vinyl rainbows in the world could not obscure the Sunshine at the center of it all.

Deb was present, of course. So were Michael and Ben and Emmett and Lindsey and . . . Shit! For all he knew, Captain Astro and Galaxy Lad could have been dancing on the counter, and it wouldn't have mattered, for he saw only one face.

Justin was standing in the doorway, blue eyes huge and filled with bright glints of laughter, and the rest of the world was suddenly fading into an obscure blur as he could only sit at the table and watch as the man who had once (once???) been the center of his universe walked toward him.

The chatter of conversation continued around them, but neither was listening to anyone else's words, except maybe for a rich, dark voice in the background, as music floated on the surface of reality - Lou Rawls, he thought, as his attention was snagged - just for a moment - by lyrics that might have been written for this fragment of time.

"So meet me at the same place we fell in love before, so we can fall in love all over again."*

It wasn't the kind of music one ordinarily expected to hear at the diner, but it was so appropriate, so personal, so perfect, that he didn't think to question it. And it was obvious that Justin heard it and understood its significance too, because the glow in his eyes grew brighter as the song played on.

He was vaguely aware that plenty of voices called Justin's name, at first in joyful greeting and happy surprise and then - when he didn't respond - with a growing sense of exasperation over being ignored. But it didn't matter. Debbie and Michael and Ted and Melanie - even Jennifer and Daphne. None of them mattered, for he could tell by the look in those beautiful eyes that Justin saw only him.

They were in the middle of a crowded, bustling scene at the Liberty Diner, and they were alone in the world.

He opened his arms, and Justin was there, filling him, completing him, giving back the only real life he had ever known, and he wondered, in a fleeting moment of confusion, why he had ever let go of what he had once held in his hands - his own personal key to paradise.

Their lips met and clung, as Justin went to his knees and fitted himself into the V of Brian's legs and pressed their bodies together, chest to waist to crotch, pressing closer and harder until there was
nothing to mark where one body ended and the other began. Between one millisecond and the next, there was nothing in the world except the taste and the scent and the touch of Justin's body, Justin's essence, Justin's heat, as Brian was suddenly lost in sensation, as everything around them fell silent, as if they were suddenly at the center of a stage, surrounded by an audience who realized that they were witnessing something incredibly rare, something virtually unprecedented - the kind of deep, visceral, bottomless connection that occurred all too seldom in the bustle of life. An emotion most of them would never be privileged to experience.

Justin pulled back just enough to whisper Brian's name, just enough to brace his face against Brian's cheek and flutter his lashes against beautiful golden skin. In turn, Brian opened his mouth to speak, but was silenced by the gentle pressure of two fingers against his lips. "Don't talk," Justin whispered. "I don't want to talk. I want to suck you; I want you to fuck me."

"Here?" Brian managed to laugh around the confining fingers.

"No." Something flexed then, and there was a sensation of movement, of transition, as Lou Rawls faded to silence, to be replaced by a different voice, a different melody playing in the background, while the bright ambiance of the diner became . . . something else. "Here."

Brian smiled, as the scene shift was completed, and it was his loft - moonlit, pristine, warm and cozy in contrast to a frozen world beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows, and the words of the song seemed once again to be a perfect accompaniment for the setting.

". . .tell me again how you'll still be there when the heartache ends."*

Justin stood silhouetted - nude and perfect - against the window, the moonlight painting him with a silver patina and rendering his hair a cap of spun gold.

Brian, equally bare, stood watching him, mostly cloaked in shadow but aware, nonetheless, that he made a beautiful subject for the artist's eye.

"Are you doing this?" he asked, a vague hand gesture indicating the shifting of setting, the musical backdrop . . . the magic.

"No. You are."

"Are you really here?" Brian moved closer, barely daring to breathe lest he destroy whatever illusion this might be.

"I've always been here."

"No. You . . ."

Even in the semi-darkness, the smile was almost blinding. "Come to bed."

Brian leaned forward, reaching, wondering if it could possibly be this easy, only to find . . .

. . . that it was. Justin lay beneath him now, stretched out against the expanse of midnight silk sheets, his fingers playing with a brand new nipple ring, braided and beaded in three colors of gold. "You should never have let me go," he was whispering, his pupils so distended that there was only a thin rim of sapphire surrounding the black circles.

"What?" Brian's response was sharp and rough. "Should I have chained you to the wall?"

The brilliant smile appeared again. "I was thinking . . . to the bed."
Brian leaned forward, closing his lips over the ringed nipple and used his teeth to tug lightly, just enough to elicit a soft gasp for breath, and he smiled as he felt the lithe, supple body writhe beneath him as arms closed around his neck. Then hands fisted in his hair and sought to push him downward, to where a large, impressive erection was throbbing against his belly.

"Please!" It was barely audible, more breath than whisper.

"Please what?"

The fist closed tighter, and jerked him up so he could look directly into glazed, heat-seeking blue eyes.

"I want you in me. Now!"

"But you beg so sweetly," he replied with a soft snicker. "Makes me so hot."

Justin's smile was different from his customary brilliant grin. It was, just slightly, smug. "You do realize that - in this circumstance - you can fuck me bareback."

Brian frowned. "Sunshine, you know . . ."

"Think of it, Brian." The whisper was like liquid heat against his skin. "No barriers. Nothing but you inside me. Your big, beautiful dick, buried inside my ass, with nothing to separate us. Touching me, like you've never touched me before."

"Justin . . ."

"Please. Please, Brian. Take me, like you've never taken anybody. Touch me, like you've never touched anybody. Claim me."

"I won't put you at risk."

The smile flashed again. "The only risk - here - is that you could let me go again, and we'd never have this. This - this is what we're meant to be. Don't you understand that yet?"

"Justin . . ."

But there was suddenly no more fight left in him, no more resistance as he felt that tight, hot body surge against him and draw him in. There was no transition, no time for second thoughts. One moment he was poised at that quivering opening, and the next he was inside - balls-deep and gasping at the sensation of molten heat completely engulfing him. He could not think, could not pull away, could not speak. He could only thrust, and thrust harder, and feel himself slip deeper, until there was nothing left to mark where he ended and Justin began. Until they were finally, totally one body. One being.

Blackness claimed him then, drew him in and wrapped him in an ecstasy so profound, so intense that his mind could no longer grasp it. He sank, and felt his body entwined with another, joined indelibly, falling together. Falling into darkness, falling into . . .

. . . pale light. Something flickering, hard-edged, sharp. Something moving against his back - hot but surrounded by bitter cold. "Your turn." The whisper was harsher than it should have been, and held something beyond need, beyond desire.

Something . . . wasn't right. There should be downy softness beneath his body, and silken skin against his back, and the fingers that traced down his spine should have been gentle, stirring his
Voices rose, music flared.

. . . how's it going to be, when you don't love me any more . . .*

"Justin?"

"What?" Flat, hard, and not where it was supposed to be.

"Why are you . . ." Hands, gripping him from behind, hard and brutal and holding him still for . . . pain - vast, sharp, piercing through him like a blade, up through his body like a line of fire, ending deep within his chest and exploding outward, racing through every muscle and along every nerve ending like a river of molten lava.

Gasping for breath and struggling to free himself from the iron grip that bound him, he opened his eyes and knew where he was. And knew what was waiting for him; he had, after all, been here before, only this time . . .

Justin was standing there in front of him, hands braced against iron bars on either side of Brian's shoulders, and the look on his face . . .

Brian stared, and felt something vital, something irreplaceable, fracture and explode deep inside him, generating a physical and emotional agony that reduced the terrible pain that was blasting through his body to a trivial thing of no consequence. He felt the thick rod of flesh pounding into him, felt himself rip and tear and bleed, and still couldn't find it in his heart to care much, for the pain radiating from the core of his being was the only thing that mattered - a raging inferno that reduced everything else to ashes. For what he read in Justin's eyes was pure malice, and a towering, limitless, bottomless thirst for vengeance.

He turned his head and saw that the man behind him - the man who was plowing into his body with what felt like a battering ram - had a face that changed from one moment to the next. It was Ben; then it was Vic; then it was Rodney. Then it was the monolithic cretin who had tied him to these bars and tortured him with whips and knives and chains in the first place. Then, the faces shifted again - each uglier and more diseased than the one before. But, in the end, it didn't really matter, for they were all the same. They were all laughing, but none laughed louder than the young man who still stood looking straight into his eyes, the tears clinging to blond lashes expressing mirth rather than sorrow.

They were waiting for him to scream, to beg. But he wouldn't. Mostly, he wouldn't be able to speak at all, but he did manage to dredge up one word.

"Why?"

"So you get what you deserve." That face, so beloved, so cherished, was suddenly twisted into an ugly caricature of itself, filled with rage as it leaned closer. "And I get what I wanted - to fix it so you can never forget. So you understand what you lost, what you can never have again."

The sunshine smile was painful to behold. "What? Did you really think I was always going to come running back to you? Did you really think you were worth it?"

Brian closed his eyes, and, strangely, heard music again, something soft and melodic, working its way underneath the blood and the terror to touch a dark place deep inside him, something he could finally understand, and grasp. So he opened his eyes to watch as Justin turned and walked away, as the song swelled and filled his heart.
cause I need you more than I needed before, and now where I'll find comfort God knows, 'cause you left me just when I needed you most."*

He collapsed then, felt himself go limp and realized that he no longer cared what happened here, no longer cared about anything, as his only reason for caring was gone. Until a guttural, coarse voice muttered in his ear, and he realized that his assumption that nothing could hurt worse than what he'd already endured had been tragically, horribly wrong.

"He thinks he's safe," laughed the voice. "He's wrong. In the end, he's going to wind up facing the very same thing... That'll be his legacy - from you."

And just like that, he discovered the existence of a pain so deep, so integral to the person he was, that it defied imagining. It was then that he understood that all he really wanted, all that mattered now, was for it to be over. Everything he had done, everything he had tried to do, had mattered not at all; he had still managed to destroy the only thing he'd ever loved.

But he knew one thing for sure, knew that Justin was wrong in his assumption. Brian had always known that the day would come when the man who had claimed his heart would turn and walk away for the last time, would go and never return.

He had always understood that he was not worth the risk.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

The cry was like something out of a nightmare - primal and raw and filled with such a dark intensity that it literally chilled the blood, and Chris McClaren was on his feet and leaping forward before he even realized that he was awake, as the last notes of Randy Vanwarmer's biggest hit faded to silence.

He didn't think, didn't observe, didn't even try to understand. He simply wrapped his arms around the man who had bolted upright in his bed, and held on, knowing that there was nothing more he could do.

He had been waiting for this - had understood that it must come sooner or later. Only, he had begun to fear that it never would.

Kinney was a special case, unique among all the victims he'd ever encountered - a victim who was determined not to be victimized, perpetually cool and composed.

Only he was neither cool nor composed now as he thrashed in McClaren's arms, struggling to free himself, to rid himself of the fragments of nightmare that still clung to him like chains, binding him tight within the bloodbath in his own mind.

"Let me go, let me go, let me go..." Each repetition was slightly louder than the one before, as Brian began to fight in earnest, to try to push himself upright and away from arms that restrained him; arms he did not recognize.

"Shit!" muttered McClaren, knowing that he dared not release the man who was in the grip of a panic which would not allow him to recall that he could not stand alone, that he would pay a huge price if he tried to climb out of his bed.

"Let me go, let me go..."

"Brian! Stop it. You're going to bust your stitches. At the very least. Be..."

"Let me go." Then a beat of silence, before the voice continued, rising now and strident with fear. "I
have to find him. I have to tell him. Please, let me go."

He went silent then, but his body was still rigid, his muscles tensed and waiting for the right moment.

"Please let me go."

This time it was only a whisper, and there was no doubt that it was a plea, rather than a command.

"Sorry, Friend," said McClaren, knowing better than to relax his grip. "I can't do that. You're just . . ."

"But they're going to kill him. I can't . . ."

McClaren huffed his frustration. "Fuck it, Man. You're the one who nearly died. You're the one . . ."

Brian remained stiff and unyielding for a few seconds longer; then he seemed to fold in upon himself, and he let himself slump forward, coming to rest against the FBI agent's shoulder.

"Why?" he whispered. "Why did they . . ."

McClaren closed his eyes, looking for the right words and the right tone in which to speak them.

"Because it's a shitty world, Friend. Because there are people who can only justify their existence by trying to destroy those that are different. Because they only feel whole when they can tear someone else to pieces."

He lifted one hand to thread gentle fingers through Brian's hair. "Because they couldn't live with your beauty and your courage."

And, at that moment, Chris McClaren was granted the privilege of seeing something that only two people had been allowed to see in more than twenty years - Brian Kinney, weeping; something that his parents and his sister had not witnessed since he had grown old enough to go to school, something that most of the people who knew him at all would have denied as impossible. He did not sob, did not moan, did not wail. He just cried, exactly as he had when he was a very small boy - silently, hoping no one would notice. And, mostly, no one ever had. The FBI agent, sensing the rare quality of the moment, did not try to offer words of comfort. He simply held the lithe body against him, and rubbed soft, easy circles on Brian's back.

"Was Justin, was he . . . there?"

"What?" McClaren jerked back and tried to look into Brian's eyes, but that proved impossible, as they remained tightly closed. "Why would you think that? Of course, he . . ."

"But he will be. You need to . . ."

"What? What do I need . . ."

Very softly. "You need . . ." The explosion of motion and the burst of energy almost succeeded in throwing the FBI agent off the bed and gaining Brian the freedom he was trying to achieve, as the whisper became a near bellow. "You need to let me go. I need to find him."

"Son of a bitch!" snapped McClaren. "For a fag, you're a strong little fucker. Now stop that, before you do some real damage. Goddamn it!" He renewed his grip on the patient, struggling to subdue him, and raised his voice as he realized - belatedly - that he was going to have to call for help. "Shit! Somebody get in here and . . ."
The body that came racing through the door was only a blur in the dimness of the room, but McClaren was beyond caring which of the hospital staff or the security men might have answered his summons, as he was painfully aware that he was very close to losing control of both the situation and the man in the bed.

"Shit!" he muttered, as his chin came into direct contact with the upswing of Brian's elbow. "Just . . . fuck . . . grab his arm before he takes my fucking head off! What the . . ."

"Stop!"

Later, McClaren would spend a lot of time trying to analyze why he had reacted to that single, barked command by freezing in place and turning to stare at the new arrival. But then, he would recall the remarkable reaction by the other participant in their little fracas, and he'd conclude that he might have some small inkling of what had really happened.

Then he'd reconsider, and revert to thinking that he didn't really have a clue.

Nevertheless, the effect was instantaneous.

McClaren watched in stunned silence as a slender, blonde figure climbed up onto the bed, and settled against Brian's chest, arms lifting so that hands could thread through the dark locks which were not covered by swaths of bandage.

As for Brian, he took one deep, shaky breath, lifted a hand to cup the face of his new defender, and then immediately fell back against his pillow, slipping once more into an easy, tranquil sleep. As part of the same motion, the blond settled himself within Brian's arms, positioning himself so that the top of his head was tucked neatly under the chin of his former lover.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" McClaren demanded, although he was careful to keep his voice down, in the hope of avoiding more fireworks.

Justin adjusted himself so that his body was cradled against Brian's chest. "He has nightmares," he replied, by way of an explanation that didn't really explain anything.

The FBI agent almost snorted. "Of course, he does."

"What?" Justin retorted. "You haven't noticed?" His face was suddenly very pale, almost haunted. "He never talks about them, but he has them."

"You're not supposed to be in here," McClaren observed flatly.

Justin nodded. "I'll go. When he's settled down." His voice was very soft now, barely above a whisper. "I used to think that they started when I got bashed, but now . . . now I think they go deeper than that. I think he remembers things, things he's never told anyone. Not even me."

McClaren stepped up then, close enough to look down at Brian's face, close enough to lean forward and check his breathing and his pulse. "So," he murmured, "human after all, then?"

Justin laughed. "If you hadn't already figured that out, you're not as smart as you look, and not nearly smart enough to have any claim on . . ."

"On him?" McClaren allowed a tiny trace of annoyance to creep into his voice, and then was more than a little surprised to realize that it was genuine.

"Yeah. On him."
The FBI agent settled back into his chair and watched as Justin clasped Brian's arm to his chest.
"What were you doing hanging out in the hallway? Stalking?"

"You could say that."

"He doesn't want you here."

Justin hesitated, debating how to respond. Then he smiled. "Yeah. That's why he's sleeping like a baby, with me wrapped up in his arms." The smile faded. "You should know," he said slowly, "I'm not going to just give up and let you have him."

McClaren was equally careful in choosing his words. "Even if he loves me? Even if I turn out to be the one who can make him happy, make him forget the nightmares?"

The smile returned. "I've thought about that - a lot - in the last few days. But the bottom line is that you'll have to prove it to me."

"And if I do?"

Justin shifted around so he could stare at Brian's face, and reached up to smooth a lock of hair off his brow. "If you can really make him happy - happier than I can - then I'll walk away."

He sat up slowly, carefully easing his way out of Brian's embrace. Then he paused to look down at McClaren, and the smile was back. "But he's the only one who can make me believe it. Otherwise, you should just fuck off."

"Justin." McClaren's voice shifted into a lower pitch, and he was annoyed to note that there was a vein of uncertainty within it. "He's going to have a rough time for a while. He has to confront some things that he's never had to deal with before, things that you and the rest of his posse haven't even considered."

"Like what?" Flat, sharp, impatient, but filled with fear nonetheless.

McClaren sighed. "I know about what happened to you. At your prom, and . . ."

"He told you about that?" And there was no way of ignoring the depth of the pain contained in that simple question.

"Not exactly." The FBI agent knew that he should have just confirmed it, that it would have served to widen the gap that was forming between the former lovers, which would be exactly what Brian purported to want. But somehow, he just couldn't bring himself to do it. "But what happened to him - it's different. What that fucker did to you was an act of passion. It wasn't planned; it wasn't the result of a scheme to take your life away from you. It might have killed you, but it wasn't designed to punish, to inflict pain and suffering."

"Oh, sure," Justin snapped, voice dripping venom. "It was just a lovetap. Right?"

McClaren shook his head. "This . . ." he said, with a gesture that took in the condition of Brian's body, "this was a deliberate attempt to destroy the man he is, to punish him for being different, to strike such fear into him that he'll never be the same again. You don't know what it's like to realize that people can hate you that much, just because you're not like them. To be treated like you're some kind of sub-human monster. They tortured him, Justin. Everything they did - it was done to inflict horrible pain, to make him suffer. To make him regret everything in his life. To make him afraid and make sure that he could never regain his courage. It was payback, because he dared to face the world and refuse to hide himself away. That's . . . he's going to have to learn to live with that. It won't be
easy, and it won't be quick. He's going to need time to figure it out."

Justin had risen by this time, and moved to stare out into the storm-lashed night. "And you know all this, how exactly?"

The FBI agent was almost startled into an ill-advised smile. The kid might look like Meg Ryan in drag, but he was no ditzy blonde. "Let's just say I've seen it before. For someone like Brian, someone who's always believed that he was in control of his life, it's going to be doubly hard, but until he learns to deal with it, there's no way he's going to heal from this, and no way he's going to be able to walk back out into the world and not see monsters on every corner. Every time someone looks at him, he's going to wonder who they are, and why they're staring at him. Every hand that reaches for him, every body that brushes against him . . . he's going to have to learn to accept the fact that there's never any way to be sure of how the people around you feel, and what they think - that safety is an illusion. That he's not invincible. He never was."

Justin closed his eyes, suddenly swept up in drifts of memory: Brian, as he'd been on the night they met - bare and beautiful and standing with his arms open, waiting for Justin to decide if he was coming - or going; Brian, as he'd stood waiting on a sidewalk, Gibraltar in a tide of uncaring humanity, there to give Justin a chance to spread his wings when he'd forgotten how to fly; Brian, risking everything, watching as his possessions were hauled away, facing bankruptcy and unemployment, but still managing to smile; Brian, standing alone and confronting the specter of cancer, determined to survive - or not - without relying on anyone's helping hand; Brian, struggling to make it across the finish line of the Liberty Ride, battered and weary - but unbowed; Brian, standing tall in the rubble of Babylon, filthy and bloodied and scared out of his mind, but radiant nevertheless.

But - finally - Brian, bludgeoned and bruised by life, but ultimately unbroken.

He smiled then, and McClaren felt a moment of intense jealousy, realizing that there was something here that he could not see, something that Justin knew that might very possibly never be known to anyone else.

"Yes. He is."

"Justin . . ."

"Your job," continued the blonde without missing a beat, "is to get him to remember it."

It was McClaren's turn to smile. "My job? So you're . . . what? Conceding defeat?"

"In your dreams," Justin retorted. "It's just . . ." His voice softened as he turned once more to gaze down at Brian's face, resting now in easy slumber. "Somebody's got to help him. If he won't let it be me, then you'll have to do." He looked up them and favored McClaren with a lopsided grin. "You're not quite the troll I thought you were."

The FBI agent could not quite swallow a quick burst of laughter. "You're too kind," he managed to retort.

"Just don't hurt him." There wasn't a trace of humor in that whispered comment that was as much entreaty as command.

"That's your area of expertise. Not mine." It was spoken so quickly that McClaren didn't even have time to regret the impulse before it fell into the air between them.

Justin's eyes were suddenly huge, and they both felt the surge of bright, vivid anger that flashed
through him, that was almost powerful enough to compel him to spit out the denial that trembled on
his lips.
Almost - but not quite. Justin had become extremely skilled in the twin arts of self deception and
denial over the years, but he did not deal in lies.
The moment seemed to stretch out and surround them in heavy silence.
Until . . .
Bob Marley began to sing about Red, Red Wine, and they both relaxed into easy smiles, as Brian
shifted in his bed, his breathing suddenly uneven.
"Got any Miles Davis on that thing?" asked Justin. "Or Coltrane?"
McClaren smiled. "My mother's family hails from Memphis. So what do you think?"
Justin nodded. "OK, then. A little lesson from freshman Kinney 101. When he's really tired or really
troubled or just can't sleep, blues goes a long way to soothe the savage beast."
"I'll keep that in mind." A quick adjustment on the iPod found Monk's classic Straight No Chaser,
and Brian settled once more into even breathing.
"Can I . . ." McClaren stood, and found it hard to speak what was in his thoughts. "Any messages?"
he asked finally.
"No." Huge blue eyes were now filled with shadow, and the soft glint of tears unshed. "He won't
even remember that I was here. Will he?"
"Unlikely. The drugs he's on - they're pretty powerful."
Justin nodded and turned to walk away. Then he paused, and spoke without looking back.
"Whatever choice he ultimately makes, will you . . . could you make sure that he knows, when all is
said and done, that I loved him. More than my life. More than I'll ever love anything else. And that I
always will. Even if he never . . . " Then he drew a deep breath before completing the thought.
"Even if." There was, finally, nothing more to say.
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1It's Not Over --- (Chris Daughtry) - Gregg Watenberg, Christ Daughtry, Mark Wilkerson, Ace
Young
2 Crazy --- (Gnarls Barkley) - Brian Burton, Thomas Callaway, Gian Franco Reverberi, Gian Piero
Reverberi
3 Let the River Run --- Carly Simon
4 Let's Fall in Love Again --- Lou Rawls
5 When the Heartache Ends --- Rob Thomas
6 How's It Going to Be - (Third Eye Blind) - Stephen Jenkins, Kevin Cadogen
7 Just When I Needed You Most --- Randy Vanwarmer
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Chapter 24

Waking was different these days.

He remembered a time - either fairly recently or ages ago, he couldn't really say which - when he had adored the sensation of waking at his leisure, cocooned in his cozy nest and luxuriating in the fact that he could choose whether or not to greet the day with energy and enthusiasm or simply slip back under the covers and drowse for as long as he liked. But, regardless of the method chosen, he had always made the transition from sleep to waking almost instantaneously, if not always enthusiastically.

That was no longer true. The process had changed.

Waking now was like stepping through a series of veils, each slightly less opaque than the one before it, ranging in color from a deep obsidian cobalt to the palest Alice blue.

Blue, of course. What else would it be? And would he ever again catch a glimpse of any variation of that color without comparing it to the only blue he ever truly wished to see again?

Shit!

It was harder to awaken now, even though he much preferred being awake these days, since the texture and the quality and the intensity of his dreams had changed so drastically.

Not that he hadn't had dreams before. He had always had dreams, but, until recently, he had been much more skilled at pushing them away and locking them into airless little vaults deep inside him, places which he would never choose to visit and from which those dark and twisted images could never escape.

Now, the vaults, it seemed, were full - almost bursting at the seams. Too full to contain the nightmares as efficiently as they once had.

Sometimes now, during the transition to waking, those images managed to wriggle free from their containment and follow him toward awareness.

. . . a pale spark of firelight, illuminating messy hair and a distinctive profile, barely glimpsed . . . and a voice that felt familiar, but not quite right . . .

Brian Kinney had never lived in fear. Not even at the worst moments of his life. Never . . . until . . .

. . . blood, bright as a fucking neon sign, pooling on dirty, cold cement, painting Rorschach inkblots on skin as pale as fresh cream, on a body limp and unresisting, cold and unresponsive under his hands, without a single nuance of breath or heartbeat to indicate that it was anything more than a lifeless mannequin.

Something in him had died that night, there in that dark, empty parking tower.

Something that had erupted out of his heart before falling, crushed and lifeless, into those dark vaults deep in his core; something he hoped never to see again.

He had learned what real fear was on that fatal evening, and it had taken up residence inside him, in
the place vacated by . . . whatever it was that he had lost.

He had never quite succeeded in ridding himself of its toxic effects. It was still - and always would be - indelibly bound to his worst nightmare.

Still, the dreams that had assailed him lately, if not quite as unbearable as the piece de resistance of his collection, were proving difficult to manage. Like the one he'd endured just hours earlier. He did not remember details - a circumstance for which he was profoundly grateful - but he did retain bits and pieces of images. Enough, at least, to allow him to realize that something . . . something was different in this one; that he had seen something, or experienced something, or realized something that he had not confronted before.

Something that he was absolutely certain he did not want to know.

". . . most important lesson of your life . . ."

And then . . . something else that he not only wanted to know, but wanted to hold close to him . . . but couldn't.

He was shaken by a deep tremor, before deciding that it was better to waken than to linger on the fringe of sleep and risk epiphany.

When he opened his eyes, he found himself to be the object of scrutiny by three pairs of eyes, each conveying a different message - impatience, concern, and, in the case of Chris McClaren, something he could not quite identify.

The first and closest of them - as blue as any he'd ever seen (Goddamn blue . . . again!) - were staring at him with unveiled irritation, completely disinterested in whether or not he was ready or willing to awaken. Nurse Beck had informed him, during one of their remarkably frank little chats, that Rick Turnage would never win an award for his bedside manner. And she was dead right.

"Beauty sleep's over, Kinney," he said without preamble. "We need to get started."

Brian glanced toward the window, where the sky was still filled with storm clouds and rainwater still ran in rivulets down the glass. "If you'll check with my social secretary," he drawled, with a glance toward McClaren, "I'm sure you can schedule an appointment that isn't in the middle of the fucking night."

"It's after eight," said Turnage, sounding confused.

"Exactly." Brian closed his eyes, ignoring the grin on Matt Keller's face.

"Come on, Brian," said his primary physician. "Just answer a couple of questions, and you can go back to sleep. Until they bring your breakfast, that is - which should be in about five minutes."

"What is this?" Brian demanded. "A hospital or a torture chamber?"

Keller's smile was suddenly tender. "Now is that any way to talk to the man who just returned from a special excursion to Starbucks?"

One hazel eye opened, revealing a glimmer of interest. "Starbucks?"

It was a bit of a surprise to everyone in the room how quickly the patient was able to push himself to a sitting position and make a creditable grab for the tall cup the physician was holding.
"Ahh, not so fast," said Keller, just eluding the groping hand. "Questions first, latte later."

"Coffee first," retorted Brian, "or go find your own fucking answers."

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" snapped Turnage. "Give 'im . . ."

Chris McClaren shook his head and stepped forward, taking the Starbucks cup from Keller and then seating himself on the side of the bed to allow Brian easy access to the magic elixir.

"All right," said Turnage, after waiting just long enough to allow for a couple of swallows. "Provided you're sufficiently caffeinated now, maybe we can proceed. What I need, in order to finalize arrangements for your treatment, is photographs. Professional quality close-ups, if possible. From as many angles as possible. Do you have anything like that?"

Brian sipped again, and nodded. "Talk to Cynthia. There should be plenty in the files."

Turnage blinked. "You have professional photographs of yourself, in your business files?"

"It's an advertising agency, Doc," Brian replied, tongue firmly in cheek. "Image is everything."

"And besides," laughed Matt Keller, "he's Brian Kinney. Reigning king of Liberty Avenue, immortalized in song, story, and glossies in every gay magazine, newspaper, and nelly-bottom hope chest in the greater Pittsburgh area. One word, and you'll have more photos than you'll know what to do with."

Turnage, however, was no longer listening. He was focused instead on his Pocket Palm, busily entering notes and calling up data.

Brian lay back and turned once more to stare out the window, wondering briefly if the sun would put in an appearance today - or ever again. He was tired of the cold, tired of the grayness, and hungry for . . .

. . . warm, firm hands, ghosting over his skin as strong arms moved to wrap around him, and soft, familiar lips touched his throat, as a voice murmured against him. "He has nightmares . . ."

"Brian!" Chris McClaren was leaning over him, immediately aware that he had lost himself somehow, between one moment and the next.

"Someone . . . was here." It was just a whisper, barely audible.

McClaren stared down at him, before drawing a deep breath. He did not believe in lying to the individuals under his protection, and he would not start now. But he was tempted, for he was pretty sure he knew where this was leading. If he was correct, Brian was just taking the first steps on a very long, very difficult journey, and, uncharacteristically, he wished there was some way to spare the man the ordeal. But there wasn't. If he was ever going to be able to move beyond what he'd been forced to endure, he had to face what still lay ahead of him.

"Yes. Someone was."

Brian's eyes were suddenly filled with a bleak loneliness that was painful to witness. But it was a shadow that was gone almost before it could be seen, to be replaced by steady resolve. "Why?"

"You . . . had a rough night."

"Are you in pain?" Keller was standing close by, green eyes very bright in the morning dimness.
Brian huffed an impatient little sigh. "That brings up an almost irresistible urge to point out what bears do . . . in the woods."

Keller grinned. "I'll take that as a yes. However, Lt. Horvath called a few minutes ago and asked that we hold off on your joy juice for a bit. He needs to talk to you."

"But maybe," Brian pointed out - very reasonably, he thought - "I don't need to talk to him."

McClaren felt - and quickly suppressed - a surge of sympathy. He had realized, almost immediately, that Kinney was not and never would be one of those individuals who found catharsis or healing in the simple act of talking things out, but some things simply could not be overcome by avoidance. "No choice, Bud," he observed. "You probably don't remember it very well, but your first interview wasn't particularly productive. Just be grateful that he waited this long."

Brian shifted then, trying to find a comfortable position, and McClaren adjusted the bed controls accordingly, raising the head of the bed as Keller eased the patient up to allow him to reposition pillows and blankets, one arm bracing his longtime friend against his chest like a cherished infant.

"Fuck!" Brian snarled. "Would you please stop treating me like a fucking invalid!"

"Sorry, sweet cheeks," the physician replied easily, "but, for now, that's what you are. So . . ."

Both Keller and McClaren went silent, noticing a quick look of surprise in Brian's eyes as he moved to adjust his morning erection, some tiny little nuance of satisfaction in his expression indicating that he was delighted to find it just as firm and demanding as it had always been; then he felt something crinkle against his skin, something tucked into the strip of bandage that rode low on his torso.

"What is that?" asked Keller, as Brian extracted a folded piece of paper from its place against the softness of his belly.

McClaren smiled, remembering pale hands stroking and caressing a bare chest and the bandages that obscured parts of it, and pushing beneath blankets to touch whatever could be touched, as a slender body nestled against Brian's sleeping form. "Looks like someone . . . left a calling card."

"Well?" Keller, fully aware of his friend's hunger for privacy, carefully avoided letting his eyes drop to the crumpled slip of paper as Brian unfolded it and stared at it in silence, but he never took his eyes off Brian's face. Thus he saw, as McClaren did, the quick flicker of something in the depths of those hazel eyes - something there and gone within the space of a heartbeat.

"Nothing," Brian replied after the faintest hesitation. "It's nothing."

But when McClaren reached for the paper, Brian shook his head. "It's . . . private," he finally managed, tucking the note beneath his pillow and resolving any doubt that might have remained in the FBI agent's mind, about who had left the rumpled message.

"Fortuitously, from Brian's point of view, a disturbance at the door announced the arrival of a radiology tech with a wheel chair, precluding further conversation. "Mr. Kinney?" Brian managed - barely - not to wince away from the bright, cheerful greeting as a smiling middle-aged woman bustled into the room. "They're ready for you in x-ray."

Brian grimaced and glared at Matt Keller. "Not again. By the time I get out of here, I'm going to glow in the dark."

"Hey," replied Keller, raising his hands in quick denial. "This time, it's not me."
"That's true," said Turnage, still making entries on his PDA. "I ordered this set. I need to get a fresh perspective on how your healing is progressing, so we can determine when we can get you out of here."

The patient glowered. "I'd be doing handstands - and juggling - if I could just make myself believe that I won't be jumping out of the frying pan straight into the fires of hell."

Turnage blinked, but didn't argue. In fact, he shrugged. "How much is that face worth to you?"

Brian's gaze was remarkably steady. "Almost as much," he said flatly, "as it's worth to you."

The plastic surgeon watched in silence as the patient was transferred into the wheelchair and wheeled out into the hallway where two individuals waited to escort him down to the x-ray department - one uniformed police officer and one rather nondescript young man who would maintain a discreet distance from the subject of his surveillance, but would watch everyone and everything around him and be ready to act accordingly.

"Smart-ass!" It was barely a whisper, and Rick Turnage might not have even realized he'd spoken aloud, if Matt Keller hadn't snickered in response.

Brian's old friend regarded the plastic surgeon with a smug smile. "Trust me when I tell you," he said with an unmistakable air of satisfaction, "he's only just begun to confound you. I'm pretty sure that he's going to be your Starry Night but, by the time he's done with you, you'll be lucky if all you lose is an ear."

Chris McClaren allowed himself a small grin as the two physicians exited the room, still snarking at each other.

Then he did what he knew he must, although he wasn't particularly proud of himself for it.

Brian Kinney was a much more private man than most of his acquaintances would have believed, and McClaren respected that facet of the man's personality. But right now, under these circumstances, secrets were a luxury that Brian could not afford and his protector could not allow.

With a sigh, he pulled the slip of paper from the place where Brian had saved it, and read the lines scrawled upon it.

Then he wished he hadn't, as there was nothing there that anyone needed to know. It contained only the pain and hope of one heart, reaching out to touch another. But it was, of course, entirely too late to let it go unread - untouched - unsullied by the horrors of this serial tragedy.

I'll claim you
In the youth
Of some new existence,
Before there have been
Other promises
And old fears.

I'll look in fields
Where yellow flowers grow,
Remembering how you loved them so,
And on some hill
Where the wind blows free,
And sets the flowers dancing,
I'll hear you
Call my name,
And I will turn and you'll be there,
And I'll hold you again.*

McClaren spent a moment staring out into the gloomy morning before he carefully returned the folded, crumpled paper to its hiding place, handling it with the reverence it deserved.

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At this point, he thought, he had progressed beyond pitiful, all the way down to pathetic, which, of course, reminded him instantly of how that particular word sounded when employed as a condescending insult by one Brian Kinney.

But it was undeniable, nevertheless. When you'd sunk to the level where hospital cafeteria coffee had become acceptable - even passable - you had lost all sense of taste or propriety. Even though he'd never been a big coffee drinker - not nearly at the level, for example, of Brian Kinney, caffeine junkie - he was intimately familiar with the good stuff, as any Kinney associate would have to be.

But this - he stared down into his stained and discolored mug - this was something that one might use to peel paint from the walls, in a pinch. And yet, he drank it without complaint. In exactly the same way that he chewed on a bagel with the consistency of wet cardboard.

He could have called for aid, of course. His mother, Debbie, Cynthia, Daphne, Emmett - any or all of them would have come to his rescue, hauling in coffee and sustenance from Dunkin' Donuts or Starbucks or IHOP - or the Liberty Diner. All he had to do was ask. But somehow, he didn't, because he couldn't. And he hadn't a clue why not.

He could not explain it, but he felt compelled - more and more with every passing hour - to handle the situation without accepting help from anyone; it seemed somehow as if the real world around him was withdrawing inch by inch, falling away into a featureless blur.

Brian Kinney, rubbing off on him? Maybe. He didn't know. He only knew that he had to do this his way.

He spread a little cream cheese on his bagel, hoping to render it slightly less bland and more palatable, and thumbed through the slim book that lay on the table before him.

During this entire nightmare, he hadn't been able to find much for which to be grateful, beyond the obvious fact that Brian had survived his ordeal, after a fashion. But there had been one pleasant consequence. Much to his surprise - and almost against his will - he had made a new friend; someone who would never have been so much as a stray blip on his radar before he had come to this place and found his life caught up in tangled skeins of improbability. Which, he supposed as he took another sip of his coffee, served to prove that life did not progress by any definable logic.

Cedric Lasseigne had been sitting in the lounge area of the Rehab unit the first time Justin had walked into the area, looking for . . . in truth, he had no idea what he'd been looking for. Distraction, maybe? A cause to champion? A way to feel as if he could contribute something worthwhile? Or, perhaps, just a means to help him pass the time between one Brian sighting and the next. He still didn't know. But he was, nevertheless, grateful that he had made that particular choice, for it had provided an unexpected dividend.

There were a number of small tables scattered around the perimeter of the lounge area, and a number of different kinds of games in progress when Justin had wandered in. Dominos, checkers, several
varieties of card games, even one Scrabble match, each drawing its own group of onlookers and hecklers. Patients, visitors, and staff members, all clotted together in pairs or trios or groups, interacting, chatting, sometimes squabbling.

Except for one person, seated alone at a small table near a corner window. The man was not particularly remarkable, except for the fact that he was the only person in the room who was not a part of a group and he had a thatch of silver white hair that was so bright it almost seemed to glow and so thick that it was literally standing on end. On the table before him, a chess board sat ready for use, complete with pieces, but he was not playing. Instead, his face was literally buried in a book, with several more stacked beside him on the corner of the table.

Justin was never quite sure what had drawn him toward the solitary figure, especially since his initial impulse had been to seek companionship elsewhere as the old man seemed a likely victim of Alzheimer's or some equally disturbing form of dementia. Yet, somehow, for reasons he would never fully comprehend, he found himself standing behind the man, reading the book titles over his shoulder.

"Hey," he said, recognizing an old, worn copy of *Huckleberry Finn*, "I've read that one."

Without missing a beat or raising his eyes, the elderly man replied, "Or course, you have."

Justin hesitated. "How do you know which one I'm talking about?"

"Have you read them all?" the voice - rough and heavily accented, but cultured nonetheless - retorted.

"No," Justin admitted, ducking his head to discern the other titles and finding none of them familiar.

Abruptly, the man closed his book and raised bloodshot gray eyes to meet Justin's gaze. "Veneration of Mark Twain is one of the roots of our current intellectual stalemate."

Justin blinked. "Huh?"

"Actually," replied the elderly man, "I was reciting it from memory. I'm afraid Mr. Toole was not terribly fond of dear old Clemens."

Interested in spite of a little voice in his head that was screaming that he should be running away as fast as he could, Justin took a seat across from the man, and regarded him steadily, noting pale skin, mottled with age spots and veined with a fine network of wrinkles, skin that was so thin it was almost translucent, and noble features that hinted of a strong bone structure beneath the ravages wrought by time. "I thought everyone loved Mark Twain."

"Mostly," said the man. "But Toole was nothing if not a contrarian. He found the greatest pleasure in exposing the clay feet of other people's sacred cows."

Justin opened his mouth to remark on the dangers of mixed metaphors, but closed it again as he realized that the comment, as stated, made a certain kind of twisted, sardonic sense, and, being a big fan of twisted humor, a la a certain Liberty Avenue stud, he decided to pursue a different verbal
The man closed his book and laid it on the table, pushing it forward so Justin could read the title, barely legible on the worn and faded cover. "A Confederacy of Dunces, by John Kennedy Toole," he read.

"Let me guess," said the older man. "You've never heard of it."

Justin shook his head. "Sorry."

The man shrugged. "It's your loss, Son. Not mine."

"It's that good?"

The man's smile was bittersweet. "I'm an old drunk who hails from New Orleans - traits that some sanctimonious individuals would probably describe as redundant," he replied, "and this book is . . . well, it contains the heart and soul of the life in my beloved city. It won the Pulitzer Prize in 1981, and the man who wrote it had been dead then - by his own hand - for more than ten years, never knowing that he had created a masterpiece. I always thought that was just wrong. If a man can create such an incredible work of art, shouldn't he know it? Shouldn't someone have recognized it while he still lived? And, if they had, might he have made different choices?"

Justin, for a moment, was caught up in thoughts of his own art and how it would feel if it should remain forever locked away from the individuals for whom he had painted it, if . . . someone should never see it. "Yes," he said softly. "Someone should."

"My name is Cedric Lasseigne," said the older man, holding out a gnarled hand to shake, "and I shouldn't presume to judge the book for you. You ask me if it's that good, and all I can honestly say is that it is, to me. You'd have to decide for yourself."

Justin grinned. "Isn't that what teachers are supposed to do? Tell people what they should and shouldn't like?"

Lasseigne's eyes skittered away from Justin's scrutiny. "I wouldn't know.

"I'm Justin," said the young artist. "Justin Taylor."

"And are you a reader, young Justin Taylor?"

Justin was surprised to feel a warm flush stain his cheeks. "Not so much," he admitted. "I've been busy."

Lasseigne smiled. "Yes, of course. The world is a busy place. But I repeat, it's your loss."

Justin gestured toward the chess set. "You play?"

One eyebrow - silver to match the hair - climbed toward the hairline. "No. I just like to sit here so I'll look like one of the intellectual snobs who do."

Justin's flush deepened. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to sound . . ."

"Condescending? Arrogant? Patronizing?"

"All of the above," the blond conceded.
Lasseigne laughed, and, despite the hoarseness that betrayed a lifelong addiction to nicotine, the sound was rich and full and pleasant. "I'm a southerner, Young Taylor. Not an imbecile. And as hard as it might be for a product of Pennsylvania Social Register breeding to understand, the two are not necessarily synonymous."

Justin grinned. "Faulkner was a southerner. And Caldwell, and Tennessee Williams and Thomas Wolfe. And Harper Lee."

The southerner's eyes softened a bit, as he looked at Justin - really looked at him - for the first time. "And you've read them all, no doubt."

"No." The flush was back and heating up. "But I've read some of them."

Lasseigne grinned. "Let me guess. American Lit 101."

"Well, yeah. Mostly. But I have seen A Streetcar Named Desire, like a dozen times, and I actually read To Kill a Mockingbird, just because a friend . . . just because I found it lying on a friend's bedside table."

The flush grew even deeper as he recalled the first time he'd come across the book, as he'd knocked it to the floor in a mad, desperate scramble for condoms and lube.

There was no way, of course, for Lasseigne to discern the reason for his embarrassment, but a glint in the man's eyes suggested that he might be seeing more than he should. "A very good friend, no doubt."

"Yeah. He . . . is." And he could not quite avoid the flinch that touched him as he realized he'd almost spoken in the past tense.

Lasseigne regarded him in silence for a moment or two, and, once again, Justin had a strange feeling that the man was looking straight through him, and seeing things he should not have been able to see. "So," he said finally, "are you open to new experiences, young Justin? Would you care to explore more of the work of southern writers?"

Justin shrugged. "Sure. Only . . . no Faulkner, OK? I don't need any help in finding things to be depressed about."

Lasseigne smiled, and Justin found that he was beginning to bask in the warmth of the old man's hard-won approval. "In that case," said Lasseigne, as he extracted a slender volume from the stack before him, "we'll start with baby steps. Which, with poetry, is sometimes a very good thing. Just give this one a try."

Justin accepted the small book, noting that it was just as worn as the others in the stack, and that the faded gilt of the title was barely legible. When he prepared to open it, the old man reached out and stopped him. "Just . . . let it open, at random," he suggested. "With poetry, it either grabs you, or it
doesn't, and logical progression is not part of the process."

Justin managed - barely - not to roll his eyes, thinking to himself that his first impression might have been right after all; the man was certainly old enough to be experiencing bouts of dementia.

Then he opened the book and scanned the lines printed there.

And understood exactly what the old man had been trying to tell him, as he read about a star that had thrown its fire against the heavens and grown cold and died long before the poet was born, and he felt his breath catch as certain lines seemed to reach for him, to touch him with gentle fingers and explore the limits of his heart.

Lasseigne had simply smiled, and when they'd parted company later that day, after a hard-fought chess game and discussions over subjects ranging from the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina to Broadway's reception of Jersey Boys to the merits of Creole cooking as opposed to Tuscan cuisine, Justin had walked away with the book of poetry tucked under his arm, a gift from a friend he had not expected to make.

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Somehow, the sweet, short verses had become his mantra, his means of coping with the tiny victories and defeats of each day, and today would be no exception. He heard them constantly now - in the percussive rhythm of rain against the windows, in the cadence of footsteps hurrying down the hallway, in the babble of voices in the waiting rooms, and the rise and fall of traffic in the streets; they had become the background music of his life.

He sat and played with the handle of his coffee cup, and flipped the book open. By this time, it was as if it had been trained to open to the right page, and the words touched him again, as they always did.

It does not matter.
For it is the light
I follow,
Not the star.
It is the beauty,
Not the source.*

He could not explain exactly why it meant so much, or why it translated as it did in his thoughts. He only knew that it was Brian's face he saw as he read it, and Brian's voice he heard reciting it in his mind.

He closed the book and tucked it safely into the backpack beside him - safe and protected and waiting for the right moment, when it could be offered as a gift, the perfect means for conveying the perfect message, undoubtedly inspiring the recipient to respond with a perfectly beautiful, characteristic smirk.

Sometimes he thought he couldn't stand to wait another minute; sometimes he thought he would wait forever, if that's what it took.

"Well, well, well." The voice was sharp and hard as a blade. "The prodigal returns."

Justin didn't need to look up to identify the speaker, so he didn't. He found it much easier to contemplate the dark sludge in his cup than the malice he knew he would see in night dark eyes.
"Hello, Ethan. I thought you were off serenading the crowned heads of Europe, or something."

"I was." The violinist dropped into the chair opposite Justin's, and clasped his hands in front of him. "But one grows weary of all the glitz after a while, and longs for the simple life."

Justin grinned, unable to contain the urge. "You could always go back to peddling your art on street corners. That's pretty simple."

He looked up then, just in time to surprise a fleeting look of outrage in those dark eyes before it was quickly suppressed. One quick sweeping glance revealed that Ethan's life had been good, of late, if the well padded body was an accurate indicator. He wasn't actually fat - probably never would be, given his frenetic metabolism - but he had definitely not been going hungry. Of course, even if he'd still been rail thin, the beautifully tailored Hugo Boss jacket would have proclaimed his success resoundingly. Justin wondered if the violinist had chosen the style and designer out of some subconscious urge to try to one-up a certain stylish ad exec. He allowed himself a little smile as he realized that, if that had been the goal Ethan set for himself, he had failed miserably, as nobody wore Boss quite as spectacularly as Brian Kinney.

"That's something I don't miss in the least," said the fiddler. "My days of scrambling for pennies are long gone."

Justin nodded. "So I hear. Your tour was a success then?"

"As if you didn't know," retorted Ethan. "I'm sure you followed my progress. Madrid was wonderful, but Berlin . . . ahh, Berlin was a particular triumph."

"I'm sure it was," Justin replied. "Your grandfather would have been proud."

"Yeah. He would. So . . . what about you? Rumor has it that you were the toast of the New York art world. Until you threw it all away to come running back to Pittsburgh, to resume your post as boytoy to the mighty Kinney. But wait; he's not so mighty any more. Is he?"

Justin closed his eyes and swallowed the resentment that was threatening to choke him, knowing that an outraged response was exactly what Ethan was hoping to provoke. So, instead of venting his anger, he managed a cold smile. "What is it - exactly - that you want here, Ethan? I'm sure you have more important things to do."

"Not really. I guess it's petty of me, but I couldn't quite resist the urge to find out how it feels. What it's like to have deserted the person who should have been your soul-mate, the love of your life, to go running back to a beautiful face and body that's nothing more than a memory now. Tell me, can you even stand to look at him now?"

Justin finished the last of his coffee, and gathered his trash before rising to depart. He had meant to go without saying anything, but he found, ultimately, that he wasn't quite noble enough or forgiving enough to manage that. So he chose to express himself instead, speaking very softly. "First of all, Ian . . ." He surprised himself with a quick, brilliant smile "you were never my soul-mate, nor the love of my life. You were just a convenient fuck who managed to convince himself that he was so superior to everyone else - so prodigiously gifted - that he was above the constraints of such elementary things as common decency and honesty. And second of all, if you think that Brian's beauty has anything to do with his face or his form, then you're even more stupid and superficial than I thought you were when I left you." He turned away then, but paused before making good his escape to look back once more. "And thirdly, if you're very, very lucky, you might find out one day that setting the world on fire - music or art or whatever world it might be - means nothing if your heart is empty while you do it."
The violinist started to rise, the anger in his eyes fading abruptly to be replaced by something shifting and indistinct. "Justin, wait. I wanted . . ."

"Oh, and by the way," Justin interrupted. "I forgot to thank you. I'm not sure how you found out so quickly, unless you were keeping tabs on us while you were out conquering the music world, which would seem a little pathetic to me, but - hey, what would I know about life in the musical stratosphere - but if you hadn't been kind enough to send me that tabloid photo, I couldn't have gotten here so quickly."

The violinist's anger returned in full force. "You're making a fool of yourself. Word on the street is that he doesn't even want you here. So how long are you going to hang around, like some pathetic little lap dog, waiting for him to fuck you over again?"

Justin's eyes were suddenly very soft and unfocused. "As long as it takes, for I can't think of anything I would rather do than get fucked - over or otherwise - by Brian Kinney."

Anger fading again, giving away this time to desperation, and there was no disguising it. "No. Justin, please. I've never been able to let go of . . . us. Brian's gone, and, with him out of the picture, you and I can have it all. A perfect beautiful life. I can give you everything you ever wanted, everything he was never willing to give you."

Abruptly, Justin was no longer angry; instead, he felt only pity. "Ethan, there is no us, and whatever I might want, you can't give me, because it's Brian that I want. He's everything to me. And he will never - never - be gone, because he lives . . ." His smile was achingly gentle as he touched his fingers to his chest, "right here."

"No, Justin," Ethan cried, "You can't just walk away. You can't . . ."

"Ethan, I love Brian; I always did. I just let myself get distracted by you and your romantic bullshit because I was young and stupid and I didn't understand what I really wanted. Now, I'm sorry. I don't mean to hurt you. But you and I were just . . . a mistake. That's all."

"He turned you against me," snarled the fiddler. "That's all he ever wanted."

"No, he didn't," Justin answered gently. "You managed that all by yourself."

He sighed then, as he saw the cold, hard brilliance flare to life once more in Ethan's eyes and knew that there would never be forgiveness in the musician's heart; he would forever see Brian as the enemy, the man who had stabbed him in the back and stolen what should have been his. He would never understand that Justin had never belonged to him in the first place, that Justin had always belonged to Brian.

The cold, bitter stare was unnerving and served to suggest that Ethan would bear watching.

Justin turned and walked away, wondering idly just how many enemies Brian had managed to make for himself in the course of his lifetime.

And the answer, he thought, was frighteningly simple. Too many.

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"Here! Wrap up in this."

Brian turned toward the speaker just in time to snag a woven blanket out of the air, to prevent it from dropping over his head. "What the fuck?"
"Wouldn't want you to get cold," replied Chris McClaren, as he took his place behind Brian's wheelchair, dismissing the radiantly adolescent volunteer who had been instructed to escort the patient back to his room. The girl, blonde and pretty in a delicate, porcelain-doll way, looked as if she might want to argue, pale gray eyes regarding her charge with more than a trace of interest as she recalled the laughter they'd shared about Carrie Underwood's methods for dealing with a cheating boyfriend in her hit song that was just barely audible on the girl's iPod. In the end, however, she settled instead for blushing in response to Brian's murmured word of thanks and the slow smile that bandages could not quite obscure, prompting the FBI agent to note her dreamy-eyed stare and realize that Kinney's charm was not only a lot deeper than he'd originally realized, but was also virtually without conscious volition. It was as natural and effortless as breathing, and he wondered how many nights the girl would spend fantasizing about something that was not even remotely possible, although there was no way for her to know that. Unless she was a tabloid reader, of course.

Brian adjusted the waistband of the silk pajamas that Cynthia had run out to buy for him on the occasion of his awakening from his coma - Brian Kinney, after all, would not be caught dead, or comatose, in a dowdy hospital gown - and pulled the collar of his cashmere robe more tightly around his torso as he raised a cryptic eyebrow toward his FBI protector. "Unless you're planning an Arctic expedition, I think I'm dressed appropriately."

"Not to mention elegantly," replied McClaren, speculating on whether or not the cinnamon-colored robe might have cost more than one of the suits he usually wore to the office when he was not in undercover mode. (It had.) He then stepped forward to spread the blanket across Brian's lap, before returning to his position behind the wheelchair. "No Arctic explorations," he explained, digging in his pocket to extract a bright rectangular box. "Just thought you might be up for a little foray into Marlboro country."

Brian grinned. "'You keep this up and you might even turn out to be remotely fuckable."

"You wish," McClaren laughed, and then deliberately looked away so he would not see the quick smile that just touched the sensual lips barely visible beneath snowy bandages.

"So," Brian said softly as he was propelled toward a sliding glass door that opened onto a covered terrace, "what's this going to cost me?"

McClaren shrugged. "I figured it'd be easier to face your third degree if you can feed your nicotine addiction at the same time."

Brian grinned. "And you need a cigarette every bit as much as I do."

The FBI agent knew there was no point in denying it. "That too. You're a terrible influence."

"It's my calling in life," Brian replied, taking a deep breath as they emerged from the building. It was silly, of course, to entertain the notion that a single inhalation of decidedly damp, undoubtedly polluted city air could cleanse the lungs of all the toxic residue of a hospital environment . . . but he couldn't ignore the fact that it felt ridiculously therapeutic. Of course, with his next breath, he would take in a whole new set of toxins, the kind with which he'd been poisoning himself since he was fourteen years old.

"God bless Phillip Morris," he exclaimed as he felt the familiar burn fill his lungs, and the first hint of the buzz that a renewed acquaintance with nicotine would provide.

"You know," McClaren said slowly, after lighting his own Marlboro, "you could treat this as an opportunity to break a really bad habit."
"Said the pot to the kettle," Brian pointed out with a grin. "But you're missing the point. My addictions are the things that see me through the bad times, so why mess with success?"

"You do know that smoking causes wrinkles, don't you?" Only after he'd spoken did McClaren recognize the horrible irony of what he'd said, as he realized that he was grateful for the bandages that still obscured most of Brian's face, making it unnecessary for him to read the grimace of pain he was certain his remark had caused.

"Not a problem any more," Brian replied, very softly, head back and eyes half-closed. "Besides, excuse me while I enjoy the first rush I've had in weeks, so kindly keep your observations to yourself."

"I'm sorry, Kinney. That was a thoroughly stupid, thoroughly brainless thing to say."

"True though." The response was flatly spoken, unemotional. "And that's the one thing that I appreciate more than any other." He opened his eyes then, and regarded his protector steadily. "So do us both a favor, and don't start second-guessing what you say to me. I don't need empty reassurances or pious platitudes or subtle evasions. You speak your mind, and I'll speak mine, and we'll get along just fine. And if you're occasionally insensitive, I promise not to go all Lana Turner on you. I'm a lot less fragile than you apparently think I am."

McClaren was startled into a broad grin. "On, no, Stud. Whatever else I might think of you, I know you're not fragile. In fact, you're probably one of the toughest motherfuckers I've ever come across. So let's make a deal, shall we? Because of the circumstances, we both have to go through this charade. Play the game, so to speak. But between the two of us, truth. Just truth. Okay?"

"Truth," replied Brian, with a droll smirk, "or nothing at all."

McClaren laughed. "You always leave yourself an escape hatch, don't you?"

"Be grateful for what you got," Brian chuckled. "Now shut up and enjoy your vice, unless, of course, you think you could score something a little higher on the scale of intoxicants."

"I'm an FBI agent," McClaren retorted, as he blew out a series of smoke rings.

"Which means your sources are top of the line."

The agent snickered. "Yeah. They are."

"I'm going to pretend," said Detective Carl Horvath as he stepped through the doorway, "that I didn't hear that."

"But I'm not." Emmett's eyes were bright with laughter as he came forward and wrapped Brian up in a hug that was almost strong enough to make the patient flinch away from the grip. Almost.

"Welcome back to the real world, Baby," Emmett breathed as he dropped a kiss on the dark thatch of Brian's hair.

Despite the fact that he rather enjoyed Emmett's gentle touch, Brian looked up at him with wary eyes. "What are you doing here?" he asked, none too patiently.

The third member of the newly arrived group moved forward then, reaching out to just touch Brian's arm in a gesture that was half greeting, half comfort offered. "You brought him into this," said Lance Mathis, "by putting him in charge of Babylon. He's here because he needs to be kept in the loop, so he can take appropriate measures to protect your business, your patrons, and your friends."
Brian did not exactly roll his eyes, but he came very close. "Okay," he said finally, turning his head to look up at his chief interrogator, "let's get this over with. What exactly do you want?"

Carl moved around to take a seat on weathered wooden bench at the outer corner of the covered terrace, checking all around to make sure they would not be overheard by any eager eavesdropper. "I want," he said firmly, "to know anything you might have remembered since our last discussion."

Brian was silent for a moment as he watched how the group sorted itself for participation in this little contretémp. Horvath faced him squarely - of course - but both Emmett and Mathis chose to take places to his right, relatively close to him, as if to spring to his defense if necessary. Most interestingly of all, however, Chris McClaren remained standing at his back, his arms braced against the top of the wheelchair, with his hands only inches away from Brian's shoulders. For a brief moment, Brian actually turned to look up at him, as if to question what exactly he thought he was doing. But in the end, he chose to say nothing, feeling just slightly comforted by the warmth at his back, until he realized that it was inappropriate to take comfort from such an ambiguous detail, and decided, instead, to give in to his annoyance.

Thus, when he decided to answer Horvath's question, his tone was decidedly antagonistic. "What makes you think I've remembered anything more? I told you what I had to tell you."

Horvath remained placid and unperturbed. "I'm asking," he said quietly, "because this is not my first rodeo, Mr. Kinney." The form of address was deliberate, and Brian recognized it as such. This was not his best friend's pseudo-stepfather speaking to him, nor the soul mate of the woman who was - sometimes - his alternative mother. This was a well-trained, highly skilled detective with the Pittsburgh PD, and Brian understood that he needed to remember that. "I've dealt with this kind of assault before, and while there are instances when the memories are never recovered, that usually happens with people who . . ." He paused for a moment, and Brian noted the soft trace of sympathy that flared in the man's eyes. "People who are too frail or too frightened - or maybe just too young - to be able to deal with them." Then he smiled. "Granted, you're a lot of things, Friend, but frail or frightened just doesn't apply."

"You forgot young," Brian pointed out - deadpan.

Horvath grinned.

Brian took a moment to consider his response and take another deep drag from his cigarette. Then he nodded. "Okay. Yeah, I've remembered a little bit more. But it's all just bits and pieces. I can't make sense of it, can't quite connect the dots. Yet."

Horvath nodded and took a deep breath. "My better half suggested that I take cover before making this suggestion to you, and I'm pretty sure she's right. I should probably be wearing body armor."

"How is Debbie?" Brian asked quickly, wanting to know and, at the same time, dreading it.

"Concerned. Upset."

"Pissed off at me?" Though it was worded as a question, it was pretty obvious that Brian already knew the answer.

"You hurt him pretty badly, Brian. But then you already know that. Don't you?"

Brian chose not to answer.

Horvath's smile was weary. "You don't have to say anything. I already know."
It was Emmett that turned to stare at the detective then, green eyes alight with speculation. "Do you? Have you really figured it out? That's surprising, Carl. Some of us have been stumbling around in the dark for years, and still aren't sure we see the whole truth."

The detective glanced at Brian, noting the growing disquiet in dark, stormy eyes. "That's because some of you - most of you - are so caught up in how you feel about certain things, that you can't be objective. I don't have that problem."

Chris McClaren tried not to laugh, but was not entirely successful, so that he was forced to try to disguise his chortle as a wheezing cough. He thought he was moderately successful, except of course for the one person he most wanted to fool. Brian's eyes glinted ice cold as he turned and looked up at his FBI protector.

"So what 'suggestion' do you require protection for?" demanded Brian, once McClaren had been glared into silence.

"I realize," Horvath replied slowly, "that it's a matter of some pride to you that you've managed to handle almost everything in your life, without requiring any assistance from anyone. I even realize that you're probably infuriated that you have to allow people to look out for you now, and try to keep you safe from further harm. But that's just the way it has to be, and you're going to have to learn to live with it, for as long as it takes. But . . . you're never going to be able to get past this, to put your life back together and regain your ability to face whatever the world throws at you, until you let somebody help you."

"Such as?" The tone and the words were clipped and frozen and as rough as dirty ice.

Chris McClaren took a deep breath. "He's right, Brian. You can't do this alone."

"I've been doing it 'alone' my whole life." Brian's voice was very low, very steady.

"I know that." It was, somehow, suddenly as if only the two of them - protector and protected - were alone in the world as McClaren leaned forward to drape his arms around Brian's shoulders and speak directly into his ear, while the rest of the group suddenly seemed to take a metaphorical step back, to focus on fresh spates of rain blowing off the roof or the spiral of smoke from Brian's cigarette or the pattern of cracks in the concrete floor. Indeed, on anything but the two principles of the scene. "But you've never had to come back from something like this. Never."

"I'm a fag," Brian sneered, twisting to look up into brilliant blue eyes, and struggling to pull free of the arms that restrained him. "A queer. A cocksucker - and I've been hated for it my whole life. You think I'm going to let these . . . these fuckers break me? You think . . ."

McClaren held on, not tight enough to inflict pain or damage, but tight enough to prevent Brian from twisting free. "Yeah, I know. You've been hated, like every homosexual has been hated. But, until now, no one was ever bold enough to try to make you pay for it. No one ever hated enough to torture you, to try to destroy you. To make it personal, about you. And that kind of hatred - it's not something that you can choose to tolerate or understand. And it's not something you can just shrug off. You need help."

Brian pushed then, pushed hard in an attempt to free himself, but he had still not regained all his strength, and McClaren was a young man in his prime and well trained in the physical arts. "Stop it!" he snapped. "I'm not going to let you go. And I'm not going to let anybody hurt you - ever again."

But if he'd expected Brian to give in easily, he'd been very much mistaken. "I am not some pathetic little weakling who needs your protection." Brian was almost snarling and managed, finally, to push
McClaren moved quickly to a position at Brian's feet and stared up at him, his eyes clear and filled with resolve. "Nobody is ever going to mistake you for a weakling, Brian. But all of us need help sometimes. Even you."

"And you?" Brian retorted. "If this is True Confessions, let's hear about your needs."

McClaren grinned. "OK. I'll show you mine if you'll show me yours. Only . . . can we delay the soul-baring for later? Right now, we need to concentrate on trying to catch the motherfuckers who did this to you. And, in order to do that, you're going to have to face your memories. All your memories."

Brian huffed an impatient sigh. "Look, I don't know anything. I haven't remembered anything new except for a few bits and pieces."

McClaren nodded. "But you will, because it's all there inside you. You just need a little help to grab it."

Brian looked up then and found himself the object of scrutiny of the entire group. "Fuck therapy!" he snapped. "I'm not talking to any shrink."

"Hey," said McClaren quickly. "There are shrinks, and then, there are shrinks. And I'm not talking about therapy. Not any kind that you'd recognize anyway. You just need to talk to the right person."

"What the fuck are you babbling about?" Brian's patience was obviously at an end.

"I'll tell you later."

Brian rolled his eyes. "Why don't you do something useful then, and give me another cigarette?"

McClaren hesitated for a moment, studying the shadows moving in hazel eyes, before nodding and pulling two fresh cigarettes out of the pack, somewhat surprised to realize that he and Kinney had reached a point where they were able to communicate without the actual need for words.

"What about your leads?" he asked Horvath as he returned to his place behind the wheelchair. "The pawn shop? The watch?"

Carl smiled. "Well, there's good news and not so good news. You'll be glad to know that we got your watch back, Kinney."

"Okay."

"Okay? That's all you have to say?"

"What did you expect me to say?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Lance Mathis. "Maybe, thanks for getting my $30,000.00 watch back."

"Fuck the watch! Did you get the guys who hocked it?"

"Bloodthirsty little shit, aren't you?" McClaren muttered.

Horvath struggled to suppress a smile, surprised to discover that he was enjoying the repartee between the two young men. "Actually, that's one reason I wanted to talk to you. I have some photos for you to look at, to see if you recognize anyone."
Brian sighed. "I'll take a look, but I don't know if it'll do any good. I didn't get a good look at all their faces, although I got to know their fists fairly up close and personal."

Horvath nodded, glad to see that the infamous Kinney sarcasm was still working at peak efficiency. "You needn't worry. We have plenty of forensic evidence to connect these punks to the crime, even if you can't identify them. They're going down for this. No doubt about that, but the problem is that these two were just hired muscle. It doesn't look as if they had any direct contact with the masterminds behind the whole thing, although it's still possible that they know more than they're saying. One thing's for sure though. They're scared shitless, which would seem to indicate that they know enough to figure that keeping their mouths shut is their safest bet."

"So they're a dead end?" Brian said slowly.

"Not necessarily," answered Lance Mathis. "They're in custody, and the cops are still working on them. Plus there's the fact that they were part of the mob that almost killed you, Brian, and it doesn't really matter why they did it. Whether or not they provide any more information, they're going to get what's coming to them."

Brian nodded. "Let me see the photos."

Horvath stood and extracted a sheaf of documents from a briefcase and handed them to Brian, who hesitated before accepting them. "And by the way," said the detective, "we do have some promising leads - things that have nothing to do with these two thugs. This investigation is far from over."

Brian sighed, and regarded the detective with a skeptical gaze. He did not actually state that he was very good at recognizing bullshit when he heard it, but it was in his eyes.

Then he looked down at the documents he held in his hand, scanning from one face to the next. Twelve individuals, two photos each. Mug shots, he supposed, since the shots featured full face and profile. Most of them were unfamiliar. Until he glanced at the first face on the bottom row of the second sheet.

Sharp, aquiline features, deep-set dark eyes, a nose that had been broken sometime in the not-too-distant past, and a spider tattoo just below the ear, a tattoo he had seen before, although he had not remembered it until this moment. Brian closed his eyes, and heard the echo of a voice as it snarled in his mind. "Somebody give me a knife and . . ."

"This one," he said, speaking clearly and refusing to allow any trace of a tremor in his voice. "I think I broke his nose."

"Excellent," answered Horvath, not even trying to hide the note of approval in his voice. "Anyone else?"

Brian shook his head. "Sorry. That's the only one I recognize."

A sudden gust of wind drove a spate of raindrops into the covered area, and Brian shivered, prompting McClaren to pull the wheelchair further back under shelter, allowing them all to pretend that the reaction had been due to the chill in the air, rather than the memories dredged up by the photograph. "Turning nasty out here," said the FBI agent. "Let's get you back inside."

But fate was not quite finished with young Mr. Kinney yet. As he was turned toward the building, a slender figure came through the door, so intent on lighting the cigarette dangling from perfectly molded lips that he did not see who was coming toward him until they were almost face to face or, more literally, knee to knee.
Everyone froze, as no one could figure out what to say to ease the awkwardness.

No one except Brian Kinney, who would probably have been just as speechless as everyone else if he'd only stopped to consider, but he didn't.

"You smoke too much," he said softly, going very still as he drank in the sight of the young blond who had frozen in place when he'd realized who was looking up at him. Huge blue eyes seemed even bluer than usual as they reflected the flame of the match he was still holding.

Justin did not bother to try to suppress the grin that touched his face. He could see nothing of Brian's expression, and there was no opportunity to evaluate body language as his former lover was completely swathed in clothing, bandages, and blankets, except for one tantalizing patch of bare skin just visible within the collar of the robe. But there was, nevertheless, no mistaking that sardonic wit, biting but contained perfectly within four precise words.

"I enjoy my addictions," Justin answered.

At that instant, the flame flared against his fingers and he dropped the match. "Shit!"

Brian chuckled, knowing he shouldn't but unable to restrain himself. "The obvious thing to say would include a reference to 'playing with fire', but I don't think I'll say it."

"Right. No one could ever accuse Brian Kinney of being obvious. You . . . all right?" Justin took a deep breath, unwilling to let the moment go.

"Yeah. You?"

The grin flashed again. "Better now."

Another pause - roughly nine months pregnant. "You shouldn't be here."

Justin shrugged. "Yes, I should."

Brian stiffened, already regretting his unguarded moment. "No, you . . ."

Leaning forward abruptly, Justin reached out and stroked his hand over that small patch of skin, ignoring Brian's slight recoil. "Save your breath," he whispered. "I'm not leaving."

Brian looked away quickly, but not quite quickly enough to prevent Justin from spotting the swift stirring of shadows in the depths of those incredible hazel eyes.

He wanted to speak out, wanted to fall to his knees and beg Brian to put an end to this charade and open his arms and heart to allow Justin to return to the place where he belonged - the place at Brian's side. But he was too slow and too uncertain and too afraid to risk inciting Brian's anger, so he said nothing, watching in silence as Brian left him there, alone against the backdrop of the growing storm with Ethan's taunts still echoing in his mind.

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"Your photographer is very good," said Rick Turnage as he inspected the array of photographs spread out over the polished fruitwood surface of Cynthia's desk.

She nodded. "Only the best for Kinnetic . . . and the model's not bad either."

The surgeon nodded his agreement. "He said that all this is just part of his business. Is that true?"
Cynthia's smile was of the Cheshire cat variety. "True enough," she explained. "But if you're asking if there's an element of narcissism in having that face immortalized in a series of Kodak moments . . ." She shrugged. "He's Brian Kinney, a man with his fair share of flaws, but false modesty isn't one of them."

"Well, in this case," Turnage replied slowly, as he selected three of the shots and tucked them carefully into his briefcase, "it's a stroke of luck that we have them. Reconstructing a face is always easier when there's a perfect image of what one is trying to achieve."

Cynthia sat back in her custom leather executive chair and regarded him with a pensive expression. "Can you really do that?" she asked finally. "Can you really restore him?"

"If I can't," the surgeon answered absently, once more caught up in studying one of the photos before him, "no one can."

Cynthia laughed. "You and he should get along just fine, provided you don't kill each other along the way."

"He could have been a model," Turnage observed.

"He was," she replied, opening a file drawer in the credenza behind her desk and extracting a slender folder. When she opened it and laid it before him, he saw a glossy magazine ad featuring a buff, beautiful young body on a surfboard, acres of golden skin gleaming under brilliant sunlight. It was not a close-up shot so the face was not distinct, but the figure was, nevertheless, unmistakable.

"The Freemont-Briggs people offered him a fabulous contract. Wanted to make him the poster boy for their BareBronze suntan oil. That one ad increased their sales by almost thirty percent."

"But he turned them down," he said quietly, not really asking.

She smiled. "And I'll bet you know why."

"Because the one in front of the camera is not the one calling the shots."

"Precisely. And I think Brian always knew he was meant for bigger things, from his perspective anyway. He was in college at the time, so he definitely enjoyed the money they paid him, but it was never more than a means to an end."

Turnage looked up then, his eyes taking in the elegance of the setting, and the woman at its center. "Can you handle all this? While he's gone, I mean."

She leaned back and regarded him coolly. "It's a lot to manage," she admitted, "but he seems to think I can. I've spent many years trusting his judgment, so it's a little late to start doubting him now. How long do you think he'll be gone?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

He took a deep breath. "On how successful my efforts are, how quickly he heals, and . . ."

"And?"

"On . . . when he considers himself ready to face the world again."

She smiled. "You almost said 'if', instead of when. Didn't you?"
Turnage frowned, obviously annoyed. "Do you second guess him too?"

"Every day," she laughed. "It irritates him too, but it allows us to work together almost seamlessly."

"He's asking a lot of you," he observed. "I hope you're well compensated for your efforts."

She paused for a moment before answering, and something in her tone suggested that he had struck a particular nerve. "In ways you could never imagine," she answered finally. "So, in Kinney vernacular, don't fuck this up, Doctor. Granted he has his share of enemies, but you'd be amazed by how many friends he has and how much he matters to them."

"Are you . . . threatening me?" he asked, amused by her temerity, almost in spite of himself.

"Of course not." Her tone said otherwise. "Just making sure you understand that this is a high stakes game you're getting into."

He took a deep breath, and told himself that he wasn't really intimidated by this blonde vixen and her not-so-veiled warnings. Nor was he going to allow himself to be distracted by subliminal stirrings.

"When are you leaving?" she asked, suddenly a bit uncomfortable under the scrutiny of eyes that seemed to grow bluer by the moment.

"Tomorrow, I think. Provided all the lab tests and x-rays show what I expect to find."

"And all the arrangements have been made? Living arrangements, nursing care and PT, serving staff? Everything?"

"My assistant is very efficient," he answered sharply. "I don't leave things to chance."

"And security?" There was no trace of softness or tolerance in her voice now. This was strictly business.

"That I'll leave to the FBI," he retorted. "It's not my area of expertise."

"Maybe not," she agreed, "but you might just make sure that your assistant - and your people, in general - understand the need for discretion here. I don't have first hand experience in such things either, but I trust the judgment of those who do, and the consensus of opinion seems to be that the people behind all this might not be content to just let it be."

"You really are trying to scare me, aren't you? I'm taking him away from the scene of the crime. He'll be 600 miles from here, and from anybody who might want to hurt him. Isn't that enough?"

She shook her head. "Is it? Money has very long arms, Doctor Turnage. I just want to make sure you know the score. You need to be aware of . . . ."

"The only thing I need to be aware of," he interrupted, "is my patient's medical condition and what I can do to fix it. The rest is not my concern."

To his surprise, she laughed. "You really are a single-minded bastard, aren't you?"

The physician smiled, and reached out to tap the photo of Brian Kinney that was closest to him - a profile shot in which the man was looking down at something, eyes obscured by a thick sweep of dark lashes. "I have a feeling that you have a particular fondness for single-minded bastards," he retorted, tongue tucked firmly in cheek.

Cynthia stared. Single-minded bastard or not, the surgeon was a spectacular treat for the eyes and the
senses, and she was dismayed to note the heat of a flush touch her face. She quickly busied herself with gathering up the photos and returning them to the files.

"You know," said Turnage, a speculative gleam rising in his eyes, "it would be helpful to me - in deciding how to proceed with treatment - if I knew more about him. Habits, lifestyle, health history - that sort of thing. Maybe we could have dinner? To continue our . . . discussion."

Cynthia compressed her lips to suppress a smile. "I'm sure you already have his medical records. Isn't that sufficient?"

"Not really," he replied quickly. "The more I know about him, the better my chance to give him what he wants."

"Maybe you should talk to his friends. They might be able . . ."

"Maybe," he interrupted. "But somehow I doubt it. I think you know him, better than almost anybody."

She hesitated for a moment, lost in a memory of a slender blond teen-ager who had, somehow, always known Brian better than anybody else ever would - even when they'd only just met. "Maybe," she conceded finally. "Almost."

"Very well then." Turnage's smile had turned slightly smug. "Dinner?"

"Sorry," said a new voice from the doorway. "Wouldn't want to interrupt anything . . . important."

Lance Mathis' tone was flat, unemotional, but something in his dark eyes suggested a certain degree of satisfaction.

"Of course you wouldn't," replied Turnage, watching carefully to see if there was any unspoken emotional current between Brian Kinney's administrative assistant and his chief of security, but there was nothing to see. Or nothing, at least, that either was willing to display.

"You and I," continued Mathis, meeting Turnage's gaze, "need to have a discussion. About the arrangements you've made for Brian."

"The FBI is fully aware . . ."

Mathis' smile formed quickly, but it did not reach his eyes. "If the FBI screws up and something happens to Brian, they have to answer to Washington and their superiors. On the other hand, if I screw up and let him get hurt - again - you don't even want to know how many people I have to answer to, some of whom will have my balls on a barbeque pit before you can whisper the first of the many 'Mea culpas' you'll be saying before they - and I - are done with you. So, you let the FBI do their thing, while you provide the information I need to help me do mine. Understood?"

Turnage was outraged. Nobody had ever talked to him like that, and he wasn't about to stand for it. "Fuck off!" he snarled. "Who do you think you are?"

"I'll tell you exactly who I am," Mathis replied, glancing toward Cynthia and noting the tiny smile she was wearing. "For now, I'm prepared to be your best friend, your staunch companion. But if something happens to Brian Kinney because of information you withheld from me, I promise you that I will become the worst nightmare that you can imagine. But hey, cheer up. If it makes you feel any better, we can have our little talk over dinner. You were looking for a dining companion, weren't you?"
It had been a hell of a lot easier watching blond boy eye-candy fidget around at the airport (especially when said blond boy was Playgirl-centerfold material) than playing homeless vagrant on a cold Pittsburgh street, thought Jared Hilliard. Especially when the most eagerly anticipated feature of spring had yet to put in an appearance (in that the temperature still hovered around the freezing mark in the wee hours) while the most thoroughly dreaded feature was in full queen-out mode (in that the rain looked to be around for an indefinite stay).

Luckily, he wasn't quite as destitute as he appeared to be - appearances being everything in the world of clandestine surveillance. He was wrapped up tight in a huge plastic tarp, with tears and gashes artfully applied at strategic spots, and his face was obscured by the hood of a soiled and stained poncho, which looked more battered than it actually was, and an artfully applied layer of grime. He also looked decidedly bulkier than usual, due to the multi-layers of cold weather gear that were concealed beneath the plastic, including a ragged old army jacket, one shoulder showing through one of the strategically placed rips in the plastic, displaying a faded patch - the unmistakable image of the Screaming Eagle - the emblem of the 101st Airborne. Though the rest of his garb could be considered a disguise, the jacket was his own - a worn, but treasured remnant from his years of service.

The night was bitterly chill, but he did not feel it, having spent hours preparing himself for his little masquerade. In fact, he was almost too warm, and was beginning to regret the battery-powered socks that were making his feet sweat inside a pair of worn and run-down old regulation combat boots.

He had arranged his little tableau with precision, although it appeared to be completely haphazard. Tucked tight within his plastic shelter, he was wedged into a tiny V-shaped alcove, formed by the intersection of a graffiti-adorned brick wall and an oversized dumpster with its cover thrown back and leaning against the building. Thus it provided some small protection from the ceaseless rain, but - more importantly - it blocked the light from a flickering streetlamp at the corner, and provided a measure of privacy for Hilliard's more covert activities. He had scattered a couple of empty screw-top wine bottles around him, along with a few empty Vienna sausage cans and the de rigueur cigarette butts that were such an inescapable part of street life, even though such items were now - literally - worth their weight in gold. Then, he had insulated his attire with layers of crumpled up newspaper - a common ploy among street people to ward off the chill of the night, and he nestled now into his makeshift shelter, head down and shoulders scrunched against the weather, with a lopsided plastic storage box, protected by a black garbage bag, wrapped tight in his arms - the equivalent of a bag lady's shopping cart, thus completing the illusion of a homeless drifter, attempting to survive the elements.

Of course, if anyone had been able to see through the layers of plastic, they would have been shocked to discover a state-of-the-art laptop computer, which was part of a wireless network that included an incredible array of electronic devices, including bases at Kinnetic, at police headquarters, and at a temporary command post set up by an FBI team. In addition, it had access to the ultra-efficient surveillance system that had recently been installed on the nondescript-looking brick building on the opposite corner, at the intersection of Fuller and Tremont.

Hilliard tried to convince himself that it would be okay to just huddle in his makeshift shelter and concentrate on staying dry, but some niggling little thing in the back of his mind insisted otherwise. Thus it was that he divided his time equally between surreptitious checks of his laptop's display and regular sweeps of the area around him. In addition, he appeared to be muttering to himself almost constantly, when he was, in fact, wired for sound and communicating with other members of the security network that was in place for only one reason: to protect Brian Kinney and his domain.

It had been a relatively quiet night, but Hilliard was still on edge. He had no specific reason to be apprehensive, no explanation for why he was anxious. Yet there was no denying the gnawing
sensation in the pit of his stomach. He drank endless cups of coffee from a thermos concealed alongside his laptop (which did absolutely nothing to soothe his gut, of course) and hunkered down under his cover, careful to reveal as little of his face as possible when pedestrians wandered by. Residents of this area - and those just passing through it - tended to ignore street people, unless something out of the ordinary caught their eye, and Hilliard's bright blue eyes tended to do that, being startling against dark bronze skin, so he was careful to avoid meeting the gaze of anyone who came too close.

He watched obliquely as a painfully thin old man shuffled by, a scruffy-looking hound at his side, both huddling under a length of plastic sheeting that the man wore like a shawl, and Hilliard hoped that the two were headed toward some kind of refuge for the night. There was, he knew, a homeless shelter a couple of blocks over that provided a dry place to sleep and breakfast to all comers - no questions asked - but he doubted that animals would be welcome there. The urge to leap up and offer assistance was almost impossible to resist, but resist he did. If he compromised his cover, the price to be paid might be much worse than a lonely, uncomfortable night for an old vagrant and his dog.

He did, however, indulge in a bit of mumbling, which would sound like nothing more than gibberish to any casual observer, but said plenty to his contacts - enough, at least, to motivate someone to emerge from concealment a couple of blocks away and intercept a weary old Vietnam veteran who suffered from a form of Alzheimers which reduced him to wandering around in a mental fog and living off the scanty and episodic generosity of strangers. It would not provide a permanent resolution for his problems, but it would assure that, for a few nights at least, he would find refuge that would allow him and his dog to be safe and warm and well fed, at least until he wandered off again and lost himself in the grayness of the city, in the grip of a renewed state of mental fugue.

Hilliard would have liked to believe that it was this particular encounter that he had been awaiting all evening, but, somehow, he knew better. He continued his clandestine surveillance and his masquerade, exchanging ribald remarks with a couple of prostitutes who had come up empty on this cold, clammy night and were making their way back home with empty pockets. Then came a carefully scripted confrontation with a patrol cop who gave him just enough grief to seem plausible but stopped short of actually rousting him out of his grubby little nest.

After that, the traffic grew thinner, as the clock on the old brewery warehouse down the street ticked past midnight. Within the next hour, lights began to go off in the various businesses situated nearby on Liberty Avenue that catered to evening clientele - coffee shops and video rental stores and neighborhood bars and a bowling alley, although the night was still in its infancy for places like Woody's and the Meat Hook and Babylon.

The rain continued to fall, neither waxing nor waning, and the temperature continued to drop, and Hilliard was no longer sorry for having worn the battery-powered socks. The wind, which had been gusty and capricious all day, had finally died down, and the area was now enveloped in a deep, abiding silence that was only emphasized by the muted roar of the rain. It should have been soothing, but - somehow - it wasn't. He shifted beneath his tawdry shelter, and winced as a cold rivulet found its way beneath his layers of polypropylene and traced a path down inside his collar, causing him to flex his shoulders and twist his head to the left as he rubbed a gloved hand across the nape of his neck. And that was when he saw it.

It wasn't really a body, so much as a shadow of a body. But it was enough, because it was definitely in a place where it was not supposed to be.

A quick glance up at the top floor of the building that was the focus of his surveillance recorded the extinguishing of one interior light and the igniting of another, all according to a random pattern determined by the computer-generated security system. All was exactly as it should be within Brian
Kinney's loft, but the same might not be true of the area around it.

"Heads up!" Hilliard's muttered warning was little more than a whisper, but it was more than enough to gain the immediate attention of those at various locations on the other end of the connection. "At my ten o'clock," he continued. "Movement in the access area by the hardware store."

"Could be a dog," observed a voice in his ear.

Hilliard was very still, eyes locked on the thick darkness of the entrance to the tiny lane that provided access to the alley that ran behind the old hardware store and the other buildings along Tremont Avenue, including the one at the corner. It was pitch black there, and he could discern nothing at first - not even with the aid of the small but powerful binoculars he pulled from a pocket of his jacket. Nothing at all - until there was a quick flicker of flame, which burned for only a fraction of a second before being extinguished.

"Not unless Fido's taken up smoking," he said quickly.

"How many?"

"Two, I think, but there could be more."

"We're moving in," said another voice.

Hilliard took a moment to check out the display on his laptop, making sure that the feed from the concealed cameras that overlooked the alley behind Brian's loft was clear and unobstructed. The alley, of course, was pitch black, except for a few squares of light from windows in adjacent buildings, but the darkness was not an issue as the surveillance units were equipped for detection of infrared wavelengths.

"Hold on," he said quickly. "If we play this right, it might be our chance to get inside, with a little luck . . . and perfect timing."

"You think they'll try to break in?" A female voice - probably one of the FBI monitors.

"I doubt it," said someone else. "If they run true to form, they're only interested in causing as much damage as possible. Vandalism takes time, and they have to know there's an expensive alarm system in place. So they'll probably go for faster, easier ways."

"In that case," said Hilliard, getting to his feet and freeing himself from the constraints of his plastic protection, "I think this is my cue."

"Better be razor sharp, Friend." That was Mathis, undoubtedly monitoring everything from his office at Kinnetic. "If you fuck it up and something happens to his loft, he's going to have your balls."

"Is that supposed to be a threat?" Hilliard grinned when his response resulted in a long, uncertain beat of silence.

"Just . . . be careful." Mathis sounded as if he might be on the verge of laughter - or not.

"Yeah. Keep me in the loop, but wait for my signal before you spook 'em."

Hilliard stood and took a moment to adapt himself to the character he was portraying, adjusting body language and posture to reflect the appropriate street persona. Then he began to move down the sidewalk, using the shadows wherever possible to avoid drawing attention to himself, but being careful not to appear to be doing anything more than trying to walk down the street and shield
himself from the nastiness of the night. No one watching would have clued in on the fact that his demeanor was assumed while his focus and determination were unswerving. Despite an apparently casual gait, he was moving very quickly.

"Camera four's got 'em," said Mathis very softly. "I only see two, but there could be a look-out still hiding in the passageway, so watch your step."

"Any clue what they're up to?"

The security chief's response was quick. "Well, one of them just busted out a pane of glass on the window at the bottom of the stairwell, and the other one just pulled something out of his coat that looks an awful lot like a Molotov cocktail, so better hurry, Hilliard, because there's not much time to lose."

"OK, I'm in position. You can . . ."

He never got a chance to finish the sentence as a remarkable number of things occurred at that exact moment. Bright halogen bulbs flared into blinding brilliance, bathing the entire alley in harsh, shadowless light, while a shrill alarm rose to a piercing shriek that threatened to shatter the eardrums of anyone who was too close to it. At the same time, one of the two would-be vandals hurled his home-crafted incendiary device into the building through the broken window, and Jared Hilliard came streaking around the corner so suddenly that the two hoodlums could only stand and stare at him, obviously not quite sure if he was real or some kind of demented apparition. At that moment, the fate of both young hoodlums was already sealed, as the surveillance cameras recorded clear and irrevocable evidence of their part in the crime.

But the play had only just begun.

"What the fuck are you doing?" yelled Hilliard, grabbing both teen-agers by the collar and pushing them ahead of him down the alley. "Are you crazy? Don't you know the fag that owns this place has got the God-damned cops in his pocket, and enough money to have a security system that makes Fort Knox look like a neighborhood pawn shop. Unless you want to spend the next twenty years getting fucked up the ass by some prison gang, you better fuckin' run."

"But . . ." One of them was stumbling, and struggling to catch his breath.

Shit! Hilliard barely managed not to roll his eyes. Just his luck, in trying to fake the perfect, skin-of-their-teeth escape, to get stuck with a fucking asthmatic juvenile delinquent.

"I said run, Boy!" he snarled, and the sheer volume of it was apparently enough to scare the kid right out of his short-windedness and into a full-fledged panic that motivated him to run like the wind, no longer worried about whether or not he could breathe. They sprinted into the night, the two youths being herded and guided by the big man who seemed to know, instinctively, how to avoid the paths that would have led to their immediate capture.

Jared Hilliard managed, by virtue of a mighty effort, not to smile.

Behind them, flames spread quickly around the base of the old staircase, as the alarm sirens continued to shatter the night.

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*I'll Find You Again --- Jim Metcalf*
* A Confederacy of Dunces --- John Kennedy Toole
* Starlight--- Jim Metcalf

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tbc
Chapter 25

The realization that it was long past time to go home struck Sharon Briggs when it occurred to her that she could not remember the silken touch of her damask-patterned 800 thread count sheets against her skin or the smell of the special blend of espresso that wafted from her sunny kitchen every morning or the sound of raindrops dappling the surface of her flagstone terrace or the taste of the Scarlet O'Hara cocktails that the bartender at her neighborhood bar always made special for her. Enough was enough, she reasoned, since she couldn't even remember - exactly - just how long she'd been locked up in this mental ward that managed - but only just - to masquerade as a trauma center.

This observation was prompted by the confrontation she'd just witnessed between a boisterous, emaciated crack addict and Nurse Mandy Fleming, who had just ejected him - physically - from the private room where his grandmother was recuperating from a stroke. Apparently, the young thug had decided that his beloved Nana would be happy to give him permission to rifle through her belongings and steal a wad of cash from her purse, if only she weren't still comatose.

Sharon had watched the occurrence while forcing down an almost irresistible urge to spring from her seat and handcuff the little bastard while shoving her Beretta 9MM up under his sternum. She didn't act on the impulse, leaving the hospital security staff to deal with the fracas, but she was sorely tempted.

Which was another reason to go home.

But she couldn't - not quite yet.

According to the information she'd been given, her release would come tomorrow, when Brian Kinney was finally to be allowed to take flight, to go forth and try to find his way into whatever future awaited him; logic suggested that a few more hours spent here, in this sterile, colorless, perpetually mind-numbing environment, where drama unfolded only on the other side of gray walls and security doors, would be as futile all the previous hours had been. Mostly.

Although she did have certain suspicions. But thus far, there was nothing that she could prove, so she acknowledged that she should just pack up and go home.

Only her suspicions were a little like an itch that needed scratching. She just had to figure out a way to reach the right spot.

She was still not entirely comfortable working under the supervision of the man who had borrowed her services from the Narcotics Division. Things were different among the narcs, by necessity. Regulations still had to be followed, of course, and policies observed, but there was more room for interpretation, more freedom to step outside the boundaries of convention in an environment peopled by drug dealers and their henchmen, and addicts and snitches and undercover cops representing a dozen different agencies - federal, state, and local. Still, she had to admit that Detective Horvath had surprised her by being a lot less rigid than she'd expected. He had allowed her to use her own judgment in a case that obviously had special significance for him, leading her to conclude that he had realized that his objectivity might be compromised if he refused to defer to those with more experience in undercover operations.

It took a pretty big man to cope with that kind of self-awareness.
Sharon, AKA Shoshona, had more than nine years of experience under her belt, years in which she had lived two completely separate lives. Two identities, two residences (although one of them barely even qualified as a squat) two personalities - two lives, each totally separate from the other. And Horvath had acknowledged her skill and expertise and refrained from throwing his considerable weight around. She respected him for that, but it didn't make her any less weary of the whole situation.

Was it any wonder that she sometimes had trouble remembering who she was supposed to be at any given time? But, for this moment at least, there was no confusion, as she had been in character far longer than usual during this little excursion, becoming more and more comfortable in her adopted skin, and thus - paradoxically - more and more prone to fatal error. Slipping so deeply into alternative reality sometimes degraded natural tendencies to paranoia, which could save a life - or cost one.

She thought longingly of her Jacuzzi tub and the pitcher of Margaritas she could prepare to enjoy during a long, luxurious soak, as she watched as a weary custodian pushed a dust mop across the floor, pausing along the way to watch David Letterman cracking wise with the latest blonde Madonna-wannabe.

Sharon sighed, and rose to walk to the window, pulling her shabby old parka more tightly around her slender form. She was not really cold, but the sterility and impersonal atmosphere of the hospital was beginning to wear on her, not to mention the fact that she had been 'in character' for such a long time now that she was losing touch with the person she really was - the stylish young woman whose closet was filled with Dolce and Gabbana clothing and Manolo Blahnik shoes and whose fashionable townhouse was furnished with Regency antiques and custom upholstered pieces and stunning impressionist artwork from a group of up-and-coming young artists who might very well turn out to be the Picassos of tomorrow.

Tomorrow. She had a ridiculous urge to break into song - a la Andrea McArdle - and go dancing down to the street and over into the parking garage where she could duck into her lovely little Mazda RX8 and step back into her genuine existence - simultaneously. Sharon had come from money - her father was the Briggs half of Freemont-Briggs Health & Beauty Products - and thus, was one of those rare individuals who did not depend on the earnings from her job to support her lifestyle. She was a cop - and a very good one - out of volition, not necessity, to the horror of her very traditional parents. And she had known Brian Kinney for a very long time, although he would most certainly not recognize her if he happened to catch a glimpse of her in her current guise.

She still got an occasional laugh from the memory of the look on her father's face when he'd been told the truth about his new face (yeah, right - like it was the 'face' that mattered) of BareBronze, who also happened to be the target of the old man's latest scheme to find a suitable mate for his hard-headed daughter.

She smiled, remembering how Brian had charmed her parents with his sardonic wit and sense of style. Then she recalled how he looked now, what had been done to him, and the smile faded. She turned away from the spectacle of the stormy night and looked across the bland, featureless waiting room toward the nurse's station . . . and went very still.

The itch was back and refusing to be ignored.

Perhaps the endless hours she had spent here, portraying a familial devotion to a comatose great aunt - the comatose patient was real enough, although the family connection wasn't - would not prove to be the complete waste of time she had feared, although she had, over time and with great reluctance, come to feel a certain connection to the old lady in Room 406, since it had become obvious that the elderly stroke victim - a retired school teacher - had no one else to care for her. How would it feel,
she had come to wonder, to live through almost nine decades and find one's self completely alone and unattached to anyone after enduring so much of life? The answer, she thought, was something she preferred not to know. Thus, she had begun to talk to the old lady during her visits to the room, speaking in generalities, since she knew very little about the woman's past, but feeling compelled, somehow, to offer snippets of conversation and observations about life in general. She had no idea, of course, if the patient could hear her, or would care if she did, but she felt, somehow, that it was the right thing to do, especially since she was using the woman as an excuse for her continuing presence in the waiting room.

Nevertheless, professionally, it had not been a very productive period, but perhaps her luck was about to change, if she was very careful and very lucky . . . and very quiet.

Head Nurse Jessica Burnside had not had a very good night. She was obviously tired and frazzled and having a bad hair day, as she vacillated between hoping that everyone around her would fall into a deep, dreamless, bottomless sleep so she could just sit and vegetate for a while and - conversely - wanting some cocky little twerp to walk out of the elevator and give her a perfect opportunity to vent her not inconsiderable level of frustration. She almost envied Nurse Fleming's run-in with the crackhead. But for the moment, she would settle for a little peace and quiet to allow her to indulge her need for caffeine and to finish reviewing the physician's orders and medication instructions for the heart patient in 416, while awaiting the arrival of a new patient transferring in from the ICU.

Thus, when Viola Ritchie, an older LPN with a wide body and a cheerful disposition, and the freckle-faced nurse's aid who was her regular assistant departed for the night, the RN confined her farewell to a quick wave before returning to her task, her frown reflecting the degree of the headache pounding in her temples. So focused was she that she barely registered the passage of the respiratory technician who bustled down the hall to administer a breathing treatment to the pneumonia case in Room 411 and failed to even notice the arrival of the lab tech who took up a position at the counter, where he proceeded to affix labels to a group of test vials and check them against notes on his clipboard. Nor did she see when the man shifted his body, with exaggerated casualness, in such a way as to shield his movements from inquisitive eyes as he lifted one folder from the chart cabinet and flipped it open to scan its contents and capture a couple of photos with his cell phone before returning the file to its original position, all in less than thirty seconds with no one the wiser. Dark eyes swept his surroundings and saw exactly what they expected to see - nothing remarkable and no living being except for the nondescript young black woman who had been sitting there in the waiting room for so long now that she had become almost a fixture, barely worthy of notice, especially since she seemed to be fixated at that moment on the latest Brangelina scandal exposed on the pages of a battered copy of Us magazine.

The man smiled, confidant that he had found what he was looking for and gone unobserved in the process.

Sharon Briggs saw the smile and was careful to maintain her appearance of fascination with the ridiculous expose in the tabloid, while just glancing up at exactly the right moment to catch a glimpse of the man's employee ID tag.

Oh, yes. This night might just prove the old adage: good things come to those who wait.

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Chris McClaren had been restless and apprehensive all evening, watching as the night moved toward its nadir and then progressed into the wee small hours of the morning. He had finally managed to doze off just when the buzz of his cell phone caused him to jerk awake, scrambling to silence the device before it could awaken the room's other occupant, who definitely needed his sleep. Brian had
not had an easy day, and the FBI agent hurried out of the room before speaking.

"Yeah?" he answered, after glancing at the phone's ID screen to identify the caller and noting that it was just past three AM.

"Very professional response, Agent McClaren," said a contralto voice with sardonic overtones.

"Hello, Alex," he replied, massaging weary eyes with thumb and forefinger. "Still rubbing elbows with the rich and famous?"

Alexandra Corey blew a tiny little raspberry into her phone before replying. "Bite your tongue, Junior. It was Sen. Marbury's sub-committee. Would you willingly rub anything with that woman?"

"Point taken," he conceded. "So where are you?"

"In the Pitts, Hon. Literally. I've spent most of today getting to know your Mr. Kinney - a very interesting day, I must say."

McClaren chuckled. "He's definitely not your typical victim."

"Agreed. I'm really eager to meet him, to see for myself if he lives up to his press, but I think it's going to have to wait a bit longer. I still have more people to see, more details to nail down before I'm ready to hear his side of the story."

McClaren was silent for a few seconds, debating whether or not to say what was on his mind or simply trust her to figure things out for herself, as she always did. Then he smiled as he realized that, by his very silence, he had already said too much.

"Out with it," she demanded, as he heard the snick of her cigarette lighter and comforted himself with the realization that her latest attempt to give up cigarettes had been as futile as the thousand or so earlier attempts had been. He knew it was petty of him to be glad that there was a weakness that she could not overcome by dint of sheer will power, but he was glad nonetheless. Such a weakness proved that she was not - quite - perfect, and that was a comfort to seriously flawed beings, such as himself.

"Don't make the mistake," he said slowly, "of judging him by standards that might not apply."

Then it was her turn to pause. "Do I detect a tiny nuance of admiration, Agent McClaren?"

He smiled. "Let's just say I'm withholding judgment until all the facts are in."

"I've read his file, you know. And seen his photographs."

He took a deep breath, struggling for patience. "Have you ever known me to be distracted by a pretty face?"

"No," she admitted, "but he's hardly just a 'pretty face', is he?"

"No. He's not, which is reason enough to wait until all the facts are in before reaching any kind of conclusion."

"Good enough," she retorted, and he sensed, somehow, that she was pleased with him, which was reason enough for him to be moderately pleased with himself, as Alexandra Corey did not bestow approval without very good cause. "One thing is certain, however," she continued. "He apparently has an incredible gift for pissing people off. So much so that some of his biggest fans attempted to
McClaren huffed a small sigh. He had not yet visited Kinney's home, but he'd heard about it from a variety of sources and found himself hoping that it had not been destroyed by the man's enemies. He wasn't sure why, but he was hungry to see the place for himself.

"And did they succeed?"

"Are you kidding?" she chuckled. "The White House should have such a security system. A little bit of smoke damage on the bottom floor, some scorched tiles in the back entrance. Nothing to worry about. Have you seen his place, by any chance?"

"No. I've been too busy standing guard over his ass to go sightseeing."

"From what I hear," she laughed, "that's not such a terrible assignment."

"The ass may be charming," he retorted, "but he's got a mouth on him that you wouldn't believe."

"Oh," she said softly. "You'd prefer Little Mary Sunshine, maybe?"

He grinned. She really did know him entirely too well.

"Okay," he conceded. "So what's his place really like?"

"From what I hear," she answered, "it's a lot like him. Elegant, classic, stylish, and very, very self-contained - unless you know what to look for."

He wondered what she meant by that, but quickly realized that pressing her for an explanation would be counter-productive.

"Have you turned up anything interesting?" he asked.

"Interesting doesn't even begin to cover it," she said with a soft sigh. "Given his background, I'd say that we're all very, very lucky that young Mr. Kinney didn't turn out to be a combination of Jeffrey Dahmer, the Zodiac killer, and Jack the Ripper."

"Son of Psycho?" he asked, wondering why he wasn't more surprised.

"At least."

"Alex," he said softly, "he's just begun to process everything, just begun to confront issues he never thought he'd have to endure. He's going to need help, but . . ."

"Let me guess," she interrupted. "He's not going to make it easy for anybody to help him."

"How'd you figure that?"

She sighed. "Strong, independent, self-motivated individuals are seldom willing to admit that they can't handle everything on their own. It's nothing I haven't seen before."

"With all due respect," he replied, "I can almost guarantee you've never met someone like him before. He's unique. And he resists any suggestions about counseling like it was a venereal disease. His entire philosophy can be summed up in two words: fuck therapy."

She laughed softly. "Oh, I am looking forward to this. You know how I enjoy a challenge."
McClaren grinned. "In that case, you better prepare yourself, because you're going to fall deeply, hopelessly, madly in love with this cocky, arrogant, sarcastic, completely uncontrollable little bastard."

"That's the second time you've called him 'little'," she observed, "which is unusual for you. He is a grown man, isn't he?"

"Mostly," the agent conceded. Then his grin grew wider. "But I'm taller and, believe me, when you're dealing with Brian Kinney, you need every bit of leverage you can get."

McClaren checked on Brian once he'd finished his conversation with his boss, and found him resting comfortably, which was a bit unusual. The Stud of Liberty Avenue - God, he really had to stop thinking of Kinney in those deliberately sardonic terms - seldom slept easily these days. He did not actually talk in his sleep, for the most part, but he was often restless, and his breathing was rarely regular and deep. McClaren was pretty sure he knew why, although the man was loathe to discuss it and, in fact, sharply denied any suggestion that his restlessness might be due to an endless succession of bad dreams.

Still, he was quiet for the moment, and the FBI agent thought he'd just grab a few moments of downtime and a cigarette. He summoned his back-up to take up a place by the door before striding down the hallway toward a small balcony area that overlooked a rear courtyard. It was not - officially - a designated smoking area, but, under the circumstances and given the lateness of the hour, it would do.

He should have been surprised, he thought, as he stood looking out into the night, and watching as pale glimmers of moonlight managed to punch through the cloud cover, while he filled his lungs with the welcome tang of nicotine poison. He should have been - but he wasn't.

"Have you given up sleeping for the duration?" he asked as Carl Horvath settled beside him at the railing.

Horvath grunted. "I hear that tomorrow marks the end . . . of the duration," he said as he accepted a cigarette from the agent. "And if my better half ever asks you, you've never seen me smoke."

"Hey, I'm not the PC police monitor, so your secret's safe with me. But seriously, what the fuck are you doing here at this hour?"

Horvath looked up and noted that the clouds seemed to be fleeing before the onslaught of fresh winds out of the south. "Just had a little confab with one of my undercover people. She thinks she might have a lead worth pursuing."

"Someone here?" McClaren knew better than to question too deeply. Undercover work was hazardous enough without complications, and he wasn't about to complicate anything. Still, he was curious.

Horvath nodded. "Probably nothing to do with the original perps, but a possible connection to all the information that's been leaked to the press and whoever else might be interested."

McClaren nodded. "Stands to reason that the movers and shakers that set all this in motion would want to keep tabs on his condition."

Horvath turned to study the FBI agent's expression. "You think there's still more to come."
"Don't you?"

The detective sighed. "I think they're bound to be getting nervous."

"Meaning?"

Horvath paused before answering, considering his words carefully. "This whole thing was orchestrated in such a way that they had complete control of everything. From the very beginning. They were on this huge power trip, that allowed them to believe that they could do anything they liked to him, and he'd have no recourse but to knuckle under, to crawl into a hole and hide from them and the world, and that they'd just be able to walk away from it free and clear. But things didn't quite go as they planned."

"I'm not sure what you mean," McClaren replied, "except that they didn't have time to finish it."

But Horvath was shaking his head. "But that's only part of it. Think it through. First of all, they must have been astonished - not to mention infuriated - when Brian didn't react the way they'd planned. He defied them, apparently to the bitter end. So if they were outraged to begin with, just imagine how they must have felt when their plans were thwarted. Then there was the fact that Mathis and his crew were smart enough, with a bit of a boost from the 'luck of the Irish', to figure out where to look for them and get there in time to prevent them from finishing him off according to plan. Not to mention sending them all scattering like roaches in a bright light, leaving a crime scene behind, along with a dead body. I'm sure you've realized that they never intended for anybody to recognize where this all happened. If they hadn't been interrupted, Brian would have been dumped somewhere out in BFE when they were done with him, with no way to connect him to that warehouse - or to them - and no evidence for our forensics people to process."

"So they're worried."

"Exactly. And now, they not only have to be concerned that someone might connect them - one way or another - to the crime scene or to the thugs they hired, they have to wonder if Brian might have seen something or noticed something or figured out something that they hadn't anticipated. In light of that, even though their original plans were for him to suffer a slow, agonizing, lonely death, they might be scared enough to stop worrying about extracting their version of divine justice and just want it done."

McClaren stubbed out his cigarette and dropped the butt into a trash barrel. "If you're trying to scare me, Detective, you're wasting your time. He already scares the shit out of me, with no help from you."

"What do you mean?" asked Horvath, obviously confused.

"He's going to make my job twice as hard as it has to be, because he's not going to be willing to keep his head down and his mouth shut. So . . ."

"So you've already figured out what you're up against." It was not a question.

McClaren's laugh was low-pitched and filled with irony. "I think it was Keller who mentioned that Kinney's only barely begun to confound us."

"Hard-headed little fucker is going to get himself killed," Horvath observed, taking a final drag on his cigarette.

"Not," said McClaren coldly, "on my watch."
Horvath just nodded.

"So," said the FBI agent, still staring out into the night, "this undercover cop of yours - how good is she?"

"As good as I've ever worked with. If she thinks she's found something, it bears checking out."

"So you'll keep me posted."

Horvath turned to go back into the building. "Don't worry about that, Mr. McClaren. If you fuck this up, it's your job that might be on the line. On the other hand, if I let anything happen to young Mr. Kinney, a certain loud-mouthed redhead will be grinding my balls into mincemeat and serving them up with marinara sauce, so it's definitely in my best interest to make sure you're well informed."

McClaren smiled. "It's funny, you know."

"What?"

"That so many people care so much about a man who does his best to portray himself as a complete shit."

Horvath's eyes were suddenly suspiciously bright. "Yeah. It's funny."

McClaren smiled as he watched the detective turn away and move off down the corridor. Did any of them really understand what Brian Kinney meant to them, he wondered. Then his smile faltered as he looked at the question from a different angle - a darker, sadder angle. Did Brian himself have any inkling of how important he was in their lives, and, even if he did finally figure it out, would he be able to believe it?

He thought not.

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There were voices all around him, but no faces. No solid forms. Everything - everyone remained in shadow, and every time he turned to try to determine who was speaking, the gloom seemed to thicken as the voices fell silent, only to be replaced by other voices, further away. All around him, there was only debris and smoke and ashes that hung motionless in the air, forming a curtain that felt tangible enough to resist his efforts to move forward, forcing him to push against the restraint. He didn't know why it was so important that he keep moving; standing still seemed a perfectly viable option, especially in light of the fact that the effort to move was painful, although he could not figure out exactly what was hurting him. The darkness was so thick and pervasive that he could not look down and see his own body, but the smell in the air was acrid with a coppery tang, and he was conscious of a slick wetness that seemed to envelope his lower torso. Was he bleeding? And why couldn't he remember what had happened - why didn't he know how he'd been injured, if he had, indeed, been injured, if it was not all just some weird illusion?

And why was it so important that he keep moving forward? What was waiting there ahead of him that he felt so compelled to pursue?

There were screams now, creating a shrill descant that rose and fell and sometimes obscured the softer moans and the sound of weeping that formed the baseline of a terrible symphony. Although they provided no real illumination, showers of sparks erupted above and behind him periodically, and there was the snap-crackle-buzz of electric wires swinging free and awaiting the random touch of careless hands. He was stumbling now, trying to feel his way around broken obstacles and through twisted rubble, while trying not to identify the charred lumps of flesh that were contorted
into bizarre shapes along his path. He fell once, and cringed away from the gut-wrenching crispness of flame-broiled skin, blackened and bonded to scraps of melted polyester.

Death was everywhere around him, and he wondered why he didn't feel more afraid, and why he kept hearing Bob Dylan's famous line repeating in his mind. "He not busy being born is busy dying.”

He was not afraid for himself . . . but there were other considerations.

Memory stirred, shifted, and blended with dreamscape; he had been here before, but 'here' encompassed more than one memory, more than one place.

The stench was almost unbearable, and the air, almost unbreathable, until he looked up and saw . . . he thought he smiled as he realized that even this awful, pervasive darkness could not completely obscure the gleam of hair as blond as summer straw and eyes aglow with life, a sight just glimpsed until he stepped through the particulate curtain that surrounded the setting and saw something else. Somewhere else. Below him, at the center of a shadowed arena, in a distant circle of light, somehow pale and icy, he saw a slender figure, elegantly clad in tuxedo and silk scarf, dancing away into the night, while a second figure, similarly clad, followed, swinging a baseball bat like a club.

“Justin!” He knew the scream was useless, knew that it had come too late and would not carry far enough. But he could not resist it, could not contain it, as he found himself sprinting down into that huge arena, watching the swing of that bat and hearing the heart-stopping sound of the blow as it impacted bone and flesh. Not once, but over and over and over again. And then he was there and he saw the blood and the crumpled body lying in the dark pool, and he threw himself forward to shove the attacker away, grabbing for the bat and preparing to administer a rough form of justice.

Only he couldn't because . . .

"No." The denial was torn from him, leaving him fighting to breathe.

He could not - would not believe it, as the attacker turned to face him and favored him with that mega-watt smile that had given rise to his nickname.

"Sunshine, what are you . . ."

He recoiled from the deep, icy rage flaring in the depths of those incredibly blue eyes and fell to his knees to wrap his arms around the limp body at his feet, murmuring a litany of denial as he tried to wipe the blood away from that beloved face, gone white as fresh snow. "No, no, no, no, no . . . God, no!"

Then he looked up and saw the same face laughing down at him. "You should have left me to die, Brian," said a cold and detached version of Justin, smirking at the bloodied vision of his own body and watching tears overflow from the eyes of the man who had been his lover. "Now, you have to pay, for both of us. And learn the most important lesson of your life - the wages of sin.”

And he swung the bat, again and again, and Brian absorbed the force of the attack, trying to shield the body in his arms, feeling the blood flowing in rivers, feeling his skin split under the terrible power of the blows, until everything suddenly went silent, and the young man wielding the bat was no longer the attacker, but the attacked, as a group of ominous figures appeared around him, bearing chains and iron bars and bats of their own, and laughing as his eyes grew huge, as he recognized his danger, as he realized what was coming, as the cruel, vicious, empty-eyed doppelganger was transformed into the beautiful, vulnerable young man that Brian had always loved, even when he'd forced himself to deny it.
"Brian!" Justin cried, desperately seeking a savior. "Brian, don't let them . . ."

Brian knew he had little strength left, doubted that he could make a difference, felt himself edging toward darkness. But this was Justin. He could not just let himself go, could not simply release his hold on consciousness when it was Justin who needed help. The body he had held in his arms was gone now, and there was only the young man whom he held, instead, in his heart. Nothing else mattered; nothing else made sense if anything bound up in this kaleidoscope of nightmare could be said to make sense.

He managed to get to his feet and stepped forward to confront the savages he had confronted before, savages who had tried and failed to make him beg for his own life. But this time was different. This time it was Justin's life that hung in the balance.

"Please," he said softly, barely audible. "Please, don't hurt him."

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To his surprise, Chris McClaren had managed to achieve a deep, restful sleep after his return to Brian's room, even though it only lasted a couple of hours. He had not expected to catch more than a quick nap or two, as was his wont when he was on a mission, but he was finding his current duty a lot more taxing than he'd anticipated - so taxing that he must have been more tired than he'd realized.

He smirked into the darkness as he wakened, admitting to himself that it wasn't actually the duty that was trying his patience so severely; it was the subject of his scrutiny. Kinney was . . .

Sitting up in bed, arms uplifted as if in supplication, breathing labored and hoarse, as he repeated the same words over and over again.

"Please don't hurt him, please don't hurt him, please don't . . ."

It was barely even a whisper, but the lack of volume did not diminish the level of desperation; Kinney was terrified - frightened enough to resort to begging, something McClaren was willing to bet he'd never done before.

The agent did not stop to think, did not hesitate. He simply leapt to his feet and climbed up onto the bed, wrapping his arms around the trembling torso of the young man who was - much to his surprise and even more against his will - becoming so important to him.

"Hush now, it's okay," he murmured, shifting so that his back was against the headboard of the bed so that he could settle Brian's weight against his chest. "Nobody's going to hurt him; it's all over. It's all over. It's just a dream." As he offered his singsong litany, his hands moved in soothing strokes against the areas of silken skin not covered by bandages, as Brian's breathing slowly eased to a normal rhythm.

"Justin?" Lost and uncertain, sounding for all the world like a frightened child.

"Justin's fine, Brian. Everything's all right. So just . . ."

"Justin? Did they hurt you? Are you . . ."

"No, Brian. Listen to me. Justin's fine. I told you, it's just a bad dream. So . . ."

"I'm so sorry, so sorry." The tears were flowing freely now, and the words were halting, broken. "I'm sorry I couldn't . . ." Brian was shaking, racked by silent sobs.
"Hush now. It's okay. He's fine, Brian. He's . . ."

"Justin? Please, answer me. Please don't . . ."

Shit!

"Oh, God, please don't let him be . . ."

Double shit!

McClaren took a deep breath before touching his lips to the bare skin near Brian's ear. "It's all right, Brian. It's me. It's Justin. And I'm all right. You saved me. You . . ."

"No, I didn't."

The FBI agent sighed and wondered if anybody - anybody at all - had ever realized the depth of the despair with which Kinney lived, every day of his life.

"Yes, you did. You saved me."

Brian's eyes were still closed, and McClaren was certain now that he was still locked up tight in the realm of nightmare, even though he was responding, marginally, to what was being said to him. So he continued to run his hands down Brian's back and to murmur soft assurances into his ear, until the shuddering sobs began to subside. He sighed then, thinking that the patient had emerged from the depth of his dark dream and slipped back into deep, mindless sleep. But it turned out that he was only partly right.

One form of nightmare had ended, but another was ongoing, possibly perpetual.

He almost missed it, as it was only a whisper, and barely even that. More of a faint exhalation - words barely breathed. He almost didn't hear it at all, and was, somehow, grateful that he was lucky enough to catch it, because he would come to believe - later - that it explained so much.

"I didn't save you. I never saved . . . anybody."

McClaren lifted one hand and stroked it though spikes of thick, dark hair. "Yes, you did," he replied. "You . . ."

He was more than a bit startled when he couldn't complete the assurance because his lips were suddenly taken by a soft but relentless mouth, a very skilled mouth that refused his somewhat feeble attempts at evasion.

Shit!

"Should I leave you two alone?" The question and the tone were sardonic, but the look in Matt Keller's eyes as he switched on a bedside light was as sharp as a freshly-honed blade.

Double shit!

"Doesn't anybody around here ever sleep?" McClaren growled.

"Don't you?" came the retort. "It's funny, you know. I thought your purpose here was to protect him. Instead of . . ."

"Relax, Doc. He was having a nightmare, and . . ."
"And?" Keller was not even close to backing down.

"And he thought I was Taylor."

Keller was quiet for a moment, apparently absorbed in evaluating data from the plethora of medical monitors arranged beside the bed, and noting, with some measure of relief, that his patient had apparently shaken off any wisp of nightmare and settled back into dreamless slumber. Then he looked up, and his eyes were filled with far too much understanding for McClaren's liking.

"Convenient for you."

"Look, I didn't . . ."

"Just so you understand," Keller continued, determined to make his point, "the pain meds are still working on him. Makes it difficult for him to determine what's real and what's not. So his judgment is a little impaired right now. It would be a mistake to assume that he's aware of . . ."

"I don't assume anything." McClaren's response, though barely more than a whisper, was sharp, brittle with the level of his irritation, and he was immediately annoyed with himself for letting any nuance of his emotional reaction color his tone. He extracted himself from Brian's arms and stood, his gaze meeting the physician's with an almost measurable degree of defiance.

Keller proceeded with a quick examination of his patient, his demeanor completely professional as he recorded his findings in Brian's chart. Then he paused, and lifted his eyes to examine the expression of the FBI agent who was watching him like a hawk.

"Can I give you a piece of advice?" he said finally, choosing his words carefully and managing, with the aid of a deep, cleansing breath, to suppress the resentment that always flared within him momentarily whenever he witnessed the inevitable fascination that people developed for his old friend. He had absolutely no right to be jealous of anyone in Brian's life, and he knew it, but that didn't change the fact that he always was, just a little.

"Fire away," retorted McClaren, wary now, but willing to listen.

"I imagine that you must - as a matter of professional necessity - regard everyone with a certain level of suspicion. You could hardly do your job if you didn't. And I'm sure you've encountered some of the worst examples of scum and villainy that the human race has managed to produce in the course of your career - individuals that live in the heart of darkness, so to speak, who are a danger to anyone who comes in contact with them."

McClaren just nodded, understanding - somehow - that what the doctor was trying to say to him was important, not for the sake of his job, or his clients, or his employer - but for himself.

"So it stands to reason that you have to be able to recognize danger when you see it," Keller continued, his eyes very focused, very intense. "But sometimes, it can sneak up on you, come at you from an unexpected direction."

"What is it you're trying to tell me, Doc?" McClaren's patience - ordinarily almost inexhaustible - was wearing thin.

Keller smiled. "You obviously already know how to watch your back, but you might want to pay a little more attention to watching your heart."

McClaren managed to dredge up a quite convincing smirk. "So . . . what? You're warning me because you're concerned for my well-being? You think I'm cruising for a broken heart?"
"What I think," Keller replied, completely unperturbed, "is that you have no idea just how dangerous this man can be."

"The so-called Stud of Liberty Avenue?" McClaren's tone was thick with scorn.

Keller's gaze was steady. "If that's what you see when you look at him - if that's all you see - then forget I mentioned it. You have nothing to worry about."

McClaren frowned. "Meaning what exactly?"

It was Keller's turn to smile. "Stupid people are immune to the infection known as Brian Kinney syndrome. You'll never even register on his radar."

McClaren was still trying to come up with a suitably withering retort when the physician went strolling out of the room.

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Ben stood looking out the kitchen window, not quite sure that he believed what he was seeing. He almost couldn't remember how long it had been since their tiny back yard had been touched by real, honest-to-God, undiluted sunlight. The clouds and the frigid rains of winter's last gasp - despite the fact that the calendar claimed that spring had sprung - had dissipated overnight, leaving a huge sweep of brilliant blue sky to smile down on a city too long wrapped in deep chill.

He sipped at a much-needed cup of coffee and wondered, for a fleeting moment, if the change in the weather might be enough to spark a change in the mindset of his husband. Then he sighed, recognizing the futility of the thought.

Michael was not going to be cheered up by any of the lovely markers that announced the arrival of spring. The truth was that Michael was probably not going to be cheered up at all - not for a very long time. And Ben was struggling with himself over whether or not he should take steps to put an end to the depression that had gripped his young partner since his last encounter with the only other person in the world who held the power to inflict that kind of damage on him.

He sipped again, still undecided. He was almost certain that he had figured out what Brian was doing, and why. What he didn't know was whether or not he would be doing Michael a favor by making him see the truth, or exposing him to dangers that didn't bear thinking about, a consequence for which, he knew, Brian would never forgive him and would - in his own inimitable way - exact vengeance.

He still found it ironic that he, of all the people who were members of Michael's extended family, was the one who had finally, to some small degree, begun to unravel the snarled skeins of the enigma that was Brian Kinney, and he was pretty sure that it was only because he was slightly immune to the man's charm. Okay - that was a bit of an overstatement. In truth, no one was completely immune, not if Brian decided to exert himself enough to focus it on any one individual, but the truth was that Brian, for whatever reason, had never exerted that effort toward Ben. On the one hand, Ben half believed that it was because, as Brian himself had admitted following the debacle at the Babylon bombing vigil, Brian didn't like "Zen Ben" very much, but, on the other, he had a sneaking suspicion that Brian understood him perfectly well and even - maybe - respected him a little, even if he scoffed at most of the things Ben believed in.

There was, however, a 'third hand', so to speak - maybe the most important thing of all. Ben sometimes believed that Brian could forgive him anything, simply because he loved Michael, and that was reason enough.
At any rate, whatever the explanation, Brian had never been completely successful in convincing Ben to buy into the façade he maintained for the rest of the world, thus allowing Ben to recognize a basic truth.

Beneath the arrogance, beneath the hype, beneath the glitz and the glamour and the flagrant self-interest, Brian Kinney was the most honest, most generous man Ben had ever known. That was, of course, beside the fact that he was also a complete shit, when the mood took him.

None of which solved his current problem.

But, with a nod to the Zen teaching that even the longest journey begins with a single step, he turned away from the window to pour his husband, still snug in their marriage bed, a cup of dark, rich, aromatic coffee, in an attempt to entice him to rise. Shining, he would worry about later.

He was, however, a bit late with the effort as Michael came stumbling into the kitchen just as Ben was spooning sugar into the Rage mug that was Michael's favorite.

"Morning, Baby," Ben offered, careful not to inject too much cheer into the greeting, since Michael would undoubtedly bristle if he detected any false note of merriment.

"Mmmhmm." Which could mean absolutely anything or - more likely - nothing at all except, "Gimme the fucking coffee."

Ben set the mug down on the table as Michael dropped into a chair, one hand lazily scratching at his chest.

"You want some breakfast?"

"Mmmhmm."

Ben chose to interpret that as an affirmative.

"Waffles? Toast? Oatmeal?"

No response.

"Fine herbs omelette, with a serving of hemlock?"

Michael looked up from the night-black liquid in his cup to fix his husband with a fishy stare. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Just something to grab your attention. Michael, you need to . . ."

"Ben, just . . . stop. OK? I know what I need to . . ."

The knock at the door came at a very opportune moment, from Michael's perspective, since he really had no idea how he'd planned to end that sentence.

Although, when he saw who was standing on the porch, he was less certain he should be happy with the interruption. He had not seen either Monty or Eli since the ugly confrontation in Brian's hospital room, except for casual glimpses as the two couples came and went in the course of their days. And he wasn't sure he was ready to see them now, not quite able to put aside his memories of the things they'd said during that ugly little episode.

Still, he wasn't prepared to be rude, and he had to concede that they were certainly not alone in their willingness to judge Brian harshly. Half of gay Pittsburgh - the half that considered itself superior to
the world that Brian occupied - would probably agree with them.

"Just thought we'd stop in to see how you guys are doing," gushed Eli, his manner indicating that there should be no cause for awkwardness in the moment. "We brought muffins."

Monty held up a bakery bag. "Michot's Bakery. Fresh out of the oven."

Michael's hesitation was brief, but not quite brief enough to be termed non-existent, and, when he stepped back and opened to door wide to admit them, the couple exchanged quick, knowing glances.

"We brought plenty," said Monty as they followed Michael into the kitchen. "In case Hunter or J.R. might be here."

"No," said Ben, quickly and correctly reading the uncertainty in Michael's expression. "Neither one is here, but judging by the smell from that bag, I'm sure we can do them justice."

Eli smiled, ignoring any potential awkwardness. "Only the best for our good neighbors. You can choose between banana-chocolate chip, cappuccino-chocolate, carrot-and-raisin, or nutty-mincemeat."

Ben nodded, fetching fresh mugs from the cupboard. "And the coffee's fresh brewed."

They all settled in to sample the baked goods, and even Michael was tempted enough to polish off a couple of the sweet morsels.

Then Ben made a bit of a production of looking up at the clock. "This was really nice of your guys, but, unfortunately, duty calls. I've got a class in less than an hour, and Michael . . ."

His husband shrugged. "That's the advantage of being your own boss. I get to come and go - or not come and go - as I choose."

"Michael . . ."

Eli held up a hand, signaling his intention to step into this particular breach. "Michael," he said, very reasonably he thought, "we've noticed that you've been a little out of things lately, and we're worried about you. Don't you think it would be better to get back on the horse, and . . ."

"With all due respect, Eli," Michael retorted, his tone not particularly respectful, "you have no idea what I've been dealing with, and I'm the one who'll decide when it's time to let it go. You just . . ."

"But surely, now," said Monty slowly, "you'll be able to put it all behind you. Since he'll be gone, and . . ."

Michael went very still. "What are you talking about? Who'll be gone?"

"Why, Brian Kinney, of course," Monty replied, with a small note of self-satisfaction in his tone, and a quick glance at his partner that conveyed the tiniest nuance of I-told-you-so. "After today, he'll be . . ."

"What. He'll be what?"

"Oh, no!" Eli managed to sound both confused and embarrassed, although Ben, silently observing the whole act, was almost certain that he was actually neither. "We didn't mean to intrude, Michael, but we were sure that you must know about it. Although, in truth, no one knows exactly where he's going. Only that he's leaving today. And it seems he'll be gone quite a long time. Rumor has it that
he's going for treatment, but nobody is sure exactly what that means. Therapy, maybe, to help him deal with how he looks now. After all, it's a far cry from . . . from who he used to be, isn't it?"

Michael stood so quickly that his chair tipped over backwards and crashed to the floor. "I have to go," he said abruptly. "You'll excuse me."

"Oh, but Michael," Monty protested, "you know it's . . . it's almost impossible to get in to see him these days. Between the police and his security people and that guy who's always there with him, and Dr. Keller . . ." The last word was spoken with particular disdain.

Michael barely paused on his way toward the stairs to call out a response. "No. It might be impossible for you to see him, but he'll see me. One way or another."

Ben just happened to be looking at Monty, as the lab technician turned and exchanged quick, but loaded glances with his partner, and knew that something was definitely up, that something was more than it seemed, and abruptly realized that he had never really liked either of the two men very much, although he'd let himself be taken in by their domestic bliss routine during a time when he and Michael had been particularly needy and vulnerable.

But he had no time to pursue that thought for the moment. He had something more important to do, to help his husband prepare for the confrontation he was facing.

The time had come . . . for truth.

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Brian sipped at his latte gratefully, favoring Matt Keller with a quick thumbs up while Rick Turnage made new, apparently extensive notes on his PDA, and Cynthia arranged a sheaf of documents that needed Brian's signature.

Completely out of character for her, Cynthia seemed nervous, the papers trembling in her hand as she tried to put them in order, and Brian noticed immediately, despite the fact that she was obviously trying to conceal her unease.

"Matt," Brian said softly, "could you take Pygmalion out of here for a minute? I need to have a brief business discussion with my junior partner."

Rick Turnage turned to stare directly into the eyes of his patient. "Pygmalion?"

Brian shrugged. "Sorry." But his tone made it plain that the apology was just a token.

Turnage was obviously not happy with the comment, but did not resist as Keller, wearing his customary smirk, led the plastic surgeon out into the corridor.

"Junior partner?" Cynthia managed a soft chuckle, still not completely herself, but sounding slightly calmer.

"Actually," Brian replied, reaching over and extracting a file from the nightstand, "yes. All signed, sealed, delivered - and completely legal."

Cynthia's eyes grew huge as she stared at the document he'd placed in her hand. "Brian," she whispered, "no. I can't accept this. I can't let you . . ."

She saw the smile in his eyes. "You can't stop me. It's done."
"But . . ."

"Cynthia," he said earnestly, "you need to understand this. No matter how much he insists otherwise, there's no guarantee that God-the-Surgeon's-Son out there is going to be able to do what he says he can. There's no guarantee that I will ever come back here. And, if that's how it all turns out, you're the person who'll have to run Kinnetic for me. For me, and for Gus. And for you . . . and Katy."

She took a deep, shaky breath. "For you," she whispered. "And for Gus and Katy. But only until you come home. I will not accept that you won't be coming back. You promise me, Brian, that you'll come back to us - no matter what. Do you really think I give a shit what you look like? Do you really think any of us care about that?"

He sighed. "Some will, and you know as well as I do that, in advertising, image is everything. Kinnetic needs a pretty face to present to the world. And now - that's you."

She nodded. "But only until it's you again."

He managed a small laugh. "Okay. If that's how you want to look at it."

She looked at the document again, which granted her a ten per cent interest in the company. "There are some people who are not going to be pleased with this," she said slowly.

He shrugged. "Fuck 'em all, Girl Friday."

She hesitated, then nodded. "Okay. Fuck 'em all. Now sign this shit for me so I can . . ."

"No need," he reminded her. "Your signature will work just as well."

"Maybe so, but I . . ."

She was interrupted by a commotion at the door and a cacophony of voices, as Chris McClaren left his post by the window, where he had been discreetly pretending not to hear the exchange between Brian and his assistant, and hurried to intercept whatever trouble might be trying to break in.

Trouble, as it turned out, was embodied in one dark-haired young man with determination in his belly and fire in his eye and his hunky partner-in-crime at his heels.

"Brian!" Michael's voice rang out like a rifle shot. "If you don't let me in, I'm going to tell my mother what really happened to her souvenir hurricane glass from Pat O'Brien's. I'm going to tell Horvath who really glued Judge Roy to the toilet seat. I'm going to . . ."

"Fuck!" said Brian, trying to concede defeat gracefully. "Let him in before he wakes the dead."

Michael didn't wait for a formal invitation, but forged inside, actually nudging Chris McClaren out of his way and leaving Ben to follow as best he could.

"Fuck you, Brian Kinney!" Michael snarled, stopping beside the bed and staring down at the man who had been his best friend since junior high school. "You're fuckin' pathetic, you know that?"

Brian simply blinked, and resorted to his coldest, most condescending manner. "What the fuck are you raving about?"

But Michael was not buying it. Instead, he simply leaned forward and kissed Brian - the kind of kiss that they only exchanged when their feelings were too profound for words. "Mikey . . ."
"Shut up, Brian!" Michael snapped. "And listen to me. Are you listening?"

Brian was not quite able to suppress a reluctant smile. "Yes. I'm listening."

Michael sat down on the edge of the bed, and stared daggers at Chris McClaren when it appeared that young man might step forward and try to pull him away. "Do you have any idea," he asked, returning his attention to his old friend, "how stupid I feel? That it took Ben to figure it out, and show me what you were up to? That I thought I knew you better than anybody, but never understood what you always tried to do?"

"Mikey . . ."

"I said, Shut - Up!" Michael retorted. "For once - just this once - you're going to listen to me. You're going to hear me. Understand?"

The smile was almost a grin now. "Yes, Boss."

"Sometimes, Ben understands me better than I understand myself. I know you probably think that's bullshit, considering your attitude about marriage and monogamy, but it's true anyway. He's the one who figured out how much I was hurting - inside - when I turned my back on you. And he's the one who reminded me that you've always protected me, even when I didn't understand that I needed protecting. And, finally, he's the one who's always known how much I loved you - how much I still love you. And I don't give a flying fuck whether you're still the beautiful Brian Kinney or you look like some ugly troll." His voice went soft then, as his eyes were suddenly filled with tears. "You're still my Brian, and you will always be young and beautiful to me, because I don't see you with my eyes. I see you . . . with my heart."

"Mikey . . ."

"Shut up. I'm not done."

"But . . ."

Ben was smiling. "I'd advise you to do as you're told, Mr. Kinney. He's in rare form today."

"Yeah," Brian muttered, "and it's all your fault."

"No more games, Brian," Michael said softly. "You've managed to fool just about everybody, for as long as I can remember, but you keep forgetting that I know you; I know what's under all the bullshit, and I'm not buying into the act any more. You're going away from us - today, if I heard right - but you're never going to be able to leave me behind. Because I'm always with you. And I always know what you are." He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Brian's forehead. "You're my best friend, and I love you, and I know what you deserve out of life."

"Yeah?" There was only a faint tremor in Brian's voice, but it was definitely there. "And what's that?"

"The best." Michael was absolutely certain. "Because that's what you are - the best friend a man could ask for."

"Mikey?"

"Yeah?"

"You're pathetic."
"I know."

"And I'm no angel, you know. In fact, I'm still more sinning than sinned against."

Michael blinked. "Huh?"

Ben chuckled. "Only Brian Kinney can twist Shakespeare around to suit his own purposes."

But Michael was not - quite - done. He had come to get an answer - one particular answer - and he wasn't leaving without it.

He looked down at Brian's face and waited until his old friend met his gaze, his eyes steady and unshadowed. "Do you still love me?" He asked, his voice feather soft, his heart in his throat.

Brian knew he should deny it. Knew that it would be the smart thing to do, for everyone's sake, especially Michael's. And he had always had the ability to lie without reservation, without qualms, when the need was dire.

Only, for some ungodly reason, not this time.

"Always have," he answered finally, lifting his hand to touch Michael's face. "Always will."

Michael took a moment to close his eyes and revel in the gentle touch of the fingers against his face. "Me too," he murmured finally. "And when I call you, you better fucking answer your phone. Am I allowed to know where you're going?"

Brian looked up and saw the warning in Chris McClaren's eyes. "It's better that you don't," he answered. "Better for you, and better for me."

Michael nodded, reluctantly, and looked over at his partner only to see that Ben was studying Chris McClaren's expression with great interest. He'd have to make a mental note to question his partner about what he'd found so interesting.

"One more thing," said Brian, as Michael hugged him, albeit very gently. "The people who did this ..." He drew a deep shaky breath, "they weren't kidding, Mikey. They meant to do as much damage as they could, to me and to the people I care about. And that could include you. So you promise me that you'll be careful. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Promise."

"I promise."

"Swear it!"

Michael was, by this time, having trouble seeing through the tears clouding his eyes. "I swear it, if you'll swear that you'll come back to us." He paused for a moment to regain his composure. "Nothing would ever be the same, without you."

Good-byes followed - quick, brisk, tearless. Mostly. Until there were only the patient, his primary physician, and his FBI bodyguard/pseudo-lover left in the room.

"You okay, Brian?" Keller's tone was very gentle.

"Fabulous," came the cold, clipped answer. "Why wouldn't I be?"
Keller leaned forward, ostensibly to check the security of the patient's IV line, but managing, in the process, to lay a tender palm against a bare patch of skin. "No reason," he replied. But his touch said much more. "The chopper will be here soon, so they'll be moving you up to the roof in a few minutes."

He started to pull away, but Brian caught his hand and held him motionless for a moment. "Thanks, Matt. I won't forget everything you did for me."

Keller grinned. "Damned right you won't. I intend to hold it over your head, forever." Then he dropped a quick kiss on Brian's forehead, and he was gone.

Minutes later, so was Brian.

The half-played chess game lay on the table before them, mostly forgotten, as Justin's eyes wandered repeatedly to the brilliant morning light pouring through the windows. His companion took another sip from the super-sized cup of Starbuck's French roast, extra bold coffee, a treat his young friend had brought to him every morning since he'd discovered how much Cedric longed for the taste of the dark roast blend native to his hometown. This was not real Cajun coffee, but it would do in a pinch.

They had started their game early, as they did almost every morning, since neither ever managed to sleep late given the general clamor of the hospital setting. Cedric, of course, had a designated room as part of his rehab program, but Justin tended to roam the corridors of the facility, sleeping wherever the notion took him - waiting rooms, consulting rooms, even empty patients' beds, on occasion.

Many of the staff members knew, of course, but they also knew why he was here, since several of them were part of his information network, helping him to keep tabs on the condition of one Brian Kinney. Doing so was, of course, against any number of regulations - local, state, and federal - but somehow, none of those he had enlisted could quite find it in themselves to deny his request for help. They laughed at themselves when they realized that they were moved to help him for ridiculously romantic reasons, but there it was, and they did not shirk their duties to him. He was young; he was beautiful, and what had happened to the man he obviously loved so desperately was enough to motivate anyone to try to help him.

At any rate, they all turned a blind eye to his transgressions, and did their best to grant him whatever comfort he managed to take from his desperate situation.

He sighed as he looked once more out into the sunshine, and thought about simple things like walking in the park, and floating in a pool, and driving with the top down. With Brian, of course. Otherwise, it just didn't matter.

Then he looked back at his friend, and read sad comprehension in the old man's eyes. His throat felt dry, and a glance at his watch revealed that he had been talking for more than an hour. He hadn't realized it had been so long; also hadn't realized how much he'd wanted to have someone listen to his story - his whole story, stretching from that first moment under a streetlight on Liberty Avenue, through his misadventure in a parking garage, his dalliance with Ethan, Brian's cancer and the whole Stockwell debacle, his glamorous stint in Hollywood, the bombing at Babylon, the wedding that didn't happen, and all the long hours since that last moment he'd spent with the man who still owned - would always own - his heart.

Cedric had been extraordinarily attentive, asking questions when appropriate, but mostly just listening.
When Justin had finally fallen silent, after struggling through a rough but thorough description of what had been done to Brian, and how he'd behaved afterwards, Cedric had nodded, and taken a few minutes to consider what he'd heard.

Justin was still waiting to hear whatever wisdom Cedric might have to offer in response.

The first thing the elderly man said puzzled him.

"If I were to tell you that your entire story involved the regular repetition of three little words, what do you think I'd be talking about?"

Justin smiled. "Guess there's no denying that I love him."

Cedric nodded. "I know that you do, Justin, but those aren't the three words I'm talking about."

"They're not?" Justin was honestly confused.

"No. They're not. You tell your story beautifully, you know, and you make your feelings for him very clear. Not to mention painting him with words almost as beautifully as I'm sure you paint him in oils. But this, ultimately, was not the story of how much you love him. The three words that you repeated - not just once, but several times - are, 'I left him'. Does it really surprise you so much that he has begun to doubt your willingness to base your life on your feelings for him?"

"But . . ."

"Especially," continued the older man gently, "if he's one of those noble souls who tends to blame himself for all the sins of the world. As I suspect he is."

"Brian?" Justin laughed. "Brian never blames himself for anything. He thinks he's perfect - above reproach."

Cedric's smile was very gentle. "Does he now?"

"Yes, he . . ." Justin fell silent, struck by a series of memories. Brian's face when he was trying to help Justin regain his memory of his bashing - white, and still and clinched with pain. Brian's face whenever he had refused to bind Justin or Lindsey or Michael - or anyone at all - to him whenever they chose to escape his grasp; Brian, resisting help or sympathy when he was diagnosed with cancer and didn't wish to be a burden to anyone; Brian after the bombing, helpless and desperate to make up for something he had no part in, but . . .

Could it really be that simple?

Cedric smiled again. "Perhaps you need to rethink your conclusions."

"Yeah." Justin felt like a kid with a brand new toy, eager to explore whatever it offered. "Maybe I do."

"Justin!" It was Roy Guerrio, one of the housekeeping staff who regularly worked the wind where Brian's room was located. "I've been looking all over for you."

"Hey, Roy," he replied. "What's up?"

The big, black man rolled his eyes. "What's up, Blondie, is that there's a medical chopper coming in for a landing as we speak, and your boyfriend is going to be loaded onto it, heading for parts unknown. And if you're gonna catch him before he's gone, you better skedaddle right now."
"What? What the fuck? Why didn't anybody tell me?"

Justin was already on his feet, racing toward the elevators.

"Not that way," shouted the housekeeper. "Take the stairs to the roof. It'll be faster. As for why nobody told you, it was top secret, I guess. I don't think anybody knew."

But he was talking to thin air, as Justin had already slammed through the door to the stairwell.

Chris McClaren didn't like rooftops. They made him nervous - too exposed, too lonely, too open, too unprotected. But since one couldn't very well land a helicopter in a parking garage, he supposed he'd just have to deal with it.

He had posted look-outs, both police officers and Mathis' security guards, and the bureau was monitoring everything via satellite. But he still didn't like it.

The chopper was heading toward them from the South, and would arrive within two minutes, and then it would be a matter of moments to get Brian and the plastic surgeon aboard for a short hop to a small local airport where they would board a private jet to complete their journey to the coastal area of North Carolina where Turnage's ultra-upscale, ultra-private little clinic and the cottage that had been rented for Brian's use were located - places that would be considerably easier to secure than this giant, sprawling complex.

But first they had to get there.

Brian was seated in his wheelchair, with a nurse close at hand to monitor his condition and his vital signs, while Rick Turnage asked him a series of questions, referring to information in the voluminous chart he had extracted from his briefcase.

A clatter behind them caused McClaren to spin toward the disturbance, and he had almost drawn his sidearm before he realized who it was who was racing toward them across the flat surface of the roof. A quick hand signal alerted the security people that the threat was not a real threat, but he shuddered to think how easily the situation could have gotten out of hand if Taylor had not been so instantly recognizable.

"Brian!" The young man wasn't wasting any energy in trying to approach quietly. "Brian, wait!"

McClaren glanced down at Kinney, and saw the renewed surge of despair in his eyes.

Justin was just a few feet away before he seemed to realize that he might be crossing some line that he should not cross and slid to a halt. "Where," he asked, gasping to catch his breath, "are you going?"

Once more, Brian had cause to be grateful for the bandages obscuring his face. Even wearing the mask, he wasn't entirely sure that his hunger for his former lover might not be glowing in his eyes, so he was careful to keep his gaze turned toward the approaching helicopter.

"I don't see why you need to know that," he replied shortly.

"But why? How can you be sure you'll be safe out there, wherever you're going?"

Brian's snicker was particularly nasty. "Like I was safe here, you mean?"
"No, I . . ."

"I told you to go home," Brian continued sharply. "Why are you still here?"

If McClaren had foreseen it, or been quick enough, he would have stepped in to intercept the young man, but Justin was surprisingly quick, and was on his knees at Brian's feet before anyone had a chance to react.

"Because I love you. And because I know you still love me, no matter how much you claim otherwise."

Brian closed his eyes, and only McClaren was close enough to notice how much he was trembling as he fought to regain his emotional control. "If you really love me," he said finally, softly, "you'll do as I ask and let me go. I can't spend my life waiting for you to make up your mind, Justin. You wanted your freedom; now you have it. So go. Fly away."

Tears trembled on blond lashes, as a gentle hand reached up to touch Brian's face. He flinched away, but not quite quickly enough to prevent Justin from caressing his cheek, the gentleness of the touch feeling like a redhot brand against his skin.

"I can't fly without you, and I know you don't mean it. Please, Brian. Don't leave me."

"I have to," Brian whispered, suddenly weary of it all. "I'm tired, Justin. I can't do this any more. I need you . . . to let me go."

Justin studied his face, trying to see through the bandages, trying to read an expression he couldn't see, but all he could actually see were Brian's eyes, which seemed to be filled with an almost unbearable sadness.

"Is that what you really want?"

Brian thought his heart might shatter in his chest as he recognized the defeat in Justin's weary voice.

"It is," he answered, forcing himself to allow nothing of his grief to color his tone.

"Then show me," Justin demanded. "Say good-bye, exactly the way you always have."

Brian didn't know if he could endure this, but he knew what he had to do. He leaned forward, and reached out to caress beautiful, pale, silken skin and hair shining like spun gold in the bright morning light. Then he touched his lips to the mouth that he would have gladly spent a lifetime devouring, if fate had only allowed it, and traced his tongue across its sensual curve.

"I did love you," he whispered, barely able to swallow the tears rising in his throat, "but it's time to let it go."

Justin simply nodded. Then he stood up and walked away. He never looked back as he heard the helicopter settle to the roof behind him, and was buffeted by the wild cyclonic swirl of its landing.

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The hook had been set by virtue of a lot of careful preparation - and a little bit of luck - but reeling in the catch, without allowing it to wriggle free, would require the touch of a master. Luckily, Jared Hilliard was a skilled angler, so to speak.

Fine-tuned orchestration of the events following the attempt to burn down Brian Kinney's residence had gotten exactly the results that Lance Mathis and his team had intended, but not without a concentrated effort. The police and security pursuit of the culprits had been an intense exercise requiring precision timing and just a tiny nuance of slight-of-hand - a deliberate choreography of glancing blows and near misses, culminating in Hilliard leading his two marks into the basement of an abandoned building with only seconds to spare as a group of pursuers rounded an adjacent corner to find themselves charging into a blind alley with no obvious means of escape.

The window through which the three had gained entrance to the old building was small and low to the ground, and almost invisible behind a couple of trash barrels, unless, of course, one knew where to look. It was the perfect hiding place, noted and prepared well in advance, and the two young targets had never thought to question Hilliard's knowledge of it. He was, after all, a street person - homeless, vagrant, and dependent on his familiarity with such places for his survival.

They had waited in dark, damp, almost breathless silence as the search had progressed, and Hilliard had been forced to hide a smile as the police personnel had played their parts admirably, two of them, at one point, even pausing just outside the window for a cigarette and a casual discussion about why they had to waste their time "protecting a little queer like Brian Kinney", all carefully scripted, of course, to encourage the targets of the sting to begin to develop a sense of security.

The two young hoodlums had been so terrified of being found out that they'd alternated between struggling to breathe and shaking so violently that the tympanic rhythm of their knees knocking together had almost certainly been audible to the search party lingering nearby, but, in the end, all necessary parts had been perfectly played, and Jared Hilliard, AKA Jed Harper, had ingratiated himself into the lives of his new buddies, having given them cause to be extremely grateful for his intervention. He had also realized, almost immediately, that these two were mere tools in the hands of the still unknown, faceless individuals who had been responsible for the original attack and everything since. Neither Buddy Charles nor Pete Ruiz, in spite of their superficial façade of street creds, were capable of conceiving or implementing any kind of plan for causing damage or pain for Brian Kinney; in fact, neither of them even knew who he was or why he had been targeted. Thus, they were useless in helping to understand the motivations or the goals of the powers behind the plot. But they did possess one bit of knowledge that might prove invaluable to the investigation. They didn't know the basic truths behind the attack, but they knew someone who did, or who, at least, could provide the next link the chain. Thus, they were worth cultivating as a source.

With a little luck and a judicious application of his own very specific brand of street smarts, he would be able to convert that asset into coin that would move the investigation closer to its desired conclusion - the identification and apprehension of the individuals who had fired the opening salvo in this little homophobic campaign that was threatening to develop into a full-fledged war of attrition.

But he needed to exercise extreme caution in taking the next move; the prey was still skittish, and his access to the lowest level of the conspiracy was no more than a toehold. He would need to be slow, methodical, and extremely wary in trying to expand it, but he already had an inkling of how to go about it, always providing that he could get help from his contacts or make that Kinney's contacts, within the ranks of Pittsburgh's finest. He had talked to Mathis about his idea, and found him
receptive, but the next step meant discussing the scenario with Horvath, who might be less willing to take a chance.

Still, it was time to concentrate on doing his part - taking the next baby step - before worrying about calling in the cavalry.

His cover was still intact. To reinforce it, and prevent any trace of suspicion about a connection to the area around Kinney's loft, he had gone back earlier in the day to remove his makeshift shelter from its position across from the building that was Kinney's residence. He had been circumspect in his movements, careful to preserve the lackadaisical quality of his decision to move on so that any observer would conclude that he was simply wandering off in search of easier pickings. Meanwhile, the less-random-than-they-seemed patrols of the neighborhood would continue, and a new protocol had been established, involving 24-hour surveillance - four team members, in six-hour shifts, patrolling the interior perimeter of the building's ground floor, behind newly-installed window tinting which would prevent their presence from being detected, as they made their rounds and made use of the continuous electronic monitoring which Mathis had implemented immediately after Brian's rescue.

Thus, Hilliard did not feel as if he were deserting his post; instead, he was marginally convinced that he was making real progress toward finding answers.

When he arrived at the site of his new flop, he paused for a moment, looking out across the abandoned park that was his destination, to the spires of the old church which was even older than most of the buildings around it, and spent a few minutes trying to imagine what the area might have been like during its early years. Now it was a blight upon the face of the city, dark and stained and derelict, a slum in every sense of the word and a far cry from what it had once been.

Reilly Flats had once been a working class neighborhood, which had begun its life as a semi-rural hamlet clustered around a general store, a barbershop, a dilapidated old Esso station (long before the advent of the ubiquitous Exxon logo) and a tiny pub, all huddled close against the solid gothic walls (and the solid moral compass) of the Holy Name Catholic Church, located beyond the extreme outskirts of the city. It had flourished with a true village mentality only to eventually be engulfed by the urban sprawl of greater Pittsburgh. In the course of its evolution, it had spread out to become a vast area which - remarkably - managed to retain a small-town sense of neighborhood. It had been composed almost entirely of single family dwellings: small, one- or two-story clapboard houses with covered, hospitable front porches, narrow basements, and detached single-car garages, constructed on shallow lots and providing shelter for lower middle-class factory workers - employees of the steel industry and chemical plants and foundries, tool and die makers, canneries, trucking firms, paper mills, and bottling companies. Small, grassy back yards provided space for multiple strands of clothes lines and tiny concrete-block patios supporting barbeque pits made from 55-gallon drums, all built within walking distance of a city block-sized expanse, locally known as Darby's Field, with a tiny little pond at the northern end and a fenced-off baseball diamond at the other, a simple venue which was a combination playground, athletic field, and gathering place for use by the whole community.

During the middle years of the twentieth century, the Flats had been home to a predominantly white population, many of them second or third-generation descendents of Irish or German or Italian immigrants, hard-working and fiercely independent. Though never home to the social or cultural elite, or the wealthy or politically prominent, it had been a good place to live, the kind of grass roots, heartland community that contributed greatly to the world's idea of what comprised the American dream. Despite occasional hard economic times and cyclical troubles, it had been a product of American's Age of Innocence - a surprisingly safe refuge from the darker times looming on every horizon. Brian Kinney and Michael Novotny and the others who were part of their crowd would not understand how much it was missed by some of the people who had been a part of it, but Debbie
Novotny understood it perfectly, having been born and raised within its borders; it had always bothered her that her son had never experienced that kind of social innocence - an urban world where children had been able to play safely in and around the streets without having parents driven instantly to a state of panic if their offspring were out of sight or out of mind for a few hours, and where terms like "child molester" and "pedophile" and "sexual predator" had not yet become a part of the lexicon of the streets.

Maybe, Debbie sometimes thought, it had not been Camelot or Xanadu or Shangri-La - exactly, but, in retrospect, it seemed to have come very close.

But time, economic fluctuations, and the eventual decline of the steel industry had caused elementary changes in the neighborhood. The old-timers who had built the area during the halcyon days of their youth, had died off, and the younger generation had migrated to the suburbs, while the infrastructure had deteriorated. Single-family dwellings had gone to ruin over the years as personal income had declined, and the erection of cheaply-built housing projects and multi-storied warrens masquerading as apartment houses had resulted in an influx of the poor, the unemployed, and the uneducated.

Nobody was ever exactly sure when the much-lamented community had disappeared, lost beneath the rise of the ghetto.

Darby Field, once the site of softball tournaments and 4th of July celebrations and block parties and impromptu hockey games and intense snowball fights during the long, dark winter months, was now little more than a trash-filled, overgrown vacant lot that provided a short cut from one crowded, dirty street to the next, with nothing more than a few cracked concrete slabs scattered here and there, the half-collapsed skeleton of a tin-roofed section of bleachers and one rusted basketball hoop dangling from a broken backboard to remind anyone of what it had once been.

Jared Hilliard chose his spot carefully, tucked away beneath the only remaining part of the bleachers that had not caved in upon itself. It was not, in truth, much of a shelter, but it was better than some other places he had used during his years as an undercover cop in his native city of Baltimore, when playing the role that allowed him to develop a rapport with the street people who often knew much more about truth and reality than the so-called respectable members of a given society might realize. His efforts had earned him a nickname within the department that he'd been rather fond of - the Chameleon. But these days, he didn't allow himself to spend much time thinking about those years, or the career that was irrevocably lost to him when a drugged-out prostitute had shot him in the back while he was defending her from the pimp who was trying to carve her into mincemeat. Sixteen months later, after multiple surgeries and intensive rehab, he had been informed by his oh-so-sympathetic superiors that the damage caused by his injury precluded his return to his previous job. Instead, he was offered a position overseeing the evidence locker at central headquarters - a position most frequently filled by beat cops no longer able to deal with the rigors of patrol and biding their time until they had sufficient tenure to retire.

He had considered the offer for exactly two minutes before surrendering his gun and his badge to the lieutenant who had been charged with breaking the news. Then he had walked out of the precinct office, never to return.

It had been the end of a dream he had pursued throughout his youth, beginning with his stint in the army which provided the funding to allow him to earn a criminal justice degree in order to qualify for a professional-level position with the police department where his two older brothers were both employed as patrolmen.

He had left Baltimore a week later, finding employment with a private security firm in Philadelphia, quickly establishing himself as an expert in undercover surveillance. A year later, the company had
expanded and opened an office in Pittsburgh, and Hilliard had accepted an assignment there, only to
find, to his complete astonishment, a home, like none he had ever known before.

He still didn't understand why the city had immediately felt so familiar to him, or why he had realized
that it was the place he was meant to be, but he did not try to deny it. He had always been a big
believer in taking life as it came to him, and Pittsburgh, for whatever reason, had come to him like a
revelation. It was home, and it always would be, even though the job - and the people he worked for
- still left a great deal to be desired. A few months later, reacting to a vague sense of wanderlust, he
had found himself strolling into a pool hall on Liberty Avenue and striking up a conversation with a
friendly young executive-type named Lawrence Blanchard, who was, at that time, chief of security
for Kinnetic Corp, the predecessor of Lance Mathis.

The rest, he thought, as he gazed out across a field of broken memories, was history.

Well - almost.

He had liked Lawrence Blanchard immediately, finding him approachable, hip, direct, and blessed
with an understated, wickedly dry sense of humor that reminded Jared of his baby brother, David.
Jared's father, a deeply religious man with iron-clad protestant convictions, had always mourned his
youngest son's sharp tongue and smart mouth, generally labeling his attitude and his commentary as
blasphemous, but Jared had always preferred to describe young David's outlook on life as both
remarkably accurate and extremely irreverent - a combination he enjoyed enormously. Blanchard
and David would have gotten along beautifully, he thought, and when Blanchard offered him a job
as assistant security director at Kinnetic, after having known him only a matter of hours, explaining
that the position would entail being part of a team dedicated to protecting the interests of the Liberty
Avenue version of Casanova, he had accepted without a second thought, thoroughly intrigued. Any
man who could inspire such a sobriquet he knew he had to meet.

Later, he would come to speculate about how his younger sibling would have reacted to the colorful
- many would say flamboyant - individual who was both the source and the focus of his employment.
Conversely, he never had to wonder what his father would have thought of Brian Kinney. Jared had
been present at Kinnetic - the very first shift of his very first day on the job - on the occasion of
Brian's infamous shouting match with his mother, after his bout with cancer, and the security guard
had known immediately how difficult it must have been for Brian to endure the condemnation that
was written so large on his mother's face as she'd hastened out of her son's office; Jared had known
because he had endured something very similar on the day his father had learned that his third child
- the fine, upstanding, police-officer son, who had always been his pride and joy - was not quite as
much an adherent to the straight and narrow path as he'd always believed.

After Joan Kinney had made her escape from her son's presence and from his life, undoubtedly
washing her hands of him and wiping the dust of the place from her feet in a manner befitting
Biblical decree, Jared had stood in the lobby for a few minutes, remembering his own feelings
following his father's rejection, which had come in the form of an eerily calm announcement of
Hilliard Sr.'s certainty that no fornicating abomination could possibly be a son of his. That occasion
had been followed by the same kind of stunned silence that followed Brian's mother's departure, as
everyone else in the building had seemed frozen and uncertain of what - if anything - should be
done, but Jared had acted instinctively, going to Brian's office and knocking on the door, not even
sure what he meant to say, but knowing he had to say something.

He had been surprised to find Brian smiling when he'd stepped into the office, and he'd faltered then,
suddenly wondering if his presence might be considered intrusive rather than supportive.

Brian had looked at him, interest flickering in beautiful hazel eyes, but with no real sense of
recognition.

"What's up?" the heart and soul of Kinnetic had asked, his smile growing larger as he'd apparently found some cause for obscure amusement in his own words.

"Are you . . . all right, Mr. Kinney?"

Brian had frowned then. "And that would be your concern, how, exactly?"

Hilliard had offered a small shrug. "It's what I get paid to do."

"What? Sticking your nose in my business?"

Hilliard, with absolutely no indication of embarrassment or apology, had replied, "No. Protecting you."

Brian had paused, looking confused. "From my mother?" There'd been no mistaking the degree of his incredulity.

And Hilliard had laughed, recognizing the farcical nature of the moment, prompting Brian to laugh with him, while asking, "By the way, who the fuck are you?"

That had been their formal introduction, and they had shared a few laughs about it since then, mostly late at night when Brian was working after hours on some special project and had invited Jared in for brandy and cigars. Brian had, of course, given the comely security guard the de rigueur once over that was expected of him in any face-to-face encounter with an attractive man, and Hilliard had recognized, immediately, that the man did not believe in fouling his own nest - which, he occasionally admitted in the privacy of his own thoughts, was a real pity. However, as time had passed, Hilliard had discovered something about his employer that had surprised him, once he'd managed to get beyond the levels of attraction and desire that Kinney inspired in almost everyone. He had expected to lust after the man; he had definitely not expected to like or admire him.

In some ways, such feelings made his job easier. In others, much more complicated.

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He unloaded his belongings from the shabby old wheelbarrow that served as his means of transport, and proceeded to erect his shelter, re-using plastic sheeting and cardboard and an assortment of items salvaged from trash barrels and dumpsters. He had been doing such tasks over such a long period of time that it had become routine, requiring little in the way of conscious thought, and allowing him to concentrate his attention elsewhere.

Thus, he was instantly aware of the approach of the two teen-agers who had urged him to take up residence here, within the area that they considered their own stomping ground, where - they had suggested - their extended families would welcome him to the neighborhood, which, of course, was exactly the kind of connection that Hilliard had been anticipating.

"Hey, Jed," said Buddy, as he knelt at the entrance to the newly constructed shelter, "why were you hanging out in Queerville? I mean, you're not . . . like that, are you?"

Hilliard fixed the teen-ager with a stern glare. "How is that any of your business, Punk? And what have you got against queers anyway?"

"They're queers," the boy answered, obviously feeling no need for any further explanation.
"Yeah, well, let me tell you something, Stud," Hilliard replied. "A little piece of wisdom, just in case you ever find yourself in dire need. The people who live there - in the area you call Queerville - are a hell of a lot more generous than your ordinary man on the street. Ask anyone who's ever been homeless, and they'll tell you that you've got a lot better shot at getting help from the fags on Liberty Avenue than the solid citizens of Shadyside or Squirrel Hill."

"Yeah," said Pete Ruiz doubtfully, "but they're queers."

Hilliard sighed. "Yeah. I believe that's already been established. So just so we're clear on it. Is that why you were trying to burn down Kinney's loft? Because he's a fag?"

Ruiz shrugged. "That's enough, ain't it?"

"Actually, it's not," Hilliard answered. "You took a really stupid risk. For what? So you'd get some kind of silly kick out of some secondhand account of the blaze? I mean, it's not like you were going to get the chance to stand around and watch it go up in smoke. And why that specific place, for fuck's sake? There are plenty of easier targets on Liberty Avenue. Like I told you, the guy that lives there has more money than God, and lots of friends, so, if you're not angling for a long stay at Frackville, you'll pick better targets for your petty vandalism."

"Look," said Ruiz, "it wasn't like that. We were just doing something for . . ."

"For kicks," Charles interrupted, an angry warning blazing in his eyes as he glared at his friend. "Look, Bro, we know we were stupid, and it could have gone bad for us if you hadn't stepped in. So we owe you one. And my mom - she wants you to come have supper with us. Tonight?"

Hilliard looked askance at the young black man whose skin was the color of dark honey and very beautiful. "Wait a minute. You told her? She knows what happened, what you did?"

The teen-ager grinned. "I may be young, but I'm not brainless. Of course, I didn't tell her the truth. She got a slightly edited version. She thinks you saved me and Pete from a bunch of North Charles Street Crips."

Hilliard drew a deep breath. "And now you expect me to what? Go along with your lies."

Charles shrugged. "All you have to do is nod and just agree with whatever she says. It'll be okay. And when's the last time you had a real home-cooked meal, Dude? She's a great cook. Even rich white dudes can't get enough of her cooking."

"Yeah?" Hilliard laughed. "And how many rich white dudes drop in for dinner at your house?"

The youth rolled his eyes. "Not at my house, Asshole. At her job. She cooks for this fancy rich man's club out in the north hills."

Hilliard frowned and looked out across the park toward the drab concrete façade of an apartment tower, knowing that he needed to shore up his image as a homeless veteran. "I don't do too well in social settings," he explained. "I'd probably make your mother uncomfortable."

Pete Ruiz leaned against an upright support beam and lit a cigarette. "No worries, Man. Buddy's dad was a Viet Nam vet, who came back home with lots of problems - physical and mental - so there's not much you could throw at Miss Rachel that she couldn't handle."

Hilliard's eyes were suddenly full of shadows. "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

Buddy Charles frowned. "Okay. You're right. I don't know. But it's just one meal, and my mom
really wants to thank you for your help. One hot meal and a few hours inside, where it's warm. What have you got to lose?"

Hilliard managed - barely - not to smile, as he concluded that the important question was actually the reverse of the one the boy had posed. What, after all, did he have to gain?

Brian relaxed against the suede softness of the plush recliner, noting to himself that traveling via private jet was definitely the way to hop across the country, held tenderly in the lap of luxury. He tried not to fidget under the attentions of the nurse who was cutting away the last of his bandages. Ordinarily, he would not have resisted the gentle touch of a human hand - even of the female persuasion - but he was tired of having people treat him as he were made of fragile crystal, just one high C away from shattering.

Brian Kinney was nothing if not tough, despite the perfection of his face and form.

He frowned. Make that the former perfection of his face and form. How long would it be, he wondered, before the self image within his mind matched the reality of the vision he might glimpse in any mirror. And how long before he came to envy Count Dracula’s immunity to reflection?

He turned his head then, to glance out the window and spotted the distinctive sprawl of the nation's capital laid out beyond the port wing, the curve of the Potomac glittering in the brilliance of the afternoon sunlight. Chris McClaren was watching as well, sipping at a glass of very old, very expensive single malt whiskey which had been served up by the lone flight attendant who was still standing nearby, waiting to respond to the beck and call of any of the plane's passengers. Or the man who was, undoubtedly, her lord and master.

Rick Turnage was, of course, ignoring them all, giving his full attention to an image on his computer screen.

"Nice wheels, Doc," said Brian, his eyes taking in the details of the luxuriously furnished main cabin of the Lear Jet.

Turnage didn't even lift his eyes as he offered up a minimal response. "It serves the purpose."

"Please, Mr. Kinney," said Brenda Herring softly, as she attempted to wipe away the last of the adhesive residue from his face while maintaining a professional demeanor. "Just a few more moments and we'll be done here."

When Brian flinched away from her touch as she was forced to rub forcefully at a stubborn spot, she recoiled slightly. "I'm so sorry," she murmured. "Dr. Turnage needs to be able to examine you thoroughly, so we need to remove every trace of this adhesive, but I'm trying not to hurt you."

Brian looked up into gentle gray eyes, and frowned. "How did you," he asked in a tone that managed to combine tender regard with more than a touch of sarcasm, "wind up with him?"

Rick Turnage was still busy at a miniature version of the desk that occupied center stage in his office at home. "Brenda supplies what I can't," he volunteered, looking up quickly to confront his patient with cold blue eyes. "Coddling."

Brian surprised himself by responding with a bark of laughter. "I hope you pay her extremely well. Making up for your singular bedside manner must be a particularly demanding, almost full-time job."

Turnage frowned. "What I pay my assistant," he said slowly, "is none of your concern, Mr. Kinney.
But I'm curious about what you're expecting from me. If you want me to stroke your ego - which doesn't appear to need any stroking, from me or anyone else - then you're in the wrong place. I assure you, there are plenty of sycophants out there who'll be happy to hold your hand and moan and groan with you over the cruelty of fate and your terrible misfortune. If that's what you want."

Brian's smile was cold. "It's not. I don't need anyone to grieve on my behalf."

"Good, because that's something I can't give you, although I'm sure Brenda will be glad to manufacture tears for you, if it'll make you feel any better."

The nurse in question simply continued with her task of cleaning Brian's face, but her smile as she did so was very sweet, and her touch seemed to grow even more gentle, managing to convey her message without ever actually needing to speak.

"On the other hand," said Turnage, rising and moving to Brian's side with a small leather pouch in his hand, "if you want the damage that was done to you repaired, you're exactly where you need to be."

Brian took a moment to study the man's expression before choosing his response. "All right, Doc. It's time for truth - with all cards on the table. I understand that medicine is not really an exact science - that there are no iron-clad guarantees. But I want your best professional opinion. Do you really believe that you can fix this?" He lifted one hand in a gesture that managed to convey the full sweep of his injuries.

Turnage did not answer immediately, and Brian found that he was grateful for that. He did not want knee-jerk assurances and easy promises. He wanted the truth - or as much of it as the physician was capable of providing.

The doctor leaned forward, his eyes examining every detail of the patient's features, taking in the full extent of the damage; what would fade with time, what would heal without intervention, and, more importantly, what would not. He wanted to be glib in his response, cocksure and unapologetic and disdainful of any possibility of failure; it was an attitude he frequently assumed in such moments.

Only . . . Shit!

Instead of offering his customary arrogant assurances, he surprised himself by settling into the chair at Brian's side and choosing his words carefully. "You're right. As much as I might prefer to disagree, I cannot promise you - without reservation - that it will be possible to 'fix you', as you put it. But I will tell you this; if I can't do it, it can't be done. And I firmly believe that I can not only repair the damage . . ." He could not suppress the gleam of avarice that flared in his eyes, "I can improve on the original. You'll not only be the beautiful Brian Kinney again; you'll be better."

"No, I won't."

Turnage frowned. "Why not?"

Brian chose to favor Nurse Brenda with his most brilliant smile, which still managed - somehow - to be brilliant despite the terrible mutilation caused by his injuries. "Because you can't improve on perfection."

The nurse squeezed his hand, barely managing to swallow the little laugh that his insouciance had triggered. It was truly a marvel, she thought, that a man so severely damaged could still manage to touch the hearts of those around him. She also noted that Chris McLaren didn't even bother to try to suppress his snicker.
Turnage went back to his examination of Brian's injuries, his gloved hand exploring a particularly ugly scar just in front of the left ear that had damaged underlying muscle tissue, resulting in a distortion of the shape of the eye. "I could build up your chin, you know," he said, fingers probing and pulling as he ignored the patient's attempts to evade his touch. "It's not really proportional to the rest of your face, and it would be fairly easy to correct, so . . . oh, for God's sake, would you please be still!"

Brian shifted slightly and fixed the physician with a cold stare. "My chin was fine, just the way it was."

Turnage was abruptly, uncomfortably aware that Chris McClaren was standing close behind him. Too close, and it was vaguely alarming to realize that he had never even noticed when the FBI agent had approached, almost as if he had simply materialized, out of thin air.

"I believe Mr. Kinney is uncomfortable, Doctor," said McClaren softly, but there was an element of steel beneath the velvet tone. "Perhaps you could give him a little time to recover."

"Time is something we can't afford to waste," snapped Turnage. "I need to take some measurements of his bone structure, and diagram his injuries, and . . ."

"Dr. Turnage," said Brenda, "I'd be happy to do the measurements, while you record the damage." Her tone was very professional, but her smile was slightly diffident. "Surely, that would be the most efficient use of our time. Wouldn't it?"

Turnage could not quite conceal the grimace that touched his face, and Brian realized immediately that the man was being played, and knew it. Furthermore, it was pretty obvious that he did not like it, but Brenda Herring was, apparently, not quite such a helpless supplicant at the feet of the Great God Turnage as she'd first appeared, as the doctor elected to back down, rather than call her on her insolence.

Brian decided that he was coming to admire Nurse Herring more with every passing moment, and the expression on Chris McClaren's face suggested that he might agree, if, indeed, the tiny, barely-there smirk that had appeared so fleetingly on his features could be termed an expression at all.

The patient allowed the nurse to position him carefully, in preparation for using the instruments in the leather case to measure the dimensions of his bone structure. His eyes, however, remained restless, following Turnage's movements with more than a trace of skepticism. "Matt Keller told me that you do volunteer work on children from third world nations, with facial deformities."

"That's correct," Turnage replied absently as he adjusted the settings on his interactive pen display unit.

"Hard to believe," Brian observed.

"Why's that?"

"Because arrogance and charity don't usually co-exist very well." Brian grinned. "I should know."

At this point, Chris McClaren was forced to turn away, to avoid laughing in the face of both the physician and his patient, but Turnage, in characteristic narcissist mode, simply ignored the FBI agent and appeared to be considering his response carefully. "You think me incapable of charity?" he asked finally, apparently not even remotely insulated.

Brian smiled. "I think you unconcerned with compassion, and incapable of empathy."
To the surprise of everyone in the cabin - except Brian himself - Turnage nodded. "Very astute, Mr. Kinney. So why do you think I donate my time and efforts to repair those damaged children?"

Brian did not hesitate. "Two reasons. Because you learn from them - every attempt is an opportunity to get better - and because it strokes your ego to be acknowledged for your humanitarian efforts."

Turnage paused for a moment, resetting the definition on the screen of the pen device, suddenly caught up in the memory of the first of the children he had 'repaired' - a six-year-old girl from the Dominican Republic who'd been born with a horribly deformed cleft lip, among other things. Her name had been Paola, and fortune had been hideously unkind to her, in a multitude of ways. Though he had managed to reconstruct her face so that she had no longer been a creature of extraordinary ugliness, there had been little he could do to repair her body of the other birth defects which had left her twisted and paralyzed and almost certainly doomed to an early, meaningless death. Nevertheless, when she had been ready to depart, to go back to her bleak existence in the slums of Santo Domingo, she had smiled at him and thanked him for making her 'beautiful'. In truth, she had not really been beautiful; the extent of her deformities had precluded that possibility, but her comment had led him to understand that beauty and normalcy were all a matter of degree.

He had never told anyone about what he had felt when she'd expressed her gratitude or what he had learned from her example of courage and grace. And he wasn't about to do so now.

Humility was not a suit that he wore easily or often or well.

"Right," he retorted finally. "Now, can we stop philosophizing, and get on with the business at hand?"

The physician moved back to his desk to bring up a new file on his computer, and Chris McClaren dropped into the chair at Brian's side, a speculative look on his face.

"What?" asked Brian, slightly alarmed to realize that he had begun to read the FBI agent's expressions with a remarkable degree of accuracy.

"Did it every occur to you - considering that he's going to be standing over your unconscious body with a scalpel in his hand - that it might be a good idea to avoid pissing him off?"

Brian lay back against the pillows that Nurse Herring had arranged beneath him in order to brace his neck and shoulders, and regarded McClaren with a stony stare. "Don't see the point," he answered after a moment of consideration, "seeing as how he'd rather cut off his own thumbs than take a chance on fucking up the work he does on me and winding up looking like a first-class screw-up."

McClaren appeared to think it over. Then he smiled. "Unless you make him so furious that he decides it would be worth it, just to shut you up."

Brian confined his response to a wordless half-shrug which translated - in typical Brian jargon - to something akin to "So what?"

"I want to talk to my son," he announced suddenly to no one in particular. "Now."

Turnage didn't bother to try to camouflage a huff of impatience. "Look, Kinney, we really need to finish our preparations. My primary surgical team will be waiting for us when we land, and . . ."

"In that case," Brian interrupted, "it would be better if someone gets my son on the phone for me now, rather than later."

The nurse paused for a moment in the measurements she was taking to clean away a final spot of
adhesive residue from an area under the patient's jaw and regarded him with steady, sympathetic gray
eyes. "Mr. Kinney," she began, "don't you think . . ."

"I think," he replied firmly, "that I've made myself clear." Then he turned to look up directly into
McClaren's eyes. "Would you get my son on the phone? Please."

McClaren paused briefly, returning Brian's gaze, not quite sure what it was he was hearing in the ad
exec's voice. But then he realized that it wasn't important to understand why Brian wanted to talk to
his young son at this particular point in time. It only mattered that he wanted it. So he nodded and
retrieved the telephone handset from its cradle against the forward bulkhead, and put the call through
without comment.

Brian lay quietly, allowing the nurse to proceed with the task she was performing, but his posture
was becoming increasingly rigid as his breathing seemed to grow rougher and less regular, and
McClaren watched him with growing concern. Thus, it was with a sense of relief that he moved
forward to hand the telephone to Brian, as a small, shrill voice echoed through the cabin, a voice
screaming, "Daaaddddeeee!" And immediately, Brian was relaxed again, his eyes bright with
anticipation.

"Hey, Sonny Boy," he said softly, settling the handset against his shoulder. "How are you?"

And that, as usual, was all that was required to set Gus into full soliloquy-mode, cataloging every
detail of his day and his thoughts and his enthusiasm and the thousand other aspects of who he was,
while Brian simply smiled and listened, interjecting an occasional word of encouragement or request
for enlightenment.

Chris McClaren returned to his post near the window, staring down at the eastern shoreline and the
muddy gray sweep of the Atlantic beyond, and let his mind wander, while he monitored the
conversation going on behind him with half an ear, just in case there might be some scrap of useful
information in Brian's responses to his son's breathless monologue. It was truly amazing, he thought,
how the attitude of one person could set the tone for everyone within the sound of that particular
voice, even when the man in question was totally focused on a person and a place that was steadily
falling farther and farther behind them.

Then he grinned as he wondered how traditional psychologists would categorize Brian Kinney.
Would they agree with his own assessment? Would they be able to overcome innate, hard-wired
resistance to the idea that an out-and-proud, unapologetic, totally upfront homosexual could also be
the alpha male of any given group? Or would they voice their disagreement loudly, scoffing at his
conclusions?

In the end, it wouldn't matter; he needed no confirmation from anyone else.

He turned then to study Brian's face, and was marginally surprised to realize that he had learned to
look beneath the horrible damage, below the injuries and the trauma, and see the man who still lived
beneath the façade. That man was smiling now, obviously deeply, irrevocably in love with the child
he claimed he'd never wanted, and not looking especially alpha in his father-guise.

But McClaren knew the truth. There was a deep, sensually-satisfying peace in the cabin at that
moment, and it touched them all. And it emanated from the man at its center.

The alpha male.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~
"Gone? What do you mean, gone?"

Cynthia sighed, noting that Ted's voice tended to climb into operatic octaves when he was distressed. Or angry.

"Sit down, Ted," she said softly, "and I'll . . ."

"I don't want to sit down, thank you very much," he retorted, standing very stiff and straight. "I want to know why Brian would just vanish like this. Where the fuck has he gone?"

She considered her response carefully before speaking, trying to find a way to defuse the situation and calm her associate's outrage. "He's being transported to a private clinic. For intense physical therapy. And surgical intervention."

Ted began to pace, his movements jerky and without grace. "And Kinnetic? What happens to this company - the one I've . . . " He paused, and had the grace to flush crimson beneath her speculative gaze,"we've all fought so hard to build?"

She smiled, but swallowed it quickly as she realized that he would interpret any such expression as patronizing and condescending. "Relax, Ted. It's not like he's traveling out into the depths of the Sahara, or to the ice ridges of Antarctica. He'll have access to telephones and computers, and he'll be checking in regularly. He's run the company in absentia before, so . . ."

"I know, but there are sensitive decisions to be made. Financial issues that need addressing, and clients to entertain and mollify, and new accounts that require . . ."

She held up a hand to put a stop to the tirade, and to prevent it from escalating into a full-fledged queen-out. "Ted, simply jot down any question you might have, and send them all to me via email - as needed - and I'll make sure he gets them."

Ted stopped pacing and fixed her with a cold stare. "Why should I send them to you? Why can't I go directly to him for answers? I have his email address, and his cell phone number so why . . ."

But Cynthia was shaking her head. "Ted, he's not . . . he needs time to come back from all this, which is why he's asked me to handle as much as I can of the day-to-day business of running Kinnetic. He needs to be able to concentrate on getting better, and he trusts me to . . ."

"Aha!" he replied sharply. "That's the real issue here, isn't it? He trusts you. He's put everything in your hands."

"Of course, he hasn't," she replied, refusing to allow her own anger to flare in the face of the accountant's hostility. "You, Ted Schmidt, are his CFO. For God's sake, man, you control the money. All of it. Do you really think he'd just walk away and leave you with that kind of power if he didn't trust you implicitly?"

For the first time since entering the office, Ted's resentment seemed to fade, and he allowed himself to settle into a chair. "No," he admitted. "He wouldn't. It's just . . ."

This time, Cynthia allowed herself the tiny smile. "We're all scared, Ted. No matter how successful the company is, or how efficiently it operates in his absence, without Brian, it's not . . . Kinnetic."

Ted sighed. "No, it's not. But I guess we're all going to have to step up, until . . . well, until we see what happens. Have you considered the possibility that he might . . ."

He fell silent then, and looked as if he wished he had not begun to express his darkest concerns.
"No," she said quickly. "And neither should you. He's Brian Kinney, and he will come back, one way or another."

But Ted thought about the images he'd seen in that awful tabloid - the damages that might be irreversible - and he wondered. If Brian could no longer be Brian, would he even want to come back? Or to face life at all? If one had been such a man - the object of desire and sexual fantasy for hundreds, even thousands of individuals, male and female - and was forced to conclude that such a thing would no longer be even remotely possible, would he find the courage to confront those who had resented him and envied him throughout his whole life?

Cynthia seemed to be positive that he would, but Teddy wasn't so sure.

"Okay," he said finally, rising and heading for the door. "Oh, and by the way, I think I've landed a new client for us. I've scheduled a meeting with some of the board members to explore . . ."

"Ted, wait," she said firmly. "We need to talk about our spheres of influence, for lack of a better term. As always, you have complete control over all matters financial and fiscal. But handling clients, overseeing campaigns, day-to-day operations - those fall under my jurisdiction. Including deciding which new clients we might take on."

He stopped and turned to stare at her. "But I've always had a say about things like that."

She nodded. "And you'll have a say now. But the final decision is mine. With Brian's oversight, of course."

Ted opened his mouth to protest, but decided against it when he saw the look of resolve in her eyes. Bitch!

He blinked, and chided himself for giving in to such a tawdry impulse. He and Cynthia had worked together for several years now, and he had always respected and admired her. But for Brian to choose to entrust her with control of the company . . . It just wasn't fair. It wasn't, after all, as if he hadn't known that Brian would be going away for a while, or even that Cynthia would be left in charge. But he had never dreamed that he - Ted Schmidt, CFO of Kinnetic and personal confidante of its owner - would be denied immediate and constant access to the man who was the heart and soul of the company. It was just unconscionable.

"Of course," he said aloud. "I'll reschedule the meeting, subject to your approval."

She nodded briskly. "Good. I know Brian will appreciate your cooperation."

_Of course he will. When everything he hears is filtered through you, you'll make sure that you come out looking like his champion, while the rest of us are just nameless, little drones._

He made his exit quickly, leaving her to pore over a graphic presentation of the new Dandy-Lube campaign, and hurried toward his office, careful to exhibit nothing of the renewed resentment that was rising within him, understanding that he needed to take refuge in a quiet, private place where he could sit and consider his best course of action.

Cynthia Whitney was about to find out - the hard way - that Ted Schmidt was nobody's fool. He was perfectly capable of recognizing a power play when he saw one, and he was definitely seeing one now. Brian was vulnerable, as he had never been before; that much was clear. Obviously, he wasn't thinking clearly, and might even be susceptible to manipulation by a scheming opportunist, and Cynthia was finally showing her true colors as a corporate predator, apparently eager to take advantage of her employer's temporarily inadequate defenses.
Ted took a deep breath as he moved toward his office, knowing that he needed to explore all the possibilities and take measures to protect himself, and to protect Brian from his own weakness.

He might even need legal advice. And he certainly knew where to go to get that.

Allegheny General Hospital wasn't a particularly splendid example of architectural elegance. It tended more to the utilitarian than the artistic. But it did have one feature that could - on rare occasions - render one speechless with appreciation, and Cedric Lasseigne was experiencing such a moment as he sat on an upholstered bench in a small alcove near the admitting desk and waited for his final discharge papers to be brought to him.

The front lobby featured a kind of glass-walled atrium that soared six stories into the air, projecting from the western face of the building like a rectangular shaft, and, on rare, cloudless afternoons - like this one - it became a kind of focusing crystal that bathed the interior with refracted sunlight, causing almost everyone who entered to pause for a moment of silent appreciation and - for some - a bit of introspection devoted to the concept of stopping to smell the roses, in whatever form they were offered up.

Lasseigne was a big believer in rose-sampling, and he smiled as he spied the young man hurrying toward him, the sunlight striking glints of pure gold from a mop of amber hair.

"Got 'em," called Justin, waving a small sheaf of documents as he came across the lobby. "You're officially a free man."

Cedric's smile was brilliant, if slightly weary. "I sometimes thought I'd never see the day," he admitted.

Justin regarded him with genuine affection, and Cedric reflected - certainly not for the first time - that the young man's remarkably blue eyes were completely incapable of concealing whatever emotion he might be experiencing at any given moment.

"Okay," said the blond, picking up the one, small duffle that contained virtually everything that the old Cajun owned. "Let's get you home."

But Cedric was not yet ready to concede defeat in his effort to convince Justin that he did not require further assistance. "Justin, wait," he said sternly. "I don't need your help. In the first place, a half-way house hardly qualifies as a 'home'. And, in the second, I have been navigating the dark and dreary streets of this city for a very long time, without requiring intervention from anyone." He smiled then. "Not even a - what is it that your Brian calls you when he wants to be particularly assinine? - a piece of blond boy ass? I am perfectly capable of making my own way."

"I don't doubt that," Justin replied, refusing to take the bait of the insult, "but why should you?"

He glanced toward the hospital's main entrance, and saw exactly what he expected to see. The dark sedan with the nondescript young driver was waiting at the front landing. He had finally, though reluctantly, given up his fruitless protests about the security people who shadowed his every move, and decided that he might as well take advantage of the opportunities they provided. Such as immediate, convenient transportation - for him and any companion - to wherever he wanted to go.

"Come on," he urged, taking the older man's arm in a casual grip that camouflaged the fact that Lasseigne was not entirely steady on his feet and required a bit of support.

They started forward, but Justin paused immediately as he spotted two figures coming through the
crowd, and sighed, realizing that he wasn't sure he was prepared for the moment racing toward him at breakneck speed.

"Sunshine!" Justin winced, and wondered if Debbie had ever managed to shatter glass with the sheer volume of her voice. "What the fuck is this about Brian being gone? Gone where? And why? And without even telling me?"

"Or me?" said Lindsey, for once almost as loud and as outraged as her red-headed companion. "What was he thinking? And where the hell did he go?"

Justin settled Cedric back into his seat on the bench before turning to face his inquisitors.

He debated what he should say to them, but realized quickly that he could only tell the truth. "I don't know," he admitted. "He didn't tell me where he was going."

"What do you mean, he didn't tell you?" That was Debbie again, volume and pitch increasing. "Then who did he tell?"

Justin shrugged. "I'm sure Dr. Keller knows, but I doubt he's going to tell you anything. Doctor/patient privilege, you know."

Lindsey's eyes narrowed. "We'll just see about that. I'm the mother of his child, so . . ."

"Lindsey," Justin said suddenly, "does it occur to you that he would have told you himself, if he'd wanted you to know?"

"Yes, well, he doesn't always know what's good for him. You, of all people, should know that."

Cedric Lasseigne was observing the exchange between these people who obviously considered themselves proprietary friends of Brian Kinney with great interest, and wondered if any of them ever stopped to consider the deeper meanings concealed beneath their words. He rather doubted it.

"Besides," said Debbie, "why would he do this? Why would he leave behind the only people who care about him?"

Justin sighed. "I think he . . . he's going to try to figure out where he goes from here. What he really wants, and whether or not he can come back from this."

"What?" Debbie again, still angry, still loud. "Like whether or not they can fix his face? Or whether or not he can regain his title - be the Stud of Liberty Avenue again? Is that all he cares about?"

The redhead looked up then, and happened to catch the hard gleam that flared in Justin's eyes and found herself suddenly stricken speechless, realizing that she had never before seen the young man so completely overwhelmed with anger.

"Is that what you really think of him, Debbie? How can you have known him all his life, and still not have the first clue about who he really is?"

"Sunshine, I . . ."

"Don't call me that," he snapped, turning once more to help Cedric to his feet. But he hesitated as he started to lead the old man toward the front entrance, and turned back to face the two women, both of them still open-mouthed in shock. "That's Brian's name for me, and he's the only one that gets to use it."
Debbie closed her mouth abruptly, and it never even occurred to her to point out that she was, in fact, the one who had bestowed the nickname on the young blonde. Given the look on his face, she figured she was better off letting it go.

She was right.

The coffee shop wasn’t exactly upscale, but it was a big improvement over the hospital cafeteria, thought Sharon Briggs. And the Guess jeans and Tommy Hilfiger jacket she had donned, to replace the faded, drab K-Mart garments she had worn during her extended visit at Allegheny General, felt wonderful against her skin, by comparison. They might not be in the league of the Dolce and Gabanna and Prada designer wear that she preferred during those rare periods when she was able to exist within her real persona, but they were, nevertheless, a vast improvement and perfectly in character for a young professional just dropping in at Barney’s Coffeehouse for a mocha latte.

In addition, they had the advantage of rendering her completely unrecognizable to anyone who had noticed her as she hung around the hospital waiting rooms, waiting to learn the fate of her ‘aunt’.

Like the man who was seated in the booth directly behind her, ordering a double serving of cappuccino, and drumming his fingers against the formica tabletop. Obviously waiting for something or someone.

Sharon turned slightly in her seat, to glance out toward the street where the sunshine was almost blinding in its purity, which was a good thing for her. It allowed her to continue to wear the dark glasses that concealed the movement of her eyes, and the fact that she was constantly scanning the individuals who were moving along the sidewalk outside, waiting to identify the person who would be joining the subject of her surveillance.

She did not worry about being recognized, even though the man had been standing at the nurses’ desk - as he so often did - when the skinny, overworked young resident had come out of the ICU to inform Shoshona that her ‘aunt’ had finally succumbed and passed away. Peacefully.

Sharon had been glad that the old woman had not endured further suffering; she had also been grateful that the timing was perfect, from her perspective. The woman’s passing provided a timely excuse for her departure, just as the morning shift was ending, and many staffers were finishing their day. It was a perfect opportunity to pursue the lead she had developed.

Thus, here she sat. Sipping her latte, and waiting, confidant that her subject would not recognize her. It often amazed her how people always managed to see exactly what they expected to see and ignore anything that didn't fit their preconceptions. So the man would not connect this pretty, stylish young woman to the skanky little hooker he had observed earlier at the hospital, even if he were to stare straight at her. Which he wouldn’t. She was not his type.

The bell over the entrance jingled, and Sharon looked up and barely managed to suppress a smile.

Bingo.

She would not even need to utilize her fine-tuned powers of observation to help her learn the identity of the individual for whom her subject was waiting. She recognized him immediately, and knew that she had discovered a significant link in what might prove to be a very heavy, very long chain.

She sipped again, and listened while reaching up to activate the tiny tape recorder concealed beneath the leather collar of her jacket.
"You're late," said Monty Peabody.

But he didn't sound particularly annoyed. It wasn't every day, after all, that a simple lab tech was granted an exclusive one-on-one meeting with John Vincent Fincher, senior managing editor of the local Fox television news team and author of a recent bestseller called *Self-Defense*, a weighty volume which purported to justify the distorted interpretation of the American Constitution to enable authorities to ignore the constraints of long-established protocols like the Geneva Convention, in the name of 'national security'.

Sharon's father - ordinarily the most tolerant of men - had labeled it the most disturbing piece of Nazi-caliber rationalization he had ever read. Sharon agreed.

"Sorry, Monty," said the news man, seating himself across from the lab tech and taking a moment to smooth the immaculate sweep of perfectly barbered silver hair back from his forehead. "Traffic, you know."

He paused to order coffee - plain, black, dark roast - before continuing. "At any rate, I hope I haven't kept you from something important."

Sharon Briggs bit back a smile. How was it, she wondered, that she could hear the derision in that cultured voice so clearly - the assumption that a poor schmuck such as the lab tech could not possibly have anything more important in his life than being at the beck and call of a man of Fincher's standing - while Peabody couldn't hear it at all.

"No, no. I'm just a little nervous. This is a first for me."

"I know, and I want you to understand how much we appreciate your cooperation. You're doing us a huge favor. And, at the same time, you're supporting the people's right to know the truth. This Kinney person has been painted like some kind of hero by the liberal press, and I think we both know what a sham that is."

Monty nodded. "I know. It's deplorable. To take someone so common, and try to turn him into an innocent victim. It's disgusting. And people should know the truth. Know what he really is."

Fincher nodded and smiled. "It's always satisfying to be reminded that there are still good, decent, common people in this country who are motivated to do the right thing. To want to see justice done. So what do you have for me?"

"Well..." For the first time, the lab tech seemed to hesitate. "This is really dangerous for me, you know. I could lose my job if anybody finds out, and, well, you know..."

"I do indeed," Fincher replied, and reached into his pocket to extract a plain white envelope. "And I think you'll find this more than adequate to compensate you for the risk you're taking. And, of course, for the photographs. They were very useful to us, and, if there were any real justice, you'd be hailed as a hero for your actions."

Monty allowed himself a smug little smirk, and took a moment to open the envelope flap and stare at the check inside.

The smirk became a full-fledged grin as he read off the numbers on the check, then tucked the envelope into his own jacket, never noticing the quick but intense look of contempt that flickered across his co-conspirator's face.

The lab tech took a thumb drive from his shirt pocket and slid it across the table. "This includes copies of his medical records, chart notes, everything I could find. But there is a problem."
Fincher looked up then to meet the lab tech's eyes, and Monty almost flinched away from the
glimmer of raw rage he thought he saw there. But the gleam was gone almost before it registered,
and he was able to convince himself that he had been mistaken. He was, after all, a hero, according
to the man to whom he had just sold his soul.

"What kind of problem?" Fincher asked, having regained his urbane composure after a momentary
urge to throttle the black bastard who was daring to look him straight in the eye, as if he were entitled
to do so.

"Kinney's gone. They moved him this morning, and, so far, I haven't managed to find out where they
took him."

The newsman's eyes went dark and cold. "Moved him how?"

"I'm not sure. I was picking up some lab samples at Saint Clair Memorial, and when I got back, he
was gone. It was all very hush-hush, you know. The police have been all over him, so I was lucky to
be able to get what I got. I don't think . . ."

"Mr. Peabody," Fincher interrupted.

"Yes?"

Fincher leaned forward, and there was no mistaking the hard gleam of impatience and frustration in
his eyes. "We just paid you a great deal of money for comprehensive information about Brian
Kinney. Including what happens to him next, and where he's going to be. Are you now telling me
that you are unable to provide the information you promised us?"

"No," replied Monty, his mouth suddenly dry, almost painful. "Not at all. I just don't have it . . . yet.
But I will. I promise you, I'll find out."

Fincher sat back, fixing the lab tech with a glare that stated - more clearly than any spoken word
could have - that he had better be right, and it had better be soon.

"Very well then," he said, rising and pausing just long enough to adjust his Armani jacket so it
showed his lean physique to best advantage. "I'll expect to hear from you. By Friday?"

Monty frowned. "That's only two days. It might take longer, if . . ."

Pincher smiled, but there was no trace of warmth in it. "For your sake," he said softly, "I hope not."

As he walked away, Sharon Briggs reached up to adjust the scarf around her neck, and turned off the
tape recorder. But she did not leave. Not just yet. She was curious to see if her subject really was as
dumb as he seemed to be, or if he would figure out that he had just been threatened with dire
consequences should he fail to deliver what he had promised.

But Monty seemed content to sit there and enjoy his cappuccino, probably contemplating how he
was going to spend the money that he had received for selling out his professional integrity. Sharon,
on the other hand, wondered what price a corrupted soul was going for these days.

When the lab tech stood and sauntered out into the late afternoon sunshine, she followed at a discreet
distance, noting that he seemed very pleased with himself as he turned toward his home.

Yep. Just as she'd thought. Dumb as dirt.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~
tbc
"Chapter 27"

Thy mind is ever moving,
In regions dark to thee;
Recall its useless roving,
Come back, and dwell with me.

I know my mountain breezes
Enchant and soothe thee still,
I know my sunshine pleases,
Despite thy wayward will.

- Shall Earth No More Inspire Thee -- Emily Brontë

Danny Boyle had decided that - all things being equal - he'd rather play chauffeur than street hustler or pool shark or vagrant. Only all things were not, exactly, equal.

Yes, when he was tasked with driving young Justin Taylor wherever he might want to go and making sure that he arrived safely at his destination, he was warm and dry and safe, relatively speaking. Insulated from the harshness of Pittsburgh's raw early spring and rarely having to leave the comfort of the dark green Buick Century assigned to him by Lance Mathis, he was able to fulfill his duties to watch over Kinney's blond boytoy with a minimum of effort and a maximum of efficiency. Since Taylor spent most of his time these days at Allegheny General - which was as secure as an FBI lockdown for the most part - it was rarely even necessary for him to brave the colorful environs of Pittsburgh's gay conclaves in order to do his job.

That was an advantage, sometimes. When it wasn't a pain in the ass.

It bothered him more than a little to realize that he was actually beginning to miss his regular interaction with the brash, lurid aspects of Liberty Avenue society and the loud, unapologetic people for whom it was the center of the world. He wasn't gay; didn't share most of the interests that drew the residents of the area together; couldn't even imagine having any desire to make out with a guy or touch another man's dick.

Mostly.

But his connection to the people who were an integral part of the world from which he had sprung had almost nothing to do with sex or lust or desire. Instead, it was about freedom and tolerance and the willingness to suspend judgment and understand the true natures of the individuals who existed beneath the superficial criteria of sexual preference, which, he knew perfectly well, was a semi-twisted version of an oxymoron. Homosexuality was not a preference; it was a physical characteristic, as genetic and unalterable as eye color or blood type. Danny wasn't sure how he knew that, but it was, nevertheless, something he had always known.

Being a part of the Liberty Avenue ambiance actually had nothing at all to do with what a man chose to do with his dick, or who he chose to do it with. It was about accepting people for what they were beneath the skin, and he was sometimes certain that - hetero or not - he would never really fit into the world beyond the boundaries of 'Queerville', as it had been christened by most of its residents. He
would sigh sometimes, when he came face to face with that conclusion, but, in its most elementary form, it was the defining truism of his life.

He was, he thought, the pluperfect example of the proverbial square peg forcing himself into a round hole and being content with the rather odd fit. He tried to imagine how some of his straight buddies - and he had a number of them - would react to the circumstances of his life, and found that he could not quite picture it. What would they think - how would they handle being teased and publicly, frequently identified as the 'token hetero' in the crowd, or tagged with names like Fag Hag and Dyke's Beard and Dr. Straightlove? He could well imagine the horror writ large on their faces under such conditions. And why, he wondered, didn't such things bother him more? But he didn't waste much time on that kind of speculation, because he actually already knew the answer, which was ridiculously simple. Though the voices that called him such names and appeared to delight in pointing out his differences were almost always filled with a spicy tongue-in-cheek humor, there was almost never a single trace of hostility or true animosity contained within the taunts themselves.

Tolerance. It was the only requisite for acceptance in 'Queerville', the only coin of the realm, given freely and demanded in return. It defined the place he lived, and the people who were his neighbors and - yes, there was no denying it - his friends.

So he would enjoy the opportunity to stay warm and dry and mostly unthreatened, and to catch up on his favorite reading (while being very careful to wrap his current guilty pleasure within the camouflage of a copy of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette as he indulged himself; it wouldn't do at all for a guy who presented himself as a 'street tough' to be caught reading *The Thirteenth Tale* or to be exposed as a devotee of British fiction) while he waited around for Justin Taylor to decide where he wanted to go next; he would treasure the moments as they happened. But he would comfort himself with the certainty that, when this assignment ended, he would go back to the turbulent, flamboyant, bright and bawdy streets that were his home, his family. Queer or not.

The quick staccato rhythm of a familiar voice, sharp and colored with vivid tints of irritation that Boyle was coming to recognize too frequently and too well, drew his attention to the front entrance of the hospital where a slender figure was erupting through the doors so quickly that he cleared the expanding opening of the automatic panels with only an inch to spare. Justin Taylor was in a hurry and, judging by the set of his face and the hard glitter in his eyes, he was pissed off in a big way.

Boyle felt a renewed sense of relief that he no longer had to maintain a pretense of disinterest or distance. Taylor, when determined to elude surveillance, had been a huge challenge for the individuals charged with protecting him, and Lance Mathis, in managing to convince the young man to accept the advantages of being monitored by security personnel, had done everyone a favor. Including Justin Taylor, who no longer concerned himself with who was watching or why. He simply did whatever he chose to do, and let others worry about the logistics of his safety.

It had come as a huge surprise - to both the watcher and the watched - that they had managed to form a fledgling friendship, which might expand and grow over a period of time, or might wither on the vine, depending on the circumstances. But, for the moment, it made life simpler.

Except when the blond half of the equation was on the verge of a major queen-out/meltdown. Like now.

Taylor was coming toward the car, a nondescript old duffle bag in one hand and the arm of an elderly man with a spike of silver hair gripped firmly in the other, with two women, voices shrill and full of protest, in pursuit. Having studied the file on Brian Kinney and his extended family closely, Boyle recognized both of the women, although he would have known Debbie Novotny anyway, as would any lifelong denizen of Liberty Avenue. He would even have known her if he'd been
suddenly stricken blind, as her voice - currently in mid-screech - was even more recognizable than her colorful appearance.

"Justin, hold on there," she was shouting at the blond's rapidly retreating back. "What's all that supposed to mean? And where the fuck do you think you're going?"

Justin did not slow down as he called out his answer, never turning to look back. "I'm taking my friend, Cedric, to his new quarters, and, as to what I meant by what I said, I'm pretty sure you're both smart enough to figure it out."

Debbie actually stumbled, and was stricken, temporarily, speechless - but her companion appeared to be made of sterner stuff.

"Justin, please," said Lindsey Peterson. "Wait. Surely you understand that I'm . . . I only want to know . . ."

Justin paused as he reached the car, and smiled his thanks as Boyle stepped out of the Buick and opened the back door in order to admit Justin's elderly friend.

But finally, Justin turned to look back at the blonde woman who was by this time standing almost toe-to-toe with him. "Please," she repeated.

"Lindsey," he replied, taking a moment to draw a deep breath, and summon up patience already worn too thin, "it's his choice. And we have to honor it. If you love him at all, if you ever loved him . . ."

"How can you ask me that?" she demanded, forgetting her prior resolve to remain calm and use reason rather than emotion to plead her case. "Surely you, of all people . . ."

"Yes," he answered firmly. "Me. Of all people."

She went very still and was suddenly very cold. "Justin," she said slowly, "I'm so scared. What if he . . ."

He reached up and cupped her cheek with gentle fingers. "It has to be his choice, and we have to love him enough to abide by it."

She shook her head. "I don't know if I can."

He pulled her close and stroked her back with a gentle hand. "Yes, you can. Of us all, you're the one who can't really lose him. He'd never walk away from Gus. You know that."

But she was not so sure. "Yes, he would. If he thought he was a danger to his son, he would walk away and never come back. I can't . . ." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I can't lose Brian."

Justin pulled back to stare deep into her eyes, and was somewhat surprised by what he saw there, and by the fact that she had allowed him to see it. "Does anybody know," he asked, "how much you really love him?"

Her smile was rueful and shaky. "No."

"Nobody?" He knew he should leave it alone, but he couldn't.

She couldn't - quite - meet his eyes. "Nobody . . . except him, of course. No matter how I tried to deny it, he always knew." Then she looked up and met his gaze squarely. "And I always suspected
that you might have figured it out."

His smile was very gentle. "And Melanie?"

She sighed. "Why do you think she hates him so? She doesn't know all the details, of course. But she knows enough."

He nodded, and lifted her hand to touch it to his face. "Then you have to love him enough - we both do - to trust him to do what's right, for him."

"Can you do that?" she asked faintly. "Can you just let him go?"

He took a deep breath. "I can do whatever he needs me to do. He's the center of my life, but it's just not right to use that to hold him. Because that's what I've always done before, you know." His voice grew rougher, and his eyes were suddenly filled with sympathy, but he continued to speak, refusing to fall silent until he'd said everything that needed saying. "It's what we've all done - assuming that our needs were all that mattered, and we've used those needs to keep him where we want him, which is exactly what he's always refused to do to us in return. So it has to stop. Now."

Debbie Novotny had been listening, while trying to look as if she weren't. But this, apparently, was just too much for her to accept without dispute. Her snort was almost pig-like. "What a bunch of bullshit!" she snapped. "You make it sound like we all took advantage of him. Asked him to sacrifice for us - to take care of us - when the truth is that he's never cared about anybody but himself. The Stud of Liberty Avenue, whose only real interest is which mouth is going to be next to suck his dick. Brian Kinney, God's gift to the world, who's never been able to love anybody. Why would you . . ."

Justin turned to stare at her, his eyes suddenly filled with weary sadness. "Really, Deb? If that's true, then why do you care if he goes away and never comes back? To hear you tell it, he'd be doing you a favor, since he's never done anything for you. Or for Michael. Or for anybody, for that matter. You know, I've never really understood why so many people seem to enjoy it whenever things go badly for him, or why you seem to resent him so much, but, all things considered, you ought to be eager to see the last of . . ."

"Resent him?" Debbie retorted. "Why would I resent him? Except that he always gets away with everything, that he never has to pay for the damage he inflicts, that he never regrets what he does wrong?"

This time, it was Lindsey who posed the question. "And what, exactly, do you think he should apologize for?"

Debbie hmmphed. "For hurting people. For breaking hearts and never trying to make up for it."

Justin and Lindsey exchanged knowing glances, both understanding exactly what Debbie was saying without actually saying anything at all; both choosing to remain silent on the subject as there was, literally, nothing they could say that would make any difference at all in Debbie's opinion of Brian, since he would never be able to give her the one thing she really wanted, but would never admit. Brian loved Michael, uniquely, intensely, and without reservation, but he had never been, was not now, and never would be in love with Michael, and he would never pretend otherwise. Brian might, occasionally, lie about trifles, but never about things that mattered.

And it was for that deadly flaw that Debbie would never be able to forgive him.

"So," Justin said finally, attempting to end the conversation, "can we give you ladies a lift somewhere?"
Lindsey glanced back toward the hospital. "Are you sure they won't tell us where he went?"

Justin didn't bother to hide the eye-roll. "'If it'll make you feel any better, go ask. But you're wasting your time." He paused then and deliberately caught Lindsey's eye. "And you're failing to honor Brian's wishes."

"Well, what if something happens and we need . . ." That was Debbie, off on another tangent.

Justin allowed himself a deep, exaggerated sigh. "You both know him too well to think he left without making arrangements to handle anything that might come up." Then he couldn't resist a sardonic grin. "Besides, what could you possibly need from such a self-absorbed, thoughtless, unapologetic, narcissistic prick?"

Debbie felt a flush touch her face, but refused to address the challenge in the blond's eyes.

"So," Justin continued, "how about that lift?"

Throughout the conversation, Cedric had observed the exchanges without comment or expression, but when Debbie moved as if to climb into the back seat beside him, he was not quite able to suppress the look of sheer horror that flickered across his face. Justin snickered, but stepped up quickly to come to the old man's rescue by guiding Debbie to the passenger-side front seat, thus earning a quick glare from his bodyguard/chauffeur. But the blond figured - rightly - that Boyle was more capable of handling Pittsburgh's premier fag hag than an elderly Cajun gentleman, fresh out of rehab.

Thus, it was Justin and Lindsey who wound up flanking Cedric in the back seat, and a quick exchange between the old friends, regarding an upcoming exhibition of new artists' work at the Sidney Bloom Gallery, initiated a spirited discussion about the contributions of contemporary artists to the political and cultural landscape of the new century, before progressing to a comparison of favorites - Justin raving about the vivid style and lavish color used by Ksenia Milicevic while Lindsey waxed poetic over the work of Dominique Sanson and his Ibiza saga (wondering only briefly why the mention of the project made Justin smile) and the singular, eclectic quality of the work of Robert Rauschenberg. Both of them were enjoying the discussion thoroughly, and welcoming Cedric's surprisingly insightful comments and his suggestion that Sam Dillemans and José Beral were both worthy of inclusion in the ranks of prominent contemporaries, while Debbie looked on, trying to look as if she weren't completely out of her depth - which she was.

Until Cedric brought up another name - one that even Debbie recognized.

"Of course, my personal favorite has always been Sam Auerbach," said Cedric with a big smile. It wasn't often that he got the chance to talk art with people who actually knew the difference between the Bloomsbury Group and the Doonesbury cartoon, and he intended to enjoy it. "There's just something so flagrantly sexual about his work, don't you think? And, since he's a local boy, I assume you guys know him."

Justin carefully avoided looking into Lindsey's eyes. "Yeah. We know him. He's definitely one of a kind."

"You can say that again," Debbie muttered, while Lindsey was suddenly preoccupied with searching through her handbag for . . . something. Anything.

Justin was careful to avoid staring at her, and was pretty sure that she had never in her life been so glad to see the Liberty Diner appear on the corner of the next intersection.
"You sure you don't want us to drop you at the hotel?" he asked, thereby killing two proverbial birds with the one verbal gambit - changing the subject and offering Lindsey an alternative to having to listen to Debbie, just in case the redhead decided that this would be a great opportunity to allow her to assuage any lingering curiosity about the relationship between Lindsey and Pittsburgh's artistic rogue.

"No. Thanks," Lindsey replied with an appreciative smile. "Melanie should be here soon, if she's not already waiting for me. I expect we're going to have a serious discussion tonight."

"About?"

Lindsey's eyes flashed with a momentary impulse to suggest that he mind his own business, but it was gone almost before it formed. "She's been trying to convince me to go back to Toronto since the day we got here. Now, with Brian gone . . ."

Justin nodded, his eyes downcast as he considered what she'd said and how she'd said it. "Lindsey," he said softly - too softly for it to reach Debbie's ears, "is there a reason you don't want to go back? Is everything all right?"

She stepped out of the car before turning to look down at his face as he leaned toward her. "I'm just as all right . . . as you are." But there was no animosity or resentment in her tone. There was only a deep understanding of a life filled with regrets, with having been forced to learn how to cope with wanting what one could not have, and - perhaps - a glimmer of hope that he, at least, would learn how to mend what could not be endured.

She started to close the door then, but hesitated, once more meeting Justin's eyes, biting her lip slightly as she considered whether or not to speak her mind. But, in the end, she knew she had no choice; the question was begging to be asked.

"Justin?" Her tone was like a caress. "Did he go alone?"

The young man managed not to flinch away from the question, but only by the narrowest of margins. He closed his eyes then, and was immediately back on that roof, feeling the whirling blast of air from the helicopter's blades and fighting against the impulse to turn back, to take one more look, to see the man who was the center of his world just one last time. But he hadn't; he'd forced himself to be strong, to do what Brian had asked him to do - to let him go. But as he'd turned his head to the side, to shield his eyes from the swirl of grit particles in the cyclonic blast, his eye had been drawn to a reflection in the polished steel surface of the door - a reflection of a tall, muscular individual, the last to board the chopper, who stood for a moment, framed in the doorway and scanning the rooftop, as if to make certain that nothing was being left behind - nothing forgotten.

Chris McClaren, beautiful in the sunlight as the wind molded his leather jacket to his sculpted body, directing one last glance toward Justin as he stepped up and disappeared into the cabin, sure of himself and sure of his place at Brian's side.

Lindsey did not wait for an answer - did not need to - for it was written, clearly, painfully, and indelibly, on his face. Brian had gone away, leaving Justin behind and never once looking back. And he had not gone alone.

Babylon at three o-clock in the morning was a magical place, a gateway to a promised land where dreams were always waiting to be realized just around the next corner, where the most beautiful men in the world came to leave their inhibitions at the door and release their alter-egos to explore realms
of possibility, where one lived in an infinite moment in which the next face one saw might be the face, the man who would fulfill every wish, unlock every door and guide one into a realm of endless, sexual bliss. It was a fantasy land, the air filled with the hard, visceral beat of the music, with glitter and the dazzle of strobe lights refracted in the spin of mirror balls, the taste of whiskey as smooth as honey, and the scent of men in heat. A sexual paradise, hardcore, driven, and without apology or excuse.

On the other hand, at three o'clock in the afternoon, it was just an empty shell, dark and dreary and haunted with wisps of memory, hollow and a little melancholy, especially so in the absence of the man who was its driving force, its heart and soul. Brian Kinney's sandbox was just a sandbox like any other, without Brian Kinney.

A few hours later, noise and lights and frenzied crowds and the smell of sex would transform it into a semblance of its characteristic glory (even without its lord and master in attendance) but for now, it was literally the last place on anyone's mind - which made it the perfect spot for a little confab of conspirators, safe from the prying eyes of any interested parties.

Carl Horvath had, of course, been here before, mostly in his professional capacity. One did not move up through the ranks of the Pittsburgh PD without developing at least a nodding acquaintance with the city's most notorious gay nightclub. However, he had also been present for the Stop Prop 14 benefit, not so much because he wanted to voice his support of the cause - he wasn't much on making political statements - but because his significant other, the notoriously loud-mouthed Debbie Novotny, would almost certainly have refused to speak to him ever again if he had not shown up to lend his presence to the cause, if not his voice.

But any recollection of the glitter and glamour of that occasion had been forever lost beneath memories of the blood-and-guts trauma - the flames and carnage and stench of the bombing that had ended it all, and the detective sometimes wondered how Kinney had found the courage and the resolve to rebuild it and defy those who had been so consumed with hatred and hypocrisy that they had felt justified in taking innocent lives. Of course, the ugly truth was that - from the perspective of the perpetrators - the lives taken were not innocent at all.

Because of who they loved.

Horvath allowed himself a soft sigh as he entered the building through the employee's entrance, noting with approval that Lance Mathis was not taking any chances. Two of his most physically imposing security guards were posted at the doorway, checking the credentials of everyone who came seeking admittance, without exception. One of them - a strapping young Latino named Miguel Guerrara - had known the detective since his days as a classmate of Horvath's daughter, but had not so much as flickered an eyelid when he'd asked for ID and badge.

Horvath approved. It was obvious that Mathis had decided that overkill was preferable to complacency and that he was almost certainly still blaming himself for his failure to protect the man who paid his salary and was his first priority. The detective considered it a sign of maturity that the security chief was able to deal with his guilt without letting it immobilize him. It was a characteristic that made for good cops and even better bodyguards.

Despite the fact that he was running a few minutes late for the meeting, Horvath lingered at the entrance, awaiting the arrival of the most clandestine member of his team, who would, almost certainly, not be carrying badge or credentials. Those who spent their lives walking the razor edge of undercover work did not risk being discovered by virtue of an unexpected random search.

Thus, it was no surprise when Mathis' guards moved to block the doorway when Sharon Briggs - in full Shoshona regalia, including thigh-high stiletto boots, a leather skirt barely long enough to cover
the essentials, a flimsy black camisole fetchingly arranged to display maximum cleavage beneath an
unbuttoned faux fur jacket, finished off with a cascading blonde wig and a double application of
false eyelashes - came strolling down the alley, carrying a patchwork handbag big enough to be
classified as a suitcase by any airline.

"It's okay, Boys," said Horvath, stepping in before the confrontation could get physical. Not that he
was worried about Sharon; if she couldn't handle herself in such a situation, she wouldn't be worth
her weight in rust flakes on the streets, but any kind of scuffle with Mathis' boys wonder might call
attention to her and risk blowing her cover, and that he could not allow. She was much too valuable.
"She's with me."

Neither of the guards looked particularly convinced, but both stepped aside to allow her to enter
when Horvath pursed his lips and leveled his best officer-in-charge gaze at them.

"Jesus, Briggs!" he muttered as they moved deeper into the shadows of the huge building. "You
couldn't have toned it down a little?"

"What?" she retorted with a grin. "You don't dig my Lady Marmalade costume?"

He rolled his eyes. "It's not exactly the kind of thing you wear to blend in, now is it?"

"That," she answered, "depends entirely on where you're trying to blend. This . . ." She swept her
arm around her in an all-inclusive gesture, "is Liberty Avenue, my friend. Now, which of us do you
think stands out more here - you in your Brooks Brothers stand-up, or me, in Prostitute a la pseudo-
Prada?"

He nodded and favored her with a small smile. "I see your point."

They moved forward then, toward a soft pool of light in an area beyond the main bar where a group
was already assembled, awaiting their arrival.

Except for one individual who had not yet put in an appearance, but, since this person was the
representative of the most powerful agency involved in the investigation, the tardiness would go
unremarked.

Horvath made quick introductions as he took a seat at the table and accepted a cup of espresso from
one of Mathis' assistants. Then he sat back and sampled his aromatic drink, before taking a moment
to study the faces of the individuals seated around him. He, of course, knew them all, and was
gratified to note that all seemed capable and dedicated to the task at hand.

As Kinney's chief of security, especially given the site of this assembly, Mathis could have used his
position to leverage himself into the driver's seat of the conference, but he quickly demonstrated that
he had no interest in playing games or establishing a pecking order, by gesturing for Horvath to take
the lead, pending, of course, the arrival of the real powerbroker of the bunch.

"First of all," said the detective, "I want to be clear on one thing. Everything that is said here,
whether fact or speculation, must remain strictly between us. Nothing leaves this room. Although I
have authorization from Police Chief Mitchum to act on his behalf, and to commit the resources of
the department to solving this case, it can't be stressed enough that there's no way of knowing where
this threat originated or who might be involved - including some very powerful individuals and
possibly even members of law enforcement or political circles."

He paused then, and cleared his throat, reluctant to say what had to be said. "Despite the fact that
Kinney is almost an icon of the gay community . . ." He grinned and shook his head. "Okay, so
there's no almost to it - he's the icon of the gay community - there's no denying that he's made a lot of enemies by being unwilling to go anywhere near the closet where the religious right and the homophobes think he belongs. Therefore, discretion has to be our first order of business. Are we all clear on that?"

The detective looked up then and surveyed the group around the table, careful to meet the eyes of everyone present, to make sure that they all understood the gravity of the situation.

Lance Mathis, of course, needed no reminder of what was at stake, and he had already made sure that his cousin, Drew Boyd, who had somehow taken on the duties of his second-in-command during this crisis, and Emmett, who was currently running Babylon in Brian Kinney's absence, understood as well. They had all, after all, been present to witness the original attack first hand and needed no convincing of the seriousness of the matter. Thus, all three nodded their agreement to Horvath's conditions, although Emmett looked as if it would take every ounce of self-control he could summon to suppress his natural urge to vent his outrage.

Sitting to Emmett's right was Clint Abshire, chosen by Mathis to oversee the security arrangements at the Kinnetik office building - a neatly dressed individual whose appearance was a model of reserve and restraint except for the shoulder-length chestnut locks that framed his face, a man who looked more like a college professor than a security specialist and who was regarding Horvath with calm resolve, obviously fully aware of the necessity for discretion. Flanking him was Jared Hilliard, followed by Angel Diablo, both still scruffy enough to maintain their undercover identities, but lacking the more flamboyant details that usually marked their appearances. Hilliard, for example, still wore his flight jacket, but had dispensed with the plastic layers that usually obscured his appearance, and Angel, though still sporting drooping jeans and nose ring, had left his hip-hop swagger at the door.

Which brought him, finally, past the empty chair nearest the bar, to Sharon Briggs, and he noted, again, that there was absolutely nothing left to the imagination in the image she projected. She had left not a single nuance of her persona at the door, or on the street, and he knew it was because the risks taken by her male counterparts as they played their parts paled in comparison to the ones she encountered every single day of her life. In presenting herself as a perpetual victim - a target for scorn and derision and a product of abuse and sexual predation - she invited more of the same from the people who occupied the darkness at the lowest levels of humanity; it was only her skill and her courage and her finely-honed survival instincts that enabled her to endure the ordeal and fulfill the functions she had set for herself. Though the identity she had fashioned was constant, the way she played it was not, depending on the circumstances. She was always Shoshona Jackson, penniless, uneducated, vulgar, friendless, living without hope, and she was always a prostitute, barely making ends meet, always hungry and desperate. But sometimes she was raucous and loud and brash; other times she allowed herself to seem withdrawn and damaged and destitute. She played to the crowd that she needed to target at any given moment, and the transition from one presentation to the other was so seamless that no one ever noticed where one stopped and the other started, or, if anyone did, they simply put it down to the schizophrenic nature of the individual.

He allowed his eyes to slip down and take in all the details of her appearance, and he wondered, just out of idle curiosity, where she had managed to secrete her weapon. He honestly could not imagine, but he knew, beyond all doubt, that she had found a way. Despite a necessary paranoia about being discovered, she was not - quite - crazy enough to risk going unarmed. Any trace of her true identity she would not carry, but it was as certain as sunrise that her gun was always within reach.

She lived in the middle of a perpetual balancing act requiring both formidable skill and unflinching courage to pull off, and she played it perfectly. Thus, she was enormously valuable to the Pittsburgh Police Department. Almost irreplaceable. Yet, by the very nature of her tasks, she spent her life
almost entirely isolated and locked up within protective walls of her own devising, unable to let down her guard except on those rare occasions when she was able to return to her own identity and the bosom of her family, the only people who were ever allowed to know the woman who existed beneath the surface.

Horvath wondered how she stood it and then wondered, as he always did when his thoughts strayed in that direction, why anyone would choose such a life.

He was pretty sure he would never figure it out on his own, and she would never volunteer an explanation, but he was inordinately grateful for what she did just the same.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Except for one thing," replied Hilliard, incredibly blue eyes sweeping the room and obviously not finding what he was looking for. "Where's the brass?"

Horvath smiled, and noted that Briggs was chuckling softly, huge, dark eyes sparkling with amusement and appreciation as she allowed her gaze to explore the impressive physical attributes of her male counterpart's physique.

Once in a while in the course of her life - Brian Kinney being the original case in point - she'd been moved to regret her sexual orientation. What she saw when she looked at Jared Hilliard inspired her to another one of those moments.

_Oh, well!_

She shifted in her chair as a new voice - slightly hoarse and definitely edged with amusement - rose from the shadows behind her.

"Present, and apparently just in time."

Horvath looked up and watched in silence as a stocky figure emerged from the gloom and moved to the only remaining empty chair, where she deposited a slim briefcase on the table before taking a seat and adjusting the cuffs of a very subdued but ultra-expensive gray Armani jacket. Then she glanced briefly at each the faces of the individuals seated around the table before turning finally to look directly at the senior detective.

"I apologize for my tardiness, Detective Horvath," she said. "I don't ordinarily believe in being 'fashionably late', but, in this case, it was unavoidable. I'm Alexandra Corey."

Jared Hilliard grinned. "AKA, the brass."

If Hilliard had been one of his own people, Horvath would probably have given him a stern look to encourage him to mind his manners, but that would have been a complete waste of time for the kind of freelance employees that worked for Mathis, so he didn't bother. Instead, he chose to get down to business.

"Would you like to take the lead here, Agent Corey?" he asked. "I assume you want to brief everyone on whatever you've discovered."

"Please call me Alex," she replied, "and actually, I'd prefer to simply observe, for the time being. All of you have been on the scene from the beginning, so your observations should provide a great deal of insight into everything that happened, while my own findings are still strictly preliminary. Plus, I'd really like to hear any speculation or conjecture that any of you have to offer."
Lance Mathis turned and regarded the woman with a smile, noting the exquisitely cut cap of salt-and-pepper hair, the subtle, but skillfully applied make-up, the eyeglasses dangling from a gold chain around her neck, and - above all - the intense intelligence gleaming in dark eyes that were evaluating him just as thoroughly as he was evaluating her. "So no more 'Just the facts, please'?"

She smiled, and everyone at the table was abruptly aware of being in the presence of a very focused, very powerful individual. "The days of 'Dragnet' are far behind us, Mr. Mathis. And we've learned a lot since then. Such as how to take advantage of the instincts - the sixth senses, if you will - of people like yourselves. Profiling criminals now requires broader parameters."

Mathis nodded. "And victimology?"

Her smile grew wider as her eyes - a brown so dark it was almost black - flashed with approval. "Very good. Victimology can be just as vital to tracking down an unsub as forensic evidence. And that's my particular specialty."

"So you've been looking into Brian's history, right?" It was the first time Sharon Briggs had spoken since sitting down at the table, and Horvath turned to level a quizzical gaze at her, having heard something in her voice that he could not quite identify.

The FBI agent, however, was not even remotely surprised. "I have. To say that it's very colorful would be an understatement. Wouldn't it?"

Briggs grinned. "That it would. I take it that you've seen the BareBronze ads?"

Corey did not - quite - wink. "Indeed I have."

"Excuse me," said Emmett, not bothering to try to disguise the degree of his annoyance, "but what the fuck are we talking about here?"

He was not the only one who was slightly lost and disoriented and making a mental note to check out BareBronze and its ad history.

Alex Corey simply favored Emmett with a tolerant smile before gesturing for Horvath to continue with his agenda for the meeting.

It didn't take long for the detective to lay out the summary of what the police investigation had turned up.

The forensic evidence gathered from the scene of the crime, and the facts learned from the thugs who had been arrested after pawning Brian's watch, was minimal, at best. Although the CSI techs had gathered massive quantities of data from the warehouse, none of it had proved to be useful in trying to identify the individuals who had orchestrated and financed the crime. Several more members of the attack group had been identified, arrested, and interrogated, but none had known anything about the men who'd hired them. Or so they'd claimed. Horvath had found it unlikely that none of them had noticed even the smallest detail about the individuals who had been there to observe on the night of the attack, but he'd realized quickly that their silence spoke volumes about the power wielded by such men. All of the hired thugs had been recruited and paid - in cash - by Andrew O'Malley, who had also rented the van in which Brian had been captured, and he had turned out to be exactly what Horvath had expected - a vicious, creninous bigot with ties to the Aryan Brotherhood prison gang, who had obviously taken great delight in carrying out the job he'd been hired to do, but with no discernible connection to the men who'd targeted Brian Kinney specifically. O'Malley was, in more ways than one, literally a dead end.
The authorities had realized early on that they were dealing with powerful individuals who were experts in getting what they wanted while remaining completely enshrouded in mystery, preserving their anonymity with great skill and all the discretion that big money could buy, never getting their hands dirty or risking exposure.

"Beyond that, we've got very little," he concluded. "The only evidence that might prove useful - and that's a big stretch - is a tire track spotted in the side alley by the warehouse, which we wouldn't have gotten at all except that the exhaust from an idling vehicle melted a patch of snow, and the mud underneath picked up the track when the car sped off. Turns out it was a Bridgestone Potenza S-03, primarily found on Mercedes Benz E500 sedans."

"Well, that's significant, isn't it?" asked Emmett, obviously eager to find some scrap of hope to cling to. "I mean, there can't be that many cars like that in Pittsburgh, can there?"

Horvath sighed. "Actually, there can. Since we don't have a single detail to narrow down the field - no idea about year or model or color - there are literally hundreds of them registered in the city and hundreds more in the surrounding area."

"So you're telling me," Emmett continued, his voice heavy with frustration, "that you have no clues as to who could have done this? That they're going to get away with . . ." He fell silent then, unable to find the words to express his dismay.

"Now hold on," said Horvath. "I didn't say that. I only said that the forensic evidence hasn't given us anything conclusive. Yet. There's one more thing that might pay off eventually. Apparently, one of the observers had a cold or something. Anyway, the CSI techs found a discarded tissue on the platform where the Peanut Gallery, as Kinney called them, were standing, and . . ."

"DNA," gasped Emmett, clasping his hands together quickly, gleefully. "You got DNA."

Horvath nodded. "We did, but . . ." He held up a cautionary finger. "Don't get your hopes up, because we haven't been able to match it. There are no matches in any database we've been able to access."

"So what does that mean?" Emmett demanded. "How can that be possible?"

"Relax, Emmet," said Lance Mathis gently. "DNA databases are still in the developmental stage, so they're extremely limited."

Emmett was not in a mood to be mollified. "In that case, what good does it do to have it? If you can't use it to find . . ."

"The good it will do, Mr. Honeycutt," said Alex Corey, her voice soft with sympathy, "is that it will confirm the identity of the suspect once we do find him."

"And how exactly do you plan to do that?" Emmett had risen to his feet now, his chest heaving as he was close to hyper-ventilating. "It might be easy for all of you to sit here and speculate and talk about this case like it was some kind of strategy game, but . . . you weren't there. You didn't see what they did to him. Jesus Christ!" His voice dropped to a whisper. "You can't imagine. He was . . . my God! I've never in my life seen anyone who was as beautiful, as exquisite as Brian Kinney. He was like - I don't know - like Apollo made flesh. He would . . . he'd take your breath away, and for human beings to do this to someone like him - or to anyone for that matter, and then to just . . . walk away. And all because God made him a little bit different - a little too perfect for them to bear. For them to get away with it, it's . . . it's not right. It's not fair."
Drew Boyd was on his feet then, wrapping Emmett in arms like steel, and cradling him against a rock-hard body, while everyone else looked away, uncertain of what to do or say.

Everyone, that is, except Alexandra Corey, who stood up and moved around until she was standing directly beside the football player, reaching up to lay her hand on Emmett's shoulder. "Listen to me, Emmett," she whispered. Then she waited until he turned to look at her, tears still filling his eyes.

"Are you listening?" she asked, and had no idea why he was suddenly smiling down at her.

"Yes. I'm listening."

"We are not going to let that happen," she said firmly. "Do you understand me? They're not going to get away with this."

He stepped back then, while lifting one hand to stroke Drew's face in a wordless expression of gratitude. "How can you be so sure?" he asked, wanting to believe her, but unable to swallow his skepticism.

Her smile was gentle. "Because I'm like a fucking bulldog, my young friend. I never give up until I get what I'm after. And because I really do believe in the concept of karma. What goes around really does come around - sooner or later."

It didn't make any sense at all for him to believe her, to trust in her assurances, which were simplistic, at best. And yet - somehow - he did. Thus he leaned forward, and spoke softly, while wiping away the last of his tears. "Sooner... would be better." He chose to trust her, but not quite enough to convince him to relinquish his hold on Drew's hand as he sank back into his seat.

Carl Horvath took a moment to make sure that the young man who was still a resident of the Novotny/Horvath household had regained his composure before he resumed the briefing. "So - to address the question Emmett posed - how do we go about identifying these bastards. Obviously, we're going to have to approach this investigation from different angles, so let's see what you guys have managed to come up with."

He looked first to Sharon Briggs who quickly produced a digital audio device to play back the recording she'd made of the discussion between the lab tech, Monty Peabody, and John Vincent Finchon, senior editor to the local Fox News affiliate. Before hitting the play button, she announced the time, date, and location of the conversation, and the identities of the people involved.

By the time it was finished, Jared Hilliard was grinning at her. "Oh, you are good, Baby," he laughed, eliciting a huge grin in response.

"Jesus Christ!" said Drew Boyd. "John Vincent Pinchon? Are you kidding me? I mean, I know he's a right wing fanatic and a homophobic prick, but surely he wouldn't get involved in this kind of atrocity."

Though the remark was addressed to Briggs and Horvath, it was Alex Corey who responded. "I wouldn't be too sure about that."

Horvath turned to stare at her, suddenly sure that there was something - maybe many somethings - that she was not sharing with the group. "What makes you say that?" he asked.

She smiled, knowing exactly what he was thinking, but choosing to ignore the innuendo for the moment. "Think about it," she replied, by way of avoiding the question he had not asked. "If you were mixed up in this kind of horror, wouldn't you be eager to keep tabs on your victim? Especially if you were paranoid enough to let yourself wonder if you might have missed something in the
measures you took to remain unidentified. Which, of course, doesn't prove that Finchon himself is
directly involved, but he has very powerful friends who might have persuaded him to look into the
matter on their behalf."

Horvath regarded her solemnly, before replying. "Uh, huh!" His tone was blatantly skeptical.

Then he turned back to Briggs. "So how should we pursue this?"

She smiled and looked toward Jared Hilliard. "I think I've exhausted my access," she answered,
"since I'm not Peabody's type. But maybe I can think of someone else who is."

"It's funny," said Emmett, "how you just never know. Peabody is a neighbor of Ben and Michael,
and he's supposed to be this pristine bastion of morality, not to mention completely committed to a
monogamous relationship."

"Honey," retorted Briggs, "have you seen him? If he's monogamous, it's because no one else would
even look twice. And I've seen his partner, who is also a bottom-feeder."

Emmett thought about it for a moment; then he grinned. "I do love a woman who tells it like it is."

Alex Corey was nodding her approval, with a speculative glance toward Hilliard to acknowledge
that he was almost certainly attractive enough to pull off the necessary seduction.

"And," she added, "there are other avenues available, to keep tabs on Pinchon."

It was Mathis' turn to feign disbelief. "The FBI infiltrating the fourth estate? I'm shocked."

Horvath repeated his skeptical reaction. "Uh, huh!" Then he lifted an inquisitive eyebrow at the
security chief. "You guys got anything?"

Mathis gestured toward Hilliard, and nodded for him to proceed.

"You wanted something from a different angle," said the undercover agent, "so here it is."

He talked for several minutes about the things he had learned and observed about Buddy Charles and
Pete Ruiz and their families. Then he wrapped up his report with a bit of speculation. "These two
boys didn't do this on their own, as some kind of prank. For one thing, although they spout the
rhetoric, they're not really gay bashers. No real malice in them - just ignorance. But someone put
them up to the attempt to burn down Kinney's building. They're covering for someone - someone
who has some kind of power over them. And sooner or later, they're going to let something slip,
although it may not be enough to advance us very far in our search."

"But I don't get it, Jared," said Abshire. "If I understand you correctly, these are slum kids. From the
Flats. And every indication is that the people who were behind this attack are rich and powerful. So
how do you explain a connection between the two extremes?"

Hilliard smiled. "Sometimes, connections are a little convoluted, but that doesn't mean they don't
exist. You're right in thinking that neither of these little punks have any link to members of the upper
crust. But sometimes there can be family ties that aren't obvious at first glance."

"How so?" asked Horvath.

The young, black man sighed. "Let me tell you about the dinner I was served last night, by Miss
Rachel Charles - Buddy's mother. The ingredients were simple - cheap cuts of meat, canned
vegetables, rice, evaporated milk - that kind of thing." He grinned. "Though I know I don't look like
it, at the moment, I can tell you that I've dined in some of the world's greatest restaurants, enjoying elaborate meals prepared by some of the greatest chefs. In New York, Paris, Milan, Madrid, Monaco - literally all over the world. And in all that, I have never had a better meal than the one I ate last night in the kitchen of a run down little shotgun house in Reilly Flats."

"So-o-o, what are you telling us?" asked Mathis. "That Buddy's mother is the Julia Child of the ghetto? So what?"

Hilliard clasped his hands before him on the table. "She learned it from her mother, who learned it from her mother, who learned it from her mother. Four generations of women who were taught that it was their purpose in life to become world-class cooks, to provide the very best service for their patrons."

"Their patrons?" It was almost a snarl from Sharon Briggs, and the disgust in her tone was a perfect reflection of his own reaction when he'd first heard Rachel Charles use those words to explain her relationship to her employers - the individuals who had employed her family for more than a century. "What the fuck does that mean?"

"What do you know," Hilliard asked coldly, "about a place called The Club?"

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

"It's a half-way house, Justin," observed Cedric Lasseigne, as he looked around the narrow, gloomy little room that was to be his home for the next few months. "What were you expecting - a suite at the Ritz?"

Justin stood in the doorway, looking into the tiny chamber which provided just enough space for a single bed, complete with lumpy mattress, foam-rubber pillow, and frayed, faded army blanket, one tiny chest of drawers and a very old wooden rocking chair. The rear wall - barely eight feet across - featured a small window with a spiderweb of cracks in the glass, and the floor was tiled with a dull, gray vinyl that was instantly recognizable as the kind that was used in every institutional establishment in the country.

"It's a closet, Frenchie," said Justin. "Which is appropriate since you don't have one."

"Don't need one," Cedric responded, "since I don't have anything to store in it."

Justin walked further into the room and plopped himself down in the rocking chair, which squeaked alarmingly under his weight, before tilting slightly to the left and settling into a new configuration. "Frenchie," he said tentatively, "you've never told me . . ."

The older man sat on the edge of the bed and spoke quickly, forestalling his companion's question. "I'm really hungry. You hungry?"

"Not really," said Justin, his nose twitching slightly at the lingering smell of liver and onions that permeated the entire house. "Maybe we could go down to the diner - get a pink plate special. If you think you can deal with more of Debbie's loud mouth, that is."

Lasseigne shuddered. He had known plenty of women like the notorious Debbie Novotny - women who meant well, but were never content unless they could delve into every nook and cranny of a person's life. And his nooks and crannies were not available for examination, to anyone.

Unconsciously, he moved his hand to rub at a spot on his left forearm, a spot that was safely concealed under the dark, faded plaid of his shirt sleeve.
"Why do you do that?" asked Justin idly.

"Do what?"

The younger man smiled. "Whenever you want to avoid answering a question, you rub your arm."

Lasseigne shrugged, and deliberately clasped his hands together. "Just a silly habit."

Justin studied the Cajun's face, bothered slightly by the undercurrent of some, strange, nameless emotion he heard in the man's voice. "Come on, Cedric. You don't . . ."

"Tell me something, Justin," Lasseigne interrupted. "Do all of your friends think of Brian the same way those two women do?"

The blonde shook his head. "Not really. Debbie has her own way of thinking, about everything. And Lindsey . . . she . . ."

"Loves him." It was not a guess.

"Yeah. I guess she does, but it's complicated."

Lasseigne allowed himself a tiny smile, pleased that he'd managed to divert Justin's attention to a new topic. "Would you mind if I offered you a different perspective? Conclusions drawn by someone who has no axe to grind, no ulterior motives, other than to help you sort out your thoughts?"

Justin, who was more perceptive than the older man realized and who knew he was being deliberately diverted, simply smiled.

"You've been a real blessing to me, cher. Over these last days, I've listened to your stories - about your life and your friends . . . and your Brian - and it's allowed me to step outside my own meager existence. To see things that may not be obvious to the people who are so intimately involved with him, and with you. You're a good man, Justin, and I think you're getting very close to making a huge mistake. One that I would not see you make, if I can do anything to help you avoid it."

"What kind of mistake?" Justin's voice was filled with youthful skepticism.

The elderly man's smile was gentle. "You're about to open your hand, and let go of the greatest treasure of your life. You're about to let go . . . of Brian."

Justin closed his eyes, and let the image form in his mind. The perfect image. The image of the man he loved with his whole heart. "It's what he wants."

Lasseigne leaned forward and laid his hand against the young man's shoulder. "Bullshit!"

Justin couldn't help but grin. "What?"

"How is it possible for you to love him so much, and know him so little?"

"More to the point," Justin retorted, "how is it possible for you to think you know him at all?"

Lasseigne sat back and regarded his young friend with a sympathetic smile "Because you've allowed me to see him through your eyes, but without the distortion of loving him. How many times has he pushed people away from him, Justin? You - and Lindsey - and Michael - and God only knows how many others. And every single time he's done it, what's been the motive behind it? How many times are you and your friends going to let him save you, by giving up his own dreams and needs? Are you really going to allow him to wind up alone - to give up everything he wants - in order to protect
the people he cares about?"

"That's not what he does. He just doesn't want any . . . silly romantic attachments. He doesn't want me."

"You know," Lasseigne said with a sigh as he rose and moved to stand at the window, looking out into the blustery day, "you're not nearly as smart as you think you are. Or as I thought you were."

"What do you mean?"

The old man turned and stared down at his young friend's face, and Justin could not quite shrug off the expression of pity he read there, which sparked a surge of anger within him. Why on earth would this broken, pathetic old drunk think he had a right to pity Justin Taylor, up-and-coming darling of the art world, member of the social elite, artiste extraordinaire?

Lasseigne saw the flare of rage in Justin's eyes, and knew exactly what it meant, knew that he was probably wasting his time and that any persistent effort to force his young friend to open his mind to a truth he might not be ready to face would very likely put an end to their friendship, and that was a risk he preferred not to take. Thus he turned away, and went back to looking out the window. "Don't mind me. I'm just a tired, meddling old busybody. What do I know?"

Justin flushed. "I'm sorry, Frenchie. I didn't mean . . ."

"Of course, you did. You're young, beautiful, successful, talented - with your whole life ahead of you. Why should you listen to me, when I've made such a mess of my own?"

Justin stood and moved to touch the old man's shoulder. "Maybe because you're one of the smartest people I've ever met."

Lasseigne was rubbing his arm again. "Maybe I used to be," he said finally, his eyes soft with stirred memories. Then he turned back to regard his young friend with a tiny, enigmatic smile. "It's time for you to go, Justin. I need to get settled in here and figure out what I'm going to do next, and you . . . you need to think things through. I don't have any evidence to offer to convince you that I know what I'm talking about; that's a conclusion you'll have to draw on your own - or not. But I will say one more thing. If you let him go, you'll be making the biggest mistake of your life. After listening to everything you've told me about him, it seems to me that Brian has spent years pushing people away, because he thinks, at least in some small part, that he doesn't deserve to be happy. Because he blames himself for everything that's ever gone wrong in his life - for everything that he couldn't 'fix'. Because he truly believes that it would be best - for you - if he walked away. I know you don't believe that; I don't even know for sure why I believe it, but I do. If you let him go, you might eventually find a way to go on with your life; you might even manage to build a good, happy future for yourself, but it will never make up for what you've lost. Even if you don't ever understand that."

Justin's eyes were suddenly distant and unfocused and filled with shadows, as he considered what the man had said. He realized that he would like to believe that Cedric was right, but the simple truth was that the old Cajun didn't know Brian at all. If he had, he'd have realized that Brian - beautiful, arrogant, narcissistic Brian - did not deal in guilt or remorse. It simply didn't make sense, given the motto by which he lived - no regrets, no excuses, no apologies. Sorry, after all, was still bullshit, in the framework of Brian's life. And always would be.

"I wish I could be sure of that," Justin replied, "but I need to know . . ."

Lasseigne's smile was sympathetic. "You accuse me of being a smart man, Justin, but the simple truth is that I've led a foolish life - defying the odds, taking silly chances, never learning the things I
needed to learn, until it was too late. So I can't claim to know much. But there are a couple of things that I have managed to learn along the way, in spite of my own deliberate ignorance. Two little bits of wisdom, which is not much, admittedly to show for a lifetime of experience, but I don't have anything else to offer you, so I hope you'll indulge a silly old man.

"The thing about real life, cher, is that you can't always know. Sometimes, living requires a leap of blind faith. So that's the first thing you have to decide - whether or not he's worth the risk. And the second thing is that you have to fight for the things you really want. Things worth having don't usually come easy. That's what you and all of your friends have never stopped to consider - never allowed yourself to know."

Justin shook his head. "I don't understand. What are you saying?"

The old man sighed. "Your Brian - your beautiful, arrogant, self-absorbed, narcissistic Brian - has spent his whole life fighting to protect and defend the people he cares about. But no one - no one - has ever fought for him."

Justin suddenly found it very hard to breathe.

Most nights, there were no stars visible over Babylon, but this night was different. Not that there were a lot of stars - no amazing sweep of galactic splendor - but there were a few, glittering in the spaces between layers of gray, moonlit clouds and plumes of the industrial smoke that almost always punctuated the Pittsburgh skyline. In addition, the air was clear, days of wind and rain having washed it clean of the metallic tang it usually carried.

Everything was beaded with water, and Justin's shoes - the disreputable old Reeboks that he usually wore when he decked himself out in 501s and ratty old t-shirt - were soaked through as he traipsed through puddles to reach his goal.

Near the left rear corner of the roof, there was a cozy little partially enclosed nook, semi-sheltered by a right angled joint of brick walls that formed stair-steps around the corner, leading to the entrance to the first drop of the northernmost fire escape. Within that space, a couple of sling-type lawn chairs had been arranged on either side of a plastic Parsons table and a small metal storage cabinet that housed a stack of pillows and waterproof cushions.

A quick inspection of the area confirmed that it had not been used in a very long time - the non-usage confirmed by the absence of cigarette butts and empty beer cans and used condoms. He had not expected to find evidence of recent use, since it was a place that very few people even knew about, but he was glad, nevertheless, to find his expectations fulfilled, especially since it was a part of the personal space designated primarily for the use of Babylon's owner.

Brian had not been up here recently. Unless, of course, someone had come in to clean up behind him, as was certainly possible. People were always cleaning up after Brian - both those who got paid (very well) to do so, and those who simply did it because it was just what they did.

Justin decided that he would stick to his first impression; he would believe that Brian had not come here without him, because it was easier to believe that than the alternative.

He would prefer to assume that the corner - AKA The Fuck Nest, in Kinney-speak - had gone unvisited since the last time he and Brian had come here together, even though he knew that was unlikely.
He stood beside one of the deck chairs and let his fingers drift across its frame as his mind drifted to other days, sweeter memories . . . one specific memory, vivid and unforgettable.

There had been stars that night too - and moonlight - and spotlights sweeping the sky, originating from some big to-do over at PNC Park, but it had not been raining or wet. There had been a definite chill in the air, as there almost always was except in the depths of summer, but it had not mattered.

Brian had seen to that.

*It was early - early for Babylon, anyway - before midnight, when Justin overheard Michael complaining about 'Brian's disappearing act'. At the time, he had been dancing with a particularly toothsome stud - tall, auburn hair, intense green eyes, and a six-pack to die for - but his interest and his erection had waned immediately when he'd looked around and realized that Michael was right. Brian was nowhere to be found.*

*He was not on the dance floor, staking out his newest mark; he was not standing on one of the catwalks, watching the crowd in order to zero in on a new target; he was not leaning on the bar, allowing some hunky stud to whisper in his ear about all the things the stud might dream of doing with him and for him; he was not standing on the stairs, smirking at some lame, stale joke that Ted or Emmett had managed to mangle; he was not even in the back room, getting his cock worshipped by some newbie/hottie who was undoubtedly fooling himself into believing that this was the beginning of something beautiful and lasting.*

*He was simply not around, and Michael was doing what he did better than anyone else in the world: whining.*

"*Jesus!* He was almost shouting from his vantage point on the stairs where he could look out across the dance floor and take in all the action. "What did he do? Triple the power of the amps? My fucking eardrums are bleeding, and . . ." He paused and glared at a tall, hunky young brunette who had taken advantage of an opportunity to brush up against him during his descent to the ground floor and then hesitated for a moment to favor him with a wink and a come-hither smile. "I'd forgotten how it feels to be treated like a piece of meat," he complained, deliberately turning his back on his admirer and moving into the circle of Ben's arms. "Nothing ever changes in here."

*Emmett - irrepressible as ever - grinned and directed a playful smile toward Michael's cruiser. "Not if we're lucky."

But Michael was not in the mood for banter that he now considered silly and beneath his dignity. "It all just seems so shallow, and juvenile." He glanced at Ben with a self-satisfied little smirk, using that comment as a segue into his next complaint. He did not actually say "and speaking of juvenile", but he might as well have done so, as everyone heard it anyway. "And where the fuck is Brian? He's the one that insisted we haul our asses down here, and then he pulls this vanishing act? What's up with that?"

*Ted was nursing his tonic water and watching a couple of go-go boys perform a blatantly erotic dance as Bon Jovi's Wanted - Dead or Alive blasted from the speakers, and he continued to watch until the song was finished before turning to regard Michael with a puzzled gaze.*

"*Lighten up, Mikey,* he suggested finally, with a slightly sardonic smile. "As I recall, you used to enjoy the quality of the single-minded repartee around here."

"*Yeah, but then I grew up. That's what most people do, you know. Unless you want to stay an over-the-hill club boy forever, like . . ."
He fell silent abruptly as he noticed that both Ted and Emmett were looking at him strangely, as if they weren't quite sure who was speaking to them. But that was okay with him, because he had recently come to believe that his old friends had changed with time, that he no longer knew them as well as he'd once believed, and that they no longer understood his attitudes about love and life and morality. And friendship. In addition, Justin was staring at him, obviously surprised and uneasy and uncertain how to react to his anger.

"Let's go, Ben," he said quickly. "If our host can't be bothered to stick around, I don't see why we should."

"Hang on, Michael," said Ted steadily, leaning close to speak directly into his old friend's ear. "I'm sure he'll be down shortly. Since he bought the place, he has responsibilities, so he's not always . . ."

"Responsibilities, my ass!" His laugh was sharp - almost caustic. "The day Brian Kinney is responsible for anything, except figuring out who to fuck next, there'll be snowballs in hell."

Emmett tilted his head and stared at Michael uncertainly. "Funny. I thought he was your best friend."

Michael took a deep breath, and his eyes were suddenly filled with bitterness. "Yeah. Once upon a time, so did I."

"Michael," said Ben gently, "if this is all about this mess with J. R. . . ."

"Yeah," Michael snapped. "A mess that never would have happened if Brian had kept his nose - and his money - out of our business."

"Michael," Ben went on, obviously trying to placate his partner, "he's Gus' father, and he's got a right . . .".

"Like he ever gave a shit, about Gus or anybody else. All he's ever cared about . . ."

"Right," Ted interrupted, surprised to realize that he was about to blurt out what he was thinking, even though he knew he should just shut up and mind his own business. But then again, he figured, in a way, it was his business; he felt suddenly a bit proprietary, in spite of the fact that he often took some guilty pleasure from applying the screws himself and making Brian squirm whenever he got the chance, but that was different. He might even say it was expected, since Brian always responded in kind. But this - this was just . . . wrong. "He really gives a whole new meaning to the term 'deadbeat dad', doesn't he? I mean I happen to know for a fact - since I am his accountant, you know - that there's never been a single time when Lindsey or Gus - or certain other people - needed something from him that he wasn't there to write the check, or hand over the car keys, or put in the right word, or risk everything to take on the crooked politician, or sign over his parental rights in order to do what was best for his son - and all without ever once expecting to be paid back. Or even acknowledged for his contributions."

"He's not a fucking hero!" Michael was almost snarling.

"No," Ted agreed, his eyes filled with ineffable sadness. "He's not. He's just a man. There was a time when that was enough for you, but I guess that time is gone."

When he fell silent and turned to walk away, it was uncertain who was more astonished by his outburst - him or his audience.

Justin did not wait around to gauge the response of the crowd. Instead, he simply stepped forward to lay a gentle hand on the accountant's shoulder, before pushing past everyone to make his way.
upstairs.

It was time to find Brian.

The search didn’t take long, as he had a pretty good idea of where to look once he’d made certain that the owner’s office was unoccupied. Brian had been brooding and uncharacteristically quiet for the last couple of days, as if he had something on his mind that he didn’t wish to discuss - a condition that seemed to be happening more and more frequently of late. Justin had questioned him once or twice, but realized quickly that he was wasting his breath. Brian would talk about it when he was ready or never talk about it at all, and nothing Justin could say or do would change that.

He pushed open the heavy metal door which lead to the roof and came to a sudden stop, more than willing to pause and suspend breathing in order to appreciate the vision before him.

Brian Kinney - dressed in black jeans and sleeveless black shirt, standing atop the ledge at the front of the roof, a joint in one hand and a glass of whiskey in the other, as he gazed up into the sky, with a full moon framing his perfect profile and emphasizing every sculpted line of his perfect body. The young artist realized, at that moment, that he felt a driving, almost irrational need to capture the image on canvas, to define the essence of the man and the world stretched out at his feet. He even knew what he would title it.

Solitude

He was momentarily surprised by that idea, until he thought about it, and came face-to-face with a truth that he had never let himself recognize before. Despite the fact that he was seldom physically alone, that he could have virtually anybody he wanted, that almost every man or woman within his sphere of influence would gladly kneel at his feet - Brian Kinney spent most of his life in solitude. Not physically, of course. Nobody who fucked as much and as often as he did could be termed ‘solitary’. But inside - where he really lived, where the real Brian Kinney resided - he was rarely touched by anyone.

Except . . .

Me? Has he really let me get close enough to touch him, to see who he really is?

He wasn’t sure why he found the notion so frightening.

Michael, of course, had been admitted to that very select club, once upon a time. Could it be that it was really over between the two who had been like brothers most of their lives? He closed his eyes and visualized the look on Michael’s face as he’d vented his anger at Brian, and he almost cringed as he recalled the deep, abiding resentment that he’d seen lurking beneath the petty malice.

Could Michael really have forgotten all that Brian had meant to him - all that he had done for him and for his family?

He thought then about Michael’s final, desperate snarl.

"He’s not a fucking hero."

And he stared once more at the lonely figure standing tall and unbroken in the liquid moonlight, and suddenly was almost certain that Michael was wrong in his assumption. Heroes, by their very definition, came in many different guises.

"Hey, Shepherd Boy. Looking for your lost sheep?"
Justin grinned. "Fuck the sheep. I'm looking for my big, studly stallion."

Brian turned to face him fully, and seemed unaware that he was standing just inches away from a fall that would almost certainly kill him. He was completely relaxed and unconcerned, except... oh, yes. There it was again - the whatever-it-was that had been bothering him lately was still there, buried deep beneath the easy smile, but still definitely there.

"What are you doing up here?" Justin asked, moving close and helping himself to a drag from Brian's toke.

"Meditating." There was no attempt to disguise the sarcasm in his tone, along with the faintest note of genuine anger.

"Brian," said Justin softly, taking his companion's hand and pulling him down off the ledge, "is something wrong?"

Brian shrugged. "What on earth could be wrong?"

"Isn't that what I just asked you?"

Again, Brian shrugged before moving off toward the nook at the rear of the building, tossing back the last of his drink. There was a fresh bottle of Beam on the table, and he quickly refilled his glass.

"Are you angry with me?" Justin asked, dropping into one of the sling chairs, as Brian moved to take a seat on one of the stair steps at the corner.

"Of course not. You're perfect. What on earth would I have to be angry about?"

It was Justin's turn to shrug. "You weren't too happy with the new Rage issue - the wedding, I mean."

"It's nothing to do with me." The answer was clipped, flat, unemotional. "Rage belongs to you and Father Michael, so you can do whatever you like with it."

Justin took a cigarette from the pack on the table and lit it. "I think he and Ben left. He's um... not too happy with you."

Again the shrug. "Me and Abe Lincoln have a lot in common."

"Huh?"

The smile was sardonic. "You can't please all of the people, all of the time."

"Maybe you should have stayed out of this whole J.R. situation."

Hazel eyes were suddenly filled with flecks of ice. "Yeah, maybe I should."

He stood then and started to walk away.

"Brian," Justin called, quickly tossing his cigarette over the edge of the roof. "Brian, wait. I didn't mean it. Michael and Melanie are both acting like complete jerks, and Lindsey's probably the only one of the three with any real concern about the baby. The other two only seem interested in getting their own way, no matter what J.R. might need."

Brian paused, but didn't turn back to face Justin. "Sometimes," he said, very softly, "you can't please anybody at all."
Justin stepped forward and molded himself against that beautifully sculpted back, wrapping his arms around his lover's waist and letting his palms settle against the bulge at Brian's crotch. "You can always please me," he replied, nuzzling against the golden skin of Brian's bicep where the soft fabric of his shirt had slipped up to expose hard muscle.

Brian didn't offer a response, but his eyes were extraordinarily dark, as if he were sifting through old memories . . . old, shadowed memories, like . . .

And suddenly Justin knew - knew what Brian was seeing, what had caused him to close himself off, to turn inward.

It was the painting - the new one that he'd just completed, the one that was filled with his own doubts and fears and uncertainties, comprised of vivid, angular coils and jagged swatches of ebony and crimson and acid green, and huge blocks of cobalt and charcoal that loomed like walls. Prison walls above cracked foundations. Most people - even people who claimed to understand his art - only saw reflections of themselves in his paintings; their own beliefs, their own hopes or desires, their own despair. But Brian had always had the ability to see and identify the emotions that Justin poured into his art, had always been able to discern Justin's truth.

He had only looked at the completed painting once, but once had been enough.

He knew. He knew that the light was waning; that the desperation was building. He had figured it out, and was stepping back. Just as he always had. Stepping back, and opening the door, to allow Justin to be free to make his own choices.

As he always did. The darkness present now in those beautiful hazel eyes was the specter of hope, relinquished.

But Justin could not just . . . walk away. He loved Brian, had always loved Brian. But how could he go on living with the emptiness, without the commitment that Brian would never give him?

He loved Brian, but he wanted more. He wanted all the things that Brian did not believe in, would never believe in. Even though he knew that Brian loved him - loved every bit as much as he was loved in turn.

But what kind of future could they have if Brian could never bring himself to admit it, to give of himself, to admit his need? If he could never believe in them?

And . . . would someone else ever step up to fulfill Justin's dreams as long as he was standing in Brian's shadow?

He looked up then, straight into Brian's eyes . . . and understood.

Not today. Maybe not tomorrow. But soon. Soon they would be saying good-bye. Soon, Brian would stand there, and watch him walk away.

But not, please God, not tonight.

He threw himself into Brian's arms and felt him falter, felt him start to pull away, but Justin was not going to allow him to step back. Not yet. Not tonight.

When he ripped off his shirt and shucked his jeans, Brian just stood there watching. But he was not retreating, not turning away, and Justin bit his lip to conceal a smile. There were few things in his life that he knew with certainty, but he knew Brian Kinney - knew that the man had never quite managed to figure out how to resist this particular seduction.
When he was completely bare, his skin touched only by the moonlight and the reflections from the skylights, he lifted himself up on his toes and slipped his arms around Brian's neck and fitted himself against that sleek, perfect body. "I need you to fuck me," he whispered, licking his way up through the stubble just forming on Brian's throat. "I need you to take that big, beautiful dick and shove it into my ass and fuck me so hard that I see stars. Brian, please, I need your cock. I need to feel you inside me, so deep that you're a part of me. Deeper than you've ever gone before. Deeper than anybody ever has, or ever will." Then he leaned back and looked up to see the desire smoldering in those night-dark eyes. "So deep that you mark me - inside - like no one else ever could."

Brian's hesitation lasted only a moment, but it felt infinite as Justin easily read the thoughts running through his lover's mind - the reluctance, the doubts, the certainty that tomorrow was almost upon them. But then Brian grabbed him - roughly, almost brutally - and shoved him forward until he was braced against the brick railing at the edge of the roof. Tearing off his own clothes and retrieving lube and a condom from the cabinet, it was a matter of seconds for Brian to ready himself and then plunge into the ripe, lush, pulsating darkness that was calling to him. His hands were gripping Justin's hips so firmly that they both knew there would be bruises tomorrow, and his mouth was devouring Justin, his teeth clamping into tender flesh as if he could consume him, but it didn't matter. In those incredible moments, nothing mattered except the power and the brutal joining, the compulsion to be one. When orgasm took them, simultaneously, it was an explosion of sensation, a white-out so intense that consciousness escaped them both, and they collapsed together into the corner.

It was not the last time they would fuck before the end, but it was farewell nonetheless.

Justin sat on the ledge, swinging his legs over and staring down at the street below, his cock twitching with the memory of that incredible night when they had fucked and fucked - and then fucked again.

But then, inevitably, his mind moved forward to remember the rest, to recall that it was just four days later when Brian had returned from a visit to the doctor to announce that he had syphilis, his statement triggering a completely ridiculous queen-out on Justin's part, when he had managed to forget how many random partners he had entertained during and since his time in L.A., and even the one time when he'd been bombed out of his skull on coke and wakened in the morning to find himself in bed with a strange, hot guy, his ass sore and wet, and no condom anywhere in sight.

He had been terrified on that occasion, and hurried off to the nearest clinic for testing. Waiting for the results had been the most horrible time of his life - a time he had never spoken of to anyone. Not even Brian. In fact, especially not Brian.

But he had managed to put all of that out of his mind when he'd gotten furious and lectured Brian about his promiscuous lifestyle and how "it was a miracle that it hadn't happened sooner".

God! He'd behaved like such an unbelievably hypocritical asshole - behavior which had always seemed to be the one of the favorite pastimes for their fucked-up little extended family.

And a week later, he was gone, and Brian was alone. Again. Like he'd always been.

He sighed as he remembered - again - how many times he'd left Brian, and then he thought about other times, when he'd refused to go, which reminded him about one of the things which Cedric Lasseigne had pointed out to him, something that - in retrospect - was so obvious that he couldn't believe he'd never thought of it himself.
He'd been waxing lyrical - almost boasting - about what he'd done when Brian had tried to push him away after his cancer surgery, about how he had stood his ground and refused to be banished from his place at Brian's side by pointing out that they had "a commitment", which he intended to honor.

Cedric had seemed skeptical. "And he was okay with that?" he'd asked, obviously doubtful.

Justin had allowed himself a smug smile. "Must have been. He accepted it."

"Did he? Or was he just too tired and too sick and too devastated by the treatments to continue to fight it?"

Justin had gone very still, realizing that he had never once considered that possibility.

Cedric's smile had been very gentle. "What do you suppose the word 'commitment' means to a man like your Brian? A romantic promise? A pledge of undying love? Or a locked door?"

Jesus! How could he have been so fucking blind?

He sat for a while, watching the patterns of the night, the stars shifting toward the horizon, the occasional passage of a jet overhead, reflecting in the puddles on the roof. He sat and remembered, and thought about Brian.

He thought about his life, about what lay ahead of him, of what his life would be without the man who was his center. And he wondered if he could endure it. For it was time for him to face the truth, exactly as Cedric Lasseigne had suggested.

He could live without Brian, if he had to. But his life would never be what it should have been. He would never reach the full, complete existence that the two of them were meant to share if he allowed Brian to walk away. In order to be complete, to be everything he was meant to be, he needed Brian at his side for the rest of his life. But that was only one half of the equation. The other half was equally important and must be addressed. Was he what Brian needed? Would both of them be happier together than apart, or would Brain ultimately be better off if Justin simply turned . . . and walked away?

He tried to look down through the years, to consider everything rationally, to figure out where his place was in Brian's life, and how he would endure the emptiness if the man whom he now recognized as his soul mate should never return to his side.

When he eventually decided that it was time to stop sitting here moping, he was still no closer to knowing what to do.

Tomorrow, he was to be interviewed by some hotshot super-sleuth from the FBI - some woman who was supposed to be able to put all the pieces of the puzzle together and fix everything that was broken.

As if that were even possible, for some things, he knew, could never be fixed, a thought which led him to remember Brian's face - to remember what had been done to him - and to face the possibility that no one would ever be able to make him right again.

Not that he would care how Brian looked. But Brian would care. Being Brian Kinney had, after all, been the focus of his whole life.

He closed his eyes and remembered the beauty, remembered the perfection, remembered how that face had taken his breath away the first time he'd ever seen it.
Brian Kinney - the face of God.

Tomorrow, he would manage to get through his interview, and then he would talk to Cynthia, who knew Brian better than almost anybody and who was straightforward enough to be truthful with him. As much as she might wish to spare Justin's feelings, her loyalty to Brian would not allow her to put anyone's needs above those of the man who was both her employer and her friend.

Tomorrow, he would decide. But for tonight - for tonight . . . he rose and stood at the edge of the roof, lost in the darkness and in the memories and knew only one thing: Brian was not here, not beside him, not close enough to touch, and all the logic in the world couldn't compensate for the fact that everything inside him was screaming that this was not the way things were supposed to be.

He had come home to Brian, but Brian had left him here - and taken 'home' with him when he'd gone, leaving Justin to realize that no place would ever be 'home' again, if Brian Kinney wasn't there.

He had always loved the darkness. Even when he hadn't needed it. But now he had good cause to love it more, since it had become his best, most intimate friend, since it allowed him to stare directly into the eyes of the world without worrying about what would be staring back.

The air was warm and perfect, touching his skin like a drift of silk that had been left lying in the sunlight, and the roar of the surf breaking on the beach below was the perfect accompaniment to the idle scroll of his thoughts.

He looked out toward the east and watched the progression of waves rolling toward the strip of sand, as moonlight silvered the froth that crowned the breakers. It was not peaceful - exactly; there was entirely too much chaos and tumult in the pounding of the water against the shoreline, but it was comforting nonetheless. Predictable chaos.

Unlike his life which had, somehow, plunged off the deep end of possibility into unknown realms, leaving him without an anchor to cling to or a lifeline to reach for.

Except for Justin, of course, who had tried to reach him. Tried to throw him a line. But that he could no longer allow.

He knew, beyond all doubt, that any hope for happiness he had ever known had left him on the day that Justin had walked out of his life, but he knew something else with even greater certainty. Rather than see Justin threatened - in any way - he would put a bullet through his own temple, without a second thought or moment of hesitation. He could contemplate spending the rest of his life alone and without solace, so long as he knew that Justin continued to exist . . . somewhere; that Justin could live a good, rich, full life, wherever he might be.

Brian had always expected to spend his life alone, so it was not such a great adjustment for him to make. His only real regret was that he had foolishly allowed himself to forget who he was - what he was - when he got caught up in a fantasy of joy and romantic attachment with a maddeningly persistant blond twink who simply refused to take no for an answer.

But that was the past. This . . . this was the future. Darkness welcomed, embraced - sanctuary.

It was lovely to feel free again, unfettered, even if it was all just an illusion. He was not really alone, sometimes wondered if he would ever be alone again. But Chris McClaren, thank God, was smart enough to have figured out that Brian did not like being crowded or watched. Even if the watching part was necessary to save his life.
Thus he was sitting here on the deck of the cottage that the FBI had found for him, basking in an illusion of privacy when the truth was that there were probably plenty of security people out there in the night, getting paid to make sure no one intruded on his solitude, except them. But at least, they'd been discreet, so far. And McClaren, who actually occupied the cottage with him, had departed several hours earlier, muttering something about an urgent errand. As far as Brian was concerned, the man could have excused himself by claiming that he had to catch a flight to Jupiter. It didn't matter why he'd left; it only mattered that he was gone.

Tomorrow, he knew, he would step back into the madhouse, as a car would arrive very early to transport him to Turnage's little castle by the sea - AKA The Turnage Clinic - where he would undergo the first of several surgical procedures. Where the good doctor would begin the process of fixing what was broken.

Brian wasn't sure he believed that it was possible to repair the damage, but he figured he had nothing to lose by trying. If the rest of his life was to be spent in scouting out ever new, ever younger and more beautiful tricks, it would definitely be to his advantage to avoid looking like a taller, skinnier version of Quasimoto.

Of course, if he could manage to continue to run Kinnetik - without scaring away his big clients - it probably wouldn't matter much anyway. Money, after all, could buy anything, including pretty young things who could pretend not to see ugliness and mutilation so long as they were sufficiently well compensated. But he was a little too fond of his own money to want to give it away if he didn't have to.

He closed his eyes for a moment, and the rhythm of the surf stirred a quick flash of memory - which he suppressed almost before it could form.

Almost.

*Blond hair, beautiful creamy skin stroked by golden sunlight, slender body splayed against the softness of sand drifts, blue eyes filled with laughter - and lust. A business trip to Jacksonville, a conference that lasted two days, interspersed with incredible nights of bottomless passion and then a week-end, filled with hours and hours of mind-blowing pleasure as the two of them explored the beachfront property of the client who'd been so pleased with Brian's campaign suggestions that he'd urged them to take advantage of his hospitality while he headed to Dallas for more interminable business meetings.*

*They had not wasted a single moment of it.*

Brian shifted on the chaise lounge, focusing on obliterating that memory from his mind, relieved to find that his body seemed to be healing quickly. Though still stiff, he was now able to move without great discomfort or having to ease into new positions by degree to avoid straining over-taxed muscles or damaged tissue.

He had learned a hard lesson of late; everything was a matter of degree.

The house behind him was dark, except for a single small lamp that would provide enough light for him to avoid smacking into the furniture when - and if - he should decide that it was time to seek out the narrow but comfortable bed that had been set up for him in a small chamber off the main room of the little, two-story house. Though there were two full bedrooms upstairs, he was not yet capable of navigating the stairs. Besides, it hardly mattered where he slept or how much room he might have since he was, inevitably, sleeping alone.

He did not waste any time lamenting his solitude.
No excuses. No regrets.

He looked up as an airliner appeared over a cloudbank low on the northern horizon and followed it until it disappeared into a pale mist rising over the water. Somewhere, a bell was ringing - a dull, lonely sound in the darkness.

He didn't want to think about lonely things.

A decanter of Jack Daniels Single Barrel whiskey sat on the table at his side, and he drained his glass before pouring himself a new serving. He knew it was probably not a good idea to be drinking; he was, after all, only a few hours away from going under the surgical knife, which would have happened two days earlier had he not developed a slight fever during the trip down from Pittsburgh.

But . . . what the hell? It wasn't as if he really cared that much anyway.

The booze was smooth and satiny going down, and he reminded himself to find out who had provided it, so he could offer his thanks for the thoughtfulness and for providing a new addition to his list of preferred libations.

There was a faint thump and then a soft rustle from somewhere behind him, and a slight stir in the air told him that he was no longer alone, and he wondered - idly - if he should be concerned enough to turn around to see who had chosen to disturb his lovely silence. But, in the end, he didn't. To reiterate his earlier observation, it wasn't as if he really cared that much anyway.

"If I were a serial killer - or a psychopath - you'd be a dead man," said Chris McClaren.

"Uh, huh." Brian didn't even bother opening his eyes.

"Did you eat?"

A semi-toast with the half-empty glass. "Uh, huh."

"Liquid diet, huh?"

"Finest kind."

McClaren grinned. It was always an unexpected pleasure to discover another Hawk-eye Pierce aficionado. "Not quite," he replied, as he moved forward and sprawled into the chair on Brian's right. "But it's early yet."

Something in his voice - something new that Brian realized he had not heard before - spurred sufficient interest to convince him to open his eyes just in time to see McClaren remove a small plastic container from his jacket pocket and set it on the table between them.

"What's that?"

"Your fondest wish."

Brian opened his mouth to dispute the claim, but the FBI agent beat him to it. "Except for that."

Brian grinned, as McClaren opened the container, and laid out the necessary accouterments. "All for me?"

"Fuck that. There's enough for two."

"Strictly for medicinal purposes, I suppose."

"Your boss is going to be so disappointed in you."

McClaren's grin was roguish. "Only if she finds out we didn't save her any."

Brian watched as the fed assembled a fat joint, before pulling a disposable lighter from his pocket and igniting the toke. The aroma was like an elixir as the first plume of smoke swirled around them.

"I could kiss you," said Brian, as McClaren handed him the joint.

"Maybe later," came the response.

Brian couldn't quite suppress the chuckle that escaped him. "Magritte's pipe, my ass!"

He inhaled deeply and felt the first tiny rush expand within his body. Then he took another hit before turning to study the profile of his companion who was staring up into the night.

"I'm never wrong, you know." It was a simple statement of fact, and it was obvious that McClaren required no clarification.

"No. I don't suppose you are."

The FBI agent pushed back into his chair, and then went very still as he noticed that the blanket spread across Brian's lower half was slipping, revealing . . . skin. Lots and lots of smooth, unbroken, golden skin.

Shit! The man was fresh out of the hospital from a beating that should have left him so badly marked that nothing about him would be able to stir sexual interest in even the horniest individual in the world. Shit!

"Shit!" he muttered. "Why the fuck are you sitting out here naked?"

Brain simply shrugged. "What difference does it make, way out here in the backside of nowhere? I don't think I'm offending anybody."

He then handed the joint back and lifted his eyes just in time to catch McClaren's gaze and interpret what he saw there.

Hazel eyes darkened as he carefully, deliberately, turned away while he tugged the blanket back into place, and his voice was rough, almost hoarse, when he continued. "On the other hand, maybe I am. It's all right. You don't have to explain anything."

It was McClaren's turn to laugh, but there was no real amusement in it. "You think you got me all figured out, don't you?"

"It's not exactly rocket science." The answer was straightforward, sharp, clipped.

McClaren sat up sharply and turned until he was leaning forward, almost - but not quite - invading Brian's space. "You think this matters to me?" he asked, one hand gesturing toward Brian's face. "You think I can't see what's beneath it. See the man you were before this happened, and the man you'll be again, when it's all over?" He took a deep drag before handing the joint back to Brian. "Then you're not nearly as smart as I thought you were."

But Brian was still gazing out into the night. "You could always just close your eyes."
"You stupid fucker!"

McClaren darted forward then and wrapped his arms around Brian's shoulders and pulled that supple, slender body against his chest until their lips were almost touching. "You stupid fucker!" he repeated, before claiming Brian's mouth in a steamy, hungry kiss that had nothing of tenderness or uncertainty about it, a kiss that left them both breathless and reeling and left Brian realizing that he had seldom been kissed so thoroughly - or so well.

Brian blinked. "What was . . ."

"That was the kind of kiss that one horny man gives to another. The kind of kiss that I'm pretty sure you're more accustomed to giving than getting. But you need to understand something."

Brian stared at McClaren's beautifully proportioned face for a moment. Then he took the joint from the agent's hand and deliberately inhaled deeply, waiting to hear the rest of the story.

"Yes, OK. You're right. I'm as queer as you are. And I want the same things you want. And right now, the thing I'd like most is to fuck your hot little ass into next year." He grinned when he saw the denial rising in hazel eyes. "Or vice versa. We could argue about that later. But, in another way, you're wrong. No matter how much I'd like to fuck you, if I did that, I couldn't do what I'm supposed to be doing. If I'm fucking you, or - God, I can't even believe I'm thinking about it - letting you fuck me, then I can't do the most important thing of all. I can't protect you.

"That's the only thing that really matters. And if you think about it, you'll begin to understand why. I don't want to have to deal with that amazing blond twink of yours, and you can't even imagine how weird it is that I could be alarmed at the idea of having to answer to him if anything should happen to you. Nor do I want to confront your Italian-drag queen best bud, or the mother of your child who's trying to make herself believe she'll ever love anybody else the way she loves you, or that crazy loud-mouthed redhead who manages to resent you and love you all at the same time, or that amazingly lovely nelly-bottom who would probably lay down his life for you, or your eminently fuckable head of security who isn't interested in either one of us but would gladly take on the Russian mob to defend you, or any of the other few thousand individuals who care about you way more than they should. Or, last but certainly not least, my boss, who will have my head on a plate if I let anybody get close enough to hurt you.

"So, as much as I might like the idea, it ain't happening. And, just to be sure we understand each other perfectly, I'm also unwilling to provide the body for you to use to pretend that the one you really want doesn't matter to you. If things were different, I might - and that's a big might - be willing to work out a fuck-buddy arrangement with your tight little ass, but I'm nobody's substitute twink. So . . . are we clear?"

Everything went strangely still for the space of a brace of heartbeats, and then - unbelievably - Brian Kinney laughed and took another deep drag of the joint.

"I knew it," he said as he settled back against his chair, letting the blanket fall as it would.

"Knew what?"

"It's a sixth sense."

McClaren was trying - without much success - to stifle a rising sense of resentment. "What is?"

Brian looked up, and once more enjoyed the touch of the warm breeze against his skin. "I always know," he replied, turning to regard McClaren with a smug smile, "when someone is ogling my ass."
McClaren blinked.

*Shit!*
Chapter 28

She had known it would turn out to be a mistake when she did it, but she'd managed to convince herself that it would be all right. That it would prove it was all just a figment of her imagination.

Only . . . it wasn't.

The pencil mark she'd made on the soffit of the vaulted porch roof had been intended to demonstrate that the stain which was bleeding through the cracked and faded mint green paint was not really expanding; that she was only imagining that it was bigger this week than last, and bigger then than the week before. Only now, with the mark a good two inches inside the leading edge of the dark, moldy smudge, there was no way she could refuse to see the truth of it.

She should never have made the fucking mark in the first place.

Claire Kinney-DeFatta sighed. So here it was - proof positive that she could no longer just ignore; the fucking roof was leaking; new evidence that the fucking townhouse was falling apart - a new item to add to a growing list of symptoms that included the buckled vinyl in the kitchen, the broken faucet in the laundry room, the warped flooring in the main hallway, the cracked windows by the front door, a cranky water heater that made a hot bath a crap shoot, at best, and crumbling grout around all the plumbing fixtures in bath and kitchen.

Falling apart. Just like her fucking life.

It just wasn't fair. But that shouldn't have surprised her at all. Nothing - not one single thing in her entire life - had ever been fair.

Not from day one, although she had come to believe, over the years, that it had been at least a little better, until roughly day 1100 - the day he had been born. The fact that she had absolutely no memory of those pre-Brian years did not in any way change her belief that she had been the apple of her parents' eyes, adored and indulged, until he'd shown up to ruin everything.

She glanced at the Timex she wore on her wrist, and then stepped forward to look down the street, in the hope (vain, she was almost certain) that she'd see the service truck from Bert's Garage coming toward her. But the street was empty, just as she'd expected, and it was time to face the facts. No way was she getting to work on time. Even if she left now and raced to the bus stop down at the end of the street, she would still be at least a half-hour late, much to the amusement of her fellow cashiers at the Dollar Emporium and the satisfaction of her sadistic, condescending supervisor, who lived to make an example of any employee who gave him the slightest excuse for a queen-out. Of course, Donald Prentiss, shift supervisor at the Morrison St. branch of the discount chain, was not gay - or so he claimed - so it was probably not entirely accurate to term his characteristic emotional hissy-fit a 'queen-out', but she thought that, in this instance, the shoe most definitely did fit.

Besides, she wasn't so sure about the 'not gay' thing. After all, she knew 'gay'; given the flaming, shameless lifestyle of her notorious brother, there weren't many people who could claim to know it any better. So even though Prentiss paraded himself around with a bleached blonde he introduced as his fiancé, and bragged about his history as a notorious womanizer, she wasn't so sure. In the final analysis, she knew about closets too, even though her brother had never spent much time in one - not nearly as much as he should have, anyway.
Shameless, indeed - and constantly flaunting himself in front of his betters.

It just wasn't fair.

She turned once more to glare at her dilapidated old Ford Escort, sitting more lopsided than usual due to its flat rear tire, and felt an almost overwhelming urge to pick up a brick and smash a window or two. But that would only mean another repair bill that she couldn't afford to pay, so she forced herself to turn and walk away, digging her cell phone out of her smock pocket to cancel the service call from Bert's.

She would just have to ride the city bus to and from work, and John would have to change the tire when he got home from school. He would not be happy about it, but what the fuck else was new? When was John ever happy with anything these days? She knew, of course, that it was almost a right of passage for sixteen-year-old boys to make asses of themselves and despise everything in which their parents believed, but she was almost at wits' end in trying to figure out how to handle him, and his father - tucked away in his idyllic little brownstone in Greenwich - was certainly not going to offer any help, considering that he could barely be bothered to send an occasional check to cover the pitiful pittance of the court-decreed child support that he was supposed to pay every month. Not that John would have listened to him any better than he listened to his mother, or his grandmother, on those increasingly rare occasions when the older woman was sober enough to deliver a summary of her religious platitudes. The kid seemed to hate everything and everyone lately, and the letter she'd received just last week concerning his behavior in school and his dismal grade levels was more than adequate proof of that.

And now he'd gone and done it again, apparently determined to confirm his growing reputation as a troublemaker. And a borderline delinquent.

Gay-bashing. That's what the assistant principal had called it, and when she'd spoken to him on the phone, his tone of voice had suggested that he was just as unhappy with the terminology as she was. Since when, she'd asked, was voicing an honest opinion about perverts and degenerates a punishable offense? Hedley Cooper had not - quite - snickered in response to her mini-tirade, but he had been quick to assure her that he would not be bothered to send an occasional check to cover the pitiful pittance of the court-decreed child support that he was supposed to pay every month. Not that John would have listened to him any better than he listened to his mother, or his grandmother, on those increasingly rare occasions when the older woman was sober enough to deliver a summary of her religious platitudes. The kid seemed to hate everything and everyone lately, and the letter she'd received just last week concerning his behavior in school and his dismal grade levels was more than adequate proof of that.

"No permanent damage done, thank God!" the assistant principle had said, "but the boy's mother is a bit over-protective and, well, very . . . liberal in her socio-political views."

"Uh, huh," Claire had responded. "Soooo - because this spineless, bleeding-heart parent doesn't have the gumption to teach her lily-livered son how to man up and walk the straight and narrow path, my son has to be held accountable for objecting to his perversions?"

Cooper had gone silent for a moment after that outburst, and when he had finally deigned to answer, she'd heard something in his voice that made her wonder if she might have been wrong about him, if she might have taken her protest a little bit too far.

At any rate, the bottom line was that John was now on probation, and any additional infraction - anything at all - would get him expelled for the remainder of the school term.

Meanwhile, there were other problems - of a completely different nature - with Peter, her youngest, who was turning out to be John's polar opposite. While John tended to hang out with a rough crowd, with boys who had a reputation for bullying and intimidating and throwing their weight around, Peter, it seemed, was turning out to be the kid that everybody wanted to pick on. He'd been beaten
up twice since Christmas, and pushed down the stairs so violently on one occasion that he'd wound up with a cracked rib.

And each time such events had occurred, bystanders had been stricken with the kind of selective blindness that plagues so many urban school settings; to wit, no one had seen anything. Compounding the problem, Peter had been stubbornly mute when questioned - refusing to identify his attackers or even to admit that there'd been an attack at all, and Claire was pretty sure she knew why.

It was practically John's creed: a guy didn't rat out other guys. Not even when a guy was getting the shit kicked out of him on a regular basis. And Peter, despite the fact that he was nothing like John, would never do anything to displease or disappoint his big brother.

John, on the other hand, seemed to have no interest in returning the favor, and Claire had not yet determined why. In truth, she had not yet even asked, and she was careful not to examine her reasoning too closely, for, if she did, she would almost certainly have to face an uncomfortable fact - that there were some things a person simply did not want to know.

Claire increased her pace as she approached the corner of Milburn and Lounsberry Streets, spotting a couple of busses half-a-block away. If she was lucky - as she had not been yet today - one of them would be the express out to the Morrison district.

Her luck, however, was running true to form - all bad. She stood and watched as both of the diesel behemoths belched out clouds of dark, oily smoke and pulled out heading north, when she needed to go west.

She sat down on the bench at the corner, taking no notice of the heavy beads of rainwater that still clung to its surface and wincing as she felt the wetness soak through the seat of her pants.

Wonderful. Now she'd not only have to try to ignore the smug smiles of her co-workers as she arrived late, and the pissy attitude of her supervisor, she'd also have to endure stupid jokes from infantile stockboys about senile old women who wet themselves and should wear Depends or rubber pants.

Could this day get any worse?

Then she sighed. Of course, it could - and probably would.

The thought recalled a memory of Peter as he'd looked when she'd walked into his room the previous afternoon and found him there, bloodied and bruised and trying not to cry.

He had turned to look up at her, and she had been stricken speechless, as another image - an old, almost-forgotten image - had superimposed itself over his face, and - for a single instant - it was not Peter she was staring at in horror; it was her brother. It was Brian.

She had quickly put the thought away, shoving the spark of recognition back into the gloom of her sub-conscious mind, where it belonged. It did not matter, after all, that Peter looked nothing like her or his father or his brother. It did not matter that he was much more . . . no; she would not use that word - that word that should never be applied to boys, that should never have been used at all to . . .

She looked up the street, almost praying for the bus to materialize so she could make her escape, from the chill of the morning air, from the wetness of the bench . . . and from the cruel visions of sharp, clear, relentless memory.

*She had been trying unsuccessfully to join the pep squad at Oliver High School for over a year, but...*
she had finally made it, when Brenda and Glenda Shepherd - twin members of the Oliver In-crowd -
had moved away after their father had been transferred to a new job in Philadelphia. Even then, she
knew, she would probably not have been accepted in the group if Marilyn McConnell had not been
forced to give up her place in the club because of academic probation.

But ultimately, it didn't matter (or so she assured herself) why she had been made a member. It only
mattered that she had finally been accepted into the organization, and - since this was her senior
year - given a last chance to infiltrate the social layers of the club.

The previous eighteen months had been hard for Claire - hard for the whole family, in fact. They
had been uprooted from their previous home when her father had lost his job at the shipyard in
Brooklyn, and they had been forced to migrate to Pittsburgh so he could apply for work at one of the
big steel mills. Luckily, his uncle was a shift manager there, who managed to pull a few strings to get
him hired on, but it had been a big comedown from the position he'd held before. Though he'd never
made it into a management position, he'd worked for the shipwrights for almost twenty years before
an internal financial scandal had caused the operation to shut down. So there had been no fancy title
or private office, but he'd earned fairly decent money in his union-protected job, and he'd long since
realized that there was no point in dwelling on his lack of advancement within the company
hierarchy. Though he'd spent most of his life cursing his bad luck and insisting that he'd been cut out
for better things, the truth was that he'd been lucky to have a steady job, a secure place in the
community, and certain personal perks that compensated for all the advantages he didn't have.

The move to Pittsburgh had changed everything, intensifying his feelings of resentment and
bitterness and, although he managed, eventually, to find new compensations - new personal perks -
he'd never even made an effort to forgive those he held responsible for his bad luck: his wife, who
had spent years blaming him for her own coldness and disappointments and submerging herself in
the empty rituals of her church, and his son - the child who should never have been born, who had
been the reason he could never free himself from the chains that bound him to his miserable
existence.

Thus, no member of the family had been happy about the move to Pittsburgh.

But Brian had, in his characteristic pragmatic fashion, found ways to deal with what could not be
changed. Claire had never been so fortunate. Brian had always been the lucky one - the beautiful
one - the bright one, the one for whom doors seemed to open, as if by magic.

It really wasn't fair, especially since, by that time, Claire had begun to realize what Brian was,
although she'd been too ashamed to tell anyone of her suspicions. Except Brian, of course, who had
not bothered to deny her conclusions, and his lack of concern had contributed to the growing rift
between them. She couldn't quite figure out why she should be so ashamed that her baby brother
was a fag, when he seemed to be completely without guilt or remorse. That, she'd believed, was just
wrong, recognizing that she would be horribly embarrassed once the truth came to light, while he -
the one who should be ashamed to be found out - would probably just shrug it off, as he did with
most things.

And yet at that time in her life, she had not yet come to hate him or resent him, because the
unavoidable truth was that he was the only reason that her life wasn't dreadfully, traumatically,
horribly worse than it already was. It wasn't something they ever talked about; it wasn't even
something she ever admitted to herself. But she knew it nonetheless; the only reason she and her
mother weren't subjected to the violent physical abuse her father dished out regularly, whenever he
drank too much or went into one of his periodic rages because of his resentment of his life, was that
it was Brian who provided the outlet the old man needed; Brian who was the target.
Jack Kinney had never realized what his only son was growing up to be, but it hadn't really mattered anyway. Brian was the child he'd never wanted - the child he blamed for destroying any hope he might have had of ever getting away from his miserable life - and that was all that mattered.

And Joan, their mother . . . that was the part that Claire tried never to think about. For a while, when Brian had been very young, Joan had tried to step in, to protect Brian and persuade Jack to leave the boy alone, but that had only lasted as long as it took Jack to figure out that he had enough cruelty and hatred within him to spread around. Thus, when he'd begun to target his daughter and his wife, Joan had reconsidered her options, and made her choice. Brian was supposed to grow up to be a man, wasn't he? And men should be strong and resourceful and able to endure such abuse, so it hadn't taken long for her to figure out how to console herself and rationalize what Jack did to his son. She was a good Christian woman, and it was her duty to defend and protect her helpless daughter, and if her son had to learn to stand up and take a little physical hardship in the process, it would undoubtedly serve to make him a better man, in the end.

Jesus, after all, had been scourged and beaten, hadn't he?

It was convoluted logic, of course, but it worked perfectly well for someone desperate to find a way to bear an unbearable truth.

Joan was proof positive of the accuracy of the old adage: there are none so blind as those who will not see.

But Claire, despite having never been told, had always known the truth. She had seen the bruises and the blood and the broken bones and the black eyes. She knew what Brian endured, and she knew that it was done to him - at least in part - so it would not be done to her or her mother.

Thus, on that autumn day when she'd finally managed to overcome the obstacles of being the "new kid" in school and not being one of the so-called 'beautiful people', when she'd managed to convince herself that it was only a matter of time before popular girls like Lisa Van Horn - of the Twin Rivers Lincoln-Mercury Van Horns - and Allison Carlisle, principal's daughter, and Pam Sullivan, Beta club president, began to accept her, and that her senior year might not be a total loss after all, she still cared, at least a little bit, what happened to her baby brother, even if he was turning out to be a big queer.

That afternoon, it had only taken a few minutes for her to figure out that Pep Squad practice was nothing more than an excuse to get out of class early and spend a little time drinking Coca Cola, sneaking an occasional cigarette behind the bleachers, giggling with friends . . . and watching the boys practicing on the football field, which would be the biggest attraction of all, once the coach finished up the lecture he was giving in the locker room, releasing the team to come charging out through the end zone.

Meanwhile, the girls took advantage of the opportunity to arrange themselves to best advantage to be noticed when the boys arrived, and to gossip and giggle and chatter about the next Ghostbusters movie or the new Prince album or the real reason why Dianna Knox would not be back to school this year, or how the new girls' gym teacher, with her butch haircut and her plaid shirts, was probably a dyke who'd spend all her time hanging out in the shower trying to spy on all the pussy she could lay her eyes on.

Claire had taken special care in dressing for this occasion, having raided Brian's closet when he wasn't looking, and helped herself to one of his Polo shirts - this one a dark navy with scarlet trim - that she'd tucked into the Guess jeans her mother had bought for her birthday. Thus, she felt as if she really fit in perfectly when she took her seat in the stands, directly behind the trio of girls who were the elite members of the senior class, and watched while the cheerleaders on the field finished
running through one of their standard routines.

Still, she thought, one could never be too careful, so she was taking a quick peek in her compact, checking to make sure the lipstick wasn’t smeared and the shag haircut was shaggy in all the right places, when she heard Lisa Van Horn - the blondest, richest, and prettiest of the group - take a quick, deep breath, that was almost a gasp.

"Oh, my God!" the girl cried, one hand knotted at her throat. "Who is that?"

"Who is what?" replied Allison Carlisle, she of the Miss Clairol super-bright auburn hair.

"That!" Lisa retorted. "Jesus! Are you blind?"

"What the . . . " That was Pam Sullivan, putting in her two cents.

"There, you twits. Right there. Look. Third on the left - front row."

A beat of silence, followed by Pam’s exaggerated exhalation. "Oh, for God's sake, Lisa. That's just the junior soccer team. Why would you . . ."

Lisa turned and fixed her companion with a cold glare, and the other girl went abruptly silent. Lisa was not one to accept fools - or dissent - gladly.

"Unless you have lost your fucking mind," said the blonde, "if you'll just open your eyes and actually look where I'm pointing, you'll see what I'm talking about. Now turn around . . . and look!"

By this time, Pam and Allison were not the only ones looking, since everybody in the stands - both those who were members of the "in" club and those who only aspired to be - pretty much took their cues from the golden trio. Thus, Claire joined the crowd in looking across the field, trying to see what had so inspired the blonde trend-setter.

But there was nothing there, except . . .

"Oh, shit!" said Pam. "How could we miss that?"

No. Claire was almost afraid to breathe. They couldn't possibly mean . . .

But they did. They must. What else was down there to rivet their attention? Over on the left side of the field, in a patch of chilly sunshine, the members of the junior varsity soccer team were stretching and loosening up, and right in front - where else - was a tall, beautifully-built individual, decked out in the soccer team's black and scarlet uniform, colors which, naturally, were among those which flattered him most, accenting long, well-muscled legs, perfect golden skin, broad shoulders and narrow waist, and - at that exact moment, with his legs spread wide as he bent forward - his perfect, beautiful butt displayed to wonderful advantage.

"Who is that?" asked Allison, her tone hushed, almost breathless.

"I don't know," answered Lisa, "but I sure as hell intend to find out."

"Ummm . . ." Claire took a deep breath, and leaned forward, attempting to affect a slightly bored demeanor, but not succeeding very well. "Don't waste your time. He's just a freshman."

Pam Sullivan sniffed loudly. "I don't give a shit if he's twelve. Holy shit, what a body!"

Claire forced herself to breathe again, wondering if - just maybe - this might prove to be her lucky day after all. "If you like," she said slowly, "I could introduce you. If you're really interested, I
mean."

Three heads turned simultaneously, and three pairs of eyes gave her a swift, efficient, condescending once-over.

"You?" said Allison Carlisle, not exactly sneering - but close enough. "You know him?"

Claire was careful to toss her head in just the right way, exactly the way she'd seen her peers - or the people she hoped to adopt as her peers - do it before. "Know him? Of course, I know him. He's my brother."

Three pairs of eyes scanned her again, slightly colder than before, and one of them - she was never sure which - began to laugh.

"That," said Lisa with a venal grin, "is related to you? You can't really expect us to believe that . . . that beautiful creature is . . ." She was actually giggling now, her cheeks flushed bright red with the attempt to suppress whoops of laughter, "is your brother?"

It was Pam who spoke up then, to put the final dollop of icing on the cake. "He must be . . . so . . ." She didn't even bother to try to finish the sentence, as everyone in the stands was now laughing too, delighted to be included in a chance to enjoy the mortification of an intrusive outsider who would never fit in with the 'Beautiful people', no matter how hard or how long she tried.

Claire made a wild grab for her things, her face hot and glowing scarlet with embarrassment, and took off at a dead run, not caring in the least that she was dropping her belongings behind her as she raced away. She made her exit as fast as her legs would carry her, leaving behind the final shreds of her hopes for acceptance and belonging in a school society completely indifferent to her existence. And down on the field, where the soccer team continued to warm up and the sun was striking bright auburn glints in a mass of thick, dark hair and gilding a beautiful, perfect body, Brian went on with his stretching, never realizing that he had just lost the last vestige of his sister's loyalty.

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Thank God! The fucking bus was finally coming up the street, and Claire stood up and stepped forward, her face grim and set and determined.

No point in crying over old memories. Or new ones either. It had been silly of her to think that Peter looked anything like Brian. Even if there was some tiny, superficial physical similarity, there was also one major, elementary difference; Peter had looked embarrassed and scared, and Brian . . . Brian had never been scared of anything in his life. Defiant and cocksure - yes. Resentful and furious - yes. But never scared. And never embarrassed, even though he should have been. And above all, never, never, never sorry, never once showing an ounce of remorse over the fact that he was always the one that managed to be the center of attention in every situation; the one who unfailingly drew the eyes of family and friends and acquaintances and perfect strangers on the street; the one who always managed to land on his feet no matter how far he fell - or was thrown; the one to whom everything came easily - school, friends, scholarships, athletic ability, wit, charm, education, acclaim, admiration, desire . . . money.

It just wasn't fair.

The bus was crowded today, and she quickly made her way toward the back to take a seat, still not quite able to put Brian out of her thoughts, especially given her current circumstances, since it was, in a way, his fault that she was running so late this morning. If she hadn't had to take time out of her busy schedule - the appointment had almost made her miss the regular episode of Big Brother - to be
interviewed by that FBI woman, she wouldn't have had to stay up so late to finish her nightly chores and thus, wouldn't have overslept this morning.

Yet, she couldn't very well have refused to speak to the woman. No matter what an embarrassment Brian had turned out to be, he was still blood, and of course she had to cooperate with the authorities in their attempts to apprehend the individuals responsible for his injuries. In addition, she had hoped that it might give her an opportunity to learn more about the circumstances of the crime and the damage done to her brother, but that hadn't exactly worked out as she'd wished.

Alexandra Corey, with her elegant Armani suit and her Jimmy Choo shoes and her expensive leather briefcase had not exactly lived up - or down - to Claire's expectations of how a civil servant should look or act. For one thing, she'd been very uncooperative in answering the questions Claire put to her while simultaneously insisting that Claire should reply to hers fully and comprehensibly.

Thus, in an attempt to take charge of the confrontation, Claire had confined her initial responses to mono-syllables - simple yes and no replies to not-so-simple questions - and Agent Corey had taken notes in a leather-bound journal, in a cryptic, indecipherable shorthand, her own contributions to the conversation limited to nods or non-committal hums. But as the minutes had passed, Claire had begun to grow impatient with the agent's silences, had grown increasingly determined to elicit some kind of genuine response. But nothing had worked. Even when she'd begun to elaborate on some of her answers, Corey had remained entirely unmoved and uninvolved.

Until, after a half hour of extremely minimalist give and take, the agent had crossed her legs and settled herself comfortably into her chair, regarding Brian's sister with a speculative glance before offering up a single, apparently idle question.

"Was your brother always so beautiful?"

It had been softly spoken, without a nuance of hidden meaning or malice, but it had struck Claire like a dagger through the heart, and she had suddenly felt the cold weight of years of misery and bitterness and jealousy settle upon her, a monstrous weight that succeeded in destroying all of her defensive walls and releasing a floodtide of pent-up rage and resentment, of disappointments and disillusionment and disgrace.

Of never being good enough. Of never being loved enough, for - even in that, even in that one final certainty she had trusted to provide the only solace she would ever know - even then, she had been wrong. In the end, despite every effort she had made, despite the fact that beautiful, perfect Brian had betrayed everything their father ever believed in - the father who should have loved her, who should have been proud of her, who should have been grateful for the love and affection she gave him - despite all that, at the very end, he had betrayed her, lying on his deathbed, gasping for his last breath, and, with it, whispering the last word he would ever speak.

Brian.

As life had drained from his body, it had been Brian who occupied his thoughts, Brian from whom he hungered for respect and forgiveness; Brian, who had been loved, almost as much as he'd been hated.

Claire had stared at the FBI agent, at the smirk on her face and the knowing gleam in her eyes, and been suddenly swept away in an overpowering urge to speak out, to scour away the dark stains of her miserable life in a blinding flash of truth.

She had ranted for almost an hour, her words tumbling and falling over each other, mixed with occasional sobs and desperate sighs, only realizing, as she came to the end of her diatribe, that her
voice had risen to a shrill scream and that her youngest son had emerged from his room at some point to stand on the stairs and listen to everything she'd said, his eyes huge and dark with desperation. At that point, she'd discovered that she couldn't even remember most of what she'd said, and she'd fallen silent, her breathing harsh and uneven, as she'd felt a stir of panic in wondering if she'd gone too far - said too much. Then she'd turned to stare at the FBI agent, and study the shadows moving in the woman's dark eyes. Alexandra Corey had spent many years learning to conceal her emotions and mask her feelings, but, on this occasion, she hadn't been totally successful in suppressing her responses to everything Claire had said.

The woman had looked stunned, scandalized, subdued, obviously shocked at everything she had heard, and Claire was filled with a sense of satisfaction, in the belief that the truth had been revealed, that the FBI agent had been forced to reassess her opinions about the man she had previously characterized as a victim.

A victim!

Claire stared out through the dirty window of the bus, her eyes narrow and filled with malice.

A victim!

Brian Kinney had been many things to many people in his life, but the one thing he had never been was a victim - no matter what had been done to him. She had seen the photographs in the tabloids; she'd even kept one, locked away in a bureau drawer, a keepsake that she could take out, when life was too hard and too bitter to bear, a reminder that justice - harsh, brutal, relentless - would always be served, sooner or later.

Exactly as it should be. Exactly as she'd explained it to Agent Corey.

Even though she was here, on this miserable, dirty old bus in route to her bleak, thankless job, apparently destined to live in a ramschackle old townhouse that she could not afford to repair, with two boys who hardly ever saw their father and seemed to have no real connection with family members, while her brother - the pervert - was off somewhere, no doubt flaunting his glamorous lifestyle and enjoying all his considerable wealth while his incredibly elegant, beautifully decorated home lay empty and untouchable and off-limits to the people who should have mattered to him. His face, she was pretty sure, would never again be as perfect as it had been during all those years when people had fallen all over themselves to rave about his beauty, but it wouldn't matter in the end, since he had enough money to buy the kind of fawning behavior that he obviously craved. She sighed then, momentarily caught up in a memory of that face, of a time before she had learned to hate and resent him, when even she had been charmed and taken in by his wiles, but the memory was fleeting, quickly dismissed and replaced by other memories - sharper, colder, more painful. She had suffered at his hands, more than anyone would ever know, but at least, she had the satisfaction of knowing that she had never earned the kind of vicious hatred that would motivate unknown individuals - powerful, vengeful individuals - to try to destroy her or to find joy in mutilating her face and body. No one would ever have just cause to condemn her for perversion and debauchery.

At least, she had the moral high ground, and she had managed to force Alexandra Corey to see that, even if she had been reluctant to accept it. In the end, Claire had seen it there in the woman's eyes - the horror of truth dawning, of recognizing what Brian had done to the people around him and how he had earned his just desserts.

Ultimately, she was content with her performance, never once stopping to consider that the FBI agent's horror might not have been directed at Brian at all, but at a completely different target. Thus, when she had moved to shake the woman's hand at the end of their interview and Corey had turned away, apparently never noticing the hand that was extended to her, Claire had simply chalked it up to
weariness after a long day and an emotional session. It had not occurred to her that the woman might have been repulsed by the idea of touching someone so consumed with malice.

Still, Claire was not completely satisfied with how the confrontation had gone; she had not learned very much about Brian's condition or his prognosis or his current location - all things that she and her mother had a right to know. They had managed to find out that he had left the hospital; Allegheny General had provided that information, at least. And a subsequent phone call to Kinnetik and a conversation with that blonde bitch/glorified typist who called herself Brian's assistant had confirmed it, but had ultimately only served to intensify their sense of frustration when Cynthia Whitney had refused to divulge anything about where he'd gone or why he'd gone there. She had been icily polite, but adamant.

Nasty little bitch. Claire and Joan had both speculated on whether or not Brian might have secured her loyalty by virtue of exercising his notorious seductive powers to lure her into his bed, but both had dismissed the idea quickly, realizing that Brian just didn't swing that way. Although there had been that ridiculous blonde when he was in college - the one who, according to rumor, had borne a child, claiming the Brian was the sperm donor. Which was, of course, also ridiculous. The idea of Brian Kinney as a father was just ludicrous.

Still, there was much they did not know, and there was too much at stake in all this to simply walk away. What if it turned out that her brother's injuries were more severe than anyone had admitted? What if he was never able to resume a normal life? What if he needed someone to look out for his best interests?

Perhaps it was time to mount a little investigation of her own in an effort to sniff out the weak links in the chains with which Brian had always surrounded himself. She was certain that there were plenty of shady characters who were a part of his life who would not hesitate to take advantage of his current circumstances to make sure that they could profit from his misfortune, which, of course, could not be allowed. If anybody deserved to benefit from his situation, it should be the people to whom he owed such a huge debt - the people he had hurt so badly throughout his life.

His innocent family.

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Dr. Rick Turnage was trying to decide whether or not it would be completely beneath the dignity of an acclaimed surgeon to totally lose his temper and throw a chair through a plate glass window.

In the end, he concluded that it would be - but only just - and even then, if he could have been certain that the shattered glass would disintegrate in such a way as to make hamburger out of a certain arrogant, unapologetic FBI asshole, he thought that he probably would have proceeded, no matter how far beneath his dignity it might be.

How the hell was he supposed to do his best work when that bastard, McClaren, had made it impossible for him to function under optimum conditions?

"This is unacceptable!" he snapped, standing nose-to-nose with the agent. "You had no right . . ."

"On the contrary, Doctor, I had every right."

Turnage wasn't sure which infuriated him more - the flat refutation of his statement, or the agent's cool serenity in the face of his outrage.

"You . . . you . . ." Turnage paused to take a deep breath. Then he tried again. "You actually vetted
my staff? You took it upon yourself to investigate my people, and to decide who . . ."

Chris McClaren held up one hand to end the incipient tirade, his expression giving away nothing except his determination. "Calm down, Doctor," he said smoothly. "If you'll pay attention, I'll explain it to you."

"But . . ."

This time, the agent raised only a single finger. "Your job, Dr. Turnage, is to restore your patient's physical well being. And his appearance. And that's a worthy endeavor. However, my job is to keep him alive. And I think you're smart enough to figure out which takes precedence. Now, I know you're not happy with having to operate without the services of your chief nurse/anesthetist, and, believe it or not, I sympathize with your difficulty, but . . ."

Turnage's mutinous expression suggested that he didn't believe a single word of the agent's assurances.

McClaren, however, continued without missing a beat. "However, you must also understand that this situation is unique in that Kinney's need for your services makes it impossible for us to protect him using ordinary measures. We can't simply make him disappear into Wit-Sec, as we would under normal circumstances. For one thing, you're too high-profile. For another, so is he. But at the same time, his life is on the line. So is mine, and it's not beyond the realm of plausibility that yours might be as well."


"Relax," McClaren said quickly. "As part of protecting him, I also have to protect you." His smile was slightly smug. "Look, Doc. This investigation is still in its infancy, but everything we've learned so far suggests that this wasn't just an example of random violence - a result of Kinney happening to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. All indicators are that it was well planned and deliberate, and that the people behind it are powerful, determined individuals. Which means that we have to scramble to make sure we stay one step ahead of them.

"And while I understand your objections to our methods, I can't allow a question of convenience, for lack of a better term, to impact my decision. The simple truth is that your anesthetist has strong family and personal attachments to a group of individuals in Pittsburgh who might - or might not - have some interest in this case. And while I agree that it's unlikely that there's any real connection at all, it's a risk I dare not allow. Thus, it's just easier to err on the side of caution and make sure that Nurse Connor is never tempted to betray his professional obligations and violate confidentiality regulations. Comprende?"

But Turnage was still not convinced, having grown more and more annoyed as the agent explained himself. "Group of individuals?" he quoted with a sneer. "You mean gang members. This is all because Darrell was in a gang when he was a kid. Christ, that was thirty years ago. What does he have to do to . . ."

McClaren's eyes were suddenly icy. "You may be right, Doctor. His ties to the Brighton Place Crips may be long forgotten. But his youngest nephew is still a member in good standing, and the unavoidable truth is that some of the thugs that served as hired muscle in the attack on Kinney were gang members. So this is the bottom line; you may be willing to risk your patient's health on your certainty that Connor's integrity is thicker than blood - so to speak - but I'm not. Especially when the fix was relatively simple. A couple of phone calls, a little finagling, and . . ."

"Simple? You think this is simple? You arrange for some pencil pusher at the nursing home where
his eighty-year-old mother is confined to come up with some kind of bogus discrepancy in her financial arrangements, so he has to go flying out of here in a panic, and . . .

McClaren shrugged. "Don't sweat it, Doc. Everything will all be worked out in a few days, and the old lady will never know anything about it. At which time, a few other factors will come into play to make sure that Connor has to stay there for a few weeks, to take care of family business, so that, by the time, he's free to return, Kinney will be tucked up safe and sound in his cozy little cottage, with no further need to spend time here. Everybody wins."

"Very neat," retorted Turnage. "Except for the fact that I now have to perform an intricate, tremendously complex surgical procedure without one of my most trusted assistants. And there is absolutely no guarantee that there won't be many such procedures to be done in the future, before this patient is done with treatment here. So what happens if . . ."

McClaren's finger was up again. "One day at a time, Dr. Turnage. Let's try to concentrate on . . ."

"Oh, fuck off!"

McClaren grinned as he watched the tall, beautifully-built physician flounce off down the hall, observing that it was really a shame that the guy was straight. The task of taming such a shrew could have proved intensely challenging, not to mention extremely orgasmic.

Turnage was just blowing off steam - performing the primadonna-physician's version of a queen out - because, for once, his word was not law. Not even within the boundaries of his own clinic, where he was usually accorded the respect ordinarily reserved for heads of state - or gods. But the FBI had already done its homework and determined that Vera Holtz, Turnage's alternative to Darrell Connor, was every bit as skilled and capable as Connor, with none of the questionable family associations, and Turnage was just going to have to accept their judgment, whether he liked it or not. Which he obviously didn't.

The FBI agent walked down the hall and stepped out onto a small terrace to get a breath of fresh air and a cigarette. Kinney, it was obvious, was a terrible influence. McClaren had been trying to quit - had convinced himself that he was on the verge of quitting - until Kinney had favored him with that trademark sardonic grin, which saw too much and knew too much and never accepted a single ounce of bullshit as truth.

Shit!

He lit up and didn't even bother to try to conceal his pleasure in the taste that filled his lungs, as a fitful breeze swirled around him, prompting him to gaze out into the small bay that spread out below the promontory on which the clinic stood. A cold front had raced across the coastline during the early morning, and now the water was frosted with whitecaps as it raced toward a tumble of boulders that marked the edges of the narrow strip of sandy beach, pocked by tidal pools. The air was crisp, having shed most of its warmth in the wake of the north wind, and the light was hard-edged and sharp, glinting in the water like shards of broken glass, tinted by the ombre shading of the sea's jeweled layers, while a sleek sailboat tacked into the wind far out beyond the rocky peninsula that formed the southern arm of the bay.

Off to the north, near the edge of the property, a lone figure was silhouetted against the horizon - McClaren's back-up, who was walking the perimeter, eyes constantly in motion and body at the ready for anything unexpected that might turn up. Never let it be said that the FBI was not prepared for any eventuality.

It was bright, peaceful, breathtaking in its natural simplicity. It should have been beautiful - was
beautiful. Except . . .

He dropped his cigarette into a sand-filled container and hurried inside, chiding himself for allowing a reaction to what was, obviously, a simple case of nerves.

Everything was fine. Kinney was fine.

He went striding into the room where the patient was currently being medicated prior to being wheeled into the sterile, pre-op area, and paused in the doorway to draw a deep breath. Given Kinney's sometimes uncanny ability to read body language, demeanors, and - might as well admit it - maybe even minds, it wouldn't do to approach him without double-checking to make sure one's mask of indifference was firmly in place.

Only, McClaren had failed to take into account the possibility that the reverse might not be true - that it would be Brian Kinney who was stripped of his customary façade. It was a mistake that would prove to be disturbing.

Brenda Herring, looking crisp and professional - and very pretty - in maroon scrubs, was just finishing the injection of a clear liquid into the patient's IV line, looking up as he approached and greeting him with a friendly smile. "He's doing fine, Agent McClaren. Everything as it should be. Only he's going to be drifting off very soon now, so I wouldn't put too much credence into anything he might say to you, at this point."

"How long will the procedure take?" he asked, stepping forward to look down into Brian's face and noting the distended pupils and the creamy pallor of the skin.

Her smile grew slightly sardonic. "That depends on God - and Rick Turnage. Best guess is three hours or so, but don't be alarmed if it runs longer. When the doctor gets into his groove - so to speak - he sometimes has to be reminded that Rome - and faces like this one - weren't built in a day."

When Brian spoke, both of them were slightly surprised that he sounded completely rational and aware of his surroundings. "So it's your job to make sure he doesn't get carried away?"

She nodded, and touched his arm with gentle fingers. "Among other things. You're in good hands, Mr. Kinney. I promise."

He managed to take her hand, although he had to grope a bit to find it. "I'll hold you to that. If I die on the table, I'm going to come back to haunt you."

She grinned. "Hmmm, let me think about it. My very own charming, witty, gorgeous ghost? I think I could learn to live with that."

Brian closed his eyes. "Two out of three, anyway."

But the nurse wasn't going to allow him to drift away on a sea of doubts. She leaned close and gently braced his face with both palms. "None of that now, Mister. You're going to be just as beautiful as you always were, and I'm going to make sure that your doctor doesn't take it upon himself to try to improve on perfection."

Unexpectedly, Brian grinned. "When all of this is over and done with, you could come to work for me, you know."

She lapsed into an exaggerated semi-frown. "Are you trying to bribe me?"

"Whatever works," he answered.
She laughed and moved away. "I'll be back to get you in a few minutes. Just relax and think pleasant thoughts, so you'll have sweet dreams during the procedure."

McClaren had backed away and stood silent throughout the exchange, but he stepped close again as he spotted the shadows rising in hazel eyes at the mention of dreams. "Easier said than done, huh?" he said softly and watched as Brian looked away, refusing to meet his eyes.

He sat then, pulling up a chair so that he was close enough to reach over and touch Brian's hand - should he feel the need to do so.

"You don't have to pretend otherwise with me, you know. After what you went through, it's only natural that . . ."

"Could we please talk about something else?" Brian interrupted, with ill-concealed impatience. "How about you tell me how you lost your virginity, or . . ."

"Or maybe," McClaren said quickly, "I can guess how you lost yours. Let's see now. Young, I bet. Thirteen, fourteen maybe. And no fumbling around with the teeny-boppers on the block for you, I'm thinking. So . . . an older man. Gorgeous and hip and not believing his luck when this drop-dead beautiful kid falls at his feet and . . ."

Brian laughed. "Okay. You've made your point."

He shifted his head then, and adjusted his shoulders against his pillow.

"You all right?" McClaren knew better than to come on as touchy-feely and hyper-concerned, but a tiny little show of empathy might go unrebuked.

"Yeah." Cut and dried, without a single trace of emotional excess. "I'm fine."

McClaren simply nodded, and distracted himself by browsing through an old edition of GQ with Johnny Knoxville on the cover, looking very cosmopolitan in a suit that even Brian Kinney might have deigned to wear, and when he looked up again, he found that Brian seemed to be dozing, one hand curled against his chest with the other - the one closest to McClaren - lying loose and relaxed against the side of the bed.

He was never entirely certain what moved him to lean forward and clasp that smooth, perfectly manicured hand with his own. But he did it anyway, only to be astonished when it closed on his fingers, and he felt himself jerked forward, until he was virtually nose-to-nose with a very wide-awake, very focused Brian Kinney.

"I need you to listen to me." Brian's voice, for all that it was no more than a whisper, was riveting, and McClaren knew that he could not have refused to hear what the man had to say, no matter how much he might have wished to. "Are you listening?"

"Thought you were sleeping," the agent replied, tempted to pull back and tempted, at the same time, to lean forward and claim that perfect, luscious mouth which had somehow escaped all the damage done to the rest of that once-perfect face as Brian adjusted his hold, moving from the agent's hand to his collar, and pulling him a bit closer.

He was obviously not about to allow any distraction. "Are - you - listening?"

McClaren took a deep breath and allowed himself to get caught up in what was gleaming in Brian's eyes. This was no casual exchange - no exercise in caustic wit. This was serious. "Yes, Brian. I'm listening."
Brian nodded, but he didn't release his hold on the agent's shirt. "Despite all the bullshit assurances," he began, his expression daring the agent to dispute what he was saying, "you and I both know that if someone wants a man dead badly enough - wants it so much that he's willing to do anything, pay anything, take any risk necessary to make it happen - chances are that the target is going to wind up dead. Guys like you who fool yourselves into thinking that you've got all the bases covered never seem to remember one thing. People who are that desperate to take somebody's life aren't bound by any moral consideration to spare innocent bystanders that might get in the way. You, on the other hand, have to consider everybody. You can't just shoot somebody because you think they might be a threat to me, while they . . . Shit, they can do whatever they like and never lose a minute's sleep over who else might get hurt. If they're determined enough, they'll probably find a way. They could drop a fucking bomb on this place before you could even draw your gun, or on any other place I might be, and wouldn't give a rat's ass how many people they'd have to kill to get the one they really want. Can we agree on that?"

McClaren really looked like he wanted to argue, but, in the end, he couldn't, because the man was right. Always accepting individuals like heads of state, who could usually be protected from anyone who might be after them - and even that was not always true - any man could be killed at any given moment. "You think you're that important to them?"

Brian took a deep breath. "I don't know, but it's possible. And that's why . . . that's why I need you to make me a promise."

"Can't we talk about this later, after your surgery, when . . ."

But Brian was shaking his head. "Can you be absolutely, 100% certain that nobody managed to get into this clinic and slip a little cyanide into the oxygen lines, or to infect a surgical instrument with a lethal dose of plague, or maybe they kidnapped the child of one of the surgical team and the only way to save its life is to kill me. All of those things are possible, along with a thousand other things they could have done to make sure I never wake up again?"

"Come on. You're being a little paranoid, aren't you? There's no way . . ."

"You don't know that."

And McClaren saw the truth of it in the other man's flat, forbidding gaze. Kinney was right. No matter how careful they were, no matter how many precautions they took, there was always the off chance that they might miss something. The chance might be miniscule, but it existed, nevertheless.

The FBI agent studied Brian's face, deliberately taking note of the damage done - the mutilated eye socket, the broken cheekbones, the torn and distorted muscles, the fractured jawline; he saw it all, but somehow, he could still see the beauty that was there beneath the damage, waiting to be restored.

"Brian," he said softly, "is there something . . . do you know something you haven't told us? Is there some reason they would want to be sure you never get a chance to tell the whole story? What do you . . ."

"I don't know." Flat and non-equivocal, but McClaren was quick to note that the man had not denied knowing something; he had only suggested that, if he did know something, it was something he had not yet managed to recall or relate. "Sometimes I think . . . sometimes there's something that I think I ought to know, but . . ." He shook his head then, obviously frustrated with his own inability to be precise. "I . . . can't."

McClaren nodded. "OK. What promise?"

Brian did not - quite - smile, but there was a warm, lovely flash of approval in his eyes, and the FBI
agent was pleased to have put it there.

"I've told you before, and I meant it. There are only two people who matter to me. My son and . . ."

"Taylor."

Brian's hesitation was brief. "Right. Taylor. My son will be . . . all right, I think. His mother will take care of him, and she'll make sure that he stays far enough away from any memories of me to keep him safe. With any luck at all, he won't . . . he won't even remember me. And there'll be plenty of money to set him up for life. But Justin . . ."

McClaren sighed. "He's going to remember it all, isn't he?"

Brian closed his eyes. "He's going to blame himself. No matter what I do, no matter what measures I take to prevent it, it's not going to work."

"Why?"

"Because he's a stubborn little twat. Because he never listens to what I say. Because he believes he knows me . . ."

McClaren leaned forward and touched his lips against Brian's forehead. "Because he does know you. Brian, I can't . . ."

"Justin has got to get on with his life," Brian said firmly, pulling back and looking up into eyes gone dark with shadow. "And you have to promise me that you'll see that he does."

"And how - exactly - am I supposed to do that?"

Brian took a deep breath. "I don't know. I don't care. You just have to make sure that he doesn't waste his life mooning around over what might have been. He's got too much to live for, too much to give. Too many miles to go and too many people to love. You have to . . ."

"And what if you don't die?" McClaren said quickly. "What if we catch these bastards who did this - we are very good at that sort of thing, you know - and you come through all this with flying colors so that, in the end, you're the same beautiful, desirable glamorous, irresistible Brian Kinney you always were?"

Brian dredged up a smile, but there was no joy in his eyes. "I was all that before, and it wasn't . . . it was never enough. So why should it be enough now?"

McClaren hesitated, struggling to find words to offer comfort without resorting to empty platitudes. "So," he said finally, realizing that there was nothing he could say that would change the elemental truths, "you're willing to give him up - to let him go completely - in order to . . . what? Keep him safe?"

A quick inhalation - not quite a gasp. "To let him find his way, so he can be what he needs to be. As long as he's safe and happy, nothing else matters."

"You should tell him, you know." McClaren's voice was very soft, barely audible, but filled with conviction nonetheless. "He has a right to know how much you love him."

To the agent's astonishment, Brian huffed a small, sardonic laugh. "Now why would I do that? So that he feels obligated to stay with me? So I can use my feelings to bind him to me so tightly that he can never find a way to escape?"
His eyes were suddenly dark with a bleak certainty. "That's not love. That's possession."

Footsteps in the hallway announced the arrival of the staff members who would wheel the patient into the surgical suite, and McClaren rose to step aside and get out of the way. "We'll talk when . . ."

"Your word," said Brian, obviously struggling now against the effect of the drugs he'd been given, but still alert enough - determined enough - to regard the FBI agent with a steady gaze.

"Brian . . ."

"Your word." A demand, not a request.

And McClaren knew he had no choice. "You have it," he said finally. Then he smiled. "Are you going to come back to haunt me if I screw it up?"

Brian's response was just a sigh - a soft breath as he released his hold on consciousness. "Every fucking day."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

The full-length mirror that hung in the corridor just outside the Club's main dining room was there for a reason. It would simply not do for any member of the serving staff to appear in the presence of the Club's patrons without making sure he or she was presentable, according to the establishment's impeccable standards. To appear within the elegant setting of the formal dining area in a rumpled uniform or a stained shirt or with unkempt hair would have been as unthinkable as setting a table with soiled linen or serving a perfectly prepared rare steak with a pedestrian bottle of sweet white wine. It was just not done.

Thus, when Rachel Charles was summoned into the presence of a group of the Club's charter members, she was careful to take a moment to check her appearance before proceeding. Salt-and-pepper hair coiled neatly in a bun at the nape of her neck (with her legally-required hairnet tucked safely into the pocket of the apron she'd removed and hung on a peg in the kitchen at the moment she'd received her summons); make-up freshened and discreet; well-cut black dress (no slacks allowed for those of the feminine persuasion) free of any food residue and adorned with only a simple silver/marcasite broach set with seed pearls; clean, dry hands with carefully manicured, unpolished nails; sturdy black shoes with moderate, stacked heels, and - perhaps most important of all - a demure, serene demeanor with appropriately downcast eyes.

She had worked for this establishment for almost three decades, so she knew exactly what was expected of her - and what wasn't - even though she could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times she'd ever been requested to appear within the inner sanctum. Thus, it was fairly easy to figure out that her experience during the next few moments could prove to be either very good - or very bad.

She squared her shoulders and prepared to step forward to learn which it was to be, but she was delayed briefly by the touch of a gentle hand on her shoulder, prompting her to turn to regard the young man who was standing at her side, favoring her with a lovely smile. "Not to worry, Miss Rachel," whispered Nicholas Avolar as he brushed a speck of dust from her sleeve. "They've been raving about your new entrée. The second stringers are so stuffed they can barely move, and Mr. Clayton has been practically orgasmic."

She was almost successful in suppressing the tiny smile that touched her lips, knowing that it was
never a good idea to encourage the younger staff members to indulge their tendency to disrespect the powers-that-be, knowing that she should chide him for the term he'd used to describe the members of the Club who were considered to be the second tier of governing power in the organization. Nevertheless, Nicholas was an adorable young charmer who was very hard to resist, so she confined her response to a gentle frown and a headshake to remind him to guard his words carefully. He needed to keep in mind that a sharp tongue was not really an asset for anyone who aspired to become a permanent, valued employee of the Club.

"You hush now," she whispered, trying to administer an admonition but only managing to show concern for his well-being. "If your snide little remark falls on the wrong ear . . ."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," he replied with a grin. "As if they even realize I can speak in complete sentences."

"Shhh!" she answered. "Please, don't . . ."

So," he interrupted, as he arranged dessert dishes on a silver serving tray, "how'd you come up with your newest gastronomical delight? With black truffles going at - what? Fifty bucks an ounce? Must be really hard to find a way to perfect a recipe. How do you come up with the ingredients so you can practice?"

She offered a quick little scapegrace smile and a tiny shrug. "Here at the 'royal court', it's beef Wellington with winter truffle sauce. At my house, it's pot roast and mushrooms." She leaned forward then and adjusted his tie. "As you get older, you're going to learn that everything - all things - are a matter of degree."

"You better move along," said Nicholas with a cheeky grin, "and you do know that they don't like it when the great unwashed call this place the 'royal court', don't you? Just as you know that they don't like to be kept waiting."

She didn't argue. Mostly because he was right.

On this night, the dinner crowd was small, and the atmosphere in the dining room was almost intimate, under soft indirect lighting and the flicker of the flames in the fireplace. There were only six individuals gathered around the main table, and they were awaiting the arrival of their desserts when Rachel made her entrance and came to stand beside the man at the head of the table - the man who was always seated at the head of the table whenever he was in residence for a meal.

"You wanted to see me, Mr. Clayton?"

"I did indeed, Rachel," said the elderly individual, his smile emphasizing the network of wrinkles that riddled his face. "I wanted to tell you that you have absolutely surpassed yourself with this new creation of yours. It's extraordinary. A true culinary masterpiece."

She smiled and lifted her eyes to meet his gaze, but only briefly. She had never actually been told that the upper echelon of the Club preferred downcast eyes from the hired help, but she knew it nonetheless. And she was glad to note that Nicholas seemed to be minding his manners as well, as he served dessert. "Thank you, Sir. I'm so pleased that you enjoyed it."

"Enjoyed is hardly the word," said the younger man sitting to the right of the head of the table. "We're all speechless with delight."

"That's quite a compliment, Chief Stockwell," she answered. "Coming from a politician, I mean."

The former head of the Pittsburgh police department looked up sharply to study the look on the black
woman's face, not entirely sure he liked her tone of voice. Unlike most of the other Club members, he had not been born to the rarefied atmosphere of the organization. Instead, he was a first generation member, drafted into membership because of his successful political career and the power he'd commanded as chief of police. Not to mention the money he'd made for his powerful backers, several of whom were seated at the table with him. Thus, still being a bit of a novice to the hierarchy, he was not quite as sanguine as the others in his assumptions about the loyalty of the hired help, so his suspicions were more easily aroused. Still, a quick but thorough survey of Rachel's expression, which fairly radiated humility, convinced him that he'd only imagined a cold reserve in her response, so that he was comfortable enough to continue. "Perhaps you'd be good enough to share your recipe with my wife. She'd be the envy of the Ladies' Auxiliary."

"Of course," she replied, clamping down hard on an impulse to tell him to piss off and take his spoiled, trophy wife with him; it was at that point that she experienced a sudden mental epiphany and was astonished by the anger and resentment in her own thoughts. What in the world was wrong with her? She had never before allowed herself to resent the presumptions of the people who paid her salary, even though she had always realized that they frequently took advantage of those whose lives they controlled. Still, that was the nature of the game, wasn't it? The way it had always been played, and always would, so why should it bother her now?

She closed her eyes briefly, and recalled the image of a dark, handsome face favoring her with a smart-ass smile while she remembered a conversation they'd had in which she'd described her job and the conditions under which she worked. His response to her comments about how she was treated by her employers had, at first, shocked her; then, after a moment of reflection, it had made her smile - reluctantly. Now, she was hearing it again, sharp and clear and unequivocal. "You should tell them to piss off."

His name was Jed Harper, or so he'd claimed, and she had no idea why she doubted the truth of his claim, but doubt it, she did. She also had no idea why the thought of that young man with his outrageously, unbelievably blue eyes should be intruding on her thoughts at this moment, when she should be concentrating on showing appropriate humility and gratitude for her employers' willingness to take the time to express their appreciation for her accomplishment. It was, after all, only coincidental that this self-same individual had served as her guinea pig for testing the down-to-earth version of the entrée which was currently winning her such lovely acclaim.

This was a rare and singular occasion, and it might even mean a little something extra in her paycheck. She should be jubilant. So why did she feel like shit? And why was she suddenly unable to resist the temptation to phrase everything in language she had always resisted as tasteless and coarse and unsuitable?

Bad company. But the thought didn't really excuse her attitude. Instead, it made her want to smile.

"My congratulations too, Rachel," said the tall, slender individual seated on the other side of the table, looking for all the world like a college professor in his tweed jacket and argyle sweater vest. "Although in truth, I don't know which I appreciate more - the main course, or this wonderful dessert. I'm going to have to spend an extra hour in the pool to work all this off." So saying, Randolph Hobbs, father of Randolph Jr. and grandfather of Christopher, loaded a fork with a huge bite of Rachel's trademark dessert dish - a towering praline meringue - and assumed an expression of pure bliss as he devoured it.

She inclined her head. "Thank you, Sir. You're too kind."

She then bowed slightly and waited for a moment to be sure that she had been dismissed before retreating toward the service entrance, not really breathing easily until she was back in the corridor.
Still, she did overhear a few words as the conversation at the main table resumed while she was making her escape.

"So," said the silver-haired individual at the head of the table, "am I right in assuming that everything is ready?"

It was Hobbs who replied. "It is. Assuming, that is, that everyone here has completed their arrangements."

There was a general nodding of heads around the table.

"And there's no way that this can be traced back to us. Correct?"

Hobbs laughed. "Trust me. When this thing explodes, there's going to be so much mass confusion, no one's going to even think to try."

"And you're sure that the contact within Kinney's firm is going to be able to deliver?"

This time it was Stockwell who laughed. "Not only is he going to be able to do what's required, he's going to be overjoyed at the prospect. He won't know, until it's much too late, that he's provided the means to bring the whole enterprise down around Kinney's ears."

"And Craig?" said Hobbs. "He's on board as well?"

Stockwell nodded. "And thrilled with the prospect of finally getting a bit of payback."

It was at this point that Rachel reached the doorway, where she came face-to-face with Nicholas Avolar, just in time to surprise a strange, enigmatic shadow in his eyes. But neither of them spoke, choosing instead to make their exit together.

Behind them, the distinguished individual at the head of the table folded his hands and turned to look out into the darkness beyond the French doors, gray eyes narrowed and unfocused as he considered whether or not to say more. Then he leaned to his right and spoke very softly, for Stockwell's hearing only. "And the other issue?"

"Still in the works. Nothing definitive yet, but it looks promising." The politician frowned, and looked as if he wanted to say more, but, in the end, he didn't, something in his expression suggesting that he knew it was much too late for any second thoughts he might be entertaining.

"You do realize," said the other, "that timing could be critical?"

"Of course I do." For a moment, there was an element of impatience, almost anger, in Stockwell's tone, before he recalled who he was speaking to and managed to swallow it before it grew too strong to control. Instead, he gestured for the waiter to bring coffee, and then grumbled because the young man was nowhere in sight and took a full ten seconds to respond to the summons.

Young Nicholas reacted, of course, exactly as he'd been trained to do. With a smile and an apology - as required - and any private thoughts he might have had remained precisely that: private.

The room was exactly as he remembered it: stylish, welcoming, and elegantly simple. Exactly like its owner. Or not, since Brian was not, always, really welcoming. It depended entirely on his mood.

But the room still resonated with his presence, even if he was no longer physically present. Even if
Justin was pretty sure that Cynthia was responsible for maintaining that ambiance. The office was never used by anyone but Brian; that was a given. And yet, despite being sequestered and off-limits to almost everyone, it still gave the impression that its owner might walk in at any moment and find it exactly as he'd left it, with a pitcher of cold water available near the desk, with a bowl of fruit - perfectly arranged - at hand on a conference table, with sleek, modernistic lamps pouring pools of light at various spots around the room, and with a selection of the latest mock-up boards arranged atop a low shelf - colorful, vivid, inspired or not - but always engaging the eye and inviting speculation and interpretation.

Like Brian.

Justin walked around the desk, and sank into the custom-built chair - something he'd only done a couple of times in the past - and tried to allow himself to sink into the personality that had created the ambiance of this world.

But he couldn't quite grasp it. Because he wasn't Brian, and there was no "quite" to it. He wasn't Brian, but the problem wouldn't stop there. The real question was, was Brian still Brian? And the second question, possibly just as important, but in a different way, was what would Brian - whoever he might turn out to be - need from Justin, in order to be able to rebuild his life?

He spent a moment staring at the photograph - the only extraneous object on the surface of Brian's desk; Brian half asleep with baby Gus braced against his chest. It had always been Justin's favorite picture, so beloved that he had completed a half-dozen different paintings as variations of the same image.

One of them was hanging on the wall beside the desk; until he had walked into the office this morning, he had not known that Brian was the buyer who had purchased it anonymously.

He looked over at the liquor cabinet and knew that it would be fully stocked with plenty of liquid anesthesia to help get him through the day. But it was barely ten A.M., and he knew that if he started stocking up on liquid courage at this juncture, it would only get worse as the days progressed. Instead, he went looking for coffee and found it in the employees' lounge area - and Cynthia with it.

He squared his shoulders, poured himself a generous cup, and followed her into her office, closing the door behind him.

He wasn't sure she could help him understand what he needed to do, but he was virtually certain that, if she couldn't, no one could.

If he'd been hoping that she would take control of the conversation and simply tell him what he should do, he figured out PDQ that he was in for a big disappointment, as she seemed perfectly content to sip her coffee, bide her time, and wait for him to begin.

"You know why I'm here?" he asked finally, suddenly a bit uncomfortable under her scrutiny. He chose not to meet her eyes, concentrating instead on the flow of images on her computer screensaver - images of a beautiful little girl with flaxen hair and a lovely, natural smile.

Cynthia smiled. "Have you come looking for enlightenment, Grasshopper?"

He gave her an exaggerated eye-roll. "You've been spending entirely too much time with your boss."

But Cynthia was not about to allow him to sidetrack the conversation. "In point of fact," she replied, "I haven't. And neither have you. And I assume that's why you're sitting here at what is probably -"
for you - an ungodly hour and looking at me as if you think I hold the keys to the universe."

He lifted one eyebrow, obviously puzzled by her choice of words. "Ungodly?"

The smile became a grin. "Brian used to say that you were the only person in the world who was less of a morning person than him."

He looked, for a moment, as if he might dispute the assumption, but then he realized that he had no grounds to do so and shrugged instead. "One of the advantages of being a freelance artist," he admitted. "Working at midnight or sleeping til noon. Whatever works."

She nodded. "But here you are." Now it was her turn to employ a quizzical eyebrow.

"Yeah. Here I am." He stood up and walked to the window to stare out at a view that could be described, at best, as uninspiring.

Cynthia sighed, resisting an urge to rub her temples to dispel a burgeoning headache. "Justin, what . . . ."

"I don't know what to do," he said softly. So softly that she wasn't sure she'd heard him correctly.

"I'm sorry?" she replied, uncertain of how to respond to the aching emptiness in his voice. "What do you . . . ."

"I want you to tell me what to do," he said finally, in a rush, as if afraid that if he didn't just spit it out, he'd never manage to say it at all.

She sat back in her chair and regarded him as if he'd just sprouted wings, or a second head. "Oh. Is that all?"

"You think I've lost my mind, don't you?" He moved back to his seat and sat, once more concentrating on the photo display on her computer screen.

"I think," she replied slowly, "that there are a lot of people much better qualified to advise you on this. Your mother, your best friends, your boyfriend, your . . . ."

"The only boyfriend I have," he snapped, "just flew off into the sunset - metaphorically speaking - so that I don't even know where he is. As for the others . . . ." He looked up then, and she almost flinched away from the raw determination she read in his eyes. "Maybe they know me better than you do, but, right now, I don't need someone who knows me. I need someone who knows Brian. And I've begun to think that almost none of us really know him as well as we think we do. Except - maybe - you."

She suddenly realized that this was a conversation she didn't really want to have. Only there was no way of avoiding it. But she could perhaps, delay the inevitable. For a few minutes, anyway. "Why do you say that?" she asked finally, genuinely curious about what was going through his mind.

"I think he talks to you," he said, after pausing to consider how to respond. "I think we - all of us for whom he's the center of our world - tend to think of him as this Mount Everest of a man, who never needs anyone to lean on, to trust. Who can take whatever we dish out, and stand alone to endure it. But nobody can really do that. Not all the time, anyway. Everybody needs somebody to listen, somebody to be there, to understand. Somebody who won't condemn or judge or make demands. I think - for Brian - that person is you. I think he trusts you enough . . . . to let you see him cry."

She very deliberately did not meet his gaze as she took a sip of her coffee, and when she spoke, she
did not confirm his speculation. But neither did she deny it. "What do you want me to tell you, Justin?"

"I want the truth," he replied flatly. "The gospel, according to Brian Kinney - minus the bullshit and the trimmings."

"Regarding?"

He took a deep breath. "Me. I need to know what he needs . . . from me."

"But surely you don't . . ."

"He says that he can't spend the rest of his life waiting for me to decide that he's what I want. That he got tired of me walking away - of me choosing to leave him behind so I could go off on to explore my brave new worlds - Hollywood, New York, my dreams of monogamy, of artistic excellence." He sighed, and his voice dropped to a whisper. "Ethan Gold. And I . . . I can't even believe how blind I was. How I never let myself consider how it all must have looked from his perspective."

Her eyes shifted to the view outside the window as she considered his words, and he was grateful that she wasn't just offering him kneejerk responses. "You do realize that he could have stopped you. If he'd really put his mind to it, he could have . . ."

"But he wouldn't," he said quickly. "And that's really the point, isn't it? Brian doesn't believe in chains, doesn't believe in holding on to something - or someone - who doesn't want to be held. Not even when that someone is too stupid to understand that being held is what they should want. What they need. Why - why does he do that, Cynthia? Why doesn't he do what everybody else does? Why doesn't he hold on to what he wants most?"

She sighed. "You just answered your own question. He doesn't believe in chains."

"But . . ."

"Justin, I don't know what to tell you. I don't even know what you're asking."

He leaned forward to brace his elbows against the top of her desk and clasped his hands against his face. "I've made so many mistakes," he said softly. "I bought into so much bullshit and allowed myself to believe that I needed so many things so I could consider myself a big, fat, fucking success. But I've finally realized that it's all just sound and fury, just background noise - without Brian. He's . . . he's my world, Cynthia. But I don't know if I'm still his world, and I won't use chains on a man who doesn't believe in chains. He says we're over, that he's done with me. He says he doesn't want me or need me any more. And I need to know if that's true."

Cynthia closed her eyes, and knew that she'd been right before. This was a conversation she really, really didn't want to have.

"If he told you all this himself," she said slowly, "why are you asking me this? Why don't you believe him?"

He favored her with a lop-sided smile. "Because I'm a stubborn twat. Because I don't want to believe it?" Then he sighed, and the smile vanished. "Because I have this friend - this new friend who doesn't know Brian at all, but who seems, somehow, to have figured out a lot of shit I never even thought about before - who's made me look at things from a new perspective. Who suggests that maybe - just maybe - all of us who think we know Brian so well have never really looked under that façade that he's built around himself to see the man he really is. I mean, it's practically gospel among our fucked-up extended family: Brian Kinney doesn't do sacrifice, does he? Doesn't feel guilt or
obligation or remorse. Doesn't allow himself to need anyone."

He looked up then and met her gaze directly. "Doesn't believe in love."

Cynthia looked away, unable to endure the fear rising in his eyes, and spent a moment reflecting on how easily people could fuck up their lives. Even the great god, Kinney. She thought about all the time she'd caught glimpses of the Brian Kinney that almost no one was ever allowed to see - the man who loved his baby son so much that he'd been willing to give him up rather than see him grow up in a broken home; the man who loved his best friend so much that he'd been willing to endure the loss of a lifetime of that friendship in order to give Michael a chance to grab a romantic brass ring; the man who loved his friends so much that he'd moved mountains on their behalf, and never let anyone know about what he'd done or why he'd don't it, and - above all - the man who'd loved Justin - still loved Justin and always would - who'd believed that he could never give his young lover what he needed to make him truly happy, so he'd simply stood and watched as Justin walked away - over and over and over again.

Was it any wonder that he'd finally reached a point where he could not endure it any longer?

She knew what she had to do. Protecting Brian was no longer just her job; secondary only to one other thing, it had become her purpose in life. She knew that he still loved Justin; that had never been in doubt. But she also knew that Brian had come to a critical crossroads in his life; that he'd already endured too much, faced too many consequences.

He wanted to cut his losses, and it was her responsibility to help him do so.

Wasn't it? Wasn't an empty life, filled with empty days and vague longings, better than an existence filled with relentless pain? Wasn't it better to be lonely than to be hurt?

"Justin, I . . ." She paused, and made the mistake of looking directly into his eyes, to see what was staring back at her. She knew what she should do - where her loyalties should lie. It shouldn't matter that she was on the verge of demolishing the dreams of a young man she had always admired and liked. She had to protect Brian; nothing else mattered. She owed him too much and, in her own way, loved him too much. But what if . . . what if she took a chance? What if, for once in his life, Brian needed something he didn't know he needed? What if it was time to roll the dice, and hope for a bit of divine intervention?

What if he realized what she'd done and never forgave her? Did she love him enough to be able to endure that?

She took a deep breath and felt the answer rise in her mind. She did.

"Justin, I need you to do me a favor," she said quickly, not allowing herself time for doubts to resurge. She opened her desk drawer and pulled out a key ring which she handed to him, along with a plastic card embossed with a series of numbers.

She was willing to take this risk, but she would not try to tilt the odds, one way or another; it was time to trust in fate. "Those are the keys to the loft, and the codes to disarm the alarm system. I need you to go over there and bring me Brian's back-up laptop. It should be on his desk in the office area. There are some files on it that I need in order to complete a presentation for Brown Athletics' new NFL sportswear line, and I don't have the time to go get it. Can you do that for me?"

Justin looked confused. "You want me . . . to run an errand for you? To go to the loft to fetch . . ."

"You know as well as I do how paranoid he is about allowing strangers into the loft." She grinned
then. "Unless, or course, he's planning to fuck them. And I really need those files."

Justin simply stared at her, obviously dumbfounded. "But . . ."

"Please," she said quickly. "If you'll just do this one thing for me, then . . ." She hesitated, biting her lip for a moment before deciding how to continue. "When you get back, I promise I'll answer any questions you have."

"But . . ."

"I promise."

He heard something in her voice then - something that suggested that this errand was much more than what it seemed. That it was something he needed to do, and, perhaps, there was something he needed to learn. Something that he would find at the loft.

Still he hesitated. "You promise?" he asked finally, getting to his feet.

She met his gaze squarely and nodded her agreement.

"In that case," he said quickly, zipping up his jacket, "I'll be right back."

Her smile was diffident, hard to analyze. "Take your time. It's always best to stop - and smell the roses."

When he was gone, she sat for a while, spellbound by the progression of images on her screensaver. Images of her world, of the only things that really mattered - except one.

She sighed, and put her head down, wondering. What - exactly - had she done?

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"Does that itch?" One hand gestured toward the fake facial hair - mustache and trim goatee and the voluminous wig that accompanied it.

"Like a son of a bitch," came the curt answer, emphasized by a quick smoothing of an equally fake heavy eyebrow, to make sure everything was still exactly where it should be. "You sure you're ready for this?"

A snicker of a laugh. "It's not exactly brain surgery, now is it?"

"All right." There wasn't even a trace of a smile on the handsome, ordinarily clean-shaven face, but it was there in the voice nevertheless. "I assume you don't need any instruction on how to behave like an asshole."

"It goes with the territory."

"OK then. Break a leg."

The reply was only a whisper, although there was no doubt that it was intended to be heard. "Smart-ass!"

A pause, and a murmured assurance. "Get it right, and I'll owe you a drink."

"Just one?"

Another pause, preceding a barely audible invitation. "Woody's? Tonight?"

"OK. But lose the stubble"

A brief flicker of a grin, impossible to squelch. "I promise I'll be gentle."

A soft chuckle and a quick thumbs up. "Showtime."

"Excuse me," called a rich, pleasant, baritone voice from the corridor, just as the elevator doors began to close. "Could you hold the elevator please?"

Monty Peabody had to clamp down hard on an impulse to roll his eyes, but did, nevertheless, press the button to stop the doors from closing. Even though he was in a tearing hurry, it would be extremely rude to ignore the request, and rudeness by an employee at Allegheny General Hospital was always a risky business. Unless one was a doctor, of course, in which case rudeness - to the nth degree - was simply business as usual Literally.

"Thanks, Friend."

Monty looked up and was instantly mesmerized by eyes as blue as any he'd ever seen, remarkable enough in any face, but particularly so in that of a black man, who could best be described as... the only word that came to mind was 'exquisite'. Nothing else even came close to being adequate to
describe the composition of perfect face and perfect form, filling out crisp navy blue scrubs. The lab
tech couldn't seem to tear his eyes away from the new arrival, although he wasn't ordinarily a fan of
facial hair or ponytails on men, but, in this case, he was willing to make an exception.

"You're wel . . ."

"Hold that God-damned elevator!" This voice was just as rich and just as baritone, but nowhere near
as pleasant.

Peabody would have liked to ignore it; he knew that voice and knew that obeying the command
would not bode well for anybody. But he also knew that ignoring it would be tantamount to courting
disaster, so he dutifully kept his finger on the button to prevent the doors from closing, while offering
an apologetic little smile to the man who had just entered and stood now at his side, awaiting the
arrival of the most obnoxious member of the pantheon of physician/deities who demanded - and got -
abject, fawning, limitless, sycophantic obedience from the hospital staff.

Matthew Keller, eyes glued to his PDA, strode through the doors and issued orders, never bothering
to look up to see who was there to receive them. "ICU," he said curtly. "Now."

"Dr. Keller," said Peabody, gritting his teeth but being extra careful to project an attitude of
deferecence, "this elevator is going down. ICU is up."

The surgeon continued to gaze at the miniature screen in his hand. "I said, 'ICU, now'."

"But . . ."

Intense green eyes, flecked with ice crystals, looked up then and examined Peabody in much the
same way an entomologist might study a cockroach. "I assume," he said coldly, without so much as
a glance toward the elevator's other occupant, "that you've been working here long enough to know
what that means."

The 'that' to which the good doctor was referring, was the regular, actinic flashing of a blue light in an
electronic panel near the ceiling, its rhythmic pulsing synchronous to the soft but insistent beeping of
the audio-alarm system, which was, in turn, underscored by the steady repetition of the
announcement coming through the PA speakers.


"Yes, sir, but . . ."

"Am I to understand," Keller continued, "that you're planning to ignore a Code Blue alert, so that
you're not late for your . . ." He glanced at the Rolex on his wrist, "lunch break?"

"Of course not, Dr. Keller, but . . ."

"But what?"

"There are other elevators." Peabody's tone had grown slightly sullen, almost petulant, as he avoided
raising his eyes to meet Keller's gaze. Instead, he focused on a part of the physician's anatomy which
was considerably lower than his face, but that was a mistake too, as there was no way to avoid
noticing that the jeans the surgeon was wearing - in violation of the hospital preference for scrubs for
on-call physicians - were somewhat form-fitting and did absolutely nothing to conceal the size of the
bulge at the man's crotch.

"Indeed there are," the physician responded, "but I'm not in any of them, am I? Now, either you stop
leering at my package and hit the over-ride to send this car to the ICU level, or you get out and walk, and I'll do it myself, in which case you can be sure my next stop - after handling the patient's medical crisis - will be in HR. Would you like to guess why I'd be going there?"

Monty managed to assume an air of outrage. "I wasn't . . ."

"No, Doctor." Peabody hit the appropriate button, and carefully avoided looking into the face of the stunning stranger who had witnessed his humiliation, and wondered - not for the first time - why the most beautiful men were always the biggest assholes. Rumor had it that this latter-day version of Dr. Mengele was bosom buddies with the king of the Liberty Avenue perverts, Brian Kinney.

Very appropriate, thought Peabody, even as he struggled to avoid visualizing the two of them together - bare and buff and succ . . . He shook himself and deliberately focused on a saccharine-sweet public service/organ donor poster on the elevator wall, momentarily grateful that there were few things more effective in eliminating erotic thoughts than the image of a bloody liver packed in an ice chest and ready for transport.

For his part, Jared Hilliard was careful to maintain a stoic demeanor, refusing to exchange so much as a glance with the surgeon, who had played his role perfectly. The Code Blue had not been a part of their plan; it was just a fortuitous circumstance, but the physician had incorporated it perfectly into their scheme to enhance his portrayal of an arrogant, pompous, overbearing ass.

But the act was not quite done yet. Keller glanced at the floor indicator, and realized that there was just enough time to implement the little scenario which they'd originally planned to enact, to snare Peabody's attention and co-operation.

"Holloway," he snapped, turning to regard Hilliard with a sneer, "didn't I send you downstairs to check on the blood gas analysis for Mr. Ramsey?"

"Yes, Dr. Keller," Hilliard answered, biting his lip to contain the urge to grin. "I was just on my way when . . ."

Keller lifted one hand to forestall the explanation. "Yes, I'm sure you were. But now, instead of following my instructions, you're wasting time riding around in the elevator. Why didn't you take the stairs?"

"I thought the elevator would be faster, Sir."

"Yes, well, that was your first mistake, wasn't it?"

Hilliard looked genuinely puzzled. "What was?"

"Thinking. From now on, just do as you're told."

Hilliard nodded, and kept his gaze glued to the floor, knowing that if he looked up and surprised a glint of amusement in those green eyes, he might not be able to resist an urge to take a swing at the smart-ass bastard.

At this point, the elevator arrived at its destination, and Keller went charging out into the corridor. However, though obviously in full emergency mode, he paused for a single moment and turned back to eye the young man who was currently wearing a temporary employee badge which identified him as Jack Holloway. "Well?" said the physician, obviously on the verge of losing the last of his miniscule supply of patience.
Hilliard opted for a slightly confused expression, and the lift of one quizzical eyebrow.  

"Stairs," snapped Keller, spinning and racing toward the ICU, yelling back over his shoulder. "It'll be faster."

Hilliard/Holloway opened his mouth to dispute the claim, but, in the end, he didn't. Especially since the errand on which Keller had supposedly dispatched him was entirely fictitious, and this was just another ploy to foster commiseration between two individuals who might consider themselves co-victims of the notorious Dr. Keller.

"Asshole!" Hilliard muttered as the physician raced into the ICU, immediately dismissing any thought of the two men who were watching him go.

"Amen to that!"

Hilliard smiled. "Yeah. Now I better get downstairs, or he'll have my balls - and not in a positive, life-affirming way."

He almost faltered then, almost lost his place on the page, so to speak, as he realized that he'd just quoted Brian Kinney as if he'd expected Peabody to recognize the source. Which, of course, he didn't. There might be a few individuals with whom Kinney would have less in common than with this smarmy little troll, but Hilliard couldn't really imagine who they might be.

"Pardon?" The lab tech simply looked confused.

"Never mind." Hilliard put on his most beguiling smile. "I'd better get going."

"If you don't mind a little advice," said Peabody quickly, "I can save you a trip. Assuming you're on your way to Dr. Castille's lab, you'll just be wasting your time. Our lab director is the only person who hates Keller more than the rank and file, and nothing you can do is going to make a spot of difference in how fast he produces the data that Keller wants. In fact, if you piss him off, it's going to take twice as long as it should."

Hilliard paused, looking perplexed. "So what should I . . ."

Peabody glanced at the name tag the young man was wearing, managing to get an eyeful of a lovely well-muscled chest at the same time. "Do yourself a favor, Jack. Learn to choose your battles. This is one you can't win. Might as well go find yourself some lunch."

"But what if Keller calls down there to . . ."

"He won't. They don't speak to each other. So just count your blessings and grab a bite while you've got the chance. Keller's not famous for giving his assistants the time to take care of their personal needs."

Hilliard grinned. "OK. You convinced me. But hey, I'm new here. Any suggestions about a good place to eat?"

"Well, if you're looking for haute cuisine, you're out of luck."

"Nah. Just some good, cheap home-style cooking."

Peabody hesitated. Under the circumstances, this was certainly not the best of times to cultivate a new acquaintance, since he really needed to concentrate on the task at hand. He was growing ever
more nervous about the deadline he'd been given by his clandestine friends - a deadline which had already been extended once. And his luncheon date, while nowhere near being a sure thing, was undoubtedly his best chance to score the information he desperately needed. Keeping that in mind, he should probably just concentrate on what he needed to do and wish this lovely creature a pleasant meal and a nice day.

Only . . . for a split second, an image of his life partner rose in his mind. They shared so many things, he and Eli - hopes for the future, plans for their children, principles, vision, a conservative philosophy/morality, a fundamental awareness of the way things ought to be . . . monogamy. Only . . . he looked up once more and was immediately transfixed by the perfection of those incredible blue eyes.

Surely, it wouldn't hurt just to spend a little time basking in idyllic fantasy - just looking. After all, he almost never indulged himself in such a harmless pastime, mostly because . . . He took a deep breath, not really wanting to complete the thought. Not really wanting to admit that the main reason he seldom looked was because no one ever looked back.

On the other hand, it might - just might - serve an additional purpose. It might give him a little edge in finding a way to complete his mission, while there was still time. Since he had pretty much exhausted every other possibility.

The hospital, despite his best efforts, had proved to be a dead end. Impossible as it seemed, the medical records that he needed to access, in order to find a way to fulfill the promises he'd made, had just vanished into thin air.

It boggled the mind. How could medical records just disappear? And not just the hard copies - the physical files - but the computer information too, and all peripheral data - lab results, x-rays, c-t scans, everything. All gone, deleted as if it had never existed in the first place. How could such a thing happen?

And the answer was both obvious and a bit frightening. There were only a few entities - corporate, government, or otherwise - capable of wielding sufficient power to make such a thing happen, and those were entities that a man like Monty would not ordinarily choose to defy.

Only there was all that lovely money, much of which he'd already spent. And there was also the idea that he was providing a vital service for powerful people - people who would value his contribution to their efforts, who would owe him their respect and their regard in the future if he managed to come through for them now.

He had never done such a thing before, of course, and promised himself that he never would again; it would only happen one time. He comforted himself with the certainty that he would never have stooped to such an action at all if it weren't for the identity of the victim.

Brian Kinney. God, if anybody had ever deserved a quadruple dose of negative karma, it was . . .

Another image formed in his mind: Kinney before . . . Jesus! It was just wrong for anybody to look like that, especially when the darkness that lived inside the man was so well concealed by the beauty on the outside. So, he occasionally pondered the images - Kinney before, and then - Kinney after.

Surely divine retribution in its purest form.

And now, if he didn't figure out a way to stack the deck in his own favor, the Kinneys of the world would triumph again.
It was just completely unacceptable.

So maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to accept a little help from an unexpected direction. Young Holloway might provide a perfect distraction for the individuals who needed to be persuaded to share what they knew - what he was certain that they must know. An egocentric prick like Brian Kinney would never ride off into the sunset without making arrangements to retain the loyalty and focus of his little group of cheerleaders.

"So," he said, finally coming to a conclusion, "how did you happen to wind up assisting Allegheny General's version of the Grinch?"

Hilliard was very careful to conceal a slightly smug smile as he realized that his ruse had worked perfectly.

"That's a long story," he said instead.

"No problem," Monty replied, taking his new friend by the arm and heading down the stairs. "We've got plenty of time. And if you come with me, I'll show you a perfect place to have lunch while you tell me all about it. You might even make some new friends while you're at it."

Hilliard nodded, and gave himself a mental tug to make sure his disguise was fully in place. Like all good undercover operatives, he knew that people usually only see what they expect to see, and rarely look beneath the surface unless some small unexplainable detail triggers an unexpected response. His only concern had to be to make sure that no such detail was left to chance. He thought he would be fine, as long as Peabody's choice of venue was anything other than the Liberty Diner, since there was almost no disguise sufficient to fool the eye of the hyper-aware, uber-suspicious Debbie Novotny. But he was pretty sure that he was safe, since the hospital was a dozen blocks away from the flagship/luncheonette of Liberty Avenue. On the other hand, if he was wrong, he'd have to improvise - in a hurry - but he wasn't really concerned. Of necessity, improvisation was the first order of business in all undercover operations, and he would adapt, as needed.

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It was amazing that it still appeared so fresh, so current, so enticing.

It looked as if it might have been done yesterday, except . . . the only thing about it that was even slightly dated was the fact that it did not - quite - reach the pinnacle of upfront, in-your-face, avant garde sexuality that typified virtually all advertising in the 21st century. Other than that, it was perfect: the strong, elegant, golden body; the beautiful, classic profile that served to emphasize the knowing smile; the vivid colors of sunlight and ocean and primal, elemental, stunning male - brilliant turquoise sea, bronze skin, sunlight striking auburn glints in dark hair, and the perfect curves of the sculpted ass framed in a bright coral Speedo - the only detail that might have been done differently in 2006 than in 1991. Today, any professional photographer worth his salt would have posed that perfect model on his sleek surfboard, with his body arranged to display the huge, beautiful bulge at his crotch to maximum advantage while that exquisite face was laughing into the camera.

Brian Kinney. Alpha, alpha, alpha male.

Had he pursued the opportunity offered to him at that time, his face - and body - would have become instantly recognizable, all over the world. As it was, the campaign, though limited in scope, had netted him a comfortable little nest egg, not to mention reaping a small bonanza for Marty Ryder, who had come up with the original concept. In turn, that one contact with the advertising industry had opened the door for everything that had come afterwards, giving Brian his access to the agency that would launch his career.
Cynthia sat back in her chair, and studied the face in the picture - and wondered. She had retrieved the full-size ad from the files in order to show it to one of the individuals who were due in her office shortly, but she had forgotten the intense reactions generated by the images at first sight. She had forgotten how beautiful he'd been, how he somehow managed to dominate everything around him even then, with nothing more than a smile and a quirked eyebrow.

What had she done?

There weren't enough words in the English language to explain what she owed to Brian, or what she would have done for him. So why had she done the one thing - perhaps the only thing - that he might never manage to forgive her for?

When the answer occurred to her, she had to smile at the simplicity of the notion: someone had to step up and be Brian Kinney - for Brian Kinney.

Somebody had to be the person who always knew the right thing to do, and always had the balls to do it, no matter how much it cost him. Only that wasn't quite true either. Brian didn't always really know; he had doubts, just like everybody else. Only he never let anyone else see them or know of their existence, and he never allowed himself to be paralyzed by the fear of being wrong.

That was the true difference between him and everybody else - that he was always the one who could summon up the guts to roll the dice and live with the consequences. And that's what she would have to do now. Brian had always been prepared to sacrifice everything to protect the people he loved, to give up every hope he had ever had of realizing his dreams so that Justin and Gus - along with everyone else he cared about - could live full, rich, unrestricted lives. He had always been willing to do whatever it took to save them.

But not this time. This time, someone had to step up to save Brian Kinney, whether he approved - or not.

She glanced at the French provincial grandfather clock behind her desk, and noted that her next appointment was already slightly overdue. It surprised her a bit that she had not yet received the call that she'd been expecting ever since she'd sent Justin strolling out to meet his fate, but she couldn't put everything else on hold to wait for it. It would come soon enough, and there was no point in trying to predict the outcome of what had amounted to a shot in the dark.

A gambit truly worthy of the Master.

At that moment, Garrett Delaney knocked and opened her door, giving her renewed cause to be grateful for Brian's excellent taste in men. Looking at that caliber of eye candy was always a good way to put aside somber thoughts.

"Two of your lunch guests are here," he announced, before stepping aside to admit the women in his wake.

"Thank you, Garrett," she answered, rising to greet the new arrivals. "Is everything ready in the board room?"

His grin was infectious. "Not quite. Emmett is not happy with the first course. Apparently, somebody had the unmitigated gall to substitute almonds for the pecans he ordered in the strawberry/romaine salad."

Cynthia nodded. "Minor contretemps or major queen-out?"

The grin grew wider. "Actually, he's demonstrating the true meaning of grace under pressure."
"Anything else?" she asked, noting that the young man was fidgeting a bit - something completely out of character for him.

"Uh, yeah," he said with a little sigh. "Ted wanted me to tell you that he's - uh - he'll be out for a while. He's got a lunch date and then a meeting with some hedge fund people. Wasn't sure when he'd be back."

Cynthia considered the troubled look on Garrett's face, and figured - rightly - that the CFO had said a great deal more than the receptionist was reporting; the accountant had made no secret of the fact that he didn't find it acceptable to be 'excluded' from Cynthia's little "cloak-and-dagger" session, but she had really had no other options. The person who had arranged this meeting had stipulated the terms, including who could be present and what was to be discussed.

"Thank you, Garrett," said Kinnetic's acting CEO. "Let me know when everything's ready, and when my other guest arrives, send her right in."

The receptionist nodded and closed the door.

"Ms. Whitney," said the older of the new arrivals, "I've heard a lot about you. I'm . . ."

"Alexandra Corey," Cynthia interrupted, not quite smiling. "Your reputation precedes you." The FBI profiler simply nodded, apparently unperturbed by the slight suggestion of antipathy she noted in Cynthia's tone. She was accustomed to being treated with suspicion and understood the reasons perfectly, conceding that, if the situation were reversed, she would probably react the same way. Profiling victims was sometimes a painful process.

None of this was openly expressed in the Cynthia's face, but something in her eyes suggested that she knew it anyway.

But there was no doubt about the warmth of her smile when she turned to greet the second of her guests.

"Long time, no see, Ice Queen."

Corey's expression became quizzical. "Figure skater?"

"Hockey." The answer was softly spoken, almost absent-minded. "Right winger."

The FBI agent nodded, slightly humbled - and amused - to be reminded so graphically that stereotyping was always a risky business. Sharon Briggs - wearing her own skin rather than that of her undercover alter-ego - might look like a beauty queen, but was, in fact, something else entirely.

And, despite having offered the clarification, she appeared not to be paying attention at all; she was much too busy losing herself in the vision looking up at her from the desk. When she finally managed to tear her eyes away from the bright image, she found both Cynthia and Agent Corey staring at her, obviously understanding her fascination perfectly.

"Jesus!" she said with a tiny smile. "How is it that you never quite remember how gorgeous he is until it catches you by surprise all over again?"

Then she grinned. "Hello, Tink. How are you?"

Cynthia laughed. "Old enough to regret I ever let him saddle me with that nickname."

But Sharon's eyes were soft with reclaimed memories. "Why? Obviously, he's still Peter."
The two old friends stared at each other, blue eyes locked with brown, and Sharon managed not to flinch away from the regret she saw in Cynthia's expression. "He was," said Brian Kinney's ultimate defender. "Until this happened. Now . . ."

Sharon Briggs leaned forward and placed her hand on Cynthia's shoulder; one quick touch, a tiny squeeze, and it was over, but Cynthia was surprised to find herself comforted by the gesture. "He's still Brian Kinney." Obviously, the undercover cop felt no need to say more.

Cynthia tried to ignore the images rising in her mind of Brian as she'd seen him last - tried and failed - but only for a moment.

"I take it," said Agent Corey, as she took a seat in one of the antique wing chairs that fronted Cynthia's desk, "that you two are old friends."

"More like old competitors," laughed Sharon. "From back in the day."

"Oh, please," retorted Cynthia with an eye-roll. "I was never really in the same league. Not like you and Lindsey."

But Sharon was shaking her head, her laughter fading into a gentle smile. "In the end, we were all just part of the pep squad - the satellites of Brian Kinney."

"Sounds like a fan club," observed Alexandra Corey.

Cynthia nodded. "In a way, that's exactly what it was. We were all in college together. But I was lucky enough . . ."

When she fell silent, Corey - who was exceptionally good at her job and exceptionally perceptive - did not do what most people would have done. She did not just ignore the lapse. "Lucky enough to what?" she asked, sympathetic but firm.

Cynthia circled her desk and settled into her chair before answering. "Lucky enough to never fall in love with him," she said finally. "And you have no idea how rare that was. He was . . ." Again she fell silent, her eyes dropping to the colorful image still displayed on her desk.

"Yes," replied Corey, with only a bit of twinkle in her eye. "I'd have to be deaf, dumb, and blind not to see exactly what he was. And how fortunate that you never loved him."

Cynthia looked up, and Corey was momentarily stunned by the flash of anger in eyes gone slightly gray, like storm clouds gathering on a blue horizon. "That's not - exactly - what I said."

"Easy, my friend," replied the profiler. "I understand the distinction, so let me qualify my response. How fortunate - for both of you - that you never fell in love with him."

Cynthia confined her response to a quick nod.

Corey then turned to regard Sharon Briggs with speculative eyes. The FBI and the Pittsburgh PD were hoping to use this young woman's considerable skills in undercover work to forward this investigation, but no one, it seemed, had delved very deeply into her history with the victim - a history that might have generated some heavy baggage, in the form of an emotional entanglement that could compromise the woman's professionalism and objectivity. Time, perhaps, to dispense with some assumptions that might prove problematic if not addressed decisively.

"Is there anything you want to tell me," she asked finally, "before we get to a point where old bridges - never crossed or crossed too often - come back to confound us?"
Briggs' smile became enigmatic. "You haven't met him yet, have you?"

Ciorey shrugged. "No. I try to get all my chess pieces in place before confronting the knight, in all his glory."

"Nice analogy," Briggs retorted. "But it does leave you with a potential blind spot."

Corey blinked. No one had ever suggested such a potential problem. Not, at any rate, to her face. "Such as?"

"You can't possibly understand the impact of coming face-to-face with Brian Kinney, until you experience it for yourself."

Cynthia Whitney could not - quite - contain a tiny snicker.

"Which doesn't exactly answer my question," Corey replied, still completely impersonal. Almost.

"Relax, Agent Corey," Briggs said with a small, Cheshire-cat grin. "I'm a dyke. Always was and always will be. But if you think that's enough to make a woman Kinney-proof, let me just disabuse you of that notion. For most lesbians, the fact that he sports a remarkably generous package - equipment-wise - would be enough to render him completely uninteresting, not to mention the fact that he's an arrogant, narcissistic, self-serving bastard. But he's Brian Kinney, and that puts him in a league all by himself."

"How so?" Corey asked, fascinated in spite of herself. "Why would he ..."

It was Cynthia who stepped in to attempt an explanation, knowing full well that she was doomed to failure from the first word. "How about the fact that he never lies - not, at least, about anything that matters? Or that he never pretends to be anything other than what he is? Or that he never buys into anybody's bullshit, or lets anyone else around him buy into it either? Never believes that an apology makes up for whatever the original mistake might have been, and never accepts anything less than the best effort a person has to give, or demands more than a person is capable of, and always seems to know the difference, while the rest of us are standing around looking bewildered." Then she smiled. "And that barely scratches the surface. You could spend a lifetime trying to get to know the man beneath the image, Agent Corey, and I doubt you'd ever succeed."

The profiler was silent for a moment, considering what she'd heard. Then she looked up, a new resolve written in her eyes, and regarded Sharon Briggs with calm determination. "Did you love him?" she asked, going right to the heart of the matter.

"Of course, I did," came the response, equally cut and dried. "And so will you. Always providing you don't hate him. You're going to discover that Brian Kinney inspires many things, but indifference isn't one of them."

A brief pause. "OK, then," said Corey slowly. "Rephrasing the question. Will your feelings for him make it impossible for you to function in this new role we're asking you to take on?"

"No."

"How can you be so certain?"

Briggs took a moment to choose the right words, to make her meaning clear. "Brian Kinney," she said finally, "is the person who helped me to see that the closet was a place where I didn't want to live, the person who refused to play the game I'd set up for myself and, by extension, for him. He was the beard I wanted to wear, who refused to be worn." Then she grinned. "He was the son-in-law
my father was so eager to bag that he practically had St. Paul's Cathedral on standby for booking the wedding." She paused then, growing pensive and introspective. "Brian was the man who finally convinced me that I was doing everyone a disservice - myself most of all - by pretending to be something I wasn't."

Unexpectedly, Corey laughed. "So - instead - you made a career out of pretending to be something you're not."

Briggs gave a little 'touche' shrug, as her smile grew wistful. "After the dust settled, my father hated him for a while. Until he came to understand what a favor Brian had done him, by insisting that I give him the chance to know the woman his daughter really was."

Corey frowned and asked the question, obviously regretting the necessity. "Should I add your father to my growing list? Of persons of interest, I mean?"

She was grateful when Briggs laughed. "My father? The ultimate flower child? No, Agent Corey. My father is completely incapable of violence, and he did - finally - come to appreciate Brian, although it took a while. Today, they're very good friends, although he still, occasionally, gets a little misty-eyed over the idyll he'd constructed for himself. You know - the society wedding, the big house in the suburbs, grandchildren . . ."

"Fathers are like that," said a wry voice from the doorway.

Sharon Briggs smiled, without bothering to look around to identify the new arrival. "Hello, Peterson."

Lindsey laughed. "Hey, Briggs."

"Let me guess," observed Corey. "Sorority sisters?"

"Good old Alphi Phi," replied Lindsey with a pained smile. "Pretty much the only thing Briggs and I ever had in common."

"Except one," Briggs pointed out.

"Yes." Lindsey closed her eyes, reflecting that she had spent too much time of late, lost in memories. "Except one."

"How's bitch-Marcus?" The words were harsh, but there was no real animosity in Brigg's inquiry.

"Just as you remember," Lindsey answered, moving into the office and taking a seat beside Agent Corey. "Bitchy as ever."

"Sorry," Briggs said with a grin, obviously not sorry in the least.

She and Cynthia exchanged quick glances and even quicker notes of understanding; neither of them had ever managed to develop any kind of rapport with Lindsey's significant other, but it had never really mattered much. Brian was the nuclear glue that bound them all together; Melanie Marcus was just a rogue particle, insignificant in the grander scheme of things, although not, of course, to Lindsey.

"So," said Agent Corey, "are we ready to proceed?"

Cynthia sighed. "Yes . . . and no. Lunch, courtesy of Auntie Em's catering, will undoubtedly be delightful, and all of us - including Emmett - are ready to answer your questions, Agent Corey."
Although I have no idea what we can say that we haven't said to a dozen different people already. But . . . " She favored Briggs with an apologetic little smile. "Hilliard isn't here. I was informed - rather brusquely, I thought - by Kinnetik's chief of security that wherever he is, is need-to-know only, and apparently, I don't qualify." She looked slightly disgruntled. "I'd love to see them try that shit on Brian Kinney, who would eat them all for lunch in a New York minute, but I don't seem to be quite as intimidating, so no luck. He did, however, leave a thumb drive for you, Sharon, which should contain all the data you'll need."

Sharon nodded and they all rose to make their way to the conference room, with Cynthia bringing up the rear.

"Let Mathis know he can join us when he's ready," said Cynthia, as they passed the receptionist's desk.

"Agent Corey," said Lindsey, as they moved into the sanctuary of Brian's office - a place that almost seemed to breathe his scent, which was somehow both comforting and disconcerting. "I'm not quite sure what you're looking for, from us. Surely you've already got all the facts and . . ."

"Indeed, I do," replied the FBI agent. "I've got every imaginable kind of record concerning Brian Kinney's life - school records, medical records, tax records, business records, family history . . . you name it."

"So what can you possibly hope to learn from us?"

Corey smiled. "I know all I need to know about the facts of his life. Facts - but not truths. They're not the same, you know."

"But what . . ."

"I know the record. I've seen the files. But that's not what I need. What I need is to see the man. Not through my eyes, but through yours."

Lindsey went very still, eyes growing wide and dark, and, when she spoke, her voice was faint, barely audible. "I'm not sure . . ."

"Oh, don't worry about it," Corey said quickly, offering reassurance. "It's a piece of cake. You can do it."

But Lindsey was shaking her head, and she and Sharon Briggs were staring at each other, exchanging thoughts without actually exchanging a word.

"You don't understand, Alex," said Briggs finally, almost unwillingly. "It's not that we can't do what you're asking. It's that we're not sure we want to."

Cynthia Whitney was nodding her head, obviously in complete agreement with the other members of this volunteer brigade of Kinney supporters.

Alexandra Corey studied all three of them, suddenly at a loss for words, not sure now if she knew how to convince them to speak what was in their hearts, what she needed to learn from them in order to get to know this man, in the way that they knew him.

And wondering, on the breath of an impulse that came to her from some remote place previously unsuspected and unencountered, if she really wanted to know him at all.

She felt a tiny smile touch her lips, as she speculated on how her boss - and her partner of many,
Alexandra Corey was relentless, indomitable, unflappable, and had never in her life been intimidated by anyone.

Until now.

Brian Kinney, who appeared to be a man who wore so many hats that no one could keep track of them all; who had, thus far, proved impossible to categorize or limit to a specific identity; who had intrigued her more than anyone she had never - yet - met.

And who, if she were to be totally honest with herself, possessed one other attribute that distinguished him from every other subject she'd ever studied.

She looked up then and saw a photograph on the rear wall of the reception area - a huge, colorful candid shot, obviously taken at a party celebrating the grand opening of the business - and the man at its heart: beautiful, urbane, glamorous, blazing-bright Brian Kinney, who just might turn out to be the most frightening man she'd ever need to know.

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First of all, he didn't know why he didn't feel comfortable going up to the loft alone. Then he didn't know why he didn't want to take the elevator to the top floor. And finally, he wasn't sure what it was that almost drove him to turn away from that huge, dented sliding door and run screaming from the building, refusing to go in at all.

So here he stood, hesitating - staring at the scarred metal surface of the door as if it held a fucking Rosetta Stone that would unlock the secrets of the universe. Or the secrets of Brian Kinney, which would probably be at least as complex and convoluted and, ultimately, totally fucked up.

Danny Boyle was standing behind him, trying not to goggle but not succeeding very well. Brian's loft was legendary. There was no other word for it. And while the individuals who had been privileged to visit it - once - were many, the ones who'd ever gotten more than a glance of anything except the bedroom ceiling were few indeed. They might have been lucky enough to gather a general impression - sleek, modern, elegance in its purest form, providing the perfect setting for the jewel at its center, but it was astonishing that the man who occupied the place - and the center spot in so many lives - remained mostly an enigma to the many who thought they knew him, as well as to the few, who knew better.

In the end, Justin thought, there were only two or three who had ever managed to find their way into the labyrinthine passages that might - with time and patience and an extraordinary amount of luck - lead to the core of the man. And even then, that was assuming that Brian would allow it, which was problematic at best.

Once, not so long ago, he had believed that he had achieved that goal, that he knew Brian, as no one else ever would or could. More than anything in life, he still wanted to believe that. But . . .

Boyle shifted slightly and cleared his throat, trying to observe the expressions on Justin's face without actually appearing to be watching - a no-win situation in either case. "Hey, Dude," he said finally. "We goin' in, or what?"

With a funny little half-shrug - a gesture that would have been immediately familiar to Brian Kinney, but probably not to anyone else - Justin put aside his misgivings, squared his shoulders, and unlocked
the door in one not-quite-fluid series of movements.

It was time to stop dithering; time to grow a pair, in Kinney-speak; time to . . . He shoved the door open and walked . . . into yesterday. To all his yesterdays that had ever mattered - the ones he'd turned his back on when he'd left Brian behind to run away to New York, and an art world that - in retrospect - meant nothing, comparatively speaking.

*Dear God in Heaven! What had he done?*

It was almost too much to bear, and even Danny Boyle - who would never be mistaken for a particularly empathetic, perceptive individual - sensed enough to remain by the door and say nothing while his eyes swept the scene before him, taking it all in, memorizing something he knew he might never see again while Justin keyed in the code that would disarm the security system.

Boyle continued to watch, noting everything, including the look on the face of the blond at its center who had moved into the heart of the room and was gazing around, saying nothing, but - obviously - completely wrapped up in memory.

*Brian Kinney, in all his radiance.*

*Arms spread wide, beautiful, bronzed body still showing the traces of a bottle of water poured over an upturned face, mouth wearing a seductive little smile.*

"*So . . . are you coming or going? Or coming, and then going? Or coming . . . and staying?*"

*Such a simple beginning to evolve into something so complex and multi-dimensional that it defied defining.*

*Because they defied defining.*

Justin went very still, struck by the elegant simplicity of the thought and frozen into a dark silhouette against the bright luminosity of floor-to-ceiling glass.

Could it possibly be as simple as that?

Not buddies, not tricks, not boyfriends, not lovers, not partners, not husband-and-husband, not soul-mates - none of those things, and all of those things, at the same time.

Had he wasted years trying to force the freeform shape of what he shared with Brian into the stereotypical round hole of convention? And, if he had, could he now step outside the parameters of expectation imposed by society and family and culture and learn to do the only thing that Brian had ever really asked of him; to accept what they were together for the unique, unconstricted, elementary force that it was? And, even if he could learn to do that, was it already too late?

Was Brian already gone?

The silence was becoming uncomfortable, and Danny Boyle moved into the kitchen, running his hand across the sleekness of the granite countertop. "Hell of a place!" he observed, careful to keep his tone light. He didn't know any of the particulars about the Kinney/Taylor relationship, but one didn't live anywhere in the neighborhood without having gotten an occasional earful of the rumors, so he thought it best to avoid imposing on what was probably very private territory. "Want something to drink?"

"Uhh, no. Thanks," Justin replied absently. "But there's always beer in the fridge - probably Samuel Adams brown ale - so help yourself."
Boyle opened the stainless refrigerator and spotted the familiar six-pack of brown bottles on an upper shelf. "The man's got taste," he remarked, helping himself.

Justin smiled. "You have no idea," he whispered, his eyes moving from object to object around the apartment, noting what had changed and what had not: new plasma tv with a Blu-Ray player, new treadmill, new rug - ivory banded in almond - under the dining table, new free-form sculpture on a low display table in the living area, flanked by a new Barcelona chair. Other things were unchanged: sleek, glove-soft Italian furniture, the gleam of perfectly finished hardwood floors, the stairs to the bedroom and the plushness of the duvet that was just visible through the partially-open door; the stylized crystal ashtray that was the only item on the Mies Van Der Rohe coffee table; the Fender guitar case propped near the sofa, indicating that somebody had been fooling around, probably bare-footed and bare-chested, in a bout of reminiscence concerning old, almost forgotten dreams.

And then, of course, there were the things that were no longer where they had been: a large, smoky quartz, handblown vase that had probably finally succumbed, after surviving too many close calls, to one of Brian's cartwheel/juggling/handstand sessions; a deep green cashmere throw, which had figured in a thousand different configurations of sexual hi-jinx, now nowhere to be found; and, of course, the artworks: the one that hung now on the wall in the Kinnetik reception area, and others which were simply gone. Charcoal sketches, bright acrylics, oils, a couple of minimalist studies of two bodies entwined, expressing both lust and need, and various studies of Brian's face, caught in moments of reflection, of speculation, of tenderness, of loneliness, which Brian had never admitted, of course, but Justin had known anyway.

Justin allowed his eyes to drift around the loft - once. After that, he concentrated on finding what he'd been sent to fetch.

He went to the desk, noting as he approached that some things were truly immutable, changeless - such as Brian's work habits: clear, spare, direct, streamlined, without wasted effort or motion. Files there were, neatly placed and labeled, slides and sketches and CD-roms, also labeled, but no laptop. Brian's camera bag, complete with his state-of-the-art Canon EOS Rebel, but no laptop. He turned and once more looked around the room, knowing what had to come next, no matter how much he didn't want to know it.

No laptop.

All right then. Boyle was enjoying his beer when Justin stalked across the room and climbed the steps to the bedroom. He'd been slightly concerned that he might be forced to confront Brian's unmade bed or discarded clothing, but that, of course, was not the case. Mrs. Oliver, Brian's cleaning lady, was every bit as efficient and perfectionist as everyone else who worked for him, and would rather have left dog poop on the bathroom floor than leave his undies tossed in a corner.

Immaculate, as always. Bed made, pillows fluffed, duvet perfectly draped, wood surfaces gleaming and dust-free, closet neat and perfectly organized, including what appeared to be a brand new dark charcoal Armani suit, obviously meant to be paired with the French-cuffed black Gucci dress shirt hanging beside it, while a quick look inside a small, discreet, elegantly understated leather valet on a high shelf revealed a new pair of Tiffany cufflinks, a yin/yang design in black pearl and platinum - having absolutely nothing to do with Zen spirituality, if Justin knew his Brian Kinney, which he certainly did, but everything to do with the fact that the man had always been fond of the symmetry of the pattern. Justin sighed, spotting a very similar ensemble hanging further back in the closet and pondering the reason for the upgrade. A shift in the acceptable size of lapels, perhaps, or a variation in the cut of the slacks. If Brian Kinney ever stopped being a label queen . . . Justin very carefully backed away from completing that thought, and looked around once more.
No laptop.

*Shit!*

Now what? There was no place else, except . . .

He smiled. Of course. It had been weeks since Brian had been here, and while the Master himself would never have shoved his precious computer - almost as irreplaceable to him as his right arm - or his dick - into a narrow little cupboard to get it out of sight, his cleaning lady, a neat freak of the first order, might very well have cleared a spot for it in the tiny storage closet tucked away in the alcove beyond the entertainment area.

Convinced that he'd guessed correctly at last, Justin traversed the width of the apartment, crossed the television viewing area, and pulled open the double louvered door that ordinarily concealed the storage space for DVD's like *East of Eden* and *Giant, On the Waterfront*, and *One-Eyed Jacks*. But then he froze, confronted not by shelves of movie disks or VCR tapes, but by a gaping darkness instead, a shallow, shadowed passageway into . . . something else. Some *place* else.

Shocked and a bit disoriented, the blonde made a quick, gasping sound, as if something had knocked the breath out of him, and Danny Boyle jumped up and started forward, slightly alarmed by both Justin's pallor and the expression of dismay on his face.

"What is it?" he demanded. "What's wrong?"

For a few moments, Justin made no attempt to answer, having no real idea what it was that had disturbed him so. There was nothing, after all, to be afraid of. Nothing to fear. It was just a room, but it was a room where no room was supposed to be. Where no room had been before and where not a single sliver of light penetrated, beyond the gleam of a swath of warm wood reflected at the base of the doorway. "Nothing," he said finally. "It's just . . ."

"Just?" Boyle was sounding even more perturbed now, stepping forward and reaching out and . . .

"No!" The blonde's voice was sharp, almost gasping. "No." Softer now, falling into a murmur. "It's nothing. It's just . . . stand back. Just stay there."

Then he took a slow, deep breath, squared his shoulders, and stepped forward into the darkness, pulling the door closed behind him, before reaching out and realizing that he was standing in some kind of vestibule, that his way was blocked by a second door, a heavy wooden barrier on which an electronic keypad had been mounted at eye level, a keypad which emitted a faint, bluish glow just bright enough to render the digits and symbols adorning the keypad visible.

He paused, and ran his hand down the velvety smoothness of the woodwork to his left, his fingertips caressing a faint depression on a sleek switchplate, resulting in a soft click, and a pale amber glow rose from beneath him - not really bright enough to reveal anything except a crisper image of the doors which formed the boundaries of the tiny vestibule in which he found himself.

"Justin?" Danny Boyle's voice was just a half-step away from full-fledged panic mode.

"It's all right," he said quickly. "It's just a storage compartment. I'd forgotten about it, but it's nothing to worry about."

"Bullshit! You never saw it before."

Justin smiled. "Okay. I never saw it before. But it's nothing to get alarmed over."
"How do you know?"

The smile grew wider, softer. "Because I recognize the fingerprints."

"Say what?" Boyle didn't even try to conceal the level of his annoyance.

Justin reached out and drew his fingers down the incredible silkiness of the hand-rubbed oak veneer, reflecting that he couldn't think of anybody else in the world who would go to such extreme measures to render the surface of a door so sensually pleasing. His smile stuttered and morphed into pure indulgence as he remembered how often he'd accused Brian of being the ultimate hedonist - and how right he'd been.

Shit!

He reached into his shirt pocket to retrieve the datacard which Cynthia had thrust at him when she'd sent him on his errand, and noted, for the first time, that there were actually two strings of symbols embossed on its surface - the sequence he'd already used to disarm the primary alarm system, and now, a second sequence, composed of prime numbers and simple glyphs, which would, he hoped, serve as the "Open, Sesame" for the new barrier looming before him now.

He took a moment to draw a deep breath, bracing himself - he wasn't sure why - before tapping in the appropriate sequence and calling out to his nervous companion. "Just relax and drink your beer, Danny. I'll be right out."

For a space of seconds, nothing happened; then there was a silken shimmer of sound and motion, as the door in front of him slid aside on a soft susurrations of air and he was aware of gentle illumination swelling from the base of walls that appeared to be extending before him, stretching perhaps eight meters ahead and three on either side of him.

He moved forward slowly into . . . a different place - a place that he recognized, even though he'd never seen it before. A place to which he was drawn, to which he was meant to return - to which he belonged.

A place built for him by Brian Kinney. He didn't know how he could be so sure of that, and he couldn't conceive of how such a thing was even remotely possible since it was logical to assume that Brian knew as much about carpentry or construction as he might know about brain surgery or quantum physics. But he was certain of it nevertheless.

He sank into a drift of softness - a combination sofa and bed and chaise and console, and felt it conform around him, as if custom designed for his comfort. His fingers fell naturally to a series of controls arranged along the edge of the seating unit, something he did not need to see in order to activate, and, with the first touch of his hand, the display began seamlessly, with no period of adjustment from one phase to the next. It began with a pale spear of light drawing the eye up toward the ceiling, before expanding into a deliberate, perfectly timed progression of a series of images, illuminated one at a time, each unique, each perfectly positioned to be studied and examined and explored in intimate detail, and it was so perfectly, subtly done that it took a few minutes for him to realize that it was his body and the platform on which he rested that were shifting to allow a new perspective of each item displayed. The works of art were stationary; the illumination and the eyes that followed it were not.

It was a retrospective of the art of Justin Taylor - twenty-eight different pieces, ranging through a full gamut of mediums, from vibrant graphic works to subtle sketches to intricate studies of exquisite detail - portraits, abstracts, still lifes; some he'd done many years before and others that were more recent, including six from his last show - the six he would have chosen to keep, if he'd indulged his
own desires; the six he'd resigned himself to never seeing again - like most of the others he was seeing now, for the first time in a very long time. He'd never imagined that Brian had been buying his work over the years. The first displayed was the oldest of the lot, dating back to his earliest encounters with the *tour de force* that would alter his life. It was the first sketch he'd ever done of Brian Kinney - Brian sleeping and naked and beautiful. Perfectly Brian.

Other pieces were a complete surprise. A storyboard from his sojourn in the rarefied atmosphere of filmdom; a sketch of his sister, rendered in pastels, that he didn't even remember doing; a watercolor featuring a group of laughing faces - the extended family who'd adopted him when his own father had thrown him out. Throw-away stuff - or so he'd believed at the time. Obviously, someone had disagreed.

And then . . . oh, no. How could this possibly be here? How could Brian have dealt with this? Brought this darkness into his home? It was a heavy, brooding piece, although it had not been intended as such originally. A gloom-shrouded, slender figure, back-lit, done almost entirely in black and white and shades of gray, standing at the edge of a stage and looking out over a sea of dim faces, one hand dangling a violin as the other was lifted in greeting. The face, barely visible in shadow, was not smiling.

It had been intended as a paean, in praise of the passion of his new lover, the individual he'd allowed himself to trust to give him everything that Brian couldn't - wouldn't. But he had never titled the painting. Not then. Not until much later, when he'd glanced at it one day and seen the truth - a truth that had always been there, but that he had never been willing to see.

He'd called it *Consolation*, only realizing the truth of it when the word had popped into his mind on the occasion of revisiting the painting. It represented hope relinquished - settling for second-best - or worse.

*Why on earth would Brian have wanted it? Why would he . . .*

But the next item presented for his contemplation provided the immediate answer. Brian had wanted the murky, brooding portrait of Ethan for the contrast it provided. For the next work expressed everything that the dark, haunted likeness did not. It was the explosive surrealistic piece Justin had painted on the day Brian had given in to his relentless pursuit and taken him back, the day they'd reclaimed their ties to each other, the day of reunification.

It was light and joy and hope and promise; it was the thing that existed between them, that would never exist with any other, incorporating every feeling, every surge, every nuance of lust and belonging. It was the two of them together, the lifeforce that bound them, expressed through music and motion and the burst of energy and the voiceless tide of fulfillment.

He had titled it *The Hallelujah Chorus*.

It had been one of the first pieces he'd sold after going to New York, not because he'd wanted to let it go, but because it had simply been too painful for him to keep.

He was aware of music playing - somewhere, pale and gentle and beneath the level of conscious hearing, lovely classical work - without a single violin in evidence anywhere - but stroking his consciousness, perfect for the setting, soothing and leading him through transitions from one moment to the next, exactly as it was meant to do.

The images were elemental and filled with light, crisp and perfect and beautiful. And Justin inhabited every one of them; Justin, complete; Justin, best and worst, most and least, beginning and ending and every nuance in between; Justin in all his radiance, reflected completely in the luminous eyes of the
man who loved him best.

Until this very moment, he had never really understood how much.

The retrospective light show ran for eighteen minutes, each new image touching him deeply, calling up a series of vital memories, each more precious than the last, and ending as softly, as perfectly, as it had begun, with the final image lingering within the intimate shadows around him - the most precious image of them all, and his eyes fell to the small, engraved plate affixed to the bottom of the painting - the title. Even now, after all this time, he was still not sure he'd done the right thing, but it still felt right, and it was far too late to rethink it now.

The print was small, and he doubted he would have been able to read the words if he hadn't already known what they said.

But, from his perspective, it still rolled perfectly off the tongue, as appropriate now as on the day of its christening: I Don't Want to Miss a Thing.

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The vestibule of the popular luncheonette was dominated by a huge, colorful poster, and Ted Schmidt seemed uncomfortable under the gaze of the individuals depicted on it.

"Do you ever get the feeling that Big Brother is watching you?" he asked as he and his companions waited for a table to come available. The poster, despite its age, was still as bright and eye-catching as it had been when it had first been hung all those years ago - a poster that featured the smiling faces of a group of sweaty, young athletes enjoying a moment of sweet victory on a Penn State soccer field, at the conclusion of a regional play-off game in the halcyon days of 1994. In the center of the group, striker/stopper Brian Kinney and goaltender Johnny Burnside - the son of Brenda Jo Burnside, proprietor and namesake of the Dixie Belle Café - were laughing together, arms wrapped tight around taut, muscular torsos.

Brenda Jo was the southern belle equivalent of Debbie Novotny, but without the interpersonal hang-ups. Unlike Debbie's son, Johnny had never been entangled in any kind of love-hate-more love-more hate relationship with Brian; they had simply been good friends and athletic team-mates, and Brenda Jo had accepted young Brian for exactly what he was - a friend of her son's who happened to be gay. She had never understood why people felt compelled to make a big deal out of what she considered a simple fact of life.

The café was a prosperous, well-run business, popular with young professionals and blue collar workers alike. Thus, it was almost always busy, because it was bright and warm and friendly, and because the food was exceptionally good, featuring a variety of southern specialties, like chicken and dumplings, red beans and rice, corn *maque choux*, and hush puppies, and a wide selection of luscious baked goods, like Niemen Marcus cake and New Orleans bread pudding. Usually, the only way to be sure to get a table was to arrive early and be prepared to wait. Unless, of course, one's name was included on a very short list of preferred customers. Like Brian Kinney.

But Brian was not around these days, and precious few of his associates qualified for that very select list. But Michael - by association - was usually lucky enough to snag a table. Because he was one of Brian's best friends, and because his comic book store was located just a half block down the street from the cafe, so that he usually arrived early.

But he still had to wait, like everybody else, so he had the time to turn to study Teddy's face, not quite sure what to make of the sour note he thought he'd heard in the man's tone.
"Who pissed in your Cheerios?" he asked finally, not reassured by the hard glitter he spotted in the accountant's eyes.

"Why?" Ted snapped. "Just because I don't buy into the whole St. Brian charade?"

"No," Michael retorted. "Maybe because you might want to think twice about everything he's done for you?"

Ted's eyes were hard and cold. "Brian only does what's good for Brian. If the rest of us benefit from it, we're just lucky to be in the right place at the right time."

"Really?" That was Ben, turning to examine Ted's face with a speculative gaze. "Soooo, it's all just coincidence that you're living the good life again, with all your troubles behind you, and . . ."

"Anything I have," Ted retorted, "I've earned - and more. And I'd have earned it with - or without - Mr. Kinney's help. All things considered, I'm pretty sure he ought to be thanking me."

A new arrival stepped up at that moment, and Ted looked around to find Monty Peabody looking at him with a smile of approval. "How quickly they forget, hmmm?" said the newcomer. "What has Brian Kinney ever really done for anyone - except himself?"

"Amen," agreed Ted, greeting Monty with a warm smile, and allowing his eyes to drift - with a stir of avid appreciation - to the tall, well-muscled individual at the lab tech's side.

"Hey, Guys, this is Jack Holloway. He's new around here.

"And a welcome addition to the group," said Ted, eyes bright with interest. As he reached out to shake the newcomer's hand, he dismissed a faint mental impression that he'd met the man somewhere before.

For his part, Hilliard spotted the tell-tale nuance in the accountant's expression and refused to react to it, knowing that it would pass quickly unless he reinforced it with flag-raising behavior.

And it did.

Michael, meanwhile, had turned to meet Ben's eyes. He was sometimes amazed - not to mention appalled - to remember how easily they had allowed themselves to buy into the whole range of Monty/Eli pseudo-intellectual, holier-than-thou pretensions, and both of them were sometimes painfully reminded of all the times they'd remained silent and allowed these so-called friends to pass judgment on a man who had done nothing to deserve their contempt - a man whose primary flaw, aside from an outrageous vanity that no one would even try to deny, was a complete unwillingness to tolerate hypocrisy; a man who had, indeed, stepped up on countless occasions to save those who were too weak or too fragile or too frightened to defend themselves.

"Besides," said Ted, "surely we can find better things to talk about than the no-longer-reigning king of Liberty Avenue."

"That's an interesting attitude," said Ben, deliberately standing tall so he could look down into Ted's eyes, "toward a man who's still signing your paychecks."

"And we'll just see how long that lasts, won't we?" Ted observed cryptically.

Michael, on the other hand, had turned to confront Monty, and was making no effort to hide the fact that he was enjoying the view of the tall stranger at his side. "Hey, Monty," he said, flashing the newcomer a friendly smile. "Where's Eli?"
"Job interview," Monty replied sharply.


"Umm, no," Monty replied slowly. "Actually, he's got an appointment with the manager of the Tyler Lane Big Q."

"Oh," said Michael, with a frown. "My condolences."

"And what, exactly, is *that* supposed to mean?" The lab tech's voice had taken on a decidedly testy edge.

Michael smiled. "Only that I've worked with Andrew before, and I don't envy anyone the experience."

"Yes, well, unfortunately, some of us don't rate the kind of support and perpetual forgiveness and approval that are accorded to . . ." He glanced up toward the portrait of Brian and couldn't quite conceal a quick satisfied smirk, "the Chosen Few of Pittsburgh's elite gay community."

Ted grinned. "I couldn't have said it better myself."

Michael blinked, as he turned to meet Ben's gaze, and knew that they were having one of those intuitive moments in which two minds shared a single thought. "You know who you sound like, Teddie?" he asked, with a tiny, rueful smile.

"No. Who?"

"Me." The single syllable conveyed volumes of shame. "At the height of my Stepford-fag pretentiousness. God, I don't know how he resisted an urge to deck me."

Ted flushed an ugly, splotchy red. "Don't be ridiculous, Michael. Just because someone kicked the shit out of him does *not* make him a hero."

"Y'er right," said a new voice - rough and twangy with an accent that fell heavily on Midwestern ears and dredged up thoughts of long, hot summers in the wooded hills of the Carolinas. "There was plenty of other things that took care a that a long time ago." Brenda Jo Burnside's eyes were very dark - as close to true black as human eyes could get - and almost feral in the degree of anger they expressed.

Ted flinched, and then took a deep breath, telling himself that he was only imagining the looks of concerned sympathy from his companions. Surely, they couldn't believe that he was actually afraid of this coarse, uneducated country bumpkin, even if there were rumors that the bumpkin in question kept a loaded shotgun stashed behind the cash register - a weapon, it was reported, that she was not loathe to use when the situation called for action. Further, rumor had it that she was a crack shot.

"Table for two, Michael?" said the bumpkin with a steely smile.

"Actually," Michael replied, giving her his best, brightest Pollyanna grin, "make that four."

The steely smile did not waver.

"Five," said Monty quickly.

"Four." Jared Hilliard deliberately removed himself from the equation, thus claiming a measure of approval from the woman of the moment - the one with the power to seat him where, when, and if
she chose. "I hate a crowded booth," he explained in response to Monty's lifted brow.

Brenda Jo's twitch of a smile said that she knew full well what he really hated.

For a moment, both Ted and Monty were treated to a shrewd, semi-hostile inspection from night-dark eyes, and the expression on her face made it clear that the discreet sign posted in the front window was not just for show. In this establishment, the management truly did reserve the right to refuse service to anyone, for any reason - or no reason at all. It was all according to the will or whim of Brenda Jo.

"Suit yourself," she said finally, gesturing toward a corner booth and nodding for Hilliard to take a seat at the counter, close enough to the booth in question to include himself in the conversation should he choose to do so, and to overhear anything that might be said there.

The proprietor took a moment to study the newcomer's face, with eyes that saw a great deal more than most people would have credited. Then she smiled and leaned forward, thrusting a menu into his hands and catching his eye just enough to give him a quick, discreet wink.

Hilliard managed - barely - not to grin. So much for fooling all the people, all the time, he thought. But a glance toward the booth where Kinney's friends and acquaintances were being seated confirmed that the necessary façade was still intact, and there was no question that Brenda Jo would help preserve his cover, should the need arise.

Nevertheless, when she walked away to seat another group of new arrivals, Hilliard flinched slightly when he heard Ted mutter a quick, nasty comment to his companions - a sarcastic slur about having to put up with "hillbilly trash". A quick glance over his shoulder confirmed that both Novotny and Bruckner appeared shocked by the ugly nature of the remark, but Peabody seemed unperturbed. Even bigotry, it seemed, was acceptable - under certain circumstances.

The group spent a few minutes catching up on local gossip: Chanda Leer's new gig at the Cabaret du Monde; the recently scheduled revival of *West Side Story* that was coming to the civic center; the next fundraiser for Angels over Pittsburgh; Ben's new class featuring the works of Oscar Wilde, and Hunter's role in the upcoming production of *The Glass Menagerie*; a change in the management team at Woody's. But eventually, inevitably, the discussion turned to the individual most central to the entire group. Brian Kinney.

"So," said Monty, digging into a steaming helping of shepherd's pie with gusto, "have you guys heard anything from Pittsburgh's gay Casanova? About how he's going to handle the loss of his status?"

Michael sipped at his iced tea. "You almost sound like you're looking forward to watching him cope with the damage," he said quietly.

"No," said Monty sharply. "Why would you think that?"

"Because there are a lot of people who seemed to feel that Brian deserved what happened to him," said Ben, his eyes meeting those of his husband, and reading the sadness reflected there.

"Not deserved," said Ted. "Nobody could have deserved . . . that. But he didn't exactly go out of his way to win friends and influence people before it happened, now did he?"

"Is that how you really see things, Ted?" asked Ben. "Because I suggest that there are plenty of people who'd argue that he did exactly that. Despite his rather in-your-face style, Brian has a lot of friends. Even a lot of very influential friends. That might come as a surprise to some, but there are
plenty of people who appreciate the man's honesty and his total lack of pretension. Not to mention the fact that he's shown himself to be willing to step up and fight for the things he believes in and the people he cares about."

Michael was looking directly at his old friend at that moment and recognized the resentment that flared in Ted's eyes even before the man had a chance to respond.

"Let's go," said Michael quickly, dropping his fork into his barely touched plate of beef stew.

"But," Ted sputtered, "you said you were starving, and you haven't eaten a thing."

"Lost my appetite." The explanation was terse and sharp and not at all in keeping with Michael's usual diffident nature.

"Oh. I see," Ted said with a frown. "So is this how it's going to be from now on? Nobody's going to be allowed to criticize St. Brian, without incurring the wrath of his ardent defenders? He runs afoul of a group of homophobic assholes, and suddenly he's everybody's hero?"

Much to Ben's surprise, Michael did not leap to his feet. Instead, he calmly folded his napkin and laid it beside his plate, and slid out of the booth where he took a moment to collect his thoughts before looking down to meet the eyes of the man who had been a close friend for many years - a man who suddenly seemed to be wearing the face of a stranger.

"You just don't get it, do you, Teddy?" he said softly. "This isn't about whether or not Brian is a hero. Or whether you agree or disagree with his lifestyle or his beliefs or his choices. This is about the fact that we almost lost him. He could have died, because there are people out there, right here in our world, who hated him enough to want to kill him. Not because he's a cruel, vicious, vindictive monster, or because he's gone out of his way to destroy lives. Not even because he's a huge fucking success who gets his kicks by rubbing people's noses in it. But just because he's different. He doesn't love the way the great moral majority thinks he should." He paused then, and Ben was frightened by the terrible depth of pain he read in his husband's eyes. "And maybe, from the way you're talking, he doesn't love the way you think he should either. Maybe he hasn't been sufficiently grateful for all the wonders you've performed on his behalf. But you know what?" The sadness gave way before an upsurge or rage, barely contained. "You seem to have managed to forget a few miracles he pulled off for you, and for the rest of us."

He backed up then, and there was no mistaking the swell of contempt in his eyes. "Good for you, Teddy. Makes life so much simpler, doesn't it?"

"Wait, Michael," Ted said quickly, scrambling to his feet. But it was too late. Michael was gone, and Ben was regarding Ted with the same degree of revulsion he would have accorded a cockroach.

"I didn't mean . . ." Ted started to explain.

But Ben was not buying it. "Yes. You did. And you're certainly entitled to your opinion, Ted. But there is a bottom line in this that you might want to consider. The relationship between Brian and Michael has endured a lot of trauma in the last few years. Between the two of them, they almost managed to destroy it. But, in the end, they didn't. In the end, it proved to be stronger than either one of them expected." He leaned forward then, and fixed Ted with a stern gaze that carried more than a hint of warning. "It's going to take a lot more than a queen-out demonstration of spite and petty jealousy to change it, and if you insist on going on with this, it's not going to be Michael's feelings for Brian that are going to change."

Then he smiled, but there was no warmth in the expression. "It's your choice."
He turned away then, leaving Ted open-mouthed and at a loss for words, and moved to the register to pay the tab, only to find that Brenda Jo had already managed to retrieve their virtually untouched lunches and transfer them into take-out boxes. He also found that she was refusing to take his money.

When he tried to argue, he discovered that it was futile to dispute the final decision of a stubborn southern belle. Her smile was broad and filled with warmth. "Call it a reward," she explained, "for a job well done." Then she leaned forward, managing to catch Jared Hilliard's eye in the process, as she whispered in Ben's ear. "But it does make me wish I'd taken advantage of the opportunity to spit in the fucker's water glass."

Ben nodded and whispered back, "Next time, you'll know."

Jared Hilliard was suddenly fascinated by the texture of his BLT club sandwich, which allowed him to concentrate completely and resist an almost overwhelming urge to laugh.

In the corner booth, Ted and Monty exchanged uneasy glances, and the silence between them was awkward as Ben disappeared through the front door and Brenda Jo turned to regard them with a look of disdain she didn't even try to conceal.

Ted finally took a deep breath. "St. Brian strikes again," he observed, but he was careful to keep his voice down.

Monty nodded and took a big gulp of his Pepsi. "Well, at least this makes it a bit easier on me," he said. "When Michael and Ben ask me about what's going on with Kinney's medical treatment, it's tough to have to keep my mouth shut. Professionally speaking, of course. I really do hate it when they try to pump me for details about what's going on with him, and I can't give them the answers they want." He carefully avoided meeting Ted's eyes, concentrating instead on loading his fork with a generous dollop of meat and potatoes. "Of course, I'm sure you don't need any details from me - being his financial guru and his professional associate."

Ted made a snorting noise deep in his throat. "Brian can't be bothered to confide in a poor schmuck like me these days. He's got dear Cynthia for that. The only reason I know anything about it all is because I get to take care of piddling little details. Like filing his fucking insurance claims. And the only thing I have to say about that is that I hope this fucking Dr. Turnage with his fancy, la-di-da private clinic is all he's cracked up to be, because his charges are outrageous."

Monty Peabody managed - barely - not to mutter a prayer of gratitude.

And Jared Hilliard could not quite swallow the bitter taste of dismay that rose in his throat as he realized that Peabody had scored exactly the information he'd been seeking. The only positive aspect of the whole thing was that he hadn't scored it under the cover of darkness.

Things were about to get very complicated.

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The delicate, filigreed glaze of Emmett's crème brûlée clung to Cynthia's spoon as she tried to resist the urge to clean her plate like a three-year-old angling for a reward, but, in the end, no resistance was possible. So she scraped up the last of the silky cream, made sure to get every particle of the caramelized sugar, swirled it around the last of the perfect, ultra-plump blackberries which were an integral factor of the signature dessert, and savored her final bite.

Then she sat back, ridiculously sated, and gazed at the individuals seated around the table, reading identical expressions on all their faces - sensual overload.

Except Emmett's, of course, who - even though he truly enjoyed his own creations - always maintained a tiny nuance of professional demeanor, so he could gauge the reactions of his patrons.

Sharon Briggs said it most succinctly. "Oh - my - God!"

Emmett did not exactly preen. "I do hope you were pleased," he said, cocking his head in a typically flamboyant Emmett posture.

"Pleased!" echoed Briggs. "Pleased doesn't even begin to cover it. God, Emmett! I've always considered myself a pretty fair cook, but this . . . this isn't cooking. This is art, Picasso-level. Honest to God, I'd get on my knees and beg for recipes if I didn't think it would be like asking Da Vinci to give us a paint-by-number version of the Mona Lisa."

"Oh, stop," Emmett replied with a blush. "I'm no artist. I just enjoy a good meal now and then, and find it easier to make one than to find one. Usually."

Alexandra Corey sighed, and didn't even try to conceal the fact that she was unbuttoning her jacket to ease the pressure. "'Well, let me just assure you," she said firmly, "if you ever grow weary of feeding your friends here in Pittsburgh, I have some acquaintances in D.C. - at a rather well-known address - who would welcome you with open arms, and I'd be only too happy to put in a good word for you."

Emmett's response was an exaggerated eye-roll. "You don't really expect me to feed Republicans, do you? I'd rather cater the 700 Club."

Corey laughed. "Maybe I should hold off until the next administration comes in."

"Thank you, Agent Corey," he replied with a winsome smile, "but if you really want to make me happy, just make sure that the people who tried to kill my friend don't get a second shot at finishing the job."

Corey sat back in her chair, and studied his expression for a moment as she straightened the notes she'd taken during the course of their meal. "I have to admit, Emmett," she said finally, "that you surprise me. You just don't strike me as the kind of person to be a member of the Kinney fan club."

Emmett was silent for a moment, considering his answer. "And you'd have been right - until recently. Brian and I . . . we have almost nothing in common. In the vernacular of our culture, I'm the ultimate Nelly-bottom, and Brian is everything that I'm not. Brash, confrontational, arrogant, super-confidant,
full of himself. But . . ."

"But what?"

"It took me years - literally - to learn to see through the façade of Brian Kinney, to see what exists under the surface. Sometimes I'm still pretty sure that I only catch occasional glimpses, at those odd moments when he lets his guard down a little. And now, I'm ashamed to admit how often I looked at him, and just saw what was easiest for me to see. I saw what I wanted to see, so I never had to think about what he endured, what he lived through while the rest of us just ignored what we didn't want to know."

"And why do you think that?"

Emmett looked away then, his eyes focusing on a bleak empty spot beyond the window and suddenly filled with shadow. "When Justin got attacked - at his prom - and Brian cut himself off from everyone and built huge, thick walls around himself, we all let ourselves believe that it was because he didn't care. That he was operating in typical Kinney mode, as in 'If your boytoy gets broken, get yourself a new toy'." He sighed and scrubbed at his eyes with his fingers. "God! I actually said that once, congratulating myself on being so clever and hip. We all wanted to believe that, because it was easier than having to find a way to get through those walls and help him to overcome a guilt he never should have been expected to bear. But we did expect it. All of us. Because as much as we were full of all our noble, brave assurances - the ones that declared that Justin had every right to go to his prom and celebrate his 'right of passage' - to be out and proud and not shrink from anybody - the simple truth was that we blamed Brian for showing up there, for flaunting who he was and for encouraging Justin to flaunt himself as well. And while we were all busy condemning him and patting ourselves on the back for our smug, supercilious, liberal superiority, he was dealing with his guilt and his pain completely alone. Going to that hospital every damned night and watching over Justin, and never once letting any of us know what he was doing. In point of fact, if it hadn't been for a compassionate nurse who saw what was happening and was so convinced that Justin had a right to know about it that she disregarded Brian's wishes and spoke out, none of us would ever have known. Truth to tell, I'm not entirely sure that Justin ever did find out, because the nurse didn't go to him directly. Instead, she went to his mother, and Jennifer was so wrapped up in her own rage - her own belief that it was all Brian's fault that Justin got hurt - that she decided to keep that information to herself. It was only later - years later - that she let it slip out one day. To Debbie Novotny, of all people, and that, of course, was like taking out a full-page ad in the Times. So that's when we learned how wrong we'd been. I can't speak for everyone else, of course, but I can tell you that it hit me right in the gut - made me stop and think, and wonder how many other times we'd all just assumed that we knew what Brian thought or felt or why he did the things he did, when the truth was that we didn't have the first fucking clue."

The FBI agent stirred a dollop of real cream into a cup of dark-roast coffee and took a moment to inhale the rich, invigorating aroma. "God, this is good! The bureau should recruit you as a secret weapon." She sipped and closed her eyes to savor the taste. But when she opened them, her gaze was sharp and direct. "You're not dense enough to have allowed yourself to be duped so easily, Emmett. Surely you've figured out why you all jumped to those conclusions."

He allowed himself a quick chuckle. "Because that was exactly what he wanted us to do. Because Brian never wanted anyone to feel obligated to look deeper, or see more. Or feel a single nuance of sympathy for him."

She nodded, and simply repeated her question. "And why do you think that?"

He paused for a moment, lost in thought, and when he did speak, his voice was barely above a
"Because he knows more about dealing with hurt and loneliness and emptiness than any of us. And because he'd move heaven and earth to keep any of us from sharing in that, or ever having to deal with it."

Corey smiled, and her eyes were full of sympathy. But not full enough to make her drop the subject. "Because?"

But Emmett was not going to say another word. So she said it for him, but only by leaning forward and whispering in his ear. "Because he thinks he deserves it. You couldn't possibly have blamed him, more than he blamed himself."

Emmett didn't give any indication of agreement, but he didn't argue either.

"The human spirit is an incredible thing," she said softly. "Especially in its infinite capacity to find ways of dealing with pain."

His smile was bittersweet. "There are plenty of people who would wager their last dime that Brian Kinney has never known a moment of pain in his entire life."

She grinned. "That's the other amazing thing about the human spirit - its infinite capacity for stupidity."

Emmett laughed, and Cynthia exchanged a quick, knowing glance with Lindsey, both relieved that Corey seemed to understand things intuitively, without requiring a lot of explanations or analyses. Brian, after all, was a perpetual enigma, impossible to diagram.

Lance Mathis, who had spent the entire meal trying - without notable success - to push away from the table without over-indulging, was talking quietly with Sharon Briggs, sharing specific points of interest in the information he had received from Jared Hilliard and making subtle suggestions on where to concentrate her efforts in setting up the next phase of the undercover operation - the part that she would need to handle personally, which might require some local support, from Mathis' people and the Pittsburgh PD, while Cynthia listened in, not interjecting herself into the conversation but ready to lend her support - and that of Kinnetik Corp - if necessary. Luckily, they would not have to deal with laying out the preliminary background for the sting. That part was already in progress, under the mighty auspices of Alexandra Corey and the FBI, and for that, both Mathis and Briggs were grateful.

Everyone around the table seemed well satisfied with the progress of the meeting - Alexandra Corey, in particular - and there was a general rustling as they all prepared to rise and go about their business. But Lindsey had a different idea, sitting exceptionally still as everyone else got ready to depart.

"Hold it!" she said sharply, laying her hands flat on the table as if bracing for something that might not be pleasant. When she looked up directly into the FBI agent's face, there were shards of ice in her eyes.

"We've given you everything you asked for," she said slowly. "Provided all the information we could, some of it so personal that it felt like it should fall in the category of 'none of your business'. But we answered anyway. For Brian, to help you do whatever you have to do in order to make sure this never happens again. But now, I think it's time you repay the courtesy."

Corey squared her shoulders. "Ms. Peterson, surely you know that I can't divulge . . ."

"Ms. Peterson, surely you know that I can't divulge . . ."
and your policies and procedures, and your cute little protocols. We just spilled our guts for you. Dotted every 'i' and crossed every 't', so you can put the finishing touches on your pretty little report. I've told you things about my relationship to the man who's the father of my son that I've never told anyone before. By this time, you know almost everything there is to know about him. And in return, all we get is platitudes and vague reassurances about how the bureau is doing everything it can, and we have to trust you to see that he's protected. Well, let me tell you something, Ms. Corey. Your assurances suck, and I'm not interested in platitudes, and, where he's concerned, I don't trust anybody. So far, I haven't seen much reason for giving you my trust, and before I can even consider doing so, I want to know how your investigation is going. I want to know that you've got some real evidence that's going to let you identify these bastards." She paused, and drew a deep breath. "I want you to promise me that he's going to be all right. I want your word, and I want more than the law-enforcement equivalent of 'the patient is doing as well as can be expected.' That's just not good enough."

"You know I can't give you specific answers to your questions," Corey said firmly. "It would . . ."

"Do you know," Lindsey interrupted coldly, "who did this to him?"

"We're pursuing . . ."

Lance Mathis stirred uneasily as Lindsey lifted one pale hand to interrupt the standard press conference response. "Do - you - know?"

Corey paused to take a deep breath. "We think so."

Ordinarily, such a response from a ranking FBI official would have proved sufficient to silence most interrogators, but Lindsey Peterson was not a run-of-the-mill paparazzi, out for a juicy tidbit of gossip. She was, instead, a woman on a mission, and she knew exactly how to pursue it; as she'd observed previously, under different circumstances on other occasions, she'd learned from the master. In point of fact, she'd learned from a couple of them. "Based on what? A hunch? Intuition? A gut feeling? Tea leaves or shadows in the crystal ball or some other bit of Harry Potter nonsense? Do you really know something, or is this all just speculation? Or just an act to keep the crowd from getting too restless?"

Agent Corey resumed her seat, and clasped her hands in front of her. "What is it that you want to know, Ms. Peterson?"

Lindsey took some time to compose her answer as all the lunch guests settled back into their chairs, each of them caught between wanting to hear whatever Alexandra Corey could tell them - and not wanting to hear anything at all. Except for Sharon Briggs and Lance Mathis, of course, who were both privy to a great deal of confidential information from the investigation.

"I want to understand," said Lindsey finally, very softly. "I want to know who would do such a thing, and why anyone would feel justified in trying to destroy him. I want to be able to look these people in the eye and try to figure out how they can walk around among ordinary people and not stand out as the monsters they are. I want to know why we didn't see it, why no one realized what they were capable of, before it was too late." She closed her eyes then, and didn't notice when a tear traced a path down her cheek. "And I want them to pay for what they did. I've spent my whole life supporting liberal causes and defending victims of injustice and fighting for the underdog. But now . . . I'm not sure it's just justice I want. Maybe it's vengeance. Maybe I want them to endure what he endured, suffer what he suffered. But above all, I want to know that they're not going to be able to just walk away from it. I want them to pay."

Corey nodded. "Good. So do I."
Lindsey could not quite suppress a grin. "You do?"

"What?" retorted the FBI agent. "You think all us high-ranking FBI types adhere to some superior moral standard, so that we can divorce ourselves from the human part of this equation? That we don't sympathize with the part of you that wants payback?" Her smile was slightly weary. "In the end, I'm bound by the law, in what I'm allowed to do, and in what I can allow others to do. But I can assure you, Ms. Peterson, that there is a part of me - a rather large part, in fact - that would love to be able to put a red hot piece of angle iron in your Brian's hands and let him administer his own brand of justice to the cretins who did this to him. I can't actually do that, of course, but that doesn't mean I don't fantasize about it. Or look forward to nailing these bastards so that the criminal justice system can exact its own version of a pound of flesh."

Lindsey smiled. "So you really do have credible information? Genuine leads that . . ."

"Oh, yes," Corey replied. "We've been very busy, and we've received an enormous amount of support from . . ." She looked up and favored both Mathis and Briggs with a smile, "local resources. We don't have names yet, but we're getting closer. We've narrowed the field now, so we can concentrate our efforts where they'll do the most good. We will find them, Lindsey. I promise you, we will."

"And when you do?"

Corey frowned. 'I'm sorry. I'm not sure . . ."

"In some parts of the world - even in some parts of this country - gay-bashing is almost a spectator sport, and plenty of bashers have just walked away, with nothing more than a slap on the wrist." She sighed. "Everyone here has been witness to that. The young man that Brian . . ." She faltered then, and needed a moment to regain her composure. "Chris Hobbs almost killed Justin Taylor, and, if he had, I'm not entirely sure that two young men wouldn't have died that night. And that fucker walked away without getting so much as a scratch on his pretty little preppy face. Is that what we can expect, for the people who did this to Brian?"

"No." There was not an ounce of equivocation in Corey's tone.

But Lindsey was not going to be easily persuaded. "How can you know that? Hobbs was caught red-handed and lived to walk away from it. You don't even know who . . ."

Alexandra Corey rose and moved around the table to stand at Lindsey's side, where she could reach out and take the younger woman's hand. "But I will," she whispered. "I swear to you. I will find them, and they will pay for what they did to him." Then she paused, and favored Lindsey with a smile that was just slightly venal.

"These bastards planned this all very carefully, and they're obviously accustomed to having things their own way. But they made one really critical mistake." Her smile grew wider. "They chose the wrong victim. The things that made them want to destroy him in the first place - his boldness, his refusal to stand in the shadows, his in-your-face attitude - are the very things that should have sent them running like cockroaches in the light when he got anywhere near them. Your Mr. Kinney is not some sweet, innocent little high school student, without a voice to speak on his behalf, or with parents too gutless to stand up for him. He's brash and brilliant and vain and apparently not afraid of anybody. Add to that the fact that he's got plenty of friends, some of whom are quite powerful, who don't seem to give a fig who he chooses to fuck. As he himself would undoubtedly tell you, we live in a country where money talks. And big money talks bigger. Brian Kinney has both money and power, and the balls to use them."
She leaned forward then and stared directly into Lindsey's eyes. "That's what you've all been telling me, isn't it? Are you going to doubt him now?"

It was Sharon Briggs who answered. "It's not him we're doubting," she laughed. "It's you."

Agent Corey's eyes widened as she turned to stare at the undercover cop. Then she started to laugh, a deep, from-the-belly rumble that was infectious in its irrepressible spontaneity. "Fair enough," she finally managed to say, as she dabbed at her eyes with a tissue, to wipe away tears of laughter and smears of mascara. "It's up to me then, to prove to all of you - and to him in particular - that he's truly met his match."

Emmett's grin was brilliant. "Now that I want to be around to see. Brian Kinney, meeting his match. A truly historic occasion."

A discreet knock at the door announced the intrusion of Garrett Delaney who flashed an apologetic smile toward Cynthia as he leaned in. "Sorry to interrupt, but Jared Hilliard is on line three for Mr. Mathis, and he's insisting that it can't wait."

Cynthia's grin was sympathetic. "Threatening your life, is he?"

"Among other things," he replied ruefully.

Mathis went to Brian's desk to take the call, but both Corey and Cynthia noted - with approval - that he did not settle into Brian's chair.

He listened for a moment, before summoning the FBI agent to join him for a quick, soft-voiced consultation. Then it was Corey who was taking out her cell phone and making a quick, urgent call, at which point Sharon Briggs wasted no time in injecting herself into the conversation.

"What's going on?" demanded Cynthia, noting the none-too-subtle looks of excitement on their faces.

"We need to give Hilliard a raise," Mathis replied, an odd gleam in his eyes emphasizing the grimness of his expression, but that was apparently all he was prepared to say, for the moment, and Cynthia gathered that things were developing in the investigation that the principals were not yet ready to discuss. She was not exactly pleased with his reticence, but she knew that there were some things she was probably better off not knowing. At least, not yet.

It was at that point that a clamorous disturbance erupted from the front of the building, with a cacophony of raised voices and a sharp clatter, followed by a series of wall-shaking thumps.

"What the hell?" she demanded, as she went racing out of Brian's office, only to come to a screeching halt at the sight that greeted her in the lobby.

Danny Boyle was the first person she saw, standing off to the side of the reception area, heavy-laden with a deep-pocketed leather carry-all strapped across one shoulder, bulging with whatever was concealed inside it; a large stretched canvas, heavily daubed with bright paint, dangling from his left hand; an easel held at an awkward angle in the other hand, and a sizeable Fender guitar case wedged under one arm. He was braced against the door frame of the small coffee alcove, barely managing to retain control of the assortment of articles, all limbs engaged, and his disheveled appearance was compounded by a big splotch of cerulean paint smeared across the front of his shirt, down one leg of his jeans, and ending in a spray of droplets that dappled one boot.

Still, to the astonishment of the group of spectators who had come hurrying out of Brian's office, he was smiling, his eyes, bright with amusement, focused on his companion.
And if Boyle, in this configuration, was a surprise, his companion was a revelation.

Cynthia turned to stare at Justin Taylor and discovered that, for perhaps the first time in her life, she couldn't think of a single thing to say.

Clad only in jeans and sneakers and a suspiciously familiar-looking Boss leather jacket that hung open to reveal that the torso beneath it was shirtless and smeared with a motley hodgepodge of vivid smears of paint, Justin was balanced in a classically perfect gymnast's handstand atop Garrett's desk, feet pointed and together, back gracefully arched, head back with golden blonde hair falling in a gleaming cap around his face - a face beaming with a bright, exuberant grin.

The spectators, as a group, seemed dumbfounded, until Emmett found his voice. "Justin? Honey? What . . ."

"If I could sing," answered the blond, wavering just slightly, "I'd be warbling something ridiculously rapturous, like . . . I don't know, like The Age of Aquarius or Pour Some Sugar on Me or Footloose or something equally euphoric - but I can't. Sing, that is. So I have to find another way. This is our way. This is the Taylor-Kinney way - or the Kinney-Taylor way, if you prefer."

"Way to what?" asked Emmett, still not entirely sure they weren't dealing with a case of early-onset dementia.

"To celebrate, of course." Justin's tone said that he found it ridiculous that anyone would even need to ask. "To express joy and wonder and a full heart. Streisand sings; Baryshnikov dances; Julia Child cooks; Tiger golfs. But the Taylor-Kinneys - they do handstands, and cartwheels. And paint, of course, but that's for later. Right now, they do this." So saying he gave a mighty push with his arms and twisted in mid-air to land on his feet, only to launch into a series of cartwheels across the lobby, while bellowing at the top of his lungs in a voice that was so off-key it was almost physically painful. "Do a little dance; make a little love; get down tonight; get down tonight."

* In the process, he managed to avoid doing any real damage, except for toppling one floor lamp, and came to a stop finally at the edge of a small seating area, where he appropriated a double handful of apples from a wooden bowl and began to toss them in the air.

"And juggle," he added. "That's what Taylor-Kinneys do." Then his smile blossomed into a huge grin. "I did warn you that I couldn't sing."

"Taylor . . . Kinneys?" Emmett was still dumbfounded, but at least, he was asking questions. Everybody else was still speechless. He turned to exchange puzzled looks with Lindsey, and silently mouthed the question again. "Taylor-Kinneys?"

But Lindsey had no answer to offer, being just as confused and disconcerted as everyone else.

Justin's grin grew wider still as he succeeded - for a short while - in keeping four apples in motion in the air. Then he looked over toward the small crowd that was still standing near the entrance to Brian's office, and spotted Cynthia in the middle of the group, and immediately understood the meaning of the strange, diffident smile that she was wearing. The apples fell to the floor, forgotten.

"I saw it," he said softly. "I saw what he did for me. And I know - I know - that he was the one who did it. Wasn't he?"

With a quick flick of her hand, Brian's assistant - and friend - managed to wipe away every trace of the tears that were welling from her eyes. "You do realize," she said, by way of an answer that was not - quite - an answer, "that we're talking about a man who wouldn't know the difference between a ball-peen hammer and a ballpoint pen?"
The sunshine smile grew brighter. "I don't care. I know he did it. Didn't he?"

She hesitated briefly, knowing full well that she was treading on dangerous ground. Then she nodded. "As much as possible - and in a manner of speaking - he did. He designed it, contracted the various stages of construction, even got some instruction to learn how to do some of the hands-on stuff himself. Then he furnished it - the seating unit is custom-made, according to his design - and arranged it all. It's completely private, Justin. So private that, as of now, there are only three people who've ever seen it completed, and one of them only because somebody had to go in to finish hanging the exhibits, after . . . well. Just after."

Justin walked forward, and clasped her hands with his own, pulling her close enough to drop a kiss on her forehead. "He really does, doesn't he?"

She studied his expression, and wondered if anyone among the individuals standing around them would understand what a breakthrough this moment represented. "You really didn't know?" It was a question, but only barely.

He closed his eyes briefly. "I was never sure if it was real, or if it was just that I wanted to believe it so badly that I convinced myself."

She nodded then. "Brian Kinney doesn't do anything by halves, Justin. Including giving his heart."

"So," he said softly, "how do I win him back?"

Her smile was gentle. "You never lost him. And, in one sense, you never will. But whether or not he'll ever again allow you to be a part of his life . . . that I don't know. As long as he believes that you're better off - not to mention safer - without him . . ."

He bit his lip then, and she could see the fear rising like storm clouds in his eyes. "How do I make him understand? How do I make him see that life without him is no life at all? Is not worth living."

She touched his face with her hand, and it was suddenly as if there were only the two of them in the room, as everyone else - everything else - faded into obscurity. "You take a page from the Kinney Operating Manual," she answered softly. "You refuse to take no for an answer."

He mustered up a rueful grin. "And he will say, 'No', won't he?"

She laughed. "I think you can count on that. Repeatedly, angrily, loudly, but . . ."

"But?"

"In the end, it'll all come down to one question. Do you love him enough to see it through? Because, when you get to the bottom line, he's not going to be able to walk away from you. Not if you're prepared to let him know that he's your life. That he's the only thing that keeps you breathing and waking up each day. But there's no way to fake that, Justin. Not with Brian. Because he may be an arrogant, narcissistic, self-absorbed bastard, but he knows you. Like no one else ever will, so you're never going to get away with lying to him."

"But he lies to me," he protested.

"Only when he believes that he has no choice, that he has to lie to protect you. You know that."

He nodded. But he was still worried, and Cynthia suppressed a sympathetic smile, reflecting that they all sometimes tended to forget just how young Justin still was, and just how much he still had to learn about the ways of the world - and the heart. "But in the end," he said, with a sigh, "there's no
"That's true," she admitted. "It really all comes down to how much you want him. You have to fight harder to keep him, than he fights to push you away. And you do know, I'm sure, that he sometimes fights dirty."

"Yeah. I know. That's the reason Chris McClaren is around, isn't it? He's part of Brian's dirty tricks campaign."

She sighed and looked away. "I think I've already said more than I should."

He went very still then, his eyes suddenly bright with understanding. "You weren't supposed to let me see it," he said softly. "I was never supposed to know."

Her smile was slightly rueful. "What do you think?"

He shook his head, unable to find the words to express his gratitude. "I can't believe what you did for me. What if he . . . can't . . ."

"If he can't - or won't - forgive me," she said firmly, "then I'll deal with it." Then her expression softened, and she smiled again. "But don't fool yourself, Honey. You're a lovely, sweet young man, but I didn't do it for you."

And that, he knew, was the truth. She had always been good to him; had always helped him when she could and sometimes gone out of her way to intervene on his behalf when Brian was channeling his diva/bastard persona. But the fundamental truth was irrevocable.

Cynthia's first and only true loyalty was to Brian Kinney. And that would never change, a fact she had just managed to prove, by risking everything to give him what she believed he really needed.

Justin would never forget it and would move heaven and earth to make sure that she did not pay too high a price for her actions, but the final decision, he knew, would not be his to make.

It would be Brian's choice.

It was at this point that the two of them suddenly remembered that they were not alone, and realized that they were being watched with fierce intensity. Emmett, of course, with Lindsey right beside him, was almost stomping his feet with impatience, champing at the bit to know what - exactly - these co-conspirators were discussing. But he - they - were going to have to accept that their curiosity would remain unsatisfied. For now, at least.

Brian's secret - his big, beautiful, fantastic, ridiculously romantic secret - would remain unshared among those who had no need to know, no matter how vehemently they might disagree.

For three members of the group, however, the conversation between Justin and Cynthia - intriguing as it was - was a secondary consideration. Though Mathis, Briggs, and Corey were curious, they were also distracted; they had more immediate concerns, and they maintained enough distance from the rest of the group to allow them to speak privately.

Corey received two brief phone calls during the lobby episode, and favored Mathis with a nod when the second one was completed.

"All set?" he asked.
Corey nodded. "Our Deep Throat is in place and eager to proceed."

"Not too eager, I hope," observed Sharon Briggs. "Hilliard gave you good intel, but operating in that kind of setting requires major skills, not to mention balls as big as melons."

Corey laughed. "Not to worry. We're covered - on both scores."

She closed her eyes for a moment, visualizing the 'Deep Throat' under discussion, and barely managed to suppress a smile. She would have to remember to tell Priscilla Young - AKA Prissy, AKA Deep Throat - about this conversation, particularly in regard to the size of her 'balls'.

"And the warrants?"

"Signed, sealed, delivered, and activated," Corey answered, eliciting a quick grin from the security chief, who knew just how difficult it was to get wiretap warrants from federal judges, especially when issues of journalistic confidentiality were involved.

"However, we have a more immediate concern," said the FBI agent, turning to regard Mathis with lifted eyebrow. "You have an in-house breach, Lance. What do you think we should do about it?"

Unlike many people, Mathis was not one to avoid responsibility or evade hard choices. Still, he knew this was a delicate area, involving old loyalties and elements of friendship. "I don't believe it was done with malice or deliberate intent."

"Well, that's comforting," snapped Briggs. "When we have to step up and confess that Kinney died on our watch, we'll be able to excuse our mistake by saying that the slip-up was just an accident. Without malice."

Corey ducked her head, refusing to grin at Briggs' snarky comment. But she didn't bother to suppress an eye-roll. "No deliberate intent, huh? So . . . what? Blatant stupidity at work?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so. Just thoughtlessness. Just a poor schmuck who doesn't have a clue what it is to be targeted, because he's spent his entire life hiding under the radar. Never deliberately provoking anybody. Never standing out."

"Granted," said Briggs, but there was a sharpness in her tone that suggested she was still struggling to contain an acid bath of anger. "But if this had gone unnoticed, we might very well have found ourselves with a dead victim and no idea where we screwed up. We were lucky, and I don't know about you guys, but I'm not at all comfortable with trusting in continued good fortune. So the question remains. How do we handle Schmidt?"

"Everybody was cautioned about talking out of turn," Corey pointed out. "So he can't claim that he didn't know better. This is certainly grounds for dismissal."

Mathis sighed. "Anywhere else, it probably would be. But the circumstances are a little bizarre. From what Hilliard told me, it's obvious that Peabody succeeded in making Ted believe that he already knew where Brian was."

Briggs frowned. "Can we at least manage to get that slime-ball fired for this?"

Corey smiled. "In good time, my friend. But we have to be careful. It wouldn't do to reveal that we're on to them. But Peabody will pay for his actions. I promise you that."

Briggs nodded, and contented herself with visualizing Monty Peabody's face when he found out that he was not only going to lose his job over his violation of confidentiality regulations, but that he
might also face criminal charges for his part in the conspiracy. In this case, she thought she could agree with that old, oft-quoted Klingon proverb: revenge really *was* a dish best served cold.

"And Schmidt?" she asked finally. She was slightly astonished to realize that she felt some nuance of sympathy for the accountant, who had obviously been played. But the nuance was small in comparison to her resentment that the man had put Brian at risk by ignoring the protocols that had been established for his protection.

"I'll speak to him," said Mathis. "But I'm assuming that we still don't want anybody to know about our arrangements, so I'll have to approach him with discretion. I don't think it's a good idea to let him know that he was being watched." He fell silent for a moment, obviously weighing his options. "I'll handle it,"

Corey nodded. "See that you do, because . . ." She paused, and there was no misinterpreting the hard glitter in her eyes when she resumed speaking. "If it happens again, I'll take whatever actions I deem necessary to safeguard Mr. Kinney and the integrity of our investigation."

"Got a dungeon booked on standby?" asked Briggs. "Just in case."

Corey smiled. "We have our resources."

Mathis glanced from one smiling face to the other. "Remind me," he said softly, "never to piss the two of you off. I don't even want to imagine what kind of payback you could come up with if you put your heads together."

Corey's smile grew wider. "Just keep an eye on him. Maybe you're right to trust him, but I'm not so sure. So do yourself - and your boss - a favor, and hedge your bets."

Mathis frowned, an odd expression touching his face, before he nodded and excused himself, apparently intent on following through with whatever had just occurred to him.

Cynthia, having completed her discussion with Justin, chose that moment to approach, the expression on her face indicating that she had figured out that something was definitely up, although she obviously did not expect to be briefed on the matter. Instead, she confined her interest to a general request for reassurance. "Everything all right?"

Corey smiled, knowing that the woman certainly knew better, but also knew when to allow professionals the opportunity and the space to do what needed doing.

"Everything's fine," she replied.

The acting CEO of Kinnetik didn't even bother to try to hide her skepticism as she regarded the group with a venal little smile, but she elected to keep any additional comments to herself. For the moment.

"And now," said the FBI agent to the group at large, "if you'll all excuse me, I have a plane to catch. And again, I want to thank you for your cooperation. You have no idea how valuable your information could prove to be."

Cynthia smiled. "So, is the moment at hand?"

"It is." Corey took a deep breath. "And I confess that I don't know if I should be breathless with excitement, or quaking with fear."

It was Emmett who came up with the perfect response. "Actually, I'd recommend a little bit of both.
That way, you're prepared for whichever version of Brian Kinney he decides to let you see.”

The FBI agent couldn't quite decide whether to be amused or concerned, and it was perfectly obvious that everyone in the group understood exactly how she felt.

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The hotel suite was the epitome of elegant luxury, featuring period furniture and twelve-foot walls lined with raw silk the color of aged cognac, an Aubusson rug underfoot, twin Louis XVI giltwood settees with fawn-colored suede upholstery, and a fine-wrought silver tea service on the seasoned mahogany coffee table with its olive wood inlay design. On a crystal platter, an assortment of miniature beef Wellington 

* hors d'oeuvres, tiny ramekins of escargots in garlic sauce, caviar canapés, and lobster scampi puffs was arranged to tempt the eye and the palate, while a sterling ice bucket offered a bottle of Krug Grande Cuvee.

Ted Schmidt was suitably impressed. He had always known that Marshall Hargrave, his old classmate from Wharton, would go far; even in his youth, the man had always had a singular, relentless drive to succeed, not to mention a blade-sharp intelligence, but it was doubtful that anyone could have predicted what a financial phenomenon he would prove to be. The Hargrave/Kraiden Fund had been the brightest star of international financial markets for the past six years, and entry into the stratospheric levels of its investment opportunities was by invitation only, and impossible to finagle. One was either asked to join, or one wasn't; there was no gray area in between.

Ted had, on occasion, fantasized about being invited into the fold, but he'd always known that it was unlikely. He really had never had the kind of money that would interest those who moved in Marshall's financial and social circles, or enjoyed his political connections.

On the other hand, Brian Kinney, riding the crest of his Kinnetik success, did have that kind of money, along with a growing reputation for influence, but, again, participation in this particular fund was not something one aspired to. One had to be asked.

He helped himself to a scrumptious bit of lobster scampi and barely managed to suppress a sigh of contentment. When Marshall had called to invite him to this little tête à tête, to discuss the possibility of offering Kinnetik an opportunity to participate in a new expansion within the Fund, Ted had almost refused the invitation, not entirely certain that he wasn't the butt of someone's malicious prank. He had seen his old acquaintance from time to time through the years, once at a class reunion, occasionally at alumni functions, and once at a dinner to honor a retiring professor emeritus who had been a faculty adviser to both of them during their senior year, but their conversations had always been confined to polite, impersonal exchanges with no real connection. Or so he'd always believed.

But apparently, Marshall had been paying closer attention than he'd let on. Apparently he'd noticed that Ted had been very clever and successful in handling his stewardship of Brian's money; clever enough, at any rate, to warrant this invitation and to merit an opportunity to win himself a place among the pantheon of the rich and famous. For Brian, of course. He needed to remember that, while it might be his expertise that had earned the notice of his sophisticated associates, it was Brian's money that would pay the tab.

Still, this was a moment to savor - an acknowledgement of his skill and his expertise, an accolade from his peers.

He glanced at the antique ormolu clock on the mantle and noted that he'd been waiting more than thirty minutes for his meeting, even though he'd been careful to arrive precisely on time for his appointment. But busy successful people didn't exactly punch time clocks; he knew that. God knows, the mighty Kinney had kept him waiting often enough, and usually for no reason except that
he'd gotten distracted, by an idea, or a phone call - or a hot piece of ass (all too frequently). So he'd smiled when Marshall's lovely, Prada-clad secretary had shown him into the suite's parlor, and indicated that he should help himself to refreshment until Mr. Hargrave, who was currently in conference with another client, managed to join him.

If the thought occurred to him that it was really quite rude to schedule a meeting and then leave one's invited guest to cool his heels for an indeterminate period of time, he chose not to dwell on it.

It was another ten minutes before there was a murmur of voices beyond the set of double doors at the rear of the sitting room, and two individuals emerged, still deep in discussion about an upcoming performance at the local concert hall.

Marshall Hargrave was escorting an elegantly-attired older woman who was wearing a saucer-sized emerald broach on the shoulder of her classic Chanel jacket. "I don't care where you're supposed to be in September, Marshall. You cannot miss this," she was saying. "The young woman singing Mimi was an understudy of Angela Gheorghiu in London. Claudia Moreno is her name, and she's quite spectacularly wonderful."

"Ah," said Ted, rising to his feet. "The new performance of La Bohème. I can hardly wait."

Virginia Hammond paused and regarded the accountant with cold, narrowed eyes. "And you are?"

"Ted!" exclaimed Hargrave, as he came forward with right hand extended. "How wonderful to see you! Virginia, Darling, this is Ted Schmidt, an old friend of mine. We went to Wharton together."

Ms. Hammond - former wife of deceased pickle baron, George Schickel - inclined her head slightly, in a manner not unlike one that Queen Victoria might have affected. "You're an opera afficionado, Mr. Schmidt?" she asked, obviously just making small talk.

"Oh, indeed I am," he answered. "In fact, you and I met several years ago, at a presentation of Aïda, if I recall correctly. That was before your husband passed away, I believe."

"How lovely!" she replied, with undisguised condescension.

"Yes, Virginia," Hargrave interjected. "Ted is here to discuss becoming a member of our little financial empire. On behalf of his employer, of course."

"And who would that be?"

Ted took a deep breath, sensing that this would be a potential moment of truth. "Brian Kinney. Owner of Kinnetik Corporation."

Virginia was a real pro; he'd give her that. The only thing that betrayed her was a tiny twitch of her left eyebrow. Otherwise, she gave no indication that she recognized the name. "And what - exactly - is Kinnetik Corporation?"

"Why, where have you been keeping yourself, Dear Girl?" asked Hargrave. "It's only the fastest growing, most fabulously successful advertising agency in Pittsburgh. Simply everyone is talking about it."

Virginia turned to stare at Hargrave for a moment, obviously picking up on something in his tone that gave her pause. "Really?" she said finally, before turning back to Ted. "I wonder . . . this might be a very fortuitous coincidence, Mr. Schmidt. You're obviously aware of my association with Schickel Hall, and it just happens that we're currently looking for a new agency to promote our next series of productions. The firm that's worked for us in the past has been, shall we say, less than impressive."
We're going to be presenting a series of four Puccini works, starting in late summer.

"Beginning with La Boheme, I take it," replied Ted, getting excited in spite of his determination to remain unimpressed. "I saw Claudia Morreno in La Traviata in Philadelphia last year. She's unbelievably talented."

"Yes," agreed Ms. Hammond. "She certainly is. So, can I assume that your agency would be interested in taking on this promotion? Would you like to make an appointment with our chief administrator, to submit a proposal?"

More than anything he'd ever wanted in his life, Ted wanted to respond, to agree immediately and enthusiastically to her suggestion, but he couldn't quite bring himself to ignore the warning voice that was screaming in his mind, the one that reminded him that he would have to check with Cynthia before making any commitments - that he was hamstrung by the limitations Brian had imposed on him and the necessity to function under her oversight. "Uhhh, can I get back to you on that?" he asked finally. "I'll need to check our schedule with our art director, to make sure we can give your project the attention it deserves."

"Oh," she said coldly. "I see. Well, I had assumed that you'd have the authority to make a commitment. But if you can't . . ."

"Of course, I can," he said sharply. "I just find it simplifies the management process when one employs discretion in handling human resources. It pays to keep the support staff in the loop, especially in dealing with artistic types, if you know what I mean."

This time, the woman's smile actually contained a trace of warmth, as Hargrave retrieved her mink wrap from a small entry closet. "Yes indeed. One must avoid bruising those fragile egos. Correct?"

Ted nodded, beaming his agreement. "I'll just double-check our schedule, and give you a call, shall I?"

"Oh, not me, Dear," she answered, turning to allow Marshall Hargrave to drape her fur around her shoulders. "I only deal with the artistic and social aspects of our little venue. I leave the commercial end of things to those better suited to it. You may call the theater office number any time, and ask for Jonathon Croft. And I'll just let him know to expect your call, shall I?"

Hargrave favored her with a brilliant smile. "Wonderful, Virginia. And I'm delighted that you're pleased with our final arrangements."

"Oh, yes, Marshall," she replied. "Making money always pleases me, although I do dislike having to deal with the unpleasant details. I trust we're done here?"

"Completely. And let me just say that it's always a pleasure doing business with you."

The slim, stylish secretary appeared then, apparently having been loitering in the hallway, awaiting the right moment to make her entrance and escort Ms. Hammond down to the reserved area where her car and driver were waiting.

In the wake of her departure, Marshall Hargrave favored Ted with a wink and a broad smile. "Another satisfied customer," he observed, before gesturing for Ted to resume his seat. "Champagne?" he asked, seating himself and taking the napkin-wrapped bottle of Krug from its icy niche.

Ted hesitated. He had not touched a drop of alcohol since his emergence from rehab and knew that he should decline without a second thought. But how, he wondered, did one graciously reject a
serving of a vintage that probably cost $300.00 a bottle. "I really shouldn't," he said finally.

"Oh, don't be silly. Of course you should. What better reason to indulge a bit, than two old friends embarking on a new venture together?" The broker's smile was brilliant, and Ted suddenly felt a bit uneasy, wondering why the expression reminded him just slightly of the predatory grin of a PR professional closing in on a vulnerable target.

He shook off the feeling, chiding himself for an overactive imagination, and, assuring himself that he would take one glass, and only one glass, he accepted the crystal flute that the broker handed him, and raised it in a little off-hand tribute. "To new ventures," he said with a diffident smile.

Hargrave mirrored the gesture. "So, Teddie," he said slowly, after taking a long swallow of the lovely amber wine, "are you ready to play in the big leagues? And, coincidentally, to become a very rich man in the process?"

Ted hesitated. He could not deny that the idea of making a great deal of money, of becoming rich in his own right, was enormously appealing. In the checkered course of his past, he had been quite rich at one time; he'd also been dead broke, and, in the final analysis, he could only agree - wholeheartedly - with Mae West. Rich was better. And this would be a golden opportunity for him, for although the bulk of the investment he would be making would be Kinnetik money - Brian Kinney's money - he would also tack on every dime he could scrape together from his own personal funds. So yes, he could wind up a very rich man, indeed. But he realized, to his surprise, that getting rich - pleasant as the prospect might be - was not the real objective here. He wanted to make Brian rich; well, rich-er anyway; but, above all, he wanted Brian to know, to understand, that it was him - Theodore Schmidt, AKA the schmuck - who had come through for him, in a way no one else ever had.

He wanted Brian to acknowledge him as a savior, a hero, a valued associate - a best friend.

But he also knew that he had to be careful for, as grateful and appreciative as Brian would be if Ted succeeded, the intensity of his approval would probably not hold a candle to the degree of Brian's fury and thirst for revenge should he fail.

"Marshall," he said slowly, "I can't tell you how grateful I am for this opportunity. But you must understand that I have to be very cautious here. You don't know Brian Kinney at all - a fact for which you should probably be grateful - but let me assure you that he does not suffer fools gladly. This is a huge step for me, and I dare not take big risks with his investments. One of the primary factors in managing his portfolio has always been maintaining diversity, and making sure that he's not over-exposed in any one area. If I risk . . ."

"Teddie," Marshall interrupted, sitting back and regarding his old acquaintance with a level look, "I truly understand your concerns. And I certainly recognize the wisdom of your financial oversight. But I know you well enough to be certain that you didn't come here unprepared. You've looked into our history, investigated our market performance. Surely you realize that, for almost seven years, we've outperformed almost every other investment fund in the world. Consistent double-digit gains, year after year. Even, in some cases, month after month. What could you possibly have to worry about?"

Ted shrugged slightly. "Your minimum investment requirement is pretty steep."

The broker frowned. "Does that mean that I've been misinformed? Can your Mr. Kinney not come up with the necessary funds?"

Ted grinned. "He's not my Mr. Kinney."
"Really?" Hargrave took a sip of champagne. "Forgive me, but I thought . . . you are still . . ."

"Gay?" Ted's voice was surprisingly sharp. "Yes, Marshall. I'm still a cocksucker. Is that . . ."

Hargrave raised his hands. "Ted, please," he said dismissively. "There's no need to get defensive. I don't give a rat's ass what - or who - you suck, although I'd have to have been dead or comatose not to have heard about the notorious Brian Kinney. I'm sorry that I jumped to conclusions. But it's really immaterial. If I was misinformed, and he can't come up with the minimal investment, then . . ."

"I didn't say that," Ted interrupted, helping himself to a bite of beef Wellington to buy a little time. But only a little. "I'd need to rearrange some accounts, but the cash is available. Still, $2,000,000 upfront is a pretty sizeable investment, so I just . . . I think I need a little time to think this through. To make sure . . ."

"I understand completely." The PR smile was back in place, as Hargrave popped a canapé into his mouth. "But you must keep in mind that this is an opportunity that won't be available for long. We've only just decided to expand our operation into this new market, and the number of new investors we're prepared to take on is limited. It was only due to our longstanding friendship that I wanted to let you in on the ground floor, so to speak. So I'd advise you not to think for too long, because, once the word is out, we're probably going to be inundated with more clients than we can handle. I'd hate to see you - and Kinney - miss out on a golden opportunity because of being overly cautious."

Ted blinked, and was suddenly swept up in a very old fragment of memory - a recollection of a conversation overheard between Marshall Hargrave and one of his frat-boy bosom buddies back in college, a conversation that Ted had not been meant to hear, when Marshall had described Ted and his friend, Glenn Parrish, as being "as timid as field mice". He didn't remember the circumstances that had prompted the conversation, but he did remember feeling hurt and diminished for a long time before he'd finally managed to put the incident out of his mind. He wondered briefly why he was remembering it now.

As timid as field mice. Or, in other words, overly cautious.

He rose abruptly, a spark of new resolve gleaming in his eyes. "I need to make some phone calls," he said firmly, "but I should have final confirmation for you tomorrow. Soon enough?"

Hargrave's grin barely avoided smugness, and Ted felt a rush of satisfaction. When all was said and done, he would prove himself to be a man of bold action, the antithesis of that stereotypical timid little mouse; at the same time, he would prove the validity of another old adage - the one concerning he who laughs last.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Sunlight is dangerous. It causes skin cancer. You should really haul your ass inside, and . . .

Brian grinned beneath the shelter of the sunhat that shaded his face as he stretched out against the deep cushions of the lounge chair at the edge of the deck. He knew that his thoughts were unarguably true. But he also knew that his skin was particularly beautiful when it was sun-kissed. Someone - he didn't really want to remember who - had once called him a bronze Adonis when he was wearing the kind of perfect golden glow that was unspoiled by tan lines.

Like the one he was cultivating now. Except for his face, of course, and the areas of his body that were concealed under swaths of snowy bandages.

Bronze Adonis - with splotches.
He found he didn't care much for that imagery.

"You're going to burn," said a disinterested voice.

"I never burn."

"Maybe not in Pittsburgh, with its watered-down version of sunshine," came the response, threaded with a soft whicker of laughter. "But this is not Pittsburgh. This is the South, and the sun here will fry your pretty little ass before you can whistle Dixie."

Brian grinned again. "Glad you noticed."

McClaren snorted. "I'm in survival-mode - not blind."

Brian opened his eyes, and lifted his hat in order to look up and meet the FBI agent's gaze - a look filled with equal parts resistance and desire - and he didn't turn away when McClaren leaned forward to claim his lips in a bruising kiss. No one else, except the medical team who was treating him, had been allowed to see his face without the concealment of bandages; no one else had been privileged to examine the extent of the damage done to him. Only McClaren. Brian still didn't know why he'd decided to allow the FBI agent full access. He also didn't know why McClaren did not seem to be disturbed by the mutilation.

It had bothered Brian at first; still did, sometimes, that he'd decided to suspend his moratorium - mostly self-imposed - on mouth-kissing, with McClaren, of all people. (And Michael, of course, to whom it had never really applied.) It was especially worrisome in that it had lead to nothing more than a couple of frustrating make-out sessions. Sexually frustrating, for both of them, as neither had succeeded in pretending that there was no interest in taking their physical interaction to the next level.

There was plenty of interest, but neither could overcome a growing certainty that physical intimacy between them would carry deadly risks - that it was entirely possible that neither would survive the experience unscathed.

Still, the kissing was addictive. Almost irresistible.

"You're the biggest fucking tease I've ever had the misfortune to meet," McClaren observed, his eyes sweeping down Brian's sculpted body to linger on the strong swell of a perfect cock, currently at half-mast and rising.

"Au contraire, mon amis," Brian retorted. "What you see is what you get. You just have to have the balls to reach out and grab it."

With a sigh, McClaren retrieved a towel from a nearby chair and dropped it across the beautiful temptation of Brian's crotch. "Your physical therapist should be here any minute. I assume you don't want to give the woman a heart attack her first day on the job."

"Why do I get a 'her'? Why not a 'him', with beautiful pecs and perfect abs and . . ."

"Because that's not the kind of physical therapy you need right now."

McClaren's grin was more than a little venal.

"Bullshit!" Brian's expression was mocking, as he reached up and wrapped his fingers in the collar of the FBI agent's denim shirt and pulled just hard enough to bring that exquisite face down to a spot just inches away. "I think a good blow-job would really take the edge off. Make me eager to please."

McClaren chuckled. "You've never been 'eager to please' in your entire fucking life. In fact, you
don't give a shit if you please - or not." He paused then, his eyes moving inch by inch over the surface of Brian's face, and, obviously hesitant, he lifted his hand and traced his fingers down across patches of flawless skin between areas still bruised and swollen and distorted with stitches. "It's extraordinary, you know," he said after a while, as Brian went very still under the exploration of gentle fingers. "I think you better pledge your firstborn . . . okay, okay, your second . . . to Turnage, or make him your primary heir or something, because the man is a fucking miracle worker. I hate to admit it, but I would have bet my pension that no one would ever be able to patch you up like this. It's amazing what he's done in such a short time." He sighed, then smiled. "The scars and bruises are fading, the muscles are healing, and you're going to break hearts again, Brian. By the time Turnage is done with you, you're going to be more beautiful than ever."

Then he looked down and stared at the narrow stripe of blistered, discolored skin that stretched across the area below Brian's rib cage. "Except for that. Are you really not going to . . ."

"Yeah. I'm really not going to."

"But why? You know you're pissing him off, that he says he can fix it so . . ."

"I know what he said, and I know what he can do."

"Then why?"

This time the smile was diffident, almost bittersweet. "Because sometimes a man needs a souvenir, a reminder of how things came to be."

"Don't you think you'd be better off putting it behind you? Forgetting it?"

"Been there, done that," Brian replied. "That's how I lived my life, for a long time. In the end, it didn't work very well, did it? The past is always with you, whether you choose to think about it or not."

McClaren straightened up and spent another moment staring down into a face that was well on its way to being as perfect, as breathtaking as it had been before the attack. Almost. One more procedure, according to Dr. Turnage, and there would be only faint, almost invisible traces to indicate the extent of the original damage. Physically, anyway. McClaren wasn't so sure that the mental and emotional scars would be so easy to erase, but Kinney, typically, was not going to allow anyone to get inside his defenses in order to explore such potential weaknesses. Not without extraordinary efforts, anyway.

The FBI agent helped himself to a Marlboro from the open pack on a nearby table and continued his visual exploration of Brian's body. Bandages still obscured an area low on his torso, extending around to the top of his hip, and there was still work to be done on the extremities - a plate in the left hand to be surgically removed once the physical healing was complete, and therapy to regain full motion and strength in the right leg which was still encased in a walking cast. Plus a course of moderate traction to eliminate potential spinal problems would still be necessary, but, all in all, it appeared that Brian would eventually be fully restored.

Physically.

He wished he could stop qualifying his observations about the man's recovery. He wished he could believe that there would be no residual effects.

Above all, he wished he didn't care, one way or another.

"I'm going to check with Randy at the gate," he said, enjoying the bitter tang of the smoke in his
throat as he turned to gaze out across the bay to watch a flock of sea birds wheeling and twisting in
the ocean breeze. "I'll make sure he knows he's supposed to let your therapist in. Then I'm going to
walk the perimeter. Maybe I'll go out to the lighthouse, and spy on you with a telescope."

Brian laughed. "How ridiculously romantic!"

"Roll over on your stomach, and I'll oil your back."

Brian did as he was told, although his movements were still awkward and without his customary
grace, impeded by the stiffness of injuries not fully healed. Yet he knew, once he was positioned flat
on his belly that he presented a fetching view for his observer, and couldn't suppress the urge to offer
a taunting remark. "You just can't resist any opportunity to get your hands on my ass."

With an answering smirk, McClaren straddled Brian's thighs, careful to avoid settling his weight
against the body beneath him, but not bothering to avoid the sweet sensation of skin to skin contact.

Brian laughed, and the FBI agent pretended that he didn't feel the urge to do the same.

Kinney was a bastard, and the most intriguing, addictive, captivating individual McClaren had ever
known. And trouble, of course. That was a given.

McClaren poured out a generous portion of tanning oil in the hollow at the small of Brian's back and
proceeded to massage it into golden skin, noting as his hands moved that the muscles under his
fingers were more relaxed than they'd been in days past. Initially, Brian had shown some measure of
resistance to the FBI agent's touch, a tension that almost certainly indicated an unavoidable lack of
trust and an innate inability to relax, but that resistance seemed to be dissolving, and McClaren wasn't
entirely sure that was a good thing - for either of them.

He knew - and he was pretty sure Brian knew as well. Any prolonged contact between them -
especially involving any kind of emotional intimacy - might very well be toxic.

He leaned forward then, dropped an open-mouthed kiss at the tender spot where long, slender neck
joined broad shoulder, and managed a quick slap to that exquisite ass as he rose. "Back later," he
muttered, and made his departure, deliberately ignoring an urge to spend a few breathless moments
gazing at the feast laid out before him. It simply wouldn't do to allow himself to dwell on what he'd
like to do to that luscious skin, that supple body, that perfect mouth.

For his part, Brian simply nestled more comfortably into the cushions beneath him, cradling his face
against his folded arms, and enjoyed the sensation of the sun's warmth against his body - and refused
to think about what else he'd have liked to feel against his body.

He lay still, listening to the distant cry of shore birds and let himself drift, caressed by the gentle
strokes of warm spring air and serenaded by the seductive rhythm of the surf breaking against the
shoreline. He knew that he should be wary, that McClaren's observation about the quality of
southern sunlight was almost certainly true and that he would suffer an uncomfortable sunburn if he
lingered too long here. But it was still spring, and the warmth of the light on his back - so radically
different from what he would have encountered on his own rooftop terrace in the Pitts - felt
wonderful enough for him to take the risk of lingering just a bit longer.

So he nestled down more deeply against his cushions and took a deep cleansing breath and
concentrated on not thinking of anything beyond the sensation, the pleasant drift of this moment and
the gentle ambiance of the music rising from the IPod on a nearby table.

"All my thoughts just seem to settle on the breeze,
When I'm lying wrapped up in your arms;
The whole world just fades away.
The only thing I hear is the beating of your heart.
'Cause I can feel you breathe; it's washing over me.
Suddenly I'm melting into you." **

Until . . .

"So . . . how good is he?"

Fuck!

"You can lie there with your head up your ass - or not - but it won't change anything. So why don't you turn over and face me. And answer my question. Is he as good as me?"

Brian, stubbornly, refused to open his eyes. "I only do upgrades. You should know that by now." If he didn't look, didn't see, maybe he'd be able to get through whatever was at hand without giving in to any ridiculous lesbianic urges.

"Uh, huh! So he's that good? The performance lives up to the package."

"I think I just answered that. What are you doing here?"

"Waiting to see if you have the guts to face me."

Brian swallowed the sigh that rose in his throat, and pushed himself up and around into a semi-recumbent position to stare up at the slender figure standing between him and the flaming globe of the setting sun. "Okay. I'm facing you. Now, what do you want?"

Except that he wasn't - exactly - facing his visitor. He had deliberately shaded his eyes and kept them focused at about knee-level, noting that the jeans that filled his vision were familiar, easily identified by a rip at mid-shin on the left side, and a string of paint dots - Alizarin crimson, he was pretty sure - on the right.

"I want," said that voice - that completely unforgettable voice - as the visitor moved closer, "you to put your hand down, and look at me. Let me see your eyes - your face."

But Brian was shaking his head. "Nothing here that you want to see. Trust me."

"Why?" The calm tone of the voice was trembling now, receding before an onrush of impatience, of anger. "Because it's not the same face it used to be? Because you think I can't handle the idea of an imperfect Brian Kinney? Let me tell you something, Mr. Kinney. You were never . . ."

"I know." And the voice was cold and sharp and without a nuance of tenderness or remorse. "I've heard it before, you know. But the last time you said that to me, I was too weak and too tired and too damaged to stand up and fight back. Now . . . I'm not."

Two quick steps, and refusing to look into the beloved face framed by that mop of blond hair was no longer an option, as Justin flopped down on the cushion at Brian's side, his hip pushing against Brian's thigh with no wiggle-room between them. "I'm gonna kill Cynthia," Brian murmured.

"No, you're not. Because she didn't tell me where to find you. She didn't have to."

Brian's eyes felt scalded, almost blistered by the intense liquid glow of the late afternoon sun. "Meaning what exactly?"
"Meaning I will always find you. You'll never manage to hide from me."

"I'm not hiding."

A pale hand, fine, transparent hairs standing on end under the coolness of a breath of wind, lifted and traced the line of Brian's jaw, as blue eyes examined every square inch of exposed skin. "Yes, you are, but it won't do any good. Not with me."

Brian jerked his head back and regarded Justin with cold eyes. "Not with you? Who the fuck do you think you are anyway? Why would you . . ." Quickly, the fingers moved and clasped themselves against Brian's mouth, stifling his words in mid-protest.

"I'm the one," said Justin, leaning close to whisper in Brian's ear, "who knows your secret identity."

Fuck! The little twat was even resorting to that lowest of all low tricks - stealing Brian's own best lines.

Then Justin moved to replace his hand with his lips and claim the mouth that was still clinched tight, resisting every urge to let go, to open to that insistent tongue thrusting and demanding entry, to allow itself to be claimed.

Brian would not - could not - simply give in and allow Justin to slip back into his life, back into his arms, back into the place that would put him in a position where people would want to kill him, where the simple fact of being a part of Brian's existence could cost him his life. So he pushed back violently, and closed his eyes, pouring all his grief, all his frustrations, all his pain into one snarled response. "I - don't - want - you - here. Get away from me, you little shit!"

He went silent then, as he felt the body beside him shift and pull away, but he was careful to keep his eyes closed. He had watched Justin walk away from him a lot of times in the course of his life; he didn't know if he had it in him to watch it again, even though he knew it was absolutely the right thing - the vitally necessary thing - for the young man to do.

He waited for a moment, hearing nothing but silence, and actually dared to think that he might be safe.

Until he felt a softness against the side of his throat, a warm breath, a single word.

"No."

He found that he was struggling to breathe then, to form the words he knew he had to say. "I don't want you." It was barely a whisper.

He clasped his hands in front of his face and fought against an almost irresistible compulsion to look up, to see that beautiful, beloved face one last time.

When he heard it, he thought, at first, that he must be imagining it, that it could not possibly be real. It was very faint, barely there, almost beyond hearing, but it was unmistakable nonetheless. Justin was laughing at him. "Yes," said that voice, filled with certainty and - unbelievably - with joy. "You do."

It was finally too much, so he leapt to his feet and moved swiftly toward the steps that would lead him down to the sand, to escape, to freedom. But then he realized . . .
He looked down and noted that his body was whole, unblemished, unbandaged, undamaged, unscarred, and that he was moving with an ease and strength that he had not felt in a very long time. Then he turned and looked back, to the spot where a slender, exquisitely beautiful body should have been standing, only to find a faint shimmer, as of a vision fading into nothingness, a pale shadow of a memory.

Fuck!

And he felt a sudden ridiculous urge to shout out his anger and his frustration, because he had been forced to confront what he did not want to see, and because now, he could see it no longer.

"Well," said a strange voice, almost droll, almost laughing, "they told me you were unconventional, but I had no idea I should take the warning so literally."

Brian stiffened and opened his eyes to find that he was still lying on his belly, with his face braced against his arms and his bare ass enjoying the sensual warmth of the sunlight, transitioning now to a very slight sting, thus fulfilling McClaren's snarky prophecy.

"You're late," he said to the not-so-young lady therapist in her smart suit and her sensible shoes, with a chic coif of salt and pepper hair and night-dark eyes. He gleaned all that in a quick glimpse, as he was not really interested enough to expend much energy in an evaluation of her appearance; she was, after all, not his type. He was also no more concerned with concealing his shitty attitude than hiding the perfect globes of his butt, although, if pressed, he would have been hard put to determine if he was angry because the woman had been late enough to allow him to fall asleep and drift into the dream he had not wanted to have, or if he was merely irritated that she had shown up when she did, interrupting his reluctant fantasy.

"Sorry," said the woman in a tone that held not a nuance of apology. "I didn't realize that I was expected."

"Well, you were." He saw no reason to try to fake an amiable attitude. "So, if it's not too much trouble, could you hand me my cane so I can get my sunburned ass out of harm's way?"

He twisted then and attempted to swing himself up, to get to his feet, but a sudden, piercing pain in his lower back caught him by surprise and forced him to give up the attempt and sink back against the chair cushions, as he bit his lip to control an urge to groan and indulge in a recitation of his extensive stock of colorful expletives. He put his head down and closed his eyes against the rise of tears, knowing, from past experience, that his only option was to ride it out, to wait for it to pass and . . .

The strong, capable hands that slid into place and gripped his lower back surprised him as did the immediate relief he felt when pressure was applied in exactly the right spot to ease his discomfort. Although he hadn't spared much attention to the woman who had interrupted his dream, she had not struck him as a particularly strong or resourceful individual, but he was glad to be proven wrong.

"Let's get you inside," she said, retrieving his cane and using her own body to leverage him up until he was able to stand, "and into some pants."

Despite his discomfort, he dredged up a grin. "Now that's a request I don't hear very often."

She let her eyes drift down his body, savoring the sight for just a moment, before flashing him a roguish smile. "I'm sure you don't, Honey, but I'm betting that you might be ready for a little pain management"
She nodded toward the small box on the table by the door as they moved into the house. "Probably best to cover the family jewels before you light up."

He allowed her to help him to a seat on a sturdy massage table that McClaren had set up in the den during their first days in the beach house, and favored her with a smile that did not quite manage to disguise the degree of his discomfort.

"You don't have to pretend with me," she said firmly. "I know pain when I see it. Stretch out on that table and let's see if we can't fix you up."

"I thought you wanted me to put my pants on," he mumbled, holding his breath against the relentless throbbing in his back.

"I think I can restrain myself."

If he hadn't been so focused on riding out the waves of agony, he thought as he stretched out on his belly, he would probably have laughed at the wry quality of her comment.

But right now, he was too busy trying not to notice how much his frigging back was hurting. He shifted to arrange his limbs to ease the pressure on his spine but without much luck, and he was on the verge of voicing his impatience with her failure to step up and do something to alleviate the problem when he noticed a familiar and very welcome aroma in the air.

"Here you go," she said as she handed him the smoldering joint, tightly and expertly rolled.

He was quick to accept it and indulge himself in a long, deep inhalation, telling himself that it was ridiculous to think that his pain was easing up even as he exhaled, but that's how it felt, nonetheless.

"I thought you clinical types didn't appreciate the merits of a good toque," he said, reveling in the first warm surge of the forthcoming rush.

"I'm not - exactly - a clinical type," she volunteered in a tone that piqued his curiosity, but not enough to inspire him to question further, as she placed her hands against his shoulders and began a deep, penetrating massage to which he responded with an almost feline grace, like the luxuriation of a tabby under the strokes of a master's hand. He was, in fact, close to purring. In a matter of seconds, between the euphoria inspired by the excellent weed and the expertise of the hands working the kinks out of his muscles, he was virtually boneless with a pleasure so profound it was almost as satisfying as good sex.

Almost.

"Good stuff, huh?" she asked, as she noted how his body was relaxing under her efforts.

He sighed. "My source is very well connected."

"Medical supplier?"

"No. Law enforcement."

He did not notice that the woman made a funny little huffing sound as she continued to work on his back.

"They really did a number on you, didn't they?" she said after a while. "Why would anybody . . ."

"I'm a fag," he snapped. "For some people, that's enough."
She was slow to answer, as if thinking it over. "Did you just come out or something?" she asked finally. "I mean . . . why now? You go out of your way to piss somebody off?"

This time it was his turn to take his time in answering. "Maybe."

More silence as she continued to work on his back, and he continued to grow more and more relaxed. "It almost sounds as if you think you had it coming."

She expected him to deny it, to argue. But he didn't. He simply finished his joint, and concentrated on breathing through the last remnants of his pain.

Neither of them spoke for a while, until he turned his head and took a good look, for the first time, at the cut of the raw silk jacket she was wearing - pretty expensive threads for a physical therapist. If there was one thing Brian Kinney knew - aside from how to give and receive mind-blowing sex - it was labels. And he could smell Armani a mile away.

"Nice jacket," he said softly.

There was only the faintest beat of hesitation in her movements, but it was enough. For a man so recently and severely injured, he demonstrated remarkable prowess when he swung away from her touch and managed to get to his feet and put the massage table and several yards of space between them.

"Who the fuck are you?" he demanded.

She smiled. "Well, finally. I was beginning to wonder if you possessed even a smidgen of survival instinct. You know, if I'd been an assassin - or just a thug bent on burglarizing your house and stealing whatever I could get my hands on - you'd probably be dead by now."

"No. He wouldn't."

Alexandra Corey spun around, her hand automatically reaching for the automatic weapon concealed in a shoulder holster under her jacket, only to find that she was already out-gunned, as she came face-to-face with Chris McClaren and his Beretta 92FS.

"Jesus, Chris!" she snapped. "You're lucky I didn't blow your head off."

He grinned. "You wouldn't do that. You've got way too much class to shoot first and ask questions later."

"So how long . . ."

"I saw you arrive," he interrupted, "so I circled around and came in the back. Didn't want to interrupt your cozy little assignation."

Her frown was almost stern enough to compensate for the faint twinkle in her eyes. "You do realize that, for some of our colleagues, the act of drawing a gun on me would be considered grounds for termination."

He grinned and spun the gun around to display the fact that the safety was still engaged and that the clip was missing, resting in his other hand. "Just pointing out that Brian wasn't the only one who wasn't paying attention."

She was not quite quick enough to cover up a tiny gasp of astonishment as she realized that he was right.
During this exchange, Brian was staring back and forth between the two agents, and neither of them had noticed, until the moment when they turned around to look at him when he took a step toward the door, that he was, by that time, engulfed in an almost visible aura of pure, unadulterated rage.

"Brian, what . . ."

"Shut the fuck up," snapped the man who was their sole reason for being here in the first place. "But first, you tell me who the fuck this is."

"Calm down," said McClaren. "This is my boss, the one I told you about. Alexandra Corey, meet . . . ."

"Very funny. You guys are a real riot. Thanks so much for making me the butt of your joke."

So saying, Brian spun, grabbed a pair of sweat pants from a corner and struggled into them, before heading toward the door, moving much more quickly than either of his observers might have expected.

"Brian, wait. Let me . . ."

"Let you what?" Brian did not turn back to face them, but McClaren didn't have to see his expression to recognize the fury that filled his voice with shards of ice. "Help me? I think you've already helped plenty."

"Brian, I . . ."

"I thought I could trust you." He paused for a fraction of a second at the door, the muscles in his back knotted with tension. "Thanks for reminding me of what I let myself forget."

And he was gone, through the door and out into the twilight that was now rapidly settling toward true darkness.

"Oh, shit!" McClaren lifted a trembling hand to rub the back of his neck. "Oh, shit!"

"Bit of a diva, isn't he?" asked Corey. "Maybe you should . . . ."

"What I should have done," he snapped, "was remembered what I'm supposed to be doing here, and how hard it was to get him to trust me in the first place. Jesus, Alex, you have no idea what he's been through, what he's still going through. You think he's a diva? Shit! I think he's the bravest man I've ever known, and I don't think I could blame him if he never trusted me again. So don't assume you have the right . . . ."

She lifted her hands to forestall the diatribe, and simply regarded him with thoughtful eyes. "In that case, why are you still standing here?"

He knew he could not expect to remain hidden for long. The moon was almost full, and it was a clear night, and the sand in which he sat was too white and sugary to provide much concealment. Still, he had settled in between a couple of small dunes, laced with tufts of sea grass, as much to achieve some measure of shelter from the night wind that was gusting in off the water as to obscure his presence.

For a little while, he had debated just walking away, just going on and on until he came to a place where he could lose himself in some coastal village or among groups of beachcombers. But that
wouldn't really do him any good. Unless he wanted to risk exposure, being found.

He wasn't sure that wasn't exactly what he wanted.

But he also wasn't sure that it was.

He quickly rolled a new joint, glad that he had managed to snag both his stash and his IPOD as he'd raced out of the beach house. The warmth of the afternoon was slowly bleeding away into the darkness as he nestled more deeply into the sand, grateful for the residual heat it retained, and cupped his hands around the glow of the joint to take advantage of its tiny flare of light and heat.

Soon it would be too cold to stay here, but he didn't know if he could stand to go back to the house.

He felt like a fool. It was incongruous that Brian Kinney, the man who'd hardly ever granted his trust to anybody, had been so easily duped. By a handsome face, a sculptured body, and a fine, shapely ass.

Fuck!

It just didn't bear thinking about, so he didn't. He simply settled more deeply into his sandy niche and let himself float on the sweet alternative version of Coltrane's super mellow *I'll Wait and Pray*.

He didn't bother to look at his watch, but, by his estimation, it took about twenty minutes before he became aware of a dark, slender figure standing atop a shallow dune at his back.

Neither of them spoke for quite a while, and Brian didn't even bother to turn around and acknowledge the presence of the new arrival. But there was communication between them, nonetheless, as McClaren was obviously watching closely enough to notice when Brian began to shiver. He still didn't say anything, but he did move off into the darkness, returning a few minutes later carrying an armload of driftwood which he arranged in a shallow depression in the sand and managed to ignite using a handful of dry sea grass as kindling. Then he simply settled by the fire and turned to look at Brian. Just waiting.

Brian wanted to ignore him, to spurn his attention. But it was getting colder by the minute.

Finally, reluctantly, he scooted forward, getting just close enough to be able to appreciate the first faint flush of warmth.

They sat in silence again then, until it was painfully obvious that Brian was not going to speak. Not unless provoked sufficiently to make him do so.

"That was quite a little show," said McClaren finally. "She thinks you're a regular diva now."

Brian lit another toque - and said nothing. And offered nothing.

"She didn't set out to deceive you, you know."

Dark eyes narrowed then, and there was a spark of rage within them. "But you did."

"No, I . . ."

Brian shifted quickly, as if he meant to rise.

"Okay. Okay. I guess I . . . did. In a way."

Another deep inhalation, but the expression on that classically chiseled face did not seem to indicate
any enjoyment of the sensations the smoke was providing.

"Can we have a little truce between us? I'm sorry, Bri . . ."

"Sorry's bullshit. Sorry's what liars and losers offer up when their little schemes and tricks go sour."

McClaren paused to consider his answer, apparently really thinking about what Brian had said. "Mostly, I guess you're right. Sorry comes way too easily to the tongue, and maybe not at all to the heart."

Brian blinked, and the FBI agent felt a twinge of hope rise within him as he wondered if he'd actually glimpsed a quick, trace of a smile on those perfect lips - or if he'd just imagined it as a result of wishful thinking.

"That's very poetic. But it's still bullshit."

McClaren was careful to swallow his own quick smile. "So are we going to . . ."

"Why is she here?"

The FBI agent was once again slow to answer, understanding that a lot was riding on how Brian reacted to what he had to say. "She needs to talk to you, to get your side of the story. To go over all the information she's gathered with you. And don't be fooled by that sweet, almost grandmotherly demeanor. She's tough and she's smart and she's intuitive. Not to mention she's the best profiler I've ever worked with. You'll like her, I think. Once you get beyond the suspicions."

This time, the response came quickly. "Bullshit!"

"What do you . . ."

Dark eyes glinted in the firelight, displaying amusement and a remarkable degree of awareness. "She's not here to profile the unsubs." His lopsided smile conceded that the jargon felt strange on his lips. "She's here to profile me. I can read, you know, and I made a point of finding out about the so-called science of 'victimology'. Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"I don't much like the idea of being a case study. Not any more than I already am. You've already profiled me. I've seen your notes, so why . . ."

"You've seen my notes?"

Another slow blink. "Of course I have. What? You thought I wouldn't look, when you left them lying around? It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out how to access a PDA, you know"

"You really are an asshole." McClaren was suddenly on his feet, his fists clinched and his eyes a hard, frigid, glacial blue.

"Yeah. I am."

And just like that, the anger was gone as quickly as it had come, and the FBI agent dropped to his knees again and simply stared into his companion's eyes. For his part, Brian said nothing, but he did, after a long pause, lean forward and hand McClaren the stub of the still-smoking joint.

The FBI agent, acknowledging to himself that it was probably not a good idea, at this point, to risk a blurring of his mental processes, paused briefly before taking a deep drag and savoring the sweetness
of the sensation as he stubbed the butt out in the sand. The silence stretched for a while before he
decided to speak again. "I really am . . ."

"Yeah. You already said that. So what am I supposed to say? That it's all right? That I understand?"
Hazel eyes met blue for the space of a heartbeat before turning to gaze out to sea. "Okay. It's all
right. You were just doing your job."

If he'd been on his feet, McClaren was certain that he would have staggered - maybe even gone
down - under the horrible weight of guilt and remorse that suddenly swept over him, as he was
crushed under the epiphany of understanding what Brian was feeling.

"Jesus!" he whispered. "Is that what you really think? You think you're just a job for me? Just an
assignment? Just someone I get paid to watch over?"

Brian did not flinch - not even with the slow blink that sometimes gave him away. "What else am I
supposed to think?"

In an explosion of motion, McClaren scurried forward across the sand until he was able to wrap his
limbs around Brian, until they were skin-to-skin and sharing breath. "You really want to know what
you should think?" he almost snarled. "Okay, then. How about this? How about the fact that I know
that this whole strong-silent-type act is bullshit; that I know it's ripping you to pieces to turn your
back on what you love the most? How about the fact that I understand what it takes for you to face
each day, to take steps to make sure that the rest of your life is spent without the things - without the
one thing - that means the most to you? How about the fact that I know how strong you are, and how
brave you are? And above all, how about the fact that I understand that you know more about loving
someone than any man I've ever met, and that you're willing to give up everything that you care
about just to keep him safe?"

This time, Brian blinked.

"And finally, how about the fact that I spend every hour of every day knowing that if I slip up, if I let
myself get too close, too caught up in the enigma that's Brian Kinney, that I'll never be the same
again? That I'll never be completely free of you. That I'll never find anything that could make me
forget . . . this."

The kiss was, at first, so gentle, so tender, so intimate that it was barely felt. No more than a wisp of
air, a whisper of sound, a breath.

It was his way of telling Brian that he could back away if he liked. That it might even be better if he
did.

But it was already much too late, and Brian had been alone and hurt and lost for too long.

The kiss deepened, and soon it was a question of who was devouring whom, as mouths twisted
against each other and tongues explored and bodies came together.

Nevertheless, for a moment, Brian was able to pull back, to stare deeply into eyes that were
amazingly blue, although not the perfect crystal blue of memory. "Are you sure about this?" he
asked, freshly-bruised lips twisting into a roguish smile. "Because if you're not, this would be the
time to say so. Because it's going to be too damned late if you wait."

McClaren shifted and allowed his actions to answer for him as he shucked off his clothes and then
carefully removed Brian's sweatpants before sitting back to enjoy the vision before him, a vision
somehow enhanced by the traces of the damages inflicted on that perfect body, which would soon be
perfect again. It somehow felt like a privilege to be allowed to see it, to taste it, to sample it now, before the healing was complete.

Then Brian smiled. "Fuck it. It was already too damned late the first time I saw you."

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*Get Down Tonight* - Harry Wayne Casey/Richard Raymond Finch

**Breathe** - Stephanie Bentley

**tbc**
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

Just a heads up: we are at the half-way point - chapter-wise. But those who know my work will realize that the deeper I get into a story, the more I find to say, demonstrating, once again, that I really never know when to shut up. Anyway, just so you know, there are a total of 61 chapters in this massive work, totaling more than 800,000 words, but that the chapters offered up so far are composed of only about 300,000 of those words, so we've still got a l-o-o-o-o-o-long way to go.

Fair warning, I hope.

Chapter 31

Since he'd been a night-person throughout his whole life, it surprised him enormously to find that he actually enjoyed the sensations of morning in the South - the silken caress against his bare skin of warm air flowing in from the open window; the salt scent on the breath of the morning wind blending with the aroma of espresso rising from the automatic Mr. Coffee machine in the kitchen and wafting up the spiral staircase; the satiny drift of 1200 thread-count sheets against his body - the ones he'd sent McLaren to buy on their first day in the cottage when he'd taken one horrified look at the muslin monstrosities that the absentee landlord had left behind for their use. Only - for some reason - this morning, the Egyptian cotton felt slightly roughened, a bit gritty, and it took him a few moments to figure out why.

Sand, he remembered suddenly. Sand that had clung to his skin as he'd half-walked and been half-carried from the beach to the house, up the stairs and finally to the big four-poster bed, so totally engrossed in the figure pressed against him and around him and under and over him that they had moved as seamlessly as one body. If not exactly as one mind.

He opened his eyes after lying there for a while, luxuriating in the softness of scents and sounds and sensations . . . and remembered.

"And finally, how about the fact that I spend every hour of every day knowing that if I slip up, if I let myself get too close, too caught up in the enigma that's Brian Kinney, that I'll never be the same again? That I'll never be completely free of you. That I'll never find anything that could make me forget . . . this."

He closed his eyes then, and let himself be swept into vivid, almost tactile memory - the vision of a beautiful, taut body hovering above him and slowly lowering itself, the exquisite sensation of being engulfed in tight, wet, incredible heat as his cock was swallowed by that hungry darkness, even as his mouth was being claimed and explored; the slick slide of skin on skin and the rapturous growth of pressure in his balls as he pushed higher and higher into ecstasy, the two of them moving as one, forgetting everything beyond the sweet thrill of joining until, at the very last moment, with sanity teetering on the edge of annihilation, he felt himself explode into a burst of white-hot brilliance and fall into oblivion.

Shit! When had his life - his former perfectly simple life - become so fucking complicated?
He was still lying there, staring out into the morning's liquid sunlight toward the surf breaking against the rocks at the base of the headland, when a warm body slid into the bed behind him, and he was momentarily dizzied by the rich, mouth-watering fragrance of his regular morning addiction.

"You're not asleep, so stop pretending." McClaren's voice was always slightly rough in the early morning, a fact he blamed primarily on Brian, for encouraging his renewed interest in cigarettes. "Here's your customary fix, to fend off the ravages of caffeine withdrawal, and you're due at the clinic in an hour. Better drink up and get your ass in gear."

Brian shifted onto his back, and stared up into an almost expressionless face with veiled blue eyes - veiled in an obvious attempt to re-establish and maintain a cool distance. The attempt would have been extremely effective, except for the bruised swelling of those perfect lips and the livid bite mark under the jaw-line. And the fact that the eyes, for all their coolness, were irresistibly drawn to the mouth just inches away, with lips that were equally swollen and open just enough to allow a glimpse of a wet, pink tongue.

"Where's your boss, McFed?" Brian asked, seeing no point in avoiding the subject that was hanging over their heads like an albatross.

"Downstairs, mainlining her own particular brand of caffeine addiction, and don't call me that."

Hazel eyes closed briefly, before opening again to focus on hard, steady blue. "You tell her we fucked?"

The ghost of a smile, suppressed almost quickly enough to avoid notice. Almost. "She spent the night in the guestroom." The reply was flagrantly tongue-in-cheek as a glance swept around the bedroom, noting a broken lamp and a clutter of articles strewn across the gleaming hardwood floor - a half-empty bottle of Beam, a lube container, an IPOD, a crystal paperweight, an alarm clock, a couple of hardcover books. "I'm pretty sure she was able to figure it out on her own."

There was no way to ignore the gleam of satisfaction that flared in those changeable eyes. "Sorry."

For a moment, there was a heavy silence between them. Then it was swept away before a burst of easy laughter. "No, you're not. You're just hoping she was embarrassed by having to listen to the performance."

Brian grinned. "And was she?"

"She didn't say. But I doubt it. She doesn't embarrass easily."

Brian pushed up to a sitting position and helped himself to a big gulp of the steaming latté that McClaren had learned - acting out of sheer desperation - to prepare so perfectly, in order to silence Brian's constant grumbling.

"Do you?" Brian asked finally, looking up to meet McClaren's gaze.

"No."

"You sure? It doesn't bother you that your boss was front-row center for our little fuck-fest?"

Blue eyes sparked with warmth. "I wouldn't exactly call it 'little', and I've never tried to hide the fact that I'm queer, Brian," he said easily. "She knew it from the get-go."

"And she accepted it? Never tried to . . . convert you?"
The agent stood up abruptly. "You know better than that. There's no way to convert a . . ."

"Yeah. I know that. But does she?"

"Why? Why does it matter if she understands the true nature of fags everywhere?" The smile was back in his voice, even if it never touched his mouth or his eyes.

Brian's gaze was steady as he regarded his most recent trick - choosing that term deliberately, in order to keep everything in its proper perspective - with raised eyebrows. "You call it 'victimology'," he replied with a hard gleam in his eyes. "I call it something else. I call it 'psycho-babble' - and intrusive. And I've never had much time or patience for it, so, before I allow this woman to go digging around in my head, I mean to know who I'm dealing with. Got it?"

McClaren sat back down on the bed and regarded Brian in silence, his eyes exploring every inch of his companion's face. "What do you think happened last night, Brian?" He asked finally. "Do you think the fact that we fucked is going to change how I see you, how I treat you? The fact that I let you fuck me . . ." He paused then and couldn't quite contain a bittersweet smile, "three times and then some - or anything else we did to or for each other - doesn't change who I am, or who you are, or how I look at you. I'm here with you for one reason - to keep you safe. To make sure that the motherfuckers who did this to you don't get another shot at completing the job, and to stand between you and anyone who might try to harm you. And that, believe it or not, includes the person who has the legal right to order me around. I'm professionally obligated to do whatever she tells me to do. And I will. Unless I think that it wouldn't be in your best interest. If that happens, then I'll do what my conscience dictates. I'm supposed to protect you, and that's what I'm going to do, no matter what anybody says or thinks."

It was Brian's turn to study the eyes that were staring at him and try to read what was reflected in them. "So what are you saying? You're not swearing undying love and fealty and all that shit are you?"

McClaren grinned. "I can't think of a better way to send you streaking out into the wilderness with your Calvins flapping around your knees than to declare 'undying love and fealty'. You think I haven't figured out that Brian Kinney doesn't do 'love' or 'boyfriends' or 'happily ever after'?' Then something in his eyes shifted, and the grin settled into a rueful little smile. "With one exception, of course."

Brian stirred then, his expression hardening as he shifted to turn away.

"Don't get your thong in a twist," the FBI agent continued. "Your secret's safe with me."

"You think you know me, but you don't." It was clipped and hard and brutal and unequivocal.

McClaren's smile did not waver. "Okay." But the look in his eyes said otherwise.

He turned and moved toward the door to leave Brian to his morning ablutions, including a shower that the FBI agent would have enjoyed sharing, but he was pretty sure that Alexandra Corey's liberal mindset - or patience - would not extend to waiting for the two of them to take care of twin morning erections, with emphatic vocal accompaniment, under a cascade of hot water.

"Hey, McFed," Brian called, in a casual tone that made his question sound like an afterthought. "We gonna fuck again?"

McClaren went very still for the space of a heartbeat. Then he turned and moved back to the bedside where he stood for a second staring down into Brian's eyes, before leaning forward to claim that
perfect mouth in a searing kiss. "What do you think?" he whispered.

Brian smiled. "I think," he murmured, "that your original plan was to stay the hell away from me - to avoid complications."

McClaren regarded him for a silent, almost awkward moment, before he broke into soft laughter. "You're so full of shit," he said finally. Then he sat down again, and took his time to consider his choice of words. "Think of it this way. Suppose you were on death row, scheduled to face a firing squad at dawn. And you had your choice of spending your last night on earth on your knees, praying for forgiveness for your sins and making your peace with God. Or . . ."

Intrigued despite himself, Brian prompted, "Or?"

"Or you could spend those same hours fucking the hottest guy in the world. Which would you choose?"

It was Brian's turn to laugh. "You're asking me that question? You really don't know me at all, do you?"

McClaren shrugged. "Even though you knew it would be your last chance to save your soul from eternal damnation?"

The laughter was still there in hazel eyes. "Even though."

The kiss this time was quick and hard and over too soon. "Exactly," McClaren whispered as he pulled away and made his exit, leaving Brian to ponder whether or not he should be pleased at being compared to "the hottest guy in the world" or insulted to be equated with "eternal damnation".

There was something decadent about southern coffee, thought Alexandra Corey, as she settled into a plushly-cushioned wicker chair on the shaded section of the deck. Something intoxicating enough to make a grown woman feel like curling up in a spot of sunshine and purring like a Cheshire cat.

Though what was in her cup was espresso rather than more pedestrian coffee, the effect was the same. It reminded her of the dark roast, honey-rich liquid ambrosia that Emmett Honeycutt had served her at the end of that sublime meal in Brian Kinney's office. She closed her eyes for a moment, fantasizing about the culinary masterpieces she had enjoyed that day and realizing that she really hadn't enjoyed a good meal since.

Her stay in Washington had been a bitch, in spite of giving her the rare opportunity to spend a few nights (very short nights) in the luxury of her own home. Unexpected difficulties arising from her previous case had necessitated her extended stay in the capital, and she had had no choice but to await the final outcome of the trial as she had been called to appear for re-questioning by both the prosecutor and a judiciary panel.

The only positive aspect of the interim was that it had all ended well, with the criminal convicted and sentenced to a lengthy stay in federal prison - the perfect culmination of a long, grueling investigation.

It had been a difficult, terribly busy couple of weeks, and she spent a few more minutes gazing out into the almost painful clarity of the morning and regretting the fact that she had not been able to get here sooner, as she'd intended. But there was, ultimately, no point in indulging regrets, for all the delays had proved worthwhile in the end, even if she had not been able to conclude her study of Brian Kinney as quickly as she'd hoped, and thus had made no headway in understanding the
motivation of the individuals who were behind his attack - beyond the obvious, of course. As she knew perfectly well, the clues for divining and defining the deep, intrinsic motives for crimes of this nature were almost always found in the character or philosophy of the victim, rather than in the profiles of the criminals themselves. Nevertheless, the investigation was proceeding at a good pace. They were not yet coming to the end of the tunnel, but there was, finally, light ahead.

She was pretty sure that Kinney would provide the final impetus needed to find their way completely out of the darkness.

The profiler sat back, savoring another sip of near-perfect caffeine, and took advantage of the unexpected moments of peace and quiet - interrupted only by the murmur of voices and occasional footsteps upstairs - to go through her notes; real notes - the kind one recorded with a ballpoint pen on a steno pad; the kind that would not be lost forever into the cybernetic ether of nothingness in the event of an electronic failure of whatever device one trusted to preserve such information.

She smiled. Yes, she did have a laptop, which was sitting now in its pristine leather case on a lovely wicker table in her bedroom. She also had a PDA, which was - she thought - still tucked away in the pocket of her Armani jacket. And all the information that was recorded in this stack of note-filled tablets was also stored in those electronic files, archived and tabbed and organized in such a way to enable instant linking to any database she might need, and to provide for the instant transfer of information, with the push of a single button. But, to enhance her own mental processes, she preferred documents that she could pick up and examine and doodle on or highlight or underscore or illustrate to her heart’s content - documentation that she could hold in her hand and peruse at her leisure.

She knew it pretty much marked her as a dinosaur, but it was a method that had worked for her for decades, and she saw no logic in trying to change it now.

For example, at this particular moment she was studying the report submitted by her journalistic undercover operative - a gifted young woman who had been a member of her team for almost twelve years, but who still managed - with only a little cosmetic enhancement - to look like a college student, a feature that opened a lot of doors for her and allowed her to infiltrate in a wide variety of settings that might have proven impenetrable for other agents. For example, with a bit of FBI background prep, Priscilla Young had been easily, almost instantly, transformed into Paula Harte, a journalism major at Duquesne University, interning at a major television studio as part of her graduate degree program. The young woman was so accomplished in her ability to blend in and carve out a comfortable niche for herself that she had become an invaluable part of Corey’s team over the years. It was, in fact, just this type of assignment - when she could put on the persona of an up-and-coming young professional - that she enjoyed most. And, in this case, when she had been briefed on the details of the crime and - even more pertinently - on the identity and character of the victim, she was really in her element.

The report was detailed and very interesting.

Alex knew - as did every member of her team - that it was almost always a mistake to sort individuals into categories, and to pre-assign personalities to them, based on biased expectations. Such a practice was the mark of a rank amateur. And yet - sometimes it was almost unavoidable, taking preliminary information and circumstances into account. Times - like now. In looking over the notes jotted down by Paula/Priscilla, Corey decided that John Vincent Pinchon was turning out to be exactly what she and most of her team had expected - a pompous, unprincipled ass.

Alex had been something of a fixture in the FBI hierarchy for many years, and, as such, she had been in position to enjoy a nodding acquaintance with a number of members of the White House
Press Corps, including prizewinners like Michael Abramowitz of the Washington Post and Doug Mills of the New York Times, and had once spent an entire evening sharing a few pitchers of Margaritas and some sharp political repartee with Ann Compton, Martha Raddatz, Jake Tapper, and Charles Gibson, all members of the ABC staff. She had even, on one occasion, been privileged to meet and share a few moments conversing with Walter Kronkite. So Alex Corey knew a thing or two about recognizing the crème de la crème of the fourth estate. Which meant that she was equally capable of recognizing the dregs at the bottom of the barrel.

John Vincent Pinchon, she thought, was just about as far removed from the elite of journalism's upper echelon as it was possible to be. Instead of the acumen, perseverance, and unwavering honesty that were necessary to the practice of journalistic integrity, Pinchon had ridden a combination of family money, surgically enhanced good looks, and rampant opportunism to a position of power within the Pittsburgh press pantheon - a position he had used to aid in his mission to co-opt traditional conservatism and pervert it to defend and promote his own personal crusade of homophobia and elitism.

He was currently involved in efforts to revive Proposition 14 and expose the infamous but always ephemeral, never fully defined "Homosexual Agenda".

And, as an egotist of the first order, there was nothing the man enjoyed more than the attention - the more fawning, the better - of a bright, pretty, talented young woman. Like Paula Harte, who knew exactly how to play the role that would encourage him to take her into his confidence.

It had taken the undercover agent less than a week to find out what Pinchon knew and where he was sending the information he had gathered, and Corey smiled as she recalled the young woman's remark that it was always nice to be lucky enough to be eavesdropping at exactly the right moment so that ass-kissing could be kept to a minimum - especially in the case of such a vile, depraved, repulsive ass. Being completely familiar with Priscilla's skills, Corey doubted that luck had anything to do with it, but she completely understood the sentiment.

The wiretap on his private line - and a bit of discreet surveillance to monitor the transfer of the confidential files he had obtained from Peabody and identify the recipient - had done the rest.

In the end, it had been determined that he was only a minor player in the overall scheme of things, no more than an avid fan of any kind of gay-bashing, eager to show off his network of contacts to his equally bigoted friends and associates, but, in the final analysis, completely ignorant of any deeper purpose for the data he was passing on - a fool and a homophobe, but a fool who was all mouth and no action. Of course, it was probable that he wouldn't have cared, even if he'd figured out that the people who were milking him for information had darker purposes than he'd originally believed, but bigotry and Nazi beliefs, no matter how heinous, were not grounds for indictment.

He would, however, be complicit enough in the plot against Kinney to be threatened with accessory charges and forced to provide information and testimony about his co-conspirators, when the time was right. Corey found that thought extremely comforting. Exposing hypocrisy at its highest levels was one of the incidental perks of the job.

On the other hand, one of the hardest parts of any in-depth investigation was the waiting - the necessary time that had to be spent in setting up precise operations and following the leads they generated and gathering the proof required in order to proceed. That was the stage at which the Kinney case stood now, and there was little she could do to hurry things along. In point of fact, hurrying was almost always a huge mistake in such a delicate operation.

Right now, she could only wait and allow her gifted, dedicated colleagues to do what they did best: find the evidence needed to pursue justice for those responsible for such a horrible crime.
She shuffled through a few more files, organizing her thoughts and jotting down pertinent data. Getting ready for what she had come to think of as "The Confrontation" - capitalization intended. Sub-titled "Facing Brian Kinney". She did not expect it to be easy, and she knew she had best be thoroughly grounded, for Kinney would undoubtedly prove to be as difficult and demanding as she'd been led to expect.

And rightfully so. It rather surprised her that she was ready to concede that notion, but it was unavoidably true that he had every right to demand that she be as open and frank and forthcoming with him as she was asking him to be with her. That was true with almost every victim of a crime like this one, but it was equally true that most victims were too confused or too frightened or too intimidated to stand up and demand a quid pro quo. It was dead certain, however, that such would not be the case with Brian Kinney. If he chose to cooperate at all, it would be under his own terms.

She knew she needed to be well prepared, well rested, and very, very calm when it was time to face him, and she also knew that she would give him the information he required - rules or no rules.

He had a right to know the truth so that he could decide what steps needed to be taken to enable him to get on with his life; he also had a right to know about all the threads of this investigation which appeared to be converging on one particular focus - a posh, highbrow, elite establishment known only as The Club.

And finally, he had a right to know the names of the individuals who were members of that elite fraternity, although she was pretty sure that the identities would come as no surprise to him. She thought it was safe to assume that there weren't many things that surprised Kinney.

It was, of course, completely against agency regulations for her to allow him to see the evidence that had been gathered so far, or to share her conclusions with him, but she had broken rules before, when she'd believed it was the right thing to do. And this time, it was definitely the right thing. Besides, she also believed there was an excellent chance that his insights would be helpful in determining how to bring the case to a successful conclusion.

She had come to realize, in the course of her investigation, that the man was brilliant.

She sighed and sipped and spent a moment studying the portrait of Brian Kinney that was a part of her basic file on the man - Kinney before the attack. Kinney - wearing a sardonic smile that was reflected perfectly in night-dark eyes.

He was also incredibly beautiful.

"Shit!"

"Ah-ha!" said a warm voice from behind her. "I thought you were above such prurience, Fearless Leader."

Chris McClaren flopped down into the lounge chair beside her and grinned. "Good to know that you're still human enough to appreciate the view."

She stared at him with narrowed eyes. "That particular view could probably re-animate a recently-deceased corpse. As you know very well."

The faintest blush touched his cheeks. "Yeah. Well . . ."

She lifted one hand and favored him with a small smile. "I wasn't asking for a confirmation or an explanation."
"Good," he replied, "because I wasn't going to give you one."

She nodded, and the subject was dropped, except for a tiny twinkle in her eyes that let him realize that she was not - quite - as disinterested as she pretended, and that she would have been delighted to hear all the lovely details. But she would not ask for them. Instead, she would simply use her imagination.

She reached out and laid her hand on the thick file that contained all the information from the investigation. "How much have you told him?" she asked.

He did not look at her, choosing instead to allow his eyes to sweep the beach for any signs of intrusion. "Only what he needed to hear, to make sure he understood that this wasn't random. That he was a specific target. He didn't take much convincing."

She nodded. "He knew it before you told him."

"Yes."

"And have you reviewed all the latest data?"

"Yes."

She paused then, and sighed as she looked up to follow the flight of a tern as it swooped down toward a rough patch of sea grass. "How do you think he'll take it when he finds out the identities of the club members?"

He turned to look at her, and there was no mistaking the hard gleam of anger in his eyes. "I think he'll be surprised that it took us so long to figure it out."

She smiled. "Only - it didn't, did it? Not really."

"No," he admitted, "but I couldn't very well tell him that, now could I? But I'm pretty sure he knew anyway. You're going to find out PDQ that it's really hard to slip something by him. He's very perceptive."

Her smile became a grin. "A smart little fucker, then?"

"Oh, yeah." A gentle huff of laughter.

Corey turned then to study his face, not quite comfortable with something she wasn't sure she was hearing. "Have I made a huge mistake here?" she asked finally. "Are you . . ."

"No."

"Then how do you know what I was . . ."

"Drop it!" No uncertainty in his voice now, and no regrets either. "Whatever happens, this is where I should be, doing something I was meant to do."

She considered her response for a moment, before offering him a bright smile. "Not going all mystic on me, are you?"

To her surprise, he did not smile in return. Instead, there was something troubling in his eyes, something that reinforced her own uncertainties. "I don't know if I can make you understand it," he said slowly. "It's hard to grasp, even for me. For someone who's never experienced any of the things he's endured, I'm not sure it's possible."
"Try me," she said softly. "Maybe I'll surprise you."

He took a moment to compose his thoughts. "Brian Kinney," he said finally, "has never let himself need anyone. Never. Can you imagine how much strength that took? Even when he was a kid, he only relied on himself. You can probably figure out how that can happen to a kid - what kind of family he must have had, and what he must have endured at their hands. But in the end, he survived it, because he was stronger than they were. Because he refused to let anyone destroy him or force him to pretend to be something he's not. But because of that - and everything that came after - he's never been able or willing to let down his guard and let anyone in. He's never been able to give his trust completely."

She thought about the things she'd learned during her interview with Brian's sister, and knew that McClaren's assessment was perfectly accurate.

He smiled when he saw the look of understanding in her eyes. "Except once, but that's not something that's mine to talk about. That's his very personal business and not a subject we should discuss. But the thing is . . . right now, he needs someone, and he doesn't know how to let himself need someone. Because he's never been there before. He needs someone who can stand at his side, can understand all the things he won't let himself say, can see him as he really is and not as some romantic fantasy figure, and still step up to watch his back if the need arises. That's what he needs, and that's what he doesn't know how to accept and can't ask for. He needs someone who can do that for him - be there for him, to laugh with and fight with and fuck with - to do whatever he needs, and not require him to define it or spell it out or even mention it."

He paused to light a cigarette, giving up on his earlier resolution to wait for a mid-morning break. "And that's what nobody else can give him. That's why I'm here."

"And when it's over?" she asked. "When it's time to walk away?"

He shrugged and blew out a perfect smoke-ring. "Then we walk away. Both a little older and a little wiser, maybe, but unbroken."

She looked for a moment as if she wanted to argue, but she didn't. "And the other things?" she asked. "How will he respond to the problems in his own house?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "He's spent his whole life dealing with homophobic pricks who hate him for what he is, and he's done what needed doing and defied them all. But the possibility of being betrayed, by someone close to him . . . I don't know what that might do to him."

"So you haven't told him that?"

"No. Because I'm not sure how he'll take it, and because our information is still sketchy. We could be wrong. It might just be a stupid fuck-up."

She nodded. "It might. But what if it's not?"

He took a deep breath. "Then somebody is a dead man walking, figuratively speaking. Brian doesn't deal well with betrayal, and he's not much into forgiveness."

"Not very Christian then."

McClaren burst out laughing. "I keep forgetting that you haven't really had a chance to get to know him yet."

She patted the file again. "But I know . . ."
"No. You don't. You may know the facts and the history and all the trivial details, but you don't know Brian Kinney. Not yet. And when you do, you'll understand exactly what I mean."

Again, she looked like she wanted to argue, but she didn't. She trusted McClaren, as she'd trusted only a very few young associates in her time, and if he thought she still had much to learn about the enigmatic Brian Kinney, he was probably right.

"Sooo," she said softly, drawing the word out to give her a chance to choose her words carefully, "how would you estimate my chances of convincing him to submit to hypnosis?"

He, on the other hand, required no time at all to come up with an answer. "Slim to none," he laughed, "and that's probably too generous by half."

"Chris, he really needs . . ."

His lifted hand was enough to convince her not to waste her breath. "Hey, it's not me that needs convincing. It's him, and I gotta tell you that I can't think of a single reason why he'd agree to let you do this."

Her eyes were suddenly narrow and hard. "Doesn't he have any interest in catching whoever did this to him?"

He flexed his shoulders, in an attempt to work out a bit of soreness that probably had more to do with the previous night's extracurricular activities than any job-related muscle strain. "Tell you what, Alex. When all this is over, I'd be willing to bet the farm that he will find out who's responsible, whether we succeed in our efforts or not, although I don't think he gives a shit about proof that might stand up in a court of law. One way or another, the people who did this are going to be held accountable. But let's face it; law and order types haven't exactly distinguished themselves in standing up against homophobia, and he doesn't know you, meaning that he has no good reason to trust you, so do you really expect him to just give you carte blanch to go poking around in his head?"

She considered his words for a moment, before offering up a little smile that conceded his point. "Still, there are things that he needs to know - that he has a right to know - but I'm loathe to lay it all out for him until I've had a chance to try to jog his memory. And putting him under is the surest way to do that. If we provide the details now, before I can probe his memory, there's a chance of contaminating his recollections with bits and pieces of what we tell him, and that could compromise everything."

"So what's your point?" he asked, his tone suggesting that he was still not sure he agreed with her, but that he was willing to go along - for a while.

"Just be careful how much you tell him concerning the primary investigation," she said finally, "although I have an idea that you should clue him in on our suspicions of what's going on - in-house, so to speak - because he's probably going to find out sooner rather than later anyway. Because of the circumstances, we felt that we had to tell Mathis, who, in turn, felt compelled to tell Whitney, who . . ."

"Is not going to hesitate to tell Brian. When?"

"Probably some time this morning. Mathis was just waiting for the final confirmation from our SEC sources before he takes the whole thing to Ms. Whitney. I don't know exactly how she'll react but . . ."

"She'll react like the pit bull she is. Cynthia has one fundamental loyalty, and that's her only concern.
Nothing is going to persuade her to hide this from him."

"In that case, you'd better . . ."

But he was already getting to his feet. "You're right. I've got to drive him to the clinic anyway, so we'll have some uninterrupted time for me to tell him, in a semi-controlled environment where he won't be able to mount a classic Kinney queen-out and break whatever he can lay his hands on."

"Except you," she hastened to point out.

"Except me," he agreed with a grin, "but I'm tougher than I look."

He turned to go into the house then, before pausing and looking back over his shoulder. "Trina will be here soon. She's our in-house version of Paula Deen, and - just in case he's not in the mood to be coddled or mollified or coaxed out of his snit - ask her to make his favorites. She'll know what they are. Just in case."

Corey smiled. The idea that big, brawny, buff and beautiful bad-ass Chris McClaren might be just a tiny bit intimidated by the idea of dealing with an irate, stone-cold furious Brian Kinney was food for thought and amusement - and, just maybe, a nuance of alarm.

Exactly who - and what - were they all dealing with?

She was not the least bit frightened. She had never been frightened of a crime victim in her life, and she wasn't about to start now.

She frowned, and stared out to sea with a steely glare, determined to maintain her aplomb. She wasn't intimidated. She wasn't worried. She wasn't the least bit nervous.

She absolutely wasn't. And the tiny little fluttering in her stomach was undoubtedly due to a bit of left-over jet lag or the fact that she hadn't been eating well of late. It couldn't possibly have anything to do with apprehension over her upcoming interview.

It couldn't.

Could it?

Ted had been working with computers since early childhood. He'd learned how to navigate a Lotus spreadsheet and edit a WordPerfect document before he'd learned to ride a bicycle, and manipulating financial data, via his new MacBook Pro, which had replaced his PowerBook G4, was so second-nature to him by this time that it was almost intuitive. He didn't even have to think about how to do what needed doing; he just did it.

And yet he sometimes thought that he might have been an accountant - or a scribe perhaps - in some past life. If, of course, he believed in past lives, which he didn't. Only . . . he could not deny that there was some tiny part of him that had a weakness for the crispness, the visceral experience of words and numbers written on a page, columns of figures entered into a ledger. It was not efficient; it was not a productive use of one's time. It was just satisfying.

Thus, once he had completed all his data entry, accessing the accounts and initiating the actions necessary to implement the decisions he'd made in exercising his management of Brian's liquid assets, he removed his Montblanc ballpoint pen - a Christmas gift from his boss - from its special niche in his desk drawer and opened the ledger that he'd retrieved earlier from the safe in Brian's
office. Brian, of course, did not share Ted's appreciation for these artifacts from a simpler, more refined era; he had observed, on more than one occasion, that it was nothing more than a petty conceit, not to mention a waste of time, to duplicate manually what had already been done via computer.

But he didn't actually interfere, and Ted thought, sometimes, that the man who signed his paycheck might understand more than he let on; he did, after all, have a rather profound appreciation for elegance and artistic concepts.

And this, thought the accountant, as he opened the ledger, his hand smoothing over the dark crimson leather of its cover, was art - in its own way.

The book opened easily under his fingers, and he stared down at the column of figures with a certain degree of smug satisfaction, knowing that this, too, was art, in another way. He had done very well for Brian, overseeing his investments with all his considerable knowledge of market trends and fiscal protocols. In the years since he'd taken over the supervision of Brian's wealth, he had experienced occasional setbacks when he'd been forced to record small losses, but recovery had always been swift and decisive, and he had never had to explain or justify a single losing quarter.

And now . . .

He carefully took pen in hand to record his latest transactions, the transfer of a substantial percentage of the funds previously invested in various venues into one holding account from which a final transfer was even now in process; a stroke of genius that would transform Brian Kinney from a moderately wealthy investor to a very rich man - a distinction which Brian would surely appreciate and reward, once he had a chance to come to his senses and figure out where his true loyalties should lie.

Ted did not hesitate as he made the entries, even feeling a small rush as he entered the last of them.

Two million dollars, plus.

The actual final figure would be close to two and a quarter million, factoring in the amount which Ted had managed to pull together for himself and a friend. That thought did give him a bit of pause. Not that he was worried about any possibility of not being able to retrieve his or his friend's share of the investment. For the most part, Brian never even looked at the details of his financial portfolio, except for rare, seemingly random moments when he'd decide to delve into it, just to check on what was going on. But he rarely looked, almost never questioned, and seemed content to allow Ted to do what Ted did best.

Handle the money.

Although - he paused briefly as his mind sifted through random memories - there had been times when Brian had posed some questions that seemed to indicate a greater awareness of financial market conditions than one might have expected him to possess, and Ted was reminded that it was almost always a mistake to assume that Brian was ignorant about things. Brian might not be current about the latest events in the world of finance, but he was seldom ignorant - about anything - and assuming otherwise would be a foolish risk.

When Brian asked questions, a smart individual made sure to be able to provide pertinent answers.

But this - he paused and sat back in his chair, his eyes drifting out toward the parking lot where a fitful wind was creating a miniature maelstrom of dead leaves and debris - this was different from anything he'd ever done. This would mark his greatest achievement in the field of fiscal management
and should buy him a place in the forefront of the elite group of Brian Kinney's friends. And if it also made him - and his friend - rich in the process, he was sure Brian wouldn't mind.

Except, of course, that the 'friend' in question was Melanie Marcus, and he had to admit that he wasn't entirely sure how Brian would handle that bit of information. But Ted was nothing if not gifted in rationalization. Melanie might not be Brian's favorite person, but she was a parent figure to Gus, so he should ultimately be glad that Ted had allowed her to become a part of their little investment clique.

Of course, she had only managed to come up with $40,000.00, but that sum - doubled or tripled or whatever the ultimate pay-off might turn out to be - would benefit her little family unit, including Brian's son, so he should be pleased with the end result.

But none of that was critical to this moment. He would handle Brian when the time came, and trust that the man's delight in the huge profits he would rake in would compensate for any annoyance over being kept out of the loop. Besides, it was undeniably true that he was being kept in the dark through his own fault; Ted obviously could not tell him about what he was doing when he was not allowed any contact with his employer, except as filtered through Cynthia Whitney.

Ted very carefully ignored the fact that he could have easily mentioned it to Cynthia, and asked her to obtain Brian's agreement to his arrangements. But he couldn't do that, because, if he did, he would have to reveal the details of his plan, a disclosure he was not yet willing to make. He wanted this to happen discreetly, under the auspices of his oversight, so that he would be able to present it to Brian as a fait accompli - a master stroke accomplished through his own financial genius.

To make absolutely sure that Brian Kinney would never undervalue him again.

He smiled as he remembered his last conversation with Marshall Hargrave. It had been brief, as the Wall Street baron had been on his way to catch a plane to Singapore, for a broker's conference, but there had been no denying that the man had been delighted with Ted's news.

"I knew you were too smart to pass up an opportunity like this," Hargrave had observed. "Look, just give me your email and I'll have my secretary send you the routing information for the funds transfer. And . . ." he paused for a fraction of a second, and Ted thought he heard a quiver in his voice when he resumed speaking. But on later reflection, he was sure he'd been mistaken. Probably just a rough spot in the road as the limo sped toward the airport. "And congratulations, Ted. This will be a day you'll never forget, when you took your first steps into the stratospheric level of high finance."

They had chatted for a few more minutes then, and Hargrave had invited him to bring a friend and come up to the financier's home in the Hamptons for Memorial Day week-end or to drop in for a visit at his Park Avenue penthouse the next time he was in New York, before ending the call by reminding Ted that time was critical so he should not dawdle in taking care of the details.

He had not dawdled, and now he was just one confirmation away from completing the most profitable and daring and amazing venture of his life.

With Brian's money, of course, which meant, he conceded, that it wasn't really his venture, but he consoled himself by remembering that it was his hand on the wheel, his expertise that had gained access to the opportunity, and his actions that would see it through to the finish.

And Brian would, from this day forward, owe him a debt he could probably never hope to repay.

The stratospheric level of high finance.
He was pretty sure he could get used to living in such rarefied atmosphere.

A quick, perfunctory knock at the door announced the arrival of his lunch date, and he greeted Melanie with a raised eyebrow and a smile that barely avoided haughtiness. They had decided to treat themselves to Monterey Bay Fish Grotto for lunch as a private celebration of their confidential joint venture - an expensive indulgence, no doubt, but befitting the auspicious nature of the occasion. Melanie's expression mirrored his own, with just a slightly elevated degree of smugness.

While it was undeniably true that Brian had succeeded in cutting them out of his life, for the present, this action would firmly and permanently re-establish their right to expect a place of honor at his table.

Not that Melanie really wanted a place at his table - honored or otherwise; Ted was pretty sure she actually wanted nothing more than to be as far away from Brian Kinney as possible. But she could hardly deny herself the satisfaction of knowing that he would be forced to acknowledge her right to be included in his inner circle, even when she chose to reject it.

Walking away from him - and forcing Lindsey to choose to do the same - would bring her as much satisfaction as any financial benefits she might gain from their little arrangement.

It was all there in her eyes as she took a seat in front of his desk. "So," she said brightly, "are we all set?"

"Absolutely. The final transaction will be completed tomorrow, when the transfer is confirmed from Brian's primary account. And the rest, as they say, will be history."

"And how long," she asked, "before we see results?"

Again, the smug smile. "Probably not long at all. Possibly a few days. At most, a matter of weeks, although you need to remember - like I told you before - although the indicators may waver a bit from time to time, the overall trend will certainly be positive. But it may take a few months to see anything substantial. Dealing in blue chip investments and preferred stocks requires a certain level of patience."

"I know," she replied with a sigh. "It's just that I can't wait to show Lindsey what we've achieved. She's always believed that it's Brian who is . . ."

"The genius?" he offered, when she couldn't quite find the right words. "The boy wonder? The Sugar Daddy with bottomless pockets?"

She nodded and tried, without a lot of success, to suppress a venal note of satisfaction in her voice. "All of the above. I mean . . . I know he's supposed to be your friend, Teddie, although I choose to reserve judgment on that, but you have no idea how hard it is to live with someone who's supposed to love you and believe in you but spends all her time raving to our son about how wonderful and what a huge success and how talented his daddy is. Sometimes, I think that I'll go ballistic and slap the shit out of her if she ever says his name again."

Ted's eyes were suddenly very wide, and there was no concealing that he was shocked by the degree of venom in her voice. "Not that I'd ever really do that," she hastened to add, apparently realizing that she'd said more than she'd intended.

Quickly, she stood and moved to a group of display boards that were arranged on a ledge in front of the office's single window - bright, vivid drawings etched in almost-neon hues against a glossy black
"What are these?" she asked, not really caring, but looking for a means to change the subject. "They're very eye-catching."

Ted grinned. "Glad you think so. I had Gabriel - our new intern in the art department - draw them up, according to my specifications, as part of a proposal for a new promotion for the Schickel concert hall. Of course, I'm no ad man - like Brian - but I think they're very stylish and seductive. Just the kind of thing that would entice an opera-lover to buy season's tickets."

Melanie smiled. She was always in favor of anything that would undercut the mighty Kinney, and prove to the world that his success and accomplishments were just a fluke, a matter of blind luck, having nothing to do with skill or talent or intellect.

"Very good, Teddie. You doing the presentation yourself?"

He nodded, and a certain furtiveness in his eyes told her that there was more to this story than he was telling, but she didn't press the issue. Mostly because she didn't really care.

He took a deep breath, still slightly bothered by her comments about Lindsey, but he decided to let it go, assuming that he'd simply misunderstood her meaning. "Okay," he said, closing the ledger before him and getting to his feet. "Let's just put this away in Brian's safe, and we'll go enjoy our little celebration."

He did not notice at first that Melanie had gone very still, hardly even daring to breathe. "Brian's safe?"

"Yeah." Still oblivious, he moved toward the door. "It's in his office. Come on, and . . ."

It was then that he noticed the predatory gleam in her eyes, and understood what it meant and knew what he had to do. "Mel," he said softly, "I don't know what you're thinking, but there's no way I can give you access to . . ."

"But, Ted," she said, suddenly very calm and reasonable and infused with wide-eyed innocence, "what he chooses to conceal there - in his private safe - might have a major impact on my son's well-being. Surely, you can see . . ."

"But I . . ."

She smiled then and tucked her arm through his. "Maybe," she suggested, "we go in to put this ledger away, and you get distracted. Maybe you remember a phone call you need to make, or you feel a sudden call of nature, or . . ."

Her little litany continued - soft and persuasive - as they walked out of the room.

She was still talking when they walked through the door into Brian's office, but fell silent quickly when they discovered that it was not as unoccupied as they'd expected.

It had been weeks now since Brian had actually been in his office, and the suite had been maintained immaculately in the interim, so it should have been impossible to detect even the faintest trace of his aftershave lingering in the air. But there was no denying that the fragrance was there - a soft nuance of Chanel Allure, as elegant and distinctive as the man who frequently wore it.

It was very subtle, barely detectable, but it always hit Ted like a gut punch, forcing him to pause to catch his breath as he stepped over the threshold.
As it happened on this particular occasion, he realized immediately that he should not have been able to smell it at all, since it was almost lost beneath another distinctive aroma - cinnamon and brown sugar and apple butter. Mouth-watering. Irresistible.

Auntie Em's caramel-apple kolaches. The fragrance was unmistakable, as was the individual who was arranging them on a silver tray while deep in conversation with other occupants of the room. Emmett, decked out head-to-toe in coppery silk and suede, did not notice the new arrivals as he chatted on about a new recipe for puff pastry with brie and lobster cream he had developed for the reception he was planning for Sidney Bloom's new abstract exhibition.

Across the room, Danny Boyle was dressed in blue jeans and black leather, carefully arranged with one hip hiked up on a ledge against the big rear window, a gleaming, cobalt blue Fender guitar braced against his chest, with the placement of his hands suggesting that he was picking out a tune on the instrument, and his head cocked as if listening for the perfect pitch, eyes squinted against the spiral of smoke drifting up from a cigarette burning in a nearby ashtray. He appeared to be listening to Emmett's rambling, although his responses were limited to occasional grins and soft laughter, as he snuck an occasional bite of one of Emmett's delectable pastries.

A few feet away, Justin Taylor was standing at an easel, licking a drip of apple butter from his lip as his gaze flicked between the canvas he was working on and the young bodyguard with guitar in hand. He was wearing a faded gray sweatshirt that had seen far better days, which was now even worse for wear due to a big swath of burnt umber oil paint smeared across one shoulder and down one threadbare sleeve. There was also a streak of Prussian blue smudged on his temple, blending into the hair falling over his left ear as he leaned forward to stroke a brush dripping with a blend of burnt sienna and cadmium yellow across the canvas.

Justin was talking too, but not to either Boyle or Emmett. Instead, he was speaking to a fourth man - someone that Ted did not recognize. An elderly man with a shock of white hair, nibbling delicately at his own kolache, and standing behind the artist, looking over his shoulder with his eyebrows raised in a quizzical stare.

Justin was grinning. "What's the matter, mon amis? You look puzzled."

The older man gave a little half-shrug, half-nod - a gesture that was curiously gaelic. "I recognize the guitar, cher," he replied, "and the jacket and the jeans, but the face . . . the face is . . ."

"Not here," Justin volunteered. "Danny is just providing the lines of light and shadow against the fabrics and the general configuration. But he's not the subject. Not really."

"Ahhh, I see," said Cedric Lasseigne. "So this is how I'll get my first look at the infamous Brian Kinney."

Justin grinned, but it was Emmett who answered. "Infamous, huh? A perfect description for the man who lives by my motto even better than I do. Even if it did take me a lifetime to figure it out."

Lasseigne turned to regard Emmett with a sardonic smile that confirmed how much he liked Justin's nelly-bottom friend. "And what would that motto be?"

Emmett's laughter was warm and infectious. "Fuck 'em all! I've spent my whole life trying to live it, but I don't think anybody ever did it quite as well - or as stylishly - as Brian."

Ted and Melanie exchanged confused glances.

"What's going on in here?" Ted demanded sharply, as he moved to Brian's desk, to access the sensor
which would deactivate the security lock of the wall safe. Until the attack, only Brian himself and Cynthia had been programmed into the system to be allowed to open the safe, but common sense had dictated that someone else should be added to the protocols when Brian had been hospitalized. It had only made sense, thought Ted, that he be added to that elite list since he was the person who controlled the company's finances. In point of fact, he'd thought - although he'd refrained from saying it - he should have been on the list from the beginning. Instead of Cynthia.

"Justin," he continued, moving toward the door to Brian's private bathroom in order to be able to access the safe securely - away from prying eyes, "you of all people should know how Brian feels about his office. He wouldn't like you using it like this. He wouldn't approve."

Once more, it was Emmett who was first to respond. "Wouldn't approve of what, Teddie?" he asked, obviously confused. "Of Justin using his office? Justin?" His tone as he finished speaking suggested that he doubted Ted's sanity.

"If I recall correctly," Ted called out, as he placed the ledger into the safe, "and I can assure you that I do, Brian was pretty specific in his wishes about Justin getting out of his life. And I'm pretty sure that would include his office."

But if Ted was expecting wounded silence or petulance from Justin, he was in for a big surprise. The blonde grinned as Ted stepped back through the doorway. "Yep. That just about sums it up perfectly."

"Look, Justin," said Melanie, obviously trying to summon up a sympathetic expression. "It's no secret that I'm not a big Brian Kinney fan, but if he did say he didn't want you here . . ."

The grin grew wider. "That's pretty much exactly what he said."

She made no attempt to conceal the confusion flaring in her eyes. "Then what . . . why . . . what are you . . ."

"Ever articulate, Mellie," observed Emmett, "but I should think it would be pretty obvious. We're ignoring his wishes." Then he paused, and the smile that touched his lips was winsome, and impossible to interpret. "Or, to be totally precise, we're ignoring what he said he wanted."

Ted moved closer to Justin - close enough to be able to study the canvas he was working on, and recognize the subject. "I don't get it," he said. "Why on earth would you want to paint here? It's an office - not a studio."

Justin continued to work on capturing the image of a distinctive, cowry-shell bracelet on a strong bare arm. "Because it has perfect light. Because it feels right, and because it's easier to feel close to him, like he left something of himself here."

The accountant smirked. "If you want to find someplace where he left something of himself, you should go to Babylon's back room."

The silence that fell over the group at that moment was heavy and thick with words unspoken, as everyone turned to stare at the accountant, all of them wondering why on earth he would have offered such a petty, vindictive comment. Even Melanie looked slightly taken aback, and Emmett appeared momentarily devastated, so devastated that he could not - quite - manage to keep his opinion to himself.

"Jesus!" It was just a whisper, but it conveyed volumes of distress and contempt.

"Does Cynthia know about this?" Ted's dark eyes were now hard and gleaming with anger, as he
managed to ignore the look on Emmett's face.

"Of course, she does," said Justin, deliberately avoiding meeting the accountant's gaze, because he was pretty sure that, if he did, he'd be unable to resist an urge to spit in the man's face. "How do you think we got in here?"

Ted stood by the desk and let his gaze sweep around the elegant room, noting all the classic little touches that marked it as Brian's private domain, a place which should be sacrosanct, a place, said a little voice in side him, where - no matter what - he would never be welcome to trespass.

"So this is how she looks after his interests?" he said slowly. "By disobeying his orders, and doing exactly as she pleases."

Justin took a deep breath then, as the distress caused by Ted's malicious words gave way before a primal urge to protect the woman who was Brian's primary defender. "Come on, Ted," he said, barely managing to remain calm. "You can't possibly think that she would abuse her privileges, that she would take advantage of Brian's trust and . . ."

"It appears to me," said the accountant in a clipped, bitter tone, "that she's doing exactly that. He made his wishes clear, and it's not up to her to pick and choose which she can obey and which she can ignore, and I'm going to make sure she knows it, and - when the time comes - that he knows it as well."

Emmett, abruptly, had had enough and was quick to step in. "Teddie, what the fuck are you doing? You can't possibly be sug . . ."

But Kinnetik's CFO was far beyond any willingness to listen. "We'll just see about this," he snapped.

When Ted and Melanie had stormed out of the room, the silence they left behind them was thick and awkward - the kind of awkwardness that results when no one can figure out what to say - until Cedric Lasseigne cleared his throat, and regarded Justin with a lopsided smile.

"What was that?" he asked, deliberately exaggerating the sweet honeyed richness of his southern drawl. "Seussical the Musical, starring Diva 1 and Diva 2?"

Justin smiled, grateful for the older man's attempt to ease the tension that lingered in the wake of Ted's little queen-out, but the smile did not quite reach his eyes. Until Emmett stepped up and wrapped his arm around Justin's waist and murmured something in his ear. Then he grabbed the paintbrush from Justin's hand and daubed a big spot on the artist's chin, provoking the laughter he was looking for.

But there was no denying that the easy camaraderie that had existed in the office just moments earlier was no longer quite so easy or effortless, and Justin's motions were no longer quite so fluid, just as his eyes were no longer quite so bright.

Cedric Lasseigne watched his younger companions as they tried to shake off the effects of the accountant's toxic words, and made himself a little promise.

He didn't know what Ted Schmidt's problem was, yet. But, sooner or later, he would find out, and one day, when the moment was right, he would see that the man paid for his thoughtlessness and his deliberate, petty malice.

Cedric was not the kind of person who believed in or sought vengeance. But he did believe - passionately - in justice, and, somewhere along the way, in the days since he'd gotten to know young Justin, he had come to suspect that Brian Kinney shared that passion.
He didn't know why he believed that, but he really hoped he was right, because he was almost certain that the infamous Mr. Kinney would be a world-class champion in making sure that guilty parties always had to accept the consequences of their actions.

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It should be warmer by now, she thought. Winter should have released its death-grip on the city, and things should be greening up.

And, in truth, that was probably the case in outlying areas and inside city parks and residential neighborhoods and down by the river, but here, on Liberty Avenue, it was still pretty bleak, and the sound of the wind whistling around the corners of the building still raised goosebumps on her arms, as she stared out into a blustery morning where the sunlight seemed to be filtered through multiple layers of water vapor.

Or maybe it was what she'd just been told that was responsible for her shivering.

"How could he do this?" she asked finally, her voice trembling, almost breaking. "How could he?"

Lance Mathis sat stiffly erect, his hands clasped tight against the arms of his chair, and the look on his face seemed to vacillate between his desire to stand up and go to her to offer some kind of comfort, and the urge to strike out, to hit something in order to release an almost overwhelming surge of rage. In the end, though, he did neither. He simply attempted to provide an answer for her question.

"In all fairness, Cynthia, I believe he was manipulated into it - that he really thought he was doing a good thing, the right thing. And I'm told, by my sources, that it would have been very difficult for him to figure out what was going on, under the surface."

"Difficult," she echoed, turned quickly to study his face, "but not impossible."

"No," he admitted, "but he was . . ."

"Manipulated," she interrupted. "You already said that."

He nodded. "It's understandable," he observed, "when you're victimized by people who've made it their business to learn all your weaknesses, and to play on old acquaintances."

She walked back around her desk and sat down, clasping her hands in front of her. "And I'm supposed to . . . what? Just give him a pass? Accept that . . ."

"No. Of course not." He was quiet for a moment, noting the icy glint in her eyes. "Just to satisfy my curiosity, what do you want to do to him?"

She did not hesitate. "I want to castrate him and carve him into mincemeat."

Mathis sighed. "Somehow, I thought that you liked Ted."

She closed her eyes briefly, and took a deep breath. "So did I. But there's no excuse for this. And I want to make him pay, for what he's done to Brian. For betraying his trust and . . ."

Mathis raised his hands in a placating gesture. "But that's the one thing that you absolutely can't do. At least, not yet."

"But why? Why should we . . ."
"If you let him know that we're on to him, it could tip off the ones who set this in motion. And we can't afford to let that happen. Not yet. And besides, what's done is done. He's already made his move, so he can't do any more damage. We'll make sure of that."

"Jesus Christ!" she sighed. "Two million dollars. Jesus Christ!"

"I know," he said softly. "Not exactly chump change, is it?"

"He had to know what kind of damage this could do to Brian," she observed, still staring out into the morning, looking, perhaps, for some bright spot on which to focus. "He had to realize that losing that kind of money might ruin him. That he might never be able to recover from it. Especially . . ."

"Especially what?"

When she moved back to her desk to take her seat, he was stunned by the cold determination in her eyes. "Especially if there's more to it. This little scheme was directed at Brian - personally - but it wouldn't be enough, by itself, to put him down and keep him down. Let's face it; he's got a bit of Phoenix in him. He's proved it more than once. So there had to be more. Right?"

Lance Mathis didn't really want to smile; he was a little afraid of how she would react if he did. But he couldn't - quite - suppress it.

"What?" she snapped.

The smile stretched to a grin. "The longer I know him, the smarter he gets."

The raw anger in deep blue eyes was suddenly swept away before shadows of confusion. "Who? And what are you . . ."

"Kinney. And the reason is simple. Because he knew exactly who to put in charge while he's out of action."

Big, blue eyes got bigger for a moment; then she smiled. "Trying to score brownie points, Mr. Mathis?" she asked finally.

"No. Just trying to get you to smile. It's all going to be OK in the end. It really is."

She looked once more at the printed document he had handed her when he'd first entered her office. "How?" she said softly. "How will he ever . . ."

He leaned forward and grasped her hands tightly. "He's Brian-Fucking-Kinney. That's how."

She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and extracted her hands from his, but gently, with a tender smile that expressed her gratitude for his concern. "All right then. Tell me about the rest."

He nodded. "I'll give you our best guess, but we don't really have anything definite to go on. The only thing out of the ordinary - operationally speaking - is that Schmidt pulled one of the new interns and had him prepare some very colorful, semi-theatrical posters - very derivative stuff, according to the kid. He called it 'Toulouse-Lautrec lite' - whatever the fuck that means. But it was something that no one else seemed to know anything about, and, when he asked Ted if he should run it by Marcus or Andrew, the answer was a fast and resounding 'no'. Along with a look that could have killed, again according to the kid."

She sat back and steepled her hands in front of her face. "A new campaign then. Something that he wants to keep to himself."
He frowned. "You want to know what I think is going on?" he asked after a moment of silence. "What I think he's really doing?"

"By all means."

He took a deep breath. "I think it's all part of the personality disorder that he's had to deal with all his life, and this . . . this is just the last straw. This is ultimately too much for him to cope with."

"Go on," she said, her tone indicating that she was willing to listen, even if the hard gleam in her eyes was saying something else.

"Ted has spent his whole life being the guy left sitting on the bench, when everyone else has been chosen to play on a team. He's the perpetual water boy, or bat boy, or score keeper, or equipment manager. The guy who is never going to score the winning goal or throw the winning touchdown. And he knows it. But something inside him can't quite accept it. So he tells himself that it's all just a matter of bad luck - that if he just had the breaks - if he just had Brian's looks or intelligence or grace, or Justin's talent, or Emmett's self-confidence, or your skills . . . and cojones - that it would all work for him. So what does he do? He bides his time and waits for his chance, his one big break. His opportunity of a lifetime, to be the big hero."

He paused then and reached out to tap his finger on the document that disclosed how Ted had maneuvered Brian's funds. "That's what this is. His run for the gold. His only chance to show that he's a star - that he's a hero too. That he's worthy of Brian's trust, and more than that. That Brian should treasure him, appreciate him. Be grateful to him."

She looked up then, hearing a strange note in his voice that gave rise to a bizarre question. "Love him?"

"In a way," he answered. "Although not as in romantic, happily-ever-after love. Not that he wouldn't accept it if it was offered, but I'm pretty sure he's not quite that delusional. But in a 'he ain't heavy, he's my brother' kind of way . . . Maybe."

She frowned, and lowered her chin to brace against her clasped hands. Then she sighed. "That's really sad," she said finally. "And desperate."

"Especially when you realize that he's probably done the one thing that will make sure Brian never trusts him again."

She nodded. "At any rate, we have to make sure that he doesn't commit Kinnetik to anything. Since he's already shown himself to be the weak link in the company, they'll almost certainly target him again. Whatever this secret new campaign might be, we've got to suss it out and shut it down. And make absolutely sure that no contracts are signed or negotiated. Although - if push comes to shove - Ted doesn't have the authority to enter into contracts on behalf of the company."

"Who does?" Mathis asked quickly.

"You're looking at her," she answered. "Under ordinary circumstances, Brian is the only one, but, for the moment, it's me. So . . ."

He nodded and got to his feet and was in the process of reaching for the document on the desk when the door banged open and Ted Schmidt came rushing into the room.

Mathis opened his mouth to demand an explanation for the intrusion, but subsided without speaking when he noticed Cynthia, with a masterful bit of deliberately casual slight-of-hand, slipping the tell-tale print-out into her desk drawer.
"Cynthia, what were you thinking?" demanded the accountant. "Brian is not going to be pleased with having his orders ignored. And, on top of everything else, I need to be able to reach him. It makes no sense that you can reach him, and I can't."

Cynthia blinked. Slowly. Apparently debating which comment to address, and settling finally on a generic response. "Why?"

"Why?" Ted was almost sputtering, as Melanie followed him in and settled against the door-frame, her smile just slightly reminiscent of a Cheshire cat. "Do you realize that Justin is using Brian's office - to paint?"

"Yes. I do."

It was Ted's turn to stop and blink. "You do."

"I do," she repeated. "I take it that you object?"

His eyes were suddenly very dark and narrowed. "The point is certainly not whether or not I object. It's not my office. But neither is it yours, and you have an obligation to run this company and take care of this business in a way that Brian would approve, so . . ."

"And that," she said slowly, rising to her feet in one graceful surge, "is exactly what I'm doing. You, of course, are free to disagree or disapprove. But, since I'm the only one who is authorized to speak for Brian - or to him - you're just going to have to accept my judgment. Until he returns, of course. When you'll be free to lodge whatever complaints you choose."

Mathis noted the throbbing of a vein in Ted's throat as his face flushed an ugly, deep red. The accountant remained silent for several moments, and the security chief was pretty sure it was because he couldn't summon up either the breath - or the courage - to express what he wanted to say.

Finally, he turned away, and started to walk out of the office.

"There is, however, one more thing," said Cynthia, her voice both deadly soft and icily polite. "Listen to me, Ted. Are you listening?"

He went very still, and it was obvious that he realized that she was deliberately invoking a tactic created - almost patented - by Brian Kinney.

"I'm listening," he managed to reply - barely.

"If you ever come bursting into my office and speak to me in this fashion again," she said very deliberately, "then Brian is going to hear about it, and we'll let him decide which of us he chooses to listen to. Are we clear on that?"

He hesitated before nodding, and the succession of expressions that crossed his face said that he wanted to argue, wanted to defy her and throw her challenge back in her face. But ultimately, he couldn't, because he wasn't - quite - sure enough to take that chance.

But it was immediately obvious that Cynthia had no such reservations, and that she would not be content with a non-verbal response.

She moved around the desk quickly, stepping directly into Ted's space, and Mathis was forced to look away from the confrontation for fear that he would burst into laughter at the sight of this man, who - though not particularly large - was still much too robust to qualify for twink-status, fighting off an urge to cringe away from the petite blonde. "I repeat," she said softly, each word spoken with the
clarity of a razor-sharp blade. "Are - we - clear?"

He licked his lips, and it was obvious that his mouth had gone painfully dry. "Crystal," he finally managed to whisper.

For a moment, he thought she might demand something louder and more emphatic, but she finally nodded and stepped back.

He turned away then and saw that Melanie had been watching the entire exchange, and, although it was gone almost before it registered, he instantly recognized the bright gleam of speculation in her eyes. He made a conscious choice to interpret it as speculation, although a tiny little voice deep in his mind suggested that it looked more like contempt.

He turned his gaze toward the window, and spent a moment fighting to regain his composure.

He would not forget this day; he made that promise to himself. Somebody was going to pay for treating him like some insignificant little pisser. He would make sure of that, no matter how long it took.

When he hurried out of the office, his pace increasing with every step, and then out of the building, with Melanie at his heels, it was obvious that he couldn't get away fast enough.

Lance Mathis, after watching the rapid retreat, turned back to study Cynthia's face and immediately recognized a tiny spark of triumph in her eyes.

"That was probably a mistake," he observed.

"I know." She didn't seem to have any interest in defending her actions.

"He could make trouble."

"Undoubtedly."

Then he grinned. "Felt good though, didn't it?"

"Not good enough."

"You probably should have tried to resist the urge?"

Her face was suddenly very cold. "Little fucker got off easy. I'd like to throw him into a wood chipper. But if you think I was tough, wait til Brian gets through with him."

The clinic visit had not gone well.

Turnage, as usual, had been high-handed and arrogant, and Brian, as usual, had responded to the surgeon's hubris with sarcasm and disdain, and they had wound up in a snipefest of olympic proportions. Then, after learning that the physical therapist who had originally been scheduled to handle his treatment had been sidelined by a freak hit-and-run accident, Brian had been forced to submit to the ministrations of the clinic's staff therapist, one Dulcinea (and yes, that really was her name) McCoy, a native Australian with a demeanor like a storm trooper whom Brian had christened 'Matilda the Hun'. The woman was (probably) very proficient in her professional duties, but her people skills were virtually non-existent, and, by the end of the session, it was painfully obvious that this particular therapist and this particular patient were as incompatible as it was possible for two
human beings to be.

Thus, by the time McClaren followed Brian back to their car, walking his accustomed fine line of trying to watch over the man without actually appearing to watch over him, it was uncertain who was more relieved that the visit was over - the FBI agent, the patient, or the clinic staff.

McClaren would later figure out that he should have expected things to go from bad to worse as he related the information he'd been given concerning the actions and adventures of Kinnetik's CFO.

When he'd finished the recitation, he realized that he hadn't been sure what to expect, but he was sure that this wasn't it.

Brian's eyes had gone as dark as burnt coffee. Darker. Filled with thick, almost black shadows. And his jaw was clinched tight, so tight that it looked painful.

But, so far, he had said nothing.

"Brian?"

McClaren's eyes darted from the road ahead - the narrow curving road which had to be navigated with great care if he wanted to avoid sending the BMW plowing into a dune or a patch of sea grass or a sandy crevasse - to the man at his side.

Brian had studied his face with a degree of skepticism as he'd recited the tale of Ted Schmidt's financial exploits. He'd even laughed once or twice.

Until the FBI agent had said the magic words.

Two - million - dollars.

That seemed to have done it - gotten through the façade of nonchalance and pierced the armor of invincibility.

He had expected anger, and in that, he'd not been disappointed. There was definitely anger flashing in the depths of those hazel eyes, anger that was well on its way to becoming a towering, relentless rage.

That thought might have induced a smile, when he remembered that Brian had actually been the inspiration for a comic book hero bearing that very name. Only . . . the anger, as intense as it was, seemed to be on the verge of being submerged beneath another feeling - a feeling that McClaren found himself curiously reluctant to identify.

Brian Kinney was furious, but he was also deeply, terribly hurt - and determined to keep it to himself. He was relishing the anger, trying to encourage it, to let it leap and flourish and engulf him, so that he wouldn't have to acknowledge the other feeling, the one he didn't know how to handle.

"Brian, I . . ."

"Stop the car!"

"What? Why?" McClaren heard the note of desperation in his companion's voice, and wondered if he was feeling ill, or if he was in pain, or if . . . whatever.

"Just . . . stop!" It was spoken in a tone of voice that brooked no argument.

McClaren pulled over, and the sedan had barely come to a halt when Brian opened the door and
almost leapt out onto the sandy roadside, managing - somehow - to extract the single crutch from its place beside his seat and propel himself away from the car, all in one semi-fluid motion. Quite an accomplishment, thought McClaren as he hastened to follow, for a man whose motor capabilities were, for the moment, extremely compromised.

Driven more by a burst of conflicted emotions than by physical energy, Brian managed to navigate through a narrow succession of dunes and depressions, emerging at last on a crescent-shaped stretch of beach that was pocked with tidal pools and bordered by a jumble of dark stone.

McClaren had caught up with his charge quickly enough, but the look he got when he reached out a hand to offer support and assistance was enough to make him back off - fast. Despite the fact that he was in obvious pain and struggling for balance, Brian was in no mood to accept any help.

When he reached the dark, jagged wall of stone that ran perpendicular to the water's edge, he flopped down on its surface with no nuance of his usual grace, neither knowing nor caring that one sharp edge had ripped a four-inch hole in the knee of his $300.00 designer jeans - and a gash in the skin beneath it. It was left to McClaren to notice and, swearing under his breath, pull a handkerchief from his pocket to clean the wound and staunch the blood-flow.

"Goddammit, Brian!" he muttered, as he tried to wipe away the dark sediment left by the scum on the stone's surface. "If you get fucking gangrene, I'm the one that's gonna have to explain to Turnage and my boss. Just . . ."

"Shut up." It was barely a whisper.

"Don't tell me . . ."

"Just . . . shut up, and leave me alone."

McClaren opened his mouth, ready to indulge a little emotional venting of his own, when he looked up from his task, and saw . . .

He looked away quickly, drawing a deep shaky breath, and electing to believe that he had been mistaken. There had been no tears in those hazel eyes, certainly not over something as mundane as money. Although, he had to admit, two million dollars was, perhaps, beyond the limits of "mundane".

"Brian," he said softly, after several moments of silence, "what can I . . ."

"It must be hard for you," said Brian, his eyes trained on a scrap of sail, tacking against the wind, just skimming the horizon. "With everything you see, in the course of doing your job, it must be hard."

McClaren dabbed once more at the cut on Brian's knee, before shifting to find a seat nearby. "What? What must be hard?"

"Trusting people."

The FBI agent picked up a splinter of driftwood and began to doodle in the wet sand - a quarter moon, a shamrock, a leaf. "Sometimes," he answered finally, "Depends on the person and the circumstances." He raised his head then, to peer deeply into Brian's eyes, but, if he was hoping for a flash of insight, he was disappointed. The hazel depths had gone opaque again, obscured with shadow.

"What about you?" he asked, sensing that Brian might, if he was very lucky and very careful - and held his mouth in just the right way - reveal a tiny fragment of elementary truth.
But not yet. "I don’t."

"You don’t what?"

"Trust people."

McClaren thought about that for a moment before voicing another question.

"Never?"

A pause - brief but telling. "Almost."

"But... once in a while."

A soft sound - almost a sigh. "Almost never."

"Because?"

For a while, he thought Brian would not answer at all, and when he did, it still wasn’t much of an answer. "Too much risk."

McClaren nodded. "If you say something like that, it usually means that you have trusted somebody, and you got burned."

Brian said nothing, shifting his attention to the sudden, graceful leap of a dolphin out beyond the breakers - a thing of beauty and grace, the complete antithesis of the darkness that seemed to surround him now. And once more, his eyes were suspiciously bright.

"Brian," McClaren tried again, "I know it's a shitload of money, but..."

Those perfect lips curved into a slightly mocking smile. "You think it's about the money, McFed?"

He reached into his shirt pocket then, and pulled out a pair of Serengeti sunglasses, elegant and sleek and almost as perfect as the perfect face they fit on. "Haven't you figured it out yet? I can always make more money."

At that point, McClaren tried to meet his gaze, and realized that the donning of the sunglasses had been deliberate - to render those perfectly beautiful eyes unreachable.

"Who?" he asked. "You're not just talking about some weasel of an accountant who screwed you over. That's obvious. So who did you trust that..."

Brian managed to get to his feet with some degree of agility, using the crutch to brace himself. Then he started back toward the car.

"Who?" McClaren called after him, suddenly realizing that it was not just an idle question, that he really wanted to know the answer.

"Nobody," came the answer. "Not any more. And not ever again."

The storm had been raging for more than an hour, and there was still no sign that it would abate any time soon. Lightning sizzled and trailed brilliant fingertips across the night sky as the wind howled and huffed like a wild thing, and the roar of thunder shook the foundations of the cottage, although the sound was almost lost beneath the relentless growl of the surf.
And through it all, Brian Kinney had remained almost motionless, stretched out on a deck chair beneath the shelter of the covered deck, an acoustic guitar braced against his body as his hands flexed over frets and strings. The deliberate movements of his fingers indicated that he was playing a specific melody, but the sound was so soft that it was lost beneath the howl of the storm.

On the third day of their stay, exercising a compulsion to know everything there was to know about the place they were staying, McClaren had unearthed the guitar, old-fashioned and faded, shoved deep into a high shelf in a utility closet, its case thick with spider webs, but the instrument inside mostly intact, except for a couple of broken strings, easily replaced. Brian had been instantly intrigued.

He continued his deliberate stroking of the guitar, but his eyes remained riveted on the pyrotechnics exploding across the canvas of the night.


It was a continuation of the silence which had enveloped him through most of the day, and Chris McClaren had become more and more uneasy as the hours had gone by.

Cynthia had called, as expected, just as they'd arrived back from their trip to the clinic, and Brian had spent almost an hour sequestered in his room, listening to what she had to tell him and sharing his thoughts with her. The FBI agent had no doubt that the two of them had been considering how to respond to Ted Schmidt's treachery, and, perhaps, trying to understand the motives behind it, but he had no idea what they might have decided. Brian had been stone-faced and mute when he'd emerged from the room, but McClaren was dead certain of one thing: he would not want to be in the accountant's shoes when all this was over.

When. He found himself reluctantly considering whether or not he should use a different word. Not 'when', but 'if'. But no, he would not let himself believe that the monsters who'd done this to Kinney could triumph in the end. The investigation was in progress, and the individuals who were currently in position to administer the coup de grace - the final stroke to complete the process - were highly skilled and well trained, and once they had completed their mission, there would be only one final component needed to achieve the goal everyone desired.

Justice.

Only he wasn't entirely sure that the one piece of the puzzle that would complete the picture would ever fall into place.

In the end, it would almost certainly come down to Brian Kinney and his willingness - or lack thereof - to confront his demons.

The man was as fearless as a lion; McClaren had no doubt about that. He had seen it proved time after time, even though he'd only known Kinney for a short time. But it was one thing to face the world and defy the odds and refuse to stand down; it was something else entirely to be able to turn inward and confront the dark places in one's own soul, places that would automatically shy away from the light of discovery, in the exercise of a primal instinct for survival.

Even the bravest man would think twice about volunteering for such an ordeal.

Alexandra Corey had attempted, several times during this very long day, to approach Brian, to explain what she was proposing to do and why it had to be done - to appeal to his thirst for retribution and his sense of outrage and his desire for justice.
He'd just looked at her with dark, expressionless eyes.

At that point, she'd tried a change in tactics - attempting to provoke an angry response, to make him mad enough to engage in a shouting match in which he might reveal more than he intended.

The eyes had remained dark and expressionless - almost - although there had been a tiny little spark of amusement in those inky depths, which was just enough to tell her that he knew exactly what she was doing.

Score: Kinney, two; the long arm of the law, zero.

Another change of tactic, utilizing the oblique approach: trying to charm him into lowering his guard and allowing her to encroach on his personal space as she led him through a series of innocuous questions.

He had remained uncharmed.

McClaren stood now in the dark entryway, aware that Corey was still sitting at the kitchen table, lingering over a slice of Trina’s addictive key-lime pie and another cup of coffee in a day that had already spawned a need for far too many such shots of caffeine.

He wondered if any of them would sleep tonight. Then he wondered if he would sleep tonight, and - if so - where.

He knew better than to assume anything, but this, he decided abruptly, had gone on for far too long already.

With a deep breath, he moved to the steamer trunk-style bar cabinet in the corner of the sitting room and retrieved a half-full fifth of JB and a couple of shot glasses, allowing himself a small smile when he recalled how appalled he'd been when he'd first realized that Brian had no qualms about mixing painkillers and whiskey. He had protested; Brian had laughed at him. And that had been that. He had worried a bit, figuring that he would be held accountable if the man he was charged to protect managed to overdose and kill himself in the process, but then he'd realized that Brian Kinney was not a child and did not require a nanny to protect him from himself.

If nothing else, this entire debacle had proven that Kinney was a survivor; if determined homophobes with knives and iron bars couldn't destroy him, it was unlikely that a little mingling of Vicodin and bourbon could pull it off.

He went out onto the deck, closing the French doors behind him, and noting that the floor was slick and wet as the wind was driving occasional spates of rain into the sheltered area, but the space further back, where Brian was sprawled, was cozy enough, and McClaren proceeded to move deeper into the shadows, reflecting as he drew nearer that it should be illegal for anyone to look so hot in simple jeans and wifebeater. There was, however, ultimately no denying the delectable quality of the image; the golden skin contrasted beautifully with the black shirt, and the jeans were tight enough to emphasize the generous package to perfection.

Brian did not acknowledge McClaren's arrival as he dropped into an adjacent deck chair, but hazel eyes did shift toward the clink of glassware, and there might - if the agent used a bit of imagination to embroider something he wasn't sure he'd seen at all - have been a flash of appreciation in the depths of those eyes as he tilted the bottle of Beam and began to pour.

Now that he was close enough, he realized that Brian was not quite as totally focused on the storm as he'd seemed, since there was music rising from the IPOD that was braced against his shoulder, and
that the sound coming from the guitar harmonized perfectly with an instantly-recognizable blues classic.

*Crossroads.*

Of course. If Brian Kinney was going to play guitar, he was going to do it in sync with the very best.

McClaren listened for a moment before reaching out to set a half-full tumbler within Brian's reach. "You do that well," he said, nodding toward the guitar.

The grin was sardonic to the nth degree, but at least it was a grin rather than the scowl that perfect face had worn all day. "I do most things well," came the response, "or I don't do them at all."

McClaren laughed, relieved to see some spark of that insouciant self-confidence showing itself in the face of everything else that had happened during this very long day.

Clapton was coming to the end of the song, and Brian played and joined in singing the final line. "*And I'm standing at the crossroads. Believe I'm sinking down.*"

He set the guitar aside and reached for his glass. "This the best you can do?" he asked.

McClaren knew exactly what he was being asked. "My boss - FBI honcho extraordinaire - is sitting at the kitchen table. Sometimes I might be reckless," he explained, "but I'm not suicidal."

Brian's smile was weary but willing. "Pussy boy." He lifted his glass in a mock-toast and drank.

"You didn't eat," McClaren pointed out. "If you like, I'll raid the fridge for you."

"No."

"Brian, you . . ."

"I said no."

"But . . ."

Hazel eyes glinted with impatience. "You can either be a trick or a nursemaid. Not both. So . . . choose."

McClaren moved quickly, so quickly that Brian had no chance to prepare a defense and wound up with a lapful of warm, firm body.

"Easiest choice I ever made."

Brian smirked. "Your 'honcho extraordinaire' is going to freak out if she comes strolling through that door."

"She won't. But if she did, she might want to watch."

"And she's not even a loud-mouthed redhead," Brian retorted with a little laugh, and ignored the puzzled look that formed on McClaren's face.

He looked up then into warm blue eyes, and his companion quickly claimed his mouth, making no attempt to resist the temptation. They spent a few minutes sampling and tasting, leaving both slightly breathless, and McClaren sat back and took advantage of the continuing flashes of the storm to study the face looking up at him.
"Cynthia okay?" he asked gently.

Quicksilver smile. "Define 'okay'."

The FBI agent thought for a minute. "Maintaining her cool?"

The smile became a chuckle. "If threatening to remove Theodore's balls with a rusty hacksaw counts as cool, then yeah. She's okay."

McClaren stared into eyes too dark to read. "You lied, you know," he said softly.

"About what?"

"About not trusting anyone. You trust Cynthia."

A slow blink said that he wanted to deny it, but couldn't. "She's earned it," he admitted finally.

"And Taylor?" McClaren knew that he was fighting dirty, but also knew that desperate times called for desperate measures, and the necessity was at hand. "You trusted Taylor."

"Yeah." The laugh this time was bitter. "And look where that got me."

Then it was McClaren taking a moment for a deep breath. "And me. You trust me."

"No, I don't."

"Yes. You do."

Brian looked out into the storm, as if he was looking for answers, for refuge. "No, I . . ."

"Yes. You do."

Hazel eyes turned then and looked directly up into deep shadowy blue. "Okay. I do. You want to know why?"

"Yeah."

"Because it's what you get paid to do. Because it's got nothing to do with your feelings or your heart or any shitty notions about nobility or caring or honor. Because it's your fucking job."

McClaren went very still, and prayed that nothing of what he was feeling would find its way into his eyes, for he was absolutely certain that he had never in his life heard anything more tragic, more heartbreaking. "Okay," he said finally. "I'll accept that. But now I need you to accept something for me. To trust me just that much further."

"And what would that be?"

The FBI agent considered his words carefully. "Do you know why I'm here, Brian? Why I've been assigned to protect you? It's not because of what already happened to you. They came after you and took their best shot, and you survived. And yes, it was certainly because they hated you. Not some generic, nameless, any-queer-will-do fag, but you - specifically. But for that very reason, because it was obvious that you were the specific target, it would be logical to assume that they'd know better than to try it again. That they'd realize that it would be a huge risk - that forewarned is forearmed - unless there's some mitigating factor that makes the risk worth taking."

The smirk was back. "Mitigating factor? Since when do you like big words, McFed?"
"Will you shut the fuck up and listen to me? I'm trying to make you understand why you're still in danger, and you just . . ."

Brian huffed an impatient sigh. "How fucking stupid do you think I am? I'm still a target because they're afraid I might be able to identify the big boys. Because they can't be sure I didn't notice something, see something that would put names to those shadowy faces." He paused then, and regarded the FBI agent with a smug grin. "How'd I do?"

McClaren rolled his eyes. "You're the most aggravating asshole I've ever known. And you're also exactly right. And that's why . . ."

A bigger sigh. "That's why I have to let your distaff Svengali go scrambling around in my sub-conscious memory."

The FBI agent frowned, trying to decipher what it was that he was not - quite - hearing in the man's voice. "Are they right, Brian? Did you see something - notice something - that . . ."

Brian shook his head slightly, as if to shy away from a thought he did not wish to have. "I don't know," he admitted faintly. "Sometimes I think . . . but I really don't know."

McClaren studied his expression, looking for - and finding, for just a moment - a trace of vulnerability. "Okay then," he said finally. "Let's go in and . . ."

"Tomorrow," Brian said quickly. "Sufficient unto this day . . . well, let's just say that I've had enough, for today."

"I thought Brian Kinney never got enough." The comment was accompanied by a quick roguish grin.

Brian smiled and shifted so that his lips were just brushing against the soft skin under McClaren's jaw-line - the perfect angle for nuzzling and licking and sucking and nibbling. "We've got all night to find out."

The FBI agent was immediately aware of the tightening in his groin, and one shift of the leg that was braced against his companion's abdomen confirmed that the very same thing was happening to Brian, causing his jeans to become incredibly full and tight.

He should object. He should insist that the session with Corey take precedence, that it was too important to delay. He should concentrate on his professional responsibilities.

Brian's smile was transformed into soft, sultry laughter, as if he could read every thought, interpret every nuance of reluctance, trace every pulse of desire.

McClaren frowned, not quite able to swallow a quick surge of resentment. He should refuse to be sidetracked. He really should.

But those lips were so tempting and moist, and that skin was so warm and perfect, and the scent of the man was so seductive and intoxicating, and that bulge was so thick and throbbing so intensely, and . . .

Fuck!

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

*Crossroads* - Robert Johnson
tbc
Chapter 32

Chapter 32

There might, she thought, be a more beautiful sweet young thing than Nicholas Avolar in Pittsburgh, but she doubted it. Not, at least, any more.

Brian Kinney, during his days of glory on the soccer field - and in his equally glorious early ventures into the flaming bright world of Liberty Avenue - would have qualified, but he was no longer eligible to be classified as either particularly sweet or particularly young. Not any more. Especially in light of recent events.

She took a deep, satisfying drag of cigarette smoke and wondered if he would ever feel young - or sweet - again.

Sharon Briggs had not been a regular smoker since her college days when she'd picked up the habit from the self-same 'sweet, young thing' she was now lamenting the loss of. But she still used the activity as a smoke-screen - pun intended - to provide her with common ground for establishing a rapport with co-workers and acquaintances in the process of fleshing out her undercover identities.

Like this one.

But back to her not exactly unpleasant observations about young Avolar.

Justin Taylor had been almost as beautiful, from Sharon's perspective. Except that she wasn't all that fond of blonds, although she had been reconsidering that preference of late, in light of her re-acquaintance with . . . but that was not germane to this particular moment. Nicholas was a rare combination of two worlds: black mother - a woman who had been in the employ of The Club since well before she was legally old enough to hold a job and who was, herself, quite lovely; and Hispanic father - a descendant, although on the wrong side of the blanket, of Spanish aristocracy, who had inherited none of the wealth but all of the patrician good looks of his noble ancestors.

Hector Avolar had not lived long enough to welcome his son into the world, falling to his death from the 28th floor of a skyscraper he was helping to construct in his job as a commercial welder, just two weeks prior to his child's birth, but his life had had a major impact on the boy's future nevertheless. The manner of his passing had closed certain doors to young Nicholas, and served to guide his path firmly away from the harsher environments of industrial labor.

Nicholas' mother - Millie - had made it her primary purpose in life to assure that Nicholas would never venture into the world his father had inhabited; he would not explore opportunities to develop potential skills in welding, or construction, or carpentry, or any of the other manual professions for which he might have been well suited.

Instead, Nicholas would learn about the service industry, which provided Millie's livelihood - such as it was.

Barring the unforeseen - or the virtually impossible - he would never be rich; she knew and accepted that. He would struggle, financially, throughout his life. But at least, he would not die as the result of a random industrial accident or a gust of wind pushing him in the wrong direction at the wrong time, or a careless misstep in overreaching for a tool.

It never occurred to the woman that there were other means in which a young man could lose his way - or his life - and, unless Sharon was grossly mistaken, the boy was currently trying to figure out
how to navigate safe passage through some shark-infested waters, right at this very moment.

Nicholas Avolar had several problems. Some, she thought she might be able to help him with, but others . . . for those he needed assistance that she probably could not provide. For those, he needed someone he could relate to more directly.

She concealed a smile behind her hand.

He needed his own version of Brian Kinney. Or so she thought. But she couldn't really be sure. The simple fact that he showed virtually no interest in her - had never so much as followed her with his eyes or noticed when her skirt was hiked up to reveal a shapely leg - might mean nothing more than an under-active libido or excessive shyness. She couldn't be 100% certain, of course, since she didn't have eyes in the back of her head, but a woman tended to know these things, instinctively. Still, it was debatable. While her gay-dar worked perfectly well on other lesbians, it left something to be desired in identifying the male members of the gay culture.

Brian would know; no doubt about that. But meanwhile . . . she thought she might ask for a judgment call by her current partner in crime who, according to the back story concocted for her newest persona, was both a homeless veteran currently living on the streets of Pittsburgh and her brother. The cover story was a little awkward; it did not flow as easily as other cover stories devised for her over the years, but the connection had been necessary, to gain entrée for her into the rarefied atmosphere of The Club.

It had been Jared Hilliard who had first connected with the Charles family in general, and Rachel Charles, cook extraordinaire in particular. Despite the degree of her talent - which was almost immeasurable - Miss Rachel, as she was always addressed in the ultra-formal environment of The Club, refused to identify herself as a chef, but she was instrumental in providing the opportunity for Sharon - currently masquerading as Shirley Harper - to apply for and land a position as the establishment's new assistant chef.

Sharon/Shirley sat now on the small concrete terrace designated as a smoking area for the staff, and watched as a 747 banked south for a landing at Pittsburgh International Airport. Off to the West, the sun was an arc of molten copper, a bulbous extrusion above the horizon, the framework of a new skyscraper painting stark vertical bars and ladders across its face. The building represented a real sore spot for the members of The Club since it interfered with the pristine nature of their view. They had mounted a concerted effort to block the construction, but, in this instance, their attempts had been thwarted. It wasn't often that they came up against someone with more money, more willingness to spend it, and more political clout than their own, but it still happened on occasion.

The members of the board - all of whom performed their duties in complete privacy since the identity of the board members was known only to Club members - had not been pleased with the City Planning Commission in this circumstance, but, ultimately, they had been forced to accept what they could not change. It would, however, grant them some future advantages; the next time they required a favor from the commission, their cooperation in this little venue would be remembered - and repaid.

It was politics as usual.

And all of The Club's employees were well aware of how the arrangement worked. Few places in the world were more grounded in the old, familiar principle: rank did, indeed, have its privileges.

The Club's membership would have been astonished to learn how much Sharon Briggs knew - firsthand - about such elitest privileges, as there was absolutely nothing in her demeanor or her superficial attitude to indicate even the slightest familiarity with the advantages of class and wealth. She had actually had some training in gourmet cooking - as in desultory French culinary classes for
The idle rich - which accounted for her familiarity with professional terminology, and thus she was able to excel in her new profession, thanks in part to her own affinity for cooking and, in no small part, to the natural skills and ingenuity of one Emmett Honeycutt, not to mention his willingness to share his expertise, for a good cause. Emmett had quickly agreed to provide tips for the undercover cop, finding it very amusing that he was instrumental in assisting in the scamming of such an establishment, in the certainty that any attempt on his part to set foot inside the hallowed walls of The Club would have undoubtedly set off proximity alarms. Or, as he termed them, "fag alerts".

On this particular night, for example, Sharon/Shirley had prepared a classic herb-crusted rack of lamb with rosemary potatoes, and Vietnamese caramel shrimp with coconut jasmine rice - both recipes newly developed by the flamboyant, mega-talented Auntie Em. The Club staff had been raving about the aromas wafting through the kitchen all afternoon and stealing little nibbles whenever an opportunity presented itself.

Now, her primary tasks were done, allowing her to take a breather while Rachel was putting the finishing touches on a variety of fruit parfaits for dessert. Time, perhaps, to exercise her other skills, the ones that made her uniquely qualified for her particular brand of police work.

"Come here, Nicholas," she said quietly, as she stubbed out her cigarette. "You've got a bit of a stain on your jacket." Her smile was slightly sardonic. "Wouldn't want to offend the Masters, now would we?"

"Christ! I hate that term," answered the young man, his frown reflecting more of whatever it was he was thinking than anything she might have said. But he came forward, nonetheless, knowing that she was right, whether he liked the terminology or not.

She took a dish towel from her apron and began dabbing at the tiny spot that marred the starched pristine whiteness of his sleeve. "Why? It doesn't really matter what they call themselves, does it? Especially when you know it's just more of their pretentious crap."

He had a nice laugh, she thought, as he chuckled softly. "Care to go upstairs and say that out loud?" he asked.

She favored him with a look of mock horror. "What? And get burned at the stake for spouting heresy? No, thanks, since we all know that paying homage to the idyllic little fantasy they've got going here is just part of the job description."

He looked up then, spotting a flicker of lightning in clouds off to the North. "Fantasy, huh? You make it sound like some kind of innocent little game. Like they're just pretending to live in a world that doesn't exist any more."

She nodded. "Isn't that about the size of it? I mean, no matter how much insulation from reality their money can buy, there's still a world out there beyond the gates of this place. It might never get close enough to touch them, but they have to know it's there, even if they don't want to recognize it. Bottom line is that they can't stop the march of time - not even with all their money and power."

His eyes were suddenly very dark. "Can't they? They do a pretty fair job of stopping it - here, in their own little corner of the world. And sometimes, it feels more real than what's outside, like we're all caught up in it. Like we wouldn't exist without it, you know? Sometimes..."

She waited a bit, before prompting him, hoping he'd continue on his own. But he didn't, suddenly looking as if he'd frightened himself with his careless words. "Sometimes?" she repeated.

His voice went very soft, barely rising above a whisper. "Sometimes it's like they forget I'm a real
person at all. Like I'm just some kind of cardboard cut-out or something. Just an object, who can't hear what they're saying and wouldn't care if it did."

She cocked her head, as if pondering his words. "I don't know how you keep your cool. To have to stand there and anticipate their every need, and pretend not to hear the kind of holier-than-thou, fundamentalist, pseudo-Christian crap that they use to justify themselves and their view of the world. I bet you hear some major bullshit, don't you?"

Abruptly, he pulled away from her. "That's good enough," he said sharply. "I'm just 'young Nicholas', you know. They probably wouldn't notice if I served them wearing nothing but a wifebeater and a jock strap."

She allowed a glint of predatory interest to flare in her eyes. "Oh, I doubt that, Honey. You're young and beautiful, and they may be old as sin, but they're not dead."

In spite of himself, he huffed a small laugh. "Now that's the kind of remark that could really get you burned at the stake. Ain't no sissy-boys in these hallowed halls."

Her smile was slightly arch. "Really?"

The tell-tale flash in his beautiful eyes was barely there, but it was enough.

*Bingo!*

He started to walk away, but she stopped him with a gentle hand on his forearm. "Hey," she said softly, "I know it must be really hard to put up with everything you deal with in there, but if you ever need to vent, well . . . I'm a really good listener. You know, I'm staying with Rachel, for now. Until I can find a place of my own, and she has a little open-house thing every Sunday afternoon. For anybody who wants to hang out, or sample some of her new dishes. Or whatever. Why don't you drop by? I know she'd . . ."

But he was shaking his head, preparing to raise the objections she'd expected. She had already plumbed Rachel's observations about Nicholas, and anticipated that this problem would come up. "Her son and I . . . we don't get along too well."

Remembering Hilliard's remarks about the younger Charles and his parroted comments about Brian Kinney and his "kind", she was pretty sure she understood why Nicholas and Buddy would not be friendly, but she knew that getting this young man into a more casual, less confined setting could be the key to unlocking the store of information she needed.

Information that he had. Of that she was all but certain, in that her instincts were insisting that he was the source she'd been seeking. There were others - including Rachel herself - who had provided interesting tidbits and small clues. But this young man . . . he was the answer to her prayers. Now all she had to do was convince him to talk.

Easier said than done.

Her smile grew warmer. "In case you haven't noticed, Rachel is not all that enamored with the little bastard herself these days. In fact, if it hadn't been for my brother and his - well, let's call it a timely intervention - young Buddy would probably be sitting in a jail cell these days. So look, I know Rachel likes you. She's always talking about how hard it must be for you to endure all the crap you have to take. So why not drop by? I hear she's experimenting with new cheesecake recipes this week. So how the hell can you resist that?"

He grinned abruptly, and her breath almost caught in her throat as she realized how young he really
was, and she felt a twinge of remorse that she'd been forced to manufacture a lie in order to draw him in. Rachel, in fact, had never expressed much sympathy for the boy - not because she disliked him, but simply because it never occurred to her to feel sorry for his circumstances. All of the employees of The Club inhabited the same, semi-twisted world, in which tolerating the condescension and arrogance of the patrons of the establishment was necessary to survival. It all came under the heading of accepting the status quo and living with it, in order to hold on to a job that offered security, semi-decent benefits, and a living wage. It was almost a feudal culture - a reality only found in narrow little sub-sections of a society that depended on the preservation of a long-standing arrangement between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', and it only survived if all concerned parties profited from its survival.

A grim parody, in a way, of government that existed only by the consent of the governed.

Sharon noted again how innocent the boy was - almost childlike - and that brought on another tiny pang of guilt, but she dismissed it quickly. Undercover cops couldn't afford the luxury of regrets.

"I do love cheesecake," he admitted finally.

She deliberately swallowed her misgivings and flashed him a brilliant smile. "The newest great American pastime - loving cheesecake. So you'll come?"

"You sure I'd be welcome?" he asked. "I mean, I always liked Miss Rachel, but . . ."

"I'm sure," she replied, ignoring a nagging memory of Buddy doing a mocking imitation of Nicholas offering up a serving of 'coffee, tea, or me'. If necessary, she would handle young Charles; doing so might even provide the perfect opportunity for her to vent some of the frustration inherent in practicing the patience necessary for doing her job. And she'd caution Rachel as well, who, although having nothing against Nicholas, had mentioned on occasion that his mother, Millie, was a 'flighty bit of fluff'.

It was time to encourage the building of alliances, which might, in the long run, prove beneficial to all parties involved. Even if the original purpose for the encouragement would be deemed nefarious, provided the parties ever found out about that purpose.

Nicholas was still hesitant, but finally, with a winsome smile, he nodded his agreement before straightening his once more immaculate jacket and heading inside to attend to the 'Masters' who were always assigned to his table. She watched him go, wondering if he really had no idea why he was so perpetually in demand. The quality of service he provided was excellent, of course, but no more so than any of the rest of the servers who catered to the needs of the exclusive members. He was attentive and conscientious and unfailingly polite and amiable, but so were the others.

There was really only one substantial difference between Nicholas and the five others who saw to the needs of the dinner crowd on a regular night. Nicholas was prettier; she knew that sounded slightly patronizing, even slightly sexist - in a backhanded kind of way. But it was also true, and it surprised her that the members seemed to be completely unaware that they were responding to the boy's lovely physical qualities without ever once realizing the slightly effeminate nature of his charms.

She thought it would have been hilarious, if it weren't so tragic. One day they would notice, when Nicholas was no longer such a sweet, young thing, and when they did, it would be the boy who paid the price for sins he didn't even know he was committing.

Sharon/Shirley glanced at her Timex - deliberately squelching an urge to lament the absence of her customary elegant watch - and noted that she really should be getting back to work. The 'Masters'
would undoubtedly be calling for her soon, to comment on the quality of her latest offerings. They
were always incredibly polite, even if their manner was infuriatingly condescending. Of course, they
would have ulterior motives too, in wanting to wheedle the recipes out of her, to present to their
private chefs at home, in order to please their various trophy wives. She should go in soon, and she
would . . . soon. Just as soon, she thought as she fished another cigarette out of her pack, as she paid
another little homage to the man who was responsible for so many things in her life, including her
presence here. The first drag was, as always, the most satisfying, and she gave a small nod to the
image that occupied her thoughts so frequently these days.

*Here's to you, Master Kinney - wherever you are.*

It would have been easy, of course, for her to learn exactly where he was, but she'd chosen not to
find out, in the theory that the fewer people who knew, the better. For Brian, safety now depended
on anonymity, and it pleased her to remember that she could not divulge - accidentally or otherwise
- what she did not know.

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Lindsey relaxed into the exquisite softness of the leather sofa in Brian's office, and allowed herself a
little sigh of relief.

It had been a long day, and she had Cynthia to thank for organizing everything and taking care of the
details so that Lindsey had nothing to do but go along for the ride. But she was still tired; everything
seemed to make her tired these days, and she almost slipped into a mindset which would allow her to
wonder why. Almost - but not quite; she caught herself just in time in order to avoid issues she was
not yet ready to face.

Cynthia, who was perched on a chair at the conference table, reading over a new contract agreement
with Brown Athletics, before affixing her signature to approve the terms, should - logically - have
been sitting at Brian's stylish desk; she was, after all, acting on his behalf. But she had never even
moved toward it when she'd led Lindsey into the room so she could get a look at Justin's latest work-
in-progress. Instead, she had maintained a deliberate distance as if someone was already sitting there.
Brian's desk was . . . Brian's, and she almost never allowed herself to sit there.

Lindsey was pretty sure it was because Brian's assistant had some kind of superstitious misgivings
about standing too long in his space, usurping his position.

It was silly, of course, but Lindsey understood it perfectly. She understood because she felt the same
way and knew how far she would go to assure that Brian could eventually come back to them and
resume his life, and if it involved silly little rituals and superstitions, then so be it. She would do
anything. Almost, including . . .

But she wasn't in the mood to delve too deeply into those possibilities either. Not yet anyway.

She sighed and closed her eyes. She'd been in Pittsburgh too long, as her partner kept telling her, and
she should go home. To Toronto. Only . . .

"Shit!"

She opened her eyes to see that Justin was massaging the fingers of what he always referred to as his
'gimp' hand, as he stood before the canvas he'd been working on for the last few days.

The painting was almost finished now, and it was . . . Lindsey sighed, thinking that she didn't even
have the words to describe it. She loved Justin; she really did. But she was also intensely jealous of
his prodigious talent, an ability she recognized as immeasurably beyond her own puny skills.

"You okay, Honey?" she asked, swallowing her tiny little surge of resentment. She would have given anything - almost - to be able to capture an image like that. To be able to capture Brian like that. The portrait was a masterpiece, truly worthy of its subject, and every stroke, every shade, every line of it shouted out the love of the artist for his model.

Brian needed to come home, to see this - to allow himself to understand it.

Lindsey took a deep breath, knowing that she had finally come full circle; that she had finally reached a point at which she could understand that her conflicted, complex motives in trying to persuade Justin to immigrate to the artistic mecca of New York City had been instrumental in generating something that might very well have destroyed the man she would always love, even though she had never wanted to love him. And the young artist, as well.

The bottom line was hard for her to accept, but it was unavoidable. Justin's talent, his genius, his ability - none of that mattered - if he didn't have Brian.

It had taken much time and more effort for her to accept it. Even harder was the realization that the reverse was also true. No one else would ever be to Brian what Justin was. No one would ever mean as much, and no one would ever replace Justin in Brian's heart, no matter how stridently Brian might claim otherwise.

"Fucking Chris Hobbs," Justin was muttering, motioning for his bodyguard to remain where he was, sprawled in an easy chair and paging through the latest edition of *GQ*. There was nothing that Boyle could do to remedy this particular problem.

Lindsey rose then and went to stand before the portrait, her face expressing equal parts envy and appreciation, taking in every exquisite detail.

"It's brilliant, Justin," she said finally. Then she turned to look directly into eyes so intensely blue that her own felt faded and washed out by comparison. "You're brilliant, but you're only at your best when you're with him."

Justin's smile was slightly lopsided. "So you've finally seen the light," he observed.

She nodded. "And I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

He sighed. "Don't apologize. You might have suggested it, but nobody twisted my arm to make me listen. Except . . ."

"Brian," she provided the name, without any nuance of doubt.

"Brian," he confirmed.

She folded her arms, and looked up to meet the gaze of the beautiful hazel eyes in the portrait. "Then we just have to be prepared to do a little arm-twisting of our own."

His laugh was filled with skepticism. "Twist Brian Kinney's arm? You're joking, right?"

But she knew what had to be done. "No."

"But . . ."

His rebuttal was interrupted by the rhythmic buzzing of the phone on Brian's desk.
Cynthia took a quick glance at the caller ID, which revealed the identity of the person on the other end of the line, and she raised her hand to signal everyone to be silent. She didn't give herself time to consider whether or not this was the right thing to do; she was just acting on instinct as she pressed the button to put the call on speaker.

"Mr. Kinney's office," she answered.

"Cynthia!" The name was a staccato bark expressing intense aggravation.

She smiled at Justin before responding. "You bellowed, Master?"

"What the fuck is going on?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to be a little more specific, Boss. I can't - quite - read your mind."

"You, Lindsey, Theodore, Honeycutt - none of you are answering your cell phones, and nobody's answering at the safe house where Gus is, and all I get is Mathis' voice mail. Where the fuck are you, and, most important of all, where the hell is my son?"

Cynthia closed her eyes, lifting one hand to touch fingertips to temple to ease an incipient headache. "Brian, I'm so sorry. Haven't you looked at your email? Everything is . . ."

"My laptop is . . . out of reach at the moment," he explained, leaving everyone to wonder what he might mean by that, and imagine the worst - or the best, depending on one's point of view. If he'd simply explained that he was sunning on the deck while his Apple was upstairs in the bedroom, they'd all have been relieved.

"I'm right here, Brian," called Lindsey.

"Got you on speaker, Boss," said Cynthia, not wanting him to feel ambushed by unexpected listeners. Only . . . she looked at Justin, and her concerns were plain in the frown lines on her forehead. On the other hand, the glow in Justin's eyes spoke volumes about how contented he was just to hear that voice.

"What are you doing there, Lindsey?" Brian demanded.

"Cynthia was kind enough to have some of your security people drive us to the airport, to put Gus and my father on a plane to Orlando. They'll be arriving at Disney World in a couple of hours, where they'll spend a few days and . . ."

"Are you sure that's a good idea," Brian broke in. "What if . . ."

"It's all arranged, Brian," said Lance Mathis, who was just walking in after a private discussion with Carl Horvath. "All reservations made under assumed names, the plane was a private charter - no names necessary - and a two-man security team is watching out for them every step of the way. Trust me, they'll be . . ."

"When it comes to my son's safety, I don't trust anybody."

"Brian," said Lindsey firmly, "it's all right. Everyone put their heads together and decided that he's better off down there, hobnobbing with Mickey and Minnie, than up here. Plus he was getting a little antzy. He . . ."

"What? He what?"
She took a deep breath. "He's his father's son, I'm afraid. Too smart by half, so he's figured out that things are not as they should be. And he misses you. We needed to distract him. The Magic Kingdom seemed the best way to do that."

"Shit?" It barely registered as a whisper.

"What?" asked Cynthia quickly.

"Nothing. It's just that I wanted to be the one to . . . " He paused for a moment. "It doesn't matter. Just so he's okay."

"He's better than okay," said Cynthia. "He seems to be developing a lovely friendship with his grandfather, and . . . after a visit to Mickey, he's coming to see his dad."

"He's what? Wait a minute now. I didn't agree to . . ." 

"It's okay, Brian," said Mathis. "The FBI will be in charge, every step of the way. He'll be perfectly safe."

Brian paused, obviously thinking hard. Obviously wanting to believe, but still afraid. "Are you sure enough to bet your life on it?" he asked finally.

Mathis blinked - once. "I am."

"You better be." He didn't actually voice the threat his words implied, but then again, he didn't have to.

"Brian?" That was Lindsey, doing a little blinking of her own. "How . . . how are you?"

The pause this time was brief. "Right as rain, Wendy. How are you?"

Justin could not - quite - contain a snicker, and there was another pause, longer - and more loaded.

"Asshole," muttered Lindsey, hoping to cover the awkward moment, but then, with his next words, she realized she should have known better.

"Since when," he asked, "has my office become a social center . . . for misfits?"

"Hey, Brian." Justin was still smiling.

Slighter pause, but just as pregnant. "What are you doing there?"

"Actually, I'm painting."

"My walls don't need a fresh coat."

"Very funny."

If he'd been hoping to embarrass Justin, it was obvious that it wasn't working. Another pause, followed by an audible deep breath. "What - exactly - are you painting?"

"You."

"Me? Why would you . . ."

"You should hurry home, Brian," said Cynthia. "To see it. It's incredible."
Another pause, punctuated by a faint roar that might have been waves breaking on a shore. "Funny. I thought you had to be in New York to do that."

Justin's smile went wistful. "Yeah. How stupid is that, huh?"

But Brian was not even close to backing down or backing off. "Makes perfect sense to me. Now, where's Theodore?"

Cynthia looked at Mathis for an answer, but he could only shrug. "I don't exactly know," she admitted. "He's been really busy."

"Yeah. I'll bet." Lindsey and Justin exchanged puzzled looks when they picked up on a strange note in Brian's voice.

"Brian?" Justin's tone was soft, almost wistful.

A brief hesitation. "Yes?"

"Are you really . . . all right?"

"More than all right. I'm fabulous. You didn't really expect anything less, did you? I'm Brian Kinney, for fuck's sake. Remember? So you don't have to feel obligated to hang around, waiting to do your duty because of some ridiculous ideas about 'commitments'. You're free to move along. To get on with your life, you know?"

Cynthia and Lindsey both winced slightly, glancing toward the young artist while trying not to be too obvious about it. But, to the surprise of both of them, Justin did not appear to be particularly perturbed by Brian's blunt assumptions. "Yeah," he said, still speaking softly. "I know."

"Cynthia," said Brian, his voice gone very self-assured - almost purring - and very dangerous. "You and I need to have a little talk - privately."

She bit her lip and squared her shoulders. "Whatever you say, Fearless Leader." Her voice was steady, resolved, without a trace of a tremor, and everybody in the room wondered how she managed it when it was obvious that Brian was very, very angry.

"Brian," said Justin, having figured out that his presence was the flashpoint for the man's resentment, "don't . . . "

"Don't," Brian interrupted, "tell me what to do. You don't have that right - any more."

"I don't?" Justin replied, his voice almost without inflection. "Okay then. What right do I have? The right to care about you - to want you safe." He paused then, and his voice fell to a near whisper. "The right to need you to come home?"

There was a sudden thumping, as if Brian had dropped his phone, and a pause before he started speaking again. "Cynthia, pick up the phone."

"Brian . . ." Justin tried again.

"Now." There was no arguing with the sharp, direct clarity of the command.

Cynthia took the time to favor Justin with a sympathetic smile before following her orders, retrieving the mobile handset from its cradle.

"Hold on," she said crisply, "while I put on my armor."
"Why?"

She'd expected his manner and his voice to be hard and harsh and strident. Instead, it was very soft. Too soft.

She deliberately turned and walked out into the lobby and into her own office, where she could speak privately. "You want the truth," she answered, "or a comfortable lie?"

"You even have to ask?"

She felt her cheeks flush crimson, realizing that she had crossed a line. Whatever else he might have asked her to do for him over the years - and there was plenty that he couldn't very well brag about - he had never once asked her to lie to him, or protect him from truth, no matter how unpleasant it might be.

She took a deep breath. "All right then. Here's the truth, as I see it, and you don't have to tell me that you don't like what I'm going to say. I already know that. But it needs saying, Brian, and you need to hear it, from someone who won't lie to you. You know that about me, if you don't know anything else. I'll probably do plenty of things in my life that I won't be proud of, but I will never, never, lie to you, because . . . Well, you know why. So here it is: you're wrong, Brian - wrong to turn your back on him. Wrong to try to push him away. Wrong to think that he's better off without you. You can't see this particular truth, because you're too busy believing that he's going to get hurt because of you.

"But here's the thing. There is nothing - nothing - that's ever going to hurt him as much as losing you." She paused then, drawing another deep breath. "You're his life, Brian. Just like he's yours. And if you refuse to accept that - refuse to recognize that you're nothing without each other - you might as well just kill yourself now, and him with you."

"You finished?" he asked finally, after a long, breathless pause.

"Depends," she answered, "on whether or not you listened. Did you?"

"Oh, I listened. I heard you loud and clear, but now you need to hear me. What difference does it make that he needs his soul-mate in order to live life to its fullest, if he's dead? That's what none of you seem to understand. The people who did this to me - you think they're just going to be content to crawl away to hide under a rock and lick their wounds and accept the fact that they didn't get what they wanted?" He paused again, and she heard the hoarse intake of a breath drawn through a throat tight with fear. "You weren't there, Cynthia. None of you were there, to feel what was in that room that night. There's no way for you to understand that kind of hatred; you have to experience it to know what it's like. I don't know how to explain it. They wanted to kill me, but . . . but it was so much more than that. I was ready to die, if that was the way it had to be, but when they told me that . . . he would be next . . ." Silence once more, heavy with words unspoken.

"I - will - not - risk - that. Better he lives a long, dull life - never realizing his dream of a glorious romance - than be slaughtered by those monsters, without ever even getting a chance to spread his wings. Do you understand me?"

"And you?" she retorted. "What happens to you?"

She heard his sigh clearly. "Nothing. Nothing happens to me."

But she understood it then, as clearly as if he'd explained it to her. Nothing would happen to him, because there was nothing left that mattered. "Because you're already dead," she whispered. "That's it, isn't it? Without him, you're . . ."
"Late," he interrupted. "That's what I am. Late for an appointment with my Panzer-division physical therapist. So . . . One more thing, Tink. Keep an eye on Theodore."

"You think he's got something else up his sleeve?" she asked, reluctant to allow the change of subject but knowing that Brian had already closed and locked the door on something he did not want to explore further.

"Not sure," he answered, "but you know how it is: getting screwed once tends to encourage faggots like me to engage the rear guard. I am not gonna get fucked again."

"That sounds an awful lot like a thirst for revenge," she pointed out, without bothering to add that he wasn't usually so bloodthirsty. "A nasty thing to hang your hopes on."

The little laugh he offered was more bitter than sweet. "Maybe, but it'll do - when it's what you've got left."

When she walked back into Brian's office, everyone was waiting for her, waiting to hear what she would tell them - Justin most of all.

"You appear to be all in one piece," he observed, the smile on his lips not reflected in the shadows of his eyes.

"Battered," she replied, "but unbroken."

Justin nodded, and applied one more stroke of dark paint to a lock of hair just skimming Brian's temple in the portrait. Then he laid the brush aside and moved to the sofa where he collapsed into a boneless heap and covered his eyes with paint-stained hands.

"I've lost him," he said slowly. "Haven't I? He's never going to let me get close to him again."

"Justin, he . . ."

But he was shaking his head. "You don't have to explain it. I know what he's doing, and why he's doing it. It's not like it's the first time, although I guess it is the first time I ever recognized it for what it is, before making a complete ass of myself. But it won't make any difference, will it? Whether he's doing it because he's a hard-hearted shit who doesn't care about anybody but himself . . . " He paused then, and had to fight to regain his crumbling composure before he could continue, "like he's always done his best to make us believe, or because he can't stand to take the chance that I might get hurt, because of him. Either way, the result is the same. He'll never let me get close. Will he?"

Cynthia was standing staring out the window, listening to what Justin was saying and then to the soothing words that Lindsey offered in an attempt to comfort him, but she was also listening to something else. To her own voices, her own memories - her own conscience.

"You're right," she said suddenly. "He won't. Unless somebody refuses to take 'no' for an answer."

Lindsey frowned. "So, what . . . you're planning to back Brian Kinney into a corner? With what - a whip and a chair?"

"With whatever it takes," Cynthia replied, walking toward the boss's desk, her movements brisk and decisive. "But it's something that only Justin can do. The rest of us can offer moral support, but . . ." She turned to him with a winsome smile, "in the end, it's going to be up to you."

But he was shaking his head. "And how - exactly - do I do that?"
Her smile grew wider as she picked up the phone. "One on one, and face to face, Baby boy. Face to face. This is something you can't handle by long distance, and something no one else can do for you. Now gather all your stuff together, Picasso, and get out of here."

"What?" His eyes were suddenly huge and filled with confusion. "Why? You're kicking me out? But . . ."

Cynthia gave an exaggerated eye-roll. "Jesus! You're an even bigger drama queen than he always claimed. I'm not throwing you out. I'm sending you home to pack."

"But . . ."

The eye-roll became a gentle smile. "You have a plane to catch."

His smile was bigger, brighter, more dazzling than hers as he secured his masterpiece and went racing out the door, with his bodyguard running at full speed, trying - vainly - to keep up.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

If anyone walked into the house, she knew she'd be busted. There was no one in her extended family who didn't know that she only dusted the tchotchkes when she was upset - or worried - or trying to make up her mind about something.

Like now.

She put down her dust cloth and moved to a low cabinet from which she removed an old bulging scrapbook. She set it carefully on the kitchen table and lowered herself into a chair, noting as she did so that the catch in her back was acting up badly today. Usually, she could ignore it, or just pretend it wasn't there, but it always seemed to get worse when she had something heavy on her mind.

Like now.

She opened the cracked cover and allowed the book to fall open where it would, and realized, that she had known instinctively what it would show her.

Michael and Brian. Fifteen years old, laughing together, mischief glowing in dark eyes, arms wrapped around each other's shoulders. Best friends, boys on the verge of becoming young men - happy together. At that moment.

But it had been fleeting happiness for one of them. She knew that. She'd always known that.

And that was part of what was troubling her now.

She had watched Brian endure the torment of his life with Jack and Joan Kinney, and, although she'd tried not to know too much - see too much - in the end, she'd known more than she wanted to. While she and her brother had worked together, day and night when necessary, to care for Michael, to make him feel loved and cherished and adored and to give him every advantage that they could, they had also tried to extend the warmth and joy of their household to provide a home for Brian as well, to give him what his parents could not, or would not. But they had never quite reached their goal. How, after all, did one compensate for parents who seemed to have no love in their hearts for their own son?

Brian had found a way, somehow, to accept that ugly truth at an early age, but Debbie had never quite managed to do so.
A child should be loved by his mother. More than that - a child had to be loved by his mother, and if Joan Kinney had not been able to demonstrate that love or assure Brian of its existence, then there had to be some terrible reason for her silence, something that held her back, kept her from speaking out - something like the brutal bastard she'd been married to. Debbie didn't know much about fathers, since her own had died when she herself was just a child and Michael's, of course, had never been a real part of their lives. But she remembered Jack Kinney, or - more accurately - she remembered the damage he had done to his son - the bruises and the blood and the broken bones and the look in those gorgeous hazel eyes when the young man would appear at her door in the middle of the night looking for help and refuge - and someone to stop the bleeding.

If Joan Kinney had never shown Brian that he was loved, it had to have been because she was too afraid of her abusive husband, and, by the time the old monster was dead and buried, too much damage had been done for her to be able to figure out how to fix things.

Yes, that had to be the way of it, because a child had to be loved by his mother. Debbie believed it still, and something inside her just could not give up hope that a way could be found to make it right. It was that very same belief that had driven such a wedge between her and Michael during the entire J.R. custody debacle - a nasty little period in their family history that she would have preferred to forget - if she could. That had all worked out in the end, thanks to . . . Well, never mind the how and why. It had worked out, and nothing about it had disproved her original conviction.

A child still belonged with his mother - even if that child was no longer a child. And especially if that child had been beaten and traumatized and targeted for destruction.

Debbie sighed. Who would ever have believed it? Who would ever have identified Brian Kinney as a victim? And finally, who could have foreseen that he would ultimately remove himself from the family that had been there for him all these years and push away the only people who had ever really loved him, even if they didn't always show it?

There had to be a way to make things right between mother and son, and among the extended family as well, and maybe - with a little luck and a bit of divine intervention - just maybe she could be the one to achieve it, to fix what should never have been broken in the first place.

But first, if some of the concerns which had recently been brought to her attention proved to be accurate, it seemed that a way had to be found to get around people who were determined to block any path to reconnection - people who might be honest enough in their desire to help and protect him, but who were not, ultimately, family, and thus, were undeserving of the kind of trust Brian had granted them.

Debbie didn't know Cynthia Whitney at all well; she only knew that Brian trusted her implicitly, and that he was usually a very good judge of character - when he wasn't thinking with his dick instead of his head, anyway. But this had been a strange period of transition for Brian, a time when he might have been too confused or disillusioned or vulnerable to manipulation to be as careful as he should have been. And Debbie had not cared for the things that Cynthia had said to her little extended family while Brian was still lying comatose in his hospital bed. The woman had skated very close to some old, thin-ice issues - speaking of private things that she had no right to bring up at all, and Debbie was not inclined to forgive or overlook what she considered to be a kind of emotional trespassing, in areas that should have been private and not subject to exploration by outsiders.

And that was the bottom line, wasn't it? Cynthia, though she might mean well enough, was still an outsider. Not entitled to claim membership in the extended family, no matter that Brian might disagree.

A shrill chiming sounded from the oven timer, and Debbie rose quickly to remove her pineapple
upside-down cake from the oven, before her token 'bread-for-breaking' could become a burnt offering. The aroma that filled the kitchen - rich with brown sugar and cinnamon - stirred memories of Sunday afternoons during Michael's adolescence, memories that led to other memories - specific memories, some of which she needed to suppress in order to get through the next few hours.

She poured herself a cup of coffee, and sank back down into her chair, her eyes once more drawn to the lines and angles of that exquisite face looking up at her, drawing her in, forcing her to remember things that she ordinarily refused to acknowledge.

The face that should have been that of her son's lover and partner.

And that, of course, was the one truth that she had never allowed herself to explore too deeply, the manifestation of the one sin she had never been completely able to forgive.

Brian had always loved Michael; no one could argue with that; loved him so much, so completely, that he had protected him, sheltered him, fought for him, defended him; been there for him whenever he was needed. Always. Only - for all the love and devotion, there was also one simple, unavoidable truth; as much as Brian had loved Michael, he had never once been in love with him. Sadly, tragically, the reverse had not been true, for Michael, though he'd never once admitted it, had always been in love with Brian. He'd just been smart enough to figure out that admitting that, or acting on it, would have been the one sure way to force Brian out of his life. Not, of course, that Brian didn't know it. Debbie was pretty sure that he'd always known it. But he'd still loved Michael enough - like the brother neither of them had ever had - to allow Michael to work out a way to deal with it. And deal with it, he had, in the only way he could. By swallowing that feeling, and accepting the only love that Brian was able to give him.

Michael had managed to live with it, and Debbie occasionally contemplated the strange fact that she had been the one who couldn't - quite - accept it. For all her brusque manner, for all her acrid observations about Brian and his narcissism and his vanity - which he never bothered to dispute or deny - the truth that she had never admitted to anyone was that her only real resentment of beautiful Brian was that he had never even considered assuming the role she thought he should have played - the one which would have identified him as Michael's partner and her son-in-law, and if there was some tiny little element of entitlement in her attitude, of feeling like he owed a debt to the family that could only be repaid by accepting the role for which they'd primed him - well, that was nobody's business but hers.

Bright, beautiful, intellectually gifted, successful - what mother would not have wanted him as a mate for her child? Especially when that child - deep in his heart - would never find a way to love anyone quite as much as he loved Brian Kinney.

She'd tried very hard never to let anyone see the anger within her - the natural resentment of a mother who only wanted her son to be happy, and also wanted - just a little - to have the right to brag about a rich, beautiful, successful son-in-law.

She loved Ben, and she was grateful that Michael seemed to be very happy with his choices. She had been ready to love David, too; had enjoyed fantasizing about being able to introduce him as "My son-in-law, the doctor", even though she had eventually come to see him as the smug, shallow, self-absorbed snob he'd proven to be. But, at odd moments like this when she allowed herself to explore her true feelings, she knew that no one else would ever quite fill the shoes of the person she had always visualized as the perfect mate for her son.

It was, of course, never going to happen now - had, in fact, never been a possibility in the first place, although accepting that truth had been a really bitter pill to swallow.
She loved Brian; she really did. But she had also resented him, for not being the person her son had needed him to be. Resented him so much that, when a young, blond twink had come along and managed to work his way inside the armored shell that Brian had worn for so long, in spite of his best efforts to push the kid away, she had felt some small thrill of satisfaction, and done everything she could to help the kid find his way through. And when the boy had managed, against all odds, to hurt the mighty, invincible Kinney, by running off with his pretentious little fiddler, she had been unable to resist a feeling of vindication, even of triumph, in realizing that Brian was as vulnerable, in the end, as any of the rest of them, even though a small, guilty voice deep in her mind insisted that she, of all people, should have known that all along, since she had been there from the start, to watch him grow into the man he'd been forced to become in order to survive.

Later, after everything that happened to the two of them, and all the hurt they both endured, she would feel ashamed of that pettiness, but there was no denying that some small part of her would forever resent the powerful passion that drew Brian and Justin together, forever lament that it was not her beloved Michael who was able to inspire that passion in Brian's heart.

It had taken her a very long time to relinquish that dream. And now, there was only the reality of the moment to deal with. But there were still things to preserve - worthy things, valuable things, things that would serve to build a bridge from the comforts of the past to the unknown landscape of the future. Only somebody had to make sure that everything that mattered, everything that had created those valuable things, did not get broken and discarded in the rush toward tomorrow.

Brian was gone, but he would not be gone forever. Would he?

She took a deep breath, as she realized that this was the question that had to be asked and answered; that it was the reason she was sitting here on her day off, awaiting the arrival of a group of individuals that would certainly qualify as 'strange bedfellows', all of them connected only by a single thread - Brian Kinney. And all of them waiting, in one way or another, for him to reach decisions that would impact their lives.

A glance at the clock over the stove revealed that she had been sitting here brooding for too long. Time to get ready to greet her guests.

She moved quickly to check her face in the mirror, to tuck a coppery curl behind her ear and make sure her lipstick was still red enough and her mascara still where it belonged instead of smeared under her eyes. One tug at her t-shirt, which bore the saying, "Let's Get One Thing Straight - Bush Knows Dick", scrawled under a cartoonish sketch of the president wearing a shit-eating grin. It was her current favorite, and she had donned it in the certainty that it would not please some of her guests, but they would just have to deal with it. She was who she was, and she would not pretend otherwise - not for anyone.

The buzz of the doorbell came exactly on time, and she hurried to answer it, taking a deep breath when she realized who were the first to arrive of her expected guests. It wasn't quite a miracle, she guessed, but it was close. Who would have dreamed that Joan Kinney and her daughter would ever have come calling on Liberty Avenue?

Michael alternated between staring into his coffee cup and glancing up at the faces of the people around him, and he didn't bother to try to conceal a small degree of incredulity - something that he saw reflected in his husband's eyes when they exchanged glances. This was one of those moments which proved the old adage that truth could be stranger than fiction.

The group assembled around the Novotny kitchen table was a motley assortment of individuals, most
having virtually nothing in common, with only one tie binding them together.

Brian Kinney.

Best friend of Michael, pseudo-foster son of Debbie, friend (sometimes) of Ben, employer of Ted and Emmett, acquaintance and one-time agent of Drew Boyd, son of Joan Kinney and brother of Claire DeFatta, perpetual rival of Melanie Marcus, and co-parent/adolescent semi-sweetheart of Lindsey Peterson, who was the only person present who looked even more confused than Michael and Ben.

Debbie had served her cake and poured coffee for everyone before they'd all settled into their places and waited for what would come next.

Since it was her home and - in some small way - her idea to call this meeting, although hindsight would later convince her that she had been neatly manipulated into it, Debbie felt it was right for her to speak first, although she couldn't quite settle the squeamishness in the pit of her stomach, as she realized something. Neither Michael nor Lindsey was going to like this, and - if Michael and Lindsey didn't like it, chances were that Brian - should he ever find out about it - was going to like it even less. But if she didn't do something, if someone didn't take action to make sure that all was not lost, then . . .

"I guess there's not much need to mince words here," she said firmly, clasping her hands tightly on the table in front of her and noting that she had a broken nail that needed attention. "We're here about Brian. Obviously. Now it's pretty clear that a lot of what has happened is out of our control. Not that we don't care, but there's nothing we can do that's going to make any difference. But . . ."

"But what?" Michael asked abruptly, not at all happy with the tone of his mother's voice. "What is it that you're getting at, Ma? Why did you call us here?"

Debbie took a deep breath. "This should be a family matter, and it's just not right for outsiders to assume that they have the right to interfere in family matters. Joan called me yesterday . . ." She pretended not to see the bright glint of anger in Michael's eyes. "I think you all know how I feel about mothers and children." This time, she turned deliberately to single Michael out to offer him a semi-apologetic smile. "And it hasn't always made things easy for any of us. I know that. But . . . a mother shouldn't be cut out of her son's life, especially when that son is in danger. Joan is going out of her mind with worry, and any mother would understand that." She looked up then to meet Lindsey's eyes. "Wouldn't she?"

Lindsey looked away, feeling the weight of Joan Kinney's gaze as she did so. Lindsey knew things about Joan, things that Debbie, apparently, did not know. And yet . . . she thought about Gus, and how much like his father he was turning out to be. And then she thought about how she would feel, if she were in Joan's shoes now. The woman had made terrible mistakes, had rejected Brian and everything he believed in, had caused him terrible anguish and pain during the early years of his life, before he developed that emotional armor that finally allowed him to survive her cruelty, and even more of the same when she'd found out who he really was. And yet . . .

She turned then and looked directly into Brian's mother's eyes. Could it be that this tragedy might turn out to have at least one positive consequence? Might it have taught this woman what a treasure her son had turned out to be, in spite of his parents' horrible mistakes?

At Lindsey's side, Melanie was very careful to keep her eyes down, her attention focused on the hands that were clasped tight in her lap. The last thing she wanted to do was give any indication of what she was really thinking, of her realization of what an opportunity this whole thing might prove to be for anyone sharp enough to bide her time and wait for the right moment.
"And then," continued Debbie, "I spoke to Teddie, and . . . well, he's concerned about how things are going at Brian's company. About how his wishes are being ignored or twisted around to allow certain people to take advantage of his absence."

And that was as far as some of the individuals sitting at the table were prepared to go.

"You're talking about Cynthia," said Lindsey coldly, "and that, frankly, is none of our business. We have no right to interfere with the arrangements that Brian made. Including leaving her in charge."

Melanie reached out to grasp her partner's arm, suddenly realizing that she'd assumed too much, counted her chickens too quickly. "Linz, wait," she urged. "You haven't heard it all yet. I know you want to trust her, to believe that Brian knew best, but what if you're wrong? There's a lot at stake here, and . . . ."


"No," said Ted sharply. "It's not about money. Or not only about money anyway. It's about following Brian's lead, and protecting his back."

"Look," said Melanie quickly, jumping in to reinforce Ted's contentions and to deflect any attempt to make this a discussion about attacking or defending Brian's choices. "I know you all want to believe that Brian thought this through carefully, and maybe he did, but how can we be sure of that? It wasn't like he had a whole lot of time to prepare for all this, and how are you going to feel if you just assume that everything is all right, and then find out that you were wrong? Lindsey," she turned to her partner to offer a plea for understanding, "I'm not about to try to pretend that Brian and I have managed to work out all our problems. We haven't and probably never will. But even I can't deny that the man has worked his ass off to make a success of his business. And, despite our differences, I also have to admit that he loves his son, and what happens now could have a direct impact on Gus's future. If you take all of that into account, don't we have an obligation to make sure that Brian's interests are protected?"

She leaned forward then to take Lindsey's hand and press it to her lips, while Lindsey made a concerted effort to ignore a niggling suspicion that the whole speech had been carefully planned and rehearsed for maximum effect. Then Melanie offered up an enigmatic little smile, before turning to Ted who nodded to signal his gratitude for her support.

The accountant took a deep breath, and chose his words carefully, knowing that he was venturing onto treacherous ground. "Look, I know this is difficult. That's why I hesitated to bring it up at all. But I feel like it's part of my job - not to mention my duty as a friend - to try to make sure that his trust is not misplaced. That no one takes advantage of the situation, and that he doesn't get hurt any more. Isn't that what friends are supposed to do?"

But Michael was still unconvinced, his eyes filled with apprehension as he and Lindsey exchanged speculative glances. "What are you talking about, Ted? What makes you think Cynthia is ignoring his wishes?"

Ted squared his shoulders and took another deep breath, buying time to gather his thoughts. "Do you know where Justin is, right this minute, hmm? Do you know what she did, where she sent . . . ."

"As a matter of fact," said Lindsey, as Emmett rose and moved to stand behind her, "I do know. So do Emmett and Michael. Not the specific location, of course. The FBI has been pretty insistent about keeping that secret. But we know where he's going, and who sent him."
"Well, I don't," said Debbie, obviously irritated with the hidden currents that were racing around under the surface of the discussion. "And it's really rude to talk in circles like this and keep the rest of us out of the loop. So what exactly . . ."

"Justin is on a plane, Ma," said Michael. "He's on his way to the place where Brian is staying."

"Which is . . . where?" Debbie replied.

"Which is classified as need to know only," Lindsey said, "and none of us qualify."


"You know, don't you?" drawled Emmett, staring at Ted with speculative eyes. "Not because they told you, but because you figured it out. What was it? Did you follow the money? Is that how you know?"

Ted frowned, helping himself to a big bite of cake and wondering why it was suddenly so difficult to swallow. "It doesn't matter how I know. It wasn't all that hard to solve their big mystery. In point of fact, I actually know more than Cynthia does, but she's the only one who's authorized to contact him. How is that logical or fair?"

Emmett shrugged. "Maybe it's not, but then again, it's not really true either. She's not the only one who can call him. I can, if I need to."

"What?" Ted's eyes were suddenly huge. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that he called and gave me a number. In case of emergency. I can reach him, if . . . ."

"You?" Ted's face had gone very still and very red. "Why would he give you a way to reach him?"

Emmett responded with a very characteristic eye-roll. "He didn't bother to explain, but I assumed it was because he left me in charge of running Babylon for him. But you know Brian. He's not big on explanations."

Ted turned then to stare at Lindsey. "And I suppose he called you too?"

She nodded. "I am the mother of his only child."

Ted didn't look as if he found that explanation particularly relevant.

"Who - exactly - is this Justin?" asked Brian's sister suddenly, obviously growing weary of the endless bickering. "My brother's what? Boyfriend? Lover? Or - what's the term that you guys are so fond of - his trick?" There was no mistaking the contempt in her voice. "Did Brian want to see him?"

"No," answered Ted. "He didn't. And that's my point. This was not according to Brian's wishes. His precise instructions were exactly the opposite of what Cynthia has done, and not just in this particular case. In so many other things as well. She's betrayed him, by doing what he specifically forbade her to do. She's . . . ."

"What are you doing, Teddie?" Michael's voice was soft, but surprisingly cold. "How can you accuse her like this, when you have to know that she's risking everything, in order to try to keep him from making the biggest mistake of his life? How can you . . . ."

"But it's not her decision to make. He should never have trusted her," Ted observed, his dark eyes glinting with anger. "Why would he trust her like this? What's she ever done to earn it?"
Not quite able to resist temptation, Melanie sat back from the table, releasing her partner's hand as she did so, and responded with a cold little snicker, barely above a whisper. "You mean besides kissing his ass?"

The room was suddenly very still, as Michael and Emmett exchanged knowing glances, both struggling to ignore the nasty little remark as if the woman had never spoken at all. "I don't know, Teddie," said Michael finally, sounding unutterably weary. "What have you?"

Ted spun to express his outrage at Michael's presumption, but found that he was not only facing the young man who had been his secret love for so many years; in addition, Emmett and Ben and Drew Boyd were all gathered around Michael, obviously ready to support and defend him, and none of them looked like they were in a mood to tolerate Ted's denunciation or the queen-out he was contemplating as his next course of action.

"Please," said Joan Kinney suddenly, looking up from the plate which held her piece of cake - untouched, "I don't know what any of this has to do with what's happened to my son. I just want to know . . . that he's all right. And that someone is looking out for his interests so that he doesn't come back to find that he's lost everything that he cares about. His business - his success - has always been what he treasures most, so . . ."

Michael turned to stare at her then, and there was no mistaking the blaze of bitter resentment in his dark eyes. "That you could say something like that," he said coldly, "just proves one thing. You've never known him at all."

"Michael!" Debbie barked, folding her arms and fixing him with an angry stare. "She's still his mother. She's entitled . . ."

"No," Michael replied, pushing back from the table and closing his eyes briefly, experiencing a rush of warmth as Ben wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "She's entitled to nothing. You might have forgotten, Ma, because it's easier not to remember everything they did to him, everything he went through. But I'm not ever going to forget it. Or forgive it."

"Look," said Debbie, giving up on any hope she might have had for conducting a friendly little chat over cake and coffee, "I'm not trying to make excuses for anybody. But can we really be sure that this Cynthia isn't taking advantage of the situation? You heard the things she said to us in that hospital room. Things she had no right to say, so how do we know . . ."

But Lindsey - like Michael and Emmett - had heard enough, and raised her eyes from her untouched cake to regard her companions with barely controlled disbelief. "Because everything she said that day was absolutely true. We've all spent years taking advantage of Brian - using him, abusing him, depending on him to pick up the pieces - and the tab whenever we needed him. As of right now, Cynthia is the only one who's consistently stood up for him, calling us out to answer for all the bullshit we've used to defend ourselves - to excuse our own behavior."

"You can't be serious," snapped Melanie, dark eyes suddenly aflame, as she surged to her feet, fists knotted, realizing that she could no longer swallow the outrage rising within her. "How delusional can you be? What is this - some kind of sick movement to nominate that narcissistic little shit for sainthood? He's spent his whole life using people and taking advantage of everybody around him and being a heartless bastard, and you're all so fucking besotted with him that you're willing to believe anything to keep from having to face the truth. Jesus, is he ever going to have to pay for the damage he's caused and the harm he's done?"

"Correct me if I'm wrong," said Emmett into the deep, shocked silence that followed her outburst, "but isn't that pretty much what the homophobic motherfuckers said after they almost succeeded in
killing him?"

He took a moment to look around and meet the eyes of everyone in the room, before turning and walking to the door, with his brawny lover at his side. For his part, Boyd looked as if he could not quite believe what he'd heard - and as if he'd be only too happy to never hear it again.

"I have no idea what you're planning to do," said Emmett softly, pausing in the doorway and looking back over his shoulder. "And, in truth, I don't care. You can do your damnedest to interfere, to force Brian to do what you want, or to make Cynthia answer to you. Whatever. But I'm pretty sure that I'm right about this: you're wasting your fucking time, because she's a hell of a lot smarter and tougher than you think she is, and, when all is said and done, Brian is going to know who his real friends are. Just like he always does. But as for me, I refuse to have any part of it."

"Emmett, wait," said Ted, striving for calm. "Where are you going? Don't you see that we're just trying to protect him?"

"What I see," Emmett replied sadly, "is a pathetic little game that's all about some kind of stupid pecking order, and who gets to be first in line to demand Brian's gratitude."

"How can you even think something like that? Haven't we always been there for him? Why shouldn't we have the right . . ."

"Right." Emmett's voice was barely audible now. "That's really what it's all about, isn't it? Rights. Your right to expect things from him. Your right to demand your 'rightful' place in his life. Your right to judge whether or not he deserves your loyalty, while you never seem to stop to ask yourselves whether or not you deserve his." He paused then, and looked once more around the room, his eyes coming to rest finally on Debbie, and there was no mistaking the deep, abiding sadness that touched his face as he stared at her.

"Shame on you," he said very softly. "Shame on you all."

Then he was gone, and Drew Boyd lingered in the doorway just long enough for his face to express what he couldn't say - a deep, profound and bottomless disappointment he dared not voice, for fear that it might expand and sweep him up into an irrepressible rage.

On the porch, Emmett was waiting for him, his green eyes filled with shadows, but he managed to dredge up a winsome little smile for the man who was proving to be the greatest - and, hopefully, the final - love of his life. "I'm reminded of something Brian once said," he offered as he snuggled into the arm that Drew wrapped around him, "although in a completely different context."

"Yeah? And what would that be?"

The smile grew slightly warmer. "That fags and dykes can fuck up their lives too, just like straight people. I might be wrong, of course, but I think that some of the people in that room are just about to find out how true that is."

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The sound of footsteps faded quickly as Emmett and Drew hurried away from the house, and it seemed, for a while, that nobody could figure out exactly how to break the silence. Until Joan Kinney got to her feet, and regarded her hostess expectantly.

"If everyone here feels that way, then I suppose this was a waste of time," she said coldly. "I probably should have known better than to expect understanding or help from . . ." But she could not quite bring herself to finish the sentence, leading Lindsey to wonder, once again, whether or not the
woman might have actually learned some kind of lesson.

"A complete waste of time," muttered Claire, picking up her purse and shrugging into a faded denim jacket.

"Now wait a minute," said Debbie sharply. "Emmett . . . he's just very emotional lately. He was there, you see. When Brian got hurt. He saw it all, and he's been . . ."

"Having a hard time with it," said Lindsey, her eyes daring anyone to dispute the truth of it. "Like anyone would." She and Michael exchanged understanding glances. "I think he's grown a lot closer to Brian since it happened - that they're a lot closer to each other now. And I don't really think he's wrong to question what happens next. So . . . what does happen next? Teddie? Debbie? Mrs. Kinney? What exactly are you planning to do?"

"Somebody has to stand up for Brian," Ted replied. "To make sure that Cynthia sticks to his plan, does what he wants, instead of running things to suit herself - and running his business into the ground. She may enjoy pretending that she's as capable and as smart as Brian Kinney, but she's not. You have no idea what kind of damage she could do to him, and it's up to us - his friends and his family - to watch his back and protect his interests."

"How?" said Michael. "You can talk plainer than that, Teddie. What are you planning?"

"We need to go in and talk to her, face to face," Ted answered firmly. "Present a united front so she knows that we're all together on this, that we're only concerned with making sure Brian's orders are followed."

Michael and Lindsey looked at each other, and then Michael turned to study the look on Ben's face. To everyone's surprise, it was the professor who spoke up then, resolving the issue swiftly and solemnly.

"I see no harm in us going, as a group, to speak to Cynthia, in order to express any concerns about how she's operating the business, according to Brian's plans and policies. Although it does seem a little weird to me that we should feel competent to face off against this young woman, when most of us don't know a thing about the advertising business. Also, we'd probably do well to remember that any attempt to come on too strong could look like ganging up on her, which might not sit too well with Brian, if he were to find out. But there's a bottom line here, a basic truth that everyone needs to understand very clearly." His eyes were suddenly hard and unflinching. "This is about Brian, and what he wants. And it doesn't matter in the least if any of us like or approve of his choices."

He looked directly at Melanie then, daring her to dispute his contention, and it was obvious that she wanted to do so. But she didn't quite dare, choosing instead to bide her time and rein in her blatant resentment of the man who was the biological father of her son - a fact that she would never quite be able to forget - or forgive.

Melanie had become a master at picking her battles.

"Because, in the end," Ben concluded, "it's really none of our fucking business."

Ted swallowed hard, wanting to argue, but managing, by virtue of a valiant effort, to keep his mouth shut, as Lindsey nodded and regarded the professor with an approving smile. As for Michael, his face morphed into a wide grin, and he demonstrated his delight with Ben's little speech by leaning over to give his husband a deep, passionate kiss, involving heavy tongue-action, leaving Joan Kinney and her daughter to figure out where to look to avoid having to witness such a disgustingly public display of affection.
Debbie looked around her kitchen, at empty coffee cups, and slabs of pineapple cake - mostly untouched - and tried to swallow her own misgivings around a huge knot in her throat.

She had allowed herself to be convinced that they were doing the right thing - something that needed to be done, and she held tight to that belief as she escorted the Kinney women to the door with a promise to advise both mother and daughter when the time for the proposed meeting was set.

But she kept seeing the look in Emmett's eyes, and hearing his voice as he'd walked away from them all, and she couldn't help but wonder. Were they really doing this for Brian, or were they just deluding themselves - and, if they were, were they about to incur the wrath of the mighty Kinney?

It was a thought she quickly pushed away, deciding that there were some things a person was better off not knowing.

Brian sat at the bar in the sunlit kitchen of the beach cottage, and pushed his plate away, resisting an urge to grab his fork and scoop up the remaining bites of the scrumptious shrimp salad and the last piece of bruschetta that Trina Thomas had prepared for him.

Brian Kinney did not do clean plates, and Trina was looking at him as if she knew it perfectly well and was planning to make it her life's work to change that strange little personality quirk.

"Dessert?" she asked, managing somehow to wrap those two syllables in multiple layers of her lovely, semi-musical Jamaican accent - something he doubted anyone else could have accomplished.

He lifted one eyebrow in response, as he sucked on the straw of his pina colada. "I thought that's what I was drinking," he retorted.

Her smile was complacent, even slightly self-satisfied, to celebrate the victory it had taken almost two weeks to achieve. For each of the first twelve days after Brian's arrival in the house, Trina had prepared her unique, special version of her family's traditional pina colada recipe - an original creation that was almost patent-worthy - served it up in a crystal goblet, presented it with a proud flourish, and insisted that he taste it. And on each of those days, she had been forced to either pour the lovely, rich cocktail down the drain - or drink it herself, which was definitely not a hardship. On day thirteen, she had finally worn him down and he had capitulated and agreed to taste the tropical concoction, but only if she swore on the lives of her children that she would never talk about his lesbianic lapse to anyone.

On that occasion, he had refused to comment on the quality of the drink, but by the time he'd risen to walk away from the bar, his glass had been empty.

Since that day, he'd accepted one - and only one - of her signature cocktails each day at lunch, never offering a definitive response except on the one occasion when she had presented it to him enhanced with a bright pink umbrella, a dollop of whipped cream, and cherries on a toothpick. He had simply raised one eyebrow, folded his lips into his mouth, and waited.

Umbrella and cream and cherries had vanished, as if by magic.

"It's too late, you know," she said with a happy smile. "You're ruint, fer sure."

That trademark eyebrow climbed toward his hairline, and his lips curled into a quick smile. "Ruint?"

"Um, hmmm. Next thing you know, you'll be guzzling frozen daiquiris and sharing chocolate-covered strawberries with your sweetie."
In spite of himself, Brian burst out laughing.

"Now that's a nice sound," she observed. "One I haven't heard from you lately."

He shook his head. "If ever."

She heaved a deep breath, and Brian studied the way the sunlight glinted against the deep bronze skin of her face. Trina Thomas was middle-aged, obese, with wiry salt-and-pepper hair, deep-set eyes, broad, blunt features, and a terrible overbite; yet she was possessed of a strange, rare, natural beauty, which had more to do with the person inside than what was on the surface of the body. Brian was slightly surprised to find that he was able to discern that beauty. He was pretty sure that, at one time - not so long ago - he would have missed it entirely.

"You've got another session scheduled with Madame Fuehrer, right?"

Brian took another slurp of his drink, and wondered how he would manage to talk her out of her recipe for this little concoction when he was ready to go back to Pittsburgh, and how he'd manage to prepare and drink it without anybody knowing about his new addiction. Or maybe the best thing to do would be to just take her back with him.

"How'd you guess?"

"You got that look on your face, Sugar. Like the little voice in your head is screaming, 'How the shit did I git myself into this mess?'"

Brian slurped again, and smiled. Then he looked up and met her gaze directly. "You still disapprove of me, Trina?"

She moved a little farther away from him, concentrating on her task of wiping down the ceramic tile of the countertop. "It's not that - exactly."

But Brian's smile did not waver. "Really?"

She sighed then and met his gaze squarely. He admired that in her, that she didn't try to hide from him, or shrug off his questions. "Just look at you," she said softly. "Sweet Jesus, young Brian, there ain't a woman anywhere in the world that wouldn't fall on her knees in gratitude for a chance to belong to you. You're just everything any woman could want. You're bright and smart and funny - and rich, unless I miss my guess - and not too fucking hard on the eyes either. You could have a perfect family, beautiful wife, lovely children, and with all that, what do you choose to do? I just don't understand it, that's all."

His smile was surprisingly gentle. "And that's where you're making your mistake, Friend. It's not a choice. It's who I am. And, if you're right - according to my sainted mother - I'm going to burn in hell for it. Do you think I should?"

This time she was the one with the gentle smile. "Don't go there, Kiddo. Yes, I was raised as a southern Baptist - God help me. And yes again, you are deep in the heart of a part of the country that has more than a blush of redneck to it, but I don't presume to judge whether or not folks ought to burn in hell. I got enough trouble dealing with my own sins to worry about yours. Only . . ."

"Only what?"

She leaned forward quickly and cupped his face with her huge hand. "What a waste!"

He laughed again, and knew that her remarks shouldn't make him feel better. She was straight -
completely, irrevocably - and not even remotely gay-friendly. Yet, she made him laugh, and he found that he was glad he could talk to her and listen to her comments without resenting her attitude. Straight and misguided, maybe, but not the least bit homophobic.

He could live with that, and he was slightly surprised to realize it. *Shit!* Could it be that he was really growing up - that he was leaving behind his Peter Pan fixation and moving on? *Shit!* He looked up again and surprised a fond smile on the broad face of the woman who was enjoying the view of him sitting there in the sunshine, and that led him to think about the people in his life whom he had decided to trust. The group was very restricted - as always - but it had recently expanded a bit in some ways and contracted a bit, in others, and some of the names on that list caused him to blink and come to a reluctant conclusion.

He thought about Debbie Novotny and Carl Horvath, about Lance Mathis and Trina Thomas. And most of all, he thought about Cynthia . . . and Ted Schmidt, and was abruptly reminded of the lyrics of an old song: *The order is rapidly fadin', And the first one now will later be last, for the times they are a-changin'.* 

*Shit!*

He allowed himself a tiny, reluctant, almost embarrassed smile. It appeared that, in his own way, he was just as resistant to change as some of his less sophisticated friends.

And that was how Chris McClaren found him, sitting shirtless and shorts-clad in a pool of sunlight, finishing the last of his girly-drink, and wearing a perfect, enigmatic smile. The agent paused momentarily in the doorway, and took a moment to admit - though only to himself - that he would almost certainly never see anything more beautiful in his life, even though Brian's injuries were still not completely healed. It didn't make much sense, but it appeared that the flaws only served to emphasize the fundamental perfection.

He looked up then to meet the eyes of their Jamaican-born cook, and flushed slightly when he saw that she had read his mind easily. He knew that Trina didn't - exactly - approve of Brian or of him, or of what they got up to together, but he refused to be embarrassed by her regard. With a quick grin, he moved forward and braced his hands against Brian's shoulders, thinking to ease any tension he might find in those beautifully sculpted muscles. But one touch reassured him. There was never any way of being sure he was gauging Brian's moods or thoughts correctly; the man was a walking enigma. But his demeanor and his posture and the easy strength of his body at this particular moment made it very clear that, whatever else he might be feeling, he wasn't tense.

Thus it was McClaren's turn to offer up a lopsided smile.

Alex Corey was waiting in the little room off the front entrance of the cottage that she had commandeered for her office, eager to continue her interview with the infamous Brian Kinney. Well, maybe "eager" was a bit of an exaggeration, since the previous two sessions hadn't gone exactly according to plan. In fact, McClaren was pretty sure that his boss - the world-famous profiler - had been taken completely unaware by the young man who had become the concerted focus of her interest since his head-first collision with destiny in that abandoned warehouse in Pittsburgh.

The simple truth was that Ms. Corey had dealt with virtually every variety of emotional condition during her years with the Bureau - everything from anger to fear, resentment to paranoia, defeatism to over-confidence, a desire to crawl into a hole and die as opposed to a bottomless thirst for vengeance - everything. But it seemed she had never before come up against anyone who was so keenly observant, so sardonically uninvolved, so effortlessly laid-back, and so capable of seeing the satirical humor in even the blackest circumstance that he had actually laughed at her. Well, not
laughed exactly. More like smirked, but the result had been the same.

Alexander Corey was unaccustomed to being laughed at.

"You ready to face the music?" the FBI agent asked, leaning forward and sliding his hands down the silken expanse of bare chest while nuzzling against the side of Brian's throat, just missing a small scar that was gradually fading into oblivion.

Brian took a deep breath. "Zero hour approaching, huh?"

McClaren nodded. "It is, if you want to hear all the nasty little details that you've been demanding to know. I assume you've finally realized that she's not going to change her mind on this. In order to get the full story, you're going to have to allow her to attempt to hypnotize you. I know you think it's bullshit, but I happen to agree with her. If we let you in on all the details first, it might contaminate your legitimate memories."

Brian pushed himself up, ignoring the cane that was lodged against his bar stool. In typical Kinney fashion, he had begun to fight to wean himself of the need for any kind of crutch. "You're lecturing again," he retorted as he grinned and winked at Trina, who was busily trying not to ogle the irresistibly delectable sight of two beautiful young men sharing an intimate moment. "And we could, if you'd only loosen up a bit, put our time to much better use than letting your Gestapo drill sergeant ramble around in my head. If you, for example, were to cast off the chains of servitude and tell me what I need to know . . ." The smile he then turned on his prime babysitter was so explicit and so seductive that McClaren wondered if St. Peter himself would have been able to resist it.

"Fuck off, Brian," he snapped.

But the smile remained in place, along with irrepressible glow in those spellbinding eyes. "That's exactly what I had in mind, McFed."

"She's waiting," said McClaren with an eye-roll, having long since realized that the surest way to perpetuate the nickname he really hated was to protest its use.

"What? Superwoman doesn't need food to prepare herself to inflict torture? Oh, wait, let me guess. She gets her energy directly from our solar system's yellow sun."

Another eye-roll - this one accompanied by a reluctant smile. "She ate at her desk."

Brian sighed loudly. "You could at least make some small attempt to get me drunk, before turning me over to get fucked."

It was said lightly, accompanied by a typically sardonic grin, but was there some little nuance of unspoken dread in that scornful tone of voice - something that revealed that it was not quite the smart-ass non-sequitur he had intended it to appear.

He did not speak again, before turning to walk to the front of the house, as McClaren and Trina watched him go.

The FBI agent deliberately turned away, looking out through the big window over the sink, to note that another storm was brewing out to sea, moving swiftly toward the shore.

"Storm's comin'," he observed softly, taking the seat that Brian had vacated, and reaching for the plate that Trina had prepared for him.

Thus, he was marginally astonished when she jerked it away from him, and leaned forward against
the counter until her face was only inches from his own. "Not nearly as big as the one that's going to happen in here if you don't get off your ass and go after him."

The man's lovely blue eyes were suddenly awash with shadows. "What? What the fuck are you . . ."

"You know something?" she interrupted, her tone harsh and unforgiving. "You FBI types are supposed to be so smart, so intuitive, so skilled at your 'profiling', but the simple truth is that you don't know jack-shit when it comes to what makes a man like Brian Kinney tick. He's so busy proving that he's big and bad and balls-to-the-wall brave, and all of you just buy into it, when the simple truth is that he's scared, and he's trying to find a way to face a truth he doesn't know how to handle."

She paused then, and her voice dropped to a barely audible whisper, but it still carried the depth of her compassion and the degree of her sorrow. "He's trying to find a way to survive something that he thinks might destroy him."

He hunched forward, picking up Brian's glass and draining the last drops of his drink. "That's how he wants it, isn't it?"

"Humph!" She glared at him and there was no ignoring the contempt in her eyes. "And here you sit."

"And what should I do?" he demanded hotly, unable - for a fraction of a second - to completely suppress his own sense of helplessness and rage. "I can't fix this."

Her expression softened then, as if she'd found what she was looking for, as if he had confirmed what her intuition was telling her. "Just hold his hand," she said finally, reaching out to wrap her own fingers around his. "Just be there."

He looked into her eyes then, and saw that she totally believed what she was saying, but he wasn't so sure that she was right. He wasn't so sure that any effort he might make to offer support or sympathy might not make things worse. "I'm supposed to go relieve Toby at the gate," he said, sidestepping the issue neatly.

"Where's Sonny?" she asked with narrowed eyes. Any change in the routine of the security arrangements was cause for speculation.

"Alex sent him on an errand, and you know how Toby gets when he doesn't get his lunch on time." She nodded. "You don't worry about that," turning away just to be sure that McClaren - who was a whole lot smarter than she usually admitted - would not notice the speculative gleam in her eye. "You see to Brian, and I'll go feed Toby" and find out exactly what's going on. She smiled to herself as the FBI agent paused for a moment, obviously thinking it over, before nodding and following Brian out of the room.

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* The Times They Are A-Changin' - Bob Dylan

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tbc
Chapter 33

What lies behind you and what lies in front of you, pales in comparison to what lies inside of you. -- Ralph Waldo Emerson

"This is as much for your benefit as ours." Alexandra Corey spoke with the kind of conviction that most people would have accepted without question.

Unfortunately - from her perspective - Brian Kinney was not most people.

He compressed his lips, not quite managing to suppress an impertinent smile. "How the hell do you figure that?"

She surprised him by offering a genuine grin - the kind that she very seldom allowed herself. "Because you're not content to be a victim," she answered, "and you know as well as I do that there's more there - locked up in your memories - than you've been able to access. It's not going to let you rest, until you know it all."

He was standing in front of the big bay window that looked out to the South, to where a series of dunes marched in haphazard order roughly parallel to the margins of the water until cutting sharply seaward to form a barrier and forcing the beach to take a jagged step back away from the open ocean, curving sharply into a sheltered inlet that just kissed a strip of dark, broken pebbles at the foot of a sheer headland. The wind was already rising, picking up droplets from the tumult of incoming breakers and dappling patterns of coins across the sculptured ripples of drifted sand that formed the crescent of beach at the leading edge of the water. The surf was mostly invisible from this angle, except where it crashed hard through the cove's opening and slammed against the slabs of stone at the base of the headland. It was not a particularly impressive visual display, except for those strange, almost timeless moments when the froth of the waves was caught by the oblique rays of sunlight and transformed into diamond brilliance that seemed to hover motionless on the threshold of perception, for the space of a heartbeat. Such moments, though stunning to the senses, were fleeting, but the sound of the waves hurling themselves against the stone was a deep-throated, perpetual rumble which provided an undercurrent for the occasional deeper roar of thunder rolling in from the open sea.

At this moment, the afternoon sunlight was still dominating the landscape, slanting in at oblique angles, but, in the vanguard of the approaching storm, it had taken on a hue like beaten gold, pouring down from a hard blue sky on the verge of receding before the towering thunderheads.

Brian had a momentary vision of how the landscape would look if captured on canvas - captured exquisitely by quick, decisive strokes - but he quickly dismissed the thought, before turning back to face his interrogator. "You want to see what's in here," he said firmly, lifting his hand to touch his temple with an index finger. "And I want to see . . . what's in there." His nod indicated the thick case file that was open on her desk. "All of it."

The FBI profiler sighed. "Brian, surely you don't expect me to . . ."

"Yes. I do."

She sat back in her chair and glared at him. "You have to know that there are rules about this sort of
thing - rules that forbid allowing just anyone to . . . "

"But I'm not 'just anyone', am I?"

His smile was so completely self-satisfied that she had a momentary urge to stand up and slap him. But she didn't, because, no matter how much she might want to argue his contention, she knew that he was right. And she knew something else, as well - something that she was not yet ready to reveal. The truth was that the investigation still ongoing in Pittsburgh was turning up plenty of forensic and circumstantial evidence which would probably provide sufficient proof to indict and convict the thugs who had inflicted the horrible damage on Brian's body, but it was almost certain that the hired muscle would have little or no information about the identities of the movers and shakers who had started it all. Thus, it was uncertain if enough evidence could be amassed to assure that the men behind the attack - the power brokers who had planned and paid for it - could be brought to justice. It was still a big question mark, and, in the final analysis, it might turn out that only Brian himself could provide the proof necessary to see that justice was served. Forensic evidence might be damning, but, without his corroboration, it might not be enough, since only he had been there, on the scene, from the beginning, and only he might be the key to unlocking the whole story.

"The only way you're going to get full access," he continued, "is to grant it."

Alexandra took several moments to compose her answer, using the time to study the look in his eyes, trying to read something that she couldn't quite identify. "You really don't want to do this, do you?" she asked finally.

It was debatable which of them was more surprised when he responded with quick laughter. "What was your first clue?"

She shook her head. "I don't understand you, Brian."

"Join the crowd."

She leaned forward and clasped her hands tightly, and he immediately understood that it was an effort to suppress an impulse to reach out and shake him. "Why?" she demanded. "What's so objectionable about something that's only meant to help you?"

"According to you," he snapped. "But you hardly know me at all, Agent Corey. And you don't have the first clue what I need - what would really help me. What qualifies you to decide what I need?"

She pursed her lips and adjusted her reading glasses so that she could look over them to study his face. "You really think I don't know you, Brian? That I would come into this without learning who you are, and what your life has been like?"

"I'm sure you've checked out my files, but that doesn't mean you know . . ."

She lifted one hand, took a deep breath, and began to speak, never once looking down at the file sitting in the center of her desk. "Born in Brooklyn, the younger of two children. Baptized Catholic, and took First Communion at St. Francis Cabrini at age eight, but were never confirmed. You were a premature baby and spent the first two weeks of your life in an incubator, but after that, you were remarkably healthy. Until you were five years old, when you contracted a severe case of pertussis and almost died of anaphylactic shock when they gave you erythromycin. You're also allergic to sulfa drugs and peanuts. At seven, you came down with scarlet fever which developed into pneumonia and landed you in the hospital for a week. You were small for your age until you hit a growth spurt at age nine, but you were always athletically gifted, especially in soccer and tennis. It was your love for soccer - and your skill - that got you a full scholarship at Penn, where you were MVP of the
league in your junior and senior years, and second string All-American. You got excellent grades in high school, aced your SATs, and tested with an IQ of 148 during your sophomore year." She paused to smile up at him. "That's probably declined a bit over the years, but you're obviously a pretty smart cookie, although you certainly got in your share of trouble. Suspended twice in high school - once for breaking the hand of a jock/football player (in self-defense, or so you claimed) and once for getting into a brawl with two older students, during which you managed to break the nose of one of them, and black the other's eyes. Both of them. No excuses offered that time, but a little digging revealed that it happened just a couple of days after someone - never formally identified - put your best friend, Michael Novotny, in the hospital with a broken jaw. You were voted Most Handsome and Most Likely to Succeed in your senior year. Sexually active from age fourteen, and openly homosexual from about the same time, you had your first STD at age sixteen. Through the years, you had more than your share of 'accidents'. Broken clavicle - twice. Broken ribs, three times. Broken wrist, a couple of concussions, too many lacerations requiring stitches to count. The ER nurses got to know you pretty well, although they never did see much of your parents. You've been working pretty much non-stop since you were eight - first job at a neighborhood bowling alley. When you were nineteen, you got an offer for a modeling contract with the Bellinger Agency in New York, but you turned it down." She smiled again. "Probably because you preferred a career where you might actually have a shot at becoming the boss one day, rather than spend your life working for someone else. You speak fluent French, a smattering of Spanish and Italian, still play a mean game of tennis, and developed an intense interest in Oscar Wilde during your junior year - an interest that continues today, if the books on your shelves are any indication. You graduated cum laude, celebrated with a trip to Monte Carlo where you won over $12,000.00 at the craps table, in spite of the fact that you were actually too young to be in the casino legally, and spent a week-end locked up in a love-nest with a famous European film star. When you got back, you went to work for Ryder, after negotiating a salary package that was extraordinarily generous for a brand new college grad."

She paused and regarded him with raised eyebrows. "Is that detailed enough for you, or should I expand and discuss what I know about your work history, sexual partners, professional achievements, financial holdings, favorite music and literature, your mother, your father, your sister, your internet preferences, political affiliations, client list, preferred porn sites . . . "

Brian folded his lips into his mouth to suppress a smile. "Well, you certainly collected plenty of facts, but that doesn't mean that . . . ."

"I'm a trained psychologist, Brian. The facts provide the foundation, but the rest . . . well, it's what I do."

"And I," he retorted, "have spent my whole life avoiding letting shrinks dig around in my head. It's one of the secrets of my success in life."

"Afraid of what I'll find?"

He grinned. "If I'm afraid of anything, it's that you'll manage to fuck up something that's worked perfectly well for me so far. I just don't see the need."

"Yes, you do."

"What? No, I . . . ."

"Look, you arrogant, stubborn little prick! You think I don't understand what you've had to deal with all your life? You think I haven't done my homework? I've checked you out completely, Brian. Talked to everyone who ever had a major impact on you. Well, almost everyone. I deliberately avoided a couple of individuals because their views of you are so skewed by their feelings that I felt
it best to wait til later to speak to them. But I know about your family, your circumstances, your history. From everything I've managed to put together, I know that your methods for handling all the shitty things that have been a part of your life have been remarkably successful. The fact that you survived it and managed to flourish in spite of it is astonishing. I'd give you a standing O - except for one thing. Whatever else your methods might have accomplished, they did not prepare you for this. Dear God, there is nothing that could have prepared you for something like this! Not even for the mighty, invincible Brian Kinney."

She stood up then, so that they were on the same level, so that they were eye to eye. "You need help now, Brian, to find your way through this, and I can give you what you need. If you don't allow yourself to be helped . . ." She paused then, spotting a fleeting uncertainty flaring in his eyes. "Do you realize that you flinch away from human contact now? That the only people who are allowed to get close to you - physically - are the people in this house? You even flinch away from Dr. Turnage, when he tries to check out how well you're healing. Oh, you're able to force yourself to allow him to do what he must, but your body goes completely rigid under his touch, and you almost stop breathing."

She sat back down then, and smiled up at him - a wistful, sad smile. "Is that how the Stud of Liberty Avenue intends to live out the rest of his life? Unable to allow anyone to get close enough to touch him?"

Brian's face had gone very still, his jaw-line rigid, as if set in stone. "You're wrong."

"No," said a voice from the doorway. "She's not."

Brian twisted quickly - so quickly that he almost lost his balance - and Chris McClaren leapt forward to lend a supporting hand. "You don't even know you're doing it," he said firmly, "but you do. We've all seen it."

Brian stiffened within the arms that were helping to hold him upright. "It's just that I don't particularly enjoy pain," he almost growled, before dredging up a smart-ass smirk. "S&M isn't my thing, and I get tired of being poked and prodded."

McClaren pulled back slightly to gaze into shadowed hazel eyes. "When we go to bed, you fall asleep in my arms," he whispered, "but then, during the night, you shrink away from me, and, if I attempt to pull you back, it's almost like you panic, like you're locked up in some kind of fight-or-flight reflex. And if I get too close, you . . . sometimes, you talk in your sleep."

What he did not say - and never would - was that it wasn't actually talking. It was more like a breathless cry for help, as if Brian was almost able to do in dreams what he had never learned how to do in reality - ask for mercy.

"I do not."

"Yes. You do."

Brian looked, for a moment, as if he might demand further clarification, but he didn't. Then he looked as if he wanted to argue - almost certainly would have argued with anyone else. But there was an elemental truth here that he could not afford to ignore. Whether he was happy about it or not, he truly had come to trust McClaren, and he couldn't afford to doubt him now. Unless he wanted to find himself finally, utterly, completely alone, he was running out of options.

"Shit!"
The two men stared at each other, and Alexandra Corey experienced the uncomfortable sensation of being completely invisible - and unnecessary.

"You need to do this, Brian," said McClaren, lifting one hand to caress a pale scar on Brian's forehead. "The simple truth is that nobody could endure what you have without carrying some kind of scars from it. And the only way to heal from it is to let someone help you." Then he smiled - a gentle, self-deprecating smile. "You and I - we've worked out some of it together. Our fucking has been as much about therapy as physical need. But it can only take you so far. You need to be able to process it all - get it out of the shadows of your mind and into the open. For that, you need someone like Alex."

Brian huffed a little sigh. "Couldn't I just fuck your brains out?"

McClaren grinned. "Maybe later."

Alexandra Corey cleared her throat. "Would it be easier for you," she asked, "if Chris remained with you while we do this?"

Brian looked up to examine the expression on the face of the man who was currently warming his bed at night and guarding his back by day. "Only if he wants to."

It was as close as he could come to an admission of need.

McClaren frowned, but his eyes were twinkling. "I don't know . . . it would mean giving up my chance to watch Oprah and guzzle Margaritas. But I guess I can spare a few minutes, to help out a friend."

Brian smirked. "When did we get to be friends?"

"We've always been friends," McClaren whispered, softly enough so that only Brain could hear.

Something glinted then, deep in Brian's eyes - like light reflecting in the heart of an emerald - and McClaren was sure he was going to be ridiculed for a silly romantic notion. But in the end, Brian said nothing, letting a tiny, lopsided smile speak for him.

"Very well then," said Alexandra Corey firmly. Then she fixed McClaren with a solemn glare. "Just remember that you're only here to lend moral support. Silently."

Neither he nor Brian could completely suppress an urge to grin, but they managed to keep any smart comments to themselves.

"Sit down," she continued, gesturing toward the disreputable leather sofa, which was shabby and badly worn in spots, but still surprisingly comfortable.

"I'm not lying down on your couch," said Brian, not quite pouting - but close.

"As you wish," she replied absently, obviously considering how to proceed. "I don't think it will make any difference."

"Meaning?"

She smiled. "Meaning that this whole thing might be a big waste of time. Either way, I don't think it's going to be easy."

"Meaning?" His voice was just slightly colored with growing impatience.
"Meaning that people respond to hypnotic induction methods in lots of different ways. Some succumb quite easily. Others . . ."

"Never succumb at all," he interrupted, a tiny smile touching his lips. "Care to speculate on which I might be?"

"I'd rather not," she answered. "If it works, it works, and if it doesn't, there's no point in wasting time on speculating. Now I just want you to . . ."

But he was lifting his hand to silence her, taking a quick glance at McClaren before speaking again. "Before we do this, I want to know what - exactly - to expect."

She drew a deep breath. She had rather hoped to avoid that particular question, but realized that she should have known better. Brian Kinney was many, many things, but clueless wasn't among them. "I'm pretty sure you already know the answer to that," she said gently. "The only way to get to the truth - the whole truth - is to take you back to the scene of the crime. To make you remember it, exactly as it happened."

"I was afraid you were going to say that."

She smiled. "No. You knew I was going to say that. Now, I'm not about to lie to you and tell you this isn't going to be a horrible experience. It is. You're going to re-see it - re-live it all. Except that you're not going to re-experience the physical pain. That we can avoid, but . . ."

He looked down at his clasped hands. "There are more kinds of pain than just the physical," he observed.

"Yes," she admitted. "There are. And that . . . I wish I could spare you that too. But I don't think it's possible, and, even if I could, I'm pretty sure it wouldn't resolve your problem. To bring it all out into the light - and put it behind you - you're going to have to open yourself up and let it surround you again."

When he didn't respond, except for drawing a deep, hoarse breath, she continued. "I'm sorry, Brian, but I don't think there's any other way. And, until you are able to pull it up and see it all, I don't think you'll be able to expel it from your mind or your life."

He confined his response to a sharp nod, and she pretended not to see the gleam of apprehension in his eyes. Instead she took a moment to activate the video recorder set up on her desk. "Okay, now," she said when she had adjusted its settings, "I need you to relax."

And it was at that moment that he erupted into bright, ringing, beautiful laughter - the infectious kind that inspired and invited and compelled others to join in, and McClaren was quick to respond. Even Corey had to smile.

It didn't last long, but it did serve to ease some of the tension in the room.

"Maybe we need something to focus on," said Corey. She turned to the credenza behind her desk and retrieved a plain white, fat, unscented candle which she then ignited and set on the table in front of Brian.

He cocked one eyebrow. "You realize, of course, that you're indulging in the worst kind of cliché."

"Just stare into the flame," she replied, ignoring the sarcasm, "and let your mind drift."

Brian spent a moment thinking about where his mind would drift - if he let it. Then he decided that
he should try to focus, and maybe - with a little luck - he would manage to live through what was ahead. He started slightly when he felt his right hand clasped by gentle fingers, and the ghosting of velvety lips against his palm, and realized that it had become a bit easier to relax, to let go of the apprehension . . . to breathe.

"That's very good," said Corey softly, as she rose and quietly closed the shutters that would effectively block out most of the exterior light from the room. "Now I want you to study the flame. Watch how it flickers as the air moves around it. Let go of everything else. Imagine that everything that might distract you is burning away, turning to ash. Just let it all go."

Brian sighed, and felt a slight shifting in his consciousness, a tugging that seemed to signify that he might be needed . . . elsewhere.

But of course, it would not be that easy.

An hour later, all three of the individuals sitting in the room were beginning to chafe at the bit and to wonder if this whole thing had been an exercise in futility. Brian, of course, most of all.

"I am trying," he almost snarled, as Alexandra Corey leveled a cold gaze at him. "Did it ever occur to you that the problem might not be me? Maybe it's your technique that's not quite up to snuff."

Corey closed her eyes briefly, and Brian could see that her lips were moving, but she made no sound. It was the first time he'd ever wished he could read lips, but then again, he was probably better off not knowing what she was deliberately keeping to herself, especially since she was scheduled to go picking through his brain. If only they could find a way around whatever was blocking the process.

Corey sighed, and took a moment to reconsider their options. Then she looked up and studied the physical dynamic between her subject and his defender. "Okay," she said after a while, "let's try a different approach."

She stood up and moved to a cabinet in the corner of the room. When she returned, she set two highball glasses and a bottle of Jack Daniel's Single Barrel whiskey on the table in front of Brian, who responded with a characteristic smirk. "See?" he said to McClaren. "I told you it'd be better to get me drunk before the fucking. Although . . ." The lifted eyebrow came into play again. "I can think of a faster, easier way to achieve . . ."

"Don't push your luck," Corey replied. Although she had shown herself willing to overlook certain minor illegalities that might go on when her back was turned - figuratively speaking - she was not prepared to grant further official sanction for them.

McClaren looked at the glasses; then he looked at her. "Two? Why two?"

"He needs to relax," she explained, "and he's used to drinking with you."

Brian's smirk had morphed into a grin. "Is this standard procedure?" he asked, reaching out to accept the drink she had poured for him.

"Nothing about you is standard," she answered, not quite muttering, forcing McClaren to turn away quickly to conceal the smile he could not quite suppress, as Brian tossed back the shot of rich, dark whiskey in one swallow.

She folded her hands again, and looked directly into Brian's eyes. "You've spent your whole life
building walls around yourself. It's your defense mechanism, and it's allowed you to survive all the crap you've had to live through, but it makes it almost impossible for anyone else to get inside. Which is what we have to do, if this is going to work. At this point, I'm willing to try almost anything, short of dosing you up with LSD. Now, pour yourself another."

Thus, for the next half hour, the two men drank steadily, barely speaking at all in the beginning, as they were both painfully aware of being observed, although Corey did make some small attempt to leave them to their own devices by pushing away from her desk and retreating into a shadowed corner. Initially, it was an awkward situation, but gradually, as the alcohol started to take effect, they relaxed and began to feel more at ease and natural, and less like subjects under a microscope. At that point, stiff desultory remarks shifted into good-natured bickering which grew into easy conversation, resulting finally in a warm, comfortable blend of laughter, gentle irony, and sexual innuendo - the normal camaraderie that existed between them. They had begun their little mini-binge by sitting stiffly side by side, with no physical contact, but that had changed as the level of whiskey in the bottle declined, so that, fortified by a bit of liquid courage, they ultimately wound up sprawled back against the leather of the old sofa, with legs and bodies entwined, heads braced against the sofa's cushions and sometimes against each other. Corey, meanwhile, was content to watch, feeling only a bit guilty over indulging her curiosity about the dynamic that had managed to turn relative strangers into comfortable companions in a remarkably short period of time.

It astonished her to realize that they were, in some ways, perfectly matched, although she wasn't quite sure why she found it hard to believe - and even harder to accept. Some part of her insisted that they should have been polar opposites, with no common ground on which to meet, and yet there was no denying that the bond that connected them - though oddly constructed and slightly distorted - was solid and strong and filled with riffs of laughter, and that the camaraderie between them was lovely enough to inspire any casual observer to indulgent smiles and, just maybe, some small stir of jealousy.

When Brian reacted to a ribald remark from his companion with a sharp bark of laughter, and reached out with a tender hand to wipe away a drop of whiskey that had spilled from the corner of the FBI agent's mouth, there was a rumble of thunder out over the water followed by the sound of raindrops rattling against the window, a sound which created an illusion of privacy, of being secluded and sheltered from the rest of the world and its prying eyes. McClaren smiled, having by this time completely forgotten the shadowy presence of his boss and her place in the corner, and leaned forward to taste sculpted lips and savor the shared sweetness of the fine vintage whiskey, and Brian, never one to be bothered by an audience, lifted his hands to card through thick, auburn-tinted hair and tilted his head to deepen the kiss, to allow the exploration of his mouth by a talented, invasive tongue, while a gentle thumb traced the soft skin under his jaw-line.

Alexander Corey watched, and knew that she should be ashamed of indulging her inner voyeur; knew that she should stop this now, but it was unexpectedly difficult because she was suddenly, absolutely, completely certain that she had never witnessed anything quite so beautiful or so erotic in her entire life. So she waited, just one moment more. And then one more, but finally knew that she had put it off as long as she could, that the time was at hand. She did however allow herself a tiny smile, understanding that she should feel privileged to have been allowed to witness such a lovely moment.

"Brian," she said softly, her voice barely audible against the tympanic rhythm of the rain, "it's time to look into the candle flame now. Look into it, and feel the warmth around you. Feel the softness of the arms that hold you; feel the safety of this place, and know that you will always be safe here. Feel the tenderness that surrounds you like a blanket, and take it with you as you move closer to the flame."
For a split second, Brian wanted to resist, to protest, to throw her words back at her - to tell her how ridiculous she was. But then he did feel the warm arms that held him and the warm heart that beat so close to his own, and he did know, somehow, that this man would keep him safe - would go to the ends of the earth to do so, if necessary - and that it was all right to let himself slip easily into the shadows that were surrounding him - still dark, still filled with pale specters he did not really want to see, but not, perhaps, quite so ominous or intimidating as they had been before.

He felt the lovely curves of the lips that touched his throat, clinched his fingers around the hands that held him steady, took a deep breath, and looked into the flame that flickered in the wind . . . a soft warm wind, like the breath on his bare skin. Soft, gentle . . . cooling, growing stronger and brighter, touching him . . . drawing him in as his hands flexed and touched . . .

The voice seemed to emerge from the shadows around him, sound without body, so soft that he had to concentrate to hear . . . to obey. "You're stepping closer now, into the light of the flame, but it doesn't burn. And as you move into that light, you also move back in time. Back to that night. Back to the moments before the attack. You're going to hear my voice, and respond to it, no matter what else is happening, and when I call your name, you'll answer any question I ask. You will remember everything, every detail, but you will feel no pain. And when the memory is done, I will call you back, and you will return to this moment, this room."

Brian trembled briefly, and looked as if he might argue with her, but, in the end, he didn't, choosing instead to settle more comfortably within the circle of McClaren's arms.

Corey resumed speaking, her voice softening until it was almost lyrical, as if reciting the words of a lullaby. "You're moving more quickly now, away from the now and into what happened then. You remember the feel of the night air on your skin, the wind against your face as you race through dark city streets. Now . . . where are you?"

_The powerful thrum of the big bike was a raw vibration between his legs - a reminder of the other kind of power that resided there - and he felt the frigid fingers of the night fighting to penetrate the supple leather of his jacket and the sturdy softness of his 501s. His hands gripped the handlebars of the Harley firmly, and he had a moment of confusion as he tried to reconcile the tactile memory of soft skin under his fingers and the warm cushion of his sturdy gloves. Something was not quite . . . Ahead of him - or above him, perhaps - a shadow seemed to loom, and he resisted an urge to swing away from . . . whatever it was that was waiting just beyond his range of vision. Just beyond . . ._ 

_The sensation was like flying . . . flying with . . . Hurry. The voice in his head rose from a low muttering to a primal scream - hurry, hurry, hurry, hurryhurryhurryhurry . . ._ 

_The darkness surged, and he understood that he had not - quite - hurried enough. Jumbled images, a kaleidoscope of sound and sensation, hands covering him - pulling, prodding, pummeling . . . voices rough and sharp . . . "and a pretty one too."_

"Brian, where . . ."

Brian shifted abruptly, his body going stiff and jerking away from McClaren's touch, but his verbal response was no more than a breath, barely above a whisper. "Fighting . . . for my life."

The FBI agent opened his mouth, but was silenced by a quick look from his boss; still, he knew that his purpose for being in the room at all was to do what he'd been doing for weeks - to watch Brian's back, so he gave as good as he got and glared at her in return, willing her to understand his concerns.

It only took a moment for her to remind him of how good she was at her job as she picked up on the same details which had caused his alarm in the first place. "Take a deep breath, Brian," she said
gently. "Breathe deep and easy. You will see it all, hear it all, and remember everything, but you are
in no danger. You're perfectly safe, and you will feel no pain. Understand?"

He did not offer a verbal response, but he did draw a deep ragged breath, and the lines of his body
relaxed slowly, allowing him to lean once more into McClaren's embrace.

... so many bodies, so much weight. Bearing him down, making it almost impossible to breathe.
Heavy darkness, metallic odors, shifting shadows ... "a night you'll never forget." Voices
murmuring, laughing ... "Goodbye, Sunshine ..." Being lifted and turned and slammed back against a hard surface. Fists
and booted feet coming at him. Feeling the skin beneath his eye split and the warm gush of blood
that erupted and ran down his face and flooded his mouth with its bitter copper taste. Strange - to
see it, taste it, smell it - even feel it, but without the pain. What the fuck?

Shadows turning, coming at him, spittle in his face, the stench of bad breath, bits and pieces of
words snarled ... "not so pretty now" ... "little fucker's got some pecs" ... "more targets last time,
but better like this" ... "see the damage, up close and personal" ... "want to eat my cock, pussy
boy" ... and the laughter, of course.

"They're laughing," he said in a strange, flat voice. "How does a man do something like this, and
laugh about it?"

McClaren closed his eyes, barely able to process the depth of despair contained in those few words.
Corey, more accustomed to dealing with such raw emotion - or just better at concealing her reaction
to it - responded in a soothing monotone. "It's all right, Brain. When you're done here, you'll never
have to deal with it again."

The time in the van - minutes, days, decades, no knowing which - had been a blur when it happened,
but not this time. This time, he saw it all, experienced it all, and managed, after a time, to process it,
understanding that it was all perfectly real, but that he, himself, was both there - and not there. He
was a witness, sitting on his own shoulder - experiencing it, reliving it, but insulated from the agony
of it. Only that, of course, was not quite true. He did not feel the physical pain, but nothing could
protect him from feeling the despair, the fear ... and the anger. Most of all.

Being dragged from the van, the rage within him almost strong enough to allow him to break free.
Almost - but not quite - causing the anger to grow more profound, more intense, more determined.

Four figures - cloaked in deep shadow.

"Cowards!" He wanted to shout it out, to say it aloud, to express his contempt, but he couldn't, of
course. Because he hadn't then. He felt a moment of regret for having missed out on the opportunity.

"Brian, tell me where you are, and what you see."

"I'm in the warehouse," he replied, his breath labored and harsh. "They're tying me to the iron gate."

"How many are there?"

"Five around me. Four in the shadows. Two more near the doors, and maybe more outside."

"Can you see ...?"

"You jealous because I wouldn't suck your dick?" A surge of satisfaction, despite the staggering
amount of damage to his body. The strange sensation of the big thug breaking his fingers, with no
residual surge of pain.

"... you're still gonna scream before we're done."

More taunts, more punches, and a new voice, rising from the shadows. "... flaunting yourself ... depraved lifestyle ... decent people ..." Something odd in that voice, something in the rhythm and pace of the diction that was almost ... familiar.

"You need to tell us what you're seeing, Brian. Take us through what's happening, so we can ..."

"They're getting ready to beat the shit out of me," he answered simply. "And they're telling me why I deserve it.

"One of the big bosses is talking now. He's ... different from the others, somehow. More powerful, maybe. Or more angry."

"Can you describe him?"

A pause and then, "No. He's just a shadow - tall, skinny, but his voice is ... colder than the others. More filled with hatred."

"Do you know him?"

McClaren had to fight to keep his breathing easy and silent, as he realized that this was a crucial question.

"No."

"Are you sure?"

A pause, and then, "Yes. I'm sure."

The worst, of course, was yet to come, following ... "no one's ever going to think you're beautiful again." He would deal with it - had always somehow known he might have to deal with such a thing. The true beating began - chains and cables and straps - ribs breaking, knee smashed, blood pouring - all without a single nuance of physical pain. But, as he'd reminded someone - somewhere, there were other kinds of pain.

In spite of the fact that all he really wanted to do was close his eyes and shut it all out, he tried to take it all in - to see every detail, hear every word, even among the shadows who were so careful to reveal nothing of their faces. He had, after all, promised ... somebody that he would do this. Although, if he ever remembered who it was, he thought he'd probably welcome the opportunity to beat the shit out of them.

More blows, more blood, more raucous laughter - and a murmur of words, faint, barely audible, coming from the shadows, accompanied by a sly chortle. "... hear that women fall all over themselves for him. Can you believe ..." and "... more personal, isn't it? More immediately satisfying. Too bad we couldn't get close enough to watch them bleeding and dying last year. Except for Brad ... ourse - lucky little shit. This makes up for it - a little."

But the rest of the conversation was lost beneath the curses of his attackers and the sounds of the impacts against his body.

He was flinching now within the circle of McClaren's arms, trying to twist away from the staggering power of assault after assault, and not quite successful at suppressing the moans and whimpers that
rose in his throat, and McClaren, helpless to prevent anything or to protect his charge in any way, could not quite help feeling a surge of anger toward his boss, as she allowed this horror to continue.

". . . Want to kiss my ass . . ."

"Fuck . . . you!" He was pretty sure that, in spite of the agony that he remembered, even if he couldn't actually feel it now, and the growing conclusion that his attackers were going to fall short in their attempt to spare his life in order to destroy it, nothing had ever felt quite so good as spitting out those two words.

Then came the blade, and he had to watch his skin split and peel back around it as the motherfucker carved shapes into his flesh, and the fact that he could not feel the pain did not, in any way, temper the instinctive need to pull free and run, to deny what his eyes were telling him.

Soft voice then, filled equally with vitriol . . . and satisfaction, just tinged with a trace of concern. "He needs to live . . . to suffer - to pay for his sins."

McClaren moved forward, wrapping his arms more securely around Brian as he noted that the man had gone stiff again, and begun to tremble. A glance at Corey told him that she had noticed as well, and that she was, perhaps, not quite so insulated from the man's ordeal as she'd tried to seem. Nevertheless, her eyes dared her subordinate to interfere.

"Go on, Brian," she said, without a trace of emotion. "Finish it."

"Time's up, Pretty Boy." The molten tip of the metal bar was close now, so close that he saw his skin begin to blister from the heat, close enough that he knew he might not be able to survive this ordeal - an ordeal like no other, in which an individual would come face-to-face with the deepest level of human depravity and know himself as its ultimate target, until . . . "your pretty little boytoy. You didn't really think we'd forget about him . . ."

And that was when Brian began to weep, tears pouring from his eyes although he didn't make a single sound as he was forced to confront the ultimate despair. It wasn't the physical pain that was beyond enduring; it was something much more intimate, a pain in the core of his being that nothing would ever be able to extinguish.

"Wake him up," McClaren demanded, barely able to keep his voice to a whisper. "He can't take . . ."

"He's stronger than you can imagine" Corey replied, never raising her voice, "and if he doesn't get through this now, he never will."

". . . the wages of sin." Laughter punctuated by the screams he could no longer resist.

A shout then, and figures racing through a doorway.

"Son of a bitch!"

And the red-hot iron bar was swinging toward his face, while everything else around him seemed to freeze for a split-second, as his eyes, barely able to see at all through the blood pooling around them, turned toward the shadow figures - the ones who had sat in their plush, Ivory tower-style offices or gathered together in their exclusive little private clubs and planned this atrocity down to the last vicious detail, comfortable in their assumption that God and public opinion were on their side, and hired willing participants to put it into motion. And, at the last possible instant, just as they were turning to make good their escape, hurrying back to their lives of privilege and immunity to the plight of the common man, a quick flicker of light touched them, and . . . he saw. Just before he could no longer see anything at all.
For a full minute, there was only silence, as neither Corey nor McClaren could figure out what to say or do.

"My fault." It was barely a whisper at first, but then Brian's voice strengthened, and he was repeating it, like some kind of mantra. "My fault, my fault, my fault, my fault...

"What, Brian?" asked Corey, her eyes once more daring McClaren to intervene. "What's your fault?"

"Everything that's happened to him. Everything. It's always been my fault, because I was too fucking weak to let him go. Too fucking weak to stay away from him. It's always been my fault."

Corey had to take a minute to fight for her own composure, and resist an urge to stop this now. But she knew that this was important - not for the investigation, not for learning new facts that might lead to indictments and convictions. No. This was important, for Brian. "Go on."

The tears were still flowing, but Brian seemed to have shifted his focus, seemed to be looking inward, talking only to himself. "Do you know what it's like to watch helplessly... as someone tries to destroy the only person you've ever loved, knowing that you can't prevent it, and that it's all because of you? To sit there and feel his lifeblood draining out of his body, pouring over your hands? Can you imagine... what that's like?"

"Brian, what are you talking about? Justin's bashing? That wasn't your fault."

"Yes, it was. It was because of me that he got hurt. That Chris Hobbs bashed his skull. That he lost his chance at the kind of life he always wanted. That he almost got killed by a fucking bomb. That they want to hurt him now. All of it... has always been... my fault."

"Why would you think that?"

His voice broke then, as the anger and the bitterness drained away, leaving him empty and filled with the only emotion left to him - a deep, bottomless despair. "Because I always had to have it my way, and couldn't see that I was putting him at risk. Because I've never been good enough for him. He deserves so much more than I could ever give him. It's always been... my fault."

Corey took a deep breath, even as McClaren realized that he himself seemed to have forgotten to do so as he'd listened to Brian's broken confession. "Brian, surely you don't really believe that. It doesn't even make sense. Why..."

And to the astonishment of his audience, Brian summoned up a pale replica of his trademark sardonic smile. "Story of my life, isn't it?"

The smile disappeared quickly, as if it had never existed, and his eyes were suddenly dark with dread. "I can't... do that again."

Moving quickly, McClaren grabbed a note pad and ballpoint off Corey's desk and scribbled a note on it, which he then tossed to his boss. She read the words he'd written, and then favored him with a quizzical look, obviously debating whether or not to proceed as he'd asked. But in the end, she proved that she trusted his judgment.

"When Agent McClaren observed that you trusted Justin Taylor, your response was, 'Yeah. And look where that got me.' What did you mean by that?"

Brian did not answer quickly or easily, and McClaren, understanding that this might be the hardest question of all, moved closer and renewed the gentleness of his embrace. "He deserved my trust - all of it - and I gave it to him, but..."
"But?"

The reply was barely a whisper. "But what it got me was having to stand still and watch him walk away. Knowing that it was the right thing for him to do, the thing I had to let him do."

Corey closed her eyes, once more struggling for composure. "You really believe that?"

"I more than believe it. I know it."

"Even though he loves you - with his whole heart."

Another pause, and a deep, shaky breath. "You can't love what you don't know."

Chris McClaren was suddenly unable to draw breath, unable to bear another moment of the icy cold that gripped him. "That's enough," he said firmly, no longer concerned with whether or not his boss would approve of his actions, or what might happen to the investigation - concerned only with his primary purpose, the job he was charged to do. This was about protecting Brian Kinney, and he would risk everything to live up to that responsibility. "Wake him up."

"But . . ."

"Wake - him - up!"

Corey's eyes were suddenly huge, and filled with bright glints of anger. But she realized, as she met McClaren's dark gaze, that he was not going to back down, or allow his conclusion to be overridden. "You and I," she said coldly, "are going to have a talk - later."

"Fine, but now - you wake him up."

Her entire body was trembling as she turned away from his glare and looked once more at her subject, and . . . she faltered briefly, not quite able to ignore the deep, unmistakable look of sorrow on his face. "Brian," she said softly, "I'm going to count to three now, and you're going to awaken. You'll feel refreshed and renewed, as if you're just waking from a good night's sleep. You're going to recall everything that we've discussed, and all the details that you remembered, but experience no pain from any of it. Are you ready?"

"Yes." Barely a whisper.

"One - two . . . three."

Brian shifted roughly and opened his eyes to find McClaren's face just inches away, and the FBI agent saw a dark shimmer of emotion form deep in those hazel depths, but it was gone before he could even begin to identify it, and Brian was moving away from him, using his thumbs to wipe telltale droplets from his eyes, sitting up and watching Alexandra Corey move to open the shutters and reveal the storm that was raging beyond the window.

"Brian, are you . . ."

"Stockwell," he said firmly. "He was there. And Craig Taylor."

"Are you sure?" asked Corey, sinking back into her chair and regarding him with some small degree of skepticism.

He laughed, but it was shaky. "This was your idea. Are you going to doubt me now?"

"You didn't remember before," she pointed out.
"That's because I was too busy fighting to get away from a redhot iron bar," he retorted, "to pay attention. But I caught a glimpse of Stockwell, at the very end, as he was turning to run. I recognized his profile, and how he moved, and I recognized Taylor's voice - something he said while they were gloating over what was about to happen to me. I just never realized that the reason it sounded familiar was because the inflection, the timber of it, was almost like Justin's voice."

She nodded, and made some notes in her file. "Anything else?"

"I got a glimpse of another one of them - the one who talked the most - but I didn't recognize him. All I got was a quick look at his profile and a glimpse of silver hair."

"Would you know him if you saw him again?"

"Not sure," he admitted. "His face was still in shadow. Maybe."

"Okay," she said. "Is there . . ."

"One more thing," he said very softly. "A couple of random comments that might have been about the bombing at Babylon. Nothing definite, but . . . possible. And a name. Brad, I think. Or Bradley, maybe. Something like that."

"Just Brad?" asked McClaren. "Was that a first name, last name . . . what?"

But Brian was shaking his head. "I don't know, except that, whoever he is, he might have been around to get a close look at the bomb victims. Maybe. I don't know exactly what that meant."

"And the fourth man?"

"Nothing. Just a general impression that he was smaller than the others. That's all."

Then he stood up, swaying only a bit, before starting toward the door.

"Brian," called McClaren, "are you all right?"

The sardonic smile came easily this time, but it was not reflected in dark, opaque eyes. "Why don't you tell me? The two of you have managed to expose my secret identity, so I should be an open book to you now. Right?"

Then he walked out of the room, and McClaren and Corey exchanged uneasy glances; it was left to the junior agent to voice what both were thinking.

"I think," he said slowly, "we just made the biggest fucking mistake of our lives."

"Chris," she answered, reverting to a professional demeanor, "no matter how difficult it was, he needed to do that - to face his demons."

McClaren's expression clearly reflected the degree of his disbelief. "His demons? Do you really believe he hasn't spent every day of his fucking life confronting those demons? You don't understand what just happened, Alex. Do you realize that he has never - never - spoken of those feelings of guilt before? To anyone. And now, he not only has to deal with an admission he never wanted to make, but he has to do so knowing that you and I were there to hear it. That the most private thing in his life is now out there, under someone else's control. How does he know that we'll honor his wishes, preserve his privacy? We've made him vulnerable, and that's not something he knows how to deal with."
She looked bewildered. "But we wouldn't . . ."

"Right," he snapped. "And his history - with all the people in his life that he should have been able to trust - that's going to convince him that he has nothing to worry about. Right?"

Alexandra Corey sighed. "Damn it!"

McClaren nodded. "Precisely."

She offered him a weary smile. "He really does trust you, you know, so . . ."

But he was shaking his head. "Wrong tense, maybe. He really did trust me. Now I'm not so sure."

She turned to gaze out into the storm, which was still doing its worst. "If I'm right, he doesn't give his trust easily. And I doubt he takes it back quite so quickly either. Go talk to him."

He sighed. "Un-fucking-believable, isn't it? That a man like that - Jesus! - can believe that he's not good enough."

"Just proves that we're all vulnerable inside," she answered. "And you need to get to him quickly, before he sinks deeper into depression and decides that it's all your fault."

Her smile was only slightly venal, as they both knew who Brian would hold responsible, once he had time to think about it.

He lifted his hands to scrub at his face, already trying to figure out what to say in order to make Brian see reason. "That's not the only issue," he explained. "In a couple of hours, it's very possible that this whole shit is going to blow up in our faces. I know that you felt you were doing the right thing, agreeing to Ms. Whitney's request, but . . ."

Corey shrugged. "I thought he'd endured enough - paid enough. You don't agree?"

"You saw him," he retorted. "You saw what it means to him. I think it was presumptuous to make the decision for him, that he's the only one who has the right to decide what he wants to do. And if I lose his trust now - really lose it - there'll be no getting it back. He'll never let me get close to him again."

"You're not afraid of him. Are you? You're an FBI agent, for Christ's sake."

He rolled his eyes. "And he's Brian Kinney, and if you think that's not enough to intimidate anybody - even an FBI agent - then excuse me, Ms. Corey, but you don't know shit."

He left her there then, with her mouth hanging open, wondering if any subordinate had ever spoken to her in such terms. She didn't wonder for long, for the answer was obvious.

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"This okay? For you, I mean?" Matthew Keller was not accustomed to being out of his depth, but he had no experience in the protocols required for dealing with the preservation of undercover identities. For all he knew, sitting here at Woody's with the man who changed faces and names as easily as most people changed shirts was equivalent to playing with fire while sitting on a powder keg.

Jared Hilliard smiled. "It's fine," he replied. "Let me tell you a little secret. In regular undercover work - always barring shit like top secret, clandestine, CIA-type crap - the most important thing to remember is that people generally only see what they expect to see. And, for the most part, no one
here at Woody's is going to be looking for a down-and-out homeless vet, so . . ."

"And Schmidt? Didn't he see you keeping company with that lab slimeball? Pisspotty - Peehole? Whatever the fuck his name is?"

The smile morphed into a grin. "Schmidt is so focused on Schmidt, and on his little Machiavellian manipulations, that he wouldn't notice if Johnny Depp walked in and performed a pole dance for him."

Keller blinked. "That's pretty focused," he remarked, not quite able to resist the visualization of that scene in his mind.

Hilliard nodded, and raised his beer glass. "To distraction - the undercover cop's best friend."

"That's very revealing," replied Keller. "That you still think of yourself as a cop, I mean."

A quick flicker of sadness in Hilliard's eyes was gone so quickly it was almost unnoticeable. Almost.

Keller lifted his hand and touched his companion's shoulder very gently, hoping that one day - sooner rather than later - he'd be privileged to hear the whole story. Then he smiled and drank. "I was beginning to think we were never going to get here," he observed, enjoying the view as Hilliard leaned forward and braced muscular arms on the table between them.

"You've been a busy boy."

Keller laughed. "Just your run-of-the-mill life and death emergencies." He took another sip of his beer before continuing. "I treated him once, you know."

"Who, Schmidt?" Hilliard asked, slightly confused by the change of subject.

"No. Johnny Depp."

It was Hilliard's turn to blink. "You're shitting me."

"Nope."

"So - how did that happen?"

"Film company was shooting in the area, and he took a spill on his bike. Scraped up one arm and shoulder - enough to need a few stitches. It was during my residency, and I was just finishing up an 18-hour shift when he walked in." His smile was semi-rueful. "First, I was sure I was hallucinating; then, I was sure that at the very least, he'd insist on having the medical chief of staff attend him. But he didn't. He just hopped up on the exam table and sat there, waiting for me to take care of his injury. Just like any Tom, Dick, or Harry off the street."

Blue eyes were suddenly bright with speculation. "Jesus! What was he like?"

The doctor thought for a moment. "Like sex in blue jeans. What do you think? I had a fucking boner for a week."

"Did he notice?"

Keller's eye-roll was a classic. "Have you ever tried to hide an erection in scrub pants? It can't be done. Of course, he noticed."

"And?"
"And he just smiled and sat there and let me stitch up the laceration on his arm. But when I was
done, and he was leaving, he stopped, looked me straight in the eye, and kissed me. One quick kiss-
gone almost before I had time to notice it. He tasted like spiced honey."

"No way."

"Yes, way." The surgeon grinned. "I was so stunned I almost walked into a wall, and the nurse that
was assisting me was so intent on sneaking the suture needle that I used on him into her pocket and
on not missing a second of watching him walk away that she knocked over a whole tray of sterilized
instruments and managed to impale herself with a stainless steel Haris scalpel." The grin became a
laugh. "It was pandemonium. When Brian heard about it, he didn't speak to me for a week."

Hilliard chuckled. "Let me guess. He wanted to meet Hollywood's bad boy."

"Meet him? Surely you know him better than that."

"But Depp's not gay - right?"

Keller lowered his head and looked up at his companion through thick, dark lashes. "When it comes
to Brian Kinney, I'm not entirely sure that anybody is one hundred per cent 'not gay'. At least, not
then. Now . . . who really knows?"

"You really think he won't be . . ." He made quotation marks with his fingers, "the real 'Brian
Kinney' again?"

" Doesn't matter what I think. It's what he thinks that will decide where he goes from here."

"Have you talked to him?"

Keller nodded. "Briefly. He didn't have much to say, except to tell me that I should quit worrying.
But Turnage - Turnage is determined to live up to his reputation as a miracle worker. He assures me
that Brian is going to be as good as new. Or better . . . except . . ."

"Except what?"

The doctor took another sip of beer. "Apparently, he's got it in his head that he wants to keep . . . a
souvenir of what happened. A reminder of what vicious, cruel homophobes - people who hate him
just because he's not like them - are capable of, so he never lets himself be vulnerable again."

"And you think that's what? Not healthy?"

Keller shrugged. "I just think it's a goddamned shame that those bastards are going to succeed in
leaving their mark on a walking work of art. That's all."

Hilliard leaned forward, and traced a gentle fingertip across the doctor's jaw-line. "That's not all. You
love him."

Green eyes were suddenly awash with shadows. "Hundreds - maybe even thousands - of people
believe that they have Brian Kinney all figured out - that he's all about lust and fucking and getting
his needs met and making people want him and laughing at the idea that he could ever need anyone,
or love anyone. And the bottom line is that they don't know shit. In the whole world, there aren't a
half-dozen people who really see the man that he is, beneath the façade. He's . . . he deserves so
much more than he'll ever allow himself to have. And this - this is just going to confirm what he
already believes. If somebody doesn't step in and stop him, he's going to just open his hand and let
go. Walk away from everything he's ever wanted."
"Because?"

The doctor sighed, and looked up to meet eyes that were perfectly, beautifully, impossibly blue. "Because he's convinced that he's poison - that he destroys everything he touches - everything he loves. It's what he's always believed, although you'd never get most of the people who think they know him to understand that. And I don't know if there's anyone who can get through to him, make him see how wrong he is."

"Not even you?"

Keller laughed, but there was no joy in it. "Especially not me. He knows all too well that I can't possibly be objective. I love him too much."

Hilliard sipped at his beer, obviously considering options. "Then maybe," he said slowly, "he needs to hear it from someone who has no stake in him. Someone who doesn't love him at all."

But Keller was shaking his head. "No. I don't think so. If he's ever going to be able to accept it, I think it's going to have to come from the one person he can't completely reject. The person who owns his heart."

"Taylor?"

"Taylor," the doctor confirmed. Then he dredged up a tiny, lopsided smile. "Always assuming they don't kill each other first."

Hilliard did not offer an immediate, knee-jerk response, but appeared to be considering what Keller had said before speaking his mind, and the doctor was impressed by the man's obvious desire to understand the dynamic between Brian and his blond. He was less impressed, however, when Hilliard pulled out a pack of Marlboros and a lighter.

"Damn," he said softly, with a gesture toward the cigarette, "I thought you were smarter than the rest of us."

Hilliard grinned as he lit up and watched as Keller did the same. "Mr. Kinney and I often shared a smoke break, when he'd work late."

"Yeah, well, Mr. Kinney has this bizarre idea that he's immortal." Then he realized what he'd said, and his voice dropped to a near whisper. "At least, he used to." He took a deep shaky breath and managed to dredge up a smile. "I once dragged him to an autopsy of a man who died of lung cancer."

"And how did he react?"

"Took one look, and excused himself to go have a cigarette. And I went with him. Little fucker was always . . . irresistible."

Hilliard leaned forward and laid his hand on the doctor's shoulder, sensing that the man was having a rough moment. "And invincible, huh?"

"Or so he believed. God!" Keller closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose with thumb and forefinger. "More than anything, I want to believe that he'll regain that confidence." He smiled then, obviously embarrassed by his own vulnerability. "There was never anything quite as beautiful as a cocky, confidant, completely unintimidated Brian Kinney."

Hilliard nodded. "I may not have known him as long as you, or as well, but I do know that much."
They sat in silence for a while, sipping at their beers, and enjoying a strange, easy camaraderie, which neither could easily explain but both found comforting - and worthy of further exploration. When Hilliard's cell phone rang, and his boss's name appeared on its display, he was surprisingly reluctant to allow the interruption of something that he could not quite define. But he was too well-trained and too professional to ignore the call.

Keller went to fetch another round of beers as his companion listened to Mathis's summation of the latest report from the authorities and from Brian's caretakers.

"Sure," he replied, when Mathis was done, "I'll check around. But it's a common name."

"What's up?" asked Keller as Hilliard disconnected.

The undercover operative hesitated for a moment, not completely certain of whether or not he could reveal what he'd heard. But then he realized - and rationalized - that there was virtually nothing about Brian Kinney that this man didn't already know, or couldn't find out with a simple phone call. "Brian's memories are coming back."

Keller took a deep breath. "You mean somebody convinced him that he needed to relive it - to force him to remember it all."

"Yeah. That's about the size of it."

"Shit!"

"Yeah. It sucks."

"All in the name of 'justice', no doubt. Or truth."

Hilliard couldn't bring himself to argue, although he did feel compelled to posit an alternative. "Or maybe - just to help him put it in the past, where it belongs."

Keller's eyes were suddenly bright with speculation. "Uh, huh. And tell me - did this little excursion down Memory Lane produce some concrete results?"

Hilliard couldn't quite swallow a scapegrace smile. "Yeah. It did. He remembered two of the people who were there that night. And a couple of details that might - with a little luck - help us learn more. About the attack on him, and maybe even what happened at Babylon."

The physician took a big swallow of his beer. "Let me guess. You're going to go all professional on me now, and say that you can't reveal any more than that. That I'll just have to wait until everything becomes public."

"That's exactly what I should do."

Keller sat back and stretched his long, jeans-clad legs out in front of him, just brushing against Hilliard's ankle in the process, and offering a lazy, speculative smile. "And do you always do what you should?"

Hilliard laughed, a low, textured rumble. "I can see why you and Kinney never hooked up. You're too much alike."

Green eyes glinted with humor and something else. "What makes you think we never hooked up?"

Hilliard didn't so much as blink. "Because the Apocalypse hasn't happened yet."
The doctor erupted in bright laughter. "No, but it was close."

"So you two . . . did . . ."

"Do you really think I'm going to answer that?"

Hilliard took a long pull at his beer, and decided that, in spite of an incredibly intense spurt of curiosity, he was truly better off not knowing. So he ignored the question and returned to the previous subject. "Can you think of anyone named Brad, or Bradley maybe, who might have had access to the Babylon bomb victims? Up close and personal access?"

Keller smiled. "I think this comes under the heading of one hand washing the other."

"Meaning?"

The physician was quiet for a while, watching bubbles rise in his beer, but it was obvious that he was seeing something else entirely. "I saved his life, you know. Literally. Cut him open and stuck my hands into his body, in order to fix what was broken. And I have to admit that it felt fucking fabulous. To know that I was able to do that for him. For Brian, because . . ." He looked up and gazed straight into Hilliard's eyes, deliberately allowing the man to recognize the depth of his passion. "There's no way that I can explain what he means to me, or what we mean to each other. But I find now that I want to do more. It's not enough to be part of putting him back together."

"I'm not sure what . . ."

"I want to make sure that the motherfuckers who did this understand that they don't get to just walk away from it - that they know there are always consequences. I want to do something to make sure that it doesn't happen again, to anybody." His smile was slightly lopsided. "If this is the first volley in a war, and Brian was supposed to be the first casualty, then we all need to step up. To challenge the status quo and change things that have gone unchallenged for too fucking long. To demand justice."

Hilliard grinned, and took a moment to light another cigarette. "So you want to play soldier."

But the physician did not smile in return. "I'm not playing. I want in - on whatever it is you're doing. I want . . . no, I need to do this. I think maybe we all need to do this. Because people like Brian have fought this battle alone for too damned long, not because they set out to make a big issue of it, but because they refuse to step aside, to hide themselves and apologize for being who they are. It's time the rest of us step up, and shoulder our share of the load. So I'm asking you to let me in."

Hilliard took his time to find the right words to offer in response. "I'm not exactly a free agent, you know. I take orders, so I can't promise anything specific. But I'll do what I can. Soooo . . . Brad?"

"You are kidding. Right?" Keller was shaking his head. "I can think of three Brads, a Bradley, and two Bradfords who work the nightshift at the hospital. And that's just off the cuff. No telling how many others might turn up. It's a common name."


A commotion at the door drew their attention then, and Keller didn't bother to try to suppress a smile. "I think your theory is about to be tested."

Hilliard shrugged, as he watched Melanie Marcus, Ted Schmidt and his live-in lover, Blake Wyzecki, hurry through the entrance and make their way to an adjacent table. "No worries, Mate, although, if you're really concerned, we could continue this someplace more private."
Green eyes locked with blue, and there was no denying that both understood exactly what the undercover agent was suggesting.

Keller's hesitation was brief, but long enough for Hilliard to take notice. "Never mind," he said softly. "It was just a suggestion. Don't . . ."

"Your place, or mine?" asked Keller quickly, swallowing the last of his misgivings. It had been a long time, he realized. Long enough.

"You sure?" Hilliard replied, not wanting to take advantage of a momentary weakness, and be wretchedly disappointed later.

Keller finished his beer, took a moment to peer into the depths of those incredible, cerulean eyes before leaning forward and claiming beautiful sculpted lips with a hungry kiss that allowed him to fully explore the mouth that opened to him.

The clamor and clatter that was as constant at Woody's as the smell of beer continued around them, but more than one pair of eyes paused in sweeping the room to take note of a sight that was not the least bit out of the ordinary at the most infamous gay bar in Pittsburgh; two guys kissing was simply di rigueur in this setting, but two guys like this - each defining hotness in his own particular way - that was worthy of notice, even here. Some eyes even seemed to mist over, filled with traces of nostalgia, with a haunting awareness of what had been so sadly lacking of late.

Brian Kinney, after all, had been missing from the scene for a very long time.

"Drinks are on me," Ted announced, taking a deep breath and making a deliberate decision to concentrate on the positive aspects of his life and ignore the less pleasant events of what had been a very long day.

"Are we celebrating?"

The accountant grinned. "It might be a little premature to say that, but, hey! I made it through another day of dealing with the Blonde Bimbo without resorting to driving a stake through her heart, so I'm thinking that's a good enough reason."

Blake could not quite suppress a tiny sigh. "Teddie, I know that you feel that Cynthia is deliberately trying to drive a wedge between you and Brian, but maybe she's just a little overwhelmed with everything that's happened, you know. Maybe she's just . . ."

He fell silent abruptly when he saw the shimmer of resentment rise in Ted's dark eyes. "I think I'm in a better position than you to know what she's up to. You don't even know her."

"That's true, but you have to admit that she must be under a lot of pressure, to step up and try to fill in for a man like Brian Kinney."

Ted's frown was almost a snarl. "As if she could or should. And tomorrow, she's going to realize that she hasn't succeeded in fooling anyone, that we all see through her. I hope you're planning to come to the meeting, to lend your support. I know that you always want to see the best in people, Blake."

There was just the faintest hint of condescension in that observation, but Blake managed - almost - to let it go unnoticed. "But take it from me when I tell you that you really don't know her.

"I don't pretend to know her," Blake said quietly, "but Brian does, and he must have had a reason for choosing her to . . ."
“Yes, and he's going to learn PDQ that he should have made better choices.” The accountant sat back and watched droplets of condensation trickle down his bottle of tonic water and allowed himself just a moment to contemplate how it would feel when his moment of triumph was at hand, when he was able to lay it all out for Brian, to expose the degree of Cynthia's treachery, as well as the depth of his own brilliance in making Kinnetic - and its president - the most successful PR firm in the Midwest. Maybe even in the entire country. And all as a result of taking advantage of opportunities provided by knowing the right people and choosing the right moment to venture out into previously uncharted waters in order to seize the day.

Judging from what he'd seen and heard, he was relatively certain that his employer would never again be the old, flamboyantly beautiful Brian Kinney, the man that every gay boy wanted to grow up to be. He wasn't entirely sure how he felt about that, and he was very careful to avoid analyzing his own emotional response to that assumption. Nevertheless, with the help of his devoted friend and financial advisor, Brian would be able to trade his prior stud status for something equally impressive. No, not equally. Actually more impressive, in that he would become a star in a different venue - a supernova in the world of finance - and Ted Schmidt would be able to assume a role for which he knew himself to be uniquely qualified: starmaker. He might not have the 'royal blood' or the resources to ever assume the throne himself, but he could be something just as majestic: the power behind it.

Brian would, of course, be eternally, deeply grateful, and Ted would gain the one thing for which he'd always hungered - the bottomless respect of friends, colleagues, and the Brian Kinneys of the world.

"Earth to Ted," said Melanie with a conspiratorial grin. "Weren't you the one that cautioned me about counting chickens?"

The accountant flashed her an embarrassed smile. "Sorry."

He looked up then, and was confronted with a sight that was stunning enough, and erotic enough, to cause him to lose his train of thought and feel a tightening in his groin. "Holy shit!" he said softly. "Get a load of that."

Blake, somewhat relieved at the prospect of a change of subject, turned to follow the direction of his gaze and uttered a soft, approving laugh. "Now there's a sight to lift the spirits," he observed.

"Hey," said Melanie, "isn't that Keller? Brian's best bud?"

Ted sniffed. "For now, maybe." Then his eyes narrowed as he identified the individual who was locked in a clinch with the physician. "That's Hilliard with him, one of our security people. I doubt Mathis - or Brian either - would be very happy with him putting on such a display."

It was Blake's turn to blink. "You think that Brian Kinney is going to be upset about a little PDA?"

Ted rolled his eyes. "Everybody knows that the rules are different when you're at the top of the peck . . ."

He fell silent as he felt the vibration of his cell phone in his pocket, and although he was initially annoyed by the interruption, he quickly changed his mind when he recognized the name of the caller.

"Marshall," he greeted, making sure to speak loudly enough for his companions to realize the identity - and importance - of his caller, "how's sunny . . . wherever-the-hell you are?"

"It's lovely, Ted," came the response, only slightly less than land-line perfect. "I actually decided to
cut out early from the brokers' conference, and I'm en route to a private island in the South Pacific. Owned by one of our investors. A perfect place to get away from it all. I'm sure you know how exhausting it is when you're juggling funds and manipulating investment strategies in major financial markets."

"Well," Ted replied, flashing a modest smile for his friends, "not yet really. But I'm looking forward to wearing myself out - in pursuit of newer and ever greater profits."

"Of course, and well said." There was a beat of background noise then, and an indistinct murmur, leading Ted to realize that the financier was not alone - that someone else was listening in. "And speaking of investments, Teddie, I just got an email from our bank in the Caymans, to confirm receipt of your transfer. But there seems to be a problem. Perhaps I didn't make myself clear, or perhaps it's a simple clerical error, but I thought you understood that the absolute minimum dollar amount required to take advantage of this opportunity is two million. The transfer, however, was for only $240,000. Now - because it's you, and because you're one of my oldest friends and I trust you implicitly - I went ahead and approved accepting the funds, on the assumption that the full amount is en route, but I must point out that you're running out of time."

"Wait a minute!" Ted sat up straight so abruptly that he knocked his water bottle to the floor. "What are you talking about? The total transfer was for $2,240,000.00. I checked on it myself just this morning."

Marshall Hargrave did not reply for several seconds, and once more, Ted could almost hear the voice that was speaking to the man at the other end of the wireless connection. Almost - but not quite. When Hargrave did resume speaking, he sounded amused. "Then I'm sure it must be a clerical error. Probably some pretty little clerk that isn't accustomed to dealing with major transactions of this nature. Still, in order to keep everything moving smoothly, we had to set a deadline on accepting these transfers, and there are only two days left before access is closed down. So it's too late there to do anything about it today, but I strongly advise that you take immediate action in the morning to make sure you don't get locked out of the chance of a lifetime."

"I most certainly will," Ted replied firmly. "And thanks for letting me know. I guarantee that the balance of the funds will be in your hands tomorrow, well before your deadline, and whoever is responsible for this fuck-up will pay for their mistake, I promise you that."

Almost ten thousand miles away, aboard a 280-foot luxury yacht owned by a founding father of a major European crime syndicate and staffed by a crew of 30, Marshall Hargrave smiled up at his companion - a man who had been his partner in his financial intrigues and machinations for as long as he had been in business - and spoke into his sat-phone. "Oh, that's wonderful, Teddie. I knew I could count on you, and I'm absolutely certain that you will be instrumental in seeing that justice is served."

He hung up then, and flashed a thumbs-up to the group of men gathered in the yacht's exquisite dining salon, while glancing out toward the sun deck where a bevy of beautiful, world-famous, bikini-clad models were drinking Cosmos and awaiting the attention of their rich, powerful patrons. "And that," he said, lifting his glass of Dom Perignon, "should be that. The final two million, and may I just say that it couldn't have come from a more deserving investor."

The ugly laughter that erupted around the table was thick with contempt, saturated with malice, and filled with anticipation.

In Pittsburgh, Ted was trying - without much success - to control a rising surge of anger and planning ugly vengeance on whoever was responsible for the error in the funds transfer. Melanie, meanwhile, was enjoying her martini while indulging in a few moments of fantasy, visualizing her
wife's gratitude and appreciation of the profits this little endeavor would generate.

But Blake . . . Blake was looking a bit uncertain, having picked up on something during the conversation - something odd.

"Teddie," he said softly, knowing that he was about to step on a potential land mine, but compelled to speak anyway, "isn't this all just a little too . . . cloak and dagger, a little melodramatic? I mean I understand that you want to do this for Brian - to give him this incredible gift - but . . ."

"But what?" Ted was still simmering with irritation over the failed transfer of funds.

"But what if you're wrong? Wouldn't it be prudent to simply check with Brian, before you go through with this?"

Ted's eyes were suddenly filled with a hard, icy glint. "Prudent? Is that what I should be? Let me tell you something, Blake. I've spent my whole fucking life being prudent, and being ridiculed for it by men like Brian Kinney who don't even know the meaning of the word. Never once did I leap without looking a dozen times; never once taking even the slightest risk. And you know what it got me? Zilch. Zippo. A big fat zero. That's what my life has amounted to. Noth-ing! Well, not any more. This is my big chance - the opportunity to take my rightful place among the individuals who rule the financial world. To become a mover and shaker. And I deserve it; I always deserved it. But I was just never in the right place at the right time, with the right resources. Until now. This is my bonanza. My brass ring. My moment in the spotlight. Don't you understand? I don't want to be prudent, any more."

Blake had actually opened his mouth to point out that a note of caution might still be in order, but closed it immediately when he noted that Ted's jaw was clenched with stony resolve. At this point, he concluded - rightfully - that any further protest would be futile. Thus, he was looking for another subject to broach, a diversion to redirect the conversation toward greener pastures, when he looked up and saw that Matt Keller and Jared Hilliard had finally pulled away from each other and risen to make their way out of the bar. On the way, they passed directly behind Ted, and it was just a matter of luck - whether good or bad yet to be determined - that Blake happened to be looking straight at Hilliard's face as the security officer glanced down at his fellow Kinnetic employee.

It was no secret that Hilliard's eyes were truly remarkable, due to the contrast of the brilliant blue against the dark bronze of his skin, but they were also remarkable for another reason; despite the man's ability to blend into the landscape around him - a much desired quality in his chosen profession - his eyes were exquisitely expressive, revealing thoughts and feelings with astonishing clarity at moments when he thought no one was looking or when he had no reason for shielding.

With that seemingly random observation, Blake was suddenly compelled to drop his gaze, wishing that he had not looked up to study the man's beautiful features and thus would have been spared noticing the shadows in those dramatic, jewel-toned eyes as the two maneuvered around the table. If he had not looked, he would not have zeroed in on the icy glints that sparked within that deep blue. But it was too late for that - too late to unsee what he had seen or to pretend to be uncertain of what it signified, for there was absolutely no doubt about the emotion glittering there.

Jared Hilliard was angry - coldly, bitterly angry - and something more. Angry - and scornful, perhaps. Yes. There was scorn in his eyes, but there was also an element of indelible sadness and disappointment.

Blake felt his throat go very dry, and gripped his glass of iced tea with hands that were suddenly damp and shaky as the two men made their exit.
What could have caused that deep resentment that Hilliard had not quite been able to conceal? What had gone through his mind as he'd looked down at Ted?

And why was Blake suddenly convinced that something was very, very wrong, and that there was absolutely nothing he could do about it?

The rain had stopped as the sun dipped toward the horizon, and the sky was streaked with russet and crimson that reflected in the surf, turning whitecaps into a coral froth. At the edge of the deck, Chris McClaren stood and looked out across the rippled sand to where Brian was seated at the base of a low dune, staring out toward the sea where the first stars were etched against deep purple sky. He squinted a bit, trying to make out Brian’s features and thinking to himself that the man's profile would be particularly beautiful washed with that rosy radiance. But there was actually nothing to see, as face and body remained swathed in shadow, shadow made even more impenetrable by the billow of smoke from the joint that Brian had just lit. His second of the night, or maybe his third. Nobody was really counting.

The FBI agent had tried to talk to Brian twice since the unsettling hypnosis session, but without success. Both times, he had approached the man with a soft voice and a gentle touch, only to be rejected by a cold stare and actual physical resistance. Both times, Brian had simply turned and walked away, without a word.

McClaren sighed, and turned to look back toward the cottage where Trina was finishing up dinner preparations, and Alexandra Corey was seated at the bar, working on something in a file and pretending that she was not really watching the clock.

They both knew that time was running out. They had been granted a bit of a reprieve when Toby had called and informed them that he had been unable to complete his errand, because of an unscheduled delay at the airport. But that reprieve was almost over at this hour, and McClaren took a deep breath, realizing that it truly was now - or not at all.

Squaring his shoulders, he walked down the steps and across the sand to kneel beside the silent young man who didn't even both to look up at his approach.

"Brian, I know . . ."

"Stop!"

McClaren blinked. Since Brian had not said a single word to him during his previous attempts to communicate, he supposed that this could be considered progress, except that he didn't have time to stop.

"I know you don't . . .'

Brian's exhalation was more an expression of impatience than a sigh of regret. "No. You don't know. And if you insist on talking to me like I was teetering on the edge of a mental breakdown or as fragile as blown glass, then we have nothing to say to each other." He turned then, and allowed the FBI agent to read what was in his eyes, and to be surprised that it was not at all what he'd expected. "I don't do fragile. Don't you know that by now? And you two 'experts' have apparently put your heads together and decided that I suffered some kind of epiphany during that pathetic little fuck-fest this afternoon." Then he looked back toward the sea and took another drag from his toke. "That's the most ridiculous crap I've ever heard."
He sat up then, bracing his arms across his knees, and stared at McClaren with a sardonic grin. "What? You think I learned something that I didn't already know?"

McClaren shrugged, settling in closer to Brian and welcoming the contact of bare skin to skin - a contact he had not been entirely sure he would ever be allowed to experience again. "You remembered things about the night of the attack. Things that you'd forgotten."

Brian's eyes were suddenly darker, thick of memory. "Remembering isn't learning."

"But . . ."

Brian leaned forward then, and stilled McClaren's lips in the most direct, effective way. Then he pulled back and regarded the agent's face with a smile, obviously enjoying the view.

"Don't make the mistake of thinking that never speaking of something is the same as not knowing it." He took a deep breath. "I've always known the truth."

"You're talking about Justin," said McClaren, not yet willing to let go of his argument. "But you can't really . . . ."

"Yes. I can. Really." Brian's voice had gone cold and sharp, and contained more than a hint of a warning. "And it's not anything I want to discuss with you."

"Okay, then. If you want to put it behind us, so that we never bring it up again, make me understand it. Make me see why you feel responsible for everything that happened to him."

"I've got a better idea. Why don't we just fuck, and forget everything else?"

"If it doesn't bother you, why are you dodging the question?"

Brian gave a classic eye-roll. "What part of 'I don't want to talk to you about this', do you not understand?"

"Brian, I know that you think the world revolves around you. But not even you can be so egocentric that you think you caused the things that happened to Justin."

Brian huffed an impatient sigh, and fell silent for a moment, once more staring out to sea. But he finally began to speak, and McClaren was forced to listen very carefully since his voice was very soft. "You're a big, strong guy. Able to defend yourself. Probably a good fighter. Right?"

McClaren, completely bewildered by the comments, could only nod, and watch the shadows move deep in Brian's eyes as he turned back to study the FBI agent's expression. "Given all that, I should probably be afraid of you. Do you think I am?"

"Of course not."

"Why not?"

"Because you know me. You know that I wouldn't . . . ."

"That may be true, but it's not why I'm not afraid of you."

McClaren frowned, struggling to follow Brian's reasoning but only getting more confused. "Then why?"

"Because I'm not afraid of anybody. It's how I learned to deal with the shit in my life. I trained
myself to be strong enough, angry enough - defiant enough - to face up to anything, anybody. I even learned how to fight, to defend myself by whatever means were necessary. Even if it meant fighting dirty, and I do. Fight dirty, I mean. When I have to. I was very young when I decided that I'd had enough of being victimized, and I set out to make myself invincible."

"Nobody's invincible, Brian."

Brian shrugged. "Maybe, but it's the image that counts. Just like in everything else, I learned to wear the attitude - to walk the walk, as they say, so nobody would have the balls to take me on. And while it's true that I go to the gym regularly because I'm a fag who wants to look good, I also go for another reason." His smile took on an almost sinister quality. "I'm a lot stronger than you'd imagine, and I know how to take care of myself." An odd flicker of emotion crossed his face then, and he folded his lips into his mouth to cover a trace of embarrassment. "Except for those rare, inconvenient moments when I get jumped by a dozen Neanderthals with blades and guns and iron bars."

McClaren settled back against the dune, leaning slightly so that his shoulder was braced against Brian's side, and helped himself to a deep drag from Brian's joint. "Okay," he said finally. "So you're a tough, cocky, scrappy fag. How does that make you responsible for what happened to Justin?"

Hazel eyes were suddenly midnight dark, almost opaque. "I let myself forget that it was just an image. I let myself buy into my own bullshit, and believe that I could protect myself and everybody else that I cared about. And worse than that, I made him believe it too. And then, I - I guess I lost my mind or something, and let myself get sucked into his romantic little fantasy, with some kind of notion that we could spit in the faces of the fuckers that tried to convince him that he was a hopeless pervert just because he . . .'

"Ahhhh," sighed McClaren. "And that's the bottom line, isn't it? They despised him and condemned him, because he loved you."

Brian shifted away and refused to meet the FBI agent's gaze. "He doesn't love me. Why the fuck would he love me, when every bad thing that's happened to him has been because of me? He almost died because . . ."

"He would have," McClaren interrupted. "If not for you, he would have died there in that parking garage. You do know that, don't you? Along with all this other bullshit that you've adopted as gospel, you have surely realized that Dobbs, or Hobbs, or who-the-fuck-ever - would not have walked away and left him alive to identify his attacker. I've read the police reports, Brian, and there's no doubt that if you hadn't been there, that motherfucker would have finished what he started, and Justin would have died."

Brian managed to get to his feet without resorting to using his cane to push himself up. "And if I hadn't been there in the first place, it would never have happened at all."

Acting on nothing but pure instinct, McClaren reached up and grabbed Brian's arm and jerked him back down beside him, neither one of them sparing a thought to how such a maneuver might affect his injuries. Later, the FBI agent would be grateful that the only sign of physical discomfort Brian allowed himself was a soft "Oof!" as he landed.

"What? You're God now? The All-powerful Kinney is able to look into the hearts and minds of lesser mortals? I told you that I read the police reports, but now I have to wonder . . . did you read them? Especially the part about Justin giving the little fucker a handjob after school one day. Did you read that? And surely someone as smart - as brilliant as you - the Mighty Kinney - knows that there's nothing that terrifies a homophobic prick more than any tiny little notion that maybe - just maybe - he's not quite as hetero as he wants everyone to believe."
Very deliberately, McClaren reached out and braced his hands on either side of Brian's face, forcing him to turn and meet his eyes. "He didn't attack Justin because of what you did. He attacked him because of what Justin did - and because he realized that Justin saw that the big, bad, hetero jock had loved having his willie whacked by a piece of blond boy-ass."

For a moment, the two men simply stared at each other, and McClaren sensed that this was a pivotal moment - that Brian's reaction here would set the tone for everything that came later. They would be friends - or they would not - depending on what happened how.

"You do realize," said Brian slowly, "that the only reason you're making perfect sense is because I'm stoned to the gills."

McClaren laughed, helped himself to another deep drag, before claiming that luscious mouth and sharing the hit.

Brian drew back, and smiled, but there was no amusement in his eyes. "We're done with this. Okay?"

The FBI agent sighed. "We are, only . . ." He debated just spitting it all out - dropping the other shoe - but ultimately decided against it. Still, he felt compelled to reinforce what he'd been trying to say. "Just remember, while it's true that you and I would never have met if this weren't my job, and might never have been friends, even if we had met, I think we are friends now. And friends - sometimes they screw up and make bad choices, but generally they mean well. I have your back, Brian. Even when you're mad enough to spit nails at me - or vice versa. I hope you'll keep that in mind."

Brian bit his lip, studying his companion's face and trying to figure out what it was that insisted on raising a red flag in his mind. "That sounds suspiciously like a preface to an apology," he remarked. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

The hesitation this time was very brief, but still noticeable for a man as perceptive as Brian Kinney. Nevertheless, when McClaren replied with a simple headshake, emphasized by eyes that quickly looked away, Brian decided to allow the evasion - for now.

"Okay, you two," called Trina Thomas as she finished setting the patio table for dinner for four. "Time to decide if you're going to make a meal of each other - in which case, give me a minute to fetch a chair so I can make myself comfortable for the show - or you're going to be blown away with my most famous culinary masterpiece, which poor clueless, unsophisticated souls might classify with a plebian name like Crabmeat Remoulade, never knowing that they're discussing something so extraordinary that it should be identified as food for the gods."

"Modest," remarked Brian drily, "isn't she?"

But, as it turned out, he was forced to eat his words, and admit that Trina was, indeed, modest, as the crab cakes, dripping with an incredibly rich and delectable cream sauce with a unique taste that not even Alexandra Corey - who had dined in some of the most elegant locations in the world - could identify, proved to be every bit as spectacular as she'd claimed.

And, exactly as she'd intended, Trina's beautifully prepared meal had served to further defuse the tension that had been crackling around the cottage's three primary residents all day, so that when Brian looked up from his empty plate, and favored her with a scapegrace smile, she felt an unexpected stir of warmth in her heart.

"Ruint, huh?" he asked, eyes glinting topaz in the flicker of the flames of the hurricane candles on the table.
"Ruint," she answered, raising her wineglass to him.

"How about you come back to Pittsburgh with me?" he asked, surprising himself by making an offer he hadn't really intended to make.

Trina laughed - a rich, infectious rumble. "Are you proposing to me, young Mr. Kinney?"

And Brian laughed too - an easy, comfortable sound that caused the two FBI agents to exchange soft, wistful smiles. Both realized that it was a sound they hadn't heard often, and would like to hear more frequently.

"Hey," said Brian, retrieving his iPod from a nearby shelf where it had been providing a selection of soft classic rock as a perfect background for their meal. "I think I've got the perfect thing for . . ." He spent a moment scanning through the menu, looking for what he wanted. Then he smiled.

"Yeah, perfect," he said with a grin, and watched as Trina's face reflected his own smug satisfaction as the first notes of the song sounded.

Brian stood up, and both Corey and McClaren noticed that he was becoming less dependent on his cane with every passing hour, as he stepped forward and took Trina's hand. "May I have this dance?" he laughed.

Trina Thomas was a big woman. Kind-hearted individuals would have described her as buxom, or statuesque, perhaps. The less tactful would simply have called her fat. But for all that, she was surprisingly graceful and light on her feet, and she accepted Brian's invitation with a bright grin. Still, given his recent injuries, his ability to maneuver her form to the rhythm of the music should have been compromised, at least, but somehow, it wasn't. They moved easily together, laughing over some shared, private comment.

McClaren was thoroughly enjoying the view, noting how the warm light reflected from the lamps inside the house picked up the bright hues of the tropical beach dress that was her trademark fashion, and highlighted the beautiful lines of Brian's face and body while obscuring the scars he still bore. He glanced over at Alexandra Corey and suspected that she was thinking the same thing, as the music played on.

Red, red wine,
It's up to you . . .*

The music and the dance went on, but the two FBI agents suddenly went very still, barely breathing, as both heard the sound of a car pulling up out front, and the slam of its doors.

Brian, meanwhile, managed to spin Trina under his lifted arm, only staggering a little, apparently oblivious of the eyes that followed him so eagerly. Although, thought McClaren, that was probably just an illusion; he was pretty sure that Brian Kinney always knew when he was being watched and enjoyed the effect he had on the watchers.

Only this time . . .

Brian spun his partner again, but a flicker of light from the candles caught a peculiar expression on his face, as the lyrics reached a particularly poignant moment.

I was wrong,
And I find
Just one thing makes me forget . . ."
A faint shuffle of sound, footsteps on sand, and then a voice - deadpan, determined not to laugh, but filled with such joy that it was almost overwhelming. "Well, I see some things never change. You still can't dance for shit."

And for one single moment, the entire world seemed to pause in its spin as time ceased to exist.

Brian turned, very slowly, and Chris McClaren made certain to stay focused on that exquisite face. He didn't need to look at Justin Taylor to know that the smile the young man wore was almost incandescent, spoke of love that could never be denied, of a heart reaching out, filled with the purest, most undeniable happiness imaginable. That went without saying.

But it was Brian's expression he had to see - Brian's reaction to what he could not have anticipated.

And he saw it.

Only for a moment, gone almost before it could register: Brian Kinney - open, naked, exposed, and unshielded.

And he felt something that he had never realized he would feel. In that fleeting second, he knew what it was to be heartbroken, to yearn for something he would never have.

For that one tiny frozen moment in time, it was pure, undiluted love that he saw in Brian's eyes - the kind of love that only the rare few are ever privileged to feel, and even fewer privileged to be the focus of.

He had never realized that he hungered for such a thing, and he understood immediately that he would have been better off never knowing.

Brian Kinney would only and ever love one man like that. It was in his eyes, written on his face, etched into every line of his body, and wrapped all around him like a cloak he would never succeed in shedding.

It was there . . . and it was gone, and in its place loomed a towering, frightening surge of pure rage.

And through it all, incredibly, Justin Taylor kept smiling.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

* Red, Red Wine - Neil Diamond

tbc
"We give hostages to fortune when we love."

"How the fuck did you get here?"

Chris McClaren had to concentrate to suppress an urge to flinch away from the white hot fury contained in those few words - a heat so extreme that the idea of spontaneous human combustion was suddenly not so far-fetched as it might have seemed only moments ago.

He found that he really wanted to look away, to not see that hard, scintillant brilliance sparking deep in eyes gone a sharp, bitter green, but he couldn't.

Then those eyes shifted toward him, and he realized that his first instinct had been correct. He should have looked away. Then he would not have seen that first, fleeting flash of bottomless love - which he had not wanted to see anyway - but, more importantly, he would not have been forced to watch that steaming, volcanic anger morph into bitter, frozen resentment, fueled by an infinite sense of betrayal.

The voice was softer now, and almost entirely without inflection. "Never mind. I'm not usually so slow to grasp the obvious. My congratulations on a perfect ambush."

"Brian," said the FBI agent, stepping forward and raising a hand.

But whatever he meant to say was left unsaid as Brian simply turned and walked off into the night, never looking toward any of them, but managing, in the process, to maintain as much distance as possible between himself and the new arrival.

McClaren glanced at young Taylor, and could not help but sigh as the mega-watt smile faltered. It was almost painful - probably would have been painful - if he'd not had more important things to worry about.

"Brian!" Justin's call was barely audible under a sudden gust of wind, giving Brian the opportunity to pretend not to hear, but McClaren was almost certain that the departing figure hesitated - for a fraction of a second - before resuming his determined plunge toward freedom.

Huge blue eyes - exquisitely expressive and filled with pain - turned to stare at the individuals still gathered on the deck. "You didn't tell him?" It was amazing, thought more than one of the observers of this drama, that a face so young and pretty could project such scathing contempt. "Dear God, you didn't tell him I was coming? Do you have any idea what you've done? Hasn't he had enough shit to deal with, without you betraying his trust?"

Chris McClaren's mouth fell open. Literally. Could it really be that this . . . this - what had Brian called the kid, on more than one occasion - this twat was actually sneering at them and looking as if he was both strong enough and angry enough to swat each of them like some kind of bug.

"You just stay here," the FBI agent snapped finally, biting back the rest of the scathing retort he wanted to shout.
"The hell with that!" Taylor was walking out toward the beach, completely disregarding the voices raised at his back.

Both Alexandra Corey and Trina Thomas started after him, but neither of them could actually be considered to be in prime physical condition, so it was McClaren who was the only one of the three who was able to overtake the young blonde and spin him around with a semi-violent tug on his arm.

But Justin Taylor - though he might still resemble a twink of the first order - had learned many lessons in the years since he'd been victimized the first time around, many of them - even most of them - under the tutelage of the man who'd just walked away from all of them, and he stood his ground, body tense and hands up in a defensive posture as McClaren got right in his face and prepared to cut the kid down to size. Only there, as it happened, was the rub. Justin Taylor was not about to allow anyone to send him back to victim-hood or reduce him to something less than he deserved to be.

The kid (and yes, he did know he shouldn't call him that, but . . . what the hell!) eyed McClaren with undisguised impatience, blended with a trace of . . . satisfaction? Could that actually be what the agent was sensing in that sapphire gaze? "You're not his boyfriend." There was no doubt in the timber of the voice, only undiluted conviction. "You're FBI."

McClaren knew that there was no time to lose, that Brian was getting farther away with every passing moment. Nevertheless, he couldn't quite resist an urge to puncture that bubble of smugness. "Yeah? Well, maybe you need to rethink your assumptions, little twat. Where's it written that I can't be both?"

Surprisingly strong hands gripped the FBI agent's forearms, as the young man's voice dropped to an icy whisper. "You don't get to call me that. Only one person . . . ever . . . gets to call me that."

McClaren huffed a sigh of patience almost exhausted. "Look, little shit, I don't give a damn what you call yourself. You can be the fucking Terminator if you like, but I need to go get him - to stop him . . . ."

"Why you?" Justin demanded. "Why should it be . . ."

"Because he trusts me." The words were sharp and clipped, almost snarled, but the FBI agent, despite the fact that he was speaking absolute truth as he knew it, felt a pang of regret as he saw shadows of uncertainty rise in those incredibly expressive eyes. He paused then, feeling a compelling urge to offer a scrap of comfort but knowing he couldn't afford the sentiment. "Because he knows he can trust me. Can you say the same?"

That was a low blow, the FBI agent thought as the young man flinched. But true nonetheless. "Justin," he said, reining in his impatience and trying to offer a voice of reason, "he just needs, right now. And he doesn't always know what it is that he needs. So, I need to go after him."

But Justin was not going to accept defeat easily. "I followed him across the country, after coming half-way around the world for him. And you let me come here, knowing that he would feel betrayed by your silence, so don't bother telling me that he trusts you. You'll be lucky if he doesn't tear you a new asshole. But . . . I know he needs some time to process everything and to think. So you've got ten minutes, because I'm not going to let him push me away again. So go, but hurry."

McClaren lifted one quizzical eyebrow, and then realized that there was no way he was going to succeed in changing the younger man's mind. So . . . he went - and hurried, as Trina Thomas came forward to introduce herself and to overcome Justin's assertions that he couldn't possibly eat a bite.
Thus McClaren would have fifteen minutes, instead of the ten he expected.

As it turned out, he would not have good reason to appreciate the extra time.

He was pretty sure he knew where he would find Brian, and he was right . . . almost.

North of the cottage, past a pristine stretch of sculpted sand and beyond a low march of dunes that built toward a rough headland, lay the skeletal framework of an old pier, almost obscured by thick clumps of sea grass. The structure itself was long since gone, eroded away by time and tide, but dark, weathered remnants of the foundation remained, and Brian had discovered early on that it was a good place to rest and catch his breath when he'd started taking regular walks as part of his daily regimen to help him regain his strength.

And that's where McClaren figured he would find his wayward and extremely pissed-off charge. He was not, however, exactly correct. Ordinarily, when resting or breath-catching or working his way through a problem or brooding or thinking deep thoughts or simply daydreaming, Brian would hoist himself up on one of the heavy old support beams wedged deep into the ground just above the delineation in the sand that marked high tide.

But not tonight. He was in the general location all right, but he was not sitting. And he was not actually on the beach. Instead, he was standing out in the middle of the breaking surf, with water rolling around his thighs, and he was soaked through. The pockets of his cut-off jeans were bulging with stones he had apparently gathered as he'd walked down the beach, and he was hurling them, one by one, out toward the open ocean, as his eyes sought the farthest line of the horizon.

"Jesus!" whispered McClaren, spying shirt, shoes, ankle brace, and cigarette pack dropped on the beach, and remembering, with rising alarm, that there were still some unhealed wounds at various sites on Brian's body - wounds that should never have been exposed to raw salt water. Further, it was obvious from the way that buff, once perfect body was twisting and jerking around its center that the man was probably already in considerable pain which would only get worse as he continued venting his frustration by abusing his body.

"Jesus!" the agent repeated, wondering how he was going to convince the man to come in from the surf.

And the answer, of course, was that he wasn't. Not from here anyway. Not until he was willing to stride out through that rolling tumult and confront the individual who almost certainly - at this very moment - would have gladly stood by and watched him disemboweled, without offering a single world of protest.

He knew he should move quickly to minimize the damage and the risk to Brian, but he also knew that the evening was upon them, carrying the chill of a gusting wind out of the East, and that Brian would need warmth as well as refuge from the cold wet grasp of the sea once he could be convinced to come out of the water. So McClaren hurried to the area behind the old pier where driftwood tended to accumulate, and, taking advantage of the shelter provided by a low dune, managed to put together a small campfire which he stoked and banked carefully to make sure it would continue to burn until it was needed.

Then he allowed himself one moment more, to take a deep breath and gird his loins, so to speak.

He walked out into the surf, lighting a cigarette as he went, and didn't stop until he was close enough to reach out and touch the man who was the center of his focus. Close enough, but he made no attempt to complete the physical connection. That, he knew, was not his place; not now.
Brian continued throwing rocks, and a quick hitch in his breathing as he completed the next throw announced that the motion was causing extreme discomfort. Then McClaren looked closer and saw a smear of bright red low down on the left side of that sculpted chest.

Shit.

"If you get gangrene - or some kind of fucking fungus from schmucking around in this toxic shit - I'm gonna have to deal with both Turnage and Keller, not to mention your entire cock-eyed extended family, so why don't you . . ."

"No." More bark than answer. "Why don't you?"

"What . . ."

The voice was nothing like the rich, honeyed tones of Brian Kinney in seduction mode. It was flat and cold and hard. "Why don't you explain to me - give me one single reason - why I should ever believe a thing you say to me, from this day forward." He turned then, and stepped into McLaren's space. "When you had to know that seeing him, dealing with him, is something I don't want to do. Why would you . . ."

"It wasn't just me."

Brian nodded. "I figured as much."

"Yeah? You figured out why she did it - as long as you're figuring?"

Brian shook his head and huffed a small, impatient sigh. "She thinks she owes me."

McClaren's favored him with a complacent smile. "I think she thinks she loves you."

Brian went very still then before deliberately turning away, but just a fraction of a second too late to prevent McClaren from seeing - and recognizing - a growing sense of betrayal. "In that case, she thinks too much. So you guys just put your pointed little heads together and decided that poor, deluded, dysfunctional Brian couldn't be trusted to figure out what he really needed. Why would . . ."

"Because it's not always easy to know what's best, even for yourself." The FBI agent knew it sounded lame, even as he said it, but he also knew it was true.

"I've been taking care of myself since I was eight years old, without interference or assistance from anybody. But, somehow, you guys think that you have a right to interfere, to tell me what I need? You've known me a few weeks, and you already think . . ."

McClaren reached out quickly and grabbed Brian's biceps, closing his fingers to a tight grip and giving a little shake for good measure. "You really want to know what I think? I think that people are so fucking intimidated by you and so bowled over by that icy stare and that arrogant sneer that declare that you don't need anybody - that they're afraid to tell you the truth. That they say what they think you want them to say. Or else they just prattle along and don't say anything at all. And in the end, I think it took someone who loved you enough to step outside the box, to understand that a person who hasn't spent a lifetime being dominated and controlled by you would see more clearly, speak more honestly . . ." His voice dropped to a gentle whisper as he leaned in and nuzzled against the velvety skin beneath Brian's ear. "Someone who would care enough to risk incurring your anger in order to tell you the truth."

Brian pulled back, and there was no mistaking the sarcastic gleam in topaz eyes. "And what truth
would that be?"

"The one that's the complete opposite of what you tell yourself. You're not pushing Justin away because he doesn't know you." McClaren took a deep breath and braced himself. "You're pushing him away because he does."

Later, he would admit that he should have known - should have seen it coming. After all the silent, unacknowledged anger, the bitter frustrations, the endless disappointments, the bottomless pain that he kept locked within him, the despair of dreams shattered and ground into dust, and the all-consuming fear of being helpless to protect the things that mattered most - it was inevitable that Brian Kinney would finally lose the iron grip he'd been exerting over his thoughts and reactions, and strike out, targeting the person who happened to be closest at hand at the critical moment. The only truly surprising thing was that it hadn't happened sooner.

Brian jerked himself free of the hands that sought to restrain him, pulled away just far enough to reposition his body and channel all his power, all his energy, and - most importantly - all his rage into the fist that he drove into McClaren's midriff, and the uppercut that followed it, immediately splitting the flesh above the agent's left eye.

It probably would have gone further and grown uglier except that the FBI agent simply fell back before the assault, never so much as raising a hand to defend himself - something that Brian noticed immediately, something that seemed to enrage him even more.

"Get up, Shithead!" he snarled, standing there in the surf with his hands clinched at his sides, head up, shoulders back, with moonlight just kissing that classic profile, as he shifted again, determined to stand firm, and looking absolutely fucking beautiful. So incredibly beautiful, no matter how battered. And so lost. Shit!

"Get up, and show me what the big, bad FBI agent can do to a poor, helpless, little schmuck like me."

McClaren picked himself up but simply stood there, loose-limbed and easy. "You've never been a helpless little anything, Brian, and I'm not planning to stand here and play punching bag, so you can work out all your frustrations."

"Then fight back!" The voice was still hard, filled with ice.

"No."

Brian stepped closer, braced his hands against McClaren's chest, and shoved. "Fight back, Fucker!"

"No." The FBI agent managed to retain his footing, but only barely, and he was hard put to suppress the smile that acknowledged that Kinney was stronger and tougher than any of his friends or acquaintances might have guessed. He turned then and looked directly into those changeable eyes, and saw that they'd gone stormy gray in the gloom of the evening, flecked with ice crystals. He wondered then if he was the only person who had ever cared to look deep enough, to push hard enough to force his way through the camouflage and see what was really there beneath that steely surface; the colder the voice, the purer the rage . . . the greater the pain the man was trying to mask.

"Shit!"

McClaren knew it was a near thing. Brian wanted to hit him again - and again - and yet again; wanted to beat the shit out of somebody. Anybody. But couldn't quite bring himself to bludgeon a man who refused to fight back.
"Come on," said the FBI agent softly, extending his hands once more to grip shoulders that were, by this time, trembling under the combined chill of the ocean spray and the night air. "You're freezing out here, and . . ."

"I don't need a fucking nursemaid."

McClaren nodded, and lifted one hand to wipe away a trickle of blood that was dripping past the corner of his eye. "Good for you, Champ, but maybe I do."

"Shit! You're bleeding." The voice had grown small now, and the anger and bitterness in hazel eyes were obliterated beneath thick rising shadows of shame.

Another first, thought McClaren, who was pretty sure that Brian Kinney didn't ordinarily do shame, or - more accurately - would never show it even if he did feel it.

"I'll live."

"Unless I decide to kill you in your sleep."

McClaren went very still, feeling something unexpected stir in his chest, something he had not anticipated. It should not have mattered, he knew. It wasn't as if he hadn't known the truth all along. And yet . . . He sighed, and dismissed the faint ache rising in his chest, as he realized that he was not going to get a better opportunity than this one to speak his mind. "Somehow," he said quietly, "I was pretty sure that I wouldn't be around you any more. When I'm sleeping, I mean."

The shame was immediately obliterated by another spike of rage. "What? You got this all planned out? The romantic reunion between the stud and the twink? Rose petals on silk sheets and champagne in crystal snifters and long walks on the beach with Barry Manilow playing on the iPod?"

"Why not?" The FBI agent was very careful to allow no trace of a smile to touch his lips, no matter what he was feeling inside.

Brian allowed himself to be pulled out of the shallow water, and seated near the campfire which was, by now, burning merrily and sending showers of bright firefly sparks up into the darkness. "If you have to ask," he said finally, "then you're just proving my point. That . . . those fairy-tale/prince-charming gestures . . . they're bullshit. They're not me."

"But they could be," McClaren pointed out, as he retrieved Brian's shirt from the sand and dropped to his knees to drape it around acres of bare, golden skin. He elected to say nothing further as he quickly inspected the bloody spot on Brian's torso, and gave a little sigh of relief to note that it appeared to be nothing more than a random scratch.

When Brian didn't answer immediately, the agent assumed that he was just being Brian Kinney, ignoring a comment he considered too ridiculous to deserve a response. Thus, when he did speak, his words were something of a surprise - possibly to them both. "If I could have given him what he wanted - what he dreamed of - don't you think I would have done it a long time ago?"

McClaren leaned forward so he could look up into night-dark eyes. "A few rose petals. A couple of walks on the beach? What the fuck is the big deal?"

Brian shrugged, and his companion noticed the quick grimace of pain that touched that perfect face. Tomorrow would probably not be a good day, in more ways than one.

"It's not who I am," he said slowly. "In order to give him the life he wanted, I had to become
someone I'm not." Then he smiled, and McClaren thought he had never seen anything quite so sad as that fleeting admission of hope lost. "I even tried it, for a while, but it didn't work. It was one of those 'damned if you do and damned if you don't' situations. We both tried to change and found that neither one of us liked what we were becoming. Besides, I know myself too well. No matter how much I might try to give him what he needs, in the end . . . I'd still be me. And that's not good enough." He looked up then, once more gazing out across the tumble of breakers rolling toward the shore. "Not for Justin."

"Shouldn't that be my choice to make?" It was softly spoken, barely audible above the roar of the surf, but very firm nonetheless. Very sure.

Brian didn't turn around to watch the young man walk into the circle of firelight. He simply continued to gaze out to sea, and spoke very evenly, almost without inflection. "It should, and it was, as I recall. Unless someone was holding a gun to your head to force you to go to New York, to 'find yourself'. That was you, right? Your decision."

"It was, but I didn't know . . ." Justin settled to his knees on the other side of the campfire and just stared at the man who had become his world, his life, his everything.

Brian sighed and clasped his arms tight against his chest as another tremor surged through his body, and McClaren, carefully avoiding looking at Taylor at all, moved up behind him, nudging him closer to the fire, "What didn't you know, Sunshine?" Brian sounded exhausted and didn't look up. He was determined not to notice how the reflection of the flames gilded perfect white skin and painted beautiful plays of light and shadow on that exquisite face. "That there's always a price to pay for having dreams come true? What did you really think was going to happen? That you were going to become the new Cezanne, and I was going to languish away in my lonely loft, pining for what could never be and wasting away like some faggot version of Camille? Is that really what you expected?"

"You said you loved me," retorted the blonde. "I expected you to show it."

The sad, twisted little smile put in another appearance, but only for a moment. "I thought I did."

"How? By turning your back? By walking away? How does that show anything, except that you're unwilling to give of yourself - to anybody?"

Brian was silent for a moment; then he managed to push away from McClaren and struggle to his feet. "You're right," he said firmly. "That's exactly what it shows." He turned away then and started walking back toward the house, one arm braced against his side in a manner that told McClaren that he was in a lot more pain than he was prepared to acknowledge.

Justin, however, had not been around this new, physically damaged version of Brian Kinney long enough to pick up on the clues.

"Why?" Justin shouted, leaping up and following. "Why does it always have to be your way, or no way at all? Why does Brian Kinney always have to call the shots? What about our . . ."

Brian stopped so abruptly that Justin only barely avoided crashing into his back. "I swear," he said coldly, "if you use the word 'commitment', I'm going to deck you."

Justin took a deep breath, and planted his feet. "Commitment," he said, almost shouting. "Commitment, commitment, commitment. What's so fucking awful about that one little word?"

Chris McClaren watched the play of emotions that flared in Brian's eyes and debated whether or not he should interfere. It would be very bad for an FBI agent to simply stand by and watch as one queer
strangled another, but he conceded that this confrontation was long overdue, and that it was something that both men needed.

"It's a word that doesn't apply to me." Brian's response was very logical and very cold.

Justin's, on the other hand, was white-hot with rage. "Oh, that's right. The great and mighty Kinney doesn't do commitment. Or love or loyalty or romance. He's too fucking busy running away."

Brian simply turned around and looked into blue eyes ablaze with passion, and the contrast between the one face, filled with anger and need and desperation, and the other, almost completely empty of expression, was almost painful.

"That's what you do, you know. It's what you've always done. Your family treated you like a piece of shit, and you just took it. They used you, and they blamed you, and you never once stood up for yourself. And when your friends try to become a real part of your life, you pull back and you hide. You pull your strings and work your magic behind closed doors, so you never have to admit that you care about anything. When your own son needs his daddy, who does he look to? Not you, for sure. You've turned your back on him too. Big, bad, brave Brian Kinney doesn't exist. He's just . . . an ad campaign who spends his life promoting something he doesn't even believe in. You've never really been there, for anybody."

McClaren would have given the young man credit for flair and innovation, but he was too busy studying Brian's face, looking for some kind of emotional response. He was amazed when he didn't find it.

Brian just nodded. "Right, as usual."

Justin flushed. It was all bullshit, of course, and he knew it. But he needed something - anything - to pierce that protective armor that Brian was so determined to wear.

"Do you still love me?" he asked finally, allowing the first real glimmer of what he was feeling to flare in his eyes. "Or should I phrase it differently? Should I ask if you ever really did?"

Brian turned away, to gaze once more out into the ocean, which seemed to offer him some measure of comfort. "I . . . did."

"Then why didn't you fight for me, motherfucker?" Justin was not - quite - allowing himself to indulge in tears of rage, but it was close.

Brian hesitated for a split second, something very old and weary moving in his eyes, before he managed to dredge up a patent-worthy Kinney smirk, and Justin felt a cold stab of fear in his gut, as the specter of doubt stirred in his mind. "Why didn't you?"

Abruptly, without allowing himself time to consider the wisdom of his actions, Justin stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Brian's still shivering torso. "Do you know," he whispered, "what it did to me? To find out what they did to you? To understand that you could have died there in that hellhole, that I could have lost you forever?"

Brian stood up very straight, refusing to react to the touch of those arms around his body, those hands stroking his back as he tried to block out the ugly, dark images that flared in his memories. "As a matter of fact," he answered flatly, "I do."

The two remained unmoving for a moment, frozen in time.

Then Justin stepped back, and drew a deep breath, and Brian . . . Brian seemed to stand taller, to
square himself for what would come next. Justin would pull out the big guns now; the twat would never give up without using all the weapons in his arsenal.

"Is that what you want . . . for me?"

"What I want for you has nothing to do with what you do with your life," Brian replied firmly. "It's your life. Your choice."

"Like it was yours?"

"Yes." No hesitation. No margin for doubt.

"Bullshit! You think I don't know what drives you? What's always driven you. You might have managed to hide it from everybody else, but you can't hide from me, Brian. I know you entirely too well."

"What?" Brian asked quickly, smirk firmly in place. "If you're going to channel Debbie, you need to get it right. The line is 'I've known you too long, and - regrettably - too well.' And it means as much from you as it meant from her. You two should get together, and discuss all your incredible insights into what makes Brian run."

Justin couldn't quite swallow the smile that trembled on his lips. "You know what? Debbie doesn't know shit. She only sees what you decided to let her see, and she spins it according to what she wants to believe. Because the truth would hurt too much. You really think she could deal with knowing how often she misjudged you, just because it was easier than facing the truth?"

"That's very profound, Professor." Smirk still there - deeper now. "You should get another degree, in psychology this time. Oh, but wait - you never got the first one, did you? Another example of giving up. Letting other people dictate your life. You're pathetic."

"And you're doing what you always do. Deflecting the question. Next thing you'll be quoting James Joyce - or Lewis Carroll."

The smirk twitched, and became a grin. "And cannot friends be firm and fast and yet bear parting?"

"Fuck you, Brian. I'm not your friend."

"At last. Something we can agree on."

Justin stepped in again, lifted up and claimed the mouth that dominated his dreams, waking and sleeping, and McClaren wondered if either of them knew what a perfect, erotic vision they created together. Then he smiled and came to his senses. Of course, they knew.

Then Justin stepped back. "That wasn't a kiss . . . between friends."

"Whatever. Just . . ."

Justin lifted one hand and laid his fingers across Brian's mouth. "You're not going to make it easy, are you?"

The only answer was lifted eyebrows and the sardonic gleam in dark eyes aswarm with shadows, as Justin settled to his knees in the sand and pulled Brian down beside him.

"It's always been about you. Everything - every fucking thing - has always been your burden to bear."
When you were a kid, your parents looked at you, and saw nothing but wasted chances, lost freedom. And parents aren't supposed to feel that way, are they? So - if they did feel that way - then there's only one logical conclusion." He paused and moved in closer, deliberately invading Brian's space. "There had to be something wrong with you. Right? Something deep inside you, since it was pretty obvious right from the start that what was on the surface was okay. Better than okay. You were bright and beautiful and talented, so if they couldn't find it in themselves to love you, it had to be because they saw something in you that wasn't worthy of their love. Right? So when your father beat the shit out of you and broke your bones and told the world what a useless shit you were, and when your mother spent all her days getting drunk off her ass so she wouldn't have to think about her miserable life and her miserable family and her hard, cold, heart, it was because you deserved it, right? And when your sweet little cunt-sister took advantage of every chance they gave her to blame you for everything wrong in her miserable life, and that was just the beginning, wasn't it? It was always your fault. Just like it was when Chris Hobbs went after me."

Brian had been as still as carved stone during Justin's recitation, which had grown in intensity even as it sank in volume, but he stirred now, twisting as if to move away but not quite violently enough to dislodge the hands that held him. "You've spent all these years believing that I was bashed because you had the audacity to show up at my prom, and dance with me and flaunt yourself in front of that bunch of bastards. Do you even remember how it really happened?"

Brian did flinch then, and the smile that touched his face was bittersweet at best. "Do you?"

Justin shrugged. "No. But I have Daphne's version to call on, to let me see it in my mind's eye, and I can assure you of this: I'd give anything to be able to remember it, because what came after is not the important part. Daphne said . . ." He faltered slightly then, and had to swallow around the lump in his throat in order to continue. "She said that it was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen - that you looked at me that night as if I was the center of your world, the light of your life. And let's be honest here, Brian. That hasn't happened very often. So there was this magical, perfect moment in our lives, and then Hobbs stepped in, and took it away from us. From both of us. You think I don't know how much that affected you? You think I don't know that you spent weeks, months - years, maybe - wishing it had been you instead of me? You think I don't know why you came to that hospital every fucking night, to stand guard? To make sure to protect me when I couldn't protect myself? And then my mother had to stick her two cents in, compounding the guilt you were already feeling. Jesus, Brian!" Another pregnant pause, and his voice became a whisper. "It was killing you. It was like you were filled up with broken glass, and it was cutting you to pieces from the inside. And through it all, nobody even noticed what was happening to you. The same way nobody ever bothered to tell you the rest of it, did they? Neither my mom, nor Debbie, nor anybody else. About how I'd originally planned to skip prom, maybe spend the night at Babylon - with you - getting rightly and royally fucked - but they all kept insisting that it wouldn't be right for me to pass up that 'right of passage'. That I owed it to myself to go and take a stand for queers everywhere. They never bothered to share that little fact with you, did they?"

Brian simply blinked. "What difference would it have made?"

Justin nodded. "None at all, of course. Because it wouldn't have fit the pattern of your life, would it? Never mind what anybody else did or how anybody else might have contributed to what happened to me, because ultimately, it had to be your fault. Just like the bomb that brought Babylon down and killed all those people, and almost killed Michael. You think I don't know you well enough by now
to put it all together. Okay, let's see - I'm thinking it goes something like this: Babylon was history - was gone - until Brian Kinney decided to stick his nose in where it had no business, to revive the heart of Gay Pittsburgh and reopen the club which would ultimately be the target for the kind of vicious hatred that kills and maims innocent people. So if Kinney had just minded his own business and let the fucking place shut down and die a natural death, then all those people would still be alive today."

He shifted closer and nuzzled for a moment against the soft skin under Brian's ear. "How'm I doing so far?"

"War and Peace was shorter," came the annoyed response, "and less complicated."

"Uh, huh. And now we come to the latest debacle - the attack on the Mighty Kinney himself, who must accept responsibility for his own bashing, because he doesn't have the common sense or the survival instincts or the simple discretion to keep his head down and avoid irritating those members of high society who have adopted the fundamentalist right-wing religious bullshit which decrees that queers need to be neither seen nor heard, but confine themselves to the dark at the back of the closet and allow 'decent, God-fearing Christians' to live their lives without ever being exposed to the depravity of same-sex relationships or - God help them - the 'Homosexual Agenda'."

Brian took a deep breath, his face curiously frozen. "Are you done?"

"Almost. As soon as I tell you that it's all bullshit. All this crap, this compulsion to 'protect' everybody, is just an act. Just an excuse, so that you can run away, and never face the real issues. So the perfect Brian Kinney can stay perfect, and nobody can ever see the failure inside you. You won't face your own weaknesses, but you'll let me face them for you. Or Michael, maybe, or Lindsey. Maybe Gus. Maybe he can manage to undo all the harm you've done, if he can just figure out that it's not really his fault that Daddy doesn't love him. Maybe he can find a way to do what his asshole father never could. Maybe he'll figure out how to believe in himself - in spite of you."

It was at that moment that everything around them and between them went completely silent. As if even the nightwind knew better than to intrude; even the surf seemed to recede into dark silence, and Brian, with surprisingly fluid grace, rose to his feet, hauled Justin up with him, and shoved the blonde so violently that he went sprawling backwards into the sand.

"Fuck . . . you!" It was more of a snarl than an epithet, and Brian was already moving away quickly, when Justin sprang up and lunged forward, putting all of his weight - such as it was - behind the punch that caught Brian under his chin and sent him crashing to his knees, at which point he fell slowly forward to bury his face against his arms and curl himself around his center, as he drew a deep, gasping breath.

"Shit!" McClaren knew immediately that he'd waited too long, but he'd deliberately avoided interfering in the exchange, once the two adversaries had managed to forget about his presence. He'd thought the confrontation would prove beneficial for them both, but he'd never dreamed it would come to this. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he shouted at Justin, as the younger man simply stood there, the anger that had blazed in his eyes immediately giving away before a flash of pure horror.

McClaren got to Brian first, and was appalled to find him curled around his own mid-section, shaking with emotion that he was obviously struggling to suppress.

"Brian?" The FBI agent wrapped his hands around trembling shoulders and tried to encourage Brian to shift onto his back, so that he could check face and body for damage. In truth, he doubted that Justin's blow had been powerful enough to inflict any real injury, under ordinary circumstances. But
there was nothing ordinary about this moment, and he knew better than to assume anything. Still, he had expected Brian to simply yield and roll over under the pull of his hands, but it was not nearly as simple as he'd thought it would be, as Brian only curled tighter and shook harder and ignored his efforts.

"Jesus, Brian . . ." McClaren then slid his fingers through strands of damp hair that clung to the nape of Brian's neck, to insert his hand into the soft skin beneath the jaw-line, checking for damage or, perhaps, trying to offer some kind of comfort, and feeling something hot and wet and . . .

Oh, shit! Was he bleeding or . . . could it be that he was . . . No. That was just not possible. He wasn't crying . . . was he?

He couldn't be . . . Then Brian abruptly rolled over and stretched out on the sand, and McClaren had to squelch a sudden, almost irresistible urge to take a swing of his own, burying his fist into an unprotected abdomen, because the bastard wasn't crying. He was laughing - a bone-deep, from-the-gut, steadily growing roar of a laugh - and the only tears being shed were tears of laughter.

The two men who stood looking down at him were hopelessly confused, and turned to stare at each other, neither having a clue of what to do or what to say or . . .

In the end, they could only wait until Brian recovered from his bout of hysteria, and chose to explain himself. And the look in Justin's eyes said that the explanation better be world-class.

Brian lay there on the sand, gazing up into the star patterns overhead, and felt something ease inside him - something that had been hard and painful and infinitely, intimately a part of him since the first moment of the attack that had almost killed him. He had begun to believe it would never leave him; he had begun to accept it as the cost of not dying.

He laughed harder as he felt it simply . . . slip away. Then he fell silent, and spent yet another moment just breathing, just enjoying its absence.

"Do you have any idea," he said finally, "how long I've waited for that? For somebody to call me on the bullshit and treat me like a man again, instead of a fucking martyr or a helpless victim? Or some fragile little china doll."

Chris McClaren sank to the sand and spent a moment studying that no-longer-entirely-perfect face. "What?" he said finally. "I should have punched you out the first time you ever made me mad enough to spit?"

Brian shrugged. "It would have been a lot more honest - and convincing - than all that projected compassion and politically correct bullshit." Then he looked up at Justin, who was still standing motionless, his skin a whiter shade of pale than ever before. "Thanks for the brutal candor, Sunshine. You made my day. And now - now I'm all invigorated and motivated to get back on my feet, and show the fuckers that they can't keep a good faggot down." He did not even attempt to disguise the bitter sarcasm contained in those words. "So you can go toddling back to Fantasy Island or wherever the fuck you were, and . . ."

But Justin, despite being emotionally staggered without having been the target of a single direct blow, was not ready to concede defeat yet. He dropped to his knees, and opened himself up to the gaze that examined him. And Brian wanted to look away, wanted to refuse to see what he was being shown. Wanted . . . not to know.

"Good," said the blond. "I was beginning to wonder if I was ever going to be able to break through - to get your attention."
Brian laughed again, but this one was not quite natural. Not quite convincing. "Yeah, right. It was all just a big act, to get me to . . ."

"Do you want me to become the newer, hipper version . . . of you?" The tone was hard and demanding and very cold.


Justin simply ignored the non sequitur. "Brian, listen to me. Are you listening?"

An eye-roll and a nod was the only answer he was likely to get. "Okay, so I was baiting you. Trying to get a real response out of you, instead of the bullshit you've been spouting since the attack. But that doesn't mean that some of it - a lot of it - wasn't true. I know you, Brian. Like nobody else ever has, I think, because you've always managed to keep some distance between you and anyone else who might have tried to get inside the walls you build around you. I don't blame you for that. Shit, I love those fucking walls, because they're what let you become the person you are. The man I love."

He found himself fixated on the small scar at Brian's temple, which was fading now, but still noticeable, and he was reminded of something he'd once heard attributed to Elizabeth Taylor. When asked why she never had the mole on her face removed, she'd laughed and said that one tiny little flaw only served to emphasize the perfection of the rest of the face. OK, so that was probably more urban legend than truth. Nevertheless, he was pretty sure that this scar proved that observation to be completely valid. Thus, he liked the scar, but he was less fond of the skepticism and cynicism currently rising in those chameleon eyes. "I know you blame yourself, for every fucking bad thing that happens to anyone you love. To Michael, to Lindsey, to Gus. To me. Me, maybe most of all. But do you really want me to have to live with that kind of guilt and pain? Because I will, you know. If you insist on going on with this fucking act, with pushing me away because the great, all-powerful Brian Kinney knows what's best and has to sacrifice himself to protect Poor, Helpless, Little Justin . . . then I'm going to be the one who spends his life knowing that he destroyed the man he loves and the only home he ever knew, because that's what you are to me. And knowing that, no matter where I go or what kind of success I have in my life, it's never going to compare to what it should have been. Because I'm never going to have the only thing that matters - the only thing I want." He paused then, and reached out to thread his fingers through Brian's. "I don't care if you think I'm a complete pussy, or a wimp, or the wuss to end all wusses. I don't want to be the best homosexual I can be, if it means I can't have you." He leaned close then, and rested his forehead against Brian's shoulder. "I can't find myself without you. It's all just going through the motions. I don't feel things any more. That's my life without you, Brian - no matter how much money or success or stardom in the art world I manage to accumulate. Without you, nothing makes me laugh."

Memory stirred then in Brian's mind, a cascade of images of Justin laughing - dancing, fucking, joking, sniping at his baby sister, ridiculing Michael and his whining, or Ted and his ridiculous conservative values, stuffing his face with Deb's ziti or his mother's jambalaya, or making fun of the latest trick who thought he could capture the heart of Brian Kinney; Justin at his beautiful best. Brian deliberately looked away then, no longer able to endure the pain he easily discerned in the unshielded eyes that were devouring him. He pulled his lips into his mouth, desperately looking for something to say, something to cling to, as older, more vivid images - unfaded by time - flashed before his eyes. Justin, bloody and broken and silent . . . and dying in his arms. "Justin, I . . ."

"I'm dead inside . . . without you." It was just a whisper, as those perfect, irresistible lips nuzzled up beneath his jaw. "Is that what you really want for me?"

"You're stronger than that." It was firmly spoken, but clipped off quickly, to avoid a break in the voice that spoke it.
Blue eyes filled with shifting shadow. "If I'm strong, it's because you made me strong. If I lose you, I don't want to be strong. I don't want to paint or endure or cope or . . . live. I want to be half of Brian and Justin, or I don't want to be anything at all. Do you understand me?"

Brian was suddenly very still, hunched over and staring down into nothingness. "If I lost you . . ." he whispered, and it was obvious that he had not planned to speak at all.

"You can't lose something that's a part of you. And that's what I am, you know. You can deny it all you like, but it's true just the same. We're only complete, when we're together, and if you're really determined that I should always have a choice, then you have to allow me to choose. And I choose you."

"Justin . . ."

"Just stop, Brian. Stop hurting yourself. Stop hurting me. Stop trying to destroy us. Because there's either us - together - or there's nothing at all."

Brian pulled away then, and Justin almost gasped when he spotted the twinkle rising in eyes previously filled only with clouds of dread and doubt, and he was immediately glad that he was already on his knees as he was certain that his legs would not have supported him before the sheer power of the joy that tore through him. "You do realize that's the most ridiculously romantic thing that anybody has ever said," Brian observed with a patent-worthy Kinney smirk.

Justin smiled and collapsed into arms that were suddenly there to catch him. That would, he hoped, always be there to catch him.

And Chris McClaren stood for a moment, transfixed by the beauty of the tableau before him, and stricken with something he had never expected to feel. For the space of a heartbeat, he found that he hated Justin Taylor, that he wanted nothing more than to obliterate the young blond and assume his place, secure within the arms of Brian Kinney.

Then he noticed that Brian was looking at him, and he was pretty sure that his moment of bitter jealousy and hatred had been noted and understood. So he smiled, took another moment to memorize the quick tenderness he read in those dark eyes, and turned around to walk away, knowing that some things should remain forever private. That some things were now and always would be beyond his reach.

The beach seemed suddenly very empty.

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"I don't believe it." It was more gasped than spoken, and the voice was filled with despair.

"Yes, you do, Baby." Drew Boyd found that he was barely able to speak at all, and he wished, for the thousandth time, that someone else could have handled this task. Only, if someone else had, it would have been even harder on Emmett. So he drew a deep breath, swallowed his own regrets, and clasped his arms more tightly around the young man who had - against all rhyme or reason - become the center of his world. "And you have to know that I would have spared you this, if I could."

"But you have the right to know." That was Cynthia, speaking up for the first time, and trying, without a great deal of success, to spare Boyd any further discomfort. "Because you have a responsibility to Brian. And most of all, because you've already guessed some of it." Her smile was gentle as she leaned forward into the cone of light falling from the lamp on the desk that was now Emmett's, pending the return of Brian Kinney, of course.
Beyond the soundproof walls of the office, the thumpa-thumpa proceeded unabated. Although there were some who claimed that it was not quite as enthusiastic or as energetic as it would have been in the presence of the man who was, somehow, its driving force.

"No, I didn't know . . ." Emmett's protest was quick, but died on his lips as second thoughts surged into his mind.

"Not the specifics, maybe," said Lance Mathis, "but you picked up plenty of clues that didn't quite fit into your preconceived notions of how things should go among members of the Kinney Fan Club. And now . . . now you're going to have to look at all the facts and decide where your loyalties lie. I'm sorry, Emmett. I really am. If we could have, we'd have left you out of this entirely. But you're in a position to be targeted, to be used in an attempt to get to Brian, and that's a risk we can't afford to take. It's already been done, using others, so . . ."

But Emmett was still shaking his head. "But you're talking about Teddie. Teddie, who has every motive in the world to be grateful to Brian for everything good in his life. It was Brian who rescued him, who dragged him out of the gutter and back into respectability, who gave him a whole new life . . ."

"All true," admitted Mathis. "But it was also Brian who failed to take Ted's ultra-fragile ego into account when he made arrangements for handling his affairs during his absence. In the end, it all came down . . ."

"To jealousy." Emmett provided the answer himself, knowing that he was right - hating that he was right.

Cynthia confirmed with a nod. "And we have the FBI . . ." She spared a wink for Kinnetik's security chief," and Brian's instincts for hiring the right man at exactly the right time to thank for the fact that protective measures were already in place before major, irreparable damage could be done."

Emmett clasped his hands in front of him so tightly that his knuckles were white and bloodless and closed his eyes for a moment as he felt strong, firm, massive hands close on his shoulders and try to knead away the tension there. "What - exactly - did he do?"

"Putting the best possible spin on it," answered Mathis, "he tried to make Brian a very rich man."

"Brian's already a rich man, by almost anybody's standards."

Cynthia nodded. "True, but not by the standards of the people that Ted has spent his whole life looking up to."

Emmett's smile was lopsided. "And by 'looking up to', I assume you mean envying. Being jealous of. And being snubbed by."

Mathis nodded, very careful to avoid studying Emmett's face, knowing how hard this was for the man who had once played the role of Theodore Schmidt's one and only love. "You do know him well," he observed.

Emmett sighed. "Sometimes I wish I didn't. I still remember - in vivid detail - that whole debacle with Garth Racine and how fascinated Teddie was with his lifestyle and his friends and his money, and how outraged he was when Brian wasn't the least bit impressed with his Garth-connection. And how devastated he was when the man showed his true colors. But I thought - I hoped he'd finally managed to put all that behind him."

Cynthia leaned back in her chair and drew a deep breath. "Maybe he had. Maybe this is all because I
... I should have just stepped aside and let him micro-manage everything. I never dreamed he would resent my efforts, or interpret the whole situation as an insult to him. Especially since I'm not really qualified to oversee the financial aspects of Brian's business. Brian needed Ted - still needs Ted - to safeguard everything he's worked for, so why would he jeopardize everything? I just don't get it."

Emmett rose then and walked to the elaborate bar in the corner of the room where he poured out generous portions of Johnnie Walker Red for them all. "Why don't you tell me exactly what he's done," he said as he served the drinks. "And maybe we can figure out the why of it together. Although I am absolutely certain about one thing." He paused to meet Cynthia's gaze as he handed over her glass, and recalled the look on Ted's face as he'd delivered his little speech to the extended family members gathered around the Novotny family table. "You," he said softly, with deliberate emphasis, "have nothing to apologize for."

And he was gratified to notice that Lance Mathis leaned forward to lay his hand on Cynthia's shoulder, offering tacit agreement of his own.

Or, perhaps, not so tacit, as it was Mathis who proceeded to offer up a thorough, perfectly organized listing of the evidence documenting Ted's actions and shortcomings since the uproar necessitating the transfer of power in the Kinney empire. OK - so it wasn't technically an empire; not yet. It was still in its infancy, in empirical terms. But from the unique perspectives of the individuals who were the satellites circling the prime gravitational power that was Brian Kinney, it was the dawning of a new era and a major force in their lives. Embryonic maybe, or primal. But real enough, and beginning to grow and multiply, and poised now at a critical stage when making the right decision about which way to step next was crucial.

And Brian had chosen to entrust it all to Cynthia, while Ted had been relegated to the status of a Big Q register clerk. Or so he had chosen to interpret his employer's decision.

Emmett had listened carefully to every fact that Mathis had presented to him. He had examined the documents that Cynthia presented to support the security chief's claims - had flinched away from the columns of numbers and the records of financial transfers, had sighed over the disclosure of privileged information and the nasty comments overheard by unbiased observant interested parties.

"How much damage has he done?" he asked finally.

Cynthia heaved a deep sigh. "Not as much as he might have. Preventive measures, by law enforcement and by our own security people, averted the worst of it. But there's no way of knowing how far these monsters are prepared to go to destroy Brian, or, at the least, to silence him. And Ted - Ted is still a weak link for us. And, possibly, for you."

"What do you mean?"

"Meaning that there are still threats to Brian and to his company. We have reason to believe that certain interested parties are still targeting Kinnetik, and that they're trying to use Ted to accomplish their goals. There have been indications that he's been approached to handle campaigns for some new clients. Clients who have never shown any interest in associating with Kinnetik before, but for whom Ted would have a special affinity."

"Such as?"

"The Schickel Foundation." It was Drew Boyd who answered, speaking very gently, as if he knew that the words would be painful for Emmett.

"Schickel?" Emmett repeated, very slowly. "As in George Schickel. As in the Schickel Foundation
currently controlled by Virginia Hammond-Schickel, her bitch-daughter, Frankie, and her sycophantic board of directors?"

"One and the same," said Lance Mathis.

Emmett sighed, and closed his eyes for a moment, to gather his thoughts. When he opened them again and started to speak, Drew Boyd almost recoiled, knowing with absolute certainty that the love of his life had never before spoken so coldly. "I can't claim to know many things in life, but I do know this much: Virginia Hammond-Schickel, who only lowered herself to take on the surname of her late, faggot husband once he was too dead to embarrass her with his homosexual depravity, would cut off her tits and douche with sulfuric acid before she would associate herself - or her precious foundation - with anything remotely connected to Brian Kinney or his kind."

"That's pretty much my take on it too," replied the security chief. "Ms. Hammond was a major supporter of Prop 14."

"Mind if I ask how you figured all this out?"

Mathis and Cynthia exchanged quick glances. "No big secret, Em," answered the acting CEO of Pittsburgh's most successful ad agency. "No warrants necessary for a wire tap when the company's owner gives his consent."

"So you're monitoring his calls?"

Mathis nodded. "Only on his office lines. Brian wasn't comfortable with anything beyond that, although I can't really speak for the FBI. Who knows what they're listening to or looking for?"

"And you guys don't talk to each other?"

Mathis grinned. "They only share what they feel like sharing."

Emmett nodded. "So what makes you think I need to be aware of what's going on?"

Mathis took another sip from his bourbon. "Originally, Ted had one of the new interns prepare a series of promotional posters for some kind of theatrical campaign. All on the QT. But the intern talked a little more than he should have, so we figured that something was going on, but no one had any idea what he was really up to, until we intercepted a call from one of the Shickel Foundation board members, informing him that, to their great embarrassment, a preliminary contract had already been proposed by the Vanguard agency for the fall/winter opera series. Bottom line was that Mr. . . . Wylie - wasn't it, Cyn?"

The blonde nodded, and Mathis continued. "Mr. Wylie told Ted that several of the foundation members had been impressed with the artwork he'd submitted, but that their previous working relationship with Vanguard made it difficult to make a switch. Unless, of course, he could provide some additional incentive."

"Such as?"

"We aren't sure yet. There was some talk about a face-to-face meeting to discuss possibilities, but nothing specific was said, except a quick reference to some kind of charity drive - a pet project of one of Wylie's associates that involved some kind of relief program in third world countries. That's all we know so far, but it seems likely that he might try to get friends and acquaintances involved. It might, of course, be entirely legitimate, but it might not."

Emmett sighed. "So what would you like me to do?"
"Mostly, just keep your eyes open, and be cautious. Since you're overseeing Babylon in Brian's absence, it's possible you might be approached about some kind of benefit, and that could be very problematic"

But Emmett was shaking his head. "I don't see how. What harm would it do for Babylon - and Brian, by extension - to be associated with a charitable cause?"

"None," said Cynthia, who had been unusually silent during their discussion, "if it's legitimate. But what if it's not? Do you remember how close Vanguard came to being wiped out because of its association with the Stockwell campaign when the public discovered the truth about his complicity in the murder of Jason Kemp? Then just imagine if an advertising firm was found to be guilty of bilking the public out of money for a major charitable scam. That's a chance that we absolutely cannot take."

"But Teddie wouldn't be a part of something like that. He just wouldn't."

"Not knowingly," agreed Cynthia. "But Emmett, you know Teddie. Better than almost anyone. What does your gut tell you about all this? What do you believe?"

Emmett was quiet for several minutes, spinning in his chair to examine the images on his security monitors, even allowing himself a span of seconds to enjoy the performance of a couple of go-go boys in the cage above the main bar, engaged in a very seductive, very convincing simulation of a sexual encounter. Then he took a deep breath. "I believe that he's spent his entire life trying to reconcile who he really is with who he wants to be. He tries to present himself as being above the promiscuity and materialism of people like Brian Kinney, and wraps himself in conservative values, like wearing an Armani suit, but, in his heart, he wants to be the people that he pretends to hold in contempt. He wants people like Brian, like Garth Racine, like the financial movers and shakers that he admires so much, to envy him, to want him, to want to be him, but he knows that's never going to happen. So he pretends that he doesn't care, that it doesn't matter. But, in the end, if he thought he'd found some way to make it happen, to force those same people to see him as he wants to be seen . . . I don't think there's much that he wouldn't do. Except deliberately betray the people who trust him. I could never believe that he'd do that, but he'd be a pretty easy mark for anybody eager to exploit his weakness."

Then he turned to stare directly at Cynthia. "And I think he's always found it easier to blame other people for his trouble than to look within himself. He resents you, Cyn, and I'm pretty sure he plans to confront you about it sometime soon. And he won't be alone when he does."

But Cynthia was neither surprised nor particularly disconcerted. "If you're thinking I'm going to be shocked - or panicked - think again. I can handle Ted and company. Although . . ." She went silent for a moment, eyes bright with speculation, "maybe I should return to the office for a little while tonight, considering that I have this impromptu meeting scheduled tomorrow afternoon, with Ted and . . . others he chose not to identify. Maybe I need to spend a little time preparing for whatever might come up." She had not quite said "battle", but everyone in the room had heard it anyway.

Mathis leaned toward her with a smile. "I'll go with you."

And Emmett turned quickly to look up into the face of his lover, wondering if he was imagining things, or if he'd actually heard something interesting beneath the surface of that innocuous exchange. Boyd's smile seemed to underscore his suspicions, and Emmett felt a tiny stir of warmth touch his heart. Maybe this wouldn't turn out to be such a monstrously bad day after all.

He then turned then to study Lance Mathis' face. "I don't get it. If you think he's betrayed Brian, or you're worried that he will, why don't you just get rid of him?" And never mind that he could hardly bear to think of such a horrible end to Ted's relationship with the man who had almost single-
handedly hauled him out of the gutter into which he'd almost disappeared.

Mathis offered up a lopsided smile. "Two reasons. First, we don't want to tip our hand while the investigation is ongoing. There's still plenty of undercover work in progress, so it's probably better to just preserve the status quo. And second . . . Brian Kinney. He's still my boss - and Cynthia's - and when he says, 'No', we have to listen. And right now, he's still saying, 'No'."

Emmett grinned. "Still a stubborn little shit, isn't he?"

Cynthia actually laughed. "You have no idea."

Emmett sat quietly for a while, eyes gone soft with a series of memories, before he turned to look up into Drew's face. "Yes," he whispered gently, "I do."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

"You fucked him."

It was not a question, nor even an accusation. It was just a fact.

"Your point?" Brian settled against the sculpture of the soft dune at his back and enjoyed the view. There were, after all, few things in life more beautiful that the pale, alabaster skin of Justin Taylor as gilded by the flicker of firelight.

"Was he as good as he looks?"

"Better."

Justin shifted closer so he could study the look in dark eyes rendered opaque by the reflection of flames. "What did he mean to you?"

And there it was - the tell-tale flicker that revealed that Chris McClaren was not the casual fuck/faceless trick he might have seemed.

"What difference does it make?"

"It matters."

"Why?"

Justin took a deep breath. "Because I couldn't be here, and it doesn't matter that the reason was that you wouldn't allow it. The only thing that matters is that you needed someone you could trust, and I want to know if he gave you what you needed."

"No more games, Justin." Even to himself, Brian sounded unutterably weary, like a man no longer willing to . . . He couldn't quite bring himself to think it, but it was there in his eyes for anyone who might bother to look for it. "I'm tired of games."

"No games. I swear it."

Brian leaned up to stare into the eyes that were focused on him so intently. "Then why did you come back, Sunshine? To lock the doors you left open?"

"No, I . . ."
"Because if that's why you're here, you better leave now. I don't . . ."

"Believe in locking doors. You think I haven't figured that out by now?"

"How the fuck am I supposed to know what you've fig . . ."

"As usual," said Justin quickly, a smirk curling his lips, "you weren't listening. So I want you to listen now. Carefully, because this is all that matters. I think it's all that ever did, but you have to be willing to hear it, just like I have to be willing to say it."

Brian did not - quite - resort to his customary eye-roll.

"Are you listening?"

"Raptly. Intensely. Breathlessly." There was no way to ignore the sarcasm spilling over from those words, but beneath the irony, something else was lurking. Something silent - suspended - waiting.

"Fucker!"

This time, the eye-roll was unavoidable, as was the exaggerated sigh. "Okay. Yes, I'm listening."

"I choose you."

"What the . . ."

"Don't even pretend that you don't understand me. You know what I mean: open door, locked door. Monogamy, commitment, happily ever after . . . I don't have a clue. And it doesn't matter anyway. Because that's what you always tried to make me see, and what I was always too obtuse to realize. All I ever had to do was choose, from the heart."

Brian blinked, and Justin giggled. Brian blinked again; the little shit actually giggled.

"That's all you ever asked me to do, isn't it?"

Brian was very still, his eyes gone even darker as he contemplated the slender figure before him, as Justin crept closer, settling finally across his former lover's lap. Could it be, wondered the brunette, that the twink had really, finally, seen the light - understood the fundamental truth? Could it be? He was prepared to contemplate the possibility, but not to believe. Not yet.

"Isn't it?"

"The choice was always yours to make."

Justin nodded. "But it had to be about what I wanted, what would make me happy. Not about duty, or about debts owed, or about obligations for the things you did for me. It always had to be because it was the only thing that would make my life complete."

"And?"

"Not because I believed that you couldn't live without me, but because I knew that I couldn't live without you."

"And if you change your mind tomorrow?"

Blue eyes were suddenly alight with hope. "Then I unchoose."
Brian folded his lips into his mouth, a sure sign that he was swallowing a smile. "And you think I'm going to be OK with that?"

Justin moved closer, deliberately swinging his leg over so that he was straddling Brian's hips, and that they were positioned crotch to crotch - almost. "Did he fuck you?"

Brian shifted then, pushing up slightly, to allow the hardness at his groin to rub against the answering hardness that strained against Justin's jeans. "No."

"Good."

"Why?"

Lips drew closer, sharing breath. "Because that is what you choose. Yes?"

Breath caught and held, and then . . . "Yes."

Neither was ever sure which of them actually moved so that lips met and clung and then melded together as time stretched and folded in upon itself before finally just standing still.

Justin pulled back slightly, just enough to speak. "Mine," he breathed, with absolute certainty. "Yes?"

The smile was breathtaking. "Yes."

And Justin felt the truth of it. It was not now and never would be about possession or endless fidelity or monogamy. It had always been about two hearts that could reach out and touch each other, against all odds. Not because of promises or pledges or commitments or intentions, but because of the purest, most elemental, most fundamental of reasons. Because of love without limits, without reservations, without boundaries. Without locks.

"You love me," whispered Justin.

"Yes."

"Enough to let me go."

"Yes."

"And enough to keep me close, if that's what it takes to make me happy."

"Yes."

"Brian?"

"Yes?"

"I want you inside me. I want to spend the rest of my life feeling you inside me, even when I'm not with you. I always want to feel you inside me. Yes?"

Justin looked up then, directly into night-dark eyes and saw the flare of something bright and warm and brilliant, as that beautiful mouth curled into a genuine smile. Not a smirk; not a snicker. A real smile. "Yes."

Brian lifted his hands and spread his fingers to push them through the silken blonde strands of Justin's hair, but then he laced them together to brace Justin's neck and leaned back to stare into eyes
gone wide and vulnerable. "You have to promise me," he said sternly, without a trace of desire or lust or anything but bald, unavoidable honesty. "You have to do whatever it takes to keep you safe, because I couldn't live with myself if something happened to you. You have to give me your word."

They both understood, on a primitive, no-bullshit level, that there was only room for absolute truth here. No covering up, no pretensions, no defensive walls.

Justin closed his eyes briefly, but not quickly enough to prevent Brian from recognizing the pain and the tenderness flooding through them. "I promise, but you have to do the same. Promise me . . . you won't leave me again."

Brian waited until those blue eyes lifted to meet his gaze, until there was understanding and comprehension there. "I promise not to leave you, for as long as you want me."

Justin smiled, understanding exactly what was being pledged. "Or as long as you want me," he repeated.

It had taken him too many years - too many wasted years - to realize that this was all he'd ever wanted, all he would ever need, and all that anyone could honestly promise him.

Moving slowly, deliberately, Justin pushed aside the shirt that McClaren had draped over Brian's shoulders and began to work his way down that sculpted torso. "I want to see you," he whispered. "I want to see all of you."

"Justin," Brian replied, with a strange note of uncertainty threaded through his voice - a note so uncharacteristic that Justin paused to look up and try to discern what was written in the shadows of those incredibly beautiful eyes, "I'm not the same man I was before."

Justin's smile was brilliant. "Yes," he answered without a trace of doubt, "you are."

"No, I . . ."

"You don't really think that I give a royal fuck if they left marks on your skin, do you? They couldn't touch what's inside. Nobody gets to touch that but me."

The lips were pulled once more into the mouth, a dead give-away that what he was about to say would not be easy to hear. "I just don't want you to be disappointed in what you find."

The smile was gentler this time and truer. "You could never disappoint me."

The fleeting shift of shadows in hazel eyes indicated that Brian thought otherwise. "You should know me better than that." Tongue once more firmly in cheek.

"I do." The twink was not buying it, not for a millisecond.

Nevertheless, he pushed back slightly, to allow his eyes to drift up and then back down the body laid out beneath him, before he shifted upwards to start at the top, to bury his nose first in drifts of dark hair, still uneven from having to be cut away from the site of inflicted wounds. So he kissed the stubbly area first, careful to avoid putting pressure on the skin beneath the spiky hair, which was still mottled and discolored. "Your haircut's sexy," he breathed, carefully duplicating the tone and inflection of the same remark once offered to him under completely different circumstances, before nuzzling into the longer locks surrounding the short patch.

Then he moved down to the tiny scar he'd noticed earlier. "I'm going to make a point of remembering this one. I'm even going to name it. This is Liz - the flaw that proves the perfection of
Brian drew back just enough to allow Justin to read the look in his eyes - the one that questioned the younger man's sanity, but it was accompanied by a tiny, irrepressible smile that said so much more.

But Justin was busy continuing his exploration, examining the small discoloration at the corner of the eye which would be gone in a few days, but was still worthy of a tender kiss and the caress of gentle fingers.

Next came the still swollen, still healing area over and just beneath the jaw-line - the mark of a major injury where Rick Turnage had done masterful work to restore the bone structure and graft new skin to replace what could not be repaired. Justin lingered there for a while, carefully using his tongue and his lips to trace the joining of throat and jaw, and inhaling deeply to fill his lungs with the scent that was indelibly Brian. "For the rest of my life," he murmured, "this spot, right here, is going to be the place where I come to remember how I almost lost you, what those bastards almost took from me, and how much I have to be grateful for. You are so beautiful; you will always be so beautiful."

"Justin, don't . . ."

Blue eyes sparked then, and glistened with love and laughter - and lust. "Shut - the - fuck - up. This is my journey of exploration."

"Awww, my very own little Marco Polo," Brian drawled.

Justin lifted up suddenly, just enough to be able to shuck out of his shirt and jeans, but taking time to retrieve lube and condoms from his pocket, with a wink that generated a quick chuckle from his companion. "Not so little," he smirked, taking a moment to adjust his cock - glistening hard and already leaking - so that it rested firmly against Brian's crotch. "And you're overdressed." He proceeded, with infinite gentleness, to unzip and remove the cut-off jeans that were keeping him from the most intimate object of his exploration.

Then he simply sat back and stared, allowing his eyes to take in everything that had been hidden from him until now, and Brian couldn't quite suppress a tiny, smug smile as he noticed that the blonde's nipples were already hard and budding, as his breathing grew hoarse and erratic and his dick twitched and seemed to grow even harder. But the smile was short-lived. The fact that Justin was easily aroused was not news; the kid had always been eager for the touch of Brian's hands and body; this might be nothing more than reflex - a conditioned response, since he had not yet had time to come to terms with the scope of the damage. Brian went very still, trying to brace himself for whatever might come next, and was dismayed to find it hard to draw a deep breath. It shouldn't matter so much - but it did.

"Oh, Brian," Justin sighed finally, and there was no way to conceal the tremor in his voice as he took in the full extent of the damage, the physical proof of the intensity of a malice so obscene, so bitter, that it could inflict such harm on a fellow human being, any human being. The only thing he was sure of at that instant was that those who could do such a thing should have no claim to humanity themselves.

The scars were still there, although they were fading now. Most of them, at least. But the stark realization that anyone could have deliberately set out to destroy such a thing of beauty, such sheer perfection, was almost enough to make him reel away, and close himself off, unable to endure the evidence of such vicious hatred.

Nevertheless, he knew a moment of deep, visceral relief as he reached out to stroke a tender finger down the length of Brian's manhood and around the heavy scrotum, knowing instinctively that this
perfect example of masculine beauty would not have survived intact had the cretins who attacked Brian been given time and opportunity to complete their mission and attain their objective. The perfect, massive cock of the Stud of Liberty Avenue would have been a target for mutilation too tempting to resist. He realized abruptly that he owed Lance Mathis a huge debt of gratitude, so huge that he would never be able to repay it, and he decided that he would make a point of expressing it the next time he came face-to-face with the security chief.

He looked up then, and managed a shaky smile in an attempt to reassure the man who was watching him so intently - an attempt that was a waste of time and effort.

"Remind me," he whispered, "to change my will and leave everything I own to Lance Mathis. As a token - a tiny, totally inadequate token - of my gratitude."

But light-hearted repartee was not going to be enough to soothe this particular pain - even if the blond was at least partially serious.

"Justin," Brian whispered, swallowing hard against the revulsion he was sure he was reading in those artless eyes, "it's all right. I know what it's like to . . . you don't have to look any further. You can just walk away. No one will ever blame you. I promise. Just stand up and . . ."

Blue eyes were suddenly ablaze. With a towering, indelible rage. "Walk away? Is that what you think of me? Is that what you think I want to do?"

Brian shrugged - a classic, Brian-Kinney/take-your-best-shot-I'm-bulletproof-mode shrug. "I'd walk away if I could."

"No, you wouldn't." Harsh and coarse, almost a snarl. "You've never walked away from anybody or anything in your entire fucking life. But you'd let me do it, because you want to spare me. You think I can't handle this, because you're no longer perfect? Jesus, Brian! You don't have a clue how beautiful you really are. Do you?"

Very deliberately, Brian took Justin's hand and guided it to the raw, blistered, mutilated, lurid swatch of crimson/purple that curved beneath his ribcage, and forced the young man to trace the wound with trembling fingers. "Not so beautiful now, is it?"

Justin looked directly into Brian's eyes, and read the message there with painful clarity; Brian expected him to recoil from the horrible damage done to that perfect body - expected him to be unable to endure the process of contrasting the image of who he was now with the memory of who he had been before.

Thus, with infinite gentleness, Justin leaned forward and touched his lips to the angry scarring, tracing its edge with his tongue. "You think this changes who you are?" he asked. "Or how I see you?"

Carefully but thoroughly, he kissed his way around the livid mark. "This," he said slowly, "is a badge of courage. A mark of honor. And . . ." he looked up then and smiled into eyes gone dark with emotions too deep to verbalize, "a big 'Fuck you' to the slime who tried to destroy you. You're indestructible, Brian. And you always will be, no matter what they manage to do to you; they'll never succeed in making you less than who you are."

"And that," said Brian, actually biting his lips to keep from laughing aloud, "is the biggest bunch of bullshit you've ever come up with, which - for you - is saying a lot."

The twinkish grin was irresistible. "Maybe." Then the grin was gone, and there was nothing but truth
- beautiful, unvarnished truth - written across that perfect face. "But there's not a single trace of bullshit in this. I love you, Brian. I always loved you, even when I was so fucked up that I couldn't figure out which way to turn next. Even when I walked away from you, fighting it with everything I had in me. I always loved you. And I know you loved me too. That's why you never tried to stop me, never tried to hold on to me when I was fighting to be free. And that means . . ." He paused then, and waited until Brian was looking straight into his eyes, waited until he was certain that Brian was going to hear exactly what he was trying to say. "That means that I will accept whatever decision you make - do whatever you want me to do - and always, always go on loving you. I finally understand."

Brian did not smile. He simply lifted his hand and cupped Justin's face, using his thumb to trace the curve of that sweet, almost irresistible lower lip. " Took you long enough," he whispered.

The smile this time was bittersweet, hinting of too many lonely nights, too many wasted hours.

"I know." Then he closed his eyes for a moment, and seemed to gather his strength before pushing himself up to sit back on his heels, to give the man who was sprawled so fetchingly beneath him room to breathe - or whatever else he might need to do. "Brian," he said slowly, as he shifted back and down to touch just the tip of his tongue to the head of the massive cock that was stirring against Brian's belly. He took his time tasting the bead of pre-cum glistening there. "I want . . . all I want - right now - is for you to take me, like you never have before." He turned his head slightly, to allow him to bury his face against the dark curls that cradled Brian's manhood and inhale the spicy fragrance that was uniquely Brian Kinney. "I want you to take me and make me yours, in a way that'll mark me forever. I want you to fuck me. Fuck me harder and deeper than you ever have before." He shifted again, and flattened his tongue against the fat vein throbbing on the organ's underside and slowly worked his way up to revisit the tip, noting as he moved that the body beneath him was trembling slightly, probably anticipating what would come next. "But it has to be because it's what you want too. Not just because it's what I want. I'll do whatever you really want me to do."

With a quick swipe of his tongue, he circled the cock-head, savoring the sweet, musky flavor, also uniquely Brian Kinney. "Because I have, finally, learned that it's never enough for it to be what one of us wants. We have to want it together. So do you . . ." He had to pause again, to gulp for the breath necessary to continue, and equally necessary to allow him to move away, just far enough to prove that he could do what he was promising. "Do you want me to leave you alone?"

There was only silence for a while, and Justin was careful to keep his eyes downcast, knowing that he was committed now. That if Brian should say that he really did want him gone, he would have no choice but to obey. There were no half-measures left to them.

He would go, if he was asked. He would, no matter that his heart would break within him with every step.

He would go, if that was what Brian truly wanted.

He would - but with every fiber of his body, every particle of his being, he was praying that that particular request would not come.

Silence, he thought, had never felt so heavy, so infinite. And it just stretched - and stretched - and . . .

At first the only sound was the dull roar of the surf, frosted by the whisper of the night wind, and then . . . very faint, barely there, almost beyond hearing.

"Maybe later." Hardly a sound at all. "But for now . . ."

Justin looked up, and knew that he would never forget the smile that formed on that perfect, beautiful
mouth, or the look in those incredible eyes that were suddenly dark amber in the reflected firelight. "For now?" he asked, barely able to contain a rising urge to stand up and shout and go turning cartwheels through the froth of the tide, only - not quite yet.

"For now . . ." the smile gentled, and became something else, something almost luminous that he could not quite find words to describe, "don't you have something else to do?"

Justin forgot everything at that moment. He forgot that the body before him was battered and bruised and still recovering and hypersensitive. He forgot about the injury that elbows and knees and a flailing, desperately horny body could inflict. He forgot everything - except the need to be closer, to touch completely, to eliminate space or separation as he threw himself forward and fitted every inch of skin to the skin below him.

Brian responded with a faint "Ooph!", followed by a burst of soft laughter.

Then, with incredible tenderness, he braced his hands around Justin's face, and touched his lips to the softness at the corner of that young mouth, before inclining his head so that they were forehead to forehead. He was still then, apparently content to simply breathe the same air for a while and inhale the scent of Justin's skin. For a while, they were immersed in a sweet, comfortable silence, but Brian eventually pushed back slightly, eyes dark and brooding, and seemed on the verge of speaking. Yet, he was slow to do so and took a long time to consider what he wanted to say next, and Justin closed his eyes, content to simply revel in the sensual presence of the man he had missed for so long. When Brian finally did begin to speak, there was nothing of his customary bravado or conceit in either his tone or his words. "After you left, sometimes I felt like I'd forgotten how to breathe, like I had to learn how all over again. I thought . . . I'd never breathe free again."

The words were so softly spoken, barely a whisper, that Justin thought, for a moment, he might have imagined them, as this was something he had never heard before. Once in a while, since that horrific night when Babylon - and the strangely innocent world that existed around it - had exploded, Brian had admitted that he had grown to love the young blond twink whose virginity he had claimed, but he had never embroidered on it much, or seemed particularly comfortable with voicing the feeling, so this . . . this was extraordinary. This was real and visceral, and it showed as much in the warm glow in wine-dark eyes as in the tone of the voice that had offered the words in the first place.

Brian had spoken from the heart, with words dredged up from his deepest core. And then, as if he felt a need to underscore the message, he proceeded to demonstrate the reality of his declaration. If Justin had harbored any doubts at all that the man he loved, the man who had always owned him - body and soul - was still present in the body beneath him, he was quickly disabused of that notion, as Brian - obviously tiring of his role as the submissive partner in this relationship - proceeded to reclaim his alpha-male title.

Eagerly, happily, Justin yielded when Brian pushed himself up and used his momentum to force Justin over onto his back, before bracing himself on one arm and taking advantage of the opportunity to watch the way the firelight painted delicious shadows on alabaster skin as he began his own journey of exploration, using gentle fingers to trace the lines of the face looking up at him. For a while, he seemed content to simply drink in the beauty displayed before him, but then he leaned forward and began to taste and sample, using lips and teeth and tongue and enjoying the growing warmth of skin to skin contact. And there was, to Justin's delight, plenty of beautiful, bare skin.

Brian seemed particularly enthralled with the sweet downy softness beneath Justin's jaw - tasting, sampling, licking. He spent a long time there, and Justin was seriously beginning to wonder if it was possible for a man to come to orgasm from nothing more than the assault of a talented mouth and tongue on an area of the body that no one else had ever identified as an erogenous zone. But in the
next moment, that question became moot as Brian shifted downwards and began a deliberate assault on the hard bud of his left nipple. Then on to the right.

Then a pause as Brian looked up, and Justin felt the world shift under him as he saw that look - that look he had seen uncounted times, which had always reduced him to abject fear - rise in those incredibly beautiful eyes. But it was different this time, as it had never before appeared during the thick, miasmic heat of lovemaking - or fucking, as Brian would call it.

_Not now. No fucking way... not..._

Desperately, the blond reached up and wrapped his arms around the satin smoothness of Brian's shoulders. "No, you don't," he said firmly, almost shouting. "Tomorrow, maybe. Tomorrow, like you always do, you begin to second-guess and question your own instincts - or question me - but not now. Now you fuck me, Brian, or I swear, neither one of us is getting off this beach intact. Just... stop."

Something soft, almost vulnerable, moved then in the depths of shadowed eyes, and Brian almost nodded. But then he couldn't - entirely - leave it alone. "I need a promise, Justin."

Justin blinked hard.

_What? A promise? Brian Kinney asking for a promise? Was Armageddon at hand? Were the Four Horsemen about to come riding out of the surf?_

"What promise?" he asked finally, fairly sure that he wasn't going to like what he heard.

He was right. "The only promise I'll ever ask of you." And there was no way of refusing to hear the absolute finality wrapped up in those few words.

"Go ahead."

"When - if - the day comes that you don't want... that you want to walk away, you have to promise that you'll tell me. That you won't just expect me to figure it out for myself as you ride off into the sunset." He smirked then, and although he didn't actually say, "with your new, improved version of Prince Charming," Justin heard it anyway. "You have to stand up, and say so. You don't have to explain it, or excuse yourself, or provide reasons or apologize. But you do have to tell me. Fair enough?"

The eye-roll this time came from Justin. "Why on earth would you think..." But the protestation died in his throat, as he realized that he knew exactly why. Because it was what he'd done before - what he'd always done: walk away undercover of a massive camouflage of wounded feelings and injured innocence, specifically designed to foster guilt and regret in the man who refused to become someone he wasn't, just to fit into Justin's romantic fantasies.

And Brian almost smiled, because he saw the light of epiphany glint in Justin's eyes. "Fair enough?" he repeated.

"Fair enough," Justin whispered, realizing that later on, when his mind was settled and his body not a flaming mass of desperate libido, he would need to do some rethinking, some serious contemplation of what he really wanted and expected out of this strange, new relationship. But not now. "But the same goes for you," he continued. "No throwing me off that Kinney-cliff, just because you think you know what's best for me. You have to speak up as well."

Brian's smile was lazy, faintly mocking, and slightly smug. He had obviously expected no less than the response he'd received.
"But not tonight."

The mocking smile became a self-satisfied sneer. "A sweeter, sadder song I'll sing to thee tomorrow."

"Fucking liberal arts major," Justin muttered. "But for now, would you please just . . ."

"Fuck you?" The laugh was pure Kinney arrogance, and Justin was certain he'd never heard anything so beautiful, so perfect in his life.

"Yes. Just shove that beautiful, huge, throbbing dick into my hungry, needy, empty little hole."

"You do realize," Brian pointed out as he returned to his assault on budding nipples, "that you're going to have sand in places never intended to experience sand."

"I don't give a shit what else gets inside me, as long as your dick is first and foremost."

Dark eyes blazed with need and lust. "I think we can manage that."

But not too quickly, Justin knew. A lesson was in progress - a lesson that could not be rushed.

Brian Kinney 101: How to Drive Your Lover Completely, Batshit Crazy, Before Fucking Him into Oblivion.

By the time, Brian finished exploring nipples, belly, and groin, flipped Justin onto his stomach, and proceeded to give him the rimming of his life, before flipping him once more to his back, and swallowing his cock completely, Justin had already shot his load twice, and was building to a third, soul-shattering orgasm when, boneless, breathless, and reduced to mindless pleasure, he felt Brian's lube-coated fingers push into his hole - a hole so relaxed from his repeated orgasmic eruptions that there was no resistance there at all - and then, quickly but not nearly quickly enough, the hot, wet throb of that massive cock was pushing into him, invading him, claiming him.

And in that instant, he knew.

Brian would always be inside him. No matter where he went; no matter what happened from this day forward.

Brian Kinney had claimed him, branded him, marked him forever.

No one else would ever really stand a chance.

* - Adapted from Francis Bacon

** - A Valentine - Lewis Carroll

*** - Melancholetta - Lewis Carroll

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~
tbc
Chapter 35

525,600 minutes!
525,600 journeys to plan.
525,600 minutes -
How can you measure the life of a woman or man?

In truths that she learned,
Or in times that he cried.
In bridges he burned,
Or the way that she died.

-- Seasons of Love -- Jonathon Larson

Sensation came slowly, and he was reminded - ridiculously, he thought - of a line from a very old poem - something silly about fog creeping in on little cat feet.* Only, in his case, it wasn't fog; it was physical sensation, touching him with impossibly delicate, gossamer fingers.

Truly ridiculous, except . . . it wasn't quite, for the sensations - and the messages they carried - invaded his consciousness with exquisite stealth, as if to avoid setting off his emotional alarms and sending him scrambling for cover. As much as his mind might insist that this morning was no different from any other, something inside him laughed and called him an idiot for entertaining such a thought. Still, logic forbade him to look for differences. It could not really be different. The morning air was the same soft warm glide against his skin; the sheets caressed him with the same silken touch; the song of the surf was a pale susurration almost beneath the threshold of audibility, just like every other day; and the body stretched out against him was no different - warm and pliant and perfect. Only . . . it was different, and it mattered not in the least that he couldn't quite explain the how or why of it. The taste of the skin in the soft hollow of the throat where his face was buried; the scent of the hair that just tickled his nose; the unique shape and weight of the substantial, semi-firm cock that was braced against his thigh; the slight curl of the hand that was cradled against his crotch. It should have been the same; he had, after all, not exactly been waking up to a lonely, solitary bed of late. It should have been the same, but it wasn't. It was different, in a way that could only be described with one word.

It was Justin.

Or was it?

Could it really be that he was afraid to feel it, afraid to allow it to invade his senses? Could it be that he didn't want to admit the reason for his fear?

Of course it could. Because he didn't want to face the possibility that he might be wrong, and he didn't think he could stand it if he should open his eyes and find that it had been nothing but a dream, after all.

"You're thinking too hard." The voice was morning-hoarse, sleep-deprived/grumpy, and unmistakable, and Brian chuckled.

"God!" The speaker continued, still buried in a nest of jumbled covers and pillows twisted and
disarranged so completely that feet and legs (one from each body) were exposed while faces were partially obscured and buried. "Nothing in the world feels quite like your dick in the morning." And to emphasize that observation, the fingers that were splayed across Brian's belly shifted quickly and gave a possessive little squeezing stroke of that much appreciated, semi-hard shaft, already filling with blood and stirring with morning arousal.

The chuckle became a laugh. "My romantic little hero."

"Umm. Your romantic, thoroughly-fucked-but-still-horny, little hero."

And Justin shifted then, up and across Brian so that he was draped completely over that not-quite-perfect-yet-but-getting-there body, and positioned so that he could nibble at the softness under his lover's left ear.

Brian grunted slightly, and then made a sound that was half-growl, half-purr. "You ready for round . . . what? Five?"


Brian shifted slightly so he could gaze up into brilliant blue eyes glinting with a reflection of the sunlight pouring through the window. "Only?"

"The spirit is willing," Justin announced solemnly, "but the hole is . . ."

"Weak?" Brian's voice was tender, achingly gentle.

The smile that touched perfect, soft lips was slightly winsome. "A little raw."

The bright hunger in Brian's eyes immediately faded before a shadow of concern. "Did I hurt you?"

"Never."

"Bullshit!"

The smile brightened. "Maybe, but whatever the result, it was worth . . . everything. And I'll gladly stay sore for the rest of my life, if it means getting fucked by you three times a day."

"Only three?"

Justin pushed back slightly to get a better angle for studying the face looking up at him. "Silly of me. I forgot I was talking to the Sex Machine of Liberty Avenue."

"Guess I should remind you," said Brian, before surging up and pushing Justin over onto his back. He then proceeded to claim that luscious young mouth, but very gently. He would not speak of it, of course, but he was intimately aware of the soreness of Justin's body and would treat him as if he were as fragile as hand-blown crystal for as long as it took for him to heal and regain his resilience. In fact, Justin would be vibrating with need and impatience for a fresh round of rough sex long before Brian would relent and give him what he wanted.

Meanwhile, however, he would take advantage of the chance to look his fill, to make up for all the empty days when he'd longed for nothing more than an opportunity to feast his eyes on the face that wasn't there. He braced himself on his elbows and used both palms to smooth the flaxen hair back from Justin's forehead, so that he could examine every inch more carefully. He noticed a tiny scar within the curve of the left eyebrow, and wondered if it had always been there and he'd just missed it. But no; that wasn't possible. He knew every inch of that face; the scar was new, but minor enough
to ignore. For now.

He continued to stare for a while, tracing the lines of brow, cheekbones and jaw with gentle fingers, before leaning forward and touching his forehead against Justin's, content to share breath and revel in the scent of sleep-warmed skin.

After a long silence - while Justin was content to stare up at the face that was still healing and understand that others might see only the damage while he could only see the beauty he remembered, the beauty that he knew he would always see when he stared into those chameleon eyes - Brian leaned forward and dropped a line of kisses down the side of that sweet face, to end up nuzzling at the corner of those perfect lips. "You are so beautiful," he whispered then, barely audible. "I thought I'd never have the right to tell you that again."

Justin closed his eyes quickly, but not quite quickly enough to prevent Brian from recognizing the flare of deep, visceral pain that he could not quite suppress. "You pushed me away," he whispered, not quite able to resist a tiny nuance of accusation in the tone of his voice.

"You needed to go," Brian replied, deliberately resisting any urge to express his own sense of grief or betrayal. "You needed . . . more."

"More?" Justin echoed, the first scintillant flare of anger stirring within him. "More than what? More than you?"

Brian simply continued to explore the softness of the skin of Justin's throat, not bothering to offer either answer or argument.

But Justin was not going to leave it alone. That was immediately obvious with his next comment. "That's the worst kind of bullshit, Brian. And furthermore, you know it."

Brian sighed, knowing that this was a discussion he was not going to be allowed to dismiss or ignore or derail with his masterful - but currently impotent - skills in the art of distraction. "Justin, I . . ."

"There is nothing more," Justin said, in a voice that was as close to a snarl as his WASP upbringing would allow him to come. "Not for me. And you should fucking know that. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Brian smiled, which, of course, only enraged Justin further. "Don't fucking laugh at me. Why didn't you stop me?"

The smile changed, became just slightly wistful and more than a little tongue-in-cheek, as that talented mouth moved down to sample the sweetness under Justin's jaw. "You know better than that."

And just like that - in far less time than the space between one heartbeat and the next - Justin's anger was gone. Because the truth was suddenly staring him right in the face. He did know better than that. If what he required from Brian, in order to be happy and content, was for the man to lock him up behind closed doors and cut off all escape routes, then he was never going to be happy, because . . .

God, why was it so hard to deal with this uniquely, irrevocably Brian part of this equation? Because Brian was never going to be able to provide that for him; the man's genetic markers simply did not include that particular strand of human DNA, which would give rise to a predatory compulsion to own another human being.

Brian owned himself; he would never own - or be owned by - anyone else.

But that did not mean that he could not completely and irrevocably possess the heart of someone -
the one - who loved him. It only meant that it would never occur to him to place that heart into a
lockbox.

Huge blue eyes darkened suddenly, and glistened with a sheen of unshed tears. "Brian?"

"Hmmm?" It was a not-quite moan issued from a mouth engaged in exploration of the delicious
hollows of Justin's throat.

"Do you love me?"

Brian went very still before slowly raising his head, and allowing Justin to read the gleam of
unshielded truth in the depths of eyes glinting topaz in the morning glint. "Don't you know that by
now?"

Justin's cheeks flushed bright pink, but he refused to look away from those spellbinding eyes. "I do,
but I still need to hear it. Do you love me?"

Brian's smile shifted then, became the perfect definition of tenderness. "More than my life."

"You mean it?"

"I do, but if you're expecting me to recite Elizabethan sonnets or serenade you with . . ."

Justin surged up then to interrupt the disclaimer in the most effective way possible. It was, after all,
impossible to talk around a talented, acrobatic, exploring tongue.

Then he lay back and smiled up into eyes now gone dark with passion and pure lust. "There are
better ways to show me," he whispered.

But Brian was giving him that knowing smile which announced that he knew he was being played.
"You're sore, remember?"

Justin shifted slightly, and felt the burn of severely chaffed skin stretch around his pucker, which, he
was sure, was currently as bright red as a cherry lollipop, which brought up a whole new train of
thought that he would gladly try to persuade Brian to pursue, once he managed to skirt this current
issue.

"Yeah, but . . ."

"But," Brian interrupted, his voice sinking to that ultra-sexy cat-in-cream purr, "there are other
ways."

After that, there wasn't much speaking for quite a while, because Brian, having learned exquisite
manners at an early age, made a point of never talking with his mouth full, and was too busy tasting
and swallowing Justin's beautiful dick, while Justin couldn't muster a single coherent word beyond,
"Fuuuuuuucccccc" and "Pleeeeze" and, of course, "Briiiiaaaannnn."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Chris McClaren sat at the table at the edge of the deck and inhaled his third cup of coffee, as an
accompaniment to his third cigarette of the morning and acknowledged that he was well on his way
to breaking his own arbitrary record. He never drank more than a small cup of coffee before
breakfast, and he never smoked at all until much later in the day. But this day, of course, was unlike
any other he could remember.
Dawn had been no more than a pale swatch of coral against the eastern sky when he'd first come out of the cottage, and settled into his favorite spot near the deck railing.

He'd told himself that he was getting out and about early because he'd already had too much sleep. He'd told himself that he just wanted some quiet time to consider new security arrangements that needed to be implemented. He'd told himself that he was planning to take an early morning run on the beach, something he hadn't done for the last couple of weeks.

He'd told himself he needed coffee - lots and lots of coffee - and cigarettes.

He had pointedly not told himself that if he heard one more soft moan, one more squeak of bedsprings, one more eruption of gentle laughter, that he would come unglued and go ballistic on . . . something.

He sat there and took a long drag of his cigarette, and gave serious consideration to going back into the cottage, to the discreet, nondescript little cabinet in the corner of the parlor which held a small supply of Brian's 'private stock'. But he didn't. He was, after all, a well-respected, highly-placed member of the FBI, who didn't do drugs. Not really. Except . . .

He watched a sandbird playing tag with the curl of a small wave as it broke against the shore, and tried - again - to address the question that kept repeating in his mind.

*How the fuck had he allowed this to happen?*

He was still sitting there, still asking, and still without the smallest trace of an answer when Trina Thomas came out onto the deck carrying a small tray filled with croissants and another carafe of coffee.

She didn't address him at all, unless one counted the gentle look of understanding in night-dark eyes. But then she didn't really have to voice her concerns or her conclusions. He was pretty sure that Trina had known the truth before he knew it himself.

The question stirred in his mind again, spurred by the anger he felt stirring in his core.

*How the fuck does a grown man - a very smart, very hip, very savvy grown man - allow himself to . . .*

He never quite allowed himself to finish the sentence.

Instead, he concentrated on the lighter-than-air croissants that Trina had provided, and another cup of coffee.

He was still sitting there an hour later when Alexandra Corey came out to join him. He raised his head then, just enough to note that she had forgone the jeans and cotton shirts she had sported during the last few days and re-donned her customary uniform - dark slacks, white dress shirt, and blazer.

"Today?" he asked, trying to show some genuine interest in her response, or, at least, trying to make her believe that he cared, one way or another.

"This morning," she confirmed. "Which means I won't be here to go over the file with him. Are you . . . can you . . ."

"Yes."

He pretended not to notice when she took a moment to study his expression. Then she sighed. "I'm
sorry, Chris," she said softly.

He didn't bother to deny the conclusions she had obviously reached, knowing it would be a waste of time. She was much too smart and too observant to be fooled by empty denials.

"Don't be," he replied firmly. "I'm not."

She drew a deep breath. "Are you sure?"

"No, but I . . . I think it will be worth it all, in the end."

She took a seat and poured herself a fresh cup of coffee. "He should come with a warning label," she observed dryly.

His smile was slightly lopsided. "Such as? 'Beware of horn-dog'?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of 'Enter at your own risk'."

Then he looked up, and she was tremendously relieved to spot a flash of amusement in his eyes. "Some risks," he said quickly, "come with their own rewards."

The profiler allowed herself a tiny sigh. Chris McClaren was going to be all right - slightly battered, perhaps, and sporting new scars that might be slow to heal - but all right nevertheless. "Is he really that special?" she asked softly.

But that was, apparently, a question that intruded a little too far into his personal space, as he confined his answer to a tiny, slightly condescending smile, letting her know - as discreetly as possible - that there were some things she was simply not meant to understand.

McClaren got to his feet and moved to the edge of the deck where he donned a pair of faded but still serviceable running shoes, and Corey took a moment to enjoy the view. He really was a lovely young man, especially with the fresh glow of the morning sun stroking his lean body in all the right places, and though she was a mature woman - old enough to be his mother, no doubt - she was still entirely capable of appreciating male beauty in all its radiance. She wondered if McClaren realized that he was being watched. Then she caught the glint of amusement in his eyes, and knew that it was patently ridiculous to wonder. Of course, he knew - as surely as Brian Kinney always knew - and enjoyed being the focus of avid eyes.

She had always had an irresistible weakness for beautiful, cocky, roguish scoundrels like these, although she usually managed to hide it better.

Kinney, she realized, was a horrible influence, on everyone.

"He'll remember you," she said suddenly, not quite sure why she felt a need to express her certainty, but knowing, somehow, that it was the right thing to do.

His smile confirmed it. "We'll remember each other," he observed. Then he turned and jogged out toward the beach, feeling just slightly lighter on his feet and able to face whatever the day might bring.

Something had ended; it was true, and there was no way to deny it. Something that he would miss, much more than he had expected. But missing it would not prevent him from being glad that it had happened in the first place. After all, if one were only concerned with remaining undamaged, unhurt, and uninvolved, one would never take risks in the first place, and then - there would be no memories.
He would rather remember the joy, he decided abruptly, than never to have known it at all.

Justin was still struggling to breathe when the knock sounded on the door, and Brian was still grinning, enormously pleased with himself.

Neither of them said anything at first, and the knock came again, slightly harder - accompanied by a firm voice, completely devoid of inflection.

"Brian!"

If Justin had not been looking straight into his lover's face at that instant, he would have missed it, and later, in quiet moments when he had time for contemplation, he sometimes wished he had. The grin that trembled on his own lips as he identified the voice faltered immediately, as he caught the quick flicker deep in the greenest depths of Brian's eyes.

"Yeah?" Brian replied, after a quick, almost unnoticeable hesitation. Almost.

"We could invite him in," whispered Justin, trying valiantly to ignore what he did not want to see or know.

"No," said Brian quickly, without offering any explanation.

"Jackson is here."

"Jackson?" echoed Justin. "Another conquest?"

Brian allowed himself a quick eye-roll, but it was slightly forced, not quite as natural as it should have been. "My physical therapist," he explained, before raising his voice to respond to the man still waiting in the hallway. "I'll be right down."

Another hesitation, and a brief shuffling sound. "Okay. Do you need . . ."

"No." Very quick, very clipped, followed by the faintest of sighs. "Thanks."

"Okay, but . . ." The sound of a deep inhalation. "Look, Agent Corey is leaving this morning. Back to Washington, then on to Pittsburgh to oversee the rest of the investigation. But I'll have the files here, if you still . . ."

Brian sat up quickly. "Yeah. I want to see them. Give me five minutes, okay?"

Justin was still watching Brian, trying to read the emotions flaring in dark eyes, but he glanced toward the door when he heard something - something that might have been a quick riff of laughter. "Five minutes, huh? Should I time you?"

And again, Justin turned quickly to surprise a strange look on Brian's face - a look he could not quite define.

"Yeah. You do that."

And then Brian was disappearing into the bathroom, the click of the door closing followed immediately by the rushing sound of the shower.

Justin lay very still, suddenly conscious, for some strange reason, of the waxing and waning of the sounds of the ocean - a prime example of Nature's ultimate irresistible force - and he found himself
barely able to restrain a compulsive urge to race into that bathroom and climb into that shower with Brian where he could proceed to reclaim the man's focus and seduce him into forgetting about his therapist and the files that were waiting for him, and anything - or anyone - else he might have on his mind.

Only . . . Justin sighed to realize that might not be as much a sure thing as he would have liked to believe, and he felt a strange sensation - something that was completely foreign and unprecedented in connection to his relationship with Brian Kinney.

Over the years, he had experienced a huge range of emotions during his pursuit of the Stud of Liberty Avenue: frustration and fulfillment, desire and anxiety, disgruntlement and dismay, despair and euphoria, but this . . . this was a first. He had watched an endless stream of tricks parade through Brian's bed or his personal section of wall in Babylon's backroom or . . . wherever - each hornier than the last and each fighting for the opportunity to suck or get fucked by that fabulous cock - and he had occasionally endured moments of resentment and annoyance with their intrusion into the life he shared with Brian. But he had never - not once - experienced a single pang of genuine jealousy. Some had been major-league hot, or incredibly beautiful, but, in the end, they had been just faces (and bodies) in a crowd - nameless and forgettable. So they had not inspired any emotion deeper than a passing curiosity or - at most - a quick surge of self-congratulatory smugness. No jealousy. Never. Until now.

And he decided abruptly that he'd have been perfectly content to maintain his perfect record. He was pretty sure that he would not be adding Chris McClaren to his Christmas card list any time soon, and he would be very vigilant to make sure that Brian did not do so either.

He sat up and gazed out the window to watch a huge breaker slam against the base of the headland, a violent exhibition of raw power. Somehow, it suited his mood.

Jealousy was new to him and definitely not to his taste.

"So is the stage set?" asked Melanie, as she settled into the wingback chair in front of Ted's massive desk.

Theodore did not - quite - rub his hands together in anticipatory glee, but it was a near thing. "All arranged," he replied with a satisfied smile. "By the end of the day, the air should be clearer around here. And we should all be breathing easier."

Melanie's smile was a little less smug - a little more venal. She did not like Cynthia Whitney; had, in fact, never liked her. There had been entirely too many times during recent years when Cynthia had overstepped her bounds and positioned herself to guard Brian's back during confrontations with the Marcus/Peterson household about matters pertinent to the raising of their son - the little boy whose only real connection to Kinney was that of biological descendant to sperm donor. That was all Brian was, all he had ever been intended to be, if only he had known his place and kept to it and Lindsey had been willing to stand beside her partner and enforce what was best for her true family, instead of always caving in to the man who kept inserting himself into their lives, and claiming a place in Lindsey's . . .

Melanie deliberately closed her mind at that point, unwilling to continue to the natural conclusion of that thought. Brian was nothing to Lindsey, had never been anything to her, or done anything for her, or for anyone besides himself, but Lindsey, blinded by her own silly romantic notions, had never been able to see him for the narcissistic, arrogant cretin he was. And Brian had confused the issue even further by using his money and his position to exert pressure on them to allow him some
measure of control over the life of the child who was 'his son', but only at 'his convenience'.

Of course, the money had come in handy at times. Even Melanie was forced to concede that, but it shouldn't have been enough to buy him credence as Gus's father. Gus didn't have a father; more importantly, Gus didn't need a father, especially one like Brian Kinney. He had two mothers, which should be more than enough. Of course, there was also the fact that the little boy looked more and more like his sperm donor with every day that went by, which made it even more difficult for Melanie to put Brian out of her mind, and out of their lives when she was confronted with a miniature version of his face every time she walked into her home. Still, Brian should keep in mind that the lesbians had actually done him a huge favor, as it was extremely unlikely that he would ever get another chance to pass on his genes or create an heir, and the best way for him to show his gratitude would be to do the one thing they consistently asked of him, and butt out.

Somehow, it never occurred to her that casting Gus as the heir apparent to Brian's sizeable estate and genetic heritage was antithetical to her continued insistence that Brian had no place in Gus's life.

But maybe now - now that the spectacular good looks (she never let herself wonder why God would have blessed such a self-centered bastard with such an exquisite face and form) were a thing of the past (no matter how desperately Matthew Keller might disagree) and now that he had been revealed as the typical false idol with feet of clay, since he was obviously neither as invincible nor as irresistible as he'd always pretended, maybe things would change. Once Lindsey could be forced to see the truth, as she had never seen it before.

Brian had been a myth, a larger-than-life hero in Lindsey's eyes, although, on rare occasions, Melanie had succeeded in convincing her partner that the prick was unworthy of her loyalty or her affection. Now, since he was definitely damaged goods, maybe she would finally see the man he really was - the selfish, egotistical, heartless, opportunistic scoundrel who lived beneath the surface of the physical beauty, and spent his life interfering where he had no business.

She looked up then, realizing belatedly that Ted had been engaging in a five-minute monolog, listing the grievances he planned to use to illustrate the reasons for his criticism of Cynthia's stewardship of Brian's company, even as he continued to marshal his resources, arranging his facts in a logical manner so he could present his evidence without hesitation or any appearance of uncertainty. Kinnetik would be the first skirmish in this little war, she thought - a war which would serve a dual purpose - to expose Brian's shortcomings in the first place, and to encourage him to retreat from the public eye, and let reliable individuals - like Ted - take over the management of his assets. Though his employees, his associates, and his clients had always sung his praises and credited him with the superior skill and intellect required to have built his business to such a splendid success, Melanie had always thought his achievements had been more about luck than genius, and luck, after all, was finite. It was time now to allow more professional and more circumspect authoritarian figures - like Ted - to take over and set good fiscal standards to preserve the status quo. Brian, having lost his prestigious standing in the community, would do well to simply remain in the shadows and relinquish control to those better suited to it.

And Cynthia Whitney would be the first casualty in this initial assault against Castle Kinney and its minions. Of course, this conflict really had nothing to do with Melanie or her partner, except that she had to make sure that Gus's interests were protected. That was her only purpose here - that, and keeping a weather eye on the little nest egg she and Ted had coat-tailed onto Brian's major financial investment, the one that would ultimately indebted him to Ted in such a way that he couldn't possibly take sides against him in any confrontation with uppity, self-deluded subordinates. He would be much too busy expressing undying gratitude for the insightful action which would soon make him a very, very wealthy man.
Wealthy enough, she hoped, to send him sailing off into the sunset of the kind of hedonistic, pleasure-centric existence which would keep him far, far away from the people who had once been an integral part of his life. And, in that case, it might even be possible for the Marcus/Petersons to give up their sojourn in the wilds of Canada and return to Pittsburgh. Of course, it would be difficult for her to convince Lindsey that the motivation for returning had absolutely nothing to do with Brian's absence, but she had been perfecting her skills in manipulating her partner with great success over the years, and she was pretty sure she could manage it. Of course, in the privacy of her deepest thoughts, she admitted that she would have preferred it if the man who had been the bane of her existence could be sent packing in disgrace - broke and destitute and exposed as the cretin he was - but that just wasn't going to happen, so she'd have to settle for this. It wasn't idyllic, but it was the best she could hope for, and it would ultimately have the most ardently desired effect. Brian Kinney would be gone from her life forever.

And in order to achieve that, she could tolerate anything - even the certainty that he would spend his life lolling in the lap of luxury and fucking his brains out - the only thing for which she found him truly well suited.

Ted was still in mid-tirade, apparently having no need for any encouragement or attention from her, when his desk phone rang, interrupting him in mid-rant.

"Ted Schmidt." He was, of course, the consummate professional in tone and inflection any time he answered his office line; it was a matter of personal pride. He listened for a moment, before bright glints of satisfaction flared in coal-dark eyes as he settled into his plushly upholstered executive desk chair. "Mr. Wylie. How wonderful to hear from you! I've been expecting your call."

Then he listened again, and seemed to spend a moment considering his response before speaking. "Mr. Wylie, if you don't mind, I'm going to put you on speaker. My attorney and my business associate, Melanie Marcus, is here with me, and I'd like to have her input on this matter. Just to make sure we observe all the formalities, you know. Also, she's a talented and experienced fundraiser, so I think she might be able to help us."

Another pause, and then Ted depressed the speaker button on his phone. "Would you mind filling Ms. Marcus in on our little project?"

There was a brief pause, and both Melanie and Ted got a feeling that Mr. Wylie was considering his words carefully and - just maybe - getting input from someone else.

"Not really my project, Ted," the lawyer replied. "I'm just a bystander trying to do a good deed. Dave Graham was previously the manager at the Schickel Concert Hall, a valued associate of many years' standing and a personal favorite of several of the Foundation's directors. A fine man, and an exceptionally good employee. He recently resigned from his position in order to devote his time to a charitable project that's become his primary purpose in life - specifically, raising money for orphans in Bolivia, the poorest country in South America. Dave's maternal grandparents still live there, and he spent a lot of time there as a boy, so his interest is very personal. He's put together a group of philanthropists to sponsor a free clinic and an orphanage in El Alto, a city of such poverty that, well, people like us can't even imagine it. It's going to take a major effort to raise funding for such an enterprise, nationally, and perhaps even internationally."

"That sounds like a very good cause, Mr. Wylie," said Melanie, "but how, exactly, does it involve Kinnetik Corp?"

"No direct connection, of course," he admitted readily, "but the project is near and dear to the hearts of some of our very influential investors. So influential that, when the contract for promotion of the concert hall's next season comes up for discussion, a firm's work in promoting this charitable effort
could carry a lot of weight with the Board."

Ted was gazing out the window and watching a small, scruffy-looking spaniel chasing a rolling plastic cup around the half-empty parking lot. "So," he said finally, "it would be an investment of good will now, to secure a return on the investment later."

Wylie's low-pitched laugh was slightly grating. "Isn't that the purest definition of good investment policy? Investing now to assure a good return later."

Melanie grinned. "Makes perfect sense to me."

"Still," said Ted, vaguely disturbed by something that he couldn't quite put his finger on, "such a promotion could be a major undertaking, requiring a huge commitment in terms of funding and time. I'm not sure . . . ."

"Well," said Wylie abruptly, "I do understand that it might be something you're not comfortable committing to, especially since your Mr. Kinney is not currently . . . accessible to you. So . . ."

"What makes you think that?" Ted said quickly. "Brian may not be in the public eye these days, but that doesn't mean that he's unavailable to his associates."

"So you are in touch with him, then. I didn't realize . . . ."

"Of course, I am" replied Ted, favoring Melanie with a classic, keep-your-mouth-shut glare. "He isn't just my employer, you know. He's a close personal friend. And beyond that, Brian's not the type to run away from anything, including the criminals who did this to him."

Wylie took a deep, audible breath. "That's very courageous. Not what the public expects from . . . ."

"A faggot?" Ted's eyes were suddenly cold, as was his voice. Later, he would be amazed to realize that he had actually allowed his resentment of a possibly homophobic comment to color his response and infuse his manner with a trace of hostility.

"No, no," Wylie said quickly. "I didn't mean that at all. I saw those horrible photos, and it's difficult to believe that he would still have the audacity to stand up and confront the public, after enduring such a terrible thing. That takes courage, a trait that's in short supply these days. It's a shame that he'll never get a chance to pass it along to a new generation."

Ted's momentary irritation gave way to puzzlement. "I think you'll come to realize - provided you ever get to know him - that 'audacity' is practically his middle name, but I'm not exactly sure what you mean, about a 'new generation'."

"Well," said Wylie, with an odd note in his voice, "I know that homosexuality is becoming more and more accepted in society, but there's still the unavoidable scientific fact that gays can't reproduce. Not in the classic sense anyway, so I assume . . . ."

"Well, you know what they say about assumptions," Ted interrupted with a tiny self-deprecating chuckle, having finally grasped what the man was trying to point out. "There's always a way, if a person is sufficiently determined. Brian, for example, chose an alternative method. He has a son - a perfectly healthy, beautiful six-year-old son, who will undoubtedly inherit all those fabulous Kinney genes so that, in the final analysis, the beat will go on, so to speak."

Following his announcement, there was a small, but noticeable pause - a moment of complete silence, and Ted would later wonder why he had the sudden distinct impression that the whole world was holding its breath. Even Melanie couldn't think of a single thing to say.
"God damn it!" Brian groaned. "You're a fucking sadist."

The physical therapist did what he always did when Brian had exhausted his last scrap of patience and begun to express his frustration, which was simply a tried and true method of refusing to express the physical pain that he was enduring.

For a queer-boy, Kinney was remarkably strong.

Jackson simply ignored the complaints and continued with his work, noting that the long dorsal muscles of the spine that were currently claiming his attention were growing stronger and better defined with every passing day. Whatever a casual observer might think of Kinney and his ilk, no one could fault him for lack of effort to restore the perfection of his body. The man worked like a tireless machine to regain his strength and beauty.

A funny word, perhaps, to use for a man, but appropriate nevertheless; he was truly beautiful, provided one could avoid dwelling on the damages that had not been repaired, and, from the looks of things, would remain so. The therapist thought it strange that the young man should want to hang on to such a macabre souvenir of the attack against him, but it was not his place to judge such a decision or the motives behind it.

He was here to help the body recover, and that was his sole focus. The mind and spirit were the concerns of others.

"And I hate this fucking pillow," Brian continued, trying - vainly - to fluff the lumpy cushion that Jackson always provided for his patient to use to cradle his face as he endured the deep massage and muscle manipulation required for his therapy.

"So you've said," replied Jackson. "Probably several hundred times by now."

"Yes, but it's still here."

The therapist shrugged. "So am I."

Brian finally subsided, confining his remaining comments to a guttural mutter, almost - but not quite - beneath his breath.

Their session was almost over, and the worst of it was behind him, but not even Jackson's deft massage techniques could totally ease the discomfort of the intense isometric and weight-lifting work-out. Of course, it was also true, on this occasion, that he was a little sore from exertions practiced throughout the previous night - exertions involving the hyper-sensitive responsiveness of a certain sleek young body.

Brian buried his face once more in the much-despised pillow in order to conceal the smile he could not quite swallow. The little twat was definitely going to pay for this, and sooner rather than later.

In fact . . .

"Jackson, you guys finished?"

Brian lifted his head quickly, turning slightly to study the face of his primary FBI babysitter. He had gotten to know Chris McClaren extremely well in recent weeks, so well that it was a simple thing to discern that something was definitely bothering him, and it had to be something relatively important, as the man had never before interrupted any of Brian's treatment sessions.
The therapist looked up, apparently on the verge of informing the agent that he'd have to wait a while longer, but something in McClaren's eyes seemed to give him pause, and he quickly grabbed a clean towel from his bag and proceeded to wipe away the traces of the ointment he had kneaded into Brian's trapezius and deltoid muscles. "Loose enough?" he asked then, dabbing at beads of sweat just below the nape of his patient's neck.

Brian pushed himself up and spun around to let his legs dangle. "As usual, Sensei, I'm putty in your hands."

He was wearing his customary smirk, the one that announced to the world that he was determined to get some kind of out-of-control, emotional response from the therapist before their interaction came to an end - a goal he had yet to accomplish - but the smirk faltered and faded as he looked up and read the disquiet in Chris McClaren's eyes.

"What?" he demanded, not bothering with excess, unnecessary verbiage.

"You need to hear something."

Brian neither questioned nor argued. He simply slipped into the pair of athletic shorts that he usually wore around the house - out of respect for Trina's sense of modesty - and followed the FBI agent into the small office that Alexandra Corey had used during her stay. Although Justin had been nowhere in evidence as they'd begun their short trek, he was at Brian's side by the time they reached their destination.

Brian dropped to the leather sofa, his grace and physical strength disguising the fact that his knees had begun to shake, and only he could have said for sure whether or not it was from the exertions of his therapeutic work-out, or the anxiety radiating from eyes gone dark and pensive.

"What's happened?" he asked, barely even noticing when Justin sat beside him, and reached out to grasp his hand, and that, in itself, was enough to make his companions aware of the depth of his concerns. He simply did not ignore Justin's presence or Justin's touch. Ever.

And then Justin noticed that McClaren's gaze was shifting from the light coating of dust on the surface of his desk, to the seagull soaring outside the window, then to the bars of sunlight on the wood floor - to anything, indeed, except Brian's face, and that was even more significant than Brian's distraction. It had not escaped Justin in the course of all their previous encounters that the FBI agent was every bit as likely to follow Brian with his eyes as any other gay man with the good taste to recognize beauty when he saw it.

But he wasn't following now. Instead he clasped his hands on the desk and stared down at clinched fingers. "You know that we've been monitoring phone calls at your office."

Brian simply nodded, but Justin experienced a moment of extreme resentment, a reaction that reflected a thoroughly liberal philosophy which, under ordinary circumstances, Brian would have shared. But a quick glance into changeable hazel eyes reminded him of what he had momentarily allowed himself to forget: these circumstances were far from ordinary.

McClaren took a deep breath. "This call occurred fifteen minutes ago. The agent in charge of the wiretap figured we'd better hear it, and your security chief was also calling in, probably before the last word was spoken."

He paused then, his finger poised to key the recording. "Brian," he said softly. "This won't be easy for you to hear."
He hit the switch, and there was a faint buzzing, followed by the double ring of a phone.

The voice that answered announced its identity, but it was, of course, completely superfluous. Both Brian and Justin needed no prompting to identify the speaker, or - just moments later - the speakers.

It was not a particularly long conversation, but it was, within a matter of moments, a deadly one, from Brian's perspective.

Once he realized what he was hearing, Justin stopped concentrating on the voices and what they were saying, and shifted his attention to the man seated beside him, and watched as this individual, this man more precious to him than anyone else would ever be, endured another massive act of treachery. And handled it. Handled it in spite of the huge, crippling bolts of pain that engulfed him as he listened - in spite of feeling the intimate thrust of the blade of betrayal penetrating his heart. Brian listened, and the only physical sign of what he was feeling was the uneven hitch of his breathing, and the darkness rising in his eyes. But Justin knew what he was going through, knew how terribly he was hurt, and was once more lost in admiration for his lover's courage and strength.

When the recording was finished, Brian closed his eyes for a moment, and gripped the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger, before looking up to stare into McClaren's face. "Did you make the call?"

The FBI agent greeted the question with a tiny smile, acknowledging that he had known exactly how Brian would react. "I did. They'll be here this afternoon."

But Brian was shaking his head. "I'm not sure that's the best way to . . ."

"Brian," said McClaren sharply. "You need to decide - right now - whether you trust me or not."

"How am I supposed to . . ."

McClaren rose then, and came around the desk and, with just a quick glance toward Justin, went to his knees at Brian's feet. "Don't do that. Don't evade the question. Whatever else may have happened here - last week, last night, or today - you know me. Don't you?"

Brian could not quite suppress a sigh. "I used to think I knew a lot of things," he said softly. Then a glint of something hard and icy glinted in his eyes. "And a lot of people, but I . . ."

"Fuck that!" There was no uncertainty in McClaren's voice. "And fuck them! You trust this little twat, and you trust me. And you've got to go on trusting me now. Everything will be all right. I swear it."

"Yeah?" That beautiful face was suddenly, unutterably weary. "How can you be so sure?"

The FBI agent reached out and laid his hand on Brian's shoulder. "I swear it," he repeated.

Slowly and a little reluctantly, Brian nodded. "I need to call my office," he said. "I need to talk to Mathis first. Then Cynthia."

McClaren nodded.

"And then," Brian continued, "I want to see those files. I think I've had enough of being the victim of this little melodrama. I think it's time for a major plot shift."

McClaren frowned. "Brian, I don't . . ."
"Just place the call, McFed. And if you think I'm not going to hold you to your promise, you better rethink it. If anything happens to . . ."

McClaren reached out once more and laid his hand over Brian's mouth. Then, ignoring Justin's sudden hoarse inhalation, he leaned forward and replaced his hand with his mouth, just touching his lips to the ones still open to speak. "I promised you, didn't I? I swear it - on my life."

Justin wanted to be angry, wanted to leap up and jerk the usurper away from his lover - but couldn't. He really hated to admit it, but he was pretty sure that the FBI agent had just earned the kiss he'd stolen, especially since the terrible pain that had arisen in Brian's eyes during the playback of the phone call had finally begun to ease.

So, struggling to control his breathing, the blond settled back in his seat, taking solace from the way Brian was gripping his hand as if it were his lifeline.

When McClaren went back to the desk, and proceeded to place the phone call, Brian turned to Justin and laid his forehead against the younger man's temple. "Justin, you don't have to be a part of this," he whispered. "It won't be pretty, and . . ."

"Shut up!"

"You have no idea what you'll see or learn, and . . ."

Justin hesitated, for just a moment, hearing something in that beloved voice that gave him pause, but - in the end - it didn't matter. Nothing mattered except the feelings deep inside that assured him that they could face anything as long as they faced it together.

"Shut - up!" he repeated. "What? You still think I'm this helpless little twink who can't stand to face the ugly truth? Do you really think I'm that weak?"

Brian settled back against the worn leather of the sofa, and closed his eyes, obviously considering what to say next. He knew, of course, what Justin had not yet been told, and he was pretty sure the young man was going to be livid for multiple reasons - livid at his dickhead, homophobic father, for being a part of the group that had tried to destroy Brian, and equally livid at Brian for not telling him about it sooner, and a little voice inside his head, which he was having trouble ignoring, was accusing him of being the worst kind of a coward for not speaking up immediately when Justin had first arrived on the scene. It wasn't, after all, as if he could claim that he hadn't already remembered the damning truth. But how, he wondered, did you tell a son that his father was the epitome of everything in life that he despised? And how would Justin deal with that knowledge?

He sighed then, and opened his eyes, facing the fact that he would have to confront those issues shortly, whether he was ready to face them or not.

"No," he said finally, turning to cup Justin's face with caressing fingers. "I think you're the bravest man I've ever met. But you . . . " Deep breath, to gather strength and courage to go on. "You have no idea how hard this is going to be, and you don't have to prove anything - to me or to anybody else."

Justin leaned forward abruptly, ignoring the uneasiness flaring in his own gut, and claimed that luscious mouth, harshly, brutally, without a single nuance of tenderness. "Shut-the-fuck-up!" he said as he pulled away. "We are in this together, no matter how ugly or how hard it gets. And if you try to throw me out, I'm going to make you wait at least a week before I let you fuck me again."

Brian lowered his head and rolled his lips into his mouth. "A whole week?"
"At least."

Brian moved closer and nibbled at the soft spot under Justin's left ear. "You wouldn't last a day."

"Oh, yeah? Well, we'll just see about that. I bet I could go..." A deft tongue was suddenly exploring the whirls of his ear, and he found coherent thought increasingly difficult. "I could go... a couple of hours anyway. But that's not going to happen, because... oh, shit, Brian, that feels..." Hoarse, shaky breath to achieve renewed ability to speak. "Because you're not going to shut me out."

Brian went very still then, pulling back and peering deep into crystal blue eyes. "No," he agreed finally. "I'm not. I don't think I'd even remember how."

"Really? You realize, of course, that memory loss is the first symptom of advancing age, Geezer."

The smile that he received for his audacity was brilliant, blinding, achingly beautiful - absolutely nothing held back and thus, incredibly rare for Brian Kinney. "When we're done here, I'll just have to do my best to muster the strength to demonstrate my physical appreciation of your perky little ass - in the bed, on the floor, across the desk, out on the beach, in the water..." He emphasized each suggested location with the touch of soft, exquisite lips to another perfect spot on Justin's face and throat, finishing up with his mouth tracing a trail down velvet-soft skin and into the dark softness under the collar of the young man's shirt.

Justin, having no alternative, closed his eyes and fought to breathe while Chris McClaren wished - devoutly - that he was running laps at Quantico in August, or crawling through mine fields in Afghanistan, or having a root canal.

Anywhere, but here. And given what lay ahead for them and the revelations that they would share as the day progressed, he was absolutely certain that things would only get worse from this moment on. Thus, they needed a distraction, no matter how temporary or unpleasant it might turn out to be.

When Lance Mathis picked up his phone, the FBI agent was pretty sure he had never been more grateful for anything in his life.

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She had never intended for The Meeting - and she knew that Brian would offer up a classic Kinney smirk at her capitalization of the term - to take place in his inner sanctum, but in the end, there had been no choice. No other venue in the building was large enough, unless she was willing to forego confidentiality in one of the public areas.

She wasn't.

So here she sat, undoubtedly adding fuel to the leaping flames of Ted's resentment by having the nerve to seat herself at Brian's desk.

Again, it was something she had not intended to do, but circumstances had determined that it was necessary. Nevertheless, she had not failed to note the angry glitter in the CFO's eyes when he'd come marching into Brian's office, juggling his assortment of notes and evidence to support his case. And even though some part of her mind wanted to reject that term, she recognized that it was probably appropriate; this was in no way a court of law, but Ted intended to put her and her management skills and her loyalty to Kinnetik's true Lord and Master on trial here today.

She sat back and watched the cast of characters assemble before her, most of whom she'd expected to see here, with only a couple of surprises, and speculated on how surprised the group might be when they realized the identity of the foreman of the jury - so to speak.
Melanie Marcus and Lindsey Peterson had been first to arrive, and Cynthia almost smiled when she realized that, even if she'd been naïve and gullible enough to be unaware of Ted's intentions in calling this meeting, one look at the dark malice gleaming in the lawyer's eyes would have tipped her off. In addition, the vaguely apologetic expression on Lindsey's face was equally revealing.

At Cynthia's invitation, the two women helped themselves to coffee and an assortment of the lovely pastries provided on a daily basis to Kinnetik personnel by Auntie Em's Catering. They then took seats at the conference table, and very carefully avoided looking at or speaking to each other. Cynthia was careful not to smile, imagining a tongue-in-cheek comment from a certain individual who would not appear here today, something snarky, no doubt, about troubles in lesbionic paradise.

Conversation was non-existent at first, and then only desultory as other members of the group drifted in and served themselves from the refreshment display.

Michael and Ben were next, both looking decidedly uncomfortable, and Cynthia could almost have persuaded herself to feel sorry for them. Almost.

Debbie Novotny, characteristically loud and bright, wandered in then, with Jennifer Taylor at her side, and Cynthia was a bit startled by the presence of Justin's mother, but it was immediately obvious that she was both ill-at-ease over being here at all, and had almost certainly been commandeered by Debbie's insistence on her presence. Carl Horvath brought up the rear of that tiny group, and Cynthia knew, instinctively, that - whatever his personal connection with the individuals assembled here - he was attending in a semi-official capacity. Whatever concerned Brian Kinney these days, concerned the Pittsburgh PD.

Though nothing much had been said during the early moments of the meeting, it was still painfully obvious that an awkward situation was about to get considerably more awkward when Joan Kinney and Claire DeFatta walked into the office. Cynthia once more had to resist a whimsical impulse to smile; the look on Joan's face clearly stated that she was remembering her last visit to her son's office and wishing she could forget it. At the same time, Claire's eyes were wide and filled with speculation. She had never been here before, and Cynthia was pretty sure she was busy figuring out how much everything in the room would bring in an E-bay auction.

And the answer, of course, was plenty, but Cynthia knew one thing for sure. No matter what happened today, or next week, or next year - or ever - Claire DeFatta would profit from her brother's estate only over Cynthia's dead body. And that was a literal truth.

When Ted walked into the room, accompanied by his better half - with Blake looking as if he'd much rather be facing a court martial than attending this little head-on collision - the group was complete. Save for one more, one who brought up the rear and closed the door behind him, and nodded toward Cynthia while ignoring the quick flash of anger in Ted's eyes.

It was immediately obvious that the accountant had not invited Lance Mathis to participate in this little bull session, but it was also obvious - from the stern, uncompromising expression on the security chief's face - that any attempt to persuade him to leave was going to be spectacularly unsuccessful. He took up a stance behind Brian's desk, crossed his arms, and waited, saying nothing but noticing everything.

For a moment, Cynthia thought that Ted might actually make an issue of the man's attendance; he even looked, at one point, as if he were going to voice his displeasure and challenge Mathis' right to be present, but he looked up quickly, glanced from Cynthia to Mathis and back again, and elected, finally, to keep his objections to himself.

Cynthia responded with a tiny, fleeting smile of approval, designed to let him know that she had
noticed his brief uncertainty and agreed with his final decision. What she pointedly did not say, because there was absolutely no need to reinforce the obvious, was that any attempt to oust the man would be met with the kind of resistance - verbal and physical - which Ted, on his very best day, would be ill-equipped to handle.

Instead of raising an issue he could not hope to control, Ted cleared his throat, made a brief show of re-arranging the documents he'd brought with him, and sat down at the head of the conference table, in a spot ordinarily reserved for the mega-presence who was not here today. No one spoke for a while, waiting for him to get things started.

The wait was brief.

"I believe everyone's here," he said finally, "and I want to thank you all for coming."

Cynthia sat forward and offered a diffident smile. "What? No Emmett?"

Only a very perceptive individual would have noticed the quick flush that touched Ted's cheeks as he replied. "Emmett had prior commitments."

Cynthia - who was always extremely perceptive - simply nodded and gestured for the CFO to continue.

"First of all," Ted began, "I want to assure you, Cynthia, that we have not come here to criticize your handling of Brian's affairs in his absence. We know it must have been an overwhelming experience for you, to have the weight of so much responsibility dumped on you without adequate time to prepare to handle the load. And it's not as if Brian had the time or the opportunity to make detailed arrangements for how he wanted things handled during this very difficult period. It was very brave of you and very generous to take on so much responsibility. Under ordinary circumstances, your efforts would have been more than sufficient to safeguard the company and see that his interests were served."

He paused then, probably for dramatic effect, and Cynthia tilted her head slightly, noting that Lance Mathis had shifted a bit in order to focus more tightly on Ted's face. The moment, no doubt, was at hand.

"However," the accountant drew a deep breath, "we, the people who have been Brian's family - both real and extended - over the years, who have made it our purpose in life to guard his back when it needed guarding, have some serious concerns, and felt compelled to raise these questions, to make sure that we don't allow things to get too far out of hand before we intervene. I'm assuming that you're willing to hear our questions and comments, in the understanding that we have the right, perhaps even the duty, to speak up on his behalf if we feel it wise to do so."

Cynthia braced her elbows on Brian's desk and balanced her chin against her clasped hands. "I'm listening," she replied, and Lance Mathis wondered if anyone else had noticed how non-committal her response had been.

Ted nodded, and flipped open the file folder on the top of his stack. "It goes without saying, of course, that Kinnetik is the rousing success that it is primarily because of the talent and commitment - and yes, even the genius, though some might dispute that term - of Brian Kinney. That accounts for the origin of the firm. When it was brand new and needed a strong, compelling force behind it, Brian was that power. His fire, his brilliance, and his audacity were the components of putting it together and making it a success. But when a company matures and is no longer the new kid on the block, so to speak, its needs change, and the power that propels it must also change. It grows and broadens, and one person, no matter how gifted or bright, is no longer able to handle it all. And that's what has
happened to Kinnetik. It might have been Brian's lovechild - at birth - but it's now reached its adolescence, and it needs more than the vision and the energy of one man to drive it.

"It had already progressed to that stage by the time Brian got hurt, so it was already entering a new stage of existence. Unfortunately, Brian had not had the opportunity to take that into account in planning how things should be handled should he be unable to perform his administrative tasks. Does everyone understand that?"

Cynthia smiled. "You're not exactly teaching warp physics here, Ted, so I think we can all grasp what you've said. However, I feel that someone should point out that Brian didn't exactly 'get hurt'. A bunch of motherfuckers tried to kill him. I don't really like euphemisms much."

Joan Kinney leveled an outraged stare at the blonde young woman who was currently sitting behind her son's desk and acting as if she had a perfect right to do so, but she said nothing.

Once more, deep sparks of anger flared in Ted's eyes, but he bit down on his spirited retort. "Whatever you choose to call it, the truth is that Brian is not here to oversee everything to assure that the company runs as he would want, and those of us who are in position to monitor the daily operations of the firm have become alarmed, over a period of time."

"Concerning?" The blonde's voice was colder now, without a trace of a smile.

Ted's smile was almost triumphant, and Cynthia took a deep breath, bracing herself against what was to come. Although she did take some measure of comfort from the looks on the faces of some of the group members, like Michael and Ben and Lindsey and Blake, none of whom appeared particularly sanguine with what was happening.

Ted began to go through his list of grievances, referring to his notes periodically, and growing more and more confident with every word he spoke. He addressed a wide variety of issues, ranging from the handling of certain national campaigns for some of the company's oldest clients; the rejection of certain new accounts and clients suggested by various associates and employees (including Ted); the participation - or lack thereof - of the firm in certain charitable endeavors and promotions; the hiring and - more pertinently - the firing of certain staff members counter to the recommendations of members of senior management; the contracting of professional services with a new circle of professionals not previously approved by Brian; the donation of sizeable sums to a newly-formed foundation for funding research into children's cancer; even matters as trivial as challenging trusted art department favorites on a new appearance for the Remson Pharmaceutical account.

He spoke for almost a half hour, listing Cynthia's shortcomings and errors in judgment, all the while attempting to project an air of concern and sympathy for the 'untenable position in which Brian had put her'.

At the end of that recitation, he shifted into a more personal mode, talking - with occasional verbal support from others in the crowd - about the unfairness of keeping Brian's friends and family at arm's length, of preventing the people who were his most loyal friends and supporters from going to him in his hour of need, and - finally - of ignoring his most ardent wish by disclosing his location to Justin Taylor - the one thing that he had specifically forbidden.

When he had said everything he had to say, he sat back in his chair, folded his hands, and regarded Cynthia with a self-satisfied little smile, the look in his eyes expressing his certainty that she could not possibly refute his charges or explain her actions.

For her part, Cynthia turned once and lifted an eyebrow at Lance Mathis who responded with a quick nod. Then she turned back and regarded the group seated around the conference table with a
steady, non-committal gaze, taking a deep calming breath before beginning to speak.

"All right then. I've listened to your comments and your question, very patiently I think, and I will address the issues you've raised. But first, I want to talk about one thing that you mentioned repeatedly in your little speech, specifically loyalty.

"Do any of you know how Brian and I met for the first time?" She paused then, and allowed her gaze to drift from face to face. Then she smiled. "No. I didn't think so."

"The very first time Brian Kinney ever laid eyes on me, I had just dumped an entire tray filled with iced soft drinks and beer all over Mario Lemieux, who had just come off the ice after scoring his gazillionth hat trick of the season. Or so it seemed to me."

She turned away from the group then, and chose to stare out into the windswept parking lot, but it was obvious that she was seeing something entirely different.

"Brian and I started working at the Igloo on the same date, but we didn't actually meet until a few days later. I was sixteen, and he was a year older, and we both really, really needed the paychecks. Anyway, I was trying desperately to do a perfect job, to work hard enough to impress my supervisors so they'd be sure to keep me for the rest of the season. So, just before the end of the game - the Penguins were playing the Blackhawks - I was sent down to the locker area with a tray of drinks for members of the press corps. Most people have no idea how hard professional sport teams work to guarantee friendly press coverage. At any rate, I was so busy concentrating on not spilling anything on the floor, that I failed to watch out for the team coming off the ice. I was sixteen years old, my first week on the job, desperately poor and needing to work just to survive, and I looked up just in time to see Mario Lemieux skating toward me with all his teammates hanging all over him in a mass victory hug. I didn't even have time to brace myself before I was on the floor, with him on top of me, and he was soaked through with icy soft drinks and beer."

Her voice was suddenly very soft. "Lots of people never realized that Lemieux was a lovely man - soft-spoken and gentle and polite. But on that night, he was just coming off a particularly rough game, he'd been in a couple of fights on the ice, he was scheduled to face the press and be interviewed about his latest record-breaking performance, and here was this bland, blonde, slip-of-a-girl who had just soaked him to the skin, and . . . " She hesitated then, remembering being virtually paralyzed with fear. "Jesus! I figured I'd be lucky to get out of there alive. Then, he pushed off me, and opened his mouth to give me hell, when . . . I looked up, through tears, and saw . . . the face of an angel standing over me. Brian Kinney. He was just a kid himself, young and green and probably scared to death - I mean, it was Mario Fucking Lemieux - the guy who had already broken most of Gretzky's records, who was the equivalent to God in Pittsburgh that year - and he practically had steam shooting out of his ears. And Brian, with more guts than sense, told him in no uncertain terms that it really wasn't very appropriate for an international hockey super-star to flatten a poor little girl who was just going about her business, trying to earn a living."

"For a period of about thirty seconds, it was like the whole world went silent. Nobody said anything at all, and the only thing I could hear was the roughness of Brian's breathing, which was the only way he showed how terrified he was."

"And then, to my amazement, to everyone's amazement - especially Brian's - Lemieux started laughing. He helped me up, grabbed a towel to help dry my hair, and slapped Brian on the back. The next week, during lulls in practice, he sought Brian out, pulled him out on the ice, and proceeded to teach him how to handle a puck. I think they got to be pretty good friends over the next few months."

"I also think," she continued with a rakish grin, "that Lemieux was what Brian always calls a Classic Breeder, about as straight as a man can be, but if any gay boy ever had a shot at him, it would have
been Brian who, even way back then, never once tried to hide who or what he was, and I can guarantee you there was more than one pair of eyes that managed to focus on his charming ass and follow him around on the ice while he got his lessons from the pride of the Penguins. Anyway, that was the beginning of our friendship, but it doesn't even begin to tell the whole story.”

She paused for a moment, and seemed to debate how to continue. Then she reached down and opened a briefcase that was sitting at her feet and pulled out a photograph.

"This is not something I've ever shared with a lot of people," she said slowly, obviously still not 100% certain that she really wanted to do this, "but perhaps it's time I did. Perhaps it's time for . . . a little eye-opening."

Ted's smile was brilliant, as he turned to exchange satisfied glances with his chief supporter, but Melanie was not as convinced as he obviously was that their victory was at hand.

Cynthia's next words proved her point.

"But if you think that it's my eyes that need opening, you're in for a bit of a shock."

She spent a moment staring at the image on the photograph in her hand, before she turned it so that her audience could examine the face displayed there.

"This is Katy Howard," she said very softly. Then she looked up and deliberately sought out the eyes of Ben Bruckner, although she would later be unable to explain why she had done so. Instinct, she would decide, and she'd be right. "My daughter."

"Bear with me while I tell you a little story," she continued. "It might take a while, but not as long, I'm thinking, as your little recital of my shortcomings.

"Once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess . . ." Her tone had become deliberately ironic. "A princess who should have been born into the lap of luxury, in one of the great houses of Europe, perhaps. Unfortunately, in the manner of all classic fairy tales, the poor stork got confused in the course of its appointed rounds and dumped the princess into a housing project in Pittsburgh. Instead of a royal family and a magnificent future, the princess wound up as an extra, unwanted mouth to feed in a welfare family with a drunken, abusive father." She paused again, and looked directly at Joan Kinney. "Sound familiar? But the little princess was luckier than some other examples of misplaced royalty, even though she was born into poverty. At least, she wasn't cursed with a drunken, unfeeling, self-centered, cold fish of a mother - like a certain beautiful young prince who shall remain nameless - but the princess' mother, while a good, decent woman, was in poor health, uneducated, and virtually helpless to control her violent husband."

She looked to Ben again, and found comfort in the kindness in his eyes. "It was a different time back then, and people - even very good people - were loathe to interfere in private family matters, an attitude that was, of course, very convenient for abusers. At any rate, the beautiful princess, and her beautiful princess older sister, learned early how to gauge their father's moods and stay out of his way when he was at his most dangerous, and their mother, while not strong enough to resist or defy the man, often put herself at risk to draw his attention away from infractions the girls might have committed." She smiled then, but there was no warmth or humor in it. "Infractions like eating the last piece of bread in the house when he was hungry, or answering the phone when he was trying to dodge the latest loan shark looking for payback. Things like that.

"It was not an idyllic life. So when I say that the job at the Igloo was important, that's not an exaggeration. It was, potentially, the difference between eating or going hungry. By that time, my big sister had run away, and my mother was in declining health, so . . . well, long story short, I really
needed the job. And Brian . . . I'm pretty sure that Brian saved my life. And I know for a fact that he
saved my job, on more than one occasion, by covering for me when I couldn't manage things for
myself. Like the time that I was sent to fetch supplies for the concession stand from the storage
warehouse and couldn't handle the weight of the boxes because . . . because I was so badly bruised
and bludgeoned by one of my father's drunken assaults that I was too weak to do any lifting. I think
Brian had already guessed that I was a victim of abuse - it wasn't as if he wouldn't recognize the
symptoms firsthand - but that was the first time he ever saw the evidence, up close and personal, so
to speak.

"I'll never forget the look on his face when he sat me down and lifted up my shirt. If you've ever
faced the Wrath of Brian Kinney - and if that has a vaguely Biblical sound, it's entirely appropriate
- you'll remember what that expression looks like, because it's sure as hell not something you'll ever
forget."

A number of people in the group nodded, their eyes closed as they remembered - and then wished
they hadn't.

"He took care of the task at hand for me, and then he dragged me to the ER," Cynthia continued.
"And then he took me home and confronted my father."

"He was just a seventeen-year-old kid - one my father would later refer to as 'that fucking little fag'
- but he was . . . he was like an avenging angel or something. And, fag or not, he was a strong, cocky
little bastard and physically already pretty damned impressive."

She looked down then, obviously caught up in a memory she'd have preferred to forget. "He took
me to the pharmacy first, to pick up my medication; then he took me home and told my mother what
the doctors had said and helped her to put me to bed. Then he asked to speak to my father. In all the
years before and since, I don't think I ever saw my mother more frightened than she as at that
moment, but she took Brian into the kitchen and told him to sit down and wait. And then she went to
fetch my dad.

"He never told me what happened in that room, and my mother and I couldn't make anything out,
after the first blast of outraged anger from my father - the first 'Who the fuck are you, and what the
fuck do you want?' After that, things went deadly silent. They were only in there for about fifteen
minutes. Then my father walked out of the kitchen and out of the house. And Brian came out, came
into my bedroom and flashed me one of those trademark-Brian-Kinney smiles, and explained - to me
and my mom - that everything was going to be all right. Then he left.

"Later, my father would occasionally make ugly comments about my 'little fag friend', but here's the
real revelation." She paused then, and looked up to meet the eyes that were trained on her - actually
riveted to her. "My father never laid a hand on me again."

Then she smiled. "Of course, it was still a miserable existence. We were still poorer than church
mice, and he still took advantage of every opportunity to make sure we knew how worthless and
contemptible we were. But he kept his fists to himself, and I know it was a terrible burden for him." She
laughed then, an ugly, sarcastic sound. "I could see it in his eyes that he wanted to beat the shit
out of me, time and time again, but he didn't. Something always held him back, even when I got
brave enough to speak my mind to the old bastard, which I never would have done before. I don't
know what Brian said to him, or how he managed to coerce him into controlling his violent impulses.
He never did explain it, even when I asked him. But I know this as surely as I know that the sun will
set this evening. Whatever he said or did, it worked, and it's entirely possible that it saved my life."

She took a moment then to look down at the photograph on the desk before, and to trace the delicate
young face displayed there with a gentle finger.
"We stayed good friends after that, of course. You don't turn your back on someone who's saved your life, do you? And there were times when Brian needed . . . well, when Brian needed. No point in going into the details." Joan Kinney shifted in her chair, and shared an uneasy look with her daughter at that point, but Cynthia decided to leave the subject unexplored. "At any rate, although my father no longer abused me physically, he continued to mistreat my mother, and he excelled in verbal and emotional abuse. And often, my job was the only thing that kept a roof over our heads. I was desperate to escape from it all. Brian kept encouraging me to hang on, to get my diploma and win myself a college scholarship so I could build my own life, but I was impatient."

She smiled then, but it was bittersweet. "And then, along came Bobby." She deliberately looked at Lindsey and read sympathy in the woman's eyes. "Isn't there a 'Bobby' in every woman's life, even if he's sometimes a 'Brian'? I was sure that Bobby was the answer to my prayers, that I had found my white knight to sweep me up and carry me off to his palace where we would live happily-ever-after. God, is there anything quite as naïve - or as stupid - as a self-deluded teen-aged girl? Anyway, let me cut to the chase here, and tell you that A. Cinderella meets Prince Charming. B. Prince Charming gets Cinderella pregnant. C. Cinderella is ecstatic and expects Prince Charming to take her away to a new life, and D. Prince Charming turns out to be a fucking bastard of the first order and a coward to boot. He runs, as far and as fast as his pigeon-toed little feet will carry him, and Cinderella is alone, penniless, and pregnant. And the fairy tale, of course, instantly becomes a horror story."

By this time, Cynthia was focused only on the face looking up at her from the photograph; thus she did not notice the softness in the eyes of many of her listeners. "My sister was luckier than me. She actually found a Prince Charming of her own. Of course, he was just a simple farmer from Iowa - a guy she met when he stopped in at the diner she was working at in South Bend, when he was on a trip to visit his grandparents. He wasn't a gorgeous, super-smart, super buff type of guy, but he had one thing going for him that made up for everything else. He fell deeply in love with her, and he then spent years proving it. By the time I realized that I was pregnant and found that, despite my fears and misgivings, I didn't want an abortion, my sister Bonnie had been married to him for almost two years. She and her husband, Alan, provided the answers to my prayers."

"My father never knew. In fact, no one in Pittsburgh knew, except my mother and Brian. I had hesitated about telling him, thinking that he'd be disappointed in me for making such a stupid mistake, but I should have known better. After he spent a few minutes laughing at me and making fun of my ridiculous romanticism, he helped me figure out how to do what needed doing. In the end, he even drove me to my brother-in-law's farm outside Sioux City. The timing worked out well, so that I only had to miss a couple of weeks of school, and the doctor who delivered the baby gave me a medical excuse, claiming I'd had mono, to get my absences excused."

Cynthia's voice softened noticeably. "Katy was born in September. Kathleen Amanda Howard - daughter of Alan and Bonnie Howard. There was no adoption. The birth took place at home, with a country doctor attending, and the only people who knew the truth saw no reason to complicate things with legal issues." She shrugged and smiled. "It seems a little simplistic, I guess, given how complicated our lives have become in this day and age, but it seemed the best way then, and I've never had cause to regret it."

"She's very beautiful," said Debbie suddenly, eyes fixed on the little girl's photo, but something in her voice suggested that she was wondering about . . .

"Yes, she is," Cynthia replied, taking another deep breath and resuming a more business-like tone. "But, although she was perfect to me - and to her parents - she wasn't perfect, in a physical, developmental sense. She was just a year old when we all began to realize that something was wrong. She was a truly beautiful, loving child, but she was not progressing as expected, and there were some disturbing developments, the most noticeable being an epicanthic fold in her eyelids.
"I could read you chapter and verse if you like - give you all the medical jargon and explain the presence of an anomaly in the 21st chromosome, but the bottom line is easier. Katy was a Down Syndrome baby." She looked up then and stared straight at Ted, a dangerous glint in her eyes. "Some people have a different, more disparaging term for her condition, but I'm sure you can figure it out for yourselves. She hasn't had an easy life.

"She's not as severely affected as some. She learned to walk, to talk, to feed herself. Her progress was slow, but steady, and her loving disposition made her a favorite with the doctors in Sioux City who were charged with her care."

Cynthia paused again, clasping her hands tightly before her before continuing. "It was difficult for me to accept that she would never live a normal life. I was in college by the time the diagnosis was confirmed, and, once more, it was Brian Kinney who stood by me, who helped me endure what I had to and offered what support he could. Only there really wasn't much he could do. There wasn't much that anyone could do. It's not like there's a magical cure that will fix everything and make my daughter whole and healthy, but he finally helped me to see that it could have been worse."

She smiled then, obviously entertaining another memory. "He even drove me out to see her one week-end. She was five by that time, and I . . . I was more than a little nervous over the idea of Brian - given his penchant for impatience and total lack of tolerance for bullshit - coming face-to-face with my mentally-challenged daughter." She laughed then. "I needn't have worried. He was . . . well, he was Brian, and, by the end of the week-end, my sister was dead set on convincing him of the error of his homosexual ways so he would make an honest woman out of me. Needless to say, that was never going to happen, but Katy - Katy loved him. Still does, actually. And once again, he made me see that it could have been so much worse."

Cynthia sat back in her chair and sighed. "And then, Fate stepped in and proved him right. It got worse.

"Again, I won't bore you with the clinical details. She was almost thirteen when it started. Odd symptoms that seemed to come out of nowhere and make no sense. The doctors were puzzled, my sister was frantic, and Katy . . . Katy was just . . . lost. She was in pain sometimes, and couldn't understand why. Didn't know what to do or who to trust. She wouldn't even talk to me when I flew out there to see her, and Katy always talked to me, even when she was in one of her funks and wouldn't talk to anyone else. It was a very bad time, and it went on for months. It took almost a year for the medical people to figure it out. She had a very rare type of childhood cancer, which occurs in only a couple of hundred cases a year in this country. Something called Ewing Sarcoma, of the metastatic variety. Some varieties of it are treatable, with a good recovery rate, but Katy's . . . Katy's wasn't one of those types."

She sat forward again, and clasped her hands once more. "You know, you see all these public service announcements on TV, about hospitals that do fantastic work in curing and researching children's diseases, and they're all true. But what you don't know is that they concentrate on the more common cancers, and logically so. If you're going to spend millions of dollars to find a cure for a disease, it makes perfect sense to focus on a disease that impacts a larger segment of the population. The only problem is that such an approach doesn't help those who contract rarer diseases. Researchers concentrate on helping the maximum number of people for the money invested. When Katy was diagnosed, there was only one clinical study being done, anywhere in this country, on that particular type of cancer, and Katy . . . well, given her other physical and mental problems, she wasn't a very good candidate to be included in such a study."

She smiled then, and looked up, and everyone in the room was immediately transfixed by the brilliant glow in her eyes. "Except that they had never expected to have to deal with an irresistible
"Long story short, it just so happened that Brian had some powerful contacts in the field of medical/pharmaceutical technology. He'd just completed a campaign for a newly-developed piece of Boston Scientific cardio-vascular equipment, and the doctor who was the primary force in getting FDA approval of the instrument just happened to be a member of the board overseeing the studies at the Proactive Research Foundation. But there is a simpler truth. Yes, he happened to have the right connections, but I believe with my whole heart that it wouldn't have made any difference if he didn't. He would have found a way, because that's what Brian does, isn't it? He finds a way. So I'll leave it to your imagination to figure out what happened next."

She sighed then, but it was an expression of relief, of contentment. "Today, my daughter is a happy, contented, healthy child. Cancer-free, and doing what teen-agers do all over the world - lusting after Justin Timberlake and trying to learn to dance like the Pussycat Dolls. She goes to school, and she is learning to play the piano. Last week, she learned how to make an apple pie, and never mind that it came out a bit lopsided and overcooked; it tasted just fine. She will never write papers about nuclear physics or explain the mystery of Schrodinger's cat or find a way to perfect an alternative fuel, but she will spread joy and happiness around her wherever she goes, because she's a loving, giving, generous young woman - truly a treasure beyond value.

"Brian Kinney understands that, but I doubt that most of you would. At any rate, I want to make one thing perfectly clear. You may question my intelligence, my instincts, my knowledge, my common sense, and my talent, but . . . " She stood up slowly, and looked around the room, facing each of them in turn. "Don't you ever - ever - question my loyalty to Brian Kinney. Are we clear on that?"

It was Ted who managed to work up sufficient courage to speak. He got to his feet, opened his mouth, and uttered one word. "But . . ."

"Shut - the - fuck - up!"

The room went deadly quiet as everyone - except Cynthia and Lance Mathis - looked around, completely bewildered. There was, of course, absolutely no mistaking that voice; they had all jumped to obey it, in one way or another, for years. But there was no tall, dark-haired, Armani-clad figure with sardonic hazel eyes standing in the shadows of the room looking at them as if he couldn't quite credit the stupidity of the masses.

"Brian?" That was Michael, of course, who really didn't give a shit where the voice was coming from, who only wanted to hear more.

"The one and only. Are you a part of this little ambush, Mikey?"

"No, Brian. I just . . ." Michael went silent, hardly knowing how to proceed. "Brian, I'm . . ."

"Yeah. I know you are. But one day, Michael, you're going to have to learn how to stand up."

"But . . ."

"Let me guess," said the noticeably absent owner and prime mover and shaker of Kinnetic Corp, "we have our Muncher representatives, Mel and Linz, who are, of course, only here to protect Gus's interest; our earth mother, the flamboyant Debbie Novotny, who has never once failed to stick her nose in, whether she has the right or not; Ted's main squeeze, looking very counselor-ish and not particularly happy to be a part of this little debacle; our dear professor Bruckner, very Zen and above all the pettiness around him; Mother Taylor - who should know better; and - oh, yes, let's not forget - my own loving family, St. Joan and her little vampire bat. Is that everyone?"
"I'm here, Brian." That was Carl Horvath, speaking up for the first time.

"Ah, yes, Pittsburgh's finest. Anybody else?"

"That's it, Boss." That was Mathis, saying almost nothing but managing, somehow, to convey a singular depth of contempt for what he'd just witnessed without actually expressing it at all.

"Cynthia," said Brian softly, his voice shifting into a gentler mode, "you all right?"

"I'm fine."

There was a quick sound that might have been a tiny burst of laughter. Could have been from Brian, or maybe from whoever might be at his side, and there wasn't much mystery about who that might be.

"Of course, you are," Brian continued. "Which is one reason that you were put in charge of the company in my absence. So . . ."

His pause was very dramatic, and he seemed to know it, because he took his time before speaking again. "I want you all to understand something. Understand it so well that there is no room for any further questioning. In just a moment, I'm going to hand this little dog and pony show back over to Cynthia, who is perfectly capable of fielding your questions and responding to your comments. She doesn't need Big Bad Brian to step in and defend her. But know this - if you don't know anything else in your life. She is doing the job exactly as I want her to do it. She knows full well when to make decisions on her own, and when she needs to contact me. And she does. Furthermore, she's scrupulous about keeping me informed on every major concern. Every - single - one, from the hiring/firing issues, the acceptance or rejection of new clients, changes in campaigns, financial decisions - everything. She has my complete trust, my complete loyalty. So here's the bottom line: if you question her, you question me."

He paused then, and there was another whisper of sound, as if he might be listening to something from someone else.

"So," he said finally, "let's just make sure there's no room for a misunderstanding. Whatever decisions Cynthia makes on behalf of Kinnetik are, in effect, my decisions, and, in the final analysis, none of your fucking business!"

"Are we clear on that?"

There was a general, vague muttering, but Brian was not going to just let it drop at that.

"I repeat," he said coldly. "Are - we - clear?"

The chorus of responses was sharp and clear, ranging from a simple 'yes' from a very disgruntled Melanie Marcus, to a resounding 'absolutely' from Jennifer Taylor, who had become progressively more mortified as the meeting continued.

"Excellent!" And everyone in the room could imagine the smug, well-satisfied smile that was forming on that perfect face - or was it still perfect? But that was a question nobody was quite prepared to broach at this stage.

"Theodore!"

The accountant did not actually, physically flinch, but Lance Mathis was pretty sure it was a near thing. "Yes, Bri?"
"In your office! Now!"

Ted turned toward Melanie, his eyes wide with alarm.

"Alone!"

Dark eyes blinked, and the CFO actually appeared to shrink a bit before the eyes of all those who turned to look at him, which was everyone in the room.

For a moment, it almost seemed that he might defy the summons, but then he looked up and saw that Lance Mathis was staring at him, and that the look in the security chief's eyes was almost hungry, almost eager - like a lion contemplating a tasty morsel as it decided whether or not to try to run.

In the end, Ted could only sigh. "Yes, Boss."

Cynthia watched him gather his pitiful little assortment of books and papers and notes and slink toward the door, and she almost - but not quite - managed to feel sorry for him.

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* Fog - Carl Sandburg

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tbc
Chapter 36

"In the real dark night of the soul, it is always three o'clock in the morning, day after day." – F. Scott Fitzgerald

The walk from Brian Kinney's executive suite to the smaller but still elegant office space allotted to his chief accountant was short, requiring no more than a couple of minutes to complete, but it would, under ordinary circumstances, have allowed sufficient time for Ted Schmidt to regain his composure and gird his loins - so to speak - for the face-off that awaited him. He had, after all, done nothing wrong. Okay, so he had, perhaps, overstepped the boundaries of his station just a bit, in challenging Cynthia's actions, but only because he was concerned about protecting Brian's interests. He could explain every step he'd taken along the way in preparing his presentation to his group of supporters. He had documentation for everything, and justification for his concerns.

And, of course, he also had the piece de resistance of his campaign to prove his value to the living force that was Brian Kinney - the secret trump card that would prove, beyond any possible doubt, that Brian owed him a huge, virtually unfathomable, debt of gratitude. But that he wasn't quite ready to speak of, since the ultimate pay-off was not yet within his grasp. It was, almost certainly, only a matter of days away, but he would resist any temptation to mention it until it was a fait accompli - when no one would be able to dispute the genius of his actions in pursuit of a financial bonanza on Brian's behalf.

The man would owe him - forever - a debt that could never be fully repaid.

He would, of course, be gracious in victory and in accepting his due, at the hands of people who had never granted him the honor and respect that should have been accorded to him long ago. Even Brian Kinney would have to recognize his value and treat him accordingly.

Thus, he should have been calm and composed by the time he reached his office; only, it was really difficult to achieve any level of serenity when Brian's chief of security was walking behind him, breathing down his neck much like a prison guard herding an inmate to his cell.

Nevertheless, he knew he needed to achieve some level of emotional command, because . . . well, because one did not, under any circumstances, go into a confrontation with a peeved, disgruntled Brian Kinney without aplomb and self-confidence fully engaged and ready for battle. So, as he reached his office door, he tried to pause, to take a deep breath and find his emotional center. Only, Lance Mathis was apparently not in the mood to allow even the slightest hesitation.

Thus, when Ted tried to come to a halt, the security chief denied him the opportunity in the simplest, most direct way possible. He simply . . . pushed, using superior strength, agility, and muscle to propel the accountant through the doorway and toward his chair, while Mathis leaned over the desk and depressed the speaker/phone button.

"Ready, Boss." Those were the only words he spoke, and Ted allowed himself a fleeting glimmer of hope that the man would turn around and march out the door, leaving him to speak to his employer privately. But the hope was very fleeting, as Mathis took up his customary stance near the doorway,
arms crossed and eyes fixed firmly on the target - namely, one increasingly nervous accountant.

Ted sank into his chair, grateful that he did not have to stand to face whatever music might be at hand.

"Theodore."

The accountant swallowed around the lump in his throat before trying to answer, but did manage, finally, to respond without squeaking like a frightened mouse. "Brian. How are you?"

Brian took his time in formulating a reply. "I think the phrase 'as well as can be expected' would be appropriate, under the circumstances. Don't you agree?"

"Well," Ted said quickly, taking some comfort in the fact that Brian did not sound quite as angry as he might have expected, "that's something I wouldn't have any way of knowing, would I? Since you haven't been in contact with any of us since you left."

Another brief silence, and a faint huff of breath drawn. "On the contrary, Theodore. I've spoken to Cynthia every day since I got here, and to Michael and Lindsey and Emmett. As much and as often as I needed. So I can only assume that your whining - which, by the way, is extremely annoying and not the least bit attractive - is due solely to the fact that I haven't spoken to you."

"Well, I . . ."

"Did it occur to you that there might be a logical reason for that?"

"No, but I'm . . ."

"I didn't contact you, because I didn't need to talk to you. I think that's simple enough for anyone to understand, don't you? Was there something I needed to know from you, something that Cynthia couldn't be trusted to tell me?"

"Well, I wouldn't know that, would I, since I wasn't allowed direct access. And I am your accountant. You know - the man who handles your money. Don't you think . . ."

"Yes." There was a new note in Brian's voice - something darker, sadder somehow. "The man who handles my money. I trusted you to do that, Theodore, and I assumed that you could do it perfectly well without needing me to ride herd or keep an eye on how you were doing it."

"Well, of course you did. And you were right to do so. But, with everything that was happening here, I just felt compelled to step in . . ."

"Yeah." And this time, there was no mistaking the weariness in that expressive voice. "I heard your explanation of your compulsion. And now, I want you to hear something. And after you do, I want you to give me your opinion about how I should respond. Okay?"

Ted sat up straighter in his chair, thinking that this was more like it. He had come to enjoy his status as Brian's go-to guy for advice and encouragement, and perhaps he had been wrong to assume that his position might be usurped by the blonde who fancied herself so much more than the glorified secretary she actually was.

"Okay," he replied firmly, and glanced up at Lance Mathis who was still staring at him as if he were some kind of bug under a microscope. When this whole debacle was history, always assuming that it ever really was history and Brian was ever sufficiently recovered to try to resume anything remotely resembling the lifestyle he'd enjoyed before, perhaps he'd be able to convince Kinnetik's owner to
take another look at his security chief, who seemed to be in need of a lesson in how to treat his superiors. "What do you . . ."

"Just shut up and listen."

The first thing he heard was the ringing of a phone; the next thing he heard was his own voice answering the electronic summons. And then he listened to the rest, his eyes bulging as he realized what he was hearing.

The recording concluded, and there was only silence for a few seconds.

Then he leapt to his feet. "You tapped my phone line?" It was not - quite - a scream of outrage, but it was close. "You tapped my fucking phone!"

"Yes." Brian's voice was perfectly serene. "And you can save your queen-out routine, since - in point of fact - it's actually my phone, isn't it?"

"How could you do that to me? How could you . . ."

He was still in tirade-mode, snarling more loudly with each syllable, and yet - somehow - he heard every word when Brian responded, even though the man continued to speak in a very soft monotone. "Do you know the primary advantage we had, Theodore, in making sure that my son was protected from the vicious fucks who tried to kill me? Do you know what guaranteed his safety, in a way nothing else could?"

"What?" It was still a snarl, but, perhaps, not quite so filled with self-righteous fury. Though he was deeply outraged, he was also desperately trying to remember whether or not there had been any conversations on his office line about his dealings with Marshall Hargrave. Not, of course, that there was anything to hide about those discussions, but he didn't want anything to ruin his big surprise, so he was moderately relieved to conclude that all his conversations concerning the funds transfer had taken place on his cell phone. Thus, he still felt justified in venting some of his irritation about the audacity of anyone listening in on his phone calls. "I assume it would have something to do with the FBI, who obviously have no respect for privacy. Or maybe those individuals who seem to think themselves the best private security people in the world, who apparently spend their time spying on trusted employees instead of trying to figure out who did this to you. I mean, you're Brian Fucking Kinney, aren't you, with access to the very best protection that money can buy, aren't you?"

The voice grew even softer. "Funny. It didn't work so well for me, did it?"

Ted almost gasped when he realized what he'd said, but he remained quiet, straining now to hear every word as Brian continued to speak. "Gus's best protection - the thing that guaranteed his safety better than anything else could - was the fact that most of the world didn't know he existed. Outside the most intimate circle of friends and family, nobody knew that he was my son, that I even had a son. Not even my own mother."

He grew quiet then, and waited, and suddenly, Ted felt the silence that enveloped the room, the building - the whole fucking world - like a cold, unbelievably heavy blanket of betrayal falling all around him, thick with the specter of tragedy looming.

"Oh, my God!" It was nothing but a whisper, but it cut through the stillness like a shout in the wilderness. "Brian, I . . ."

"Until today." Brian spoke as if he hadn't heard what Ted said, and maybe he hadn't. Or maybe - as seemed more likely - he had deemed it unworthy of notice. "Today, someone I trusted, someone I
believed I could depend on to be smart enough, wise enough, loyal enough to understand that protecting my son was more important than anything else in my life; today, that person - for some reason I don't think I'll ever begin to comprehend - opened his big mouth and told the world that Brian Kinney has a son."

"But, but . . . Brian, I only mentioned Gus to Mr. Wylie, and he's . . . he wouldn't say anything. He's a prospective client, and a fine, upstanding . . ."

"Are you really that fucking stupid?" The soft, weary tone was gone, and Brian's voice was as sharp and harsh as the crack of a whip. "Do you have any idea what you - you and that fucking bitch who dares to call herself a mother of my child - have done?"

"Bri . . ."

"If anything happens to Gus . . ." Brian paused, almost too filled with anger and a bottomless sense of betrayal to continue, and Ted felt ice clinch around his heart. "If anything happens to my son because of what you said, I swear to you that you will spend the rest of your life wishing you'd never been born."

"Brian, what can I do?"

Kinnetik's owner actually managed to summon up a bitter little chuckle. "Do? You want me to tell you what to do? Trust me. You don't want to hear what I'd like to tell you to do. But, professionally speaking, this is what you can do, and it's all you can do. You let Cynthia run Kinnetik, per my instructions. You stay in your office and you tend to the accounting end of things. You don't recruit new clients, or speak to old ones, you don't make executive decisions, you don't commit me or my company to anything, beyond making payroll and meeting obligations that are already in place. And you never, never, refer to my son again. To anybody."

Ted took a deep breath, trying to ignore the huge, painful pressure in his chest. "Brian, I swear I . . ."

But then he heard the clicking on the line, and realized that his groveling and eagerness to atone - no matter how sincere - would have to wait for a better opportunity. Brian, being Brian, would forgive him in time, of course; he couldn't contemplate any other possibility, but, for now . . .

Brian was already gone, and Lance Mathis had made his exit as well, after sparing one final frigid glance for Kinnetik's CFO. Ted shivered, realizing that he had never before been the object of so much contempt, so much anger, and, as much as he'd have liked to believe otherwise, he was pretty sure he deserved it all.

"Mathis, you still there?"

"Right here, Brian. Thought you might have some questions or comments. Or maybe just some orders."

"Yeah. You could say that. Is the kangaroo court still in progress?"

"It is. You want to listen in?"

"Not necessary. Cynthia is perfectly capable of telling them all where to shove it - and how high."

Mathis grinned. "Yeah. I noticed."
In the cozy little office of the beach cottage, Justin noticed the shift in the expression on Brian's face and wondered what had inspired the warm glint of speculation that formed in those beautiful eyes, as Brian favored him with a lovely smile.

"Give her time to deal with them, and then I've got a couple of chores for you."

Mathis moved into his own office, pausing to check the bank of monitors that were the nerve center for the brand new upgraded security system. "Whatever you want, Boss Man, but tell me; am I going to enjoy this?"

Brian chuckled. "You could say that."

"And Schmidt? What do you..."

"Nothing yet. I'm assuming you've reviewed the information that the FBI provided about Theodore's excellent adventure."

"Yeah. With friends like that..."

"Right. So, for the moment, just let him stew a little more. If the feds are right, it's only a matter of days - maybe even hours - before the whole thing comes tumbling down around his ears. Do you think it's petty of me to want him to experience the full effect, with no opportunity to get ready to weather the storm?"

It was Mathis's turn to laugh. "Yeah, I think it's petty - and fucking brilliant."

"Remind me to give you a raise."

"Oh, don't worry. When this is all over, and you're safe and sound and still Brian Kinney, you will."

"Agreed, only... I'm not the only one that has to come through safe and sound."

"Okay. Here's what I want you to do."

The orders were brief, explicit, and to the point, and Mathis realized immediately that Brian had spoken truly; he really was going to enjoy this.

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In the spare elegance of Brian's office, the silence following Ted's departure was extraordinary - almost palpable - as no one seemed to have any idea of what to do next.

No one, that is, except Cynthia Whitney, who knew exactly what to do and what to say, but took a moment to savor a rather sweet sensation of victory before proceeding.

When she decided that she'd waited long enough, that Brian's message had been well and truly absorbed, she sat forward and clasped her hands on his desk and chose to fix her attention directly on Justin's mother.

"What," she said softly, "are you doing here, Ms. Taylor? I understand why everyone else decided that they needed to be a part of this debacle; most of them have spent their whole lives trying to control Brian Kinney, or at least pretend that they have some right to interfere in his life. But you... do you have any idea how your son might feel about your participation in this lynch mob?"
Jennifer had the grace to blush. "I'm sorry, Ms. Whitney. I didn't mean to . . ."

Cynthia silenced her with an upraised hand, understanding that Jennifer was going to face a horribly difficult task when next she spoke to her son. It was pretty obvious to Brian's assistant, judging from his tone and demeanor during his dramatic little announcement, that Justin had not yet been told about Craig Taylor's role in the attack on Brian. She was fairly certain that, if full disclosure had been made, Brian would have been too preoccupied with trying to talk his young lover down from a major drama-queen episode to bother with intervening in this little 'dog and pony show', as he'd termed it. Knowing that he really did have confidence in her ability to handle what was happening here, she was certain that he had only stepped in because it was something he wanted to do - not because there was any real need. Nevertheless, if learning that his father was a part of the cabal who had been responsible for the attack on Brian was going to be difficult for Justin, how hard was it going to be on his mother to realize that she'd spent so many years as the wife of a man capable of such a despicable act?

"It's all right," Cynthia interrupted. "I know you've had a lot on your mind, and . . ." She allowed her gaze to drift toward Debbie Novotny, and the glint in her eyes was icy. "You were probably pressured to come here. However, I think you'll be happy to hear that Justin has survived his campaign to gain re-entry to Castle Kinney and has reclaimed his position as the king's favorite." Her smile was gentle. "I think it's safe to say that the reunion was a huge success, and I'm sure he'll be contacting you soon." She deliberately did not venture a guess concerning the subject of that phone call. That was something that would remain between mother and son, and she was relatively happy that she would not have to be involved.

"As for the rest of you," she continued, "I'm not going to discuss Kinnetik issues with you, since none of you have any standing in matters concerning Brian's professional decisions. I think he made himself perfectly clear on that subject, but I will expand a bit on the more personal aspects of your little list of grievances."

She smiled then, but there was no comfort to be found in it, and both Debbie Novotny and Melanie Marcus felt a stirring of genuine alarm, while Michael and Lindsey exchanged speculative glances. This, they thought, might get very interesting.

There was a brief pause then as Cynthia's cell phone vibrated on the desk, and she took a moment to answer it, listening for a few seconds before replying with a soft-spoken, "Yes, I know, but thanks for the reminder."

She then disconnected and took another moment to gather her thoughts. Finally, taking a deep breath, she rose and walked to the small storage area behind the desk to retrieve a framed painting from the niche where it had been tucked away since the day that Justin Taylor had departed for New York City to make a name for himself in the art world.

It had been a gift - artist to model - and it was already so valuable that it would command at least five figures should it go up for auction, which, of course, it never would.

A Justin Taylor original oil - a perfect, beautiful rendering of Brian Kinney, casually dressed in jeans and t-shirt, cigarette in one hand and a beer in the other, leaning against a brick wall supporting a tumble of lush foliage that reflected the deep amber radiance of day's end. Brian's profile was illuminated by the fiery rays of a summer sun riding low on the horizon. It was an exquisite example of the artist's work, and would have been so even if one had no idea of the identity of the model.

Cynthia moved back to the desk and sat down, carefully propping the portrait so that everyone in the room had a perfect view of that perfect face.
"Mrs. Kinney," she said suddenly, "what do you see?"

Joan Kinney's eyes widened and shifted toward her daughter, but it was immediately obvious that she would get no help from that quarter, as Claire was busy examining the chipped polish on a thumbnail. "I'm sorry," said the elderly woman. "What do you . . ."

"It's not a trick question," said Cynthia dryly. "When you look at this painting - at this man - what do you see?"

Joan took a deep breath and raised her head so that she could look down her nose at this upstart girl who seemed determined to make her look foolish in front of these people who were a large part of her only son's life, and no part - thank God - of her own. "I see my son," she replied coldly.

Cynthia's eyes were suddenly filled with ice. "Do you really? Okay then. Let's expand on that, shall we? Would that be the son who was your deliverance, who was the means by which you and your precious daughter escaped the brutal attentions of your vicious, sadistic husband because Brian was always there to take the beatings for you? Or perhaps, the son who learned to fend for himself when he was little more than a baby because he had no choice? Or maybe the son who went out to work way before he was old enough because you and the old man had better things to do than support your kid - like boozing or bitching or crusading for a spurious sainthood, or maybe just generally forgetting that he was alive? Or how about this - maybe you see the son whom you both blamed for every miserable thing in your lives, never once realizing that God - you know, that divine being that you claim such intimate acquaintance with - had given you a blessing of your very own, only you were too fucking stupid to see it."

She rose then and walked around the desk to look directly down into Joan Kinney's face. "Or maybe, what you see is the ultimate abomination - the queer - the faggot who's going to burn in hell because he dares to be true to himself, because he fucks guys and defies you and your notions about God's narrow, homophobic mind."

"You can't talk to me that way. I'm his . . ."

"I'm not sure what you are, Mrs. Kinney, but if you dare to say that word, I can't promise not to slap you. You're not his mother; he never had a mother. You just provided the uterus where he took shelter for a little while, and it was the only thing you ever gave him. So let's be clear on this, shall we? You're here - you and your little clone - because Brian, through his own efforts, has become a very rich man, and, despite the fact that he's been extremely generous to you - and to his rat-bastard father before he died - you're thinking that he's vulnerable right now, and that this might be a golden opportunity for you to get your hot little hands on more of his money."

She paused then and leaned forward. "So hear this, and know it for the truth it is, so you don't waste time and money in hiring yourself a lawyer and fighting a losing battle. What you already have is all you're ever going to get. Whatever you may think of him, he's smarter than you can even imagine, and certainly smart enough to make sure that his money goes where he wants it to go, no matter what happens to him. So, are we clear on that?"

Joan Kinney pushed herself to her feet, as Claire, slightly flustered and moving clumsily, did the same, and the older woman once more lifted her head, in a vain attempt to intimidate her son's chosen representative. "We'll just see about that, shall we? When I talk to Brian, I'm sure he'll be very interested to hear how you spoke to me. He won't stand for it, and neither will I, so, if you'll excuse me . . ."

Cynthia smiled, and looked up then, meeting the eyes - very beautiful, dark eyes she noticed - of the man standing in the doorway.
"Mrs. Kinney, Ms. DeFatta," said Lance Mathis, "come with me, please. Mr. Kinney has instructed that you be escorted from the premises and advised that you are not to return here again. If you do, his attorney will procure a restraining order to prevent any further visits, and he will also take immediate action to curtail the monthly stipend that he provides to cover your living expenses. He wanted me to make sure that you understand that he is deadly serious about this, and that you acknowledge the terms under which he will continue to provide support for you. Do you understand?"

Joan's eyes were suddenly huge, while Claire's narrowed to slits as she began to speak. "You can't talk to my mother like . . ."

"I can," Mathis replied calmly, "and I did. And my question stands. Do you understand these terms as explained to you?"

Joan Kinney nodded.

"Out loud, please," Mathis insisted. "Just so we're totally clear."

"I understand," she said, her voice trembling and uncertain.

"Let's go, Mom," said Claire DeFatta. Then she turned and glared at Cynthia Whitney. "But don't make the mistake of thinking this is over. Because . . ."

Cynthia grinned. "Let me guess. Because you are going to take on your brother? Yeah. That ought to be worth a footnote in his daybook."

Mathis then escorted the two women out of the room; he was excruciatingly polite, but he did not allow either of them to dawdle.

When they were gone, Cynthia scanned the remaining faces, waiting to see if any of them would speak up, but no one did.

"Now," she said finally, "let's talk about the rest of you and your interest in Brian, and why you have the strange idea that you have the right to interfere in his life, as you've been doing for so many years. That's the real issue, isn't it? Everything has always been about you, and your rights and how you see things. You, Ms. Novotny, are still convinced that a mother is always right, even though you saw what Hunter's mother was like, and what she did to her son. Even though you must have known what Joan Kinney was, because you had a front row seat for the damage she did to Brian. And even though you witnessed the kind of harm that could have been done to your own granddaughter by her mother's selfishness."

"Hold it!" snapped Melanie Marcus, in her most intimidating, prosecutorial voice. "What exactly do you . . ."

But Cynthia remained completely unintimidated. "A few years ago, you, Ms. Marcus, fucked around on your significant other, resulting in a separation that almost put an end to your relationship. I was never quite enlightened enough to figure out how what you did with your fellow dyke was any different from what she did with the stud muffin artist, which you found so unforgivable, but, hey, I'm not gay, so maybe I just don't get it. I figure that fucking around is fucking around, no matter the gender of the fellow fucker. Nevertheless, at that time, Lindsey apparently lost her mind, and was on the verge of marrying her live-in French fry, and it was up to Brian to save the day. Which he did, by doing the one thing he didn't really want to do - the one thing that he was convinced was the best thing for his son. So, despite the fact that he had fallen in love with the kid - as he never expected to - he volunteered to give up his parental rights in order to force you two fucking idiots to see the truth
and get back together in order to give Gus a good life. That's what Brian did for his son.

"And yet, all we've ever heard, from any of you, is what a shitty father he was. So how is it that, when J.R. came along, the three of you, who set yourselves up as such superior parents, along with Zen Master Ben, who was the cheerleader in dear Michael's corner, had only one concern - who got Tuesday and who got Thursday, and whose parental rights were most important. Not a fucking one of you stopped for a moment to consider what was best for your daughter.

"So, can you explain to me how any one of you can claim to be a better parent than Brian? What - exactly - did any of you sacrifice for your child?"

"Now wait a minute," said Debbie. "It's just not that simple."

"No?" Cynthia's smile was bittersweet. "I think it's exactly that simple. It was always that simple. Why don't we consider things that have happened over the years, such as - you guys remember when Brian was turning thirty, and he was trying to relocate to New York? New city, new job, new opportunities - hitting the big time. Remember that? And how did all his wonderful friends react? All any of you could do was insist that he was making a big mistake, that he wouldn't find anything in New York that would make him happy, that what he had here should be enough for him. Remember? And yet, at the same time, everybody was so eager to congratulate Michael on his dreams of wedded bliss with the pompous ass in Seattle. And later on, when Mel and Lindsey went scampering off like scared mice after the Babylon bombing, everybody offered support and best wishes, and never mind that it took Gus completely out of his father's life. And what about Justin and how eager you all were to ship him off to New York, to pursue his dreams? Did it ever occur to you - to any of you - that maybe Brian had a dream of his own? But in the end, when that New York job didn't come through as he'd hoped, you all just sighed with relief, assured him that it was for the best - that he'd get over it. Because he always got over it, didn't he? Because who really cared what he might dream of? He was Brian Fucking Kinney, so what difference did it make?"

She paused to gaze once more at the face in the portrait, at the eyes that were looking off toward the horizon, looking, perhaps, for something he could not see. "What difference did it ever make to any of you?"

"He's been your scapegoat for everything in life that didn't suit you. It was always Brian's fault. When he couldn't love Michael the way you wanted, Debbie, it had to be because he was a heartless shit, since it couldn't possibly be that the love he did feel for his best friend was so beautiful, so special that it should have been enough for anyone. When your brother passed away, and Brian, in a thoughtless moment, did what Brian usually does - and voiced an uncomfortable truth - it was much easier for you to strike out at him, rage at him for what he said, than owning up to the things you said to your brother, wasn't it? When Michael had trouble hanging on to that pathetic poseur of a chiropractor, it was Brian's fault and his place to fix it, even though he was right all along in thinking that the good doctor was a pretentious, self-righteous prig. When Justin's father - that paragon of virtue - attacked Brian, it was Brian's fault that Justin was traumatized. And speaking of Justin, when he came along, you all did everything you could to push them together, to help Justin get under Brian's skin, because . . . I sometimes wonder if you ever even understood why you did it . . . because you wanted someone to be able to hurt him. Because, of course, he deserved to be hurt, since it just wasn't fair for anyone to be immune to heartbreak. If the rest of you could be hurt, then so must he, and, of course, he didn't know a thing about what it was like to be hurt, did he? By the way, did it ever occur to any of you how lucky Justin was that it was Brian who found him on Liberty Avenue that night? Do you know what could have happened to him if he hadn't been so lucky? At any rate, when it happened, you pushed them together, doing everything you could to exploit what you saw as Brian's weakness, congratulating yourselves on finally finding his Achilles heel, so that you were ready to leap with joy when Justin found himself a twink fiddler and left Brian
behind. Are you still proud of that, of how you laughed over his pain and bent over backwards to welcome Justin's new squeeze into the fold? Did it hurt Brian?"

She paused then, and her voice was very soft. "Oh, yeah. It did. You should all be very proud of yourselves."

She looked around then, noting that none of them seemed eager to meet her eyes. "How many times did he save your asses? And how did you pay him back? With scorn and ridicule and laughing when you thought you'd put one over on him. Did you really think he didn't know?"

She paused again, and focused this time on Michael, whose eyes were dark with remembered moments, with thoughts of anger and betrayal. "He always knew. And he just let you believe what you wished, because it was easier for you and because he was strong enough to stand it. And I - Jesus! I can't tell you how many times I stood there and watched and wondered if any of you were ever going to wake up and see the truth, or if you were just going to go on twisting things around in your minds - tweaking your memories - so that you could go on believing what was comfortable for you.

"Remember the night of the benefit at Babylon, Michael? Justin told me about that night, about how your dear, oh-so-morally upright neighbors, upon hearing that Brian was on his way to Australia, laughed and observed that it was because he'd already slept with everybody on this continent. And you - you just stood there and said nothing, despite the fact that, by donating Babylon as the venue for your little shindig, he was effectively donating $10,000.00 to your cause. I doubt that your cunty friends coughed up anything like that, did they, but hey - they were the people you cared about impressing, weren't they? They mattered more than the man who spent his whole fucking life defending your pathetic little ass. Right?"

She paused then, and something dark and terrible seemed to rise in her eyes - so dark and terrible that she couldn't bring herself to look at any of them as she spoke again. "Did any of you ever wonder why he never told you that he had cancer? Do you have any idea how close you came to losing him then; how close he came to just turning his back and walking away? Because he almost did, you know. And I've often wondered how it would have played out if he had."

"What do you mean?" asked Michael, suddenly sure that he didn't want to know what she meant, but that it was something they needed to hear if they were to ever have any hope of understanding the enigma that Brian had become.

She took a deep breath. "Originally, he wasn't going to have the surgery. You probably remember, Ms. Taylor, even if no one else does. What he said right after Vic's funeral?"

Jennifer Taylor looked puzzled for a moment; then memory dawned, and she merely looked stricken. "That the 'tasteful' thing to do - instead of getting old and sick and lingering on - was to buy a one-way ticket to Ibiza, party til you dropped, and then discreetly disappear."

Cynthia nodded. "Exactly. And he almost did. The plane ticket was already bought, and the hotel reservations made. He only changed them at the very last minute, on the day he was scheduled to leave. And if he hadn't, he would have gotten on that plane, and no one would ever have known what happened to him."

"Well, that's just ridiculous," said Melanie impatiently. "He couldn't just disappear, and he wouldn't have anyway. He wouldn't miss an opportunity to make everyone dance to his favorite tune. 'Who's Next to Get Fucked by Brian Kinney?' If you think . . ."

"And you, of course, know him so well," Cynthia interrupted, with a caustic smile. "If you think he
couldn't have pulled it off and just vanished . . . think again. And if he had, it's not too difficult to visualize what would have happened. A couple of weeks after his departure, one of you - probably Michael - would have gotten perturbed and called around trying to find him. And then you'd have all gone into panic mode when no one could tell you where he was, but, sooner or later, you'd have concluded that he was just out there somewhere, fucking the latest hot trick and being the self-absorbed bastard you all believe him to be, because that would have been the easiest thing to believe, and the one that would suit your pre-conceived notions about him. And then - very discreetly and according to the arrangements he would have made in advance - Brian's attorney would have made sure that his estate was settled according to his wishes, and nobody would ever know what really happened to him, all nice and neat and without putting anybody through any unnecessary suffering. Brian Kinney - gone like Hendrix, or Cobain, or Morrison, or Dean - forever young and beautiful.

"He almost did it, you know. He almost walked away."

"And what stopped him?" whispered Michael. "If he was so determined, why didn't he?"

Cynthia looked at Lindsey then, and smiled. "I don't know for sure, but I think it was because of Gus. It wasn't Justin, because Brian always believed - probably still does deep down in his heart - that Justin would be better off without him, and if any of you don't know that, then you're even stupider than I always thought you were. No, I think it was Gus, that the one thing he couldn't endure was thinking that his son would grow up believing that his father had abandoned him. I think that's why he changed his mind."

"Jesus!" said Melanie suddenly, almost jumping to her feet. "This is all just a load of bullshit. You're making him sound like some kind of white knight, when we all know what he really is - a self-serving, narcissistic prick who doesn't care about anything but himself. Besides, how do you even know all this crap, or remember it? Most of the time, you weren't even around so . . ."

Cynthia gave a half shrug and a small laugh. "It always amazes me that you guys think that anything in your lives can possibly remain secret when you all announce every intimate detail to the whole world, with every breath you take. What happens in your bedrooms at night is front-page news on Liberty Avenue the next day. So when Ben gets his knickers in a twist because Michael's comic book is being made into a movie while no one will publish his novel, and takes his frustrations out by considering a little slap and tickle with a grad student, half of gay PA is watching avidly the next morning to see if he follows through. Or when Justin queens out because Brian is diagnosed with syphilis - conveniently ignoring the fact that it could just as easily have been him or any of you - it's the main topic of conversation at the diner an hour later. I hear things. I'm a very good listener so people tell me things. And Brian tells me things, although it sometimes takes him a while to work things through so he can talk about them. Everybody needs someone they know they can trust, and, for Brian, that's me. And whatever I'm told, I remember. In fact, I have an almost eidetic memory, about certain things - for faces and for the spoken word. If you tell me something, it's likely that I'll remember it exactly. Almost verbatim. Brian calls it a gift; I think of it more as a curse, since there are things I would really rather forget. But I confess, I'd rather be doomed to remember every miserable or angry word ever spoken to me, than to be the kind of person who can manipulate memories, so that I could choose what to remember and what to forget. Like you all do."

She rose then and leaned forward, once more examining each face in the group. "As for making him sound like a 'white knight', you'll have to forgive me if that's how I see him, because that's what he's been for me. And no, that doesn't mean that he's a paragon of virtue. He'd be the first to laugh at such a silly notion. Nevertheless, it's up to each of you to decide what he's been . . . for you.

"Now, I think that just about covers it, don't you? So, unless you want to raise a few more issues, or find some new things to blame him for, I think we should adjourn this little kangaroo court so I can
get on with the business of running Brian's business."

Several of the individuals gathered around the conference table looked as if they wanted to speak up, but no one did. Cynthia, however, had one more announcement to make. "Lindsey, Melanie," she said as the group rose to move toward the door, "could you wait a moment, please. Brian needs to speak to you."

"Let me guess," said Melanie, eyes bright with resentment, "he's been eavesdropping again."

"No," replied Cynthia with a venal grin. "He trusted me to take out the trash. But he does have something to tell you."

Michael, just approaching the doorway, turned then to look back at Cynthia, and she knew that he was haunted by some of the things she'd said - some of the things that he probably would have preferred not to know. But there had been too much of that already, too much refusal to explore painful truths, and it needed to end, if there were to be any possibility of salvaging the relationship between Brian and his extended, semi-dysfunctional family.

"Can I talk to him?" he finally asked, his voice barely rising above a whisper, as Ben paused at his side, offering wordless but heartfelt support.

"I'll relay the message," she answered gently. "He'll call you."

"He will?"

She regarded his face for a moment, obviously considering how to respond, before coming around the desk and moving to stand before him. Then she placed her hands on his shoulders, and stared directly into his eyes. "You're concentrating on the wrong things, Michael," she said gently. "Remember it all - absolutely - because it should be remembered. But most of all, remember what I said about how much he loves you. That never changed. You never fucked that up, and you never will. He will always love you."

He closed his eyes and could only repeat what he'd said before. "He will?"

Cynthia resisted an urge to roll her eyes, while sending a mental message to her boss, to assure him that he would owe her a debt of eternal gratitude for dealing with his drama-queen/Lost-Boy companion. "He will."

And Michael sighed - once - before breaking into a huge, beatific grin, completely reassured and ready to face the world once more, secure in his place in Brian's heart. It was simplistic and silly to be so validated by the opinion of a single individual, but it was implicitly Michael Novotny, and Cynthia couldn't quite suppress a happy smile of her own, though she did wonder, briefly, how Ben managed to reconcile his adoration for his young husband with that individual's almost pathological need for Brian's affection. He was, she thought, a big man to be able to handle it all.

Melanie, meanwhile, wasn't deigning to suppress her own eye-roll or the almost audible, "Oh, for God's sake!" she was muttering under her breath.

Lance Mathis slipped back into the office at that moment, paused to speak briefly to Carl Horvath, to arrange for a conference in his private office once the business at hand was concluded, and then stepped inside, closing the door behind him, as Cynthia returned to the desk.

"He's on line three," said the security chief, taking a seat near the door.

"Boss," said Cynthia, depressing the appropriate key, "are you there?"
Brian, having spent his time productively while waiting for the meeting to come to an end, reluctantly pulled away from his exploration of his lover's hot, quivering body, and answered slowly, settling Justin more comfortably in his arms before speaking.

"Where else would I be? Are the munchers present and accounted for?"

"Hi, Brian." That was Lindsey, almost as happy to hear his voice as Michael had been.

"Linz," he replied, his voice oddly gentle. "Is your fellow dyke there with you?"


"I'll cut to the chase, shall I? If you're a little fuzzy on the details, I'm sure Theodore can fill you in." Any gentleness that he had directed toward Lindsey was absent now, as his tone had gone harsh and frigid. "Gus and his grandfather are on the way here as we speak. Due to Theodore's indiscretions - aided and abetted by you, Melanie - Gus's relationship to me has been leaked to the public, and the only way we can be sure that he's protected is for him to be brought to the compound here and kept under FBI protection."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" snarled Melanie, pushing forward to lean on the desk. "You have no right . . ."

"Funny you should mention that," he interrupted, and Lindsey's throat suddenly felt very dry as she realized that she'd never before heard such a deep and abiding fury in his voice. "As it turns out, I have every right. It seems that there are certain unexpected advantages to being the object of an FBI investigation, including discovering fundamental facts that never would have come to light otherwise. Such as the truth about the documents I signed all those years ago, giving up my parental rights to my son - documents that were never recorded, never notarized, never filed with the courts, and about which no official action was ever taken. You never followed through, Melanie, and never formally adopted him. I'm sure you figured that I'd never know that you didn't complete the process, and you were probably right. I wouldn't have, but the FBI doesn't do anything by half measures, so it was all part of their basic investigation - a simple matter of checking the court records - and what do you know? According to the laws of the great state of Pennsylvania and the USA, he's still my son." His voice dropped then, to a deadly whisper. "And he never was yours. Furthermore, now - he never will be. You sat there - like a fucking idiot - and let Theodore tell that pompous ass that I had a son. How fucking stupid can you be? And if you think I haven't figured out that Theodore doesn't have the balls to have come up with this little sneak attack he launched today without some outside encouragement, you better think again."

He paused for a moment, obviously considering his next words carefully. "Lindsey," he said slowly, "I really do wish that you weren't going to get caught in the middle of this, but frankly, this . . . this is something I can't overlook or forgive. I stood by and let the two of you take him away, because I assumed you'd watch out for his interests, and that you'd make sure that your partner lived up to her obligation to be a good mother to him. Now . . . now I have to wonder if she ever really cared about him at all. And I'm not willing to take a chance of him having to endure . . . well, you get the idea."

"Now just a minute," said Melanie, voice hoarse with barely suppressed anger. "Who the fuck do you think you are? You can't just step in and decide what's right for Gus - especially since you've never given a shit about him before. Lindsey and I are his parents, and we'll decide what's best for him and where he can go. You need to get him back here - now. Unless you want to deal with one pissed-off dyke lawyer who . . ."

"No."

The silence in the room was as thick as clotted cream as Melanie turned slowly to stare at her partner. "No?" she echoed. "What do you mean, no?"

Lindsey's voice was perfectly steady - and dead cold. "I think it's pretty obvious. No, he does not need to send Gus back here. What he needs to do - what he's obviously trying to do - is protect our son."

"Our?" Melanie actually laughed, a nasty, barking sound. "Our, as in yours and mine? Or wait. Maybe, as in yours . . . and his? Is that what I'm hearing here, Lindsey? Are you actually taking his side, and telling me that he has the right . . ."

"Not the right, Mel," Lindsey replied quickly. "The responsibility. Don't you see that this is not about rights - or you versus Brian? This is about keeping Gus safe, and that's all that matters. The rest is just . . . bullshit."

Melanie's jaw was clinched tight as she regarded her partner coldly. "And what about our daughter? I suppose it's all right that she might be at risk. After all, she's not . . ."

"She's not mine," Brian said firmly, not willing to allow Melanie to twist the truth to suit the play she was trying to make. "Therefore, this doesn't concern her."

"Of course not," Melanie retorted, tone heavy with sarcasm. "Because nothing matters except Brian and what he wants. And Gus, because he's Brian's kid, right? How could you . . ."

"Why," said Lindsey softly, ignoring the murderous rage in Melanie's eyes, "did you never follow through with the adoption? I signed all the papers, and you told me it was all done, nice and tidy . . . and legal. But you didn't . . ."

"Oh, don't go making this about me." Melanie was beyond rational thought by this time. "This is about Brian, just like always. It's always been about Brian."

"Well," said the subject of her rage, "let's take that thought to its natural conclusion, shall we? Let's actually make it about Brian. You are currently standing in my office, in my building, trying to coerce and manipulate the mother of my son, while you issue orders about what I can or can't do to protect him - all of this after you stood by and even participated in Theodore's little disclosure, which is what put Gus at risk in the first place."

"No," she shouted. "What put him at risk is that he's the spawn of a swaggering, narcissistic, heartless motherfucker who flaunts himself in the face of decent people and dares anybody to step up and give him the beating he deserves."

Cynthia, Lindsey, and Lance Mathis all turned to stare at the lawyer, whose face, by this time, had gone stark white as she clinched her fists with rage.

Even Brian seemed to be momentarily stricken speechless, closing his eyes as he felt Justin snuggle closer and wrap him in a loving, incredibly tender caress. It was left to Lindsey, finally, to find the right words. "Funny, isn't it, how the truth comes at you like a runaway train when you least expect it? Spawn? Spawn, Mel? How could you? You let Ted put my baby in danger, and now . . . all you care about is gloating over why Brian deserved what happened to him? Is that what I'm hearing?"

Melanie's eyes grew huge, as she realized what she'd said. "Linz, I didn't mean . . ."

"Mathis," said Brian firmly, eternally grateful for the warm body that surged against him and managed to dispel the cold draught that seemed to be hovering over him, waiting to strike, "escort the . . . lady out of the building, and make sure she never shows her face there again."
"No," said Melanie, speaking softly now. "You can't... I didn't... Lindsey, please..."

"And just so we're absolutely clear on this," Brian continued, "you can expect to hear from my attorney shortly, Ms. Marcus, with an official notification of your non-status in any capacity regarding parental rights to my son. Also, I can pretty much guarantee you that he will not be returning to Toronto, no matter what Lindsey might decide. As for you and where you can go... you're probably just smart enough to figure that out for yourself."

Melanie seemed to freeze where she stood, her eyes filled with shadow as she stared at the woman who had been the center of her life for the last decade. "Lindsey," she finally managed, in a near whisper, "you can't let him do this. You can't..."

Lindsey turned then, to meet her partner's gaze, and Melanie almost flinched away from the despair she read in those huge blue eyes. "I'm reminded of an unforgettable line," said the blonde slowly, "from the neverending melodrama of our lives - a line which you once spoke to me. I think it went something like this: 'I don't know which betrayal to never forgive you for first.' If I were you, I wouldn't wait around to find out."

"Lindsey, no, I..."

"Ms. Marcus," said Lance Mathis, very polite but very firm, "please come..."

"Don't fucking touch me!" snarled the lawyer.

And Brian Kinney laughed. "Dear, sweet Mellie," he chuckled, "do you really want to wind up on the front page of the Post-Gazette, being tossed out of the building on your ass?"

"You wouldn't dare!" she snapped.

"Cynthia," Brian said softly, "do you still have that paparazzo's number on speed dial?"

Cynthia got to her feet and came around the desk until she was nose-to-nose with the lawyer. "I do," she replied, "but that won't be necessary. Because Ms. Marcus is going to haul her ass out of here, and get herself to her hotel room - the one that Kinnetik is paying for, incidentally - where she'll clear her things out and scuttle off into the darkness like the cockroach she is. And if she doesn't, she's going to be arrested for trespassing. Luckily, we actually have a member of Pittsburgh's finest already on the scene." Then she smiled. "And if you think I wouldn't love every fucking minute of it, you might want to reconsider. At the same time, I'll be releasing a statement to the press about her little comment, concerning the vicious bashing of an upstanding young gay businessman. That ought to go over beautifully with her friends at the Gay and Lesbian Center and all the other philanthropic organizations she supposedly supports."

"Bitch!" Melanie spat, fists clinching tighter.

"You better believe it," replied Cynthia, "and more than ready to prove it. So if you want to make an issue of it, now's your chance."

Neither of the two women actually noticed when Lance Mathis leaned over and whispered into the speakerphone. "Remind me to never piss her off."

This time it was Justin who laughed, delighted in the fact that Brian had more than one bulldog ready to leap to his defense.

Melanie spent another moment gazing at her partner, her eyes pleading for a reprieve, for anything that might indicate a willingness to seek out a different resolution to the awkwardness of this
moment. But, in the end, there was nothing, and Lindsey deliberately chose to stare out into the late afternoon sunlight, where a blustery wind was blowing bits of debris around the vacant lot next door.

The brunette finally allowed Mathis to escort her from the room, her posture slumped, defeated, broken.

"Lindsey," said Brian hesitantly, causing her to turn toward Cynthia with a tiny smile.

"If you apologize," she said firmly, "I'm going to ask Justin to smack you. This . . . this wasn't your fault, Brian. As hard as you might have tried - in the past - this time, it was all down to me and her, and the words we just couldn't seem to find for each other."

"And Gus?" Something in his tone warned her that a knee-jerk response was not going to suffice.

She sighed, and sank down on the leather sofa, noting as she did that Brian's impeccable taste was demonstrated in every tiny facet of his office. "Please don't assume that she never loved Gus. She did, Brian. When he was born, I don't think anyone could have loved him more than she did. You must remember that, too. Don't you?"

Brian was finding it hard to focus on what she was saying because Justin had decided to make a mini-meal out of his ear. "Not exactly."

She sighed again, more deeply. "No, I don't suppose you do. You know, in retrospect, I suppose . . . she was right. I never should have insisted that you be the father of my baby."

"Maybe," Brian conceded, "but then Gorgeous Gus wouldn't be Gorgeous Gus, would he?"

Cynthia and Lindsey exchanged fond smiles as they heard Justin and Brian share a soft laugh.

"You're incorrigible, you know," Lindsey pointed out. "In some ways, I guess it's a miracle she lasted as long as she did."

"Hey!" he retorted. "Didn't you just say that this wasn't my fault?"

She took a deep breath. "Yes, I did. Although even you have to admit that you didn't always make an effort to keep her happy."

"Not my job," he replied, "but that still doesn't explain her attitude toward Gus."

"It wasn't Gus, Brian. It was me . . . and you. As time went on, I think her resentment of you, and of my affection for you, got more and more out of control. And then, somehow, when J.R. came along, after the whole debacle with Sam, she got unbelievably defensive. She saw everything as a competition, and I . . . I never seemed to measure up in her expectations of how I should treat the baby. She didn't want me to treat them equally. She wanted . . . demanded that J.R. needed more attention, special treatment, and I'm pretty sure that it didn't make things easier that Gus is turning out to be a miniature version of you. Every time she looks at him, she sees his father. Then there's the fact that you always provided generous support for Gus - even though she pretended that she didn't know - I think that was part of it too, since Michael was never able to chip in much for J.R. Not that it made any real difference for the kids, since . . . I mean . . ." She flushed then, and suddenly couldn't find the right words to express what she wanted to say.

Brian, however, knew her too well not to sense what she was too embarrassed to admit. "It's all right, Lindsey. It wouldn't have been fair for Gus to live a privileged life while his sister was deprived. I always figured the money would stretch to cover them both."
Lindsey closed her eyes, her lips forming a soft little smile that Melanie would have recognized instantly as the expression most often associated with her partner's attitude toward Brian Kinney. "You're a good man, Peter," she whispered. "I just wish . . ."

"She's never going to see it, Wendy," he said quickly. "And any hope of a truce between me and her just went south - if it ever existed at all - and I won't deny that's as much my fault as hers, but . . . Look, what you do about your relationship with your 'significant other' - God, I hate that phrase - that's up to you. It's none of my business. But Gus . . . Gus is my business, and I just can't ignore that. I know what it's like to grow up with a parent who doesn't . . ." He paused then, and she knew he was fighting to control the tremor in his voice, as she heard the murmur of Justin's words. She couldn't make out what the young man was saying, but she knew it was an effort to smooth Brian's decidedly ruffled feathers. "I don't want to fight with you over this," he finally continued, "but I will, if I have to. I've never wanted to hurt you; I think you know that. But Gus . . . I won't let him be hurt. If you two manage to work it out, then good for you, but . . . Sonny Boy stays with me. In Pittsburgh, I mean. I said it once before, and then I let myself be convinced that I was wrong. But you know what? I wasn't wrong, Linz. He belongs there. It's his home - and mine - and, if you want to be a part of his life, it should be yours too. And Melanie is going to have to live with that."

Lance Mathis returned at that moment, taking advantage of a temporary, awkward silence to check in with Brian. "Hey, Boss, I've got Horvath waiting in my office, and Sharon Briggs just walked in with some new information for us, so, unless you need me for something else . . ."

"No, you go take care of business, and tell Sharon hello for me, keeping in mind that you can look all you want - because the view is really spectacular - but don't make the mistake of trying to touch, because she'll break your arm for sure, but . . ." Brian paused, and Cynthia wondered why she had the impression that something had just occurred to him, setting wheels of speculation in motion. "Do me a favor. When you're done, give Lindsey a ride back to the hotel. If that's OK with you, Linz. You're not in a hurry, are you?"

"No, that's fine. Is it all right if I just wander around the art department for a while? Who knows? I might be looking for employment soon. Think the boss might give me a shot?"

Brian laughed. "Mi casa es tu casa, amiga."

Both Lindsey and Mathis departed then, leaving Cynthia with a speculative gleam in her eye. "What are you up to?" she asked, as soon as she was sure they were gone.

"Now why do you always think I'm up to something?" he asked.

"Because I know you so well," she retorted.

His laugh was gentle. "So . . . you okay, Tink? It wasn't too bad?"

"Brian," she said firmly, "I have worked for you for a long time, and if I couldn't deal with major meltdown-worthy melodrama, I'd have been toast the first month. And don't call me Tink. Everything was fine. Don't worry. To tell the truth, some of it was . . ."

"Fun?" He chuckled, and she heard Justin laughing with him. "Sometimes, you're so much like me, it's almost scary. And sweet K-K-K-Katy? Beautiful and happy as ever?"

She smiled. "The light of my life, as always."

"Hey," he said suddenly, his tone reflecting the inspiration that had just flashed in his mind, "why don't you bring her down next week-end? It's beautiful here, and she'd love the beach. And Gus will
be here. I think they'd be great together."

"Are you running a fever?" she demanded. "You're actually volunteering to spend a week-end at the beach with two kids, Gus's grandfather, an FBI team, and me? Holy shit, the Apocalypse is surely at hand."

"Hey, Cynthia," called Justin, the laughter bright and unmistakable in his voice. "He's mellowing with age."

"Mellowing?" Brian echoed, and there was a quickly cut-off squawk as he obviously did something to challenge the younger man's definition of 'mellow'. "Gotta go, Cynthia. Somebody needs a lesson about the folly of speaking first and thinking later."

"Don't strain anything," she called, but the dial tone told her that she was too late by just a hair. Brian, obviously, had urgent matters to attend, and so, for that matter, did she.

Nevertheless, she allowed herself a moment to relax, to absorb the blessed silence, and to reflect on the remains of the day.

The whirlwind was over, thank God, but there would, no doubt, be many more just like it. She wondered, occasionally, if it was wise to spend one's life living on the fringes of such a storm - if it might not be safer, more prudent, to seek a peaceful harbor in which to build a calmer future. Then she tried to imagine a world in which she would be sheltered from the kaleidoscopic shifts, the excitement, the color and candor and cacophony of Brian Kinney's existence, and she smiled. Yes, life with Brian could be infuriating and frustrating and - occasionally - almost intolerable, but it would most certainly never be boring.

She thought she could live with that.

The "lesson" that young Justin had to learn at the hands of his "mellowing" older lover, was thorough and compelling but necessarily truncated by the scheduled arrival of a medical technician with a portable ultrasound machine, a competent but rather humorless young woman who dropped in twice a week to check on Brian's progress. When Cheryl Miro knocked on the door of the office, after trying to push her way in only to find the door locked, Justin was just barely beginning to recover from the blow job that, he would later admit, had to rank among the top five best of his life. If this was what was meant by 'mellowing', he'd conceded to a grinning Brian, then the unmellowness of fresh-faced youth had been ridiculously over-rated.

Their lovemaking had been fierce and frantic, with only one slightly sobering moment occurring just as Brian had begun his torturous exploration of the blond's notoriously nubile young body.

As Brian had nuzzled against the soft skin at the nape of Justin's neck, inhaling the sweet, almost intoxicating scent of the younger man's hair, Justin had pulled away and fixed his companion with a quizzical gaze. "You gave him a nickname," he'd said softly. "Why did you do that?"

Brian's eyes had gone wide. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Your FBI boytoy. You called him 'McFed'. You never use nicknames, unless . . ."

Something in Brian's eyes, something hard and sharp and just slightly predatory, had forced Justin to look away. "Unless what?"

"Unless it means something special. Unless the person matters to you." Blue eyes had been suddenly
huge and filled with shadow, as they shifted and lifted to meet the unflinching gaze of the man who was the undisputed center of Justin's world. "Did he . . . matter?"

Brian had not blinked. "What if he did? Does that change anything between us? Does that mean . . ."

"No, but think about it, Brian. Michael, Lindsey, Cynthia - sometimes - and me. Nobody else. So if you actually gave him a nickname, then . . ."

"Justin." Brian's voice had been velvet soft and very gentle. "I've already told you what you mean to me, and that's not going to change. But that doesn't mean that there aren't going to be times when I need other people. Times like this. I don't know for sure, but I . . . I think he might have actually saved my life." He'd drawn a deep breath, and closed his eyes for a while, gathering his thoughts while trying, at the same time, to keep his beloved Justin from glimpsing the remembered horrors that he had not yet managed to shut out of his mind. "There were moments when I . . . I stood there at the edge of the ocean and wondered . . ." He had gone very still then, as his eyes had darkened, and it had been obvious that he was wondering if he should complete that thought, but, in the end, he'd pushed it away, hoping that Justin would not pursue it. "This was tough, and it took somebody equally tough to get me through it. And you . . ."

Justin had sighed. "Weren't here. I understand."

"No. No, you don't." Brian had moved aside then, and turned to gaze out into the day, where clouds were moving in from the sea. "It wasn't just that you weren't here. It was . . . Justin, you couldn't have given me what I needed to help me through this. I know that's not something you want to hear, but it's the truth."

And he'd been right, of course. Justin had not wanted to hear it. Nevertheless, he'd been pretty sure that it was something he needed to know. "Tell me what you mean."

Brian had been reluctant, but, after hesitating for a moment, he'd offered his explanation without apology. "You'd have given me tenderness and sweetness and your loving, gentle heart and the chance to lose myself in you - in the beauty of you. And I'd have been grateful for every perfect minute of it. But . . . it wouldn't have gotten me through, Justin. I needed someone to push me, someone who would call me on the bullshit and refuse to let me off the hook." He'd paused again then, before looking up, and Justin had almost cringed away from the look of dread in those dark eyes. "He gave me what I needed, and if you can't accept that, I . . . I'll just have to deal with it. I guess it's the only way I can prove to you that I meant what I said. I truly want to spend the rest of my life with you, but I still can't and won't offer you any bullshit promises. It's what I want; it's all I want, but only as long as it's what you want too - more than anything else. The door will always stay open."

And Justin had thrown himself forward, retaking his place in the shelter of those beloved arms, and reclaiming that perfect mouth. The kiss had been deep and breathtaking, until Justin had pulled back just far enough to look up and find the love glowing in the eyes looking down at him. "It doesn't matter. Open . . . or closed, I'm never leaving you again. And I understand what you're telling me. I'm even grateful that he was here for you, and able to give you what you needed." He'd leaned forward then, and initiated another heart-stopping kiss before pulling back once more, with a brilliant smile. "But if you ever fuck him again . . ."

Deep, rich laughter had erupted then, as Brian experienced a joy unlike any he'd ever known before in the realization that Justin - his Justin, of the incredible self-confidence and cockiness and braggadocio, the man whose arrogance almost equaled his own - was jealous. "What? If I ever fuck him again . . ."
Justin had grinned, and proceeded to wrap his fingers in a death grip around Brian's cock and squeeze - and then squeeze again. "Do you really want me to answer that?"

The brunette's answer had been little more than a breathless gasp. "No."

"I didn't think so. Now what was that about teaching me the true meaning of 'mellowing'?"

Brian had tackled him at that point, and pinned his body to the floor as he'd devoured that smart, sassy mouth. Then he'd set out to make the little shit pay for his impertinence, ultimately experiencing the sweet taste of victory as the twat begged for the rapturous release he was being deliberately and repeatedly denied.

Cheryl Miro, relentlessly heterosexual and devoutly fundamentalist Christian, was treated to an extraordinary view once the office was unlocked and she was admitted into the small, secluded space. Although both men, by that time, were fully clothed - or at least as fully as Brian usually was - the looks on their faces and the rich, musky aroma in the air was more than ample evidence of what they'd been doing and how much they'd enjoyed it. She took a deep breath as she set up her equipment, knowing that she was going to have a hell of a time concentrating on doing her job and getting the hell out of that din of iniquity as quickly as her professional conscience would allow.

Justin, just as skilled in recognizing the pinched, disapproving expression of a classic breeder as his lover, made his exit with a sardonic smirk, leaving Brian to her mercy, as he went in search of Chris McClaren. He had a few pithy comments to make to the FBI agent, and he preferred to make them while Brian was occupied elsewhere - like now, when he was busy finding new and better ways to annoy the woman who was tasked with evaluating his recovery.

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"That's good work, Pris," said Agent McClaren, cradling the sat-phone against his shoulder as he checked the fuel gauge of the four-wheeler on which he was sitting - the vehicle of choice that the security team used to parole the perimeter of the beach property at odd hours of the day or night. It was unusual for him to be the one assigned to that task, but now . . . his smile was slightly rueful as he conceded that he didn't really have anything better to do. Not any more. The task of standing watch over Brian Kinney was no longer his to perform; the torch had been passed. Always providing that there was no real material threat to the man who was the focus of this entire operation.

He waved to acknowledge the presence of the physical therapist, who had just arrived and would wait for Brian to finish up with the ultrasound exam to begin his afternoon session. At almost the same instant, the regular groundskeeper drove up in his battered old pick-up truck, grunting his customary wordless greeting, before starting on his weekly maintenance chores.

"Not good enough, I'm afraid," said the gifted undercover agent, her voice slightly off pitch due to a tiny ululation in the sat phone's wavelength. "If I'd been really good, I'd have managed to get a name. As it is, you're going to need eyes in the back of your head to keep an eye on everyone who comes anywhere near him."

"Well, that's already in place. This place is sewn up tight as a drum, and, if it weren't for you, we wouldn't have a clue about a new threat. And there's still time."

"You hope," she retorted. "Although I have to admit, I'll be really glad when this one is history."

"Tired of breathing toxic waste, huh?" he asked gently.

"You said a mouthful, Friend," she replied. "You know, sometimes we get so insulated in our neat,
liberal though admittedly hypocritical little world - in DC, and in our highbrow social circles - it's easy to forget that this kind of provincial, nasty, hate-driven bigotry still exists in this country, and getting slapped in the face with it is not something you want to memorialize in your scrapbook."

"I take it that Pinchon is a real piece of work."

"Oh, yeah. The kind who sits in the front pew at the neighborhood Baptist church with his wife and kids on Sunday and spends his lunch hour fucking his secretary the rest of the week. A fine upstanding Christian - in that the only thing required for him to claim that title is that he denounces abortion, homosexuals, and gun control."

"Has he hit on you yet?"

Her laugh was slightly shrill, and a little on the venal side. "Only every hour on the hour, until I broke down and confessed - with rather charming tears, I thought - that I'd contracted HIV from a blood transfusion. That did the trick."

"Nevertheless," he said softly, "you watch your back. If he were to find out that you're spying on him . . ."

"Not to worry," she assured him. "Right now, he's way too busy congratulating himself on his financial coup and anticipating the fall-out that all the great unwashed are going to endure. Fucker!"

"So it's really coming down, huh?"

"Looks that way," she said with a sigh. "They really tried to control the damage, but it was just too massive. And the motherfucker moved faster than they anticipated. So now . . . well, it's going to take a lot of luck and some masterful planning to even get to the bastard. And Pinchon, as usual, is Teflon-coated. He's going to emerge from the shitstorm smelling like a fucking rose. Until we manage to put it all together, and hoist the fucker on his own petard - so to speak."

"Still, you need to be extra careful. Even a craven coward can turn nasty if you back him into a corner and give him no way out."

"Hmph, I should be so lucky. If the bastard comes at me with wicked intentions, my neat and tidy little pistol is tucked away in a very private but immediately accessible place. Meanwhile, I'm still working on it, Chris, and I'll do my best to get you a name."

"Thanks, Hon. It would be good if we could tie this up in a neat little bow, so we could all get back to living our lives."

There was a beat of silence then, as the very perceptive young woman heard something in McClaren's voice - something that surprised her. "Chris," she said slowly, "is he . . ."

The agent huffed a small sigh. He and Young had gone through the FBI Academy together, and she knew him better than most. Maybe - under these circumstances - a little too well. "Is he what?"

She drew an audible deep breath. "There are lots of rumors about your Mr. Kinney," she replied. "He's not 'my Mr. Kinney'." His voice was suddenly hoarse.

He could close his eyes and visualize her gentle smile. "So it's true. All that . . . and a bag of chips?"

He couldn't help but laugh. "I wouldn't phrase it exactly like that, but yeah. He is."
"You okay?"

"Yeah. I'm okay."

"Your voice just cracked."

"It did not."

Another pause - he was sure the smile had become indulgent - but she obviously decided not to press the issue. "Okay. Would I like him?"

This time, his laughter was warm and filled with easy candor. "Yeah. You'd fucking love him."

"Hot?"

"Yes," he admitted.

"Hung?"

"This conversation is officially over."

"Does he know how lucky he is?"

McClaren spent a moment looking out toward the sea, picking out the striations in the water and watching jeweled teal shift into deep cobalt shift into aubergine. "Yeah," he said finally, "I think he does. But, in the end, it won't make any difference." He was only marginally surprised to realize that he really did believe what he was saying. "Get back to work, College Girl, before you get caught socializing on the job."

When the FBI agent disconnected the call, he turned around to retrieve a bottle of water from the deck behind him only to find himself the object of a speculative gaze from incredibly clear blue eyes, and then he felt a ridiculous urge to kick himself for noticing how the golden rays of late-afternoon sunlight, sharpened by the approaching storm, turned the young man's cap of thick hair into a golden nimbus.

Fucking Kinney and his fucking boytoy. With these two around, a man had to learn how to function with a semi-permanent erection.

"What was that about?" asked Justin, with a nod toward the phone.

"Nothing to worry about."

"Shouldn't Brian be allowed to decide that?"

The FBI agent pursed his lips, deliberately swallowing an urge to tell the kid to piss off. "Maybe, but you're not Brian, are you?"

It was immediately obvious that McClaren was not the only one fighting to avoid churlishness, as the young blonde spent a full minute biting at his lip, and considering how to proceed.

"Agent McClaren, can you spare a minute?" he asked finally, obviously opting for a conciliatory attitude. "I'd like . . . no, I need to talk to you."

McClaren's smile was slightly lopsided. "I doubt that you'd have any interest in anything I have to say to you."
"But you'd be wrong, if it concerns Brian."

"Mr. Taylor, I . . ."

Justin grinned, and the FBI agent remembered hearing him called 'Sunshine' and immediately understood why. "Under the circumstances," the blond replied, "it's a little silly to stand on formalities. You should call me Justin."

"Whatever."

The smile disappeared, to be replaced by a dark brooding frown. Obviously, McClaren was not going to make this easy. "You probably have other things you'd prefer to call me, huh? The twat, the twink, the boytoy . . . the interfering little rat bastard, or . . ."

"I'm assuming," said the FBI agent, not quite suppressing an impatient sight, "that there's a point to this conversation . . . somewhere."

Justin looked out to the East, and spotted the squall that was lashing the sea to a froth of whitecaps. "He thinks you saved his life. Is he right?"

Now that - and the emotion behind it - came as a bit of a surprise, as McClaren was absolutely certain that the kid would rather have had his fingernails ripped out than have to concede such a possibility.

"He's . . . exaggerating," he finally replied, after a hesitation that was just a hair too long to be meaningless.

"He doesn't think so," Justin answered, turning once more to study the FBI agent's face and never mind that a little voice in his head was whispering that it was a face that was entirely too beautiful for his own comfort. "And Brian Kinney isn't much given to exaggerating."

"Yeah, well, he hasn't exactly been himself lately, has he?"

Something moved then in the depths of those amazing blue eyes - something dark and heavy and unwelcome, and the young man moved to sit on the edge of the deck, in the manner of a man whose legs would no longer support him. "And you'd know that, how?" he asked finally, his voice suddenly unsteady.

McClaren almost responded with typical snark, which would have been perfectly reasonable, he thought, since the kid was really pissing him off. But, in the end, he didn't; in the end he realized that the question mattered, no matter how casually it had been posed.

"What's the matter, Kid? You think no one else could possibly know him as well as you do?"

Justin chose to look down at his hands, which were tightly clasped. Too tightly for such a supposedly casual conversation. "If you had any idea how long it took me to breach the walls of Castle Kinney, to get to know the real man, inside the façade, you wouldn't say that. You'd understand . . ."

"Aha!" McClaren almost laughed. "And that means that nobody else has a clue. Right?"

"Well . . . maybe." The young man was definitely on the defensive now and not happy about it. "Why do you think you have the right to . . ."

This time, there was no almost to it. McClaren laughed, long and hard and from the gut. "Is that what
"You obviously disagree." The blonde's voice sank low, and the anger he had previously managed to almost camouflage was now flowing freely, ready to erupt and scald anyone it might splash. "So why don't you . . ."

"Calm down, Kid!"

And Justin felt it for the first time and was moderately astonished by it. This beautiful young man standing before him, gazing at him with jewel-toned eyes, out of a face that could easily belong to a cover model, atop a perfect, toned, sculpted body, was no lightweight fly-by-night trick who could be fucked today and forgotten tomorrow. This was a man to be reckoned with.

"What did you think, young Justin? That you were the only person who was ever going to solve the puzzle of Brian Kinney? And that by being the only one smart enough and perceptive enough to see the truth, that you were going to be able to keep him in reserve for yourself? That no one else was ever going to tumble to what the man behind the walls was really like, so - of course - no one was ever going to be willing to stay the course long enough to stake a claim on him?"

"Of course not," snapped Justin. "We've never believed in locking doors to keep each other in a cage."

McClaren's grin did not falter. "Bullshit! The only reason you never tried to lock him up was that you figured it wasn't necessary. He was Brian Fucking Kinney - the Stud of Liberty Avenue, and all anybody would ever want from him was a chance to get fucked by that legendary cock, or suck it off and earn a place among the pantheon of those who'd been had by the Master. Because that's all he'd ever be to them. Right? They'd never get close enough - he'd never let them get close enough - to figure out that he was anything more." He stepped forward quickly, invading Justin's space and pushing his face close enough that his breath caressed the younger man's face. "That's the real reason you never tried to lock him away. Because you thought you'd never need to. That they would always see the same shallow fucker that they've always seen, and he'd always make sure to hold them at arm's length, to make sure to preserve the illusion. Only it didn't exactly work out that way. Did it?"

Justin suddenly found that he couldn't quite swallow the huge lump in his throat. "Meaning?"

The FBI agent held his position for a moment, peering deep into those incredibly blue eyes, looking for something, uncertain of whether he wanted to find what he was seeking - or not.

Finally, he turned away and moved back to sit astride the four-wheeler, and when he answered, he was careful to avoid meeting the younger man's gaze. "You're a lucky man, young Taylor. For whatever reason, he loves you. Against his will, against all reason, he loves you, and I'm pretty damned sure he's the kind of man who only loves once, from the heart. But . . ." He did look up then, and the glint in his eyes was cold, almost brittle. "Don't make the mistake of thinking that you're going to win the battle to keep him, by default. If you fuck it up again and throw it away, you better remember that there are others who have figured him out, and know that he's worth whatever it takes to win the war."

"Others . . . like you?"

McClaren's smile was beautiful, almost breathtaking, as he started the motor of the four-wheeler and rode off toward the beach where the squall was fast approaching.
Justin sat on the edge of the deck and watched him go and felt like a man who’d been granted a reprieve, although he could not have said from what - exactly.

The blond was prettier in person than the photograph had shown, and a little smaller. Not really delicate, but no real threat either, although, unless things went really, really badly, there would be no threats at all.

The plan was perfect, but it could only be put in place under ideal conditions, and so far, those conditions had not been met, but there was no real rush. Sooner or later, the eagle-eyed FBI sentinel would slip up, an opportunity would present itself, and Kinney would be yesterday's news. Which was really something of a shame, since it could have been avoided so easily.

All the little fag had needed to do was just shut his mouth, and fail to identify the individuals who had been present on the night of his attack. He had not, after all, suffered any irreparable damage. Not really, especially since this plastic surgeon who was working on him was apparently a miracle worker.

And it had never been the intention of his attackers to actually kill him; that would have been too easy, and he would never have learned the lesson the group set out to teach.

He would never have been forced to embrace his place in the natural order of things - in the back of the closet and out of the sight of decent, upstanding human beings. Of course, he would also have been infected with HIV, according to the original plan, but hey - that was no longer the death sentence it had once been. Not since the fucking federal government and all the bleeding heart liberals had funded research to come up with all the new protease inhibitors that allowed HIV positive individuals to live relatively normal lives.

Of course, one of the idiots in the gang of hired thugs had gone a little too far in threatening Kinney's blond twink, in spite of the fact that the little boytoy was immune to the kind of beating that was administered to Kinney. While the kid's old man might have been an avid participant in planning the original attack, he would never have stood by while the same was done to his offspring. In fact, he obviously still had hopes that he could turn the kid around and teach him the error of his ways.

Although it was pretty obvious, judging by the twink's behavior with Kinney, that the man's hopes were just pipedreams.

Just one look at the boy's eyes as he stared at his fag lover would convince anybody; Justin Taylor was not a victim or a switch-hitter or a bisexual. He was a queer of the first order.

Too bad, since it appeared that he was stuck on Kinney once and for all, but maybe that might work out for the best in the end. Getting rid of Kinney might turn out to be a twofer, since the kid might very well not want to live without his prime cock.

The squall was hitting the coast now, which might ordinarily have encouraged the occupants of the house to seek out some private time, but obviously, there would be no opportunity to get Kinney alone today, not for the time required anyway. The twink was already seeking shelter in the cottage, and from the looks of things, whatever encounter the fags had enjoyed earlier had only whetted their appetites for more, as the blond had barely cleared the door before Kinney was there, intent on sticking his tongue down the kid's throat, and, although the blond was offering some token resistance
and trying to ask about a file they needed to see, Kinney was obviously focused on something entirely different.

Somewhere - on some cable show or something - there had been a comment about gay men thinking about sex every nine seconds, but apparently, for these two, that estimate was well short of the truth. Apparently, they rarely thought about anything else.

It was a shame, in a way, since - from a strictly aesthetic point of view - they were quite beautiful together.

Not, however, beautiful enough to compensate for the stench of perversion that lingered around them. Something obviously had to be done, but not until the moment was perfect, and, when that moment came, by the time they realized that something was seriously wrong, it would already be too late.

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tbc
And oh! I shall find how, day by day,  
All thoughts and things look older;  
How the laugh of pleasure grows less gay,  
And the heart of friendship colder.

Winthrop Mackworth Praed

"Teddie, you've got to do something. We can't let him get away with this."

Kinnetik's CFO felt his heart seize up in a moment of pure panic, as he recognized the voice on his cell phone. "Mel," he said softly, struggling for a calm demeanor, "I don't think this is the time or the place for us to . . ."

"Time or place? What the fuck does that mean? That fucking prick of a boss of yours just had me thrown out of your offices, and that blonde cunt just ordered me - actually ordered me - to clear out of my hotel room. Who the fuck does she think . . ."

"Mel," he said firmly, rapidly losing his patience but still hoping to placate her, "she's Brian's designated rep in all this, and . . . I'm sorry, but she does have the right to tell you to vacate the suite, since - technically - Kinnetik is footing the bill."

The silence that followed his response was crisp with a coldness he could actually feel closing in around him. "I see," she said finally. "So you're going to abandon me, and keep your mouth shut like a scared little faggot. Is that it?"

"Oh, for God's sake! They . . . they tapped my phone line. They heard everything - the entire conversation with Mr. Wylie, and what if Brian's right? What if we put Gus at risk by speaking out of turn?"

"Oh, puh-leeze!" she snapped. "Tell me you're not buying into this bullshit. We're supposed to believe that the whole homophobic world is focused now on bringing down the mighty Brian Kinney? Face it, Ted. He's always been just a tiny, insignificant little tadpole in a backwater pond, no matter that he portrays himself as a bloody great white shark. Nobody really gives a rat's ass about what he does. He's just playing this for all its worth, so he can stay front and center in the public eye and come out looking like a fucking hero. This whole thing has been one big ego-boost."

Ted sat back in his office chair, and tried - really tried - not to remember the images that had been front-page news on every tabloid and flyer published by loyal supporters of the so-called fundamentalist Christians. But, in the end, he couldn't. He had not let himself think about them overmuch, but he would never be able to forget them completely, no matter how much he might want to.

"You don't mean that, Melanie," he said finally. "I know you hate him, but not even you could believe that he deserved what they did to him."
"Right," she retorted. "And now, he's got a permanent, perpetual get-out-of-jail-free card with no expiration date. From now on, anything he does, no matter now outrageous or shameless or bullshit-classic-Kinney, is going to be automatically forgiven, because somebody happened to kick the shit out of him for once in his life."

Ted looked out through his window, noting the strange, yellowish quality of the afternoon sunlight, and wondered if a storm might be on its way, as he remembered a discussion he'd once had with Brian, when both of them had been slightly inebriated. "I don't think it happened just once in his life, Mel. He's queer, and he's been that way - pretty much without apology - his whole life. It's unlikely he came through it without suffering a few beatings along the way."

"Yeah, well, he sure as fuck didn't learn anything from them, did he?"

Ted felt something shift within his mind - something fundamental. "Are you listening to yourself, Mel? Do you hear what you're saying?"

"What I'm saying," she replied coldly, "is that now he's managed to accomplish what he's been trying to do from the very beginning. He's going to take Gus away from me, and, because Lindsey is like fucking putty in his hands, she's going to let him get away with it. Probably going to convince herself that, sooner or later, he's going to wake up and realize that she's all he ever really wanted, and they'll settle down to a life of domestic bliss." Her voice, by this point, was distorted with angry sarcasm.

Ted couldn't help it, although he knew it was a huge mistake. He laughed.

"Thanks so much for your sup . . ."

"Wait, Mel," he sputtered, managing to get himself under control. "I don't mean to be harsh or unsupportive, but if you really think Brian Kinney is ever, ever, going to be domesticated - by anybody - much less a woman, you've gone fucking nuts. That's never going to happen."

"I know that, Asshole. The fag-who-would-be-king is never going to settle down and deny himself the opportunity to screw the world, but Lindsey doesn't accept that. She's always had this pretty little romantic notion that she could change him. She could make him straight."

Ted pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. "You don't really believe that, Mel. I know that Lindsey is fond of Brian. I'll even concede that she might once - in the years of her innocence - have entertained some fantasy about him becoming her Prince Charming. But she is a Lesbian. Surely you don't really doubt that."

"Yeah? Lesbians don't fuck guys, Teddie. Guys like Sam Auerbach and Brian Kinney."

"Yeah, but . . ." Ted fell silent abruptly as he was struck by the meaning of what she'd said. "Wait a minute. You don't mean that she and . . . Brian . . ." His eyes grew huge. "No - fucking - way."

"Yes, way."

"And you know this . . . how?"

She huffed an impatient sigh. "We weren't exactly a couple of breeders, Teddie, entertaining visions of virginity in our prospective mates. We shared our life stories not long after we met, including our sexual experimentation through the years and how we discovered who and what we were. I always knew what I was, but she had to figure it out and took a few detours along the way."

"So Brian . . ."
"Yeah. Brian. How fucking lucky am I? With all the raunchy, eager-to-experiment and willing-to-fuck-anything gay boys in the world, she just had to stumble on the biggest prick of all time."

Ted sat for a moment, his mind full of images of Brian as he must have looked back then, and how teen-aged girls would have been all over him - exactly the way that teen-aged boys - and others - were still all over him today. Sometimes, it was really hard to believe in any kind of natural justice, since the individual who lived behind the mask was nowhere near as exquisite and irresistible as the one the world saw when they looked at him.

The accountant, suddenly realizing where his thoughts were leading him, sat forward abruptly and threaded his fingers together, clinching them so tightly, that his knuckles were white and bloodless.

What was happening to him? Brian had pulled him back from the abyss, almost single-handedly, so why was he having such thoughts now? How had the man earned his enmity? What had changed so much? What was different about Brian . . . or was the reverse actually true? Was it Brian who was different or . . . was it him?

"Ted?" Melanie's voice had hardened with impatience. "Hell-oo-oo! Where the hell did you . . ."

"I'm here, I'm here," he hastened to reassure her. "Look, I'm sure this will all just blow over, once things settle down a bit. The news about our big windfall should come through just any time now, and that . . . once he finds out how rich he is, and that you had a part in helping me arrange everything, I'm sure all will be forgiven. And when Lindsey realizes that her partner is a financial whiz . . . well, I'm sure that she'll regret being so hasty in her decision. Don't you think?"

Melanie was silent for a moment, and the accountant was pretty sure he had managed to convince her that she was worrying needlessly, when, in point of fact, he had only served to reinforce her firmly-held conviction that Ted looked at the world from a unique perspective. For most of the members of their social circle/extended family, money talked, on occasion; for Ted, it shouted, constantly.

"Look," she said finally, "maybe you're right. I hope you're right. But if you're not, you have to be prepared to help me through this, Teddie. I'm not going to let Brian Kinney take what belongs to me - not Gus, not Lindsey - not anything. Understand?"

He sighed. "I understand, but I really think you're worrying for nothing. Brian isn't going to do anything. Not really. He's spent his whole life bluffing his way through, getting people to back down because they're afraid to confront him. He knows that won't work with you, so just . . . relax. This will all be over soon."

Melanie was not convinced, but allowed herself to be cajoled into accepting an invitation to spend a few days in the new house that Ted and Blake had just purchased, a vintage brownstone located just a few blocks down the street from the one she and Lindsey had shared for so many years. So far during this visit, she had deliberately avoided the entire area, not wanting to be reminded of everything she and her partner had lost. All because of Brian Kinney.

And yes, before any stickler for detail could point it out to her, she did know that there had never been any proof that the bombing of Babylon had been directly connected to Brian. Not then anyway. But she was pretty sure that, if she put her mind to it, she could coax the existing facts and theories into a logical progression which might, eventually, be traced right back to his doorstep, and to his profligate lifestyle and his refusal to exercise even the most basic discretion in his conduct. It could not, she was sure, be a coincidence that it was his nightclub where the original atrocity had occurred, and now it was the man himself who had provided motivation for another attack by homophobic gay-bashers who were constantly in the market for new targets. Kinney could have served as the
prototype - the poster boy for their campaign.

And thus, it was Brian - and only Brian - who should shoulder the blame for any danger that accrued to Gus; Brian alone who would be to blame for any harm to which the child might come. She would make sure that Lindsey knew that when the time was right. When her partner was ready to see . . .

For a flicker of time - there and gone too fast to register - she felt her blood run cold. Lindsey couldn't really be considering . . . that. Could she?

She paused and shook her head, unwilling to pursue that thought to its natural conclusion.

It was all nonsense anyway. Gus would be fine. Justin would be fine. And above all, always and forever, Brian Fucking Kinney would be fine - invincible, indefatigable, untouchable.

Shit!

Justin was restless, filled with a vague, nameless anxiety that he could neither control nor explain.

Had anyone asked him to define it, he would have dismissed any concerns with a laugh and a shrug, and an admission that he was just going through the symptoms of not enough time to catch up for all the long months he had spent away from his lover. They had not yet even come to grips with what had almost happened during their separation - that would require many months, maybe even years, to accomplish - and their lovemaking had, after all, been restricted since his return - restricted by the presence of too many people, too many witnesses, too many interested parties. And although they had managed to fuck their way through most of the night and indulge mutual blow jobs at odd moments during the day, it wasn't enough. Not nearly enough to make up for all the time they had wasted.

How stupid had they been?

He took another look into the cottage's front room, where the physical therapist was putting Brian through another work-out session, ignoring his repeated complaints about the pillow under his head and concentrating this time on knees and thighs. Justin frowned when he noticed that there were beads of sweat on his lover's forehead, and that a grimace of pain was distorting that perfect, extremely kissable mouth. Knowing that one of the primary tenets of the Brian Kinney Operating Manual required a stoic acceptance of pain and a determined effort to refuse to acknowledge it, he deliberately turned away, allowing Brian some semblance of privacy and dignity.

He allowed himself a quick, rueful smile, even as he realized that Brian would not be pleased if he spotted it. Still it was unavoidable. Even after all this time, after everything they had endured together, Brian was still perfectly capable of rebuilding the walls that had been his first line of defense throughout his life. They didn't function very well, of course; not with Justin, who was intimately acquainted with every unguarded point of entry, but sometimes, just the illusion was a comfort, and he saw no reason to point out the futility of the effort.

Whatever worked.

Still, it meant that he needed to find a bit of diversion, to be able to leave Brian to endure the torturous treatment that was part of the process for rebuilding that perfect body.

All of which he knew perfectly well, and none of which served to put his mind at ease. Justin was pensive. He had learned a long time ago to read Brian; to detect the subtleties that anyone else would never have seen at all, much less attempted to decipher.
Something was definitely bothering his lover, and - since Brian was never one to sweat the small stuff - it had to be something pretty big.

Justin didn't want to admit that he was scared, but . . .

He was scared. How much more, after all, could they survive? Would there come a point in time where it was all just too much, just not worth the effort?

He rambled into the kitchen, his eyes dark and unfocused as he remembered shared moments - old and new: first times, best times . . . even a few "only" times. His first Pride and Brian coming after him when he'd chosen to leave Babylon, and leading him into the street to dance the night away; the first drawing he'd done of the man who would come to be the focus of his life, and how he must have known it even then because it showed up in the drawing; the celebration after Stockwell's defeat when he had seen eternity in the dark eyes that smiled down on him; Brian sick and almost broken and enduring through the strength of his will and the love that sustained him, even when he could not speak of it. They had endured so much, survived so much . . . and squandered so much time that they should have shared.

He knew another moment of acrid anger as he thought about all the people who had interfered, who had done everything possible to push roadblocks up to separate them and to convince them that other things were more important than their lives together. Sometimes, he still wondered if he would ever be able to forgive them completely - Lindsey and Michael and Mel and, yes, even Debbie and his own mother.

But he stumbled slightly then as he experienced another of those nasty little epiphanies which seemed to come upon him so suddenly of late.

Dozens of voices had been raised in the attempt to convince him to go, to fly, to seek his reward and his fame in the rarefied atmosphere of the art mecca of the world . . . but he, alone, had chosen to listen.

It was time now to stop listening to other voices, and hear what was in his heart - and in Brian's. They had already lost too much; surely nothing more would be required of them.

Would it? Or . . . was it possible that there could be something out there, lying in wait to ambush them, something they could neither foresee nor, when all was said and done, endure?

He sighed.

Over my fucking dead body. And his too, I'm thinking.

Still, there was something in Brian's eyes - something that he was trying to hide, to bury, something from which he wanted to protect his young lover. Justin knew that, and knew something else as well. He could not allow Brian to shoulder this burden, to keep it to himself in the hope that Justin would be spared whatever pain it might cause. There had already been too much of that between them.

If they were going to find a way to walk together, to live together, to truly and finally be together, then there could be no room for deception - for secrets.

Trina was in the kitchen, up to her ears in mocha frosting and praline sauce, assembling a dessert she'd just finished concocting. "Ahhh, just what I need," she greeted him with a beaming smile, broad enough to reveal the glint of the gold cap on a lower incisor. "A guinea pig."

Justin grinned. "We should take you back to Pittsburgh and introduce you to our friend, Emmett. You two could spend a lifetime out-Childing Julia."
"Is he looking for a wife?" she asked, gathering a spoonful of her confection to offer as a sample.

Justin burst out laughing. "Not hardly."

"Oh," she half-grunted. "He's like you then."

Justin felt as if an Arctic chill had just touched him. "If you mean that he likes to get butt-fucked, then, yeah. He's like me."

"Justin, I . . ."

"Don't bother," he retorted, squaring his shoulders and preparing to march away in typical Justin-Taylor high dudgeon, which was - almost - as high and extreme as a similar gesture would be from Emmett Honeycutt. "I get it. Although I can't imagine what you're doing here, working for the likes of us."

"Hold it!" she snapped, setting her spoon aside and wiping large, long-fingered hands on her apron.

"Jesus! You're a touchy little shit, aren't you? So what are the unwritten rules here? Am I not supposed to mention anything, ask anything, or comment on the fact that you and Casanova in there are obviously gay? Or when you mention your friend, and make it plain that he bats for the same team, am I not supposed to understand what you're saying, or respond to it? Look, young Mr. Taylor, as I confessed to your sugar daddy in there, I don't really understand your choices or your lifestyle, and yes, I have to admit that it seems a terrible waste to me. You're both so bloody beautiful, and all I can think of is all the sweet young women who would sell their souls for a chance to - how should I put it? - save you from yourselves."

She leaned forward then and gripped his chin firmly. "But as for how it makes me feel about you - as people - I couldn't care less. You're a sweet child, and I've been around long enough to recognize what I see in his eyes when he looks at you. You should consider yourself blessed, Honey - the both of you. Do you know how many people live their whole lives and never once find what you two have together? So I'm thinking you might want to take that chip off your shoulder. I know that you boys must live through hell sometimes, just to be able to be who you are, that there are people who would gladly lock you up in prison and deny you the right to love each other - or to breathe, for that matter - people who might even resort to burning a cross in front of your house - something that I do know about, having lived in the South my whole life, and having a very long memory. You know, if you look at things from a different point of view, it might occur to you that you are just about as white as it's possible for a human being to be - blond and blue-eyed and ivory-skinned. To be whiter, you'd have to be an albino. So white, in fact, that, if I were inclined to dwell too much in the realm of remembered horrors, I might expect to find you decked out in a KKK hood and cape and organizing a lynch mob. And yet, miracle of miracles, here we sit, having a civilized conversation. I'm black, Justin, but I'm not blind. And I'm straight, but the same logic applies. Yes, there are homophobic assholes out there who hate everything you are. But not all straight people are like that. Me, for one, and if you put your little pea brain to the task, I bet you can come up with a list of others who aren't either. So maybe you need to rethink your definition of prejudice. Looks to me like - between the two of us - you're the one who's behaving like a bigoted little prick."

Justin blinked hard, and then flushed scarlet to the roots of his hair. "I'm . . ."

"Yeah, well, you should be," she retorted. "But sorry doesn't change the fact that you behaved like a little shit, does it?"

In spite of himself, he laughed. "Are you sure you're not related to Brian Kinney? That you didn't maybe have a love child that you dropped off in the Pittsburgh area about thirty-five years ago?"
"You calling me old, Sprout?" The tone was gruff, but there was a quick twinkle in near-black eyes.

"Not at all," he answered. "Just well seasoned."

Then it was her turn to laugh. "The soul of diplomacy, aren't you? More than your boyfriend, for sure, who never bothered to learn when to bite his tongue."

"Yes, Ma'am."

But she wasn't quite done - yet - and fixed him with a steady gaze while she considered how to proceed. "It's hard sometimes," she said softly, "to believe that the good people in the world outnumber the bad - especially when you've confronted the kind of horror that your young man had to endure. That kind of thing makes it easy to convince yourself that you're hopelessly outnumbered - that most people don't give a shit about right or wrong or figuring out the difference. But that would be a big mistake, Justin. Mostly, when people don't stand up for someone else, it's about a lack of understanding, or a failure to empathize. And before you can point it out, I know that there are plenty of so-called Christians - ultra religious types - who condemn you and your relationship with Brian, but there are plenty of others who are able to look past the fact of your sexual identity and find the person inside, and those people are not going to give a shit whether or not you get 'butt-fucked', to use your charming terminology. All they're going to care about is whether you speak the truth, stand up for what you believe, and live up to the image of the man you profess to be. Gay or straight; black or white; male or female; Christian, Jew, Hindu or Rastaffarian - it doesn't matter. The decent, loving, generous people of the world know the truth. We are all brothers under the skin, dear Justin."

"And the others? The ones who think differently?"

"Sub-human and inbred. Fuck 'em all."

Justin smiled - not the mega-watt, blinding smile that had earned him his nickname, but a gentler expression - almost wistful. "Maybe you should give that little speech to my partner," he observed.

But Trina laughed. "You're thinking he doesn't know? Trust me, my friend. That young'un reads people as easily as first graders read Dick and Jane. He knows."

Justin looked off toward the sea, where late afternoon sun was glinting on a rising tide, and could not quite resist hearing the words echoing in his mind. There are only two kinds of straight people: the ones who hate you to your face and the ones who hate you behind your back.

Thus had spoken Brian Kinney, admittedly, unapologetically, shamelessly heterophobic.

"Maybe you're right," he said softly, "but knowing isn't always believing, is it? And he's lived through a lot of shit - enough to make him doubt."

"Maybe," she conceded. "Sometimes, memory gets in the way of understanding. But deep down, he knows. Ask him, if you don't believe me." Then she smiled. "And don't let him get away with giving a bullshit answer - a natural talent that he has elevated to an artform, unless I'm mistaken. The truth isn't always easy to confront, but it's always necessary, if you're ever to get beyond it and go on to the next phase of your life."

Justin was abruptly reminded of Ben Bruckner, and his unfailingly gentle philosophy in the way he looked at life.

"You know," he laughed, "you really, really need to go back to the Pitts with us. You can't believe how perfectly you'd fit in with our crazy, extended family."
"Hmph. Let me guess. Another fag friend who could be my soulmate. You s'pose I was Liberace in a past life or something?"

He felt a residual surge of resentment as she deliberately tossed out the word 'fag', but then he spotted the gleam in her eyes and realized exactly what she was doing. She used the word in the same way that Brian used it - as an in-your-face defiance of the conventional behavior he was obviously expecting from her.

"Now," she said firmly, "I still need a test subject. You willing, or not?"

He leaned forward and inhaled the rich, intoxicating fragrance of mocha. "Brian is never going to forgive you. He loves mocha, and . . ." He paused then, and she noticed a wicked twinkle rising from the depths of his eyes. "Say, I don't suppose you could spare a bowl of that? For . . . tasting purposes."

"Hmph! Tasting purposes, my ass!" she muttered. But he noticed that she carefully spooned a generous serving of the dark cream into a plastic storage container.

It would probably not be a lovely evening; he had a bad feeling about what was yet to come.

But at least, he could be sure that it would end well - with sex and chocolate. Who could ask for anything more?

He would later remember having that thought and wonder if he could possibly have been any more foolish.

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The beach property was now known as Bailey's Landing, as indicated by a discreet placard affixed to the front gate - an appropriate enough name for a seaside retreat, but reflecting nothing of the little compound's history. Though now well equipped for seasonal, vacation rental, with its primary dwelling, a couple of outbuildings, and a narrow greenhouse attached to a small barn, the house had begun its life as the home of a commercial fisherman and his family, part of a small community of such dwellings - a half dozen or so of similar size and design strewn along a two-mile stretch of the shore - housing a hard-working, roughhewn group of the kind of men who were frequently referred to as 'salt of the earth' by neighbors and acquaintances. The men all depended on the sea for their livelihoods, and the women - having never once heard of terms like 'feminism' or 'women's lib' - spent their lives raising children, mastering the art of southern cooking, and pursuing the kinds of hobbies that were deemed suitable for such matrons - sewing, quilting, knitting, playing piano, reading romance novels, and gardening. The area was especially focused, for some reason, on the cultivation of flowering vines - an interest demonstrated quite well by the plethora of varieties of clematis and American wisteria and Carolina jasmine that formed an explosion of brilliant color and fragrance within the cottage's greenhouse.

Built in the early 30's, the house had been the residence of Lyle Bailey, and his wife, Mary Louise, and their one son and two daughters. In the manner of generational progressions, especially in the American South, it had been passed on after the death of the family patriarch to Lyle, Jr., who had taken a bride of his own shortly thereafter. Junior, who had spent his whole life insisting - vainly - that he should not be called that, proved to be an excellent fisherman and a good provider for his family. Thus he was considered a good, solid man, although slightly stolid and straight-laced, by most of the people of the community. However, in the matter of his wife, the opinions of the locals were a bit more reserved. Lillian Bailey, nee Aucoin, had hailed from the Mississippi Delta where Junior had met her on a vacation trip to Biloxi. Black-eyed and olive-skinned, and speaking with a lovely sing-song accent of Creole origin, Lillian was the definitive square peg, confronted by an
endless conformation of round holes. On being brought back to the family compound, a brand new bride at age seventeen and separated from her extended family for the first time, she was confronted with an almost impossible task, and spent the next two decades trying to find a place for herself among the rigidly-structured society of a rural southern community, which was still deep in the grip of socially-sanctioned racism. While Junior was a highly respected resident of the little village, and no one ever quite dared to voice their suspicions aloud or in his face, the simple truth was that most of the population of the area believed that Lillian was 'impure', which was, of course, local jargon for a much uglier term: half-breed. Though the passage of time eventually led to a grudging acceptance of her place in the social hierarchy, Lillian was never completely comfortable with her counterparts, and spent most of her life with almost no close companions beyond her family.

Although possessed of a warm and generous nature, she had lived a mostly lonely life, and she had died young, succumbing to complications of pneumonia when she proved allergic to the antibiotics that could have saved her. She had borne only two children to Junior - both girls and both small replicas of their mother. Neither ever fit in particularly well in the community, being more the children of their mother than their father, and both harbored remembered resentments on Lillian's behalf. Thus, when Junior died, less than two years after burying his wife, the girls, adolescent at the time, chose to travel back to Mississippi to live with their mother's family, and neither ever returned to their childhood home. This proved to be the harbinger of a pattern of desertion by the younger generation of the area, and the little settlement gradually deteriorated, as interest in commercial fishing lagged to be replaced by ambitions in more upscale and profitable professions. It was not until much later that the American fascination with beachfront property developed to its full potential, and by then, most of the houses which had comprised the little community had fallen to ruin, beyond any hope of recovery.

The Bailey cottage had been the only exception, and it was not just a result of circumstance.

The oil painting that hung above the fireplace in the front parlor had fascinated Justin from the moment he saw it. The artist, though not particularly inspired in either composition or execution, had managed to capture a certain element of whimsy in the faces of some of the subjects of the portrait - in the mischievous smiles of two little girls with curly dark hair clad in identical white pinafores, and in the look of amusement on the delicate face of the young woman seated so primly and properly beside the upright, stalwart individual standing beside her - upright in the moral sense, although not so much in the vertical sense. Unless the artist's sense of perspective was virtually non-existent, the man appeared to be considerably shorter than the grandfather clock before which he was standing. That, added to a singular expression on the man's plump florid face that could only be described as smug and supercilious, created a rather unfortunate impression on anyone studying the portrait for clues to the personalities of its subjects. The woman was exquisitely pretty, very bright, and capable of deep, infectious bursts of laughter, and the girls were completely charming. The man was a pompous ass.

Or so said the portrait, but Justin was quick to concede that it might be nothing more than the fact that the artist had disliked the man intensely. It reminded him of a watercolor rendering he had done of one Michael Novotny, during one of the many stages of their acquaintance when Michael was doing everything he could to drive Justin out of Brian's life. It had not been a flattering portrait.

Still looking for something to occupy his time while Brian was unavailable to him - in a physical sense - he paused in the doorway of the small, shadowy room, the painting once more catching his eye. It was only after a couple of minutes spent contemplating the colorful artwork that he realized he
was not alone in the parlor.

The caretaker/groundskeeper/gardener/jack-of-all-trades who looked after the cottage and the surrounding area was an elderly man who managed, somehow, to fade into whatever background he happened to occupy, who rarely spoke and never intruded on anything that might be happening in or around the house. Yet, he was always there when something required his attention - a repair or an adjustment to an appliance or a reworking of something in the landscaping - whatever.

Brian had even mentioned something about it, noting that it was almost uncanny how he seemed to know when he was needed, even when nobody bothered to give him a call, and since Brian rarely commented on anything not worth noticing, Justin had been mildly intrigued.

The bottom line, it seemed, was that nobody really knew him, except for the FBI team, of course, who had vetted him prior to allowing him access to the house or its occupants. Due to his reticence, he was something of a mystery, and Justin had never been able to resist an urge to poke and prod and investigate, in order to solve whatever mystery might come to his attention.

"Hi," said the young man brightly, moving into the room where the man was re-attaching a loose porcelain tile in the facing around the fireplace. "I'm Justin Taylor. I just arrived yesterday."

The man was tall and thin to the point of gauntness, but, despite the obvious age betrayed by a mop of snow-white hair and a face deeply-lined with wrinkles, still in excellent physical condition. He moved easily and rose to his feet quickly, reaching out to accept the hand that Justin was offering, even though something in his eyes - large and night-dark and deep-set in a mahogany-colored face - said that he would have preferred to be left in peace.

Although he shook Justin's hand firmly, he said nothing.

But Justin - a product of perfect WASP country club upbringing - was not even close to conceding defeat. With impeccable manners, he smiled and said, "And you are?"


Justin grinned, his mind instantly calling up visions of a series of handsome faces and sophisticated voices offering a similarly phrased introduction. "Bond. James Bond."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Redding. So are you the reason this place is in such great shape? I mean, it's almost pristine. Sure doesn't look like a remnant from . . . what? The forties?"

"Thirties, actually. But it's only been empty since the seventies. And yes, I've kept it in order through the years. As a favor to the owners."

Justin moved forward until he was standing directly under the portrait, noting as he approached that the woman's tiny smile was even more intriguing - maybe even slightly sardonic - as he drew nearer. "These owners?" he asked.

He turned quickly when he saw that Redding was very deliberately avoiding looking up at the painting. "They were the last to live here," confirmed the handyman.

"Until they moved away?" Justin sensed that there was more - much more - to this story than the man was willing to disclose.

"Died," replied Redding. "Her first. Then him, a couple of years later."
"And they were what? The last of their line?"

The man shook his head, lifting one hand to gesture toward the painting, but still not looking at it. "Those are their daughters, but they were way too young to stay here alone. Rest of the family had gone north many years before, and the girls decided to go back to their mama's people in Mississippi. So they left."

"And what? The estate paid for you to take care of the place?"

"Something like that."

Justin barely avoided an exasperated sigh, thinking that it would be easier to extract green cheese from a moon rock than information from the old caretaker.

So he decided on a change of tactic and lifted his eyes to resume his study of the portrait.

"She was really beautiful, wasn't she?" he asked after a while, as Redding returned to his tile repair task.

The old man said nothing, and Justin glanced down to watch as long-fingered hands worked to replace the hand-painted tile in perfect alignment with its neighbors. Only the first attempt to do so - immediately following Justin's casual observation - was not quite successful as that hand was suddenly not completely steady. It took a second try to get it right, and Justin knew, somehow, through sheer instinct, that this was not a man who trembled easily or often.

"What was her name?" he asked casually, although he was pretty sure he already knew the answer. He had read the brief history of the cottage that was part of the rental data package. But he was more interested in how the caretaker would respond - manner, tone, and comportment - than in the information he would convey.

The tile was now firmly and perfectly aligned, and the fingers holding it were perfectly still. "Lillian. Her name was Lillian."

"Lillian," Justin echoed thoughtfully. "She wasn't from around here, was she?"

Simon Redding was suddenly upright - almost rigidly upright - and regarding this nosy new interloper with barely-contained disdain. "Meaning?"

But Justin was not the type to be intimidated; not even Brian Kinney had quite been able to pull that off, so an elderly southern repairman had little hope of succeeding where the mighty Kinney had failed. "You said she was from Mississippi," Justin pointed out with a shrug, carefully avoiding any nuance of annoyance.

Redding seemed to consider the response for a moment, examining it for hidden meaning, before deciding to accept it at face value. "So I did," he confirmed. Then he bent to retrieve the tools he'd been using and tuck them into a small metal box on a nearby table.

"You've really done an excellent job here," said Justin, allowing his eyes to sweep around the room, taking note of its perfect state of preservation. Even the hardwood floors were pristine, showing no signs of wear - an astonishing accomplishment in a seaside environment where sand was as insidious and persistent as humidity.

"Thank you." Clipped, polite enough, but not encouraging anything further.

"So, what's next on the agenda?"
The elderly man blinked slowly. "Agenda?"

Justin indulged the man with a fleeting version of his sunshine smile. "You didn't drive over here just to reglue a loose tile, did you?"

Redding suppressed a sigh. "I need to replace a fascia board on the deck, and tend the plants in the greenhouse," he said, not quite able to conceal a reluctance to provide any additional information.

Justin moved to the room's entry so that he could look down the hall to check on the progress of Brian's session, and saw that the patient - despite all his perpetual complaints about the pillow provided by his therapist - now appeared to be dozing comfortably with his face cradled against the offensive cushion, as Jackson administered a massage, undoubtedly intended to soothe the savage beast after his painful and strenuous workout.

"You mind some company?" asked the blond, turning back to watch as Redding latched his toolbox. "I haven't had a chance to check out the greenhouse yet."

The elderly man paused as he neared the doorway, and took a minute to study Justin's face. "You don't look like a man who'd have an interest in gardening."

Justin grinned. "Guilty as charged. I wouldn't know a rutabaga from a rhododendron. But I'm an artist, so I do know about color and textures and natural beauty. And Brian mentioned it. He called it 'a sanctuary, for when the world gets to be too much.' Sounds like a place I need to see."

Again, the old man blinked. "Brian . . . Kinney said that?"

The grin became a chuckle. "You don't know him very well yet. Do you?"

Redding moved toward the front door. "Not my place to know him. He's the tenant. I'm the handyman."

"Yeah? According to whom?"

The caretaker shrugged. "That's the way it is - the way it's always been."

But, again, there was something, something buried in the tone of the man's voice that hinted of different memories, from other days.

Justin was suddenly even more determined to see the greenhouse.

And it did not disappoint.

He had, of course, visited greenhouses before. At one point during his childhood, having a greenhouse had become all the rage among the country club set in the Bethel Park community where he'd lived with his parents. As a status symbol, it had endured for about a decade before being supplanted by a new craze for Japanese water gardens. He didn't know which fad had come along next, as he'd been long gone and completely banished from his father's social circle by that time.

Nevertheless, he remembered the greenhouses he'd visited as extremely neat, rigidly controlled, and almost symmetrical in the arrangement of the plants housed within. The specimens had been splendid, of course, and perfect; no hint of natural excess or variation allowed. He particularly remembered a group of tree roses grown in huge, copper-colored containers within the glass enclosure built by the Huntleighs, who'd lived across the street from his house. Mrs. Huntleigh had been livid when the blooms on one branch of one of the trees had turned out to be a deep, black-tinged crimson rather than the scarlet and white picotee of the rest of the blossoms. She had resolved
the problem by attacking the offending flora with a hatchet, and Justin had always thought - to himself, of course - that it was rather a shame since the contrast between the deep, jeweled hue and the surrounding brilliance was uniquely pleasing. When he thought about that event now, it rather surprised him to realize that he'd already possessed the eye of an artist, even way back then.

But the order and neatness of those remembered indoor gardens had not prepared him for what he found in this greenhouse.

There was no order, no neatness - not even any logic that he could discern. There was only flora at its most vivid, most boisterous, most naturally exuberant, and he recalled the look on Brian's face when he'd mentioned it. Once more, the Stud of Liberty Avenue had proved himself a master of understatement.

The small structure was bursting with color and scent and . . . life. There was no other word that was sufficient to describe it.

Underfoot, paths of pebbles provided space to walk, but not much. Plants were everywhere, encroaching on everything, masses of ferns and begonias drooping from above, variegated foliage vining across paths, climbing walls and supports and hanging pendulously overhead. Most of the varieties he could not have named, although a few did register as familiar. The roses, of course, although they did not bear any resemblance to the elegant, perfectly cultured specimens common to Pittsburgh formal gardens as there was nothing even remotely formal about them in this setting. Here they sprawled and tumbled, erupted in columns and climbed lattices and poles and anything else they fancied. In addition, he was pretty sure he recognized jasmine, mostly because his mother had always loved the fragrance and tried - without much success - to grow it as a houseplant during the days of his youth. Clematis, of course; he had seen pictures, but never been close to the real thing, and incredibly huge hibiscus, in a fabulous array of rainbow colors, almost as spectacular as the ones he'd seen during his brief island visit in the South Pacific - mostly observed in the drives from and to the airport..

And lilies. Everywhere. Strong and overpowering, attracting the beams of the fading afternoon sunlight, like a prima ballerina might draw the brilliance of a main spotlight - deep scarlet and burnt orange with sprays of black dots, blazing yellow and blush pink and creamy ivory, all trumpet-shaped and displayed at varying angles, some drooping as if to pour out their magic elixir on the smaller blooms below and others lifting their faces to the light, obviously basking in the radiance. There were even a few varying shades of blue and purple, with deeper colored cores. And, most striking of all, were the ones with star-shaped throats of deep, vivid rose, shading to magenta, peppered with ruby-colored sprinkles and contrasting perfectly against the sweet cream of the petals' base color.

"What are these?" Justin asked, his soft voice reflecting a sense of near awe over such perfect beauty. "They're exquisite."

"Indeed they are," replied the gardener. "They're called Stargazer lilies. They were . . . her favorites. She planted all of these."

Justin's eyes widened. "Thirty years ago? You mean to tell me these have survived for all these years?"

Redding was careful to avoid Justin's gaze, but the younger man was almost certain that the gardener's skin would have been blushing bright red if the dark pigment hadn't served to disguise it. "No. Not the originals, of course. These are the descendants of the ones she planted here."

Justin stepped forward and touched one of the blossoms - perfect and beautiful and fragrant - with a
gentle finger, offered the older man a tender smile. "So they're like her children then."

The old man, who had set about snipping off remnants of lacy white wisteria blossoms, hesitated, and Justin was pretty sure he was not imagining that the man was holding his breath.

"Yes," he said finally, very softly. "They're like her children."

Justin avoided turning to stare at the man, contenting himself with indirect observation through peripheral vision, but it was enough. Everything in Redding's posture and demeanor spoke volumes - entire libraries - about what motivated him, what drove him, what had kept him devoted to perpetuating this cottage, this compound, this garden, for almost thirty years.

Justin spun in a slow circle, trying to take everything in at once, noting a cozy corner which held a faded old chaise and a wicker table, situated beside a tiny copper fountain and partially obscured by the painfully bright cascades of a fiery bougainvillea vine.

"It's beautiful. I see what he meant - about the sanctuary, I mean."

The caretaker continued with his work, his breathing soft and even. "He didn't seem the type to notice," he said finally.

Justin grinned. "You're right. He's not. He knows zilch about horticulture or gardening, and cares even less. But . . ."

"But?" Justin felt a thrill of satisfaction as he noted the reluctant interest expressed in the single syllable.

"He knows about beauty. In fact, I doubt anybody - anywhere - knows it better."

The older man turned slowly and regarded the young blond with dark, speculative eyes, as Justin continued to turn to take in the full effect of his surroundings. "Maybe," said Redding finally, still relatively non-committal. "What are you . . . to him?" he continued, sounding as if he didn't really want to ask but couldn't quite resist the impulse.

Justin smiled, and his eyes went velvet soft. "The same thing that she was . . . to you."

The old man stiffened, and Justin was sure he was about to deny it, maybe even to march out of the greenhouse in a huff, muttering about impertinent Yankees or mouthy little fags. And it was undoubtedly a temptation, as the caretaker's breathing had gone shallow and rough. But in the end, Justin was proved wrong.

"He . . . good to you?" he asked finally, very softly.

"More than good," Justin replied, deciding that all the extraneous details of what had kept them apart and miserable for so long were immaterial to the question. "He's my life."

The old man turned then and looked straight into Justin's eyes - just once and just for a second - but Justin was struck by an almost irresistible need to run for his brushes and a canvas, to capture that quick look that expressed so much, told so much - the very definition of a beautiful, tragic, endless love story.

But it would apparently have to be done from memory as Redding turned away quickly, and busied himself with moving deeper into the greenhouse to begin cutting away faded blooms from the bougainvillea.
Justin stepped closer, lifting a hand to touch a velvety blossom. "I've never seen anything quite like this before," he remarked.

"Hmph!" Redding continued with his pruning. "Not something that you're likely to find in Pittsburgh."

The young blonde nodded. "Guess you're right. Tropical vines wouldn't particularly like Pennsylvania winters."

The caretaker made a strange, breathy little sound before offering two clipped words. "What does?"

It was Justin's turn to blink. He couldn't be sure, of course, but he thought that, just maybe, the elderly man had actually favored him with a tiny little laugh. "Have you been there?"

"Once or twice," came the gruff response, but then the voice softened, and there it was again - that hint of barely concealed amusement. "When I couldn't figure out an excuse not to go."

Justin's smile was indulgent. "Who made you go?"

The old man shrugged. "Got kin there. An aunt, cousins - plenty of 'em."

"Yeah? Where?" asked Justin as he seated himself on the battered old chaise and listened to the almost musical murmur of the little copper fountain. "I know the city pretty well, so maybe . . ."

The caretaker paused for just a moment, and turned to fix Justin with a dark, unreadable look. "Reilly Flats," he said softly. Then he turned back to his task, assuming - and rightly so - that Justin would not have any casual comments to offer to that response.

Justin fell silent. He knew of Reilly Flats, of course. Everybody in the Pitts knew of Reilly Flats, but nobody, as far as he knew, went there voluntarily. Not any more. He looked up then, following the flight of a tern as it winged its way out toward the ocean, and he studied the striation of the jewel-tones of the water rolling up on the white sand beach, as the sharply angled rays of the sun, emanating from its spot low on the western horizon, limned the sails of a distant schooner with bands of vermilion and fiery topaz. He shifted then, and allowed his gaze to drift off to the south where a mist was rising against the base of the headland, and a strange trick of the light called up another image, as he experienced a sense of déjà vu - a vision of Brian, leather-jacketed and jean-clad, walking away into fog-thickened darkness with a similarly-clad stranger, an anonymous, but blazing hot trick of the moment. Even there, in that dirty alley obscured by the fumes of the city, he had been so beautiful and so filled with defiance. So unafraid. So Brian. Justin closed his eyes, remembering the fear that had assaulted him at that moment, in the aftermath of the discovery of the body of the young boy in the dumpster behind the Diner, remembering his certainty that Brian was not nearly as invulnerable as he pretended. He shook himself, pushing the memory away as he realized that time had proven him right. Despite the warmth of the greenhouse, he shivered in the knowledge that Brian was not immune to the cruelties of random chance and focused malice. Justin had always suspected as much, and now he knew for sure. But had Brian learned that lesson, and, even if he had, would he be able to accept it?

Justin suddenly found it hard to breathe and was stricken with a fundamental need to embrace a different life - a safer life - such as the one the old caretaker had lived, here, in this place of vivid color and wonder, only without the crippling solitude. With Brian beside him - beauty within beauty, perfection framed by a perfect setting - they could build a future that would exclude all the ugliness, all the fears, all the vile hate-mongers bent on the destruction of those they could not coerce into conformity.
And yet he knew that everything in Brian's character would drive him to return to Pittsburgh when he was able, to refuse to be vanquished by the cretins who had tried to destroy him, to stand up and fight to reclaim his supremacy, his place in the sun.

Only - maybe - there were logical reasons to rethink that conclusion, to redefine those goals.

To seek out justifications to remain in a place where beauty and serenity and brilliant color provided a perfect setting for a different kind of living, a place where stargazer lilies could grow and flourish and survive for generations.

If only Brian could be convinced to re-examine his priorities, refocus his visions.

Justin sighed and closed his eyes and let himself daydream.

Twenty minutes later, Brian found him there, dozing among the flowers - as fresh and beautiful as the blossoms glowing around him - and decided that the confrontation toward which this day had been building since its dawning could be put off just a little bit longer. He worked his way onto the battered old chaise, easing into position so he could take his young lover into his arms, without rousing Justin from his well-deserved sleep, and they settled in, their bodies fitting together perfectly.

And in the shadows, Simon Redding continued his tasks, taking great pains to remain quiet as he worked - and watched.

It was raining again, spates of hard drops driven against the bay window behind the desk with almost rhythmic regularity as occasional harsh flashes of lightening seemed to draw the eye toward the lighthouse on its promontory - stark and white and generating its beacon of hope, braving the elements with disdain while the sea thundered and raged around it, beating relentlessly at its foundations. Yet still it stood, apparently unbothered, oblivious.

Justin was sure there was a metaphor in there somewhere, something profound and inspiring. Only, if he were to express such a notion, he could only imagine the derisive sneer that would form on Brian's face. So he kept the thought to himself, but he did not discard it completely, for two reasons. First of all, he was not Brian; he had his own interests, his own opinions, his own strengths and weaknesses, and he knew perfectly well that Brian would be the last person on earth to want his lover to become his clone. Brian preferred diversity in all things. And secondly, although the man claimed to have little patience for what he called 'linguistic pretensions', despite a secret fondness for certain poets, he had a heightened awareness - almost a sixth sense - for the perfect word at the perfect time, along with a remarkable talent for precision. Brian did not speak in metaphors; he dealt more in unembellished facts. And yet, when he chose to do so, he could paint a portrait in words that could capture the imaginations of those to whom he chose to speak. It was what made him a prodigiously talented ad man.

But that was obviously not what he was doing at this moment, as he sat behind the desk and alternated his attention between the documents in the bulging file laid out before him and the images on the computer screen to his right.

Alexandra Corey had been true to her word. Everything that the FBI and the task force had discovered was there in the files; everything that was proven fact, backed up by forensic evidence and/or eyewitness testimony, was included in the huge stack of documents in the manila folder - arrest reports, CSI summaries, witness statements, photos of the crime scene, and the records of the individuals who had been apprehended and incarcerated, plus the information garnered during the investigation, including the recovery of Brian's watch and the interviews and subsequent arrests of
the young thugs who had pawned it. The computer file provided the same data, but it also included much more detailed evidence and covered other areas of investigation, including speculation, suppositions, theories - clues that were still being checked out and persons of interest who had yet to be completely identified or vetted. The volume of information was massive, and Brian had been studying it for some time, sharing occasional bits of data with Justin, but mostly just reading and smoking and - occasionally - pausing to look out through the window, apparently lost in thought.

In an overstuffed easy chair in a corner, Chris McClaren sat quietly, sipping at a glass of Beam and reading an article in a battered copy of *Rolling Stone*, or pretending to, at least.

Brian had specifically asked Justin to be present to help him examine the data in the files, but, so far, they had not actually discussed much of the material. He had, however, allowed Justin to sift through the documents, and share certain observations. McClaren had provided clarification for a couple of points, when asked, but mostly, he'd remained silent. Waiting.

Justin had glanced toward the FBI agent several times, sensing . . . something. He wasn't entirely sure what was happening here, but he was pretty sure that it would prove to be something he wasn't going to like. The occasional flare of dark shadows in Brian's eyes had already alerted him to that, even without McClaren's semi-pensiveness.

Plus there was the fact that, although he'd been granted complete access to all the documents in the file, he had not been allowed to peruse the data contained in the USB flash drive that Corey had left for Brian's use.

Brian paused to light a new cigarette from the butt of an old one. Another indication of his state of mind. Although never sparing in his use of tobacco, he was not ordinarily a chain smoker, but this night was apparently an exception. He leaned forward then, and closed the computer file.

"Hey!" said Justin. "I wanted to . . ."

"Justin," said Brian softly, his voice low-pitched and almost without inflection. "What do you know about a place called The Club?"

Justin sat back in his easy chair, slightly confused. "Why?"

"Do you know it?"

"Mostly by reputation," Justin replied with a little shrug. "I think it used to be the #1 Gentlemen's Club in town for the Ivy League set. Even my grandfather Taylor was a member there. He always raved about it, said the cooks there would have put the ones at the White House to shame."

Brian folded his lips into his mouth for a moment. "And . . . your father?"

Another little shrug. "I think he's a member. It's one of those places where membership is passed on from father to son." Then he grinned, and Brian felt his heart flutter in his chest as he recognized the mischief glinting in deep blue eyes. "Although I'm pretty sure it won't get passed along to me. No perverts allowed, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah. I do know."

Justin's eyes narrowed abruptly, as he heard something in the softness of Brian's voice - something that might have been reluctance - dread. Maybe even . . . fear.

"What about it?"
Brian did not look at him. Instead, he lifted a hand and made a quick gesture toward the FBI agent.

"The investigation is still incomplete, mind you," said McClaren, leaning forward and clasping his hands between his legs as he regarded Justin directly, refusing to look away, even though he was not looking forward to watching the impact of his words on Kinney's young lover. "But we have some pretty impressive intel suggesting that the attack on Brian was planned - and paid for - by certain members of that organization."

"Members such as?"

"We don't yet have all the names. Still working on it, but . . ."

"But you do have some of them?"

"Yes, we do."

"And who would they be?"

"Justin, I don't think . . ."

"Who?" There was no arguing with that tone. He might be very young and still look like a college kid, but there was no denying that Justin Taylor was in complete command of that moment.

McClaren opened his mouth to respond, but he never got a chance to provide the answer, as Brian rose to his feet. "I'll take this one, McFed."

The FBI agent, realizing how difficult this was going to be, shook his head, completely understanding why he had been delegated to speak, to tell Justin what he was not going to want to hear. But he had failed to reckon with Brian's determination. "No need, Brian. I can . . ."

The smirk that Brian managed to summon up was almost - though not quite - classic Kinney. "No, you can't."

He then turned to face Justin directly, and McClaren had a moment of epiphany. He was pretty sure that the number of people who had ever been allowed to see Brian Kinney almost speechless with fear was vanishingly small; he felt both honored and dismayed to be able to join that elite group.

"It's not his place to tell you, Justin," Brian said after a deep, hoarse breath. "Because he wasn't there; he didn't see it."

Another harsh, rasping breath. "I'm the one who saw it."

Justin stood up slowly, squaring his shoulders and facing his beautiful lover exactly as he would have confronted a firing squad preparing for his execution. "What did you see?"

"There were four men standing in the shadows, watching what happened. Giving orders."

Justin nodded. "Go on."

"I recognized two of them, although I didn't remember it at the time. When Agent Corey hypnotized me, the memories came back. One of them was Jim Stockwell, and the other was . . ."

He fell silent then, obviously trying to find the will and the courage to continue.

"My father."
It was not a guess.

"Yes." Brian's voice was barely a breath - not even a whisper.

The silence in the room was suddenly stifling, as heavy as the kind of lead-lined blankets used in x-ray suites, but surprisingly brittle as it shattered under the force of Justin's sharp, gasping inhalation. "And you've known this . . . how long?" he asked, his eyes seeing nothing except Brian's face, Brian's body - Brian damaged and broken and bleeding.

"A couple of days." Brian did not try to dodge the question or the issue.

"And what? You couldn't bring yourself to tell me, to shatter the dreams of Poor, Little Baby Justin?"

"You know better than that."

Darkness moved in brilliant blue eyes - darkness and a terrible, bottomless sense of betrayal. "I thought I did."

"Just . . ."

"This - all of this . . ." One hand swept up and down toward Brian's body and then all around them, "because of me? Because my father couldn't accept what I am, or believe that it was my choice. Because he had to blame you?"

"No! It wasn't just him, Justin." There was no trace of doubt in Brian's tone. "This would have happened anyway - with or without him. This wasn't about you."

But Justin was shaking his head. "You don't know that. And besides, I know something else that you don't know. Or maybe you do know, and you just decided that I was too delicate - too fragile to handle it. That famous Club? My father isn't the only son of Bethel Park society who has a membership. Remember Chris Hobbs? I'm pretty sure, if you check the roster, you'll find his family listed there too. So now we not only have the infamous Craig Taylor - who once resorted to ramming you with his car to punish you for turning his precious baby boy into a flaming faggot - but we have the lovely Hobbs family, who probably never heard of Brian Kinney, but sure as shit have good cause to remember Justin Taylor, since he managed to fuck up the future of their crown prince."

Brian turned to stare at McClaren, not bothering to try to conceal the resentment in his eyes.

"Is that true?"

McClaren sighed. "The father and the grandfather are both members, but we don't have anything substantial to connect them to your attack."

"Shit!"

"Yeah," said Justin, his voice only barely audible now, as his eyes grew suspiciously bright and glossy. "So you see it wasn't about you, Brian. This - what they did to you - it was all because of me."

"No, it wasn't," Brian insisted, moving around the desk to pull Justin into his arms. "Have you forgotten about Stockwell? Have you forgotten what I did to him?"

Justin lifted his hands and braced them against Brian's face. "Have you forgotten why?" he demanded. "It was because of me, because I had to stick my nose in, and force you to go up against
him. If I hadn't . . ."

"Justin," Brian said firmly, "have you ever - even once - known me to do anything, just because somebody else wanted me to? I do what I want. You know that. I always have. You know I wouldn't . . ."

Justin leaned forward, touching his lips to the softness under Brian's throat. "You would, for me."

He pulled back then to gaze directly into Brian's eyes, and spotted the quick shifting, the wavering determination. No one else would have noticed, but Justin . . . Justin was the only person in the world who knew Brian well enough to read the meaning behind those subtle nuances buried deep beneath layers of steely resolve. "No. Not even for you. You should know . . ."

"I do." It was just a whisper, a breath of sound almost beneath the level of hearing. "I do know."

Then he pushed away, hard enough to send Brian reeling back to catch himself on the desk, as Justin tore out of the room at a dead run.

"Jesus!" Brian snarled, pushing forward to right himself in order to go after the young man who had managed - at some strange moment when he had obviously not been paying sufficient attention to keep his guard up - to become the most important thing in his life.

"You stay here." McClaren was already on his feet heading for the door.

"The fuck I will." Brian looked ready to kill should anyone try to interfere with his mission to retrieve his young lover.

"Brian! Stop, and think. Do you realize what just happened?"

"Of course, I do. Now get out of my . . ."

"He just became a blonder, younger version of Brian Kinney, and in this, you can't help him."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

McClaren paused. "Jesus Christ! What do you plan to do - see if you can out-guilt each other? Because you've spent your whole fucking life blaming yourself for everything bad that ever happened to anyone around you. That's what you were trained to do, Brian -what you were taught at your dear mother's knee. And the people around you - your so-called friends - reinforced it, because it was goddamned convenient for them; because it made their lives so much easier, to the point where 'Blaming Brian' became a competitive sport for them. And now it's turning into a fucking epidemic, something that's infecting Justin too. He's buying into the whole guilt-trip shit as well. Is that what you want for him? You want him to live with feeling responsible for what happened to you, just like you've always felt responsible for what happened to him? Is that really what you want for him? You know how bad it hurts - better than anybody. Do you want him to go through that?"

Brian staggered, overwhelmed with the notion. 'No," he whispered. "God, no. Please. He can't . . ."

The FBI agent reached out and quickly, roughly pulled Brian against him, and looked straight into hazel eyes now dark with dread. "He won't. I promise, but you aren't the person who can prevent it. He won't believe it from you, because he knows how you feel. He's always known. So it can't come from you. You've got to let me go after him, or . . ."

"Or what?"
McClaren sighed, and hoped that the hurt he felt rising inside him would not be reflected in his voice. "Or you both lose."

Brian wanted to argue, wanted to jerk free and rush out to find Justin - to hold him and protect him and make everything right. Only . . . could it be that McClaren was right, that he was not the right person for the job? Or, perhaps, that his need to protect Justin was more about making himself feel good than helping Justin exercise the right to be his own man and function from his own strength? On the other hand, how could he trust it to anyone else? How could he be sure he was making the right choice?

"Why?" he whispered finally. "Why would you do this?"

The FBI agent stepped back then, blue eyes bright with anger. "Don't you know?" he replied. "Didn't anybody ever care enough about you to step up and do the right thing - just because it was the thing that would be best for you?"

Brian was unprepared for the deep, sharp, visceral fireball of pain that erupted within him, and it took a moment before he was able to do what he'd always done - suppress the sensation and discard the memory. "Not that I know of," he said finally.

Motherfuckers!

For a split second, the FBI agent said nothing for fear that he would not be able to resist uttering his one-word denunciation of the people who had laid claim to being the 'friends' of Brian Kinney.

He leaned forward quickly and touched his lips to Brian's forehead. "Shit! How the fuck did you survive your . . ." He paused then, and drew a deep cleansing breath. "Never mind that. Okay, now you listen to me, Brian. I know this is all new to you - something you've never experienced before. But you need to trust me here and believe what I tell you. I want you to sit down, and think about how much you've been damaged by your feelings of guilt, and then ask yourself if dealing with all that shit ever accomplished anything besides crippling you with a pain you couldn't leave behind you. Then consider what you really want - for yourself and for him. Not gut reactions or knee-jerk responses. Really think about it, Brian. Meanwhile, I'll do what needs doing, not because it's what I need, but because it's what you need, and what he needs."

"No, I can't just . . ."

"Shut-the-fuck-up, and sit-the-fuck-down!"

And Brian Kinney, for once in his life, elected to do as he was told, and the world - against all odds - continued to turn on its axis, completely ignoring the ominous sign of the apocalypse.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

It was still raining, but not so hard now, and the sound of the storm had softened until it was lost under the constant rumble of the surf breaking against the headland. Lightening still flickered off to the north, but bands of stars were flaring to life out over the sea as the cloud banks moved inland.

When he'd run out of the house, he had not bothered to notice which way he was going, or what lay in his path, but - sub-consciously - he must have deliberately avoided those places which would have been painful reminders of the man from whom he'd made his escape, for his mad dash took him away from the deck, where they'd first encountered each other after all the long, empty months of separation. Away from the greenhouse, where he'd wakened in the cradle of those strong, muscled arms just hours ago. Away from the dunes where the imprint of their bodies might still remain in the
powdered-sugar sand, from their multiple bouts of lovemaking under a star-splintered sky on the previous evening. And away from the water where Brian had lain in the froth of the surf, naked and perfect and sporting a massive, throbbing erection on which Justin had impaled himself and proceeded to ride like a rodeo champion.

There was only one direction left to go - to the South, following a broken trail toward the lighthouse. But it was too far, and he was shaking too badly to cover much distance, so he faltered as he drew near the old lean-to/tool shed and made his way inside. It was narrow and damp and stank of mold and packed almost to the rafters with a jumble of garden implements and supplies and the detritus of years. But it was dark and quiet and - most important of all - private. Closed off, like a refuge from everything that he did not want to confront at this moment, which was pretty much everything - and everyone.

Atop a haphazard stack of bags of potting soil, he dropped to his knees, knowing he could go no further and no longer avoid what he had been holding off since that ugly, incredibly horrible moment of epiphany when he had realized what Brian was trying to tell him. Or rather, in point of fact, trying not to tell him.

The sobs took him then, deep and racking, pouring through him with the power and the destructive force of lava gushing through the subterranean channels of a volcano. He had known pain before; that was a given. Physical pain, although those memories were muted, probably deliberately. And the other kind of pain - the kind that no amount of time or distance could ever completely obscure. He had known what it was to believe himself lost, to give up hope, to concede defeat - to assume that he had thrown away the most precious thing that life had ever offered him.

To have had to face the fact that Brian was gone, that he had forfeited any right to claim the man who had so easily claimed his heart. He remembered that pain; sometimes he even took it out, like a scuffed and worn souvenir, to remind him of what it felt like to lose everything. But he had not let himself think of it much lately; it had been too raw, too unbearable.

But he knew now that whatever he had endured before, it had never approached the absolute agony that he was feeling in this moment of raw, powerful epiphany.

How could he endure it? To know - not just suspect or suppose or speculate, but to know - that he had been the direct cause of the horror inflicted on the man who he now recognized as the primary purpose for his existence. What if Brian had died, and there was no way to dispute the fact that it had been a near thing. The elemental truth was that he had survived only because he was stubborn enough and determined enough to live long enough to protect . . . Oh, God! To protect the person who was to blame for his ordeal.

The tears had become a deluge now, pouring from his eyes and painting his face, wetting his hair and the collar of his shirt. He welcomed the dark silence around him, knowing that there was no way he would ever have been able to pass this heart-rendering fit of weeping off as a simple allergy attack, as he'd done so often in the past. Although, in point of fact, he was certain that Brian had always known the truth, but simply elected to maintain his silence and allow Justin his little pretense. Because it made things simpler - for Justin. Because it provided a trace of comfort - for Justin. And, most of all, because he was willing to do anything - anything - for Justin.

Oh, God! Because he'd spent his life - ever since that fateful night on that street corner - trying to find ways to protect Justin, even going so far as to try keeping him at arm's length, to prevent him from getting too close so that he risked being hurt or damaged by the Brian Kinney who only existed in the mind of Brian Kinney: the asshole who was responsible for inflicting pain and injury on all the people around him; the man who would not take the chance of allowing himself to be loved.
He curled more tightly into a fetal ball, atop his makeshift pallet and covered his head with his arms, trying to shut out the sounds of the night. Though the cottage and its grounds might appear to be isolated and scarcely populated, the truth was that there were plenty of people within the quarter mile radius of the beach house - occupants, staff, security guards, FBI agents. Lots of people. Too many people for him to be able to relax and assume that he was safe from being found.

Sooner or later, someone would stumble across his location, by design or by chance, and then it would only be a matter of moments before he'd have to figure out how to deal with Brian. The only thing he had to figure out was which Brian he would have to face. He'd been known as the Stud of Liberty Avenue for most of his adult life, but there was another name that he should have borne, a name that would have been much more accurate: Chameleon, or, perhaps, the man of a thousand faces. He was so accustomed, by this time, to wearing a mask, to concealing the real Brian Kinney behind whichever façade he might decide to use at any given moment, that it was almost impossible to predict which he might choose to inhabit at this juncture.

Justin grew quiet then, his mind focusing on a new thought, a different kind of epiphany - quieter, less radical, but perhaps ultimately more meaningful, more important to any future he and Brian might be able to build together.

He loved all of Brian's masks; he loved all the games the man played; he even loved the endless manipulations that Brian used to try to control the people who were an intimate part of his life. But he needed something different.

He needed Brain - unmasked. Flawed and imperfect and vulnerable. He needed to see and speak to the real Brian, and it was scary as hell to admit that he wasn't entirely sure he'd ever actually confronted the real face behind all those masks. It was even scarier to contemplate the possibility that he might not be able to cope with whatever he found at the core of the man he loved so desperately, for . . . what if he didn't love what he discovered there?

Realization flared in his consciousness like a starburst in the night sky. Was that what Brian was afraid of? Was that why he held on to his masks so intensely, because he believed that what lay behind them was something too ugly, too worthless for anyone to be able to love? Was that why he'd fought so hard to avoid letting anyone touch his heart - because he believed no one would want to touch it once they saw it for what it really was?

Jesus! Is that what he really believes, and if it is, how do I . . .

So deep in his introspection was he that he didn't register the tiny rustle of the opening of the door or the arrival of another warm body in the old structure until he felt a weight ease down beside him on his makeshift seating.

"Relax, Blondie. It's just me. You don't have to face the Great and Powerful Oz . . . yet."

Justin sat up quickly, trying desperately to wipe away the traces of his tears without actually appearing to do so. But then he realized that it was almost pitch black inside the lean-to, and that McClaren wasn't really looking at him anyway. Instead the FBI agent had settled with his back against a rack that held gardening tools and was busy lighting a cigarette, his big hand shielding the flame of the lighter from the wind that gusted through all the cracks in the walls.

When he offered the pack to Justin, the younger man hesitated for a moment, not quite sure if he was ready to accept a peace offering - even of such a minor nature - from the man who had witnessed his meltdown. But in the end, he simply pulled a Marlboro from the pack and leaned forward to touch
the tip to the still flickering blaze. In the golden reflection, the tracks of his tears were painfully obvious, but McLaren chose not to comment or even appear to notice.

They smoked in silence for a while, enjoying the taste of the tobacco. "You know," said the agent finally, "it won't be long before you're either going to have to take a flight overseas or seek out a whole new black market to enjoy this forbidden pleasure."

Justin blinked. "What?"

"Cigarettes. Their days are numbered in the good old USA. They're no longer PC, and, of course, they are so deadly to the human body that they probably should have been banned decades ago." Then he grinned. "They're still available only because of the power of the wheelers and dealers in the tobacco industry. Which only makes the taste that much more addictive, doesn't it? But they won't survive forever. Sooner or later, they'll be outlawed. And then you'll have a whole new industry - new drug cartels that will make a fortune because there are always going to be individuals who refuse to give up their addictions and refuse to be told how they can - or can't - abuse their bodies." Then he sat forward and took a moment to blow out a couple of perfect smoke rings. "This . . ." he lifted the cigarette and spent a moment contemplating its glowing tip, "is like Brian Kinney. Deadly, dangerous, with all kinds of hidden toxins. A smart man would probably just walk away. Cure the addiction."

Justin turned abruptly, the golden reflection in his eyes now obscured by something dark and intense. "And what? Leave him to you?"

A bland stare. "Why not? Isn't that what you're out here doing? Skulking in your little makeshift artist's garret, obsessing on your guilt over being the reason your father and his minions tried to destroy him? Aren't you trying to figure out how to run away, so you don't have to endure the horrible, unbearable weight of your guilt?"

Justin wanted to strike out - to watch as his fist impacted the man's face. But he couldn't, because - God damn it! - because the man was right. "I don't know how to live with it," he admitted in a whisper. "I don't know how . . ."

"Welcome," said the cold, implacable voice, "to the world of Brian Kinney."

Justin's eyes widened, and he felt something shifting inside him, some kind of awareness dawning - awareness that he knew he did not want.

"Don't even pretend to be shocked," McLaren continued. "Because you've always known it. You've probably even examined it from time to time." He took another drag of his cigarette, before turning to look directly into Justin's eyes, and the younger man almost flinched away from the icy glare. "You've even used it, to let you manipulate him, when nothing else would have worked."

"No. I wouldn't do that. I love Brian, and I . . ."

The FBI agent shrugged. "Yeah. I know you do. But what? You think that loving somebody means you never use whatever weapon happens to be at hand to get them to do what you want them to do? Come on, Kid. You're not that naïve. But this time, what's happening here, between you two, is too important to resort to any games and Machiavellian manipulations. This time, you need to see the whole truth. Then, you decide if you love him enough to endure it - to be what he needs you to be - or you let him go. It's a simple choice, really. But one you can't make if you aren't willing to see it clearly."

Anger flared again, white-hot and vicious. "And leave him to you. That's what you want, isn't it?"
McClaren grinned. "I know you're not foolish enough to think that anybody can just give Brian Kinney away. Where he goes, who he chooses, what he does with his life - that's all up to him. But if you're asking me what I'd want . . . Yeah, I'd take him. And I'd be better for him that you are." Justin jerked and started to rise, obviously ready to turn this confrontation into something physical, but the FBI agent simply reached out and laid a hand on his shoulder, a calming hand. "Except for one thing. He doesn't love me."

Justin settled back into his crouch, and was amazed by the sweet flow of relief that surged through him.

"But you need to see the whole truth, Justin. What you're feeling now - this huge weight of guilt - Brian has lived with, to some degree, all his life. Now we won't even go into the whole mess of his shitty childhood. Because that's not really the issue here. The issue is you. He has always - always - known that it was his fault that you got bashed. And notice that I used the word 'known' instead of 'believed'. I'm pretty sure that you've told him, probably countless times, that he wasn't to blame. And he would have nodded and probably pulled you into his arms and kissed you senseless before fucking you through the mattress, so the whole issue would just be forgotten. So you'd drop it and not bring it up again, until the next time, when the process would start all over again. But the point is that it doesn't matter how many times you told him, or even if anybody else ever told him - which I doubt, by the way - it didn't change anything, because he still knows it today, just as surely as he knew it all those years ago. Brian is always going to know that you almost died, that your life was changed forever, because he let himself be convinced to break his own rules. Because he fucked up. And Justin, you have to understand this: you are never going to change that."

"But it wasn't his fault. It was Chris Hobbs, and all the homophobic crap that went on at St. James, and . . ."

"You're preaching to the choir," replied McClaren. "And it doesn't make a bit of difference, as far as Brian is concerned. He knows what he knows, and you have to learn to deal with that. Or else."

"Or else what?"

McClaren lit another cigarette, silently cursing Brian Kinney for the renewal of a nasty habit he had thought he'd almost managed to put behind him. "Knowing how you feel now, and comparing it to what he's gone through, do you suppose he'd even consider allowing you to continue to go through this? Do you think he wants you to face dealing with this kind of guilt for the rest of your life?"

Justin took a deep, shaky breath. "So what will he do then?"

The FBI agent grinned. "You're not that dumb."

Justin took another cigarette from the Marlboro pack and waited until McClaren offered a light. "He almost died," said the younger man in a tiny, frightened voice.

"Yes. He did."

"If he had . . ."

"But he didn't. Best not to make the problem any worse than it is."

"Because of me."

"No!" It was a shout that literally shook the rafters of the old outbuilding, and caused Justin to recoil, his eyes gone huge and dark with alarm. "Not because of you. Because of your father and Jim Stockwell, and the people like them. People who set themselves up as judge and jury to determine
who should live and who should die, and who should be punished for the fundamental human need to love and be loved. And if you let them destroy what you and Brian share . . . then you let them win, Justin. Is that what you want to do? Because make no mistake about it; if you walk away from him because you can't bear the guilt of feeling responsible for what they did to him, then those slimy motherfuckers have done exactly what they set out to do. They'll have succeeded in destroying Brian Kinney. They'll have won."

Justin took a deep shaky breath. "I've walked away from him before, and he's managed to survive."

McClaren smiled, but Justin was astonished to realize that he was pretty sure it was the saddest expression he'd ever seen. "Did he? Did he really?"

The FBI agent got to his feet, leaned forward and cupped Justin's face briefly with a gentle hand, and made his exit from the old building, leaving only silence behind him and the periodic gleam of the lighthouse's beacon, as its radiance found its way through the cracks in the wall, piercing the darkness of the night and attempting to provide guidance for the lost and the hopeless.

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tbc
Some are like water, Some are like the heat,
Some are melodies, Some are the beat,
Sooner or later they'll all be gone,
Why don't they stay on?
It's hard to get without a cause.
I don't want to perish like a fading voice.
Youth is like diamonds in the sun,
And diamonds are forever.
So many adventures couldn't happen today,
So many songs that we forgot to play,
So many dreams swimming out in the blue.
Let them come true.
Forever young, I want to be forever young.
Do you really want to live forever?

Forever Young --- Marion Gold, Bernhard Lloyd, Frank Mertens

It was so rare that he could barely manage to concede that it was happening at all. In fact, he couldn't remember the last time it had happened, and he wasn't particularly anxious to do so anyway.

He would have denied it, but there was little point, since the near-black eyes which were boring into him like twin diamond drills saw it anyway, whether he chose to acknowledge it or not.

Brian Kinney was squirming.

The woman who stood looking down at him was obviously not in the mood to brook any argument. "I did not spend all day in the kitchen, slaving away over a hot stove in an effort to create a new, signature Trina Thomas piece de resistance just to have you dribble some nonsense about 'no carbs after seven'. Besides, this . . ." She held out a plate bearing a tower of chocolate confection, dripping with a glossy praline sauce, and crowned with a thick swirl of mocha, "hardly qualifies as 'carbs'. That's like calling Joe Montana 'a quarterback' - accurate enough, but ridiculously understated."

"Trina," he said wearily, "I'm not . . ."

Very deliberately, she leaned forward and covered his mouth with her hand. "He'll be back," she said softly. "You know he will."

He pulled away, frowning. "Maybe. For a while."

She straightened up and regarded him with a speculative gaze. "You know what?" she said finally. "I don't know if I should be surprised - or just comforted - to see that fags and dykes - your words, not mine - can be just as stupid and screwed up as the rest of us. Are you really that blind, Brian? Do you really not know how he feels about you?"

"I do know," he retorted. "I always have, but it was never enough before. Why should it be enough now?"
She shrugged. "Maybe because he almost lost you, for good."

He looked up at her, and she almost recoiled from the glint of anger in those spectacular eyes. "Oh, that's a comfort. So I can use this whole shitty, fucked-up mess to bind him to me, to hold him prisoner. To scare him into staying by my side instead of doing whatever he might really want to do."

But if he thought that he would intimidate this woman into backing down and retreating before his obvious annoyance, he was very much mistaken. "And what is it," she demanded, "that you think he might want to do - more than he wants to be with you, that is?"

He shrugged. "The idea was always for him to become the next Andy Warhol."

"Aaah!" she replied with a nod. "The next Warhol. Pardon me for pointing out what would seem obvious - to me, at least - but Warhol is dead and gone, and biographers speculate that he wasn't a particularly happy man. Genius maybe - but lonely, cynical, and basically unfulfilled. His art didn't seem to bring him much joy. Is that really what you want for Justin?"

"It's not about what I might want for him. It's about what he wants for himself."

To his surprise, she laughed. "For someone who thinks he's so smart, you are one dumb little asshole! You need to step outside your own, narrow preconceptions, and take a good look at your young man, Mr. Kinney. All he wants - all he's ever really wanted - is you. He's just waiting for you to show him that it's what you want too."

"But what if . . ."

She leaned forward and dropped the plate, piled high with the sinfully delectable, splendidly redolent dessert, into his lap. "Hasn't anybody ever told you," she said softly, "that you think too much? Stop thinking about what you should do - for him - and start doing what you need to do for both of you."

"Now shut up . . . and eat."

He looked like he wanted to argue, but ultimately, he didn't. Instead, he shut up - and ate - and Trina, looking extremely satisfied with herself, left him to his contemplation and his chocolate concoction.

Ten minutes later, Chris McClaren appeared out of the darkness, his hair and shirt still damp from the raindrops that were falling now only in random spats, accompanied by ragged gusts of night wind.

Brian, trying without success to resist licking his spoon to capture the last tiny trace of mocha frosting, barely managed to keep his mouth shut and not ask the question that was trembling on his lips and written in his eyes.

The FBI agent paused at the edge of the deck and spent a moment looking out to sea, his profile limned briefly by the sweep of the lighthouse beacon which seemed, somehow, brighter in the aftermath of the storm.

"It's up to him now," he announced finally, before turning to look down at Brian, "and you. The two of you - together - because neither one of you can do it alone."

Brian hesitated, setting his plate aside and reaching for a cigarette, lost in thought. Finally, he looked up, and McClaren wondered - not for the first time - how anyone could claim to know this man and not see the ordeals he endured, many of them self-inflicted. "Was he all right?" Brian asked finally.

McClaren huffed a deep breath. "Depends on how you define 'all right', I guess. He's a strong young
man, but he's damaged goods, Brian. Just like you."

Brian winced, but did not try to deny the conclusion. "And how do I fix the damage?"

"You don't. Because you didn't cause it, although I'm pretty sure you won't ever manage to believe
that. Still, the only thing that will fix it is to move forward, to do what the two of you need to do to
build a life together. That's the only thing that will fix either one of you."

"But what if . . ."

"Shit! Stop thinking, Brian. And start doing."

Brian blinked. When, he wondered, had he - Brian Kinney, the legendary poker-faced Stud of
Liberty Avenue - become so fucking transparent?

McClaren moved forward abruptly, and leaned down to capture Brian's lips in a quick, hot kiss,
taking advantage of the opportunity to sweep his tongue into the honeyed warmth of that addictively
sensual mouth, now enhanced by the rich sweetness of chocolate. Then he stepped back and smiled.
"Don't fuck it up, Bud. You've got a real chance here, to grab the brass ring. Don't be stupid, and let
it just slip through your fingers."

Brian looked up, and surprised a fleeting look in dark blue eyes - a look that might have betrayed a
flicker of lost hope, of a mask being firmly set once more in place. "Chris," he whispered, "I . . ."

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

The smile was shaky, but only for the space of a heartbeat. "You know what."

And, of course, he did know. Just as he knew how unkind it would be to try to repair what could not
be mended.

"Where is he?"

"He'll be along. Let him come to you."

Brian looked out toward the ocean, and saw the moon edging out from beneath the clouds that had
obscured its brightness during the storm. "Then what?"

The FBI agent shrugged. "What? You want me to write the script for you? Fuck that, Brian. From
here on out, you're on your own."

Brian nodded, and opened his mouth to express his thanks for McClaren's intervention, but, in the
end, he didn't, knowing there was no way to verbalize what was in his heart, and knowing that the
man would not want to hear it anyway.

"Just don't fuck around all night," the FBI agent cautioned. "Remember that your kid will be here
bright and early in the morning and probably won't be particularly happy if you're too fucked out to
play with him. And keep in mind that we have an appointment at the federal judge's chambers in the
afternoon, so they can take your deposition."

Brian sighed, warmed by the reminder that Gus would be with him the next day, but not so happy
about the prospect of having to relive his nightmare again, in the presence of a whole new group of
spectators. He didn't like playing the part of a victim, even when he was the victim.
McClaren saw and understood the conflict in the man's face, but knew there was no comfort he could offer that would do any good. Instead, he simply laid his hand once more on a broad, strong shoulder before walking away.

And he disappeared into the house, never once looking back. Not, at least, until he was safely inside where Brian could not see him. At that point, he did look back - looking his fill. Storing up memories for the time which would come soon enough. The time when Brian Kinney would become just a name in a file, just a subject of an investigation.

Just someone he used to know.

He sighed. Yeah, right!

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Of course, he was waiting. It only made sense that he would be. And not only that he'd be waiting, but that he'd be looking so completely smoking hot, so completely Brian-Kinney incredible that he could have ended any blossoming discussion with a gesture as simple as a lifted hand or the curl of a lip.

But he didn't.

He just stood there, at the edge of the deck - prime Brian in black wifebeater and well-worn 501's. No shoes or socks, of course. No belt. No fresh shave, so the chin and cheeks were slightly stubbled and perfectly beautiful. Just the way Justin preferred him.

Some small part of the younger man wished that he would make the peremptory gesture. Would simply open his arms and sweep away every question, every trace of doubt.

But he didn't.

No gesture; no questions; no words. He just stood there and waited, as self-contained and fundamentally cool as he'd always been.

Only maybe not . . . quite.

Brian continued to stand motionless, watching as Justin approached slowly while trying to identify the faint trace of emotion on his lover's face.

*His Brian - quintessentially, perfectly, uniquely his, in a way that no one else could ever be, and in a guise that no one else would ever . . .

Later, when he remembered that revelatory moment, he would try to deny the power of the thought that struck him, try to reshape the memory to ignore the fact that his knees almost buckled under him and he almost fell, staggered by an epiphany that was so primal, so fundamental, that he would never understand why he hadn't seen it before.

*It couldn't be that simple . . . could it? And if it was, how could he face it? How would he restructure his thinking if he'd been wrong all this time? And, above all, how could he have been so monumentally stupid?*

He paused on the step below the deck, and tilted his head to look up - way up - to meet the gaze of the dark eyes that regarded him with a pale glint of speculation.

"Do you still blame yourself for my bashing?"
Brian's eyes went wide. So . . . no warm-up period allowed, but straight to the heart of the matter. The only question was how to respond.

He thought for a minute about what McClaren had said to him; then he recalled the comments of Trina Thomas.

Was it truly time to drop the masks? To let Justin see the man beneath the façade, and hope against hope that he would still find that man worth loving.

Brian looked away from the brilliant eyes which seemed to be penetrating all the way down into his soul, and spent a moment gazing out to sea. His answer, when he worked up the courage to give it, was curt. "Yes."

Justin was not nearly so reticent. "Even though you know it wasn't your fault?"

Brian's smile was slightly mocking. "And how would I know that? Because you told me so? Do you really think that changed anything?"

"But it wasn't . . ."

Brian lifted one hand, palm forward and looked down, gazing directly into the depths of bright blue eyes, and making a conscious effort to hide nothing, to resist ducking behind the mask. "You can slice it and dice it any way you choose, but the elementary truth is that if I hadn't given in - hadn't gone to your prom and taken you out on that dance floor and shoved what we were in their faces - Hobbs would never have gone after you."

"You don't know that."

Brian lifted his arms and draped them across Justin's shoulders and leaned forward to brace his forehead against the cap of bright golden hair. "Yes. I do."

"No, you . . ."

"What? Now you're the expert on guilt? All of a sudden you think you know . . ."

"I know this." Justin laid his hand across Brian's mouth. "If that night hadn't happened, we wouldn't be standing here like this now. It was all part of what made us who we are - Brian and Justin. No longer you and me, but us. And if I could go back and change anything - anything at all - I wouldn't. Because this is worth whatever we had to go through to get here."

"Stop!" Brian's voice was sharp with bitter anger, hard, almost brittle. "Don't be fucking stupid. What you went through . . . if I could go back, could wipe that night out, I would. I'd do anything to take it back, to make it not . . ."

"Don't I have the right . . ."

"No!" It was a primal scream, something that burst from the depths of his core carrying all the weight of the memory that had never died, never even faded to something less than immediate, unbearable pain. "Because . . . you weren't there. You didn't have to stand there and watch your life bleeding out of you - helpless and lost and so, so sorry. So sure that you were going to die, and that I'd never get the chance to tell you . . ."

"To tell me what?"

Brian was suddenly fighting to breathe, fighting to regain some tiny semblance of control, and the
tears were upon him then, overwhelming any possibility of holding back, or refusing to let the weakness be seen. "To tell you . . . that I'd have given anything - anything - for it to have been me lying there instead of you. That you never deserved it and I . . ."

"You thought you did."

Brian did not answer, but his silence was confirmation enough.

"And now?" Justin's voice was hoarse, thick with tears he refused to shed.

"What about now?" Brian lifted his hand and cupped Justin's face with aching gentleness.

"Do you think that I deserve to feel guilty over what happened to you?"

"No, but it's not the same thing."

"Does it even matter?"

For the first time, a faint gleam of speculative interest flared in dark hazel eyes. "What do you mean?"

Justin stepped up onto the deck and moved to the seating area, drawing Brian along behind him, so that, when he sank into the cushions of the old lounge chair, his companion was pulled down with him, and they settled naturally into the positions that they always assumed when seeking comfort and closeness, with Brian cradling Justin in his arms and looking down into that exquisite face and Justin having access to the warm sensuality of the perfect skin in the soft recess under Brian's jaw, where he proceeded to bury his face and inhale the essence of Brian Kinney - sweat and smoke and musk and maleness. Nothing sweet or delicate or perfumed about it - but perfect just the same.

"I mean," he said finally, comforted by the sensation of having breathed Brian into his body, and looking up so that they were staring directly into each other's eyes, "that whether you're right or wrong - or I am - we have got to find a way to put it aside. Or we lose everything, Brian. Everything. Because, when you let go of all the bullshit, all that matters is us. And you need to understand that. There are other things in my life that I love; other people that I care about, but, in the middle of my heart, the place that is at the center of my being, there's only you. If I were to learn tomorrow that I could never paint another stroke, it would hurt me, okay? I would miss it - terribly. But I could live with it, as long as I knew that every day of my life would be another day shared with you. That's the bottom line. That's what matters. But if we don't find a way to rid ourselves of this guilt, then someday - sooner or later - the load will be too heavy for us to stand, and we're going to pay a price that neither one of us will be able to endure. We're going to lose each other. And that, I can't do. Anything else, Brian; I can deal with anything else, no matter how bad it gets. But I - can't - lose - you. Do you understand me?"

"Justin, I . . ."

"Please, don't." It was just a whisper. "Please don't give me reasons, or practical rationalizing, or all the ten thousand logical explanations of why we have to analyze it to death. Because we don't. There's no analyzing this - no way to explain it or understand it. There's no logical reason why we feel what we feel. But we feel it, just the same. We love each other, Brian. Doesn't matter if it makes sense; doesn't matter if it's logical. It's right - just because that's the way it is. Please. For once in your life, don't try to figure it out. Just let it be."

Brian could not quite stifle a grin. "You sound like a fucking Beatles song."

"Yeah, well, Lennon and McCartney had it right all along, didn't they? In the end, all we really need
is love - yours for me, and mine for you - to keep us forever young and beautiful, as long as we're together. Right?

"If you start singing, this conversation is over." The light in Brian's eyes was brilliant, not to mention exquisitely perfect, and Justin could only grin.

Brian twisted and propped himself on one elbow, tracing a gentle finger down the side of Justin's face. "I never wanted this, you know," he said softly. "In fact, it's what I didn't want - more than anything, because I couldn't let myself believe in it. I never wanted anybody to be able to touch me, to reach inside and expose what lives way down in the darkness there." He drew a deep breath, and looked up, not wanting Justin to see the shadows rising in his eyes, as his voice dropped to a whisper. "Sometimes, I hated you for that - for not taking no for an answer, for making me feel things I never intended to feel. Sometimes, I still hate you for that, almost as much as I love you for it."

He looked down then, quickly enough to glimpse the rapid surge of pain in Justin's eyes, and he was sorry to have caused it, but, somehow, he wasn't sorry to have revealed the truth. It was something that needed saying. So he apologized in the only way possible - the patented Brian Kinney way - without a word. No regrets, no excuses, no apologies, but the touch of his lips said it all.

Justin's smile was achingly tender. "So are you saying that you were wrong? That you learned to believe in something that you never believed in before?"

That sensually perfect mouth went very still, before twisting into a characteristic smirk. "Have we met, you and I? I'm Brian Kinney - in case you were wondering."

Justin laughed softly. "Okay. Conceding that you're still you and some things will never change, I think I have to point out that, sometimes, things do. People do. People sometimes stumble across things - important things. My granny used to call them 'Come-to-Jesus moments' And I think I just had one."

Brian, who was concentrating on trailing his fingers through the silken softness of a mop of blond hair, went very still as something moved deep in his eyes. "Meaning?"

"Meaning," said Justin with a huge sigh, "that I owe somebody a debt of gratitude that I'm never going to be able to repay, and I get the distinct feeling that he's never going to let me forget it. I'm going to be paying for a long, long time."

"Sounds like my kind of guy."

The mischief in the depths of Justin's eyes was suddenly submerged beneath something else - something slightly brooding, maybe even a little uncertain. "That's a part of what I learned," he admitted.

"What the fuck are you . . ."

"Your friend," Justin interrupted. "Your 'McFed'. I think he just did me the biggest favor of my fucking life, and I'm pretty sure it was the last thing he really wanted to do."

Brian frowned. "What did he tell you?"

Justin wriggled slightly, settling more deeply against the faded cushions of the lounge. "That's just it. He didn't tell me anything - exactly. He just left it out there, for me to figure out on my own." His eyes were suddenly huge and filled with a tender glow. "And I realize that it was the only way I was ever going to understand. If he'd just told me - if anybody had just told me - I wouldn't have believed.
I had to find it for myself. And I did. I saw what I've never been willing to see before, and it changes everything, Brian.

"If you're about to launch into a bunch of existentialist mumbo-jumbo, just save . . ."

It was uncertain which of them was more surprised when Justin surged upward, twisting his body and pulling Brian down and to the side at the same time, so that when it was done, it was the tall brunette who was lying on his back looking up into starlit eyes, and the smiling blond who was gazing down at him.

"You might not like this," Justin whispered, leaning forward then and taking a moment to trace the outline of Brian's ear with the tip of his tongue, "so why don't we . . . do it . . . Kinney-style?"

Brian settled easily on his back, shifting to pull Justin closer and better align the twin bulges in their groins, smiling to note that - no matter how serious the discussion - some things truly never changed.

"So far, what's not to like?"

Another minute was spent with Justin exploring the downy softness between Brian's jaw and his clavicle, with tongue and lips and teeth. Then he sat up and wrapped his fingers in the hem of the wifebeater, to pull it up to expose the sculpted shape of beautifully toned pecs and obliques, but his eyes were once more locked with Brian's, seeking clues to the thoughts behind the beautiful face.

"Have you ever wondered why I left you so many times?"

And there was no way of refusing to see or recognize the quick billowing of cold shadows forming in hazel depths, as Brian struggled to reposition the mask of invincibility.

"No," Justin said quickly, once more leaning in - this time to taste and nip at lips that had gone stern and motionless. And he kept on tasting and nibbling and licking until they softened beneath his efforts and began to respond. "I need to say this," he whispered, "and you need to hear it. Every time I left you - even the first time, when I ran off with Ethan - it was because I managed to convince myself that you'd wait for me. That you'd always be there to take me back. I didn't even realize that I was doing it, but I was."

Brian shifted, and the jerkiness of the movement was adequate warning that he had not liked what he was hearing, that anger was stirring inside him. But Justin was determined to have his say, to get this ugly dark secret out into the open air where it could never harm them again. So he set about soothing Brian again, with lips and fingertips and tongue and a hand that splayed across a silken chest before inching down and slipping inside the waistband of jeans now growing too tight for comfort.

"And the reason I was able to do that," he whispered, "was because I assumed that you - being Brian Kinney - were never going to let anyone else get close enough to see you as anything other than the asshole you always played." Another kiss, and the hand descended lower, now caressing the taut skin of the belly and just brushing against the dark curls forming a perfect silky frame around the cock that was rapidly surging to rampant fullness. "The Stud of Liberty Avenue; the player that nobody was ever going to be allowed to know - that nobody was ever going to want to love, because everybody knew, from the get-go, that Kinney, the Great and Powerful, didn't do love. So they'd fight to get close enough to get fucked by you - to suck you, to rim you, to let you invade their bodies, to let you use them, to experience the ultimate goal of mind-blowing sex with the fuck-master - but the idea of loving you, of even knowing you - nobody was ever going to even consider it. You were never going to let anybody else touch the man behind the mask. And something in me knew that, counted on that. Used that."

He leaned forward again and traced a wet trail down across nipples and pecs and paused to explore the dark crater of the navel. "I managed to convince myself that you would always be there. That
because nobody else would ever figure out who you really were, or see the man behind the shit-head image, that I could always come back and pick up right where we left off. Because I knew the truth, you know. Even before you ever said it; even before you managed to admit it to yourself. I knew you loved me, and I used it, Brian. I used it to build myself a safety net. Something to catch me, whenever I fell."

He moved again, to shift downward, but this time the rock-hard arm that circled him held him motionless, and the look in the eyes that stared up at him was stern and relentless. "So," said Brian, and Justin almost recoiled from the coldness in his tone, "is that what this is, little twat? Did you need catching again?"

Justin managed to dredge up a tiny smile. "I think I'll always need you to catch me, but it's not the same thing. Because - thank you, Jesus! - I've finally seen the whole truth. No matter how much you might have tried to avoid it, tried to hold people at arm's length and never let anybody in, there were always going to be those who were smart enough and perceptive enough and determined enough, to fight their way through. To find and understand and recognize the man inside. It was just dumb, blind luck that it never happened before. McClaren - he showed me that. If I just go along, assuming that you'll always be there for me - because nobody else is going to fight for you or want you . . . or love you . . . then I'm going to be the one to wake up one day, and find that my safety net is just gone, that somebody managed to come along and roll it up and walk away with it, while I was busy fucking around with shit that, in the end, didn't matter at all."

Brian shifted, and leaned up, his face as still as if carved from stone, eyes brilliant with a fury that was fierce enough to strike fear in most mere mortals. "Which means what . . . exactly?"

But Justin remained unperturbed, unintimidated, and fearless, and pushed Brian back down in order to once more begin his exploration of that not quite perfect - yet - body, with tongue and lips and hands, moving to grip the bulge at Brian's crotch and begin a slow easy slide to foster further hardness, further growth. Brian managed - barely - to avoid groaning, and to maintain the demanding expression on his face.

"Which means," Justin whispered, "no more games. No more stupid assumptions. No more relying on blind luck." He sat up then and braced his hands against Brian's shoulders, while managing, at the same time, to grind his hardness against Brian's, casually re-emphasizing their most fundamental connection to each other. There was a deep, unlimited passion in his eyes as he stared down at the face that was almost painful to behold in its beauty, and in the vulnerability it had never revealed before this moment. "Which means that - from this day forward - you belong to me, Brian Kinney. And I will fight for you, to my last breath, no matter who tries to get in my way. Even if it's you." He leaned forward then, and took Brian's lips in a scalding kiss, before pulling back just enough to whisper. "Marriage or no marriage. Vows or no vows. Commitment or no commitment. Doesn't matter. From this day - until the day that you no longer want me - you are mine!"

Brian went very still, and his eyes were as opaque as emeralds in the darkness, so dark that Justin could read nothing in them - no light, no love, no joy, no anger . . . nothing. Until there was a faint stirring, a glimmer that was not unlike the first, pale precursor of dawning, accompanied by a faint sigh, preliminary to . . . Brian pushed up then, using his size and strength to unseat his small but wiry companion and tilt him to his side until they were lying face-to-face, with virtually no space between them as Brian's hands came to rest framing Justin's face, but lightly, as if he feared that his touch might cause injury.

"Have I ever told you," he said softly, "how beautiful you are? You're a miracle, Justin. You . . . breathe life into me." He smiled then, obviously embarrassed by such a lesbianic admission, and a tiny glint of mischief flared in his eyes. "My own personal little fountain of youth." But the mischief -
and the sardonic tone of voice - was gone quickly, as he paused and moved to touch his lips against Justin's eyes, first one and then the other, with aching gentleness. "You make me believe in something beyond myself. Something I never knew existed, until you."

Justin pulled back slightly, and lifted his hand to run it through dark, silky locks. "And the guilt?"

Brian sighed. "It's a part of me."

"But . . ."

Brian pulled his young lover closer, until Justin's face was buried in the natural niche of his throat. "I am what I am, Justin. I tried to change for you once before, and look where that got us."

Justin lay still, content to feel Brian's breath caress the silkiness of his hair. "But I don't want you to be miserable. I don't want you to mourn because you think you hurt me."

Brian smiled. "There's a simple remedy for that."

The blond pulled back then, sensing that this was important and needing to watch the expression on Brian's face to understand it. This mattered. "Like what?"

Brian went very still and waited until Justin was looking directly into his eyes, the windows - according to the poets - of his soul. "Just stay with me," he said, very softly but very deliberately. "That's all."

Justin didn't bother trying to conceal the tears that sprang to his eyes as he threaded his fingers through Brian's and brought their joined hands to his mouth. "We fight together," he whispered. "For each other. With each other. Side by side, against all comers. No more letting anyone else decide what's right for us, or dictate what we should do or how we should act or what we need. Right?"

Brian shrugged. "Unless . . ."

But Justin was not buying it. "Right?" he repeated, more urgently, while nibbling at the base of Brian's thumb, almost hard enough to hurt.

The tall brunette grinned. "Bossy little shit, aren't you?"

At that, to Brian's surprise - and the dismay of his cock which was, by this time, very hard, very hot, and feeling very deprived - Justin leapt to his feet. "Come with me," he laughed, "and I'll show you bossy."

"Justin," Brian said quickly, rising with only a tiny nuance of unsteadiness to detract from his usual easy grace. "Wait. If we're going to do this, if it's really time to lay all our cards on the table, then you have to hear it all."

Justin closed his eyes, and wanted - more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life - to refuse to listen. To run, and keep running. To not hear what came next because something told him that it would be crucial - even vital - to the question of whether or not they could build a future together, and what if . . . Very deliberately, he refused to complete that thought, and simply waited.

Brian wrapped his arms around Justin's waist, and leaned forward until his lips were just touching the curve of the blond's ear. "It's a double-edged sword, Justin. I never wanted to feel this, but now that I do, I can't do it half way. Yes, life without you is something I - I never want to go through again, but . . . but if the choice is between staying away from you to keep you safe and risking your life, then - then, there is no choice. Do you understand me? I can live with whatever I have to live with, but
letting something happen to you - or to Gus - because of me. That's . . . that's something I couldn't stand, and you have to realize what that means."

Justin pulled back then, and stared up into the green-flecked eyes that were staring down at him, offering complete candor - and demanding nothing less in return. "I do," he said finally, "but . . ."

"No. You don't."

Justin frowned, obviously confused. "Why do you . . ."

Brian's inhalation was hoarse and shaky. "Because you don't know what it's like." He closed his eyes then, and was instantly transported back, and it was as fresh and indelible in his mind as if it had happened only moments ago. "I had to stand there and watch you die. That's what I thought was happening. I was watching your life bleed out of you, and I could hear Hobbs screaming that it was what you deserved. That it was what all faggots deserved. And your blood was pouring over my hands, and it was so hot and bright and slick, and then . . . then it started to cool and thicken, and it was like . . . it was like it was you, going cold and dead in my arms."

He opened his eyes then, and stared down at the exquisite, painfully young face looking up at him. "Don't ask me to risk that again, because I can't. If you tell me that I have to stop protecting you, in order for us to be together, then . . . we can't be together. Because I can't go through that again."

Justin studied the expression on Brian's face, and the pure, unshielded love glowing in his eyes, and knew what he had to say. And knew that he had to mean it, as well. Just saying it was not enough. "Then protect me," he whispered, "just as long as you remember that I have to do the same. You're Brian Kinney - the great and powerful - and you have to protect us both, because if anything happens to you, then we're both lost. Maybe you're right; maybe you could live without me, although I doubt it. But I don't think I could say the same, and I don't want to find out. So . . . together - or not at all."

Perhaps it was not exactly the answer Brian had hoped for, but, ultimately, he decided that he could live with it.

"Now be very still," Justin whispered. "I think it's time to put this deep discussion to bed and concentrate on more immediate concerns."

The smile that touched Brian's lips was spectacularly beautiful. "Such as?"

Brian felt a jolt of pure joy as he saw the light of mischief flare anew in Justin's eyes. "Such as . . . this."

Justin was on his knees, opening Brian's fly, and swallowing his throbbing cock so quickly that neither of them had the time - not to mention the inclination - to check to see if anyone was watching.

Someone was, but not for long.

Justin had always had a lovely, innate talent for administering exquisite blow jobs, and he had only gotten better at it over the years, so it didn't take him long to nuzzle and suck and lick and deep throat the perfectly-shaped, thick organ in his mouth to bring Brian to a mind-bending orgasm, which almost sent him to his knees. Thus, for once it was Justin who provided the safety net, who caught him and cradled him in strong, steady arms and soothed him until his breathing returned to semi-normal rhythm.

"Holy shit! That was hot!"
Justin's smile was ridiculously smug. "When you're sufficiently recovered - Geezer - you think you can manage to hobble along and follow me upstairs?"

"Where we going?"

Justin leaned close, and dragged the flat of his tongue up the center of Brian's chest, pausing along the way to detour to dark nubs, which were already hardening once again, generating one of Justin's genuine, sunshine-caliber smiles. Another one of those things that (he hoped) would never change was Brian's ability to instantly recover from his last orgasm, in order to get ready for his next one. "We have a date, you and I."

"What kind of date?"

"With a tub full of frosting. Do you have any idea how wonderful that huge, beautiful, iron-hard dick is going to taste when I get through slathering it up with thick, dark mocha chocolate?" He leaned closer. "First I'm going to lick it off. Then I'm going to suck it off. And then . . ."

"And then?" Brian's whisper was rough and honey-sweet.

"And then I'm going to fuck you, Mr. Kinney. Deep and slow, and very gentle. No pain, no rush, no urgency. Just me inside you, where I'll always belong."

Brian grinned and nuzzled the soft spot just below Justin's ear. "We might have to fight about that, Sunshine."

The blond nodded, and Brian felt his breath catch in his throat when he read the pure, undiluted love in the younger man's eyes as Justin picked up a half-empty bottle of beer on the table beside them and lifted it in a semi-mocking toast. "Here's to the Taylor-Kinney War. May it live long - and prosper."

Brian's laugh was rich and full and infectious. "How did I ever live without you, you ridiculous little twat?"

"You didn't," came the answering whisper. "Now haul your ass upstairs, Kinney. Mocha frosting waits for no man."

Trina Thomas was retrieving her purse and windbreaker from the front hall closet when she heard the clatter of footsteps thumping through the kitchen and then up the stairs in a broken rhythm - starting and stopping and starting again - accompanied by murmurs and whispers and the snicker of laughter, and she paused for a minute, waiting until she heard the solid clunk of the closing of the master bedroom door before taking her leave.

It had been a long day, and she was very tired. Nevertheless, she could not quite suppress the tiny smile that tugged at her lips. A long, productive day.

Trina had made no bones about it. When she looked at the long, tall, beautiful drink of water who was Brian Kinney, and the adorable young blond who was Justin Taylor, she felt like weeping to realize that neither of them would ever establish a traditional family, or father children by some suitably lovely young woman.

And yet - she had to admit it, though she found it hard. There was something profoundly beautiful about the interaction between the two of them. She had never had any close contact with homosexual couples before, had never even contemplated the reasons for their existence, and had never once had
Until now.

She had not expected to be touched by the sight of the two young men together; she had not expected to concede that their love could be real and precious and exquisitely lovely.

She had not expected to believe - period.

And she'd been wrong.

And now, it seemed, she had another lesson to learn, about how same-sex love could be every bit as painful and heartbreaking as the so-called 'normal' kind.

She paused in the doorway of the seldom-used front parlor - a tiny room with little to recommend it, especially its non-existent view. Which, she realized abruptly, was exactly what had drawn its current occupant to tuck himself into its darkest corner where he was still sitting, concentrating on nothing more than regulating his breathing, and - obviously - not hearing anything beyond it.

"Can I get you anything, Agent McClaren?" She asked gently.

The light in the room was almost non-existent, but she could see him flinch away from the softness of her tone and the sympathy it conveyed. "No. Thanks. It's late. You should be getting home."

There was a sudden, muffled burst of laughter drifting down from overhead, and he flinched again.

"You know," she said slowly, "there's a lovely little beachside bar down at the marina. It's a ten minute walk from here, and there's always a lively crowd. And I hear they have the best Mojitos on the coast."

He managed to summon up a weary smile. "I'm working, in case you've forgotten."

Another faint burst of shared laughter - a deep, rich basso rumble and a softer, sweeter and somehow more seductive tenor response.

"I haven't forgotten," she answered, "but maybe you should - for once. Does the phrase 'above and beyond the call' mean anything to you?"

He shook his head. "In the language of the agency, there's no such thing."

She moved further into the room and perched on the arm of the worn old sofa. "There are others around who could take over for you."

"No," he replied with a sigh. "There aren't. It's my job."

"Maybe," she agreed, "but sometimes a smart man knows when to step aside."

"I can't . . ."

"Chris," she said gently, "you don't need to be here tonight. It's too much to ask, of anyone."

But McClaren was as solid as a stone tower. "I'm the one who keeps him safe."

"Yeah? And who does the same . . . for you?"

He stood up and walked across the room to stand before the narrow window that looked out toward
the front entrance where two security staffers were taking advantage of the small booth-style gatehouse to shelter from the last remnants of the rain, and probably flipping a coin to see which of them would remain snug and dry and semi-dozing in the relative comfort of the tiny building and which would take the next perimeter patrol - randomly scheduled within every given hour. Faint strains of Jim Morrison's incredibly tender rendition of *Touch Me* was drifting across the yard, and McClaren almost rolled his eyes at the tongue-in-cheek quality of Fate at its drollest.

"I'm gonna love you
Till the heavens stop the rain." *

_Fuck!_

"Thanks, Trina, but you really don't have to be concerned. It's not anything I haven't dealt with before. So just . . ."

"Is that so?" she asked quickly, her skepticism not even remotely tempered by her sense of empathy. "So you fall in love with everyone you're charged to protect? You must have your own personal shrink on a full-time retainer."

His smile was rueful. It was seldom that he was so thoroughly busted. "Okay. That was a stupid thing to say, but I can deal with it."

"Because you have no alternative," she said softly.

He could only nod.

She picked up her things, ready to depart, but she hesitated. "You surprised me, Agent McClaren. I would have thought you'd be immune - to charms like his."

Despite himself, the FBI agent laughed. "Charms? You think he has charms?"

"When it suits him," she answered.

He spent another minute gazing out into the night, considering how to respond. "Brian's so-called 'charms' are just a means to an end. He can use them - or not - according to the needs of the moment. I have no doubt that he frequently charms potential clients or business associates - people he needs to cultivate. But other than that, I don't think he gives a shit if anyone is charmed or not. So . . . no, it's not charm, Trina. It's more primal than that. It's . . ."

But he fell silent then, obviously unsure how to explain something that he actually found inexplicable.

"Elementary, perhaps?" she replied, her eyes soft with understanding. "You've actually managed to get a glimpse of the man inside and found . . . what?" Her voice grew more gentle, dropping almost to a whisper. "Something you never thought you'd find in anybody."

"Aren't you tired?" he asked sharply. "I'd think . . ."

"No point in sniping at me, Baby," she replied. "I'm not the one that put that hurt in your gut."

"There's no hurt in my gut," he said coldly.

"No? You could have fooled me. I could have sworn you were sitting here in the dark, trying to figure out how to say 'good-bye'."
"Am I going somewhere?"

Her sigh was gentle as she stepped forward and braced his face with gentle hands. "No. You're standing still, while he's . . . he's already gone. I think . . . he was always gone."

A quick, barely discernible grimace touched his face, but McClaren had said everything he was going to say, and she wished for a moment that she could turn off her insight, that she could refuse to understand how he felt as he offered her a final barely-there smile before moving back into the house. The man was struggling to deal with something he'd never expected to face - a side effect of his interaction with Brian Kinney that neither of them had anticipated, and she wondered if they would ever completely manage to confine it to the past and leave it there. Something told her that it would leave scars on both of them, scars which might fade in time, but would never be completely gone.

She heard the agent make his way through the cottage's darkened interior and open the door to the deck, just as another intimate murmur of laughter drifted down from upstairs, and she hoped that he'd made his escape in time - that he hadn't been forced to listen to it - but she understood that, in the end, it wouldn't make any difference. Whether he'd heard it or not, whether he'd seen it or not - and she was pretty sure that he had - it wouldn't change a thing. He knew what was happening in that bedroom. He knew what it meant and what it boded for him.

Chris McClaren would certainly recognize a farewell when he saw it, whatever guise it might take.

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The car was fourteen years old, but it was beautifully kept, its deep scarlet paint job - known, back in the day, as candy-apple red - and black rally stripes almost pristine, providing eloquent evidence of loving, meticulous care by its owner. Perhaps it was not quite old enough - yet - to be considered a classic, but Nicholas Avolar was sure that it would achieve that status one day. It was his passion. Everybody needed one, of course, and this was his. He might, on occasion, have fleeting thoughts of other things that might spark his interest or intrigue his thoughts or engage his feelings, but he didn't allow himself to wander very far into the landscape of those fantasies.

Nicholas had seen enough in his young life to know about prices that had to be paid and things that had to be resisted, if one were to have any hope for survival. And if, deep in his core, he knew that accepting such limitations was tantamount to sacrificing any hope of ever allowing anyone to get to know his true identity - beneath the surface - it was simply another thing that had to be handled.

Nobody ever said that life was fair.

But he loved his Camaro Z28 hatchback. It was his one extravagance, his one indulgence, the one thing he owned that he really could not afford, but would never, ever relinquish. He smiled whenever he recalled that the purchase of it had been made possible only by the assistance of one of the Club's primary movers and shakers, as a reward for Nicholas' devotion to providing impeccable service and unwavering loyalty to the select group of patrons who were his responsibility. Perhaps it had not been a completely selfless act of charity, since it had certainly insured Nicholas' renewed determination to provide any service - no matter how big or how small - that the man might need. Nevertheless, he knew he would never forget it and never be able to repay the kindness.

His shift was over now, and it had been a particularly grueling day as it always was when the patrons were conducting investigations into potential candidates for admission. The vetting process was strictly confidential, of course - swathed in deliberately arcane ritual; only the executive committee members were familiar with the full criteria used in the final analysis. But part of the process involved an elaborate dinner party to observe how potential recruits interacted with existing
members, and it always required exceptional efforts from the staff. Everything had to be perfect, from the setting, to the service - from pre-dinner cocktails to post-prandial cigars - and, most particularly, to the quality, quantity, and presentation of the food. On this particular occasion, the results had been spectacular, with both Rachel Charles and Shirley Harper achieving superb results, and the staff had been treated to effusive verbal acknowledgements and even monetary bonuses from the membership, above and beyond customary gratuities. Not huge sums of money, of course, which would have been considered excessive and in questionable taste. But generous, nonetheless, for those who depended on the Club for their livelihood.

Nicholas slipped his hand into his pocket to make sure the three crisp twenty-dollar bills were still where he'd tucked them, as he moved toward his car, pausing to use the tail of his shirt to gently buff away a smudge on the passenger-side rear fender.

God, he loved this car, and he paused to savor its sleek, beautiful lines and run his fingers across the horizontal bar of the spoiler.

He particularly loved when somebody else - friend, acquaintance, passing stranger - expressed appreciation of his pride and joy, as was happening at this moment, when Shirley Harper was coming toward him, her eyes sweeping over the car, front to rear and back again, with an appreciative smile.

"Okay," she called with a quick laugh as she approached, "let me guess. You got yourself a rich old sugar mama who bought you a coming-of-age present when you turned eighteen."

He frowned for a moment, before deciding to accept the comment as the good-natured ribbing it was intended to be.

"Nope," he replied. "I bought it myself - with a little creative financing, courtesy of a friend. You like?"

"Jesus! What's not to like? It's a classic, Nicholas. What do you do? Spit-shine it every day?"

"Pretty much."

"Bet it's a real chick magnet, huh?"

Nicholas' eyes dropped quickly as a flush stained his cheeks. "Not so much."

And in the mind of Sharon Briggs - undercover cop extraordinaire - a soft bell began a repetitive "ding, ding, ding", and she wished, for a moment, that she could produce a Brian-Kinney equivalent to test her theory. Either Brian in the flesh, to tap into his infallible gay-dar, or a similarly irresistible counterpart, to watch the youth's reaction to sex-on-legs. But on second thought, she was pretty sure she wouldn't need it. Her own gay-dar - more commonly used to identify lesbianism in her own gender - was probably enough, in this case. Nevertheless, she still wished that she had access to typical Kinney wisdom at this moment. Despite his well-deserved reputation as a rogue and a bounder, Brian had always exhibited a startling ability to come up with exactly the right words to guide young, frightened gay men through the maze of sexual uncertainty and the trauma of coming out.

She wished she knew what to say to young Nicholas, to help him find his way, but escorting young males through their de-closeting experience was not exactly her forte. But then, she realized, there might be someone else who could provide the guidance he needed, and with considerably more tact than he might have gotten from the always honest but frequently too candid Stud of Liberty Avenue.
"Don't suppose you'd care to offer a lady a ride?" she asked, deliberately ignoring the rosy flush that still discolored his cheeks. "Unless you have something else to do," she added, not wanting to alarm him by pushing too hard.

"No," he answered quickly. "Not a thing. But what about Miss Rachel?"

"Long gone, Hon," she replied, moving around the car to wait beside the passenger door. "Mr. Clayton's driver always drives her home after one of her culinary triumphs. By this time, she's knee-deep in dishing up late supper. You hungry?"

He moved around the car to open the door for her. "I, uh, I don't think the rest of the Charles family are too fond of me. Especially Buddy. But I'll give you a lift."

She waited until he slipped behind the steering wheel and started the car, enjoying the throaty growl of the engine. "Sweet," she said with a grin. "And you should tell Buddy to go fuck himself. Miss Rachel likes you just fine, and I figure you've gotta be hungry since you sure as shit didn't have time to eat anything between juggling courses."

She lit a cigarette then, rolling down her window to let the smoke escape, and sneaked a quick look at him as he dropped into first gear to make his exit from the parking lot, before coasting down the hill toward the street, where he shifted into second as he eased into traffic. "They really keep you hopping, don't they? Mr. Clayton treats you like his personal servant."

She feigned disinterest as she noted the quick flare of resentment in his eyes as his face grew stony. "I owe Mr. Clayton, and so does my family. He's done a lot for us."

"Really?" she replied. "He doesn't impress me as the philanthropic type."

Though she was careful to avoid looking directly into the young man's face, she noted the quick clinching of his jaw as he accelerated through a caution light. "Not to everyone," he admitted. "But he's been good to my mother. And to me. So I try to return the favor."

At that point, she did turn to look at him, to study the dark brooding quality of his eyes. "From where I sit," she said softly, "it looks like you more than earn whatever he might do for you. You're very attentive to his needs."

For a split second, she thought he might snap at her, offering up a not so subtle suggestion that she keep her snide remarks to herself and mind her own business. But in the end, he didn't. He chose to smile, instead, and brush off her concerns. "Isn't that what being an employee of The Club is all about? Exceptional service, for exceptional clients."

"Spoken like a perfectly trained sycophant," she laughed.

He shrugged. "Ass-kisser extraordinaire. That's me."

She turned to look out the window, understanding that her next comment would be better received if she appeared to be offering nothing more than a casual observation. "I don't envy you. Most of the time, I'm glad I don't have to spend much time in their presence - catering to their needs or listening to their conversations. Doesn't it ever bother you?"

He drew a deep breath. "I make it a point not to listen."

"Oh, come on," she retorted. "I'm only subjected to it once in a while - when the PTB want to congratulate me on my latest ganache praline with crème fraîche creation, or, more likely, pick my brain for the recipe, but even in that limited exposure, I hear more than enough of their phobic crap.
Don't expect me to believe that you don't get sick of it. You're in there constantly, and I don't think they bother to try to watch their words when you're around."

He was silent for a moment as he took advantage of a break in the traffic to accelerate around a bright yellow Hummer, but he looked confused. "Phobic?" he echoed.

"Phobic," she repeated. "People always hate what they're afraid of, don't you think? As in claustrophobic, agoraphobic, xenophobic . . . homophobic. In the end, it all comes down to fear."

She was pretty sure that he remained unconvinced, but at least he was thinking about it.

"Why should they think of watching what they say around me?" he asked finally. "To them, I'm just another piece of furniture - the hired help."

It was flatly spoken, but the undercover cop clearly heard the nuances of resentment that hovered beneath the surface of the youth's resignation. "Stockwell's a real piece of work, isn't he?"

Nicholas smiled, and she was pretty sure that she recognized a gleam of approval in his eyes. "Yeah. The adopted child - if you know what I mean."

She frowned. "No. I don't think I do." Although, in point of fact, she did, but she wanted to hear what he would say, as it would provide more clues to allow her to get to know the individual who lived behind the façade of Nicholas Avolar.

"Stockwell wasn't one of the original blueblood members," he explained. "He was just a peon." His grin was slightly venal. "Like us. Until he managed to scale the political heights and wind up as the leader of Pittsburgh's finest, and a candidate for mayor."

"So . . . what? They welcomed him into the fold?"

He shrugged. "It happens sometimes. Not often, of course. Mostly, you have to be born to The Club, with membership being handed down like some sacred tradition." He grinned quickly. "Or royal blood. But sometimes, it's an advantage to have a few members with political clout, but most of the old guard don't have much interest in running for office. That's the reason for the occasional membership drives, like the one tonight. If you took a look at the guest list - the 'recruits', as the members like to call them - you'd have seen what I mean."

Sharon, who had examined the list carefully and noted the presence of a federal judge, a county commissioner, and a marketing director for a major investment firm, managed to look clueless. "Sorry. I was up to my armpits in crème brulee. What was so special about them?"

"Clout," he replied. "Although most of them won't get in; they just don't fit the mold, if you know what I mean. But a couple will - the ones whose membership will benefit the organization, and who know how to show appreciation for the honor."

"Like Stockwell?"

He nodded. "Like Stockwell."

"Yeah," she said slowly, "but he sort of screwed the pooch, didn't he? With that whole indictment, homophobic-gaybashing business. So why is he still . . ."

Nicholas laughed - a short, ugly bark of disdain. "You don't really think they'd have impeached him for that, do you? Shit! They wanted to pin a fucking medal on him, only they had to maintain a bit of discretion. Political correctness doesn't mean much to our members, but even they can't ignore it
completely. On the surface, anyway."

She blinked. "Impeachment? They actually call it 'impeachment'?"

This time, the laugh was genuine and hearty. "They do. Which is meant to indicate that it's a lot easier to get into the White House than to be welcomed into The Club."

She grinned and nodded. "So... as for Stockwell. What's he up to now? What does he still have to offer as a member?"

Now the smile was bittersweet. "Don't fool yourself, Honey. Stockwell may have taken a lick or two, but he's far from out of the game. He's still got powerful friends, plenty of connections, and major money backers. And he sure as hell hasn't forgotten a thing about what happened to him. If you think he's just going to lie down and fade into the background, think again. For Stockwell, the wheels are always turning, and, when he's ready, you'll be amazed how quickly people are willing to forget that whole anti-gay thing."

"Yeah? Why's that?"

Dark eyes flickered toward her, bright with speculation. "Haven't you heard? Gay-bashing is a fine family tradition in the Pitts, and it's just as likely to get him elected as to prevent it. He's still got plenty of support. He's just biding his time and cleaning up a few loose ends. When he's ready, he'll be right back on the front page, challenging the city to 'clean up its act and support the fine, upstanding, moral position of the community'. If you doubt it, just wait a few months, and see."

Sharon turned to stare at him, barely daring to breathe. "What kind of 'loose ends'?"

"How should I know?" he snapped, downshifting as he approached a major intersection.

She waited until he glanced at her to initiate a quick eye-roll. "Hel-loo-oo," she said, with exaggerated emphasis. "Piece of furniture? Isn't that what you just said to me? So why would you not know?"

He sighed. "You know how I keep my job?" he asked finally.

"By knowing how to kiss ass like a pro?"

Against his will, he grinned. "Unlikely, since they're all got an extensive staff for just that purpose. No. The biggest part of my job - beyond ass-kissing - is discretion. Knowing when to speak, and when to shut my mouth."

She opened her purse and made a big production out of searching through it, huffing a big sigh to emphasize her dissatisfaction in not finding what she seemed to be looking for.

"Did you lose something?" he asked.

"Yeah," she retorted. "My press pass. I need to show you my credentials, so you know it's legit when I offer you a whole... She paused to count up the coins in her change purse, "$2.11 to violate your confidentiality agreement and give me the scoop."

There were a few beats of silence before he started laughing. "You're a trip," he finally managed. "Why are you so interested in Stockwell, or what might go on in The Club?"

She shrugged. "Just curious, mostly. And a little bit paranoid, I guess. I always like to know what's going on around me, so I don't get caught unaware if things go to shit."
He was quiet for a moment, obviously lost in thought, before he took a deep breath and offered his reply. "Well, there's plenty of shit going on, for sure. Most of it, I don't have a clue about - major-league wheeling and dealing involving investments and market manipulations and legislation - shit like that. But once in a while, I pick up on a few things."

"Such as?"

"You remember when all the shit hit the fan during Stockwell's campaign?"

She nodded. "Vaguely."

He smiled. "Nothing vague about it inside the membership. Holy shit! It was like a tsunami or something. They were all just thunderstruck. That somebody had actually had the nerve to stand up and defy a man like Stockwell . . . they were . . ."

"Amazed? Mortified?" she asked, when he seemed unable to find the right word.

But he shook his head, and glanced at her again, his mouth twisted in a smirk that would have done Brian Kinney proud. "Outraged," he said firmly. "They weren't embarrassed, and they couldn't have cared less about whatever Stockwell had done. They were just frustrated that he'd been exposed, and that they'd lost a boatload of money they'd invested in his campaign. And furious at the person who'd exposed him."

She managed to look confused. "Person? What person?"

He didn't answer immediately, choosing instead to fiddle with the radio, changing stations until he came across Coldplay harmonizing about planets moving at the speed of light. "For a long time, I didn't know who he was. They just called him 'the fuckin' fag'. That was when they were busy thinking up all the nasty things they wished somebody would do to him. Later on . . ."

"Later on?" she prompted when he seemed reluctant to continue.

"I learned his name. It was Kinney. Brian Kinney. He was the ad man for Stockwell's campaign in the beginning. But he . . . well, according to the members, he betrayed Stockwell's trust, by digging up some old dirt on him and using it to cost him the election."

"Nicholas," she said slowly, being careful to keep her tone as neutral as possible, knowing she was treading on fragile ground here, "if I recall correctly, Stockwell lost because it came out that he was involved in covering up the details about the murder of a young gay man. How can they possibly believe that it was because of this . . . Kinney person? How was it his fault that Stockwell could have done such a thing?"

The youth sighed. "But that's the thing, Shirley. In their eyes, that Kemp kid wasn't worth worrying about. They never quite dared to say it - publicly - but I'm pretty sure they thought he got what he deserved, and they blamed Kinney for exposing it and turning it into such a big deal."

She could not quite swallow the surge of anger that fire through her. "Nice people, our bosses," she observed, her tone clipped and cold.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Real nice. But you just have to realize that they . . . they come from a different world. They just don't see things the same way we do."

"Is that supposed to excuse this attitude? Jesus, Nicholas, they're . . ."

"Monsters?" he interrupted. Then he sighed. "Yeah. I know, but they're monsters who learned to be
monsters, at their mothers' knees. Or, more likely, at their fathers'. And mostly, it doesn't touch us. We're exempt."

"Really?" she scoffed, deciding that she'd had enough of dancing around the subject. "And what if we were gay, Nicholas? Would we be exempt then?"

She watched closely enough to see that his breath caught momentarily in his throat, but only very briefly. "Guess we'll never know," he replied. "Since we're not."

Every neuron in her mind was screaming at that moment - urging her to challenge him and to demand an explanation of his reasons for making that assumption. But she didn't, because she had something more important on which to focus.

She settled back in her seat, her brow furrowed in thought. Then, she looked over at him, and allowed her eyes to widen. "Kinney," she said quickly. "Wait - I know that name. He was the guy - I saw the pictures in the tabloids - the guy that was abducted and beaten half to death by . . ."

She fell silent then, eyes growing wide, and deep in her mind, she felt the visceral satisfaction that always came at the moment of victory - of confirmation - for Nicholas' expression said it all, even though he did not offer a single word in response to her comment. It was there, nevertheless, in the thick, viscous, acrid horror in his eyes.

She'd have been tempted to shout "Bingo!", if only the circumstances hadn't been so ugly and so dire, and if only this young man had not been in such spectacular pain, even if he didn't even realize it.

Nicholas Avolar knew the truth. Now, all she had to do was get it from him, or find someone who could.

Time for a change of tactic, since she was certain that any further direct pursuit would only frighten him into prolonged silence.

"My brother's going to be at Rachel's," she said, apropos of nothing. "You should sit down with him and talk. I think you'll like him."

"Yeah? Why do you say that?"

She very deliberately did not smile, and didn't even think about giving voice to the thought that was screaming in her mind. Because you're going to take one look and go home dreaming of having him in your bed - not to mention your body.

"Because everybody does, once they get to know him. Although that's a bit of a challenge. Jed can be a bit . . . standoffish."

"Why's that?"

"He's lived through interesting times. He's a veteran. Carries some old scars, but, if you take the time to let him get used to you, it'll be worth the effort."

He glanced at the clock on the dashboard. "I should probably be getting home. My mom worries when . . ."

She grinned. "Your mommie still keeps tabs on you."

His smile was embarrassed. "Yeah. She still thinks I'm twelve."
She let her eyes drift down his body and back up again. "Oh, you may be many things, Young Nicholas, but twelve is not one of them. So how about it? Come in for a minute. For dessert, if nothing else. She's got a new masterpiece she just developed - a personalized version of Bananas Foster, combined with a caramel-base cheesecake."

He grinned. "How do you two stand each other? It must be like the cooking Olympics in that house, every damned day."

Her smile was slightly lopsided. "We decided first thing that we could either compete or join forces so that it's us against the world, and the results have been spectacular."

"Not to mention fattening," he laughed.

"That too," she admitted. "But you gotta admit it - when life really sucks and everything around you is going to shit, there is nothing quite as comforting as a big slab of something delectable, mouthwatering, sinful, and guaranteed to clog your arteries. Except sex, of course, but that's just a different kind of delectable mouthwatering sin, isn't it?"

"A primo-quality eighth of chronic ain't bad either," he observed with a smile.

And Sharon Briggs couldn't quite suppress a huge grin, in the realization that Brian Kinney would most certainly approve of the addition of this young man to the elite ranks of Liberty Avenue society, always assuming that he would ever admit that such a thing actually existed, as he still occasionally denied the possibility of anything being fabulous - or elite - in Pittsburgh.

The grin softened to a smile as she recalled that her father had once observed that Brian Kinney was, in some ways, the most arrogant snob he'd ever met, and she had not bothered to deny it. With appropriate apologies to Thomas Jefferson, she acknowledged that some truths really were self-evident.

"Shit!" said Jared Hilliard, AKA Jed Harper, as he sprawled on a deck chair and unbuckled his belt, his dinner plate - bearing only a few crumbs of the crust of Rachel's extraordinary chicken pot pie - on the table beside him "I'm not coming over here any more."

"Of course, you aren't," said his pseudo-sister. "Until next week."

Incredibly blue eyes, set in a perfectly symmetrical face the color of creamed coffee, glared at her, before closing as he groaned again. "I don't do fat and flabby."

"Aha. A benefit of living on the streets."

"Fuck you, Baby Sister."

"Right back at ya, Brother Mine."

"Aha. A benefit of living on the streets."

"Fuck you, Baby Sister."

Right back at ya, Brother Mine."

Sitting on the top step of the Charles' back porch, Nicholas Avolar alternated between spooning up scoops of an incredibly rich banana/brown sugar/rum/cheesecake concoction, and studying the two people who were seated nearby. The amber reflection from the bare insect bulb in the fixture by the back door was kind to the young woman who - for some reason he could not quite fathom - had developed a fondness for him, in spite of his inveterate shyness. Her skin was particularly lovely - almost translucent - in this light, and her smile was even warmer than usual. He had, at first, found it difficult to believe that she and this tall, muscular, semi-taciturn young man were siblings, since they did not resemble each other in the least. But then they'd begun to talk and snipe at each other, and he
quickly realized that what they lacked in physical similarity, they made up for in almost identical attitude.

But this - this was something new. "Wait," he said sharply, swallowing a mouthful of his dessert far too quickly - which, he thought, was probably a mortal sin, given the quality of the dish. "You . . . you're a street person?"

Hilliard - perfectly in character - went very still and very stiff. "Now how could I be a street person?" he retorted. "My hands and face aren't filthy, I don't smell like week-old garbage, and I'm not pushing around a grocery cart full of junk and swilling Thunderbird. Right?"

"Jed!" snapped his distaff co-conspirator. "Get off his case. He didn't know."

"Jed" allowed himself to look mollified - but only a little.

"Look, Man. I'm sorry, okay? I didn't realize . . ." Nicholas fell silent, as the older man turned to stare at him, and he was momentarily lost in the depths of those incredible eyes. "Are you looking for . . . I mean, if you need a job, maybe I could . . ."

Jared Hilliard - needing nothing from his alternative persona to express his amusement - laughed aloud. "You could what? Put in a good word for me, at your precious Club?"

A quick spark of anger flared in Nicholas' eyes, and Jared had to look away to conceal the quick flash of relief that almost certainly flared in his eyes. At least, the kid - the intensely beautiful, exquisitely vulnerable kid - was not without spirit. "Look, I know it's not exactly most people's dream job, but it's better than nothing, isn't it?"

Hilliard allowed the laughter to falter and leveled a penetrating look at the youth, a look that held something Nicholas could not quite identify, although he did wonder - briefly - why a man like this, who had nothing, who lived on the street and seemed without purpose or focus, would feel sorry for him.

Hilliard, meanwhile, took a moment to exchange glances with his partner-in-crime, grateful for the content of their quick, whispered conversation as he'd entered the house, before he'd been introduced to young Avolar; her observations were - as always - spot on and extremely valuable, and already paying off.

"Not all things are better than nothing," said the homeless man softly, but, to Nicholas' surprise, there was no hostility or resentment in his tone. "But that's something you only learn with time. Nevertheless, thanks for the offer."

Sharon/Shirley had observed the exchange from beneath lowered lashes, apparently intent on spooning up the last of her dessert, but actually well pleased with the direction the conversation was taking. "It's not an idle boast, you know," she commented, her tongue busy with licking the last drop of caramel from the corner of her mouth. "Nicholas is the favorite of the high-muck-a-mucks of The Club - chosen by the In Crowd. When he says he could get you a job, he's probably right."

Hilliard turned to glare at his 'sister', making sure that Nicholas was paying attention. "We've talked about this before, Shirley. I don't want a job like that, and they sure as shit don't want me."

She huffed a dramatic sigh. "You need to be practical, Jed, and stop letting your pride get in your way."

He laughed again, loud and long, and Nicholas found himself grinning, without knowing why. It just seemed appropriate.
"Lots of people would tell you that the homeless *have* no pride," he observed when he was able to catch his breath again.

"Yeah, well, lots of people are stupid."

Hilliard raised his glass of iced tea. "I'll drink to that."

Once more, Nicholas was looking back and forth between the siblings, trying to understand what they were really saying to each other - beyond the obvious. He didn't want to be curious about this man - this vagrant individual who was exactly the kind of person his mother had always cautioned him against - but he couldn't quite manage to turn off his urge to learn more. "So," he said slowly, "is it okay if I ask . . ."

And then, of course, it was Jared's turn to experience that moment of elation, that burst of triumph in recognizing that the bait, so carefully prepared and presented, had been taken. "You can ask whatever you like, providing you realize that I don't have to answer anything at all."

Nicholas nodded. "Why do you choose to . . . You're obviously not disabled; you're in great shape, from what I can see. So why . . ." He looked up then and fell silent as he saw the ice rising in those incredible blue eyes.

"Wow! You're amazing. You've known me . . . what? An hour, tops? And you're already able to vouch for my physical health? You're definitely in the wrong business. You should become an internist - a new version of Dr. House - or a professional psychic."

"I'm sorry," Nicholas said quickly, quietly. "That was a stupid thing to say, and I didn't . . ."

Hilliard got to his feet. "Right. You didn't mean it." He turned to his sister, and managed to wink at her before moving toward the steps. "I'm out of here."

"Hey!" she said quickly. "Did you see the '91 Z28 in front of the house?"

"Yeah? So?"

"So," she replied with a grin, "it belongs to the young miracle worker there."

Hilliard paused, apparently debating with himself whether to go - or linger - and Nicholas, desperate to make amends for a *faux pas* he didn't completely understand, saw his chance. And took it. "Would you like to take a spin in it?"

Nicholas rose quickly. "Come take a look. I've worked really hard on it. When I got it, it was just a beat-up old heap, but now . . . Well, you tell me."

"Z28, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Manual transmission?"

"Yeah."

"V8?"

Nicholas smiled. "What else? I take it you're a fan?"

The older man compressed his lips, not quite managing to suppress a smile. "I owned an '89 IROC-
"Z, back in the day. Before the Army. Before . . ."

The smile became a broad grin. "Then what are we waiting for? Maybe I could buy you a beer?" He chuckled softly. "It was a big tip day, so we could say that drinks are on Chief Stockwell."

Hilliard's eyes narrowed. "He's not the chief any more, is he?" he asked, silently cheering the fact that the young man had broached the topic of the disgraced police chief with no prompting from anyone else.

Nicholas rolled his eyes. "Maybe somebody should tell him that. He still thinks of himself as one of the power brokers."

Hilliard decided that he'd delayed long enough to set the hook solidly. Besides, he really had owned that IROC-Z, and he saw no reason why he should not enjoy a little spin in Nicholas' sweet ride while pursuing further information.

As it turned out, the ride was every bit as sweet as the undercover agent might have anticipated, and Nicholas was delighted at the man's obvious enjoyment of the demonstration of the car's power and superb condition. They rode around for a while, streaking down the freeway and then venturing off into more rural roads with lighter traffic and more opportunities for intricate maneuvers.

Not until they were heading back into the city did Nicholas voice a question which had obviously been on his mind since the subject had been broached on the back porch of the Charles residence.

"What did you mean?" he asked, speeding up to merge into the traffic on I-279. "When you said that you didn't want a job like that, and that they didn't want you. Why wouldn't they want you? You're obviously not stupid, and you're a veteran, which is a big plus as far as they're concerned. And you're smart and strong. And you'd look good in the uniform, and . . ."

"And I'm black. In case you didn't notice."

"Plenty of blacks work at The Club, including me." His voice took on an edge, a bitter vein of steely resentment. "Always assuming that half-breeds count in your view, and your own sister works there. So . . ."

Hilliard shifted in the dark leather of the bucket seat, and turned so he could study the profile of the young man in the driver's seat. "I'm also homeless, Nicholas. You think they'd be OK with that too?"

"But if you had a job, you wouldn't have to be homeless any more, would you?"

Hilliard smiled. "Are you thinking you're going to take on the job of fixing what's wrong with me, Kid? Because if you are, you have no idea what you're letting yourself in for."

"No," the younger man said quietly. "I didn't mean . . . It's not really my business, is it? But I just thought . . ."

"From the perspective of people like your buddy, Stockwell, I'm beyond fixing. Trust me on that. But tell me something. How can you stand being around someone like that? Knowing what he is - what he does. How can you stomach it?"

Nicholas shrugged. "He never did anything to me, so what difference does it make how he treats anybody else?"

"Really? So you don't care what he does to other people, as long as you can keep your cushy little minimum-wage job and your sweet little ride and live in your little fantasy world? It doesn't matter
what else he might be involved in?"

"I didn't say that. It's just . . ."

"You know what people on the street are saying about him? Have you heard the latest gossip?"

"I don't listen much to that kind of thing."

Hilliard's eyes were hard. "Maybe you should. Then maybe you'd hear about that guy who was attacked and beaten half to death by a bunch of gay-bashers after he was grabbed off the street outside the nightclub he owns down on Liberty Avenue?"

"Yeah. I heard about that. But what . . ."

"Turns out he was the guy who was behind the campaign to defeat Stockwell when he ran for mayor. Hell of a coincidence, don't you think?"

Nicholas was suddenly aware of a lump in his throat and a painful knot in his chest. "Don't know anything about that."

"Really?" Hilliard didn't bother to try to disguise his skepticism. "At the very least, I'd think you'd have heard Stockwell and his cronies gloating about that guy's . . . Let's see now. What would they call it? Bad luck, maybe? I'll bet they were tickled pink that he got what he deserved. Right?"


Again, Hilliard turned to study the young man's face. "And you, of course, couldn't say a thing. Right?"

The young man's smile was rueful. "What do you want me to say, Jed? It's my job. And my mother's job. Our lives depend on those people, and . . . look! I'm sorry for that guy. I'm sure he only did what he thought was right, but it's got nothing to do with me."

Abruptly, Hilliard leaned over and touched gentle fingers to the softness below Nicholas' right ear. "Tell me something, Kid," he said softly. "How long do you think you're going to be able to believe that? How long before you can't manage to ignore the truth?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Nicholas said harshly, jerking away from the offending hand. "What are you . . ."

"This is what I meant," Hilliard explained, knowing that he was taking a chance, but seeing no other option. Too much time had elapsed already, and every day that passed without the development of corroborating evidence to support the testimony of Brian Kinney was a day of increasing danger for both Brian and the people close to him. It was time for a leap of faith. "When I said that your precious Club members wouldn't want me working for them. I'm not just black, young Nicholas."

His use of the term favored by the Club patrons for their favorite waiter was deliberate. "And I'm not just homeless. I'm also gay." A calculated pause, and the voice dropped to a gentle murmur. "Just like you."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

It had been a long night, and Chris McClaren was pretty sure he had never been so glad to see the bright streaks of burnt orange and coral sunrise streaking across the eastern horizon.

For the second night in a row, he had slept fitfully, avoiding his bedroom and spending most of the
night in the office, poring over files and evidence and dozing off finally, sprawled on the old sofa with a stack of files spread across his chest. He had known it was not a good idea, that he would pay for it with the coming of the new day, but, in the end, he had also known he had little choice. He simply could not bring himself to climb the stairs and crawl into his bed in the little corner room that overlooked the stretch of shoreline off to the North.

He told himself his reluctance had nothing to do with any sounds he might have overheard in the course of the quick trip to get to his room or while he was burrowing into his bedding. Of course, what he told himself was completely immaterial, but he felt a little better for not forcing himself to confront a truth he just didn't want to see - yet.

As he did every morning, he blessed Trina's thoughtfulness as he moved into the kitchen and was greeted with the rich, full-bodied aroma of coffee in its purest, most elemental form. He would leave the espressos, the lattes, the cappuccinos, and the thousand and one other variations of same to those with exotic tastes; all he wanted was coffee, strong and black and caffeine-rich.

He poured himself a cup, moved to the front door to retrieve the morning paper that one of the security staffers had dropped on the porch, and wandered back through the house to take a seat at the bar in the kitchen where he helped himself to one of the apple-cinnamon muffins that Trina had baked the day before.

The woman was a wonder, and a triple blessing. At least.

He reached over and switched on the Bose Wave radio affixed to the base of the overhead cabinets, adjusting the volume to a pleasant murmur and scanning through a hash of country-western offerings and a couple of hard rock stations before finding something that suited his mood more perfectly.

However, after only a couple of bars of Bill Withers' exquisite rendering of Ain't No Sunshine, he realized his mistake and reached over to find another selection, but he failed to reach his goal, as strong fingers curled around his wrist and pulled his hand back.

"Leave it. Never too early for a little blues."

The FBI agent - deliberately - did not turn to look at the man who was standing behind him. Close behind him. Too close.

"What's the matter?" he asked, his voice steady and without inflection. "All fucked out?"

Brian moved forward briefly, allowing his chest to just brush against McClaren's back, before moving to settle on the adjacent bar stool. "You really want me to answer that," he asked, "or is it just your PMS acting up?"

McClaren turned to stare into the eyes of the smart-ass sitting beside him, noting as he did so that the morning light ignited topaz glints within those hazel depths, and promised himself that he was absolutely not going to smile at the man's incredibly puerile humor.

Then he smiled. "Fuck you, Mr. Kinney."

Then he rose and moved around the bar. "Your usual poison?" he asked, retrieving Brian's favorite mug from the cabinet and reaching for the espresso carafe, in its place beside the more plebeian coffee pot.

"You don't have to wait on me," Brian snapped. "I'm not an invalid."

"No, you're not," McClaren replied, calmly proceeding to pour out a generous serving of the dark,
aromatic liquid. "You're actually a completely capable asshole, but your leg is bothering you this
morning. You were limping when you stepped around me. Too much time on your knees last night,
old man?"

Brian accepted the mug with a mocking grin, while lifting his middle finger in a quick, upward
thrust.

"I'm surprised you're up so early, or are you only up because it was up?"

Brian shook his head. "Just got a call from Ron Peterson. My kid'll be here in an hour."

The song on the radio continued to play.

". . . ought a leave the young thing alone
But ain't no sunshine when she's gone . . ."**

"They're playing your song," McClaren observed.

"Fuck you!"

"Not any more."

Brian simply smiled, and took a moment to savor his espresso, wondering - not for the first time - if
anybody would ever invent a method for mainlining the stuff, directly into the arteries to provide a
mind-blowing boost to start the day.

They sat together for a while, feeling awkward at first, but the unease slowly faded, until they were
finally able to turn and face each other and revel once more in the ability to enjoy the view.

Two beautiful young men, once intimate but separated now by a growing chasm. Nevertheless, they
found that they could still communicate without extraneous words.

"He thinks you did him a favor," Brian said finally, very softly.

"He's wrong."

Brian simply nodded. "I know. Are you . . ."

"If you ask me if I'm okay, I'm going to forget that you're a pathetic cripple and punch your lights
out."

"Okay. Although 'pathetic cripple' is a bit much, don't you think? Give me a couple more days, and
we'll see who's pathetic. Anyway, whatever you said to him, it helped him over a rough patch, so . . .
thanks for that."

McClaren grinned. "So he figured it out. Good for him, and for you."

"Yeah. Good for me. I . . . won't forget it."

The FBI agent laughed. "He's the one who better not forget it. Next time, he might not be so lucky."

"Still, I don't think he'd have figured it out - or that either one of us would have figured it out - if not
for . . .

"There are things known and there are things unknown and in between are . . ."
"The doors***," they chorused together.

Brian turned again to stare into eyes glinting bright with amusement. Then he chuckled softly. "You're the only man I know who can quote Morrison, and make it sound natural."

"And you're the only man I know who could identify the source."

McClaren went back to contemplating the bottom of his coffee cup. "It's not like you were meant to be the love of my life, you know."

Brian nodded. "I know."

But he turned then and leaned forward, his lips just touching those of his companion, there and gone almost too quickly, too gently for the sensation to register. "Thanks for opening that door. I'll remember," he whispered.

Then Brian rose and walked away, leaving McClaren to watch him go. He had not lied; he had never even contemplated the possibility that Kinney might actually be the love of his life, but something inside him had recognized it just the same. It would never be, but it would forever linger in that sweet realm of fantasy unrealized, of might have been.

It was something he would learn to forget - sooner or later.

He turned away then, went back to his coffee, never realizing that the conversation - and the kiss - had been witnessed by a silent observer who had run through a gamut of emotions during the brief interlude. Dismay, uncertainty, anger, alarm - but in the end, there was only gratitude.

Justin Taylor had always been a smart young man, and he was certainly wise enough to understand that, with a lot of help and a little luck, he had dodged a bullet.

*Touch Me* - John Densmore, Rob Krieger, Jim Morrison, Ray Manzarek -the Doors

**Ain't No Sunshine** - Bill Withers

***Jim Morrison

_tbc_
In history as in human life, regret does not bring back a lost moment and a thousand years will not recover something lost in a single hour.

-- Stefan Zweig

The cottage known as Bailey's Landing, having been constructed as a comfortable residence for a rural family, had been well suited to its purpose during its early years, but designed more toward the practical than the luxurious. That, however, had been remedied when it had been renovated to serve as a rental unit for vacationers. Although it would never be described as a four-star accommodation, it did boast certain amenities that recommended it to someone like Brian Kinney.

It was private, with no near neighbors. It was comfortable, clean, and well maintained, thanks to the efforts of a skilled and devoted caretaker. It was equipped with a modern kitchen and top-of-the-line appliances. And it had a shower in the master bathroom big enough to accommodate a team of Sumo wrestlers, if necessary.

Brian was just making his exit from that massive, luxurious enclosure - unaccompanied, for once - when he heard a thundering rumble racing up the stairs and down the hallway toward his bedroom. Thus, he was barely draped in a damp towel when a small figure came crashing through the doorway and leaping into his arms.

Gus, still much too young to understand the underlying meaning of the principle, knew one certain thing about his father, nevertheless: Brian Kinney did not believe in locks. Therefore, the child never even hesitated when he approached the bathroom door at a full run; he simply threw the door open and leaping into his arms.

Brian managed to catch the little human projectile and spin him around without falling back under the assault of flailing arms and legs, and spared a quick thought that this was proof positive that Rick Turnage was truly a miracle-worker. The fact that he could withstand the assault without going down under the force of the impact justified every dime the surgeon had charged for his services - which was plenty.

Apparently a worthwhile investment.

As Brian spun around, hugging his only offspring close and trying not to flinch away from the high-pitched shriek of "Daaadddee" that encompassed two full octaves and hit a decibel level almost beyond human tolerance, Justin came racing into the bathroom, intent on rescuing his partner and saving him from the unintended yet possibly lethal damage that a six-year-old in attack mode could inflict.

But he was too late, of course, as any potential bruising had already occurred by the time he arrived. He was not too late, however, to appreciate the spectacular view of Brian - dark hair dripping and disheveled, perfect lips curving in the achingly tender smile reserved for only one special individual, acres of golden skin, slick with water droplets, wrapped in a crimson towel, with his arms clasping a miniature version of himself to his chest. Justin suddenly found it difficult to breathe, lost in the beauty of the vision before him and realizing that the phrase "like father, like son" had almost
certainly been coined for just such a moment. He paused briefly to acknowledge a fleeting surge of sympathy toward a whole new generation of victims, currently too young and clueless to realize that they were waiting in the wings to learn about the hazards of loving a Kinney, before abandoning his musings to rush forward and participate in the joy of the reunion, reveling in the exultation of being included in the intimacy of such an intense family encounter, but swallowing a tiny little nuance of envy when he could not quite ignore the fact that, although Gus loved him dearly, it would never approach what the little boy felt for his father - an observation which prompted the stirring of a scrap of memory.

"All right, so I'm a shitty father. Are we surprised? I'm upholding a fine family tradition."

And with that image, quick as the speed of thought, the envy was gone, replaced by a devout wish that Brian could see himself through his son's eyes and the eyes of those who were privileged to watch the two of them together, so he would understand just how far from a 'shitty' father he truly was.

With no indication of any physical discomfort, Brian strode into the bedroom with both his son and his lover held close, and sank to his knees beside the bed where he deposited Gus with a firm bounce, eliciting a spate of giggles from the six-year-old. Then the young father sat back on his heels and inspected his son, taking in the red straw cowboy hat dangling from a cord around his neck, the bright blue shirt sporting images of Woody and Buzz, the new but artfully faded 501's, and the authentic cowboy boots - Frye's, he thought, reluctantly conceding that the kid's grandfather might have fairly good taste after all, for a breeder.

Gus - of course - was talking in characteristic Gus-fashion, regaling his dad and his Justin, and anybody else who happened to be within earshot, of his adventures in the Magic Kingdom and his breakfast with Mickey and Minnie and Donald and Goofy, of how much he loved the flying Dumbo ride and how cool Epcot was and how much fun he and Gramps had on the jungle cruise and the pirate ship, and Brian realized that it wasn't so much what the child was saying as the sweet tone and cadence of that breathless voice that he found almost intoxicating - so much so that it quickly became almost like background music, allowing him to lose himself in the rhythm and the exuberance of the recitation without focusing on a single word. As for Gus, he barely took a breath as he shifted from sharing the tales of his exploits in the Disney version of Wonderland to recounting stories about all the quaint little hamlets and villages they had driven through on their way up the coast, as Brian settled more comfortably to enjoy the symphonic recitation of how much his son had loved . . . the super-cool motor coach that Gramps rented for the trip, that had a real bathroom and a bunk bed just for Gus to sleep in and how Gene - whose real name is You-Gene, but nobody calls him that, and why would anybody want to be called You-Gene, anyway - had let him help pick out the best place on the beach to park the big rig - and how Gene had laughed and said that they were all 'ficially 'trailer trash' now, and what was trailer trash anyway - and how they'd roasted hot dogs and marshmallows and made s'mores over an open fire while they camped out so close to the ocean that he could hear the waves when he went to bed - and how Gene always slept sitting up in the driver's seat, which made no sense at all except that maybe it was because there was only the one bed for Gramps, and Gus was pretty sure that Gramps wasn't much like Daddy since he didn't seem to want any other men in his bed, although he wasn't sure why Mama always said that Daddy would sleep with all the men in the world if he could, since Gus had never seen him sleep with anybody but Justin, and how Gus had noticed something one morning when Gene was getting dressed, but he'd waited to get here so he could ask his daddy why Gene would wear a holster under his shirt, and he wasn't sure there was a real gun in the holster, but why would their driver have a real gun, and how the other guy who was always around - his name was Howie, another funny name - followed everywhere they went in that ugly little green car, and he didn't talk as much as Gene but he was really good at starting a campfire, and he'd been really nice about trying to find a place where Gus could get a double scoop of Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough ice cream, and how Gramps had taken
him to eat at a place called Popeye's where he was just sure he was going to have to eat fish, because Popeye was a sailor man, so of course any restaurant with his name would have fish, and Gus didn't much like fish, but Mommie always told him he had to be polite and try to taste a little bit of everything whenever somebody was nice enough to buy him some food, but, guess what, Daddy, he didn't have to eat fish at all, because it was chicken they served him, and it was really good, so they'd found more Popeye's in all of the little towns they drove through on their trip, so he could have more of their chicken, and something called red beans and rice they served with it which he really, really liked, and the biscuits were great too, and he had decided that he was kind of glad that they hadn't taken the interstate, even though it would have been faster, because it was always boring riding down the interstate, even though there was a really cool DVD player in the motor coach with bunches of Sesame Street and Disney movies - even one with Captain Jack Sparrow that he was pretty sure Mommie wouldn't have let him watch, but Gramps said it would be their little secret, and this way he'd gotten to see lots of the ocean and the beaches, and some big islands, and lots of places with piers and boats and great big birds flying low over the water, and how Daddy looked better than before because he wasn't all wrapped up in bandages any more, but he was still pretty banged up, and did it still hurt, and how Gramps had helped him gather up lots of seashells and sand dollars and build a sand castle, and guess what else, Daddy, Gramps had even bought him a real, live puppy and . . ."

It was at that point that Gus finally ran out of breath and took a minute to look up into his father's eyes and recognize the bright glimmer of pure, bottomless affection he saw there, so he simply threw himself forward so he could once more be clasped tight to that sculpted chest. Brian, meanwhile, was focusing in on his son's final words. "Puppy? What puppy?"

There had, of course, been rational reasons for all the choices made concerning the trip up from Orlando - choices that had more to do with security than less practical concerns, although Ron Peterson had made certain that his grandson would be entertained and given every opportunity to enjoy the ride. It had been decided immediately, upon learning of the potential threat to the boy's safety, that a journey via motor coach, avoiding the I-95 corridor and sticking to less heavily-traveled highways and byways, would be less easily tracked or anticipated than either a commercial flight or a jet charter, especially since the vehicle lease had been negotiated under FBI auspices. At the same time, Gene and Howie - AKA Agent Eugene Spalding and Kinnetik security employee Howard Woolsey - would provide constant surveillance during the journey. It had also been made clear to everyone involved - both by FBI brass and by Brian Kinney himself - that Gus was to know nothing about any possible threats or the need for clandestine action to secure his safety, and that any violation of that condition would result in both official sanctions by the agency, and - more immediately - suffering the wrath of the legendary Stud of Liberty Avenue. Needless to say, the only individuals who were less concerned about the latter consequence than the former were those who had never had the pleasure - or not - of dealing with Brian Kinney in full protective mode. It simply did not bear thinking about.

As a result of this caution, Gus had arrived rosy-cheeked and bright-eyed and delighted with the opportunity to regale his father with tales of his adventures, and Brian had been content to simply listen.

Until the utterance of those unexpected, startling words.

"What puppy?" Brian repeated, twisting on his knees as Ron Peterson strolled into the room, not quite successful in his efforts to subdue a small, squirming bundle of white fur in his arms, a tiny creature that seemed to be in the midst of some kind of spastic contortion intended to allow it to turn itself inside out and upside down while simultaneously freeing it from the grip that prevented it from reaching its objective - an objective which was currently clasped tight against Brian's chest.
Ron Peterson drew a deep breath, obviously caught on the horns of a dilemma, wondering whether to be more embarrassed by his inability to control the frantic little beast, or by having yielded to the temptation to buy the tiny creature in the first place, and the scowl on Brian's face was not offering any indication of which would prove to be the better alternative. The older man realized abruptly that this was the classic definition of a no-win scenario.

At that point, three things occurred almost simultaneously. Gus shifted to rearrange himself on his father's lap, causing Brian to lose his balance and plop to the floor, flat on his ass and without a nuance of his customary style and grace; the bundle of fur in Peterson's arms succeeded in freeing itself and plunging toward its target; and Justin leapt forward in an attempt to intervene - to rescue his partner, resettle Gus, and catch the ferocious little canine before it could reach its objective - but he was laughing too hard to accomplish anything.

During the ensuing mayhem, Brian's towel worked loose and fell free, leaving him naked and slightly disoriented from his seat on the floor as his son and a four-legged whirlwind of boundless energy set out to explore the sculpture of his body.

"Hey, Daddy, your tallywacker is showing. Will mine be that big when I grow up? Is that why Mama calls you a big dick sometimes? You know what? I didn't name the puppy yet. I just call him 'Pup', because I wanted you to help me find a perfect name for him. Okay, Daddy?"

Brian, needless to say, was speechless by this time, alternating between attempting to regain his lost dignity and protect himself against the flailing hands and limbs of his writhing child and the enthusiastic assaults of a tiny but ridiculously ferocious puppy that seemed determined to investigate all the enticing nooks and crannies of the naked body that was suddenly available for its exploration, and staring daggers at Ron Peterson - the perpetrator of this outrage - and at his beautiful, but soon-to-be-in-mortal-danger young lover, once he succeeded in getting his hands on the insufferable little twink, who couldn't seem to stop laughing.

"How about Nosy Little Bugger?" Brian muttered, not quite under his breath, shifting to prevent the dog from working its way more deeply under the towel he was desperately trying to retie around him, which, of course, simply sent Justin into a renewed gale of laughter.

The timing was perfect, and the tableau complete when Trina Thomas leaned through the doorway, allowed herself a single moment to notice - and enjoy - the view, before flashing her trademark brilliant grin and contributing her own wry comment. "Entertaining, are we?"

But if she - or anyone else - expected Brian Kinney to blush with embarrassment, it was simply proof-positive that they did not know the man at all. With a characteristic smirk, Brian managed to push himself up, simultaneously avoiding the flailing limbs of his son and the determined assault of the tiny dog, and retrieve his towel which he tucked around himself once more, in a completely leisurely manner. Wounded or not; aging or not - he was still Brian Kinney, and he had never once been ashamed of exposing his body. He was not about to start now.

"Did you want something," he asked, with a lifted eyebrow, "or did you just come racing up here to get in on the ambush?"

Her grin grew brighter. "Just to tell you that breakfast is served, Lord and Master, and that Chris is sitting in the office with a huge grin on his face and said to tell you that you're going to miss the fireworks if you don't get your butt downstairs, and soon." Then she dropped her eyes to stare at the miniature version of Brian Kinney who was looking up at her with eyes every bit as beautiful as his father's. "And to demand an introduction to Mini-You."

Brian blinked. "Mini . . . me?"
Trina sank to her knees and took Gus's hands in her own, absolutely certain that she would never see a more exquisite child. "Hello, Little Man. I'm Trina, and you are . . . God! You're beautiful. Christ, Brian, what did they do? Clone you?"

Gus tilted his head, fascinated by the woman's huge, almost black eyes and the fact that she smelled amazing, like fresh gingerbread and apple butter. "My mama says I look just like the world's biggest asshole."

"Gus!" said Ron Peterson sternly. "Language!"

Brian laughed while Gus rolled his eyes. "But I didn't say it, Gramps. Mama did."

Peterson smiled and looked up to meet Brian's eyes. "'Mama', apparently, says a lot of things," he observed quietly.

Brian allowed himself a tiny, enigmatic smile. "I'm sure she does, but I'd bet good money that we haven't heard the half of it, yet."

Justin, having finally managed to stop laughing, was now regarding his partner with a quizzical frown. "Brian? What's going on?"

The smile became a full-out grin, and Justin was abruptly reminded of how seldom he saw that no-holds-barred expression of satisfaction on that perfect face.

"Payback," said Brian softly. Then a tiny shadow formed in his eyes. "Guess that makes me a real asshole to enjoy the prospect so much."

And Justin, after a split-second hesitation, burst into renewed peals of laughter. "You," he gasped, when he could once again muster breath to speak, "are so full of shit."

"Language, Juss," said Gus sternly.

Brian grinned again, enjoying both Justin's candor and the interplay between his son and his lover, almost as much as he enjoyed the caress of a firm young body against his mostly bare skin as Justin stepped forward and slipped into his arms. "You've never once given a shit whether anyone else thinks you're an asshole, and if you tell me that you're going to change now - because of some screwed-up notion that it's what I'd want - then we're going to have our first serious fight. I don't want some sanctimonious, pious, conformist, pseudo-Christian martyr; I want Brian Kinney, in all his smart-ass glory. And after all the shit you've gone through . . . yeah, I know, Gus . . . you're entitled to gloat over any little bit of payback you get. As long as I get to gloat right along with you."

Brian touched his lips to Justin's forehead before whispering. "It might get ugly, Sunshine, and you might feel kind of caught in the middle, considering who else is involved."

Justin flashed his trademark smile. "When it comes to you, there is no middle, no matter who else gets in the way."

At this point, Trina leaned forward to collect Gus, with promises of banana pancakes and fruit smoothies, and paused just long enough to whisper in Brian's ear. "You're a lucky prick, Brian Kinney. Most people are fortunate if they only get one bright kid. You've got two."

Brian glared at her, and did not - quite - actually tell her to fuck off, but the sparkle in her eyes told him that she'd heard it anyway.

"Now," said Justin firmly, as Trina led Gus from the room, "you put on some pants, while I get
acquainted with the newest member of the family."

So saying he scooped up the bundle of fur which, for some strange reason, had not followed Gus out the door but was, instead, sitting at Brian's feet, panting and watching his every move.

"That's not a dog," Brian observed with a baleful eye directed toward his son's maternal grandfather. "It's a mop - with eyes. What, exactly, is it?"

Ron Peterson sighed. "It's a West Highland terrier, in need of a trim. Not purebred, I guess, since there were no papers on it, but . . . honestly, Brian, I had no intention of buying Gus a pet. Not even the turtle he wanted for his aquarium. But when he saw this puppy, he just . . . I said no, but then he . . . he got really quiet, and he had these huge tears in his eyes, and I . . ."

Justin laughed. "He played you." Then he turned and grinned at Brian. "Wonder where he learned to do that."

"From watching you," retorted Brian, smirking as he dropped his towel, took a millisecond to pose against the radiance washing in through the huge windows over the bed, before slipping into a pair of cut-offs. The smirk became a quick smile, as he noticed that Justin had to take a minute to swallow - almost certainly around the lump in his throat caused by the sight of his partner's much-desired, nearly fully recovered body.

To cover the awkwardness of the moment, Justin lifted the puppy up to stare directly into its huge, dark eyes, and the little terrier proceeded to lick his face and wag its tail and scramble to try to get closer to its new bosom buddy.

Justin grinned, and the dog grinned back, and Brian was suddenly stricken almost speechless. "Do that again," he directed, while pulling on a clean wifebeater.

"Do what again?"

"Hold him up and grin at him."

Justin, looking slightly uncertain, did as he was told, and, once again, the sight of that little face, so eager to please and to nuzzle against his skin, inspired one of his trademark smiles, which the dog, somehow, managed to mimic.

This time, Brian laughed.

"Soooo," said Ron Peterson tentatively, "we're ok? With the dog, I mean?"

Brian shrugged. "That'll be Lindsey's problem."

Peterson sighed. "Yeah. That's what I figured you'd say. Her - and her partner." He took the puppy from Justin and scratched behind its ears. "Poor little thing."

Brian was thoughtful for a moment. "If I recall correctly, Lindsey used to love dogs."

"Yes. She did. But . . . she's not the real issue, is she?"

Brian's response was slightly smug. "I wouldn't be too sure of that if I were you." Another quick smile for Justin, with just the faintest shadow in those hazel eyes to indicate that he knew he should probably be ashamed of himself - but wasn't.

He sat on the bed then, to pick up his discarded jeans from the night before and retrieve the contents
of his pockets, and the little terrier immediately went into its spastic contortions and freed itself from Justin's grasp to leap onto the bed and jump into Brian's lap where it proceeded to brace itself against his chest and lick its way up his throat to his face.

Brian - for the space of a heartbeat - was too stunned to react and both Ron Peterson and Justin were taken aback by the loveliness of the moment.

"What the fuck . . ." Brian attempted to shrug free of the animal's embrace, but the little dog held on, apparently more determined to maintain its position than Brian was to dislodge it.


Brian's expression said that he was certain that his young lover had completely lost his mind, but - with a dramatic eye-roll - he did as he was told. The licking went on for just a couple of seconds, and then the puppy gave a big sigh and settled itself into his lap, curling up and closing its eyes as if it had finally found its way home after a terribly hard day.

Justin's smile was achingly tender. "Another conquest for the Stud of Liberty Avenue."

Brian simply stared at him. "There's a dog - in my lap."

"Yes. There is."

"I don't do dogs."

Justin's smile became a brilliant, trademark grin. "But this one, apparently, does you."

When Chris McClaren rushed through the door, mouth open to voice his displeasure at Brian's failure to respond to his message, he paused in mid-stride, and his eyes grew wide with disbelief.

"There's a dog, in your lap," he observed.

"You noticed," replied Brian, deadpan. "How very perceptive of you!"

"Does it suck cock?"

Brian blinked. "What?"

McClaren shrugged. "I can't figure out any other reason you'd be fooling around with it, while the financial world is going into major meltdown, even as we speak. So - whatever you're doing, quit doing it and haul your ass downstairs - or you're going to miss the show."

Justin was shaking his head, realizing that he was completely clueless about what was happening, but knowing that it had to be important. So he scooped up the terrier from Brian's lap, while his partner scrambled to his feet.

"You've still got to pick a name for him," Justin called, as Brian went striding out the door.

"Already did," came the answer from half-way down the hall.

Justin and Ron Peterson exchanged puzzled glances. "You did?" Justin called. "When?"

"When I saw the two of you gazing lovingly into each other's eyes." This time the answer was almost a shout, as Brian followed McClaren down the stairs.

"So . . . what's his name?"
A quick sound of laughter, followed by, "Beau Soleil."

Justin frowned, once more looking toward Gus's grandfather. "Say what?" he muttered.

"It's French," Peterson replied, with a gentle smile. "It means 'sunshine'. At least," he added, with a speculative gleam in his eye as he thought of a second meaning, which he would keep to himself, "that's the literal translation."

Justin's eyes narrowed and were suddenly hard with glints of resentment. "Oh, no, he did not."

Peterson just grinned. "Oh, yes, he did."

"Yeah, well, he better just . . . think again."

Peterson nodded, but he couldn't quite swallow the grin, suddenly absolutely certain that the name would stick - and so would the dog.

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Ted's voice had taken on a stridency that only occurred when he was extremely frustrated and on the verge of losing his patience entirely, but he struggled to hold on and maintain control. Not because he felt any compunction to continue to be polite to people who were proving to be idiots of the first order, but mainly because he was pretty sure that losing his temper would profit him not at all. So far, he had been shuffled from one scatterbrained female teller, to an equally scatterbrained female supervisor, and he was now attempting to communicate with a similarly mentally-deficient female assistant manager. All three had grown progressively more shrill and less accommodating in the course of their conversations. He was now only one short breath away from demanding to speak to the president of the damned bank.

Who, after all, did these people think they were, and why would they dare to assume that they had justification for refusing to provide the information he was demanding concerning Kinnetik's accounts?

"Mrs. Dreyfus," he said coldly, "I insist . . . "

"Actually," said the woman who was the next little step up the hopeless chain of command at First Commonwealth Bank of Pittsburgh, "it's Ms. And while I do understand your concerns, Mr. Schmidt, I'm afraid there's nothing we can do - via telephone - to address these issues. The accounts are currently under review by federal authorities. I'm sure you can appreciate that we cannot override . . . "

"Oh, I see," Ted snapped. "You can't override their authority, but you have no similar problem with overriding mine, although I'm a primary signatory on the account. Tell me, if these accounts are frozen, how is it that you are processing . . ."

"The accounts are not frozen, Mr. Schmidt," said Jo Ann Dreyfus, who was sitting in her bright, comfortable little office, visualizing how much she would enjoy watching the increasingly nasty Mr. Schmidt get his balls clamped in a vice. "Please don't put words in my mouth. They are simply subject to scrutiny by the justice department. Processing of disbursements and deposits continues as usual."

Ted forced himself to take a deep breath, to avoid snarling at the woman which would probably generate a bout of hysteria on her part and make it even harder to secure the information he needed.
Time was too critical for that.

"But that is exactly my point, Ms. Dreyfus," he countered, deliberately emphasizing her title. "Processing of disbursements has not been completed according to instructions. A transfer of funds was initiated last week - by me - but the sum is still showing up in the primary investment account. The transfer doesn't even show up as a pending transaction, and this matter is very time-sensitive. It would be extremely unfortunate - for the bank - if this transfer were not completed in a timely manner, and the failure to fulfill those instructions proved to be costly to Mr. Kinney. If that should happen, the bank would certainly be held liable. And I can assure you that Mr. Kinney is not a man renowned for his forgiving nature."

Jo Ann Dreyfus took a moment to count to ten. "That may be true, Mr. Schmidt," she answered finally, icily polite, "but the oversight by federal authorities was with the full knowledge and consent of Mr. Kinney." There was absolutely no way Ted could fail to recognize the smugness of her final suggestion. "Perhaps you should check with your employer concerning his wishes before you start issuing empty threats."

And with that, the woman hung up, leaving Ted with his mouth gaping, his eyes bulging, and his face flushing to an ugly shade of purplish red.

*What the fuck? How dare they . . .*

He turned once more to his computer monitor, hoping against hope that he had misread the information provided there on Kinnetic's financial holdings. But he hadn't.

Then he entered a new command, minimizing that screen while establishing a new connection, showing the balance of the money accepted and posted on the Hargrave-Correll Securities Fund website under the ID number assigned to the Kinney/Schmidt investment account.

No change. $240,000.00.

This was just . . . just inexcusable. If the information he'd gleaned from his old friend, Marshall, was accurate - and he had no reason to doubt it - he was on the verge of becoming a moderately wealthy man, due to an explosion of the capital value of the fund, and Brian . . . unless the stupid bank acted immediately, as instructed, to complete the transfer, Brian would be left holding the bag - his original $2,000,000.00 bag - losing the titanic profits his own investment would have generated. And Ted, of course, would lose his opportunity to assume the role of the hero of the piece - the man who had manipulated Brian's moderate fortune into a level of wealth that few investors were ever fortunate enough to obtain.

Ted Schmidt - financial guru, fiduciary *wunderkind*. Recognized for his achievements, and respected by his peers, and - perhaps most gratifying of all - deserving of the undying gratitude of Brian Kinney.

Ted's hands closed into fists, and he stood up slowly, his face a mask of frozen rage. No. He would not accept this incredible fuck-up and forfeit his chance to grab the ultimate brass ring all because of the blatant incompetence of some bumbling, idiotic schmuck in First Commonwealth's accounting department.

There was only one way to remedy this - to prevent the unthinkable from happening. He had to go down there and square off - face to face - with Ms. Dreyfus, or anybody else who might think they had a right to stand in his way. He was Ted Schmidt, standing on the brink of becoming a mover and shaker in the world of international finance, and no dyke paper-pusher was going to interfere with his plans.
He quickly left his office, pausing at the reception desk to advise young Delaney - looking particularly delectable today in a charcoal gray pin-stripe Armani knock-off that even Brian Kinney might have approved - that he would be out of the office for a few hours on pressing business, and making his way toward the employee entrance when his cell phone rang. A quick glance at its screen revealed that the call was from Blake, and, in his haste, he almost elected to ignore it and allow it to go to voice mail. But, in the end, he changed his mind when he remembered how much he owed to his partner, and how Blake rarely called unless he had something important to say, since he was not much given to idle chit-chat.

Thus he paused in the vestibule to take the call, taking a deep breath to steady his nerves before speaking.

"Hey, Honey. What's up?"

"Ted," said Blake slowly. Almost tentatively. "Are you . . . all right?"

Ted barely avoided an eye-roll, reflecting that his concerns for his partner's motives did not extend to allowing for unfounded worrying. "Of course, I am. Why wouldn't I be?"

Blake hesitated, apparently listening to a voice in the background before he replied, which only served to irritate Ted further. "Ted, do you remember me telling you about a client of mine - an investment broker who was so stressed out with trying to figure out how to manage his father-in-law's millions that he ended up snorting cocaine on a daily basis?"

"I remember," Ted answered, with a snarky little smile. "I remember that you refused to tell me his name. I also remember thinking that I wouldn't mind having a problem like that."

"Ahhh, yeah." Blake cleared his throat. "Well, he's been making excellent progress in the last six months. So much so that I thought he was almost finished with his treatment. But this morning . . ."

It was Ted's turn to clear his throat. "This morning?" he prompted, patience near exhaustion.

"This morning, he's in the Allegheny General ICU, suffering from a severe, apparently deliberate overdose. His wife reported finding him in his office, sitting at his computer, with news from the European stock market on the screen. News about the Hargrave-Correll Fund."

Ted went silent for a moment; then he laughed loudly. Almost guffawing. "Yeah, right. So what am I supposed to do now? Go running to the TV in a panic? Is that what this is all about? Did my ship come in while I was dithering around this morning? Am I going to turn it on to find out that I got very, very rich - overnight?"

Blake sighed. "Not exactly. But that pretty much answers my question. You did transfer all your available cash into that fund, didn't you?"

"Yeah. I told you I was going to. Are you sorry now that you decided not to join me?"

"Ted." Blake's voice was very soft - so soft that, for the first time, Ted felt a tiny nuance of something. Something not quite right. "Go sit down at your desk, and turn on the morning news."

"But . . . but I was just on my way out."

"Trust me when I tell you that this is important. Okay? And I . . . I'm on my way. I'll be there in ten minutes, so just wait for me."

"Blake, what's going on? What have you heard?"
The drug-abuse counselor hesitated, suddenly remembering a very different Ted Schmidt from the one who was currently his life-partner - a Ted Schmidt damaged and bewildered by events he could not control and so broken that he was almost beyond redemption. "Teddie, there's a problem with the Hargrave-Correll Fund. A huge problem. It looks like Hargrave and his partner have disappeared. With a lot of money."

Ted took a deep breath. "But that can't . . . that's impossible, Blake. That just . . . it can't be."

"You just wait for me," Blake replied quickly, recognizing the rising note of desperation in his partner's voice. "I'm on my way."

Blake disconnected, but not before Ted heard the distinctive throaty growl of the ignition of his '76 Mustang. Obviously, he was on his way to meet Ted, and he was in a hurry.

Ted turned back toward his office, moving slowly, something inside him whispering that maybe he really didn't want to move at all, especially when he saw Lance Mathis coming out of his office with his face arranged in a solemn expression that did not - quite - manage to cover up a pale gleam of . . . something in his dark eyes. Moments later, it was Cynthia who was walking toward him, also striving to maintain a professional demeanor, but not quite managing to pull it off. Strangely, neither of them was looking his way. Yet he knew, somehow, that both were focusing on him, though they tried to pretend otherwise.

Something was definitely up; something . . . ominous.

Then his phone rang again, and he glanced down at the screen, cringing when he saw the name displayed there.

Melanie Marcus.

She had gone back to Toronto three days earlier, to resume her residence there and be reunited with her infant daughter, and maintain - for a while longer - the fiction that everything was still all right in her not-quite-as-cozy-as-it-should-be domestic situation.

Lindsey, of course, was still in Pittsburgh, ostensibly awaiting the return of her son from his visit with his father and grandfather. But that was simply a convenient fiction - something that everyone treated as a truth, but only in order to avoid discussing other possibilities. The bottom line was that nobody really knew what would happen next regarding the Marcus/Peterson household. On the night before her departure, Melanie had confided in Ted that Lindsey had been distant and unresponsive during the few conversations the two of them had shared since Mel's eviction from the hotel suite, had even gone so far as to ignore Melanie's half-hearted attempts at an apology for her comments regarding Brian and his circumstances. And that was truly a first. In the past, Lindsey had often gotten angry over remarks Melanie had made in the heat of anger, but she had always been willing - even eager - to forgive and forget whenever Melanie was ready to put on an appearance of remorse, even when both of them knew it to be nothing more than a convenient pretense, designed to enable them to bury old differences without ever really resolving anything.

Ted was abruptly reminded of something that Debbie had said that morning, when he'd stopped by the Diner for his regular breakfast. Knowing that Melanie had elected to move in with Ted and Blake after the big face-off at Kinnetic, she had poured his coffee while asking about the whereabouts and condition of her granddaughter's mother. When he had informed her of Mel's departure, Debbie had gone very quiet, which - for anybody else - would have symbolized nothing at all. But Debbie Novotny didn't do quiet. Ever. So it had been pretty obvious that something was definitely bothering her.
"Deb?" he'd said softly. "What's . . ."

Her smile had been just a pale shadow of her customary cheerful grin when she'd turned away to set the coffee carafe back on its warmer. "I feel like I'm trying to learn a whole new language," she'd admitted.

"What new language?"

The smile had turned rueful. "The one that doesn't blame everything on Brian Kinney. You know, just a few days ago, if you'd told me this - with me knowing everything I know about him and about Mel and Lindsey's relationship - I'd have been screeching my head off about how he'd managed to do it again, to fuck up everybody's lives without even working up a sweat. I'd have done it without thinking, because it would have come to me as naturally as breathing. Blaming Brian is what we . . . what I've always done."

She'd come around the corner then and taken a seat beside him. "But now, whenever I start to bring out the same old song and dance, I keep hearing the things that Cynthia said. And then, I start . . . wondering. Do you know that - initially - I didn't believe her? I thought she was just making it up, or exaggerating . . . defending him. Just like Michael always did, but . . ."

"But what?"

She'd ducked her head a bit then, and clamped her lips together, actually managing to smear her bright red lipstick. "I checked out what she said. The things that it was possible to check anyway. And she wasn't lying, Teddie. And now - even though I want Melanie and Lindsey to be able to work this out, because . . . well, because they're like family to me, and I always believed that they really loved each other and because they both love my granddaughter, I keep hearing the things that Melanie said about Brian, and it makes me wonder."

"Wonder what?"

"How I'd feel," she'd said softly, "if someone had said those things about someone I loved. Let's face it, Teddie. What Brian said about Vic - when he died - was nothing by comparison, and I practically took his head off, and I really thought I'd never be able to forgive him. And I don't think it matters much that Lindsey's love for Brian isn't something that's easy to define or understand. It's enough that she does love him, and that he loves her, even though he'd never admit to it."

She'd paused then, concentrating on a thumbnail where the polish had begun to chip. "Was she right, Teddie? And were Lindsey and Justin and Emmett right? And even Michael, sometimes. Have we all just blamed Brian for everything because it was an easy habit to fall into, and a hard one to break? Did we really . . . never know him at all?"

He hadn't expressed his knee-jerk opinion in response to her question. One did not, after all, tell Debbie Novotny that she was full of shit, unless one harbored a secret wish for castration. But the thought had been there, discreetly concealed beneath the meaningless platitudes he had offered.

*What the fuck was going on? Had the whole world gone crazy? Brian Kinney - a hero? An enigma? Bullshit!*

His phone continued to ring, and he continued to stare down at it. It was still pretty early in the morning - too early for Melanie to be calling just to chat and re-ignite her daily rant about Brian Kinney and his latest unforgivable behavior.

Taking a deep breath, he pressed the button to reject the call and tucked the phone back into his
pocket. Then he hurried toward his office, deliberately ignoring the furtive glances of the people who were trying so hard - but without much success - to appear not to notice him at all.

The Interpol summary currently displayed on the monitor screen, clear and concise now that it had gone through the FBI decryption process, was much more detailed and factual than the news report currently being read by Charlie Gibson on *Good Morning, America*, but not nearly as sensational or dramatic. Brian tried - really tried - to avoid an urge to gloat. The news was, after all, not really a source of joy. The exposure of the massive pyramid scheme perpetrated by Marshall Hargrave and Patrick Correll and their associates would have a horrible impact on thousands upon thousands of investors, many of whom would be ruined by the so-called Ponzi scheme. And the fact that Hargrave himself - along with a band of his co-conspirators - had gone to ground, after eluding authorities and disappearing somewhere among the thousands of islands of Polynesia, would only add insult to injury.

It was a dark day for Wall Street and the financial world.

But it was not - thanks to the vigilance and oversight of the FBI and its contacts in the SEC - a dark day for Brian Kinney.

He did allow himself a smile to acknowledge his good fortune; okay, so it was more of a broad, jubilant grin than a simple smile, which he knew to be inappropriate, but could not quite resist, but the smile faltered and faded when he realized how easily he could have been among the vast numbers who'd been betrayed and ruined by the greed and avarice of men who had been building their fortunes for many years, at the expense of investors who trusted those at the tip of the pyramid with their hard-earned money.

The entire financial world was reeling, and knowledgeable sources had barely begun to assess the extent of the damage, but speculation was already rampant that the victims of the scam would be lucky to retrieve ten cents on the dollar of their original investments. Though the accounts and assets of the discredited securities firm had been seized, the simple truth was that most of the funds had already disappeared, along with the perpetrators of the scam.

The Interpol data was, of course, more specific, providing details of Hargrave's flight, of the individuals who were complicit in the massive fraud, and of the magnitude of the theft, but, in the end, it provided little hope for the recovery of the stolen funds or the apprehension of the guilty parties.

"How could this happen?" Brian asked McClaren, still enormously relieved that he had been spared the carnage, but outraged nonetheless on behalf of others who had been less fortunate. "How did they get away with it?"

McClaren shrugged. "It just proves that old adage. If it seems too good to be true, it probably is. The strange thing is that you'd think wealthy, sophisticated people would know that, but they can be just as gullible as anybody else. Especially when it's 'one of their own' - so to speak - who's taking advantage of their vulnerability."

"But why didn't you guys step in and . . ."?

The FBI agent gazed at him with a sardonic smirk. "You, of all people, know that we can't move until we have sufficient evidence for an indictment, and most of the information in this case had to come from the SEC. To say that they're slow is a huge understatement. Slow . . . and super cautious. And they don't relish taking down one of their own, and Hargrave was a big-time member of the
financial In-Crowd. That's what put him in position to do so much damage in the first place.
Knowing all the right people is the first step in scamming the big boys."

"You think they'll catch him?"

"Who knows? He and his fellow slimeballs walked away with more than four billion dollars,
according to early estimates. In some places, that could buy him a small country of his own. On the
other hand, a hell of a lot of people are going to be super motivated to find the fucker, so . . . in the
end, it's all going to come down to who gets lucky."

Brian nodded.

"Like you." McClaren's eyes were suddenly busy looking around the room, looking anywhere or
everywhere, but at Brian.

"Yeah. Like me. Guess I owe you one, huh?"

McClaren laughed, before standing up and stepping forward, leaning down to take a quick but
thorough kiss from the brunette. "You owe me a lot more than one," he replied in a whisper. "Happy
birthday, for the rest of your life."

"Am I interrupting something?" Justin's voice was almost without inflection, but the deliberate calm
of his demeanor fooled no one, and Brian grinned. He knew it was petty of him, but he always rather
enjoyed being an object of jealousy.

"No. You're just in time to come help me celebrate my narrow escape and gloat - just a little - that
others weren't so lucky."

Justin, with the dog (damned if he was going to designate the pup with that ridiculous name) in one
hand, and Gus tugging at the other, glanced toward the television screen, just in time to see an ABC
reporter introducing a major player from a Wall Street investment firm. Both the newswoman and the
banker looked particularly solemn.

"It appears," said the stately-looking man, completely in character in his Brooks Brothers suit and an
ugly - but expensive - Fiorio silk tie, "that federal agents were on the verge of moving in to shut
down the operation, but they were too late, by no more than a matter of hours. This is . . . " He
paused, and, for just a moment, the cool façade seemed to waver and expose the face of a real person
beneath the mask. "This is going to be catastrophic, for a lot of people."

Justin turned to study Brian's face. "But not for you," he observed.

Brian smiled. "And how do you know that?"

Justin couldn't resist offering up a broad grin. "If you were broke, you'd be looking for somebody to
strangle."

Brian nodded. "True enough."

Then Justin's eyes narrowed, and a speculative gleam flared in those blue depths. "But somebody,"
he said slowly, "wasn't so lucky. Right?"

Chris McClaren grinned. "Smart kid."

"I'm not a kid!"
The grin softened to an indulgent smile. "Of course, you're not."

And with that, McClaren rose and strolled out of the room, pausing only to close down the Interpol document on the computer.

Justin took a deep breath, obviously annoyed. "Why'd he do that?"

Brian gave a half shrug. "Eyes only. You're not authorized."

"But you are?"

Brian didn't offer any response aside from a flat, level look that made Justin squirm under the steady scrutiny.

"You finished being pissy?" Brian asked finally. "Because I have a couple of calls to make. You can stay - or not - but you can't interfere. Okay?"

Reluctantly, Justin nodded, as Gus stepped forward and looked up at his father with an expression that betrayed a tiny nuance of uncertainty. "What about me, Daddy? Am I being pissy, too? Can I stay too?"

The transformation of Brian's expression - from stern impatience to unlimited indulgence - was instantaneous. "Of course, you can stay, Sonny Boy. There's some games and puzzles over there in the bookcase. Why don't you find something to do for a little while, and then we're going to go out to explore the beach, until Daddy has to get dressed for a meeting. And tomorrow, you're going to have a nice surprise. Somebody special is coming for a visit, and you guys are going to have a blast together."

Gus, by this time, was jumping up and down. "Who, Daddy? Who's coming?"

Brian's smile was gentle. "That's the thing about surprises, Gus. You have to wait for them. Meanwhile, how about a different surprise? First, I have to make an important business call, and then, we'll call Mommie. How's that?"

"Awesome!" Gus cried, with a perfect fist pump, and, in the beautiful manner of the innocent, he - and the puppy - were shortly involved in trying to sort out the pieces of a worn old jigsaw puzzle, and it mattered not in the least that the dog was doing more harm than good, and that the puzzle - originally consisting of 300 pieces - was missing more than a few. It was the process - and the laughter - that mattered. And the distraction, thought Brian as he reached for the phone.

If a person wished to avoid the report of the crash and burn of a Wall Street phenomenon, it would be necessary to stay away from every major network and news source. Ted knew that for certain, because he'd tried.

It had been a silly, idle thing to do - flipping through all the cable channels to see if anyone on the planet was unaware of what was going on, but he had done it anyway. The effort had been futile, of course.

At this moment, he was watching Fox News - ordinarily one of his favorites - as some earnest-looking (and majorly hot) young reporter was broadcasting from the sidewalk outside the granite and glass edifice that had been the primary location of Hargrave-Correll for almost a decade. It did not look so very different now, except that there was no uniformed doorman standing at the entrance, ready to assist clients in hailing a taxi or summoning a waiting limo or to raise an umbrella to escort
the powerful brokers or major-league financiers through a spring shower to a waiting vehicle.

Now there were only stern-looking young men in dark suits standing there, steely eyes trained on anyone who might approach, and the massive double doors were locked and sported a small, discreet sign which announced that access to the building was restricted, granted only by permission of appropriate federal authorities - the SEC, the FBI, the GAO - a veritable alphabet soup of government agencies.

A frazzled and obviously dismayed young woman was talking to the reporter, explaining that she had arrived at work as she did every day, at exactly 8:50 AM as was her wont, since the company brass were intolerant of tardiness for any reason, to find the building locked up tight, with only a bare-bones explanation from the federal agents who were posted at the door. But surely . . . it had to be some kind of huge mistake, didn't it? Hargrave-Correll was the most successful investment company formed on the New York financial scene in the last twenty years, with assets in the billions. So . . . it had to be a great big (bleep)-up . . . didn't it?

Yes, Ted thought. It did. A (bleep)-up of the first order, and he was pretty sure he knew full well who'd gotten (bleep)ed.

Quick footsteps in the hallway outside his door reminded him - in a distant, distracted kind of way - that he really should have taken the time to lock his door when he'd returned from his abbreviated little jaunt. But he hadn't, and it was too late now, as Blake entered, almost running and leaving the door ajar, eyes wide and filled with incipient panic, and then stopped so abruptly that Ted almost expected to hear a screeching of brakes.

"Ted?" The tone was exactly what one would use in an attempt to elicit a response from a corpse. Which, Ted rationalized, was probably not particularly inappropriate.

"Yes?"

"Are you . . . all right?"

Dark eyes - darker than usual - lifted to regard the slender young man who had been Ted's partner, his soul-mate, his savior - in more ways than one. "Why wouldn't I be all right?"

Blake nodded toward the television screen, where the interview with Hargrave-Correll employees continued, although Ted had chosen to mute the sound. "It's . . . it's a lot to take in. Out of the blue, so to speak."

Ted actually smiled. "Out of the blue? For some of us, maybe. Some, but not all."

"What are you talking about?" Blake asked softly, moving slowly around the desk and taking a seat on the edge, where he could look down at his partner as he sprawled back in his executive chair, his posture surprisingly relaxed - almost indolent.

Ted looked up at him, and Blake had to fight against a sudden urge to recoil, to flinch away from the look he saw in the man's eyes, even as Ted beckoned him closer with the wiggling of a forefinger. "Conspiracy," he whispered, when Blake leaned close. "That's what this was."

Blake sat back, obviously puzzled. "How do you figure that?"

"What else am I supposed to think?" Ted retorted. "Isn't it obvious?"

"Not to me," Blake responded, clearly bewildered.
Ted's smile faltered and hardened as the quick tap of approaching footsteps sounded in the corridor beyond the open doorway. "Then you just wait," he said in a strange, almost detached tone, "and it will be."

When both Cynthia and Lance Mathis stepped into the office, his smile became mocking. "Aha! Time for the other shoe to drop, is it?"

"Ted, I . . ." That was Cynthia, intent, no doubt, on stepping up to defend her treacherous employer. As always.

But Ted was having none of it. "No need to explain, Ms. Whitney. I get it. I've always been a fast learner, you know."

Cynthia frowned, unintimidated, but slightly confused. But there was not the slightest nuance of uncertainty or confusion on the face of Kinnetic's security chief, who simply regarded Ted with a non-committal gaze before stepping forward and depressing the speaker button on the office phone.

Ted blinked, but only once. "Hello, Brian. I guess the gang's all here now, hmmm?"

"Theodore." The voice and tone were completely neutral, without inflection. "You've heard the news, I take it."

"Oh, yes. I heard it. And obviously, you heard it too. But . . ." he paused then to lookup and fix Cynthia with an icy stare, "it wasn't really news for you, was it? You already knew. Didn't you?"

"Yes. I did."

Ted looked slightly stunned; he had obviously not expected such a blatant admission of guilt. But Brian seemed completely unembarrassed - unapologetic, as he continued. "Just as you would have, if you'd bothered to do your job, and check the details on the investment you were so eager to make."

"What?" Ted leapt to his feet, outrage glittering in his eyes. "What are you talking about? You knew I was doing this; you knew I was risking my own money, and you did nothing to try to stop me. How could you . . ."

"Well, first of all, I wasn't supposed to know anything about it. Was I?"

"To what? To be so overwhelmed and dazzled by your genius once the investment paid off, that I'd throw myself at your feet in undying gratitude?" There was a brief pause, and everyone in the room caught a whisper of a quick giggle as - hundreds of miles away - a lithe blond wrapped his arms around Brian's waist and whispered suggestions of methods Ted might have dreamed up for having Brian express his gratitude.

"Jesus, Theodore," Brian drawled. "Did your really expect that to happen?"

"But . . . but it doesn't make any difference, don't you see," Ted insisted. "Whether I told you or not, you still found out. You still took measures to defend yourself and leave me hanging out to dry. It was for you, Brian. I took the risk . . . for you."

"But it wasn't your money that made the deal possible, made it big enough to impress your bosom buddies and warrant inclusion in their little scheme, was it?" Brian replied, completely unperturbed. "It was mine. And, according to my sources - which are pretty damned reliable - there've been signs
of trouble at Hargrave-Correll for months. That's why they decided to cut their losses and run. Why the feds were closing in. Because the pyramid was collapsing under them, and the rumors were rampant. Which you would have known, if you'd just bothered to do a little bit of research. But you didn't, did you, Theodore? You were too busy trying to impress your old college chum, and using my money to do it."

"So what is this?" Ted snapped. "Payback? Vengeance? A petty little game of getting even?"

"You think we're even?" Brian asked, after a beat of silence. "Let's just re-examine that, shall we? For you, maybe it's about the money. But it's not, you know. Not really. Oh, I'd have been pissed - hugely, majorly pissed - if you'd succeeded in pissing away two million dollars. But it's just money, Theodore. It comes and it goes, and I can always earn more. That's not the important thing here."

Ted frowned, obviously ready to dispute such a spurious claim.

"I could have forgiven the money," Brian continued, his voice very soft. "That's not the problem. The problem is that I trusted you. With my money, yes. But with things that were much more important. I trusted you to have my back - to keep your mouth shut and protect the things that matter to me. To keep my son safe. To keep Justin safe. To support Cynthia if she needed it, and to take care of my business. And to make sure that you didn't do or say anything to make things worse for me."

"Well," snapped Ted indignantly, "at least you can't accuse me of violating that trust."

"I can't?"

In the smart, comfortable beach cottage, poised on its crescent of sand at the edge of the Atlantic, Gus and the puppy continued to wrestle and giggle over a scruffy old toy, Trina Thomas proceeded with her plans to come up with a new, better way to prepare the shrimp she had purchased that morning at the seafood stand at the marina as she chatted with Ron Peterson, Chris McClaren sat in the parlor going over new sit-rep reports and listened in on the awkward conversation while trying to pretend complete disinterest, and Justin Taylor closed his eyes, stepping closer to his lover to offer any comfort he could provide, wondering how Ted could fail to hear it - could fail to identify the deep, bottomless well of sadness contained in two tiny words.

There was a brief silence, as Ted considered how to turn the tables, how to make Brian understand that it was Ted who had been betrayed; Ted who had paid the ultimate price for Brian's failure to take his chief accountant into his confidence. Ted, who had been wronged.

But it was Brian who had the last word after all. "Maybe," he said slowly, "you need to think about it a little harder."

Then he hung up, leaving Ted still seated at his desk, mouth open and heart still filled with rage. "What the fuck does that mean?" he asked, of no one in particular.

But Lance Mathis was apparently prepared to provide an answer. "The meltdown at Hargrave-Correll has dominated the newscasts today," he said softly, "but there have been other things going on as well." Carefully, he leaned forward and laid the morning edition of the Post-Dispatch on Ted's desk. "You might find the article on page four particularly interesting."

"I can hardly wait," Ted snapped. "I've lost my life's savings; my boss blames me for everything that's gone wrong in his life. What's next?"

Mathis maintained his cool demeanor, ignoring the accountant's rant. Then he leaned forward,
sparing a quick, sympathetic glance for Blake. He really did feel sorry for the substance abuse counselor, but not sorry enough to keep his mouth shut.

"If you ask me, Schmidt," he said softly, "you got off easy. But hey! It's early yet. You might still manage to piss him off enough to make sure you get your just rewards."

With that, Mathis walked out of the room, and Cynthia, after watching Ted for a moment in an attempt to gauge his mood, turned to follow him.

"I assume," said Ted coldly, "that you agree with him, that you think I deserved to get thrown to the wolves."

Cynthia turned back, and regarded him with a sad, level gaze. "I don't know what to think, Teddie. I want to believe that it was just a mistake, that you're loyal to a man who's been very good to you. But I don't really know. Truthfully, I think the only person who can answer that question . . . is you."

Ted took a deep breath, fighting against a tightness in his chest. "And of course, it doesn't matter at all what he - and you - did to me?"

Cynthia sighed. "And what - exactly - was that, Teddie? He expected you to do your job, to help me do mine. To protect the people he loves and his company. Isn't that what you get paid - and paid very well, I might add - to do? Where - exactly - did he go too far in what he asked of you?"

"He . . . he . . ." But he found that he couldn't come up with a cogent answer.

"Yes. That's what I thought." Cynthia looked at him, and he almost cringed away from what he saw in her eyes. Not anger. Not contempt. Not even disappointment. What he saw there was pity. Cynthia Whitney felt sorry for him, and he realized that it hurt more than having acid thrown in his face. "Read your paper, Teddie. And learn more truths about what you almost managed to accomplish, for Brian."

She left then, closing the door behind her and managing, despite the anger that she had not been totally successful in suppressing, to avoid slamming it. In her wake, the silence in the room was profound - almost painful - until Blake elected to dispel it, sensing that allowing it to continue would be dangerous.

His smile was tremulous. "At moments like this, I sometimes regret being unable to take refuge in a bottle of single malt whiskey."

"Moments like this?" Ted echoed very softly. "Have you ever - in your entire life - been completely fucked over and betrayed by people who are supposed to be your friends? And if you haven't, how can you possibly have the slightest idea what it's like to endure 'moments like this'? Trust me when I tell you that you can't imagine how it feels."

"Teddie, don't you think . . ."

Kinnetik's CFO's eyes were dark and icy as he turned to stare at his partner. "If you're going to try to convince me that I should look at it from a different perspective - from Brian's perspective - just . . . don't. Don't go there, Blake. Don't make that mistake."

Then he very deliberately shifted his body to turn away, to avoid seeing - or understanding - the look in Blake's eyes. He'd had quite enough of pity for the day. Anything would be preferable, he thought. Even anger. Even contempt. Anything, except pity. He had been pitied before - many times - and, until just a short time ago, he had believed, had been absolutely certain, that no one would ever have cause or justification to pity him again.
What a complete fool he had been.

He picked up the *Post-Dispatch* and folded it open to read the headline on the article at the top of page four.

"Charitable Enterprise Exposed as Fraud."

Ted went very still, not even remembering how to breathe for the space of a heartbeat - not wanting to read the rest. Not wanting to know. But there was, of course, no way to avoid the whole truth now. The whole, ugly truth.

He only read the first paragraph, but it was enough.

"*Former Schickel Hall program director, David L. Graham, was apprehended by federal authorities last night, as he attempted to board a Liberty Air flight bound for Atlanta, where he was scheduled to transfer to a connecting flight to Valencia, Venezuela. The arrest came at the conclusion of an extensive FBI investigation into the charitable organization known as Aid for Bolivian Orphans. According to the articles of incorporation of the charity, Graham is listed as founder and CEO. In a press release shortly following the arrest, the FBI divulged that substantial evidence, accumulated by undercover operatives, alleges that Graham and a group of co-conspirators collected massive contributions from donors throughout the northeastern US, ostensibly to provide relief funding for children of poverty in the Bolivian city of El Alto. Graham claimed that his motivation for the creation of the charitable fund was due to family ties to the region, but, according to FBI sources, Graham was a life-long resident of Kansas City, Missouri, until his move to Pittsburgh in 1995, and his claims of any family connection to the nation of Bolivia appear to have no basis in fact."

Ted closed the newspaper very carefully and deposited it in the wastebasket behind his desk. He deliberately did not look at Blake. He also avoided looking at the computer screen, where the morning news was still being reported. Not knowing the full extent of the charitable scam, there was no way he could be sure it would not be brought up on the national broadcast, and he was pretty sure that he had heard all he needed to hear - about investment funds and charities and scurrilous bastards who took advantage of the gullibility of strangers.

Gullible.

It was a word he had never expected to have applied to himself.

Gullible, and stupid.

And pitiful.

He closed his eyes and knew the truth. In the final analysis, that was the right word.

His cell phone rang at that moment, and he did not have to look at the screen to realize who was calling.

Ultimately, no matter how determined one might be to avoid it, the music had to be faced.

"So, what do you think?" Debbie Novotny was doing one of the things she did best in the world - hovering. In this instance, over the table where Lindsey, Michael, and Emmett were sampling the newest item on the Diner menu.
Michael was too busy inspecting the bite of creamy, caramel-coated dessert on his spoon to think up a response, but Emmett was more articulate. "Is it sufficient to say that if you guys won't give me this recipe, I'm going to have to engage in culinary espionage?"

"Good, huh?" Debbie was beaming.

Lindsey deliberately rolled her eyes. "Good doesn't even begin to cover it. Where did you come up with this?"

"Justin's new/old friend," Debbie answered. "You know - the guy from New Orleans that he met while Brian was in the hospital."

Lindsey frowned. "Oh, yeah. I remember. Cedric, was it?"

"Right," replied Debbie. "He's been in a few times, mostly to check on Sunshine, I think, although I haven't had much news for him, seeing as how you guys are being so damned stingy with your exclusive information, vis a vis Mr. Kinney and his blond twink. Anyway, we got to talking, and it turns out his mother was some kind of New Orleans cooking legend or something, and he was nice enough to share a couple of her recipes, and this one - well, let's put it this way. The first time we served it - Leon had cooked up a double batch - they were gone in ten minutes. The next time, he doubled it again. Same thing."

Emmett tilted his head, a thoughtful look in his eyes. "So Justin's Cajun buddy is a cook, is he?"

Debbie shrugged. "Don't know about that, but it appears that his mother was."

"Is he still at the halfway house?"

She nodded. "Still looking for work, I think. Not too many jobs available for someone his age and with his problems. Why?"

But Emmett was not ready to share his musings - yet. "What's this called anyway?" he asked, savoring his last bite of the dessert.

Debbie grinned. "Well, he called it torte praline gateau . . ." Her pronunciation would have rendered the words completely unintelligible to any Francophile, " or something like that, but we just call it caramel pecan bars."

Emmett summoned up his most fabulous smile. "Oh, no, that's far too plebian. I intend to come up with a name for it that's worthy of its scrumptiousness. Leave it to me."

"So," said Debbie, barely avoiding an eye-roll, "anything new on the BK front?"

Lindsey sighed. "Gus is there with his daddy by now. I just . . . I know he's okay, that Brian would cut off his own testicles before he'd let anything happen to him, but . . ."

Debbie leaned forward and placed a gentle hand on Lindsey's shoulder. "More to the point, Honey, he'd cut the testicles off anybody who so much as made a move toward that kid. I know it's natural to worry, but . . . Jesus! I can't believe I'm going to say this, but I'm pretty sure that Gus is safer with Brian than he would be with anyone else in the world." Her smile went slightly tremulous. "What kind of fucking fools have we all been, hmmm?"

It was at that moment - semi-prophetically - that Lindsey's cell phone rang. She flipped it open, and it was only half way to her ear when all of them heard the shrill, staccato stream of syllables erupting from its speaker. "Mommie, Mommie, Mommie, you'll never guess what."
Lindsey's face was instantly transformed into the universally beautiful expression of doting mothers everywhere. "Hi, Gus. What is it?"

"No, no, no," he crooned. "You have to guess."

"Put it on speaker," urged Debbie. "We all want to talk to him." What she didn't say - because she didn't have to - was that they all knew who else was likely to be on the line and how much they all wanted to hear that voice too.

Lindsey knew it, of course - full well. But she did as asked anyway.

"You're on speaker, Gus. You should say hi to Gramma Debbie and Uncle Mikey and Emmett."

But Gus was too excited to bother with niceties, so someone else answered for him. "You're wasting your time, Wendy. He's currently floating about ten feet off the ground, so you probably better guess what he wants to tell you, or this could be a really long conversation."

"Ummm, okay," said Lindsey, playing along. "Let me see. Daddy bought you a sports car."

Gus crowed with laughter. "No, Mommie. That's silly."

"Okay. He taught you how to surf."

The laugh became a giggle. "Not yet."

Lindsey hesitated for a moment, not certain that she liked what he was implying. "You rode a dolphin," she offered.

This time, the pause was on the other end of the line. "Oh, that's great, Linz. You had to bring up something he'd never thought of before, so now . . . where the fuck am I going to find a dolphin for him to ride?"

"Language, Daddy."

The group gathered around the table in the diner all smiled.

"Hi, Lindsey," said a new voice, one she recognized instantly.

"Hi, Daddy. Still enjoying the trials and tribulations of grandfatherhood, or are you ready to throw in the towel?"

"Never," he answered softly, and Lindsey was amazed to realize that there were tears rising in her eyes. Good thing Brian couldn't see her, she thought, or she'd never live down the momentary temptation to behave like a lesbian.

"Okay, Gus," she said finally, ignoring the sneaking suspicion that Brian had understood her feelings exactly without a single word being spoken. "I give up. What is it that I can't guess?"

"I got a puppy," he laughed. "Gramps bought it for me, and Daddy named it, and . . ."

"A . . . puppy?" she echoed, simultaneously touched by the sheer joy in her son's voice, and filled with dread as she visualized the emotional reaction of her partner on hearing such an announcement.

She waited until she could hear Gus - accompanied by a spate of barking - laughing and apparently racing around the room, before continuing. "Brian, how could you . . ."
"Hey, don't blame me," he retorted, and it didn't require ESP for her to realize that his tongue was in his cheek and he was indulging in a trademark Kinney smirk even as he reassigned blame. "I didn't buy the mutt."

A bright little voice echoed the sentiment. "That's right, Mommie. He didn't buy the mutt. And Gramps didn't want to buy it, but . . . you don't understand, Mommie. It was like . . . like me and him were s'posed to be together."

"He and I," she corrected automatically.


"Never mind, Gus," she said finally, knowing she was both outnumbered and outgunned. "So what's he like? And what's his name?"

"He's white and he's funny and he climbs up on Daddy's lap, and his name's Bo," he replied, and once more there were sounds of scuffling and laughter.

"Bo?" she repeated. "Is that the best you could do, Brian? Bo?"

"I'll explain later," he answered. "Lindsey, have you . . ."

"What's the matter, Stud Muffin?" Debbie interrupted, still slightly amazed at the idea of any dog being allowed to climb up on Brian Kinney's anything. "You can't say hello to your friends?"

Lindsey smiled as she imagined the litany of smart remarks that were running through her old friend's mind as he considered how to respond, but in the end, he simply said, "Hi, Ma. Still sticking your nose where it doesn't belong. I see."

"Good morning to you too, Asshole." But the gentleness of her smile gave the lie to the stridency of her words.

"Hey, Brian," said Michael. "You okay?"

"Fabulous, as always, Mikey."

"So . . . you coming home any time soon?"

The hesitation was brief, but very, very noticeable to the group gathered in the Diner. "Not yet," came the answer finally.

Michael tried not to frown. 'Not yet' was certainly not the answer he'd hoped to get, but at least, it was better than a simple, irrevocable 'No'. For that, of course, was the fear that lingered in Michael's heart - in the hearts of all of the extended family, for that matter - that Brian would reconsider his life and his place in their lives and decide that he didn't need . . . but no. He would not explore the rest of that thought. He would choose to believe that 'Not yet' meant exactly that.

"Babylon misses you," volunteered Emmett, absolutely determined to avoid any suggestion that he might share that emotion.

Strangely, it was that comment that seemed to take Brian aback, just a bit, and make him pause to consider how to answer. "Thanks, Emmy Lou. I expect you to keep the home fires flaming bright."

Then a new voice joined the discussion. "Hey, Everyone," said Justin.

The Pittsburgh group simultaneously released a bit of pent-up breath they hadn't even realized they'd
been holding. If Justin was feeling confident enough to join in the conversation and Brian wasn't thundering at him to mind his own fucking business, then things must be looking up in the ongoing, never predictable, usually cyclonic chronicles of the Taylor-Kinney love story. And every one of them knew better than to ever use those words within Brian's hearing.

"Hi, Sunshine," said Debbie. "You guys . . . behaving?"

"No," laughed Justin, and they were all gratified to hear an echo of rumbling laughter from the man at his side. "Did you expect us to?"

"Is it nice there?" asked Lindsey, wanting - more than anything - to know where her son - and his father - were, but knowing also that she shouldn't ask.

"It's great, Linz," Justin replied. "Gus and I and the dog are just going out exploring. We'll catch you a starfish, if you like."

And Lindsey smiled. It wasn't much, of course, but it was better than nothing.

"Say good-bye, Gus," said Brian, his tone gentle but something in the clipped quality of his words indicating that he had more to say to Lindsey - things that he did not want Gus to overhear.

"Bye, Mommie. Hey, Juss, do they really have dolphins you can ride? Where would . . ."

His voice faded into the distance.

"Take it off speaker, Linz," Brian directed.

Lindsey looked at the faces gathered around her, and saw that they understood the misgivings that were rising as shadows in her eyes. It seemed that they all knew that they should just walk away and give her some privacy. Yet they stayed, pretending to focus on their plates or their coffee or the pedestrians walking by outside the door. Anything . . . but whatever it was that Brian needed privacy to say.

"What is it, Peter?" she asked softly, trying to ignore the knot forming in her throat.

"Have you talked to Melanie this morning?"

"No. Why?"

The knot was suddenly a huge lump, as she realized that she was about to learn something she probably would not want to know.

She was right.

Clearly and concisely - he was, after all, an ad man of the first order, well accustomed to providing the maximum of pertinent information in a minimum of words - Brian told her about the whole Hargrave-Correll debacle, and Melanie's participation in it.

When he was finished, he simply waited, giving her time to absorb what she'd heard.

"I don't understand, Brian," she said finally, barely audible. "Why would they do something like that? Why would Teddie . . ."

She couldn't bring herself to complete the thought.

Brian sighed. "I think he just wanted it too badly, so he got in over his head. I want to believe that's
what it was - that he wouldn't deliberately betray me."

Lindsey rubbed her forehead with tremulous fingers. "Even after . . . everything that's happened, I never expected that he'd . . ." She took a deep breath. "And Melanie?"

Brian deliberately avoided the knee-jerk response that he wanted to give her - not because he wanted to spare Melanie, but rather because he wanted to spare Lindsey. "If you're waiting for me to defend her, better be prepared for a long wait. However, in her case, since she's no financial wunderkind, it's possible she just saw what she believed to be a good opportunity to make some mega-money. Can't really fault her for that. Shit, Linz, if it hadn't been for my fed contacts letting me know what was going on behind the scenes, I might have been tempted myself."

"But it was Ted's responsibility to know. Wasn't it?"

"Yeah. It was, but I'm trying to believe that he was just blinded by the glitter."

"Brian," she said softly, trying hard to ignore the rising alarm in the eyes of her companions, "has Cynthia told you all of it? Do you know . . ."

"I know enough," he replied coolly. "Just drop it for now. Okay? But you're going to have to deal with one majorly-pissed partner, Wendy. And she's going to . . ."

"Blame you," she interrupted. "You didn't have to tell me that. I already knew."

"Yeah, well, I just thought you should be prepared."

"Forty thousand dollars," she whispered. "Jesus, Brian! I didn't even know we had forty thousand dollars to invest. How's that possible? And is there any hope . . . will she get any of it back?"

"Very little," he answered, seeing no point in sugar-coating anything. "But if you need money . . ."

To her own amazement - and that of all the people gathered around her who were trying to pretend that they hadn't been eavesdropping - she managed to dredge up a tiny, bitter laugh. "Have you ever stopped to count up how many times you've said that to me in the last six years?"

He didn't hesitate. "Doesn't matter. It's only money."

She took a deep breath. "I doubt that Mel is going to see it that way."

"Lindsey," he said slowly, hesitantly - which was enough, by itself, to make her eyebrows climb toward her hairline. "Do you need . . . if you need anything, I . . ."

"I know," she interrupted, allowing the warmth building within her to express itself in her tone. "Brian, I've always known. And, when I figure everything out, you'll be . . . the second to know."

He cleared his throat, probably to buy a bit of time. "Okay then. Don't worry about Gus. I'll make sure he's fine and having the time of his life. Your dad is . . . he's surprisingly good with him."

"I'm shocked," she retorted with a grin. "A breeder? Good enough to associate with the son of the great god, Kinney? What's next? Armaged . . ."

"Shut the fuck up!" he snapped.

"You behave yourself," she said gently. "Don't go corrupting my kid."

This time, the laughter was deep and genuine. "Gotta go," he announced. "I have a whole new
"Hey!" she said quickly. "Bo? Honest to God, Brian, that's all you could come up with - not to mention how I'm going to explain this to . . ."

She trailed off then, suddenly wondering if, under the circumstances, any explanation would even be necessary.

Brian, realizing the direction of her thoughts, redirected her toward the original question. "Not 'Bo'," he chuckled. "Beau - as in Beau Soleil. You'll have to see it for yourself, Linz, but I swear to God that dog and Justin must have been identical twins in some past life."

Thus, as intended, he left her laughing.

For a moment anyway - until she remembered the rest of the conversation, and what she would undoubtedly have to face from the woman who was supposed to be her partner - for better or worse, in sickness and in health, and - God help them - for richer or poorer.

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tbc
Chapter 40

My feet took a walk in heavenly grass,
All day while the sky shone clear as glass.
My feet took a walk in heavenly grass,
All night while the lonesome stars rolled past.
Then my feet come down to walk on earth,
And my mother cried when she give me birth.
Now my feet walk far and my feet walk fast,
But they still got an itch for heavenly grass.

--- Heavenly Grass --- Tennessee Williams

"Where am I going to find a fucking dolphin?"

Justin had been trying, for at least five minutes, to hide the grin that was his response to Brian's grumping, while Ron Peterson was sitting on the steps of the deck, looking as if he'd like to caution the father of his only grandson about his language - but didn't quite dare.

Gus, on the other hand, was as happy as the proverbial clam, currently engaged in building his own extensive version of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway around - and occasionally over - his father's golden-skinned, long-limbed body in sand as white and fine as sugar, although he did take time out from his project to ask, "What is a fucking dolphin, Daddy?"

At that point, there was no longer a prayer of hiding the grin - or stifling the laughter - and Justin gave up and collapsed on his back, giggling like a teen-ager enjoying his very first hit of the kind of weed only the Brian Kinneys of the world could afford.

Brian was - predictably - annoyed, but a careful observer with a keen eye might have noticed that, beneath the characteristic glower, lurked the tiniest nuance of a smile. He would never admit it, of course, but the presence of his two favorite individuals in the world, both wrapped in a cloak of easy laughter, was enough to repel all his demons and banish them to the darkest corners of his mind - places where he could ignore them. Maybe even forget - for a while - that they existed at all.

But not forever, of course.

He was careful to remain very still while Gus constructed a ramp of sand and tiny stones to make a bridge which would allow him to drive one of his Hot Wheels Jeeps - Like father, like son, Brian thought, and didn't even try to suppress the quick surge of pride that coursed through him - across his father's ankle while the newest addition to the family - obviously a smart little beast - nestled in close between the outer plane of Brian's thigh and the warm sand and concentrated on not being a source of annoyance to the man who had - for some uncanny reason - fascinated its little canine consciousness. Although it required considerable effort, Brian managed to ignore it, lifting his eyes to stare out toward the ocean, where the breakers were tumbling in toward the shore with growing strength and fury. The tide was turning.

Brian Kinney didn't believe in forever, and he wondered - very briefly - if anyone had ever figured that out. He rather thought not, since he'd never shared that observation with anyone.
Far out beyond the bay, a commercial trawler was moving in broad side-to-side sweeps toward the Southeast, two deckhands barely visible on its rear deck, struggling with the thick lines of a massive net and a hoist cable, and Brian watched as a flock of gulls wheeled overhead, awaiting their opportunity to swoop down and make off with specimens of the catch. Waiting in vain, he was pretty sure, since more crew members were emerging from the main cabin, ready to guard against any incursion by foragers.

From here, he realized, the boat looked like a toy - something that Gus might play with in the bathtub - but it was obviously much larger than it appeared, since there were at least a half-dozen crew members aboard.

What would it be like, he wondered, to spend one's life trawling the endless seas, forever bound and constrained by the treachery of the waters below - treachery that rarely showed itself but was, nevertheless, ever present and ever ready to seize the moment.

Forever.

There was that word again.

"Daddy!" Gus's voice took on the faint shrillness of a whine. "You didn't answer me. What is a fucking dolphin?"

Brian huffed a deep breath. "A dolphin is a big fish, Sonny Boy, and don't say 'fucking'. Your mommie wouldn't like it."

"Actually," said Justin, sitting up and brushing sand off his body, "it's not a fish. It's a mammal that happens to live in the water. It's got . . ." He launched into a specific explanation of what made a dolphin not a fish, his tone of voice very similar to that of professors in history classes he'd attended during his truncated sojourn at PIFA. First Brian yawned. Then Gus yawned, triggering a burst of laughter from Trina Thomas as she stepped down from the deck, carrying a pitcher of lemonade and a tray of glasses.

"Like father, like son," she said softly, leaning forward to offer a glass to Brian, noting the bundle of fur tucked up tight against his thigh, but - wisely - deciding not to comment. Justin, however, was not nearly done with his subject and certainly not content to allow Gus to lose interest. Thus he began to provide visual aids, by sketching dolphin figures in the sand, and Gus was immediately re-engaged and fascinated. Soon there was a panorama of ocean scenes, as figures of whales and sharks and sea turtles and jellyfish and a plethora of other sea life came to life under Justin's fingers. Then Gus spotted an oddly-shaped shell beside one of the drawings, which served to inspire a new in-depth discussion, concerning the variety and composition of shells and how they formed and what purpose they served and . . .

Brian yawned again. And this time, so did the dog.

"Except," said Trina, her dark eyes filled with warmth, "he talks way more than you do. I wonder - were you like him, when you were . . ."

She didn't finish the question, as she saw something - something dark and brooding, something almost frightening - rise in Brian's eyes. "If you don't have enough to do," he remarked, "I'm sure I can come up with something sufficiently time-consuming to fill your morning."

She smiled, unperturbed, except for that whatever-it-was she'd seen in his eyes, which perturbed her plenty, and retorted, "Now is that any way to talk to someone who's preparing your favorite dish for lunch . . ."
He opened his mouth to deny it - no matter what dish she might be planning to prepare.

"And who might just be the only person in the vicinity who knows where you might find exactly the kind of 'fucking dolphin' you're looking for."

He was on the verge of offering up a typical Kinney-esque retort, but then he thought better of it, noting the smugness of her smile.

"Really?" he asked quietly, quietly enough to prevent Gus from focusing on the subject of the conversation.

She shrugged. "Close enough, I think - at least, until you're ready to take him back to Orlando, or schedule a run down to the Keys. If I recall correctly, he commented about wanting to ride a dolphin - not swim with one."

"So?" Brian frowned.

"So," she answered, tongue tucked firmly in cheek, "even when you swim with dolphins, you don't generally get to ride them. So a little bit of creativity would seem to be in order, and I don't think he'll object." Her eyes took on a speculative gleam as she tilted her head to look from father to son and back again. "In fact, I have an idea you won't either, once you get beyond the requisite spate of Kinney bitching."

Brian managed - barely - not to grin, and turned once more to look back out toward the sea, where the fishing boat was on the verge of disappearing below the horizon. Gone - forever.

That word again.

The discussion concerning shells and shellfish had expanded to include the ocean bed, and from there, it was only a logical progression to Finding Nemo, and then on to Justin's favorite "really old movie - Free Willy". The lovely cadence of the enthusiastic voices was almost soporific.

Brian took a deep breath, exchanged small smiles with Ron Peterson, and returned to his contemplation of the ocean vista before him. Something about the endless swells and the perpetual quality of the tides led to a realization that these waters spread out across the world, to Europe, and down to South America to skirt the bottom of the world and then on, into the Pacific, sweeping past Australia and across to Asia, and then on to Africa, before turning north once more, to surge up the coast and then, once again, back to the shores of North America; it spoke to him of the word that rang so insistently in his mind, although he didn't know why.


He closed his eyes, barely noticing that Gus had resumed his building project, expanding its scope to include shifting Brian's leg and foot to allow him to bury the entire lower extremity with damp sand, prompting Justin to smile again, thinking that he really should get up to go find a camera in order to prove to any doubters - and it wasn't difficult to assign identities to that group - that Brian Kinney could, indeed, behave like a genuine, loving father.

But the smile was tentative and short-lived as he studied the look on Brian's face.

_Uh-oh!_

An airliner whistled by overhead, obviously beginning its descent to one of the major airports in the area, distracting Justin's attention briefly, but Brian did not move.
Forever. Why was it that the word always conjured up another phrase, the one having little or nothing to do with the other, except in his own mind. Why should 'forever' automatically trigger its companion phrase - happily ever after - when he really didn't believe in either one.

More than that. It wasn't only that he didn't believe in the concept; it was that he knew - beyond all doubt, that no such thing existed, or was even possible.

He thought he might remember believing - maybe - but it had been so long ago that it was pre-everything: pre-puberty; pre-sex; pre-self realization. Pre-knowledge of queerness. So, really, really a long time ago.

He remembered listening to all the old fairy tales, or reading them for himself and studying drawings of the princess riding off into the sunset on the horse of the handsome prince. He hadn't believed it then either, so it was obvious that truth had come early to him. How could he have believed in happily-ever-after for young lovers; he had his parents to show him the truth of it all, hadn't he?

When, he wondered, had he come face to face with the brick wall of inevitability which had taken from him his ability to accept the possibility of forever?

When . . .

It wasn't common for Brian to doze off, but the last few days had been jam-packed with raw emotions and eventualities and confronting consequences, and now . . . He sighed softly, and settled against a strong, young shoulder that was suddenly there to cradle him, even if he would have violently denied the appropriateness of that particular word had he been awake enough to dispute it. When indeed . . .

He had been telling himself all day that it didn't really matter - that it wasn't anything important. He had been careful to remember all the things he was always expected to remember - to ignore any lingering trace of his injuries which might tend to call attention to him in a negative way and to come up with a believable explanation for the bruises on his back and shoulders and the busted lip that nothing could hide; and, above all, to never let anyone see him cry or cringe or show any residual sign of pain, and he thought he'd done okay with it. Mrs. Sutton had looked at him a little strangely when he'd tried to describe how he and a couple of kids from down the street had been racing on their bikes and somehow got tangled up together and tumbled off the edge of a walkway with him getting the worst of it because he'd wound up on the bottom of the pile. For just a moment, he'd thought that she was going to ask for these kids' names - like she was going to demand witnesses to back up his story - but in the end, she hadn't, the look in her eyes confirming what he already knew, even though he was just seven years old. She might have a kind, generous heart, but - in the end - it was just easier not to know.

So he'd done okay with that part of it.

And he'd tried - really tried - not to eavesdrop when Coach Frederick had talked to his father, or, at least, not to look like he was eavesdropping, because he knew for sure what that would get him if his father caught on to what he was doing, and he really didn't know if he was up to another of their little 'basement sessions' - that's what his father called it when Brian screwed up and had to be 'brought back to the straight and narrow' - any time soon. He was still struggling not to let anyone see the stiffness in his lower back or the painful swelling in his wrist from when Jack had grabbed him the night before and twisted his arm up behind his back in a determined effort to teach him to 'take his licks like a man instead of a little pussy-boy'. And his biggest fear of all was that, if there were another one of those encounters within the next couple of days, he would not be able to pull
himself together and overcome the damages in order to endure and prove himself to be something more than a total fuck-up, in the only way he had - so far - found to do so.

So that's why he had taken the chance, holding his breath as he sub-consciously asked a God that he already didn't believe in to not let Jack notice that he was close enough to hear what the coach was saying.

Very deliberately, he didn't allow himself even the tiniest sign of pride as he listened to the man's words.

"Jack, I'm telling you, the kid's a natural. I've been coaching kids' soccer for almost thirty years. Since my own boys learned to play, and then on with my grandkids. And in all that time, I've never seen any kid with the kind of natural talent that Brian has. It's like he doesn't have to learn it. It's like he was born knowing what to do, and how to do it. I know what I'm talking about, Jack. Provided he doesn't get hurt, this could be his free pass to go to college - to any kind of a future he might want to have. He's . . . he's phenomenal. You should hear my son, Reggie, raving about him. In fact, he wants to bring one of the coaches from the elite league over here to see him play. Provided that's all right with you and his mom, of course. Can't imagine why it wouldn't be, but . . ."

"Jesus, Marty!" Jack Kinney's laugh was rough and impatient. "It's just fucking soccer. Not like it's a big deal, is it? I mean, he's not going to wind up throwing the winning touchdown in the Super Bowl or anything. It's just soccer, so . . ."

Brian risked a look up to catch a glimpse of Coach Frederick's face, and recognized a fleeting sadness in the man's eyes, as he offered up a small smile. "If you lived anywhere else in the world, you'd know that it could be a very big deal indeed. I mean it, Jack. His skill could be his ticket to a good life - to his own version of 'happily ever after'. Just pay attention, and you'll see it for yourself. You'll be . . ."

"Yeah, yeah, okay," said Jack, his tone of voice revealing that he remained unconvinced and fundamentally uninterested. And Brian risked another quick look, fairly certain of what he'd see.

He was right, of course.

He had heard his mother talking with her best friend and next-door neighbor, Brenda, once, about 'that trollop, Sandy Corrigan'. Although he didn't know what a trollop was - exactly - he was pretty sure that it didn't mean anything good, just as he was equally certain that his mother would not have been happy had she been there to notice how Jack was looking at 'the trollop' at that minute.

Which she wasn't, of course. He wasn't sure exactly where Joan was, but it didn't require much thought to realize that there were only two possible places - either at home, with Claire, sprawled on the sofa watching soap operas and sipping her special brand of 'tea', or at the church, doing her best to impress the new priest with her air of piety.

But Brian knew she would have been tight-faced with anger if she'd been there to watch his daddy grinning at 'the trollop', whose son, Rusty, was the goalkeeper on the opposing team, and Jack was looking an awful lot like he was about to go do some scouting behind enemy lines.

Probably going looking for some place to fuck.

Brian Kinney was little more than a baby, and there were plenty of things that he did not yet know, but some things - once learned - could never be forgotten. He didn't know anything at all about love; would know even less about it as the years went on, until fate intervened - but he already knew about fucking. That, he had learned at the ripe old age of four-and-a-half, when he'd walked into his
parents' bedroom one Friday evening, while his mother had been at a meeting of her altar society and his father had been 'entertaining' a friend in the bedroom - a friend who happened to be sprawled face down and naked across the bed when Brian had walked in - a friend who was naked and giggling and enjoying Jack's big, swollen, dark purplish dick that was pounding into her, along with his energetic, undivided attention. Undivided, that is, until he'd noticed his only son standing frozen and horrified in the open doorway.

Brian had actually learned two things that day; he'd found out what fucking was and that walking in on anything remotely like that - and saying anything at all about it - was just about the biggest mistake he'd ever made.

That was the first time he'd ever wound up with actual broken bones, but he'd been pretty sure - even then - that it wouldn't be the last. The damage had been inflicted with a double purpose - to make sure he never again opened a closed door unless invited to do so, and as a preventative measure - to illustrate graphically the perils involved in opening his mouth at the wrong time.

He'd already known what that meant, but his father had made certain to reinforce the lesson.

He'd never said a word. It had become the mantra of his life.

'The trollop' was blonder than the woman who had provided young Brian's initial exposure to the wonders (or not) of the naked female body, but otherwise she was pretty much a carbon copy - big bust, big butt, big hair, big, red mouth; Daddy liked 'em big, and the little boy wondered, for just a minute, why on earth Jack had chosen to marry Joan, who was completely unlike the women that always seemed to catch his eye. Later, when he spared thoughts for such things - which he didn't very often - that question would occasionally recur, but he never really cared enough to explore it to its conclusion. Nevertheless, there would always be a quiet voice inside him to whisper that - for the Jack Kinneys of the world - piety and wifely virtue were synonymous with a pale, slender demeanor and a complete lack of passion. He never bothered to examine how that made him feel - or why.

Standing on the edge of the soccer field, he folded his lips into his mouth, in a facial twitch that would become an integral part of his repertoire of favorite expressions as time went on, and deliberately turned away from the male-female point/counterpoint going on in the bleachers, as Coach Frederick beckoned the boys to gather around him.

The coach gave his customary little pep talk to the team, stressing the importance of sportsmanship and teamwork, and trying to keep them from getting too tense and hyped up to play as well as they could. Then he took Brian aside, and knelt down before him. "It's a special day, Brian," said Marty Frederick. "If we win today, we're in the semi-finals for the league championship. But . . ." He paused as his eyes drifted toward the stands where Jack was now seated beside his blonde friend, "it's also the first time your dad's ever been here to see you play, and I want him to see you do your best. Okay? So go on out there and give it all you got. And watch out for Jamie. I know how he always tries to cut you off so he can look like the big hero, and I know how you always manage to score the goals yourself without making him look like a big dweeb, so just do what you always do, Bud."

Brian grinned. He didn't really blame Jamie; it was good to be the hero. Unfortunately, Jamie didn't have the skills to make it happen, but Brian had no objection to sharing the spotlight - mostly.

He took one last look at his father, just in time to see the man returning from the concession stand with a plate of nachos and a couple of Cokes. The whistle blew then to start the game, and Brian turned away to concentrate on his playing, but not before noticing that his father never once looked toward the field.
It was a short game, of course. At their age, they played short periods. But it was hard-fought, and Brian got body-checked a number of times. As usual. Even at their age, the competitive spirit was already flexing its muscle, and opposing teams always figured out pretty quickly which players posed the biggest threats and reacted accordingly.

When it was over, Brian was even more bruised than when he'd arrived, and he had a black eye to match the busted lip. But he also had a victory, resulting from his very first hat trick, which meant that the injuries didn't even register. Nothing did, except for the euphoria of the win.

Until . . .

It hadn't really happened in slow motion; he only remembered it that way.

His team had tackled him en masse and lifted him up to their shoulders, to do a victory lap around the field, and all the parents had been milling around, cheering and laughing, when Coach Frederick had apparently decided that he needed to make a point of reminding Jack of how gifted his son was. So he'd wandered through the crowd in search of his objective and emerged from the happy uproar just in time to see Jack Kinney emerging from the woods behind the field, still engaged in zipping up, to be followed just seconds later by 'the trollop', flushed and disheveled and still tugging to adjust her big boobs inside her tank top.

In the vernacular that Brian would not learn until several years later, it had not taken a degree in rocket science for the coach to figure out what kind of tangling the two had been engaged in while their sons tangled on the soccer field.

Brian had actually tried not to watch, immediately recognizing the train wreck as it played out, but it had been impossible for him to look away. To his everlasting credit, the coach had tried to conceal his disgust and carry on as if he had noticed nothing. But Jack Kinney - whatever else he might have been - was nobody's gullible fool. In his mind - and from his unique perspective - he'd been busted; caught red-handed, and the fault could be laid at the feet of his damned kid who, by virtue of performing in a way that compelled the coach to seek out his old man to gauge and discuss his reaction, had virtually guaranteed that Jack would be caught with his pants down, so to speak.

There had been no celebration of Brian's victory in the Kinney household that night, and there had been no soccer for the rest of that season either, as the star forward of the Belton Avenue Strikers met with an unfortunate accident that evening, involving - according to the story provided for the emergency room staff - a tumble down the basement stairs resulting in a broken collarbone and a dislocated shoulder - among other things. The degree of the damage was compounded, of course, by the fact that it was several hours before anyone noticed that the injury would require medical attention - a source of additional resentment for both Jack and Joan since it would entail an unwanted expense.

The little boy could only sit on the sidelines and watch as his team was defeated in the semi-finals. He would never play for Coach Frederick again; would, in fact, never play in a recreational league again. His father made sure of that. Indeed, it was not until junior high school, when he was chosen for the school's intramural team, that he got another chance to demonstrate and develop his skills, and use them to reach for his dream, although - by that time - anyone who knew Brian at all would have figured out that - with or without soccer - he was going to find a way, no matter how much shit he had to slog through on his journey to escape the nightmare of his childhood.

So much for 'happily ever after'.

Brian came awake with a sharp gasp, as if stricken with sudden pain, and Justin had to move quickly to compensate and grasp him tightly enough to prevent him from leaping to his feet, which would
Justin noticed, of course, but chose not to comment. He knew despair when he saw it, and figured - correctly - that nothing he could do or say would change whatever had triggered it.

Luckily, he was spared the necessity for finding a solution when Brian - ever vigilant - noticed the alarm flaring in his son's eyes and quickly erased every trace of panic from his own expression.

"Daddy?" The voice was tiny and tentative, and not the least bit Gus-like.

"It's okay, Sonny Boy." There was only the barest trace of anything out of the ordinary in the tone. "Just a charley-horse in my leg. I just need to . . ."

He paused, shifting slightly, unwilling to disrupt his son's play, but needing - really, really needing, if Justin was any judge - to get up and move.

Luckily, Justin was not the only one who noticed, and Chris McClaren walked out of the house and stepped forward at exactly the right moment, reaching down to hand Brian the wireless house phone. "You might want to take this inside," said the FBI agent in a completely neutral tone of voice, and Justin closed his eyes to hide the surge of gratitude in their blue depths. All things considered, he would just as soon tall, dark, and too-fucking-handsome did not realize that Justin - at that moment - could have kissed the bastard for being in the right place at the right time with the right solution.

"Hey, Gus," said Ron Peterson, also demonstrating a surprising degree of perception, "why don't you and I get busy on a new version of our sand castle. I bet your daddy will be amazed at what we can accomplish."

But Gus was not quite as oblivious as they'd all been hoping. He turned once more to study his father's face before replying. "Is that okay, Daddy? Because it's okay if you want to just . . . sit with me. I like it when you sit with me. And so does Beau."

Brian smiled - the tender, soft, intensely beautiful smile that was reserved only for Gus - and Justin had to struggle to maintain his neutral expression. That smile always - always - made him want to cry. "Thanks, Sonny Boy. I like it too. But I probably need to take this call. So why don't you - and Beau - go help Gramps with that castle. I can't wait to see it."

Gus leaned close - close enough so that he was rubbing his forehead against Brian's ear. "Gramps taught me how to build turts," he whispered.

Brian - deliberately - did not smile. "Turts?"

"Yep. You know, Daddy, the pointy things way up at the top . . ."

"Yeah, Gus. I know what they are."

Justin chuckled, as he leaned forward and said, "Hey, Gus, I think you mean turrets. They're . . ." But Gus was shaking his head. "No, I don't. They're turts."

"But . . ."

One look from Brian was sufficient to cause Justin to shut his mouth - quickly.

"He knows what they are," said Brian firmly, with a brilliant smile for his son. "And I can't wait to
"I'll make sure there's lots of 'em," Gus assured him.

"Good. A castle can never have too many turts." At Brian's side, Justin was not being very successful in his attempts to suppress a broad grin, but a quick look at the warning in Brian's eyes made him realize that, if he valued his life - and his dick - he'd do well to try harder.

Gus's smile was smug and very bright as he turned to pursue his new interest. Still, he was moving slowly, and paused after a moment to turn back and gaze up into his father's face. "You coming back?" he asked. "After your phone call?"

"In a little while," Brian reassured him. "I have a meeting this afternoon. Remember? But we'll have plenty of time later today. And all week-end. I promise. No meetings, no interruptions."

Two pairs of hazel eyes exchanged deep, solemn gazes. "Can I . . ." Gus paused, and swallowed hard. "Can I sleep with you?"

Brian, very deliberately, did not look up at Justin. "Of course you can."

And if Justin detected a tiny little spark of victorious, almost malicious amusement in the eyes of Chris McClaren - and an even larger spark of bright sympathy in those of Trina Thomas - he allowed himself not the smallest nuance of a response.

Brian rose then, taking advantage of the chance to use Justin's arm as a fulcrum to steady himself, as Gus turned his attention to his grandfather, while dragging his new playmate with him, despite the puppy's obvious reluctance.

"You have a new fan," whispered Justin, smiling as the dog looked back at Brian with huge, soulful eyes.

Brian confined his response to a blank stare, which, of course, spoke volumes.

He paused for a moment then, watching as his son plopped himself down on the sand at Ron Peterson's side, explaining in breathless detail about the castle they needed to build and the number of 'turts' he'd decided to include. Nine years later, when his father - still the kind of man who drew every eye and inspired lust in most of them - would take Gus to Europe for the first time, and introduce him to the fairy-tale ambiance of the great castles of the Black Forest region, the teen-ager would offer up the trademark Kinney laugh, and exclaim on the number and design of the 'turts'.

It would remain, forever, their private joke.

And it would be at that lovely, golden moment that Brian Kinney would experience a small but very significant epiphany - would finally be able to consider the possibility that 'forever' might just be possible.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

"Brian, are you sure about this?"

Kinnetik's owner huffed a small sigh, and accepted an icy bottle of water from Justin as he sat at the bar in the kitchen. He was unaccustomed to hearing Cynthia sound so uncertain, and he found he didn't like it much.

"Aren't you?" he retorted.
She drew a deep breath. "It's not that I don't understand that it's logical and justified. It's just . . . it's Ted, Boss. How am I going to tell him?"

"You're not," he replied. "I am. But I can't just let it slide until I get back. I'd prefer to lay it out for him face to face, but that's just not possible right now. So you just take care of business, and he's going to have to deal with it."

"You know he's going to think this is my idea," she pointed out.

"No, he won't, though he might pretend that he does, but I'll take care of it."

"Okay," she agreed finally, still not completely convinced, but ready to tackle the next item on her list - the one she wasn't sure Brian was going to like very much. "You're scheduled at the courthouse at two, right?"

"Yes." Brian and Cynthia had been associates and friends for many years, and each was skilled in reading and interpreting the nuances of the other's behavior. Therefore, he knew immediately that she had something more to say, something that was making her a little nervous.

"Cynthia?"

"Yes?"

"Just spill it."

Another deep breath. "Okay, here goes. When you get to the courthouse, someone will be there waiting for you. His name is Liam Quinn, and he's . . . well . . . he's your lawyer."

Brian blinked. "He's my what?"

"Your lawyer."

He took a swig of water. "Unless I'm very mistaken, my lawyer," he said slowly, "is a scrawny, balding, middle-aged breeder with two ex-wives, three kids in college - all supported by me - and a ridiculously stuffy office in downtown Pittsburgh. Why would I . . ."

"He's not that kind of lawyer," she interrupted. "This guy is a criminal lawyer."

Brian's eyes narrowed - an effect completely wasted on Cynthia, of course, but significant enough to make Justin think twice and edge closer. "Last time I checked, I wasn't one - a criminal, that is."

Another, still deeper breath. "Look, Brian, I know you're not particularly inclined to trust attorneys, but, in this case, I really think you should reconsider. I was lucky to be able to engage this guy, and . . ."

"And why," he interrupted, "would you take it upon yourself to even try to . . ."

"Because Agent Corey suggested it. Because you're plunging blindly and full speed ahead into uncharted waters - as usual - and . . ."

"Because this is new territory for you," she replied stubbornly, "and you need someone to guide you through and protect your interests. Look, Brian, just meet the guy. Talk to him - and do it before you
give your formal deposition. He's really smart . . ."

"Which means he's costing me a bloody fortune."

Cynthia smiled. No point in denying an obvious truth, but, in the end, her boss truly believed in hiring the best - and paying for it - so she knew that the bitching was simply Brian Kinney being Brian Kinney. Bitching was just something he did. "I sent him a copy of the statement Agent Corey has in your file, and he's looking over it. He had some concerns, which he needs to go over with you. And he's the one that stressed that you should talk to him before you talk to them, so . . ."

"Where'd you find him," he demanded, "always assuming that you didn't just look in the phone book for an Irish name?"

Cynthia didn't even bother to dignify that comment with a bit of sarcasm of her own. "Agent Corey provided me with a short list, so I . . ."

"So he's what? An FBI shill?"

Cynthia grinned. "As the only person in this agency who's better than the boss at doing research, I can say with absolute certainty that he's not an FBI anything. What he is is a highly respected, very successful criminal defense attorney who is independently wealthy and thus free to pick and choose his clients as he pleases."

"And he chooses me? I'm touched. Is he queer?"

The grin became a laugh. "I didn't ask. Does it matter?"

"How long have you known me?" he retorted, but the slight stiffness around his eyes was easing away, and Justin could almost feel him relaxing. "You really think this is necessary?" he continued.

"I do. And Agent Corey - she impresses me as being a person worth listening to."

"Okay," he said after a brief, thoughtful pause. "I'll talk to him. Although the feds may not be pleased if I'm late to the party."

"Are you kidding me?" she replied, still grinning. "In this case, you are the party. What have they got without you?"

And it was Brian's turn to grin. "I like the way you think. So what time is your flight?"

"Nine AM," she answered. Then her voice softened, and took on a hint of uncertainty. "You sure about this, Boss? Gus and Katy together? It's not likely to be a quiet week-end, you know."

"I've had more than enough quiet week-ends lately. She there already?"

"Got in last night. God, Brian, she's grown a foot. Where does the time go?"

"I swear to God," he retorted, "if you start ranting about how we're going to be watching them graduate and have children of their own before we know it, I'm going to fire you. I get enough of that shit from Lindsey."

"Don't think that's something I'll ever have to deal with," she replied with a small sigh.

"Hey!" he said, very softly. "Listen to me, Cynthia. Are you listening?"

Her sigh turned overly dramatic. "When am I ever not listening to you, Brian?"
"Right," he replied with a smile. "So listen now. You can't know what lies ahead for her. You don't
know what the future might bring. So she's a little bit different from a lot of other kids. So what? So
was I. So were you, unless I miss my guess. So don't jump to conclusions. She might . . ."

Cynthia laughed abruptly. "If you suggest she's going to turn out to be the female equivalent of you,
I can't imagine how you think that would be comforting."

Then it was his turn to laugh. "Fuck you, Tink. Now go run my company, and make lots of lovely
money to support my decadent lifestyle. And set up a video conference for later today - say five-
thirty or so, in my office. And tell Ted I expect him to be there."

"All right. Oh, and by the way, someone else is demanding to see you."

"Demanding?" There was no missing the droll, tongue-in-cheek tone of his voice. Then he was silent
for a moment before smiling up at his blond companion. "Let me guess - small, dark, and loathsome
and of the female persuasion. Sort of."

"Yes. I know you told her to get the fuck out and stay out, but she's calling constantly, harassing the
staff, and generally making a nuisance of herself."

"Our little Melanie?" he retorted. "A nuisance? Who'd a thunk it? Has she talked to Ted?"

She sighed. "I don't think so. I think he's dodging her calls."

Brian was quiet for a moment, considering. "Okay. Here's what you do. Call the Terror from
Toronto, and tell her that, if she really wants to talk to me, she should come down and do it face-to-
face, at the video conference. We'll suspend our exile - just this once. And then call Lindsey, and let
her know about it. Just make sure that she understands that she's welcome to come and watch, but
only if she really wants to. Strictly her choice. Otherwise, I'll be delighted to do the honors."

"I hope you realize," she said slowly, "that you're risking a nuclear meltdown."

"Risking?" he echoed. "I'm counting on it."

"Come upstairs with me."

It was just a whisper, a soft susurration of sound against the velvety skin beneath his jaw-line, but it
contained all the dynamic energy of a flagrant, irresistible seduction.

"Justin, Gus is . . ."

A quick movement to get a better view of the tableau arranged on the soft sand beyond the deck, and
then the lovely lips were back at his throat. "Gus is currently constructing 'turts' and enjoying it
thoroughly, but it's going to take a while because the dog is just as enthusiastic in tearing them down
as Gus is in putting them up. So please . . ."

Fuck!

Justin laughed. "Exactly."

And Brian had to bite down on an urge to chuckle and marvel over how well the twink knew him.

"Beau," he said, tongue planted firmly in cheek.
"What?"
"The dog's name."
"Fuck the dog's name."

Brian turned on the barstool and wrapped his arms around the blond's waist to pull him close - close enough for Justin to notice the rock-hard bulge beneath the cut-offs. "I think I'd rather fuck you."

Justin moaned, and reflected that he really should have learned his lesson a long time ago. If he was going to tease Brian Kinney, he'd better be prepared to be teased - and tempted - and reduced to a quivering mass of lust in return. "You really never get enough, do you?" he muttered.

"There's no such thing as enough."

It was truly amazing, thought Justin, as they raced upstairs, just how quickly the man could move, regardless of his injuries, when sufficiently motivated.

The door was barely closed behind them when he found himself claimed and fighting to breathe as Brian sought to devour him.

Brief memories, fleeting images, flashed in his mind as he remembered other times, other places. Other men - and smashed face-first into the wall of inevitability.

How had he ever managed to believe that anything - anything in his life - could ever mean as much as this - could ever even come close to equaling what resided only here, in Brian's arms, in Brian's bed. In Brian's heart.

He pushed back then, and evaded the luscious lips that immediately sought to reclaim him as they were moving toward the bed.

"Wait," he whispered. "Please, wait."

"Not a big fan of waiting, Sunshine," came the predictable response.

Justin grinned. "Bullshit! I've seen you find a way to wait - and wait - and wait - with your cock exploring every inch of me and forcing me to cum - and cum - and cum again, before you ever let yourself go."

A quick shrug. "Gotta live up to the reputation."

The grin morphed into a trill of laughter. "Oh, you're so far beyond that, it's ridiculous. No one - absolutely no one - is ever going to be able to one-up the Numero Uno Stud of Liberty Avenue. But now . . ." Justin lifted his hand and cupped Brian's face, and spent a few moments just enjoying the image, drinking in the beauty. "I want to ride you," he whispered, drawing close enough to lick a path up the side of that luscious throat. "I want you to sit down, with your back braced against the headboard, and let me take you into my body. All the way in - so far in that your fucking cock is pushing into my throat. I want you to push myself down on you, clinch my ass around you. Taste you from the inside when you cum. I want you to push yourself into me, harder and further than you ever have before, so you can be where no one else will ever be."

Brian closed his eyes. "If you keep talking like that, we're not even going to make it to the bed."

Abruptly, Justin pushed away and moved to the corner where he'd stashed his luggage. "Oh, yes, we will," he replied, digging for something in the carry-all.
"What are you . . ."

In what appeared to be one quick motion, Justin shed his clothes and turned to face his companion, lips twisted in a classic Justin-Taylor smirk as he lifted one hand to expose what he was holding.

Brian grinned. "And what do you intend to do with those?"

Justin sank down on the bed, and turned deliberately so the morning sun streaming through the big Eastern windows painted his beautiful, perfectly-shaped ass with a wash of soft amber. Then he reached up and fastened the two pairs of padded hand-cuffs he was holding to opposite ends of the top bar of the headboard, before turning to beckon Brian forward. "Take off your clothes, Bad Boy, and I'll show you."

He was pretty sure he heard the rip of fabric as Brian hastened to obey, but neither of them cared enough to investigate.

Thus it was Brian who wound up gloriously naked and perfectly positioned, with his arms extended and cuffed to the bed-frame, leaving him with no choice but to watch as Justin prepared both of them for what would come next.

The preparations were almost excruciating, involving, first of all, a complete and thorough exploration of every orifice, every inch of that long, sensual body which was a study in bronze against the pale drift of Egyptian cotton sheets, with particular attention paid to the areas that were still healing, leading Brian to observe, finally, that 'kissing it - no matter how pleasurable - wouldn't really make it better'. At that point, Justin moved on to more specific areas, licking and nipping at the sensitive hollows of the throat, nipples and navel and perfect pecs and - finally, just as Brian began to believe that he absolutely could not stand it for another minute - to the hot center of Brian's manhood. There was no point in teasing by that time, so, in one quick rush, the blond swallowed the perfectly-shaped, painfully-throbbing, iron-hard penis, and proceeded to suck and hum and swallow around its length until Brian could hold off no longer, and erupted into a massive, mind-blowing orgasm, generating copious spurts of bittersweet cum, which Justin swallowed with all the eagerness of a nursing puppy.

Brian was pretty sure he had never climaxed quite so hard in his life, but there was little chance to dwell on it, because the twink was far from finished.

By the time Justin had retrieved the lube from the bedside table and prepared himself - taking the time to make sure that Brian followed and enjoyed the sight of each digit penetrating the lovely dark core of his body - and rolled the condom onto his lover's dick, Brian was already hard again, and eager for more.

"Jesus, Sunshine!" he whispered. "If anybody ever manages to wear me out, it'll be you."

The sunshine smile was more brilliant than usual. "That's never going to happen. There's only one Brian Kinney."

Then he straddled Brian's lap and proceeded to kiss those perfect lips, until both of them were breathless.

He paused for a moment, reveling in the perfect sensation of skin-to-skin, body-to-body - Brian-to-Justin. "I want you to claim me now," he whispered, "and I want to watch your face while you do. I want to see it in your eyes - in your soul. Show me, Brian. Show me what you never show anyone. Show me how Brian Kinney makes love."
To his surprise, Brian laughed, his eyes gleaming with a disconcerting certainty. "You," he said softly, "are the most conniving little shit I've ever known."

Justin wanted to protest - to proclaim his innocence. But, in the end, he didn't, confining his response to a scapegrace little smile which acknowledged - without actual words - that he was well and truly caught, and couldn't have cared less.

The laughter was sweet and quicksilver and beautiful, but then it was just a memory as the world seemed to narrow around them, until there was nothing - no one - outside this moment, this tiny, perfect space.

Justin shifted then, lifting himself up, but moving entirely by instinct, by the feel of his own body and the one beneath him, because he would not look away from the eyes that were like pools of truth before him. He might drown in them, be lost in them, but he would never, willingly, turn away from them again.

As he felt Brian's dick at his entrance, and pushed himself down so that the thick, slick head was forced past the first ring of muscle, he continued to stare, ignoring the pain that was as much pleasure as discomfort, that signaled the first rush of physical joy. Waiting - just waiting. Not even sure exactly what he was waiting for.

Until he saw it. Until he saw the bright, lovely warmth of what had been forever concealed behind the walls that Brian had erected around himself when he was just a kid - the walls that had enabled him to survive. They wavered now, trembling but still resisting, trying to regain integrity. But it was much too late. Perhaps it had even been too late six years earlier, beneath the glare of a streetlight on a Liberty Avenue corner. Or perhaps it had happened more slowly, over long hours spent enjoying the thumpa-thumpa of Babylon, or the sweet slide of skin on skin in the dark luxury of Brian's loft. Perhaps even in the horror of blood pooling on cold, hard cement. But in the end, it didn't matter when or why or how; it only mattered that they shifted slightly, wavered under the force of the onslaught, and then simply crumbled away, as the light of a love Brian had never expected to experience, never allowed himself to believe in, poured through them like a flood tide and engulfed his heart.

"I'm yours now," whispered Justin, pushing down hard until Brian was all the way inside him, as far as anyone could ever be. "I'm branded, where no one else can ever touch me."

He knew he had been claimed.

Forever.

It wasn't a word that Brian used often. Nor would he now, being Brian Kinney. But it didn't matter whether he was willing to say it or not.

It only mattered that they both knew it.

Justin sighed, and wondered why he hadn't figured that out a long time ago, realizing how much pain such an epiphany might have spared them both.

Their orgasms erupted at the same moment, and Justin conceded that, of all the sounds in the world, nothing would ever be more precious or more beautiful than the mingled rough harmony of his own breathless gasping and his lover's guttural groan in the rapture of release. Shortly thereafter, after regaining lost senses and the ability to move, amid deep kisses and the continued velvet glide of skin against skin, Justin released Brian from the handcuffs. But it was no more than a symbolic gesture.
Some locks could never be opened, especially the ones that loving hearts declined to close in the first place.

This is bloody ridiculous.

Despite the fact that McClaren had taken a certain amount of satisfaction from Justin Taylor's obvious disgruntlement when he had been instructed by his lover to remain at the beach house and see that Brian's son was entertained, the FBI agent found that he could not quite dismiss his own misgivings about the scheduled events of the afternoon.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so annoyed with himself. Why the fuck was he nervous? It was Kinney who was going to be confronted by a panel of federal judges - an arrangement that would circumvent normal grand jury protocols but still allow multiple approaches - multiple angles - to the questions that must be asked and answered.

But - at this very moment - Kinney was confronting something else. Or rather, someone else.

The FBI agent had not yet decided whether or not he liked Liam Quinn, and he was pretty sure that he was not alone in his indecision. Brian had studied the man very much as he might have regarded an escapee from Area 51.

Quinn was different. There really was no other word that quite applied. Not in a negative kind of way. In fact, his appearance was quite pleasant, once one decided to look at him closely, which one didn't - at first. Except, of course, for the hair, which anyone would be hard put not to notice.

Otherwise, from a strictly physical perspective, he was not the kind of man who would stand out in a crowd - until he started to move - and Brian, who knew quite a lot about grace and fluidity and compact strength (being currently and - probably - perpetually involved with a twink who almost defined that particular combination of traits) had noticed it immediately when the slender, somewhat pale young man with the thatch of bright copper-colored hair and eyes that were either blue or gray, depending on the moment, had come forward to greet his newest client. Young - that was one of the operative words. According to the data provided by Cynthia - which Brian had not bothered to request since he'd been sure she'd provide it without being asked - Quinn had an impressive record in court proceedings in cities up and down the East coast, stretching over a period of twelve years. He had begun his college career with three years spent at Northwestern before transferring to Harvard Law where he'd graduated with honors. After completing his training by spending a couple of years as an associate with a prestigious Boston law firm, he'd opened his own office in New York, and the rest - in classic cliché form - had been history. Yet he didn't look a day over thirty. Maybe thirty-five, in a pinch. A very slim pinch. Neither particularly tall nor bulky, Quinn nevertheless moved like an athlete, his stride strong and purposeful and his carriage fairly radiating self-confidence.

That much, at least, Brian liked. As for the rest . . . McClaren could almost see the wheels spinning in the ad exec's mind, only to conclude that . . . it was too early to conclude anything. There was also a very slight degree of puzzlement, and the FBI agent knew one thing perfectly well: Brian Kinney did not ordinarily do puzzled.

That, in itself, made Quinn unusual, for Kinney was not given to uncertainty.

The attorney had proceeded to compound the problem within sixty seconds of their initial greeting. Very few people would ever have any difficulty in recognizing Brian Kinney as a classic alpha male - a condition which had absolutely nothing to do with where he preferred to stick his dick - and it was almost certain that Quinn, given his level of experience in evaluating and gauging the
personalities and character of the people with whom he interacted, had no trouble doing so. But unlike most other people, he seemed to have little or no interest in sitting back and waiting for Brian to establish the parameters of their interaction.

Instead, he had established the ground rules himself, with only the barest nod toward the niceties of introduction, escorting Brian into a small conference room before issuing what McClaren would later designate as an 'opening argument'. "If these were ordinary circumstances," he'd announced, following a quick, firm handshake, "I'm sure we'd have much to discuss, and you'd have preferred to go over my recommendations and demand an explanation of why I made them. Unfortunately, we don't have time for that. Federal judges - despite the fact that you're the plum they hope to pull out of this particular pie - are notoriously impatient and disinclined to be understanding of any delaying tactics on your part. Yes, they'd probably wait, if you insisted, but they wouldn't like it. And they wouldn't forget it, and you should trust me when I tell you that you really don't want to piss off anyone sitting on a federal bench. They're like fucking elephants: they never forget a slight, and they never pass up an opportunity to get even."

Brian - to his own surprise - had laughed. "I thought they were supposed to be these bigger-than-life, impossibly noble individuals, meticulously balancing the scales of justice, with appropriate blindfolds over their eyes."

Quinn had grinned. "No, you didn't. You're too smart to buy into that crap. So, anyway, here's how it needs to go. I've gone over the transcript of the statement you gave to Agents Corey and McClaren, and I've taken the liberty of doing a bit of editing." At this point, he'd retrieved a thick sheaf of documents from his briefcase and handed them to Brian, and, even from a distance, McClaren could tell that the document had been closely examined and much had been struck through with a red pencil.

Then Quinn had stepped forward and adjusted Brian's tie - Hermes silk in shades of charcoal, gray and teal, and the collar of his Gucci shirt - also teal. "Armani," he observed, smoothing the perfect line of the pin-striped jacket's lapel. "Very nice." He smiled then as he noticed Brian's eyes taking note of his own equally elegant attire, as he gestured toward the document in Brian's hand. "With your permission - which I'm assuming you'll give, even if it is after the fact - I've restructured your statement, putting emphasis on the facts as you know them, and playing down the elements of your testimony that might be considered speculative, for lack of a better term. Now I've already spoken to the clerk, and informed him that I'm going to be in the room with you. I had to promise - more or less - to keep my mouth shut, unless - and this is very important, Mr. Kinney - unless I feel that your rights are being violated, or even threatened in any way. So understand this. There is only one purpose for my presence here and that is to protect your interests. The FBI, the justice department, the federal judges - though they must all at least pay lip service to protecting you, that's not their primary focus - except, of course, that without you, their case goes to shit. They're all about putting the bad guys away, and seeing that justice is served. Me? As far as I'm concerned, justice can take care of itself. I'll leave that to them - and to you, if you're the bloodthirsty, vengeful type. My only concern - my only job - is to make sure that you are protected, and that no one tries to convince you to risk more than you should. Understand?"

Brian had smiled. "Perfectly. Only . . . I am, you know."

"You are what?"

"The bloodthirsty, vengeful type."

Quinn smiled. "Yeah. I can see that. But you're also smart enough to avoid putting yourself at risk. This is the big leagues, Mr. Kinney. The people who were responsible for the attack against you are
certainly thugs of the first order, but they happen to be thugs with old money and lots of political clout. You want payback, and I don't blame you. But it's my job to make certain that it doesn't cost you more than it already has."

His voice softened, for just a moment. "You've already paid your dues."

Brian stepped back then and studied the pretty face looking up at him. Then he blinked - slowly - astonished that he'd just referred to this incredibly expensive, tremendously gifted, and obviously ballsy legal eagle as 'pretty'. Yet, he couldn't back away from the term, for it fit. Quinn was pretty; almost - but not quite - girlish in his prettiness, and Brian couldn't quite decide whether it was insulting to acknowledge it, or simply honest.

"So," he said slowly, "let me get this straight. You expect me to read this, exactly as scripted by you?"

Quinn shrugged. "The word 'scripted' implies that I changed your words. I didn't. In fact, I didn't make any fundamental changes to your original statement at all. I simply refined it a bit. Now it's obvious that I can't very well gag you, Mr. Kinney, and you're not a puppet I can manipulate on a string. However, what you're paying me for . . ." His smile was quicksilver, "and very well, I might add - is my advice on how to proceed to obtain the justice you want, while protecting your best interests. And to do that, you'd do well to give your statement, pretty much as I've written it out."

Brian glanced at the document before him once more. Then he nodded. "All right, within reason. And if they question me?"

Quinn chuckled. "Not if. When. They're federal judges with a lifelong history of exercising their authority and their right to be nosey, especially with a - how shall I put it? - a colorful subject like you. You're a smart fellow, so I'm sure you've already figured it out. Just try to keep your answers in the same vein as the overall tone of the statement, and, if you're not sure about something, tell them you want to confer with me. You have that right. On the other hand, if they ask you anything or try to manipulate you in any way that I deem unsuitable, I'll step in and put a quick stop to it. With your permission, of course."

Brian folded his lips into his mouth - considering. Then he nodded before repeating himself. "Within reason, of course."

Chris McClaren had watched the entire exchange, eyes narrowed as they moved back and forth between the two principals - the acknowledged Stud of Liberty Avenue and a young man for whom the term "Pretty Boy" might have been coined. But in the end, he couldn't quite figure out why he was becoming more and more certain that - in some ways - Brian Kinney had just met his match.

When a clerk appeared to guide Brian into the small courtroom where the judges and other staff members were waiting, McClaren stood up and moved forward to stand at his side, smirking in response to the quick lift of Quinn's single eyebrow. "Where he goes," said the FBI agent, "I go. That's non-negotiable."

"The judges may have a different . . ."

"The judges," McClaren interrupted, "are not ultimately responsible for his safety. I am. Now, are we going to stand here arguing, or are we going to haul our asses inside and get this over with?"

Brian was watching in silence, but the gleam in his eyes revealed that he was enjoying the sideshow. Quinn hesitated, but only briefly. Then he stepped forward and extended his hand to the FBI agent,
his expression not easy to read, but not entirely hostile either. "He's going to be spending a lot of time in my company," he explained, "until all this is over. And who knows? Maybe even beyond that. So you and I . . ."

The confrontation - such as it was - was interrupted by a quick, rich burst of laughter from Brian Kinney. "This is either the beginning of a beautiful friendship or World War III. I can't wait to find out which."

Then he turned and followed the clerk into the conference room, leaving his two companions to scramble to catch up, neither quite sure whether to smile or glower.

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It had gone well, thought McClaren. So far. Despite his certainty that there were few things in life that Brian Kinney could not handle - with considerable aplomb - he had not been able to completely dismiss his misgivings concerning this exchange of information. Especially once he'd seen and identified the members of the three-judge panel.

He had not had direct dealings with all three, but he did recognize them, to his chagrin. All were retired from active service on the bench, but still available for participation in hearings and procedures like this one, and all were well versed in the administration of justice. Though this setting was less formal than a normal courtroom venue, all three managed to look substantially magisterial despite the lack of an elevated bench and the robes of office.

Senior of the group - in age and years of service - was Judge Raymond Novak, a sixteen-year veteran of the DC circuit, a man so thin that he almost seemed emaciated, with a sharp, hawk-like face, thin nose, thin lips, a severely receding hairline, and a vulpine gaze that had been known to reduce both hardened criminals and experienced attorneys to tongue-tied silence if they happened to get on his bad side.

Next in the judicial hierarchy came Alicia Wolf-Heigel, younger than Novak by at least a decade and more recently retired from the 4th Circuit, a slender woman with a coif of thick blonde, silver-streaked hair and a gleam of amused tolerance in large, dark eyes, beautifully clad in an elegant suit that Brian easily identified as Yves Saint-Laurent. She was known to be a staunch defender of victims' rights as well as an expert in Constitutional theory.

The third of the group and, in some ways, the most flamboyant, was Jonathon Blaine, a native of Philadelphia and an ardent conservative, recently retired from service on the 3rd Circuit. Blaine was a large man, with broad shoulders, a beer belly, and a face so florid and fleshy, it virtually gleamed under the lights of the conference room. Despite the rosiness of his countenance, there was nothing remotely cherubic about his face, as he sat at the conference table with his fat fingers clasped in front of him, wearing a forbidding frown designed to intimidate as he periodically dabbed at his forehead with a limp handkerchief. Unfortunately, from his perspective, Brian Kinney was not given to intimidation - by anyone.

McClaren had taken his seat at the rear of the room immediately upon entry, but he noted that Quinn deliberately delayed Brian's progress to the chair reserved for him in order to whisper some last minute instructions in his ear. The way he was glancing toward the judges seated at the end of the conference table indicated that he was at least as well acquainted with the three as McClaren was.

Preliminary instructions were dispensed with quickly by a justice department staffer who activated the recording equipment, made sure that Brian understood the rules as explained, introduced him to the judges and proceeded to swear him in.
After that, it took less than three minutes for McClaren to realize that his nervousness had been completely unwarranted. Brian Kinney might have been born to give depositions. He gave his testimony in a strong, clear voice, completely at ease, and looking - as always - like he'd just stepped out of the pages of a GQ fashion spread.

The same, however, could not be said of the judges who watched his performance. Not all of them, at least.

Novak maintained his typical stoic demeanor, seldom bothering to look directly at the witness, although the fact that he frequently jotted something down in a leather-bound notebook seemed to indicate that he was paying attention. Wolf-Heigel seemed more focused and receptive, not to mention more capable of appreciating both the elegance and the easy candor of the young man who occasionally looked up and responded to the slight smile she wore.

But it was Blaine who appeared most involved in what he was hearing, as his face reflected a broad spectrum of reactions, from the flare of nostrils as the witness related the circumstances of his original capture, a deep frown during the recital of the injuries inflicted, and a squint of bulging eyes as names were named and attackers identified.

The statement, pared to a skeletal elegance under Liam Quinn's expert oversight, was read into the record in just under forty minutes, and Brian, as he set the document aside and folded his hands, looked over at the attorney and acknowledged his appreciation with a quick nod. The man had proved himself deserving of his undoubtedly exorbitant hourly fees.

"Mr. Kinney," said Judge Wolf-Heigel, "do you need to take a break? Given what you endured, we don't want to wear you out."

"Thanks," he answered, with a trademark killer smile, "but I'm fine."

"And you're recovering?" she continued. "Getting your strength back?"

Brian's smile took on the slightest hint of a smirk, and Liam Quinn experienced his first tiny little nuance of a qualm, sensing the rise of something vaguely . . . snarky in his client's demeanor. "I am," Brian replied. "We fags are remarkably resilient, you know."

The smirk was, by this time, firmly entrenched, but, if the witness had hoped to shock the female judge into an off-the-cuff, equally snarky response, he was doomed to disappointment, as she merely grinned, allowing him to notice and appreciate the quick sparkle in her eyes,

"Mr. Kinney," said Judge Novak, ignoring the exchange as if it had never happened, "you claim that you are sure about your identification of James Stockwell and Craig Taylor. Correct?"

"Yes."

"But you also admit that you did not recall the identity of any of your attackers until after you underwent hypnosis. Also correct?"

"Yes."

Novak nodded, flipping over a page in his notebook and studying what he had written there before proceeding. "You're a reasonably bright young man, Mr. Kinney, so I'm sure it's occurred to you that this could raise some questions in the minds of jurors and defense attorneys."

Brian could not quite conceal a smile. "As you point out, your honor, I'm reasonably bright, and I do see your point. Fortunately, although my testimony is required to open the doors, so to speak, and
point the investigation in the proper direction, there should be plenty of other evidence to corroborate my statements. And, to answer the doubt that you did not - intentionally - raise, I know what I saw and heard. The fact that I didn't recall it prior to the hypnosis was due to the rather extreme conditions of the event.” He let the smile expand then, but it never touched the ice in his eyes. "I was a bit distracted, at the moment."

It was at that moment that Jonathon Blaine cleared his throat, and Brian noticed, out of the corner of his eye, that Liam Quinn suddenly sat straighter and leaned forward, as if to listen more closely.

And here we go.

Brian wasn't sure why that phrase was suddenly ringing in his mind, but he did not question its validity.

"Mr. Kinney," said the corpulent judge, "I assume you do realize that, so far, there's not much actual forensic evidence to support your testimony. And you don't deny that you have no idea as to the identities of the other individuals who were observing the . . . episode. Correct?"

"Episode?" Brian echoed. "You make it sound like a TV script. I admit that I have no idea who the others might have been, but I object to that particular term. This wasn't a story on a printed page or a movie screen. It was, I assure you, very, very real."

"Yes, yes," replied Blaine impatiently, "I'm sure, but the information you've supplied is sketchy at best, isn't it? You're reputed to be a very intelligent, very canny young man. As well as somewhat opportunistic. Would you agree?"

Brian's smile had shifted, becoming slightly venal. "I would."

"And you have something of a history . . . with both of the individuals you identified, don't you? I believe that Mr. Taylor held you responsible for the estrangement between him and his son. And you were instrumental in sabotaging Stockwell's mayoral campaign. So . . ."

Brian's eyes were suddenly very dark, but the smile never wavered. "So . . . what? That gives them reasonable cause? In fact, I think I would rephrase your assumption, Judge Blaine . . . " Every person in the room noted his apparently deliberate omission of the honorific title, "and say that both of them have something of a history . . . with me."

"Well, no matter how you phrase it," said the judge, shifting slightly in his seat and causing the chair to creak almost ominously, "it's a history that's directly related to your homosexuality, is it not? You are a homosexual, aren't you, Mr. Kinney?"

Brian was looking directly into Blaine's face, mentally entertaining an idle wish that the creaking chair would splinter under the man’s blubber and deposit him on his enormous ass, but then he noticed that Liam Quinn was rising to his feet, his mouth open and ready to offer his protest. Brian, however, had never been one to allow anyone else to defend him, especially when he saw no need for such an intervention.

"I am," he said firmly. Then the smile became a bright, defiant grin. "However, my belief has always been that if I'm not sticking my cock up your ass, it's none of your business."

Blaine's face was suddenly bright scarlet and shading rapidly toward crimson as he threw up his arms in outrage and veins stood out on his neck and forehead. "You, you . . . that's . . . you can't . . ."

Next to him, Alicia Wolf-Heigel was struggling to suppress the smile that was trembling on her lips,
while Judge Novak stared at his colleague with a flat look of disgust. "You asked," he observed with a slight shrug, when Blaine looked to him for support.

Liam Quinn, however, though pleased and gratified by his client's easy dismantling of the judge's blatantly homophobic condescension, was not prepared to simply drop the subject. He got to his feet, ignoring both the subtle frown of disapproval on his client's face, and the decidedly un-subtle expressions of impatience, dislike, and/or resentment on other faces in the room.

"Your honors," he said firmly, his eyes hard and glinting with barely suppressed anger, "may I just remind the members of the court that Mr. Kinney is here voluntarily, that he has suffered extensive physical injury at the hands of the individuals responsible for this crime, and that he is still under the protection of federal authorities who have good cause to believe that he continues to be in grave danger. In addition, this conversation has raised the question of the appropriateness of any member of this panel reviewing data concerning his prior interactions with the individuals he's identified in his testimony, prior to hearing his deposition. It suggests the possibility of preconceived notions. Furthermore, I'm compelled to point out that it's highly objectionable to raise the subject of Mr. Kinney's sexual orientation in these proceedings, as it would seem to suggest that some among you might find the issue to be relevant, to be, in fact, an acceptable excuse for such abhorrent, unconscionable actions on the part of the criminals involved in the attack."

He paused then and stared at the three judges, his eyes meeting those of Jonathon Blaine finally, and holding his gaze as he continued. "If one were to even try to posit such a ridiculous, spurious justification for such a crime, it might motivate higher authorities to delve more deeply into the attitudes of a person who would proffer such a ridiculous notion, perhaps even going so far as to investigate seemingly unrelated circumstances." He paused then, very deliberately, and his blue-gray eyes glinted even colder. "They might even go so far as to look into things like personal history or family ties or political contributions, or even perhaps historical family links to extremist religious groups, connections that - if exposed - might prove to be extremely embarrassing for individuals in positions of authority. And difficult to explain. It could get complicated, and messy, you know. Very - messy - indeed."

He fell silent then, but moved forward until he was standing right behind Brian, where he had a perfect view of the faces of the three jurists and their reactions to his words. It was obvious that two of the three were merely confused and slightly curious about his meaning. But the third had gone deathly pale, in direct contrast to the former florid condition of his face.

"Are we clear?" asked Liam Quinn very softly.

No one answered.

"Are we clear?"

"Absolutely," said Alicia Wolf-Heigel, with a wink that was not - quite - a wink.

"Very," answered Raymond Novak firmly, completely unperturbed, almost disinterested.

The last answer was just a whisper, but heartfelt nonetheless. "Yes," said Jonathon Blaine.

And Brian Kinney had to fight to resist an urge to turn around and kiss his new attorney to applaud the man's bold, unapologetic actions. He did, nevertheless, turn to stare at him, to allow him to see and understand the appreciation in his own eyes as he felt a faint stir of realization - a growing awareness of what Chris McClaren had already sensed.

The Mighty Kinney really had met his match.
The mirror above the old dressing table was warped and discolored, and the light in the tiny room
was dim at best. But Sharon Briggs thought it was probably better that way. The lack of illumination
or a proper mirror prevented her from getting a clear, undistorted look at her own reflection.

She sat on the edge of her narrow, slightly lumpy mattress, and tried to see well enough to apply the
minimal make-up that was appropriate to her current role as assistant chef at The Club and boarder in
the home of Rachel Charles and her son, Buddy.

It wasn't difficult, since the purpose of her appearance was to allow her to fade into the background.
A cook was not supposed to stand out or draw attention.

She drew a brush through her hair before reaching for a bottle of an Avon fragrance, and stifled a
sigh.

She was dressed in Wal-Mart mark downs - subdued polyester shirt and skirt (The Club did not
approve of trousers for women) and Pay-Less shoes - low-heeled conservative pumps. Perfect for her
disguise. But she couldn't quite resist taking a moment to close her eyes and visualize what she
would be wearing if she could just go back to her cozy little townhouse, spend an hour submerged in
her sunken tub, and then wrap herself in Dolce & Gabbana or Vera Wang or even just a simple silk
dressing gown before sprawling out on her queen-sized bed on sheets of Egyptian cotton.

Sometimes, she realized, it was the little luxuries that one missed the most - the cut glass bottle of
Shalini perfume instead of the cheap Avon spray; the Ralph Lauren snakeskin handbag to replace the
canvas tote; a fine French sauvignon blanc in place of a screw-top bottle of chianti.

Shit, she was tired of this charade. It had been weeks now since she'd been able to go home and be
herself, and she was beginning to think that she had already learned everything here that she was
going to learn. Both she and Jared had been exploring every possible opportunity and had managed
to unearth a number of leads to turn over to the forensic investigators, but she wasn't sure if it was
advisable to go any further. It was beginning to look as if all the roads available to explore ultimately
led to nowhere.

Except for Nicholas Avolar. There, she was pretty sure, was a gold mine of information, if they
could only find the right key to unlock it. The young man was a decent sort, but he was tightly
controlled and very repressed, and a victim caught in the very center of conflicting loyalties, and she
was almost certain that it would be Jared who might eventually find a way to break through that
control, if anyone could.

Still, she was reluctant to give up completely. Her identity here was well established, and she knew
that she would hate herself if she abandoned the project only to learn later that she might have made
a difference if she'd just stuck around a bit longer. Especially given that it was Brian Kinney who
was the primary target of the people she was trying to identify.

Brian Kinney and those who loved him. Which brought someone else to mind - someone she had
known for many, many years, and rarely ever spared a thought for. Only now . . . what, she
wondered, had changed? What made her suddenly prone to thoughts of someone who had always
been something of a rival for the affections of the only man in whom she'd ever had even the
slightest romantic interest. A romantic interest which had lasted for no more than a few days, a week
at most, before she'd realized that she was guilty of casting him in the role of the little woman in their
little personal drama.

She grinned into the mirror. Brian Kinney - the little woman. She'd never quite dared to tell him that,
but she'd wondered occasionally if he hadn't figured it out for himself. He did, after all, have an uncanny ability to see through facades - even to read minds to some degree.

She applied the cheap hair spray that was another concession to her alternative persona, and spent a moment remembering the events of the previous few weeks. In particular, she thought about the evening when she'd met with Detective Horvath and the Kinnetic security people, to go over the details they'd discovered and discuss new lines of investigation - the very same day, as she'd discovered later - that Brian Kinney and Cynthia Whitney had taken on the world - and won. The meeting had gone well, and she'd been pleased to conclude that she and Jared Hilliard were becoming a very effective team, able to interact almost instinctively and much more efficient together than individually.

It had been a good meeting, and she'd been pleased, perhaps a bit smug, when she'd gone strolling out of the security office, laughing a bit over Hilliard's typical tongue-in-cheek running commentary, only to come face to face with Lindsey Peterson, who was seated in the foyer of the building, waiting for Lance Mathis to drive her back to her hotel.

They had known each other for years - since college - and the only things they'd ever had in common were a sorority . . . and Brian Kinney. They'd never been friends exactly; more like satellites around the same primary. But their interactions had always been pleasant enough, always allowing for a bit of jealousy whenever the primary in question leaned a bit too far in one direction or the other.

But their orbits had never once actually intercepted. Not until that moment, when Lindsey had looked up from the copy of GQ she was paging through, and allowed her old sorority sister to read the despair and loss peeking out of her eyes, and there was suddenly an open line of communication between them which had never existed before, which they immediately began to explore. The talk had been tentative at first, but quickly evolved into something more - something deeper.

Carl Horvath had hurried off into the night for a late dinner with his significant other, and Lance Mathis, after a few moments of thought, had suddenly recalled that he needed to go over a few more things with Hilliard, so he'd ordered pizza for all of them, assured Lindsey that he would escort her back to the hotel if she could be patient a bit longer, and then left the two women alone to continue their conversation.

On impulse, the two of them had moved from the lobby into Brian's private office, where they would have access to Brian's private bar and his private stash.

After a few hits of primo quality grass, both were feeling ridiculously mellow and more relaxed than they'd been in a very long time.

Lindsey had moved to the desk where Cynthia had left the portrait of Brian which Justin had painted, and stood for a while in silence, looking down at the beautiful face that was offering up the quintessential Kinney half-smile.

"You do realize," drawled Sharon, entirely tongue-in-cheek, "that we wouldn't even be acquainted if it weren't for him. It seems that Brian Kinney is the glue that binds a lot of people together, even though he'd never admit it."

Lindsey smiled, and turned to observe her dark-haired companion with a tiny smirk, realizing as she did so that she'd never before noticed how beautiful the young woman was. "Did he fuck you?" she asked, and then gasped as she realized how incredibly inappropriate that question was.

Luckily, Sharon was sufficiently high to accept the question in the same inebriated spirit in which it
had been offered. "No. Why? You?"

Lindsey sank into the softness of Brian's beloved Barcelona chair. "Once," she admitted, knowing as she said it that, under ordinary circumstances, she'd have denied it with her last breath. "He always called it 'midsummer madness'."

Sharon was quiet for a moment, debating whether or not to go to the next logical step. Aw, fuck it. "And how was he?"

Lindsey giggled. "Massive . . . and very, very skilled. Even falling-down drunk, Brian Kinney gave a whole new meaning to the term, 'multiple orgasms'."

Sharon had grinned. "I think - maybe - I'd have enjoyed learning about that myself."

"Did you ever . . . " asked Lindsey, not quite willing to put it into words.

Sharon nodded. "Experimenting, as a teen-ager. I guess I bloomed late. Actually, I bloomed under the tough love approach of one Brian Kinney, who refused to allow me to take the easy way out. He was the one who convinced me. By example, mostly, and by laughing at my pretensions. When I saw that there were people out there who were bold enough and brave enough to live their lives without apology . . . that was the push that I needed. So whatever I am today, it's largely due to the influence of the Stud of Liberty Avenue."

Lindsey gazed out into the darkness beyond the windows. "Maybe that's where things went so wrong between us," she said softly. "Maybe I let myself forget what he really is because I was too busy . . ."

"Fantasizing?" Sharon's smile was gentle. "It's not like you're the only one. He's been inspiring fantasies in everyone around him since puberty."

Lindsey could not argue. "But most people didn't let it go any further than that, didn't let it complicate their lives."

"Lindsey," said the brunette earnestly, sitting forward on the sofa and clasping her hands before her, "you and Brian share a child. No matter what else happens in your life, that's never going to change, and no fantasy is going to matter in the face of that. And . . . I'm sorry, honey, but Melanie should have been mature enough to accept that and to realize that it was a fact of life she needed to learn to live with. To simply assume that the connection would just dissolve with time was just stupid. Sorry if that sounds harsh, but . . ."

Lindsey sighed. "Actually, that sounds absolutely accurate. How did everything get so fucked up?"

They had spent the next two hours discussing the answer to that question, and devouring pizza and raiding Brian's liquor cabinet - just the two of them initially, and later, in the company of Jared Hilliard and Lance Mathis.

Sharon couldn't remember when she'd had a more enjoyable evening, and when it ended, as she was resuming her Shirley Harper identity, she came to a surprising conclusion. She had not expected to like Lindsey Peterson, but it turned out that she did. A lot.

She put on her lipstick and headed toward the door, hopeful that this day might prove to be the last of her current assignment. Jared, in his Jed Harper persona, had a late date with Nicholas Avolar after work tonight, and he thought this might prove to be the beginning of the end. They both believed that, once he started talking, the young man would not be able to stem the tide.
She was just approaching the door when she heard voices on the back porch, just outside the only window in her tiny little bedroom. She almost ignored them, almost stepped out to go on her way, but - at the last moment - she froze as the voices grew louder and clearer.

"Guess who was at Jo-Jo's last night," said Pete Ruiz, his voice accompanied by the creaking sound of the old lawn chair as he sank into it. "Glenda and Sammie."

"Yeah?" replied Buddy Charles, obviously not particularly interested. "So what?"

"So," said Ruiz, sounding smug, "Sammie said his ma heard from her cousin yesterday. You know - the good old boy from down south."

A brief pause before Buddy answered, this time showing a bit more interest. "And?"

"And it appears we guessed right. The new man on the beach and the Pittsburgh pretty boy are one and the same. Looks like he took off for parts he believed to be unknown so he could bare his ass and tan himself on the beach. Word is that he's getting treatment from some fancy/shmancy doctor down there - some genius that's supposed to be able to fix the damage. They say it looks like he's gonna be good as new when they're done with him."

"Shit!" Buddy did not sound pleased. "Some folks ain't gonna be happy about that."

Ruiz chuckled. "Yeah, well, it ain't over til it's over, is it?"

Rachel Charles' son was not exactly the sharpest knife in the drawer, as indicated by his next question. "What does that mean?"

Ruiz laughed again. "You'll see. But for now, y'er better off not knowing."

Both boys rose then and walked out into the yard, leaving Sharon Briggs to exit her room and go looking for her landlady. There was no choice now, and the possibility of blowing her cover was no longer of any concern.

The only thing that mattered was finding out who Glenda and Sammie were, and the name of the southern cousin.

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agreed to keep her more candid, less flattering observations to herself. Marcia, however, was beyond the scope of that agreement, and she couldn't stand the old fucker. With good reason, as it turns out. His family history and his connections to extreme right-wing groups have been carefully excised from his official records, offering proof positive to that old adage: money does indeed talk. Good old Marcia, however, was an endless source of gossip, speculation, and venom concerning one-time Daddy-not-so-dearest."

"And no one ever pursued it? Launched any kind of investigation?" asked McClaren. "Why would . . ."

Quinn smiled. "In the eyes of the law, it would have been regarded as the meaningless ravings of a kid with a grudge, and you can be pretty sure that any proof would have been extremely hard to come by. You don't get to the appeals court level without being able to withstand some pretty intense background checks."

It was Brian's turn to smile. "So you couldn't have been certain that there was any truth to what she said. You took a pretty big chance in using it to force him to back down."

The attorney nodded. "Life's full of risks, isn't it? Makes things interesting."

McClaren looked up then, and spotted the pale gleam in dark hazel eyes. Brian Kinney, apparently, was making up his mind about something, and the FBI agent wasn't entirely sure that he liked what he was seeing.

Eventually, Brian smiled. "OK. I've got a little business to take care of here. You want to listen in?"

"Do I need background?"

The smile became a slightly wolfish grin. "No. I'm pretty sure you can figure it out with no help from me."

And that, thought McClaren with a smirk of his own, was something that he could agree on, wholeheartedly. Quinn would figure it out PDQ.

When Justin walked in, with Gus in tow, Brian concentrated on greeting his young lover and his son, listening to Gus's monologue about castle-building and the horses he'd spotted down the beach, and the fudge brownies that Trina had made for him. He concentrated on his son, but he noticed, via peripheral vision, that Justin had not failed to notice the presence of the newcomer among them and was looking daggers at both Quinn and McClaren.

For some reason, that seemed to amuse him, and he appeared to enjoy Gus's tirade even more.

He still did not suggest an introduction, and ignored the intensity of Justin's glare.

"How did it go?" Justin finally demanded, getting right in Brian's face.

"I was fabulous. As always. What else did you expect?"

"And who's he?" Apparently, Justin had decided that the direct approach would serve him best.

Brian sighed. "Justin, Liam. He's my . . . defender."

Justin indulged in an eye-roll. "And since when do you require . . ."

"A smart man knows when he needs help." Brian smiled; then he grinned; then he laughed, and
Justin, after a deliberate pause, joined him. In the end, it didn't matter who the newcomer was or why he was here. It only mattered that Brian was able to laugh.

And at that moment, the video feed kicked in and the tv screen flickered to life.

"Mommie!" shouted Gus, zeroing in immediately on the face of his mother as Lindsey moved toward the camera, her eyes huge and devouring her son's face.

"Hi, Baby," she answered. "It's so good to see you. Are you having fun with Daddy and Gramps and Justin?"

Which, of course, signaled a new monologue which went on for roughly five minutes, as Gus filled in the blanks for his mother.

Meanwhile, Brian sat at the desk and watched the faces of the others on the screen, his hands clasped in front of his face and his eyes filled with unsettling gleams of speculation.

Cynthia and Mathis were there, of course. And Ted and Blake . . . and Melanie, and there was no way that anyone watching the screen could fail to notice that the only thing that did not show up in Melanie's demeanor was the lack of steam shooting out of her ears. Otherwise, she was the perfect portrait of rage simmering on the verge of boil-over.

Ted, on the other hand, was looking furtive, his eyes darting from person to person around him and then to the video camera, before starting on the same circuit again.

Eventually, even Gus felt the tension coming through the images before him and turned his eyes to stare at his other mother.

"Hi, Mama," he said, very softly.

Melanie dredged up a smile that was so brittle that Justin wondered if her face might crack under the strain. "Hi, Gus," she managed to reply in a relatively calm voice. "You . . . having fun?"

He nodded. "Disney World was great, and the beach is great, and Daddy . . . "

"Yeah," Melanie interrupted. "I'm sure Daddy's great. Everybody agrees about that, don't they?"

"Gus," said Brian suddenly, reaching out to touch his son with a gentle hand, "why don't you go in and see what Miss Trina is fixing for dinner. If she's making dessert, I bet she'll let you lick the bowl."

"Can I tell her you said I could have a Coke?"

Justin grinned. The kid wasn't Brian Kinney's son for nothing.

"Sure. Tell Gramps to get you one out of the cooler."

When he was gone, with a last wave toward the video camera, Lindsey regarded her son's father with a lopsided grin. "You're spoiling him," she observed.

"It's in my job description," he replied.

"Yeah?" said Melanie, in a voice that was almost a snarl. "What else is in there? Ruining his mothers' marriage? Destroying his mama's life? You really think you can just get away with this bullshit, and he's never going to know what a dick you are? Well, let me open your eyes, Mr. Kinney. He will know . . ."
"Lindsey," said Brian firmly, sharply, "do you want to go now? You don't have to stay to watch this . . ."

"Yes. I do." She sank into a chair at the conference table and folded her hands in front of her. Waiting. Just waiting.

Brian nodded. "Melanie," he said coldly, "I've never been one to hide who I am, and I won't start by hiding from my son. Now, does anybody have anything they want to say before we get started?"

"You called the meeting," observed Ted, looking in the general direction of the video camera but never quite meeting Brian's eyes.

"So I did." Brian took a deep breath. "Just so there's no misunderstanding here, let me lay it out for you. Because the FBI had advance warning that I might be targeted for some kind of corporate fraud, they were monitoring my financial holdings to avoid any potential problems. Thus, when Ted decided to transfer a substantial amount of my money into the Hargrave-Correll Fund, they acted quickly to prevent the transfer. Turns out the administrators of the fund - including Ted's old college chum - have been under intense scrutiny from the SEC and other federal agencies for several months. What happened yesterday and this morning is the result of a complex Ponzi scheme, and the FBI's actions saved me a boatload of cash."

He paused then, and looked directly at Ted, and then at Melanie. "It was their job to protect me, just as it was your job, Theodore, to protect my money. And your job, Melanie, to protect my son, and exercise financial restraint to make sure that your family was not adversely affected. If either of you had bothered to come to me, to explain what you were doing and what you wanted to accomplish, then all of this would have been avoided. None of us would have lost anything."

"True," snapped Melanie. "And if you had been honest enough - caring enough - to share the information you had, then Ted and I would have been protected too."

"Uh, huh," Brian replied coolly. "Exactly as you tried to protect me. Right?"

"We were trying to make you rich." That was Ted, still not looking directly at Brian, but offering what he thought was a convincing argument.

"I'm already rich," replied Brian. "And making me rich was strictly secondary to what you wanted. You wanted me to be obligated to you - to be eternally grateful for your genius."

"I didn't . . ."

"You didn't?"

"I only wanted . . ."

"Go on," Brian said softly. "You only wanted . . ."

Ted closed his eyes, admitting for the first time that he could not stand to look directly into Brian's eyes. "I wanted to be your . . ."

Brian nodded. "My go-to guy?"

Ted nodded. "And instead, I've lost everything."

Brian hesitated. "Not quite," he said finally.
The accountant looked up, hearing something unexpected in his employer's voice. "No?"

Brian's smile was slightly lop-sided. "You know me well enough, Theodore, to understand that I already know my legal rights - what I can do and what I can't, as well as what the law says about what you've done. Right?"

A huge, deep breath, and whatever hope Ted had allowed himself began to fade. "Right."

Brian stared directly into the video camera and waited and - finally - Ted forced himself to confront the man who had been such a huge part of his life, and who would, no doubt, determine what came next. Brian nodded slightly. "If you tried to access the Kinnetik bank accounts today, then you already know that you are no longer authorized to initiate transfers or sign checks; you also no longer retain the title of CFO of the corporation, and you should consider yourself fortunate that the funds transfers were intercepted and did not go through because if they had, I'd be a lot less inclined to be forgiving. Your losses in the fund are yours to deal with. Your choices - your consequences.

"However, assuming that there are no further surprises and that you avoid taking actions that are not in Kinnetik's best interest and that you do not commit my company to any contractual obligations that might prove to be harmful in the long run, there will be no further investigation of your actions, and no formal complaints filed against you. You keep your job - with restrictions - and your professional credentials remain intact. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Ted found that he couldn't summon up the strength to answer in anything but a whisper. "Yes, I understand."

Brian took a deep breath. "Then I want your word, Theodore, that this crap ends now. That you will do your job, as I need you to do it, respect my wishes, and accept the fact that Cynthia has my complete confidence and is empowered to act on my behalf. That you will come to her - or to me, if necessary - before you commit my company to any course of action. So, are you prepared to live with those conditions?"

Ted turned to Blake, and almost winced away from the look in his partner's eyes. It had been a long time since he'd felt himself an object of pity, and an even longer time since he'd felt that he deserved it. Did he deserve it now? Could he accept that this was how he was perceived - by his lover, his friends . . . his boss?

"Theodore." Brian's voice was not harsh or demanding, but it was firm - unyielding.

"Yes, Brian," said the accountant slowly. "You have my word."

"My, my!" said Melanie, clapping her hands slowly. "How touching! You really are conducting your own campaign for sainthood, aren't you? Saint Brian. What a fucking joke!"

Brian's eyes were very dark, very cold, as he turned his head to look at her, and Lindsey was quick to look away, realizing that she hoped the day would never come when she'd be forced to see that look on Brian's face as he looked at her.

"I believe you wanted to see me, Melanie," he said softly. "So . . . here I am. What do you want?"

She laughed, but it was not a pretty sound. "You really think you've got it all under control, don't you? You fuck with Ted, with me - let us lose money we couldn't afford to lose, because we're just poor mortals, unlike the mighty Kinney, who can afford anything he wants. Can even buy the affections of people who should know better." Her eyes drifted toward Justin then. "How long do you think it's going to be before they all figure out the truth about you - that you're using them? That
"You'll only hurt them in the end? That you're . . ."

"That's enough."

Everybody in both rooms went very still then, as all eyes turned toward the speaker. All of them seemed a bit confused because it was not Lindsey who had spoken. Nor was it Cynthia.

It was Justin, who was standing directly in front of the video pick-up, fists on his hips, eyes blazing with scintillant heat. "Don't say any more, Mel," he warned, "unless you want to forfeit any right to ever have any connection to any of us again. Including Gus. You should know that this . . ." He gestured toward a slender, red-headed man seated across from Brian's desk, "is Brian's new attorney, so anything you say here is not likely to be forgotten. You need to . . . stop."

"After all he's done to you," Melanie snapped. "How can you . . ."

"I know what he's done to me," Justin answered. "I also know what he's done for me. And for you, for Gus, for Lindsey. For all of us. And I'm not listening to any more bullshit like this. So you lost money. It's not like he held a gun to your head and forced you to invest. This was your choice- not his. In point of fact, he didn't know anything about it until it was pretty much a done deal. The FBI knew, but he didn't. You got greedy, and now you have to deal with the consequences. Just do yourself a favor, and shut the fuck up."

Lindsey cleared her throat. "Where . . ." Her voice quivered, forcing her to start again. "Where did you get the money?"

Melanie's eyes narrowed. "From my savings account."

But Lindsey was shaking her head. "As far as I know, you don't have a savings account. The only account we have is . . ." She fell silent, and her eyes were suddenly huge. "Please, tell me you didn't."

Melanie squared her shoulders. "I did what I thought was best. Please, Linz, understand that it was a huge opportunity. That it was . . ."

"We had scrimp together $18,000.00 in Gus's college fund," Lindsey said quietly, as much to herself as to the others around her. "If I go online to check the balance, what am I going to find, Mel?"

"I thought . . . I wanted to take advantage of the chance to make sure that he'd have what he needs, when the time comes."

But Lindsey was shaking her head. "His father is Brian Kinney. Do you really think there's the slightest possibility that he'd lack for money to go to any college he chooses? So where did the rest of it come from?"

"I borrowed it," Melanie snarled. "OK? I wanted . . . I wanted to fix things, Linz. I wanted to make it all right between us. I wanted things to be the way they used to be. The way they were, before Babylon. Before Sam. Just . . . before. I wanted you - and Gus - to need me, to depend on me. To forget . . ."

"Brian," said Lindsey, completing the sentence when Melanie faltered. "That's the bottom line, isn't it? You are never going to be able to forgive me for the fact that I will always love Brian, no matter how much I love you." She regarded Melanie with huge, tear-filled eyes. "And that, Melanie, is never going to change. There was always room in my heart for both of you. He always knew it, but you . . . you never will. Will you?"
Melanie closed her eyes, her hands clinched at her sides. "So what does this mean? For us?"

Lindsey swallowed, and turned to study Brian's face as he looked back at her. She saw the sympathy in his eyes, saw that he would stand by her no matter what she decided, but also saw that - as far as Gus was concerned - there would be no turning back. Brian would reclaim his son and was prepared to fight whatever battle ensued in order to win the war.

The blonde turned to her partner of eleven years, and made no attempt to hide the sorrow in her eyes. "I think that's up to you, Mel, but you have a decision to make. I'm not going back to Toronto. My life - and Gus's life - is here, where he can be a part of his father's life. You have to decide whether or not you can live with that."

"And J.R.?" Melanie's voice was rough, as if her throat was filled with shards of glass. "Don't you care about her?"

"I love J.R. more than you can imagine. So much that it almost kills me to think of leaving her with you, because I now question whether or not you're capable of loving her enough to give her the life she deserves, to put her first ahead of your own needs. But I can't - I won't sacrifice my son to placate your need to hurt Brian. You've used him as a weapon for the last time."

For the first time, Melanie staggered, reeling as if the words had embedded themselves in her body like blades. "You . . . surely you don't believe that? You can't mean that? I've always loved Gus."

Lindsey nodded. "I know you did, but apparently, you've hated Brian more."

"No." It was just a whisper.

"Get out, Mel," said Brian, but his voice was strangely void of anger or resentment. "Get out, and don't come back."

She stood motionless for a span of seconds, all color drained from her face; then she turned and left, and the silence in the room behind her was heavy and cold and very dark.

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TBC
Chapter 41

Change can come on tiptoe;
Love is where it starts.
It resides
Often hides
Deep within our hearts.
And just as
Pebbles make a mountain,
Raindrops make a sea,
One day at a time,
Change begins with you and me.

Ordinary Miracles -- Ruthie Henshall

There were few things in life, thought Brian Kinney, that could surpass, or even equal, a fine meal followed by a top shelf French cognac and a genuine Cuban cigar. Justin's ass and/or mouth and/or cock - depending on the circumstances; the sweet scent and feel of Gus's little body in his daddy's arms after a pre-bedtime bath; the mind-blowing buzz of the finest weed money could buy.

He paused for a while to consider it, before concluding that he couldn't really think of anything else.

He took a sip from his snifter of Courvoisier and savored its slightly smoky taste as he bent once more to continue his study of the document spread out on the desk before him. As he read, the background noises from the den were a constant source of comfort for him. He did not concentrate on distinguishing the meaning of the words being spoken; the tone was sufficient. Gus and Justin and Ron Peterson were chatting excitedly and laughing together - or not - as they watched the DVD of Free Willy that Brian had sent one of his security people to hunt down at the little video store in the nearby village. They were also undoubtedly scarfing down big mugs of Trina's cocoa, volumes of buttered popcorn, and slabs of her Rice Krispies treats.

Brian grinned. If Sunshine weren't careful, his bubble butt would be somewhat expanded by the time their journey to the seashore was over, and Brian wondered if it wasn't just slightly malicious of him to relish the thought. Then he remembered all the times when Justin would allow himself a bit of preening and a little cattiness in comparing his twink physique with those of friends and family who were no longer blessed with twink metabolisms, and decided that he would not feel the least bit guilty if the time came for the little twat to have cause to lament a bit of over-indulgence.

It would all come under the heading of reaping what had been sown, and he would continue to crave the butt in question, regardless of its girth or expanded contours. Within reason, of course.

The little office was mostly in shadow at this late hour, the only illumination coming from the cone-shaped desk lamp and a Tiffany-style floor lamp in the corner of the room. Beyond that, only the golden reflection of one of the exterior lights broke the darkness of the night.

Brian, in t-shirt and soft, artfully faded jeans, continued to study the document before him, pausing sometimes to reread or to make sure that he'd read a section correctly before proceeding to the next part, and the man who sat in the room with him, simply watching and waiting for the questions which were certain to come, noticed that the ad man's jaw would clinch periodically, as his eyes narrowed. Other than those miniscule clues, there was little to indicate that what he was reading was...
having a profound effect on him. Kinney, thought Quinn, was probably an excellent poker player, not given to nervous tics or tells or physical indications of what was in his mind. Nevertheless, he was pretty sure that the man was seething with barely-controlled rage - a response to what he was reading that the attorney understood perfectly, and approved.

Eventually, Brian discarded the cigar in favor of his trademark Marlboros, and noticed, as he lit up, that, if he turned his head just so, he could make out the denim-clad expanse of Chris McClaren's back as he sat on the steps of the lower deck, his hands clasped in front of him as he gazed off toward the East or turned to watch the progress of the beacon from the lighthouse as it swept across the sculpted sands. Even from this vantage point and under this dim lighting, it was obvious from the tension in the lines of the man's spine, that he was almost hyper-alert and completely concentrated on his visual reconnaissance.

Brian wondered if Chris himself realized that he was never truly relaxed, except for when he was sleeping. And even then, it wasn't certain that the FBI agent was completely at ease. On more than one occasion, Brian had been roused to wakefulness as some tiny, mostly insignificant anomaly in the rhythm of the night had brought the man from a sound sleep to full alertness in the blink of an eye.

That, of course, would not happen again - not in his presence anyway - but he allowed himself a tiny smile as he realized that it was a somewhat comforting fact, even though he knew it made life less than simple for the man himself.

He closed the file finally, and sat back in his chair, his eyes unfocused as he pondered what he'd read.

Then he looked up and confronted the man who was sitting across from him, waiting for his questions. "Is this all of it?" he asked finally.

Liam Quinn did not volunteer a knee-jerk response, but rather seemed to give careful consideration in determining how to reply. "It's everything they allowed me to see, but I can't guarantee that they didn't keep some information in reserve."

Brian nodded, and rose from his chair to move to the window where there was little to see besides his own reflection. "What does your gut tell you?"

Quinn smiled. "I've worked with Alexandra Corey before, enough to feel confident in thinking that she's given you everything you need for your purposes. Is there more? I'm pretty sure there is, but it's likely to be more about the undercover arrangements than anything that effects your decisions on what to do from here on out."

Brian sighed. "God damn Theodore!" he muttered, not quite under his breath. "What the fuck was he thinking?"

It wasn't that he hadn't already known about his CFO's indiscretions; he had received a number of briefings in which the fundamental information had been included. But he had not known the specifics of the conversation until now, and he had been unwilling to believe it at first - had been forced to backtrack and go through it again to review the exact comments exchanged between Theodore and Monty Peabody. On reading the verbatim report of the accountant's remarks, he'd been forced to pause for a moment, to take a deep breath and swallow a surge of black resentment so extreme that all he really wanted to do was pick up the phone and put out feelers for a hit man to resolve the issue and solve the problem once and for all. In spades. He sighed. It wasn't that Ted had endangered him, per se; he was a big boy and long accustomed to taking care of himself and watching his own back, and never mind that he'd screwed it up royally in this one instance. But Ted
had done something much, much worse; by opening his big mouth - not once, but twice, and who knew how many other times when no one had been around to hear it - he had endangered both Gus and Justin.

"I want to kill the motherfucker," he said coldly.

"I know you do, but . . ."

"How could he have been so fucking stupid?"

Quinn shrugged. "Just thoughtlessness, I think. And a need to impress someone with his importance to you. Not admirable, of course, but not deliberate either. Nevertheless, you more or less let him off the hook earlier today. I mean, yes, he's been demoted and had his privileges revoked, but . . ."

"But I didn't know the whole story then. If I had . . ."

Quinn nodded. "So what do you want me to do?"

Brian frowned. "Why would you think I want you to do anything? I'm perfectly capable of . . ."

"Mr. Kinney, I . . ."

"Mr. Kinney was my father," said Brian quickly, "and not one of my favorite people. Call me Brian."

Quinn nodded. "Fine then, Brian. But what I want you to know is that this is the kind of thing that I do. I protect my clients, in whatever way they need protecting."

Brian took a deep drag off his cigarette as he returned to his desk and regarded the lawyer with narrowed eyes as he dropped into his chair, willing himself to relax and take a few deep breaths. "I thought you were a criminal lawyer."

"I specialize in criminal justice, that's true, but it entails a lot more than just representing clients in a courtroom. It means taking care of business, whatever that business might entail. For example, you haven't yet mentioned Mr. Peabody, and what you might like to do to him."

Brian's smile was not pretty. "That's because I want to preserve some measure of plausible deniability - and because some things shouldn't be mentioned in polite company."

Quinn grinned, and Brian was delighted to note a gleam in those parti-colored eyes which seemed to suggest a kindred spirit - a man who knew and appreciated the value of a keen sense of revenge. "We're going to ignore any mention of possible vigilante actions, while I assure you that the man's goose is most certainly cooked. While no move will be made until the investigation is concluded - in order to prevent any possibility of tipping off the culprits and allowing them to attempt to cover their tracks - when the time comes, losing his job will be the least of his worries. By deliberately divulging confidential information about a patient, he's in flagrant violation of HIPAA regulations which is an automatic dismissal, as opposed to an inadvertent admission which usually warrants nothing more serious than a warning. Then, for the piece de resistance, there's the fact that he got paid for the information. That was documented both by the testimony of the undercover witness and copies of his bank records. Both Mr. Peabody and his co-conspirator obviously never expected anyone to tumble to what they were doing because no effort was made to conceal or disguise the transaction. Therefore, Mr. Peabody will not merely lose his job; he's guilty of a criminal act - a minor felony - and fiscally culpable as well. He could wind up serving time, and then facing a civil suit from you should you decide to pursue it."
Brian's smile was slightly venal. "I like the way you think, Counselor."

"There's also a possibility that the SEC investigation into Hargrave and his cohorts could reveal a deliberate attempt to target you. That information wasn't included in these files, so we'll assume that the investigation is still in progress, and the data is not yet available for us. However, since you did not, in fact, lose money in that fund, it's unlikely that you could participate in any civil action that might develop against them. Still it's going to be interesting to learn the identities of the parties who might have been at the top of that pyramid - people who just happened to cash in and back away from the fund at exactly the right moment to save their asses. It may not turn out to be actionable, but you never know. And if nothing else, it may point fingers in pertinent directions, in trying to figure out who might have targeted you."

Brian nodded. "All card-carrying members of the United Brotherhood of Fag Haters, no doubt."

"Probably."

Brian folded his lips into his mouth and regarded the attorney with one brow lifted. "And you, Mr. Quinn?"

The attorney grinned. "Mr. Quinn was my father, and I was just about as fond of him as you obviously were of yours. So call me Liam."

Brian nodded. "Liam, then. Are you comfortable representing someone who's pretty much the antithesis of your God-fearing, Bible-quoting, marriage-focused uber-heterosexuals?"

Quinn smiled. "You surprise me, Brian. I would have bet good money that your gay-dar was damned near infallible. Why did you assume . . ."

Brian tossed back the last swallow of his brandy. "Because you never once ogled Justin's ass, and I've never met a queer who didn't drool over Justin's ass. And because you're so damned pretty that it's almost a cliché. I almost expected you to be a gun-toting, bear-hunting, redneck macho man, just because you so specifically don't look the part."

"Thanks," said the lawyer faintly. "I think. As far as Justin's ass is concerned, I'm just a lot better at ogling discreetly than most, and you're right. No queer who's worthy of the name would willingly ignore that. However, it's fairly obvious that - enticing as it might be - it's pretty much wearing a 'No trespassing' sign. As for the rest of it, I suppose the cliché does apply, with one primary exception, and that's what should matter to you in these circumstances. I may be pretty, Brian. No point in denying that, but it's not quite the handicap you might expect. Especially when the opposition takes one look and decides to dismiss me as a 'pretty little thing' with no teeth. It's a very effective camouflage for what I really am. And that's something that you need right now."

"I'm not sure . . ."

Quinn laughed. "Fuck it, man. I'm actually not hitting on you, although I'm pretty sure that's not something that you experience often. I have a specific rule about that. I never fuck my clients, although I'll concede that you're the first person I've come across in a long, long time that makes me regret that policy. Nevertheless, what I'm trying to tell you - and show you - is what I am in a professional sense."

"Which is what?"

"I'm a God-dammed bulldog, Brian. And I do whatever is necessary to see that my client's needs are met, which is what makes me worth every dime of what you pay for my services. For instance, the
dynamic between you and Ms. Peterson's partner is very . . . interesting."

Brian grinned. "Interesting? It's been called many things - mostly by me - but never that."

"Can I ask a few pertinent questions?"

Brian shrugged and nodded. "You can ask, but I don't guarantee answers."

"Fair enough. Your son is what? Six now? Seven?"

"Six."

"And if I understand things correctly, you've been under the impression that you had forfeited all your legal rights as his father. Correct?"

"Yes."

"May I ask why you did that?"

"I thought that he would be better off - better cared for and protected and nurtured - in a home with two loving parents. It never mattered to me that they were lesbians, only that they loved each other, and would love him, as he deserved."

"And have they?"

Brian did not answer immediately. "Not exactly," he said softly. "Not as I expected anyway. Melanie and I have never exactly made peace with each other, but I could have dealt with that since her acting in Gus's best interest was always more important than getting along with me. But I think she was the primary reason for the move to Toronto, and . . ."

"And?" Quinn was obviously not unsympathetic but seemed to think it was in Brian's best interest to express his misgivings.

"And I thought - hoped - that it was for the reasons she gave at the time - wanting a better, safer place for all of them. Wanting to protect them from the threats of violence in Pittsburgh. But . . ." He took a deep breath. "But that's mostly bullshit, you know? Homophobia exists everywhere, even in Canada. It's just not quite as blatant or politically acceptable there as here in this country. And besides, over time I've come to believe that their move had nothing to do with hopes for a safer life, and everything to do with getting Gus . . . and Lindsey away from me."

"She really does hate you, doesn't she?"

"You figure that out all by yourself?" The tone of voice was mocking, almost acidic.

Quinn shrugged, refusing to be nonplussed by the tone. "You do know why, don't you?"

Brian did not answer, so the lawyer continued after a brief pause. "Is it pleasant for you?"

"Pleasant?"

"To know that even though you're a confirmed, unapologetic fag, you still have the power to inspire the lesbian mother of your only son to remain hopelessly in love with you."

Brian shook his head. "Lindsey isn't in love with me."

"Okay. But she does love you. You don't deny that, do you?"
This time, the smile was gentle. "No. I don't deny that."

"And I suspect that Ms. Marcus isn't always able to distinguish between the two types of love. She's bitterly jealous of her partner's feelings for you, and she doesn't like the fact that your son seems to love you very much as well. As much as he loves her, at least."

Brian nodded. "I'm not sure I wouldn't feel the same, if the situation were reversed."

Quinn sipped at his brandy, his eyes taking on a speculative gleam. "You're a complicated man, Brian. Not many people would be so understanding. Nevertheless, am I correct in believing that you want to reassert your rights vis a vis your son and making decisions for his future?"

"Yeah. You're correct in that."

"I can make sure that happens, if you just say the word. While I know that you have an attorney in Pittsburgh, I'd imagine he's one of those very dignified corporate types who don't like to get their hands dirty, who handles contracts and paperwork and copyright issues for you. Right?"

"Right."

"That's fine, for your corporate needs. But this is not corporate. This is personal, and you don't need an old-school, gentlemanly type for this job. You need a killer - figuratively speaking. You need me."

Brian chuckled. "Well, you sure don't lack for confidence, and I do like that."

"Indulge me." The attorney leaned forward and helped himself to another splash of brandy. "Since his birth, how much money have you dished out for the support of your son?"

Brian leaned back and blew smoke rings, deliberately not meeting Quinn's gaze - which the attorney found quite intriguing. Why, he wondered, would the man be less than forthcoming in acknowledging his generosity toward his son? Another clue in the increasingly complex puzzle of Brian Kinney.

"Not sure."

"I'm not asking for a detailed accounting. Just an off-the-cuff figure."

Brian shrugged. "A hundred grand. Or so."

"Uh, huh. Luckily, your assistant keeps better accounts. It's closer to a hundred and eighty grand. That's a heck of a lot of money for a child to whom you have no rights - and no legal obligation."

"I'd fire the bitch, if I didn't know I couldn't run the fucking company without her."

"I'm sure."

Brian's eyes grew cold. "If you already knew, why did you ask?"

"Just wanted to see what you'd say."

There was a brief pause as the ad man turned to stare at the attorney. "Are you analyzing me, Mr. Quinn?"

The lawyer laughed. "I'm an expert in reading people, Mr. Kinney, but I know a hopeless case when I see one. They could write textbooks about you - devote entire research programs to efforts to
unravel your psyche - and never even come close to figuring out the man behind the mask."

Brian poured himself another finger of brandy. "Thanks. Open books are so boring, don't you think?"

A snicker of laughter from the shadows beyond the open door signaled a new arrival. "And while Brian Kinney is many, many things," said Justin, strolling in and appropriating Brian's brandy - and lap - without asking or awaiting permission, "boring is never one of them."

"Why aren't you whale watching, little twat?" Brain asked, lifting his hands to stroke his fingers through hair like spun-gold silk.

"Willy is free, and Gus can barely keep his eyes open and wants his daddy."

"Can't imagine why."

"Me neither," Justin replied with a grin, but the look in his eyes said differently. "You want me to take him up and tuck him in? I can sleep on the couch down here or . . ."

But Brian immediately, firmly clamped his hand over soft, sweetly molded lips. "You sleep with me," he said gently. "With us."

"You sure?"

Liam Quinn felt a strange compulsion to fade into the woodwork, suddenly certain that he was witnessing a very private moment. But neither of the principle characters seemed to notice or care, so he simply settled back to enjoy the view. "What?" asked Brian with a grin. "You think it's going to corrupt him to notice that his fag father is sleeping with his favorite twink? Need I remind you that he's been witnessing his muncher mothers in the sack together his whole life. If he's not already ruined beyond recovery, I think it's safe to assume he'll survive this too."

He lifted his head so he could bury his nose in the softness beneath Justin's ear before continuing in a near whisper. "Besides, he loves you. As much as he loves me, I think."

Justin's eyes were suddenly filled with a soft scintillant glow. "I know he loves me. But not like he loves you. I don't think he loves anybody, the way he loves you."

"Bullshit," replied Brian, his expression going very still as he seemed suddenly uncertain - almost embarrassed. Then he turned to look over toward the lawyer, who was making no attempt to appear oblivious to the interaction between the couple. "We done here, Counselor?"

Quinn grinned. "Unless the two of you are planning on a little PDA."

"Not tonight," Justin retorted, deliberately shifting so that he could turn around and straddle Brian's legs, bringing them virtually crotch to crotch. "You'll have to come to Babylon some time, to take advantage of the free show."

Brian sat back and looked up, almost losing himself in the crystal depths of blue eyes. "Hey," he whispered.

"Hey, yourself, Boss man. You done saving the world?"

"Liam," said Brian clearly, never looking away from the gaze that seemed to hold him locked in place, "I'd like you to go ahead with whatever you have to do to restore my parental rights, and check out whether or not I can legally prevent the munchers from taking him out of the country.
Also, stay on top of the issue of Peabody and his cronies. I plan to enjoy the spectacle of watching that snake squirm when the timing is right. Hell, I might even sell tickets."

"And Schmidt?" asked the attorney, deliberately ignoring the fact that Justin was moving forward, obviously intent on burying his face in the soft, moist skin beneath Brian's jaw. But then the blond went very still before starting to back away, his face suddenly frozen and filled with misgivings.

"Ted? What about Ted?"

Brian's eyes were suddenly cold - almost glacial. "I'll let you know," he said with a nod toward the attorney, and without a nuance of emotion. The remark was directed toward Quinn; for Justin, he had nothing but a patented Kinney deadpan look, reflecting nothing.

Until he winced.

"Brian, you can't . . . It's Ted, for God's sake. You owe him. He's been there for you, almost from the first, and you can't . . ."

"Don't." The voice was icy. "Don't fucking tell me what I can or can't do. As for Ted being there for me . . ." He paused, and there was no way from Justin to avoid seeing the darkness and the anger that flared in his eyes. "I seem to remember it a little differently."

"Well, I don't. I can't let you . . ." And he went silent abruptly, appalled by what he'd almost said.

But the silence changed nothing. Brian had obviously heard it all - what was spoken - and what was not.

He lifted his hand, and dragged it though his hair, and Justin found it a strange sort of gesture. Almost as if it was a reaction to some kind of . . .

And it was then that Justin felt something catch deep in his chest - a quick clinching around his heart - cold and clammy. He knew what it was; he just didn't know why it was. There was plenty of motivation in this moment for feeling anger and resentment; frustration and impatience and exasperation. But he couldn't for the life of him figure out why he was suddenly filled with fear.

"Brian," he said softly, no longer sparing a thought for Ted. Brian would do what he would do, and Justin would choose to believe that he would not be the sadistic, vengeful asshole that the world frequently believed him to be. But for now, nothing was more important than the question he needed to ask. "What's wrong?"

Brian stood abruptly, managing to set Justin on his feet without actually dumping him on his ass. "Nothing. Why?"

"You sure? You just looked . . ."

The patented Kinney smirk was now firmly in place. "Perfect? Beautiful? Hot?"

Justin smiled. "All of the above, but not quite . . . right."

It was the cue for a classic Kinney eye-roll. "Justin," he said, with only a tiny nuance of impatience, "I have a headache. That's all. People get them all the time."

Justin relaxed. "I'm sure multiple shots of Courvoisier have eased your pain."

"Not yet, but I'm working on it."
"Brian . . ."

"Justin. Stop nagging, and let's go get my kid."

A quick, rough kiss, and he was gone, nodding a good night to the attorney who was replacing files in his briefcase before heading out the door, but who paused to watch as Brian moved away, causing Justin to smile. Brian was walking almost normally now, stubbornly ignoring any weakness that might require the use of a cane or a crutch and exhibiting only a small trace of a limp, and it would take a gay man of exceptional strength and determination to resist the opportunity to observe that loose-limbed, sultry slink. Quinn was obviously not that man, and Justin's eyes were suddenly soft with shadows of his unique understanding of this unique individual who was so much a part of him, as he acknowledged that some small part of Brian's rapid recovery was undoubtedly due to a narcissistic determination to appear flawless in the eyes of those who could never resist watching him. Just more proof positive that Brian Kinney would remain forever intrinsically Brian Kinney, and God help anyone who deceived themselves into believing otherwise.

Justin hung back for another moment, looking out into the night and watching as Quinn made his exit and paused to exchange a few words with McClaren before proceeding to his car. Then he moved toward the den, and hesitated in the doorway to watch as Brian lifted Gus from the sofa and braced the child against his shoulder. Gus was not quite asleep yet, but he was well on his way, and Justin was struck with a thought that was old and familiar, yet somehow always managed to take his breath away.

There was literally nothing more beautiful in the world than the vision of Brian Kinney cradling his look-alike child in his arms, his face reflecting a vulnerability and a deep, abiding love that very few were ever allowed to see.

Beautiful and perfect.

Except . . . he'd said it was a headache. Just a headache, but Justin could not quite figure out why he'd been so sure that he'd seen something else in the depths of those beautiful hazel eyes. Something darker and colder.

Justin followed father and son up the staircase, deliberately ignoring the lump in his throat. Everything was all right. They had lost too much, paid too much, suffered too much, endured too much. He had to believe that nothing else could go wrong, for, somewhere deep inside him, he wondered if they could survive anything more.

Brian had assured him it was nothing, and he had to believe it.

It was nothing.

He shivered abruptly and wondered why the air around him suddenly felt so cold.

"When . . . when did you know?" Nicholas Avolar was sitting in the darkest corner at Woody's with his back almost pressed against the wood-paneled walls, his eyes sweeping the room continuously as he tried, without much success, to assume an appearance of nonchalance. In truth, he was just a couple of steps away from full-fledged panic, but determined to allow no one else to see it.

Jared Hilliard, of course, saw it all. It was a remarkably accurate replica of his own initial trespass into the land of queer-dom.

"That I was gay?" he replied. "I was younger than you are. Chronologically anyway."
The young man tried to stop watching - stop noticing the activities going on around him - stop seeing the table where Mysterious Marilyn was laying out her tarot cards to provide psychic input for the leather daddies sitting across from her and trying to decide on a destination for their honeymoon; or the handsome young stud in tight leather pants who was currently bending over the back of his trick of the night while said trick tried - without much success - to concentrate on sinking the 12-ball in the corner pocket; or the beautiful young redhead who was currently straddling the lap of a gorgeous blond man who was probably too old for the boy, though neither of them seemed to notice - or care; or the tall, slender, flamboyant figure who was sporting a bright tangerine-colored silk shirt as he enjoyed his cosmo, smiling and flirting with a muscular man seated at his side who bore a striking resemblance to some famous sports figure that Nicholas couldn't quite place.

"What do you mean?"

Hilliard's smile was not unsympathetic. "I lost my virginity when I was fifteen, Nicholas. But even then, I had known for a couple of years, at least. It gets to be pretty obvious, when you never have enough interest to try to cop a look down a girl's blouse - or up her skirt. Doesn't it?"

"But what makes you think that I . . . My mother thinks I'm just a . . ."

"Late bloomer?" The smile grew a little broader. "That's a phrase that almost every gay boy hears, sooner or later. It's almost the password for parental denial - along with the slightly more classic 'You just haven't met the right girl yet'. I assume you've heard that one a few times already."

Nicholas huffed a quick sigh. "You could say that."

"Look, Nicholas," said Hilliard softly, "it's your business whether or not you choose to declare yourself to friends and family. And nobody here is going to force you to do anything. In fact, one way or another, we've all endured the same thing."

"Mostly, anyway. But there's something else at stake in all this."

Very deliberately, while keeping a close watch on the young man who was still so completely petrified at the idea of being outed, he pulled a photograph out of the folder he'd brought with him from his car, and laid it on the table. "Do you recognize this man, Nicholas?"

Dark, expressive eyes glanced down, as if impatient to get this inquisition over and done with, but then could not quite manage to look away. The face of Brian Kinney, at its most perfectly beautiful, would always have a profound impact on any rational individual - even straight ones - but that, of course, was not the case with young Nicholas, even though he had yet to actually address his sexual preference. "He . . . looks familiar."

Hilliard smiled. "Yeah. He should. It's not the kind of face anyone can easily forget - and even more so if you happen to be gay. This . . . is the infamous Brian Kinney."

Nicholas was looking more miserable by the minute, as if he wanted to close his eyes, to look away, to refuse to see, to refuse to be in this place at all. "Yeah. I think I've heard of him."

Jared Hilliard took a moment to rein in an impulse to call the young man on his disingenuous demeanor. He lit a cigarette instead, before once more gazing directly into the youth's face and speaking very slowly. "I'm certain you have, since it was highly-placed members of your precious club who were responsible for turning this . . ." He tapped on the photo still lying on the table, "into this." He then laid a second photo on top of the first - the tabloid snapshot of Brian as he'd looked when brought into the hospital on the night of his attack.
Hilliard almost felt sorry for the kid, as he watched the uneasiness in Nicholas' eyes morph into an expression of sick horror. There was no way that any rational person could look at the before and after pictures without experiencing a surge of revulsion, along with a tremendous need to deny, to reject the notion that human beings could be capable of such blatant viciousness - especially if the human beings in question were not strangers, but members of a familiar group. But Hilliard knew that there was no denying this particular truth, and it was his job to make sure that Nicholas did not find a way to evade the elementary issue of what had happened, and who had been responsible.

"That's . . . that's not possible." The denial was barely even a whisper. "They wouldn't. They couldn't do something like that."

Hilliard sat back. "Of course they couldn't. Not with their own beautifully manicured, lily-white hands. But they could hire somebody to take care of the dirty, bloody work, while they sat back and watched."

"No. They're too . . ."


"You can call me Nick, but what do I call you?" Dark eyes were suddenly thick with speculation. "Because it's not 'Jed', is it? And you're not some homeless, shell-shocked war veteran. Are you?"

Hilliard smiled, realizing that he had come to a point that all undercover operatives have to face, sooner or later - the moment of truth - or not, as he had to choose. He took a deep breath. "No, I'm not. At least, not the homeless, shell-shocked part of the equation. I am a veteran, but . . ."

"Are you even Shirley's brother?"

"No."

Nick closed his eyes. "In that case, she's not what she claims either. Is she?"

There was no time for in-depth analysis of the situation. There was only intuition and gut perception to call upon for guidance. Luckily, Hilliard had plenty of both. "No, Shirley is an undercover cop, and a very good one. And I . . ." He once more tapped the surface of the photograph. "I work for this man. It's my job to protect him and his family, and to find out who did this to him. You can call me Jared."

But Nick deliberately avoided letting his eyes rest on the picture. "What's all this got to do with me?"

Hilliard smiled. "Come on, Nick. You're not that stupid. Granted, it's just a case of you being in the wrong place at the wrong time, but the truth is that these people are slick as eels. They've used money and power to cover their tracks so well that catching them requires finesse and a stealthy approach. They're covered in layers of deceit and camouflage so that almost no one ever gets a glimpse of who they really are." He paused then and leaned closer, his eyes aglint with determination. "But you have, haven't you? Not because they deliberately bare their souls for you to study, but because they tend to forget that you're there. You're part of the furniture; you told Shirley that yourself. Over time, they've simply forgotten that you might be paying attention, that you might see them for who they are."

"What?" snapped the younger man. "You think they just sit around the table and gloat about how they hired thugs to do this?" He touched the tabloid photo with a fingertip, but still did not look at it.
"You think they'd spell it all out and laugh about it, in front of me? You think . . ."

"I think," Hilliard interrupted, "that you're a hell of a lot smarter than they ever realized. And no, I don't think they would have provided chapter and verse, but I do think they would have been too fucking pleased with themselves to keep it all tucked away and hidden inside. I'm not asking you to draw us a copy of their master plan. I'm asking you to tell us what they might have said, and - more importantly - who among them might have said it."

The young man clasped his hands in front of him and pretended to stare at them, but it was obvious to Hilliard that he was really seeing something else, remembering something else, and realizing that he was effectively backed into a corner from which there could be no escape. But he was not slow or mentally deficient; he was also sifting through thoughts of what any disclosure he might provide could do to his life, or his mother's life. It was obvious that there was more at stake here than a job or material needs. There was also the matter of loyalties, long ago bought and paid for.

"I can't give you much," he said finally, a shadow in his eyes suggesting that he had finished his evaluation of his options and come to some kind of decision - a decision that he was not particularly happy about, but figured he could learn to live with.

"Maybe I can help you out a bit," said Hilliard, taking a sip of his beer and assuming a relaxed, non-threatening demeanor. "It's not like the FBI hasn't spent a shitload of time working on profiling the perps." A quick glance at young Avolar confirmed what he had expected. The mention of the powerful federal agency had caused the youth to flinch and draw a quick, rough breath. "Among the members of your famous club are a former police chief whose mayoral campaign was sabotaged by our young Mr. Kinney, as well as Craig Taylor, who blames Kinney for his son, Justin, being 'converted' to homosexuality. Also, there are a couple of members of the Hobbs family, father and grandfather to one Chris Hobbs, who almost certainly blame Justin Taylor - Kinney's lover - for getting their pride and joy exposed as a violent, homophobic bigot." He paused then, and regarded Nick with soft, patient eyes. "How'm I doing so far?"

Nick took another deep breath before looking up to meet Hilliard's gaze, noticing, as he did so, that the eyes in question were incredibly beautiful - which did not make anything easier as he felt a stirring in his groin that he would have preferred to ignore. "Okay. I . . . I did hear a few things." He took a moment to swallow around the lump in his throat and consider his words carefully - the ones he could say, albeit reluctantly, and, even more important - the ones he couldn't.

"Go on," Hilliard urged, not quite able to mask his growing impatience.

"Stockwell and Taylor and Randolph Hobbs, Jr. - they . . . one night over brandy, they talked about Kinney 'only getting part of what he deserved' and how something ought to be done to make sure he paid the full price. Then they talked about his loft, and something about a plan to target his business." He paused again, and closed his eyes, and Hilliard understood that the next part would be particularly difficult. "They laughed about how it was satisfying to actually see the 'reward' - not just have to hear about it second-hand - like the last time."

Hilliard had lifted his glass to take a swallow of his beer, but froze when he heard those words. "The last time?" he repeated slowly, his eyes fixed on the beer in the certainty that the intensity of his gaze might scare the younger man into silence if he noticed it. "Do you have any idea what that meant?"

But Nick was in a state of hyper-awareness, and he sensed the change in his companion's demeanor without actually seeing it. "Not really."

Hilliard waited, finally looking up to stare at the younger man's face. "Come on, Nick," he said in a voice barely above a whisper. "This is not the first time they've laughed about something happening
in the gay community - is it?"

Nick picked up his beer and took a deep draught before answering. "What do you want me to say, Jared? That they laugh their heads off every time some drag queen gets the shit beat out of him? They do. That they donated buckets of money to the Prop 14 organization? They did. That they supported Stockwell's campaign to restore 'family values' and shut down Liberty Avenue? They did. That the motherfuckers who killed Matthew Shepherd are heroes to them? They are. They're queer-haters, but they're not exactly alone in that, are they? Half the fucking country seems to agree with them. So why do you think I . . . I don't want . . ."

Hilliard waited a few seconds, to allow the young man to continue if he should decide to do so. He didn't.

"The difference," said the undercover operative softly, "is that half the country - no matter how homophobic or insular . . . or just plain stupid they might be - doesn't pay thugs and assassins to maim and kill people. And that's what your Club members did, and will undoubtedly do again. Unless someone steps up to stop them."

He paused again, considering how to proceed before deciding that it was best to lay all the cards on the table now, as he wasn't entirely sure he'd get another chance. "Let me guess," he continued. "Last year, when the explosion at Babylon killed all those people, your patrons were . . . what? Overjoyed? Jubilant?" He paused again, his voice dropping to a near whisper. "Congratulating themselves on their success?"

Nick's eyes grew huge then, as he cringed away from a realization that he had been denying for a very long time. "No," he moaned. "No, it can't be. They wouldn't . . ."

Hilliard lit another cigarette. "You know better than that, Nick." He took a deep drag before once more fixing his gaze of the youth's face. "Somebody's got to stop them. And you know it."

The young man clasped his hands on the table in front of him and braced his chin against them. "I'm no hero, Jared. I'm just a glorified waiter - a kid from the streets who lucked into a job because it's a family thing. I don't know anything for sure. Shit! You should get Cap'n Henry to spill his guts. He's been handling the money at the Club since the fucking Civil War or something. But you're asking me to give up . . . everything - to betray my family, betray the people that made it possible for us to earn a living, to turn my back on . . ."

"I'm asking you to do what's right, Nick. I'm asking you to help make sure that this . . ." again he tapped the photograph,"doesn't happen to anybody else. Look at him, my young friend." He fished out the original picture - Brian Kinney before - and held it up so that the young man could not avoid seeing it. "They called him the Stud of Liberty Avenue; you can probably figure out why. I doubt there was a queer in the state of Pennsylvania who wouldn't have sacrificed his left nut for a chance to get fucked by him. Just one time. And he certainly tried to oblige them all. It's what he did - what he was known for. He never made excuses, never pretended to be anything other than what he was, never apologized for being himself." He then picked up the other snapshot, and shoved it into Nick's face. "This is what it got him. And you know who did it, Nick. You have the power to help me make sure it never happens again."

"No, I . . ."

"Or," Hilliard interrupted, his voice cold and sharp, "you can just turn around and walk away and pretend that it's none of your concern. Go back and live in your closet and deny who you are. Maybe even enroll yourself in one of those psycho-babble, cultural-immersion, blitzkreig courses that are designed to save you from yourself, and turn you straight." He smiled then. "Courses which never
work, by the way, although some ignorant assholes are weak enough and sufficiently subject to manipulation to claim to be cured and live a lie for the rest of their lives."

He took a swig of beer. "It's not a choice, Nick," he said finally. "And there's no changing it. Easier to change the world, and that's what you have a chance to do. That is a choice, and it's one you have to make right now, because we're running out of time."

He fell silent then, knowing that there was nothing more to say. It was up to Nicholas Avolar now, and if he hadn't already been convinced, he never would be.

"I've told you what I know. What else do you expect me to do?"

Hilliard took a moment to compose his thoughts. "The thing that the cops and the FBI hope to avoid - at all cost - is showing their hand prematurely. These are wealthy, powerful people we're dealing with, and any hint that the game might be afoot . . ." He offered up a little scapegrace grin. "Forgive my Sherlock Holmes reference. I've always wanted to say that - could send them running for parts unknown. Parts where their money could buy them political refuge, and non-extradition treaties with the U.S. would make it almost impossible to get them back here to face a trial. So the point is that we need to gather everything we can, to put the pieces of evidence together so tightly that the investigation is a done deal by the time the authorities decide to make their move."

Nick nodded. "So?"

"So I'm not a cop. And no cop has asked me to talk to you about this, so there's no question of the cops - or the Feds - violating the rights of the suspects. For example, if I suggest to you that it would be very beneficial to the investigation if we could obtain DNA samples from each of the group in question, and you decide that the decent thing for a concerned citizen to do is to get such samples - by, perhaps, impounding the glasses they drink from during one of their luxurious dinners and making sure that those glasses - appropriately labeled and sealed up in plastic bags to preserve the DNA and fingerprints - get to me where I can turn them over to a crime lab . . ."

"You want me to steal their wineglasses?"

Hilliard shrugged. "Or their cigarette butts. Or their linen napkins, if they use them to wipe their lips. Whatever you can find. I'm not particular."

Nick shook his head, his breathing harsh and uneven. "And when it's all over? What happens to me then? Will I have to get up on a stand and . . ."

"I don't know, Nick," Hilliard replied. "Maybe. But can you really just turn around and walk away from this? Because - think of it another way - if they continue with their efforts to get to Brian Kinney; if they eventually succeed in killing him, then your knowledge of their involvement makes you an accessory. Not to mention, you'd spend the rest of your life knowing that the man died because you were too chicken-shit to do the right thing."

"You don't know what you're asking." It was almost a snarl, and the anger was suddenly radiating off the young man in almost visible waves. "You don't know . . ."

"Yes. I do know. But I also know that, if you decide that you just can't handle this - that you have to look out for yourself and your family and the hell with what might happen to anybody else - then you're going to have to live with that for the rest of your life. One day, you're going to look into a mirror, and see what you allowed yourself to become."

Hilliard rose then. "I don't envy you that." He pushed his chair in and stood for a moment, looking
down at the young man who refused to meet his gaze. "I'm sure you can find your way home, and I don't think it's necessary to tell you what will happen if you say anything to your high-and-mighty patrons, about Shirley and what you've learned tonight. You're smart enough to figure that out all by yourself."

He turned then and walked away and was almost at the door when he felt a hand on his shoulder, and a quick glance around the bar revealed the smiles from fellow patrons indicating that everyone who witnessed the gesture assumed that he'd just gotten lucky, and the admiring stares at the lovely young face of Nicholas Avolar suggested that - in their eyes - he'd gotten very lucky indeed. Which was very good for whatever version of his cover he was using tonight, if he was even using a cover at all. Sometimes, it was hard to remember.

"When," asked Nick in a slightly breathless voice, "do you want me to do this?"

"Yesterday would be good."

Nick thought for a minute, mentally reviewing his schedule. "I'm off until Sunday. Come by my place that night around midnight. I'll get what I can."

"Good man," replied Hilliard. Then he glanced toward the bar where a couple of young, handsome hard-bodies were standing, staring at Nick's physique with hungry eyes. "Now, would you like to check out . . ."

"No." The answer was quick and sharp, but without anger. Then Nick offered a slightly rueful smile. "I need to take this one step at a time. Today I betray everything I've ever known. Maybe tomorrow, I can stick my nose out of the closet."

Hilliard grinned. "I hate to tell you this, Friend, but it ain't your nose they're interested in."

The two made their exit then, and found that the night had turned chilly during their visit to the bar. "Shit!" said Hilliard. "I should move to Atlanta. Or New Orleans. Or fucking Havana. Anywhere where winter is just another foreign word."

Nick stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets. "Yeah. Pittsburgh sucks, but it's home."

Hilliard started to turn away then, to let the younger man return to his car for the drive home. Then he paused. "By the way, do you know anyone named 'Brad' in the Club? Or Bradley, maybe. Something like that."

Nick thought for a moment. "No. Can't think of anyone. Why? Is it important?"

Hilliard shrugged. "Not sure. But if you do think of someone, let me know."

Nick nodded, and then hunched his shoulders inside his jacket as a freshet of colder air swirled around them. "See you Sunday night," he said, before turning away and hurrying down the block and into the alley where his car was waiting, its freshly polished paintjob gleaming in the light of a sputtering street lamp while Hilliard, in full street-person camouflage, wandered off in the opposite direction, wondering how to suss out information about someone called Cap'n Henry - a name he had never heard before.

Nick, meanwhile, slid into his car, and, while waiting for the heater to warm the interior, he thought about the things he'd heard that night, and the things he'd revealed himself. He wasn't exactly proud of himself, but he knew where his duty lay. He had given up Stockwell, Taylor, and Hobbs without too much reluctance; in spite of the fact that they were all Club members who expected perfect service from him and were generous with their gratuities as a result, he had seen no reason to
endanger himself or flaunt his defiance of a police investigation on their behalf, and it mattered not in the least that 'Jared' was not - officially - a member of the police force. Whatever the man might have indicated, he was operating under the auspices of legal authorities, the Pittsburgh PD being the least of them. Thus, Nick reasoned, he had done what he had to do. But, at the same time, he had remained resolutely silent about the one central figure who had not been mentioned by the undercover agent - the one individual to whom Nick and his mother owed a debt that could never be repaid.

He hoped, when everything was done, that he would not be identified as a source of information for the authorities, and that things would go back to normal. Maybe having 'Shirley' - he was sure that wasn't her real name - turn out to be an undercover cop would allow him to avoid being named in the investigation. Once the excitement died down again, it should be possible to return to the old ways - the traditional ways of the Club. After all, Stockwell and Taylor and Hobbs were not really old school members; they were mostly latecomers - second generation at best - and thus, expendable. Not like some others. But, when they were gone, when they were prosecuted and convicted and imprisoned, maybe then things would go back to the way they used to be - before flaming homophobia had become such a constant within the cultural and physical retreat of the Club. Then, in the calm after the storm, he might even be able to let down his guard a bit and prove to the primary Club members that their prejudice was misplaced, that not all homosexuals were abominations or perverts. Maybe he would even . . .

He clamped down hard on that thought, recognizing it for the pipe dream it was, and eased the Camaro into gear, enjoying the throaty growl of the engine. Time to concentrate on the now, instead of the maybe-someday.

As he pulled out into the street, he remembered Jared's last question, and was struck by a sudden thought. Brad - surely the man had not been referring to Bradford. Because that was just silly. First of all, that hadn't even been the name he'd preferred to use for himself, although it was the name that the members had used for him. And secondly, more importantly, he was long-gone by this time - had been gone for over a year. And finally, there was the undeniable truth that he'd never been a member of the Club, of course. The idea was silly, although Nick wondered if the man might have had some such notion, at one time or another. But if so, he'd certainly been shown the error of his ways, so that he'd realized that he wasn't a candidate for membership. Not unless . . .

But no. That was ridiculous. Bradford was long gone, somewhere down South, he thought. His mother had mentioned a rumor once, about him relocating to Florida or Georgia, or some equally southern location.

The car was still chilly, as Nick idled at a red light, and he spent a moment wishing that he too lived somewhere down South, where the spring was not constantly interrupted with resurgent drafts of winter. Then he thought a bit more about the burly individual whom he had not seen in more than a year; not since a few days after that whole bombing mess at that night club.

No, Bradford couldn't be the person Jared had inquired about. He was old history, and couldn't possibly have anything to do with the attack on Brian Kinney. As for what he might have had to do with that infamous bombing, well - that was something that Nick had no way of knowing, now did he? And it was also a question that Jared had not asked.

Besides, he had other things to worry about, like . . . how the hell was he going to manage to steal Baccarat stemware from the Club without looking and feeling like a common thief? He recalled an incident in which a fellow employee - a recently hired busboy - had stumbled and dropped a tray carrying a couple of the champagne flutes; the kid had been escorted off the premises with dire threats to his life and his manhood if he ever dared to show up there again. Not so surprising, Nick
guessed, since the fucking wineglasses retailed for upwards of $150.00 a pop. He shivered in the cold, as he drove off into the night, still pondering the important issues, figuring out how to get away with his not-so-petty theft, and giving no more thought to the idle speculation.

Despite his misgivings and his reluctance to be drawn into an awkward situation that felt like a conflict of interest, Nicholas Avolar was a decent young man with a conscience, and, one day, the memory of this night would come back to haunt him.

"Jesus Fucking Christ!" Michael was almost snarling by the time he got to the bottom of the stairs and stumbled across the foyer to reach the front door. A glance at the clock on the wall near the entry confirmed what his addled brain had already told him; it was the middle of the fucking night. So who the shit was it who was leaning on the doorbell, obviously refusing to take "Fuck off!" for an answer?

When he thumbed off the dead-bolt and opened the door, he had to blink a couple of times to make sure he wasn't hallucinating. It took almost a full minute to realize that he wasn't.

"Melanie. What the shit are you doing here at . . . whatever the fuck time it is?"

"Sorry to interrupt your beauty sleep," she retorted, obviously not really sorry at all as she pushed her way into the house without waiting for an invitation, or for Michael to step back to signal agreement to her entry, "but this is an emergency."

Michael shook his head, trying to clear his mind, before reeling back under a rush of pure panic - the kind only a parent could understand. "J.R.'s okay, isn't she?" he demanded. "Where is she, and what . . ."

"She's okay, for the moment," she replied, turning to stare at him with cold, almost feral eyes. "She's with her sitter in Toronto. But she won't be okay for long, unless we find some way to get your 'best friend' to back off and stop acting like an asshole."

Michael rubbed his aching head with thumb and forefinger. "Mel, I don't have any idea what you're talking about. It's two o'clock in the morning, and I'm a little . . . confused. Couldn't we talk about this tomorrow? When I'm actually awake instead of walking around in my sleep? I mean . . ."

"Well, there's a problem with that," she snapped. "Since the Mighty Kinney had me thrown out of the hotel room that I was sharing with my wife, and then demanded that if I wanted to confront him about this whole investment fiasco, I had to come back to the Pitts to be granted a face-to-face video audience with His Majesty, here I am in the middle of the fucking night with no place to go."

"I thought you were staying with Ted and Blake." Michael wished he could clear his mind so that he could put together a coherent thought, but he wasn't having much luck in that department. He did wonder, briefly, if things - in general - could possibly get any weirder. He would soon realize that they could.

Melanie did not quite snort, but it was a near thing. "That was before Teddie caved in under pressure from his lord and master, and left me hanging out to dry."

Michael blinked. "Mel," he said quietly, "granted I'm not particularly up on current events at the moment, I still know that Teddie wouldn't do that to you. He cares about you and Lindsey. He always has."

She flopped down on the sofa, dropping her purse and a carryall and a laptop onto the floor at her
feet, and heaving a sign of relief. It looked as if she felt like she'd been carrying the world on her shoulders and had only just found some tiny measure of relief. Michael sighed. "Look, Mel, we can talk about this in the morning. Hunter isn't here tonight, so you can sleep in his room, and maybe things won't look so bleak after you get some rest."

It was her turn to blink. "You think that a little snooze is going to fix this colossal mess, Michael? Well, let me just disabuse you of that notion, and tell you what your fucking bosom buddy is doing. He's stepped in and done what he always meant to do, what he's always wanted to do. He's fixed it so that Lindsey is walking away from our marriage, and from our daughter - Our daughter, Michael - yours and mine and hers. And he's also taking Gus away from me."

Michael simply stared, and felt his headache intensify. "What the fuck are you . . ."

"He's reclaiming his parental rights to Gus, and he's made it clear that he's not going to allow him to leave the country again. And Lindsey . . . well, Lindsey is doing exactly what you'd expect, isn't she? She's playing the sweet little WASP princess, and bowing down to his demands, just like always. So you figure it out, Michael. If she refuses to go back to Toronto, that leaves me to either give in to what he wants and come crawling back to Pittsburgh with my tail between my legs, or . . ."

"Or?"

"Or to accept that my marriage is over, that Gus is lost to me, and . . . and that I'll have to find a way to raise my daughter alone."

Michael felt a hitch in his breathing as he realized what she was saying, and found himself incapable of uttering a single word. Fortunately, there was someone else on the scene, someone who had been watching in silence from the shadows of the stairwell.

"You know that's not true, Melanie," said Ben, coming into the room to stand at Michael's side. "J.R. is Michael's daughter too, and we will always do whatever we can to . . ."

"And what's that, Ben?" she snapped. "Send a stuffed animal or two every month? Or a few comic book t-shirts to replace the ones she outgrows? Or . . . oh, yeah . . . fork over a hundred bucks or so every once in a while, when you're flush? Let's be brutally honest here, OK? And believe me, if there were any way to deny it, I would. But the simple truth is that it's Brian's money that's always made it possible for us to live in relative comfort. Because I can't practice law in Canada until I go through retraining, and I have another year of graduate classes until I can apply for my license. Meanwhile, Lindsey's job at the Windhaven Gallery has paid the bills - sort of." She drew a deep breath. "Actually, that's not true. If we'd had to live on her salary, we'd have been holed up in a shithole tenement apartment, scrambling to find some needy old lady to keep our kids while we worked and went to school. Instead, we have a sweet little house and . . . well, I'm sure you see the point. And it's Brian's money that made it possible."

Ben could not quite resist a smile. "Bet that hurt, didn't it?"

"You have no idea," she admitted, and suddenly, she wasn't so much enraged as just exhausted. "I never wanted . . . I wanted to be free of Brian. For Lindsey to be free of Brian. I was willing to do anything to achieve that. That was the primary reason behind our mo . . ." She paused, but it was too late. Both men realized what she had almost said. "But it was never going to happen. She was never going to be free of him, and Gus . . . beautiful Gus, my beautiful Gus, loves that motherfucker like a . . ." She swallowed around a lump in her throat. "Like a father. Or, even more, like a daddy. How the fuck did everything get so screwed up? And now, now . . . it's all over. Lindsey's never going to forgive me, and he's going to make sure of that."

"You have no idea," she admitted, and suddenly, she wasn't so much enraged as just exhausted. "I never wanted . . . I wanted to be free of Brian. For Lindsey to be free of Brian. I was willing to do anything to achieve that. That was the primary reason behind our mo . . ." She paused, but it was too late. Both men realized what she had almost said. "But it was never going to happen. She was never going to be free of him, and Gus . . . beautiful Gus, my beautiful Gus, loves that motherfucker like a . . ." She swallowed around a lump in her throat. "Like a father. Or, even more, like a daddy. How the fuck did everything get so screwed up? And now, now . . . it's all over. Lindsey's never going to forgive me, and he's going to make sure of that."
Ben dropped into an armchair and studied her face. "Actually, Mel, I'm not sure that's true. While Brian and I have had more than our share of issues . . ." He paused to reach out and grasp Michael's hand. "In some ways, he's more capable of forgiveness than anyone I've ever known." Then he offered her a lopsided smile. "It's just that he hides it beneath that asshole persona so successfully that no one even notices."

"Oh, puh-leeze," she groaned. "Please tell me you're not buying into this whole Saint Brian crap."

Michael grinned. "Nobody - including Brian - would consider him a candidate for sainthood. But he is very good to the people in his life, even when he's pretending total indifference. Mel, do you really think he didn't realize that the money he provided for Gus wasn't only for Gus."

"And you know this how?" she demanded. "I'll bet he loved gloating about how the munchers couldn't survive without his charity."

"He's never said a word," Michael replied. "Actually, it was Lindsey who mentioned it."

Melanie nodded, her hands clinching in her lap. "Of course, she did. I shouldn't be surprised, should I? When has she ever done anything but sing his praises?"

"Mel," said Ben slowly, almost gently, "I know it's difficult, especially at a time like this, to be objective, but don't you think your memories are a little . . . selective. I remember plenty of times when Lindsey read Brian the riot act, which he sometimes deserved . . . and sometimes didn't. I also remember that the two of you never seemed to have a problem calling on him to step in and resolve your problems, while - in return - you both appeared to be eager to interfere in his life and try to derail his intentions."

"What the fuck are you talking . . ."

Ben took a deep breath. "You and Lindsey had a great deal to do with Justin's decisions in relation to Brian. Not just once, but repeatedly. When you convinced him that it was hearts and flowers and fairy tale romance that he wanted - instead of what Brian offered to give him; when you suggested that Brian allowing him the freedom to choose his path was a sign that he didn't care about him. And ultimately, when you - and Lindsey - made him believe that he could never be an artistic genius unless he deserted the cultural wasteland of Pittsburgh in order to flourish in the elite atmosphere of New York."

"He needed to go," she insisted. "He was never going to achieve anything here - with Brian running his life."

Ben laughed, which caused Melanie to glower at him. "When," he asked, "did Brian ever run Justin's life? When did he even try, or when would Justin have allowed it? It makes me wonder if you ever knew either of them at all."

"Why are you defending him? What's he ever done for . . ."

"Brian," said Ben firmly, "is a narcissistic, arrogant, hard-headed, sarcastic, self-centered, cynical bastard who probably wouldn't bother to spit on me if I was on fire . . . except . . . except that he'd actually go to any length to protect me because he knows what I mean to Michael. Whatever else he might be, he's my husband's best friend, a friend who has been there for him - to help him, to defend him, to stand up for him - to love him throughout his whole life. Just as he's done for other people that he cares about, including your wife. And he's also a man who had to develop his own methods for dealing with a lot of shit that you and I probably can't even begin to comprehend."
He paused then, struck by a strange gleam in her dark eyes. "But you already know all that, don't you? You've known it for years. It's part of the reason you hate him so much, because you've realized that the people in his life - no matter how much they might claim otherwise - have learned the truth about him. That they love him, because he deserves it. Because he earned it, which means that you're never going to be able to turn them against him. Ever."

"I don't fucking believe it." Melanie stood up and began to pace. "Here we go again with all this noble Brian bullshit. He's not some goddamned hero. He doesn't deserve the kind of loyalty that you're all so determined to give him."

Michael had been silent throughout this exchange, but he'd been thinking about what she'd said when she first arrived. "What did you mean, Mel?" he said finally.

"What?" She frowned, obviously confused. "What are you talking about?"

"You said that you had to come back here to confront him because of this 'investment fiasco'. What did you mean?"

Melanie sat down again, biting her lip and obviously not happy to be reminded of whatever it was that had brought her back to the city. "He didn't tell you?" she asked, sounding strangely subdued.

"I haven't heard from him in a couple of days. So . . . what did you mean?"

She drew a deep breath. "Have you heard about this mess, with the Hargrave - Correll Fund?"

"The Ponzi scheme," said Ben. "Yeah, of course. It's all over the news."

"Yeah," she said with a sigh. "The whole fucking world is standing around, congratulating themselves that they dodged a bullet. If they did."

Michael moved closer, his eyes growing huge, and darker than usual. "Don't tell me that Brian . . . Jesus! Hasn't he had enough shit to deal with? How could he . . ."

"Save your sympathy for St. Brian," she snapped. "He's fine. He had people watching his back for him. He, as usual, has come through the crap smelling like a fucking rose."

Ben regarded her wearily. "Unlike some other people. Right?"

Melanie took a deep breath. "Ted was in college with Marshall Hargrave, and his old friend offered him a chance to make an investment. It looked like a huge opportunity, a once-in-a-lifetime chance, since the Fund has made incredible profits over the last few years. The only stipulation was that the minimum investment was two million dollars."

Michael and Ben exchanged confused glances. "Where" asked Michael, "would Teddie get two million dollars? I mean, I know Brian pays him well, but not that well."

She nodded, once more clinching her hands against her knees. "You're right. Teddie couldn't come up with anything like that amount on his own. But . . ."

"But he did have access to Brian's money," said Ben, absolutely certain that he was guessing correctly.

"Yeah," she admitted. "He thought . . . he honestly believed he was doing the best thing for Brian. That his strategy would wind up making Brian a very rich man. He wanted it to be a big surprise - a done deal when Brian found out about it. Only . . . it didn't quite work out as planned. Brian lost
nothing, in the end, but only because the FBI had already decided to monitor all his financial holdings, just in case someone tried to target him for fraud or embezzlement. Whatever. At any rate, the FBI stepped in and prevented the funds transfer from Brian's account. Apparently, they'd had some advance warning about Hargrave, so they did what they had to do to protect Brian. But Teddie and I . . . we sort of . . . topped off his investment with whatever we could scrape together, and that part of the transfer did go through, since the Bureau had no interest in protecting anyone besides Brian. So, when the Fund crashed, we lost everything we put into it."

"How much?" asked Michael.

"Teddie put together $200,000.00. I only managed $40,000.00." She leaned forward then and buried her face in her hands. "I used Gus's college fund, and I borrowed the rest from my parents. It was . . . it was going to be my way to prove to Lindsey that . . . that we didn't need Brian Kinney any more, that we could do just fine without him. That way . . ."

"That way?"

She looked up, and there was no misinterpreting the icy gleam of hatred in her eyes. "That way I could convince her that we should cut him out of our lives, and out of Gus's life. We don't need him and all of his shit."

"No," said Ben very softly. "Just his money."

Melanie leapt to her feet. "Well, that's history now, isn't it? Since he has no connection and no interest in our daughter, he's sure as shit not going to volunteer anything for her, is he? Gus is the only one he ever cared about - probably because he thinks he can turn him into a perfect little replica of himself. What a wonderful future for the kid, hmm? And maybe you should also keep something else in mind, Michael. I now live in Canada, and so does J.R., and since you contribute virtually nothing in the way of support, it's unlikely that the courts are going to grant you any custodial rights, that involve crossing borders. So, while Brian may have succeeded in getting rid of me and reclaiming Lindsey and Gus, he's also managed to get rid of your daughter. How do you like that?"

"Mel," said Ben quickly, noting the flare of alarm in Michael's eyes. "I seriously suggest that you think very carefully before you go on. Threatening us is not going to accomplish anything, and . . ."

"It might," she retorted. "Since he might be willing to listen to Michael. If, that is, he really loves your husband the way you claim he does. Surely, he wouldn't want to be responsible for Michael losing his daughter."

Michael looked up then, staring at her face, and Ben had to look away quickly, wondering why she didn't recognize the stirring of rage in those dark eyes. "What do you expect him to do?" Michael asked, his voice almost without inflection.

She sat back and gazed up into nothing for a bit. "I need to consider that," she said finally. "Ponder what it would take to make it up to me - to mend what he's broken and restore what I've lost."

"Let me get this straight," said Ben, not quite able to disguise his disbelief. "You and Teddie concoct a scheme to invest a shitload of Brian's money - without his permission - in a fucking Ponzi scheme that goes belly up, and tack some of your own cash on to take advantage of the opportunity to make huge profits. Then, when the scheme goes south, and Brian winds up untouched by it, you blame him for the loss - just as you blamed him for getting bashed and almost murdered and God only know what else over the years - and you expect him to replace the money you lost and repair the problems in your marriage. Does that just about sum it up?"
"It's not that simple," she retorted. "He's been screwing with us for years, interfering with our lives, with Gus's. It's time Lindsey takes a stand and tells him to fuck off."

"Melanie, I don't think . . ."

"I don't want to hear it, Michael," she snapped. "You've spent your whole life defending him - except for that little while when you actually grew some balls and stood up to him - and I'm not in the mood for . . ."

"Stop, Mel," said Ben quickly, sensing that this conversation was only going to go downhill from this point. "It's neither the time nor the place for this. And I suggest that you think twice - maybe three times - before you start lobbing threats at us. I think I just mentioned that Brian - whatever faults he might have - has always loved and cared for Michael. So, while you're probably right to assume that he's not going to bend over backwards to do anything for you, I wouldn't be so sure that he wouldn't take action on Michael's behalf. As he's so fond of reminding us, money talks. And, as you've just pointed out, one thing he doesn't lack for . . . is money. You might want to think very carefully about whether or not you're actually willing to go one-on-one with Brian Kinney in protective mode."

He leaned forward then and picked up her carryall and slung it over his shoulder. "As for the rest of this conversation, I think it would be wise to save it for the morning, when cooler heads might prevail."

"I don't need your fucking charity," she snarled, jumping up and grabbing her purse.

But Michael did not flinch away from her anger. "Oh, I think you do. For the moment, anyway. You just admitted that you have no place to go. And whether I agree with what you've said or not, you're still the mother of my daughter, so I don't want to see you wandering the streets at this hour. So go on up to Hunter's room, and we'll continue this tomorrow."

It was uncertain which of the three of them was most surprised when she stood for a moment, obviously undecided, before turning, grabbing her bag from Ben, and making her way upstairs without another word.

Once the bedroom door closed behind her, Ben turned to study his husband's face, trying to find the right word to offer comfort and solace and to ease Michael's troubled mind.

"It's okay, Ben," said the younger man with a weary smile. "Go on up to bed. I'll be there in a minute."

"Can I fix you a glass of warm milk? Or something a little stronger maybe?"

"No. I'm fine. Just . . . go on up, and I'll be along."

"Michael, don't worry," Ben said softly, moving forward to drape his arms around his husband's shoulders. "Don't let her scare you."

"Too late," Michael replied with a rueful smile.

"It's going to be all right. She can't . . ."

Michael drew a deep breath. "We don't know that, Ben. Melanie is . . . she can be very brutal when crossed. I need to know . . ."

"Know what?"
Dark eyes were suddenly aglint with an odd combination of anger, fierce determination, and quiet courage. "That we aren't in this alone."

Ben sighed. "You're going to call Brian."

Michael laid his head against Ben's shoulder. "Not if you'd rather I didn't."

Ben dropped a kiss on his husband's forehead. "What are friends for except . . . Michael, it's the wee small hours of the morning and - unless I'm remembering incorrectly - he's got Gus there with him, so it's unlikely that he's dancing or fucking the night away. He's gonna be majorly pissed."

"He'll forgive me." The smile was quicksilver. "He always forgives me."

Ben smiled and touched Michael's face with a gentle hand. "I know. When you're done, come to bed, and maybe I'll think of a way to take your mind off your troubles."

Michael managed to dredge up a small, lopsided grin. "I should have known it would happen - sooner or later."

"What?"

"After all this time, Brian is finally rubbing off on you."

Ben laughed, but did not argue, and, after one soft lingering kiss, went to bed as Michael settled on the sofa and picked up the phone.

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"What are you wearing?"

For a few seconds, the silence on the line was deafening. Then, when the answer finally came, it was neither a snarl nor a hiss, but something with elements of both.

"Novotny, it's - shit! - it's three AM, my kid is asleep in my bed and so is Justin, which accounts for the fact that I'm horny as hell and can't do shit about it. And you're calling me for phone sex? Are you out of your fucking mind? I am sooo going to beat the shit out of you when . . ."

"Brian?"

"What?"

"Can I . . ."

The silence this time was softer, filled with something exquisitely gentle but clandestine, something that was real and vital but didn't necessarily want to be seen. "What's wrong, Michael?"

"I need to talk to you. Can you . . ."

"Yeah. Hold on. Let me just go in the other room, so I don't wake anybody up."

"Too late," came a soft, drowsy murmur from the other side of the bed. "What the fuck . . ."

"Go back to sleep, Justin."

"Who the hell . . ."
"It's Michael."

A brief pause and a sigh. "Oh. That explains it then."

"Go back to sleep."

Another, briefer pause. "Okay. Tell him I said . . . he's going to get crow's feet if he keeps fucking around in the wee hours every night."

Brian grinned. "Yeah. I'm sure that's the favorite pastime of Stepford fags. I'll be sure to let him know."

"Brian?"

Brian was trying his best to disentangle himself from the duvet and climb out of the bed without waking Gus, but he paused long enough to respond. "What?"

"I love you." It was barely a whisper, barely coherent, and shouldn't have counted for much in the grand scheme of things. Yet - somehow - it did.

"Go to sleep, Twat."

"Ummmm." Easily done, thought the blond, since he had found sleep impossible for a long time after climbing into bed after their trek up the stairs. He had really tried, but he'd been unable to resist staring at the vision of Brian with Gus nestled in his arms, with the boy's back cradled against his father's perfect chest, the two breathing in unison, with Brian's long fingers stroking the child's silky curls in a soothing gesture whenever Gus would stir. Justin had been content to watch for more than an hour, and had felt something shift and catch in his throat as it had occurred to him to wonder if anyone had ever demonstrated such love and tenderness for the child that Brian had been. Somehow he doubted it - and mourned the loss.

He moved closer to Gus as the child instinctively reached out to regain the lost warmth of his father's body. A quick shifting and a wordless grumble seemed to indicate that the six-year-old was less than satisfied with the substitution, but then he settled back into the softness of Brian's pillow, apparently content with the lingering scent of his father's skin. Justin moved closer, glad to inhale the mingled warmth of father and son, and spent another moment wondering if he had ever been happier in his life. A whisper in his mind admonished him for finding joy in a situation resulting from the brutal attack on his lover, but he could not really summon up a sense of guilt. Nor, he knew, would Brian tolerate such nonsense.

They were together. Brian would live and would be himself again. Gus was with them, and the future was beautiful.

Justin drifted down into the soft embrace of sleep with a smile on his face.

Brian, however, was not smiling. He knew Mikey too well to be sanguine about what their conversation would entail. While his childhood friend might occasionally indulge in a drama queen-out - okay, not so occasionally - he rarely allowed notes of true desperation to creep into his voice, and he generally managed to confine his flaming exhibitions to a relatively small geographical area during reasonable hours. A phone call at three A.M. spanning a distance across five states did not bode well.

Ultimately, in the hope of allowing other residents of the cottage to sleep without interruption, Brian hurried downstairs and out to the deck, sinking into his favorite lounge chair before lifting the phone to his ear again.
"Okay, Mikey. What's wrong?"

"Tell that little shit to mind his own fucking business."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. The Mikey and Justin show and its perpetual 'Brian-loves-me-more' focus. And I am his business." The faintly acerbic tone of voice was meant to put Michael in his place, and it worked perfectly, as always. But then, Brian smiled, and allowed it to show in his voice and his manner. "Just like you are my business. Now, why the fuck are you calling me in the middle of the night?"

Michael grinned, slightly consoled by just the familiar tone of voice, in spite of the worry that he could not quite manage to put aside. "I remember a time when this would just count as the shank of the evening for you. You know - two tricks down and another waiting in line."

Brian huffed a quiet laugh. "Yeah. Those were the days. But now . . ."

"Yeah," Michael agreed, his sigh suggesting volumes of unspoken words, but now, he knew, was not the time to speak them. "Melanie's here, Brian. She just showed up at the front door about an hour ago. And . . . she's upset."

"Upset?" Brian echoed, making no attempt to disguise the amusement in his tone. "Just upset? I was hoping for something a little more extreme, like a global meltdown. And it couldn't happen to a nicer person."

"I know how you feel about her," said Michael softly, gripping the bridge of his nose with thumb and forefinger in an attempt to ease the headache throbbing there. "And I can't blame you. After the things she said - and the things she did, most of which I just found out about - you'd have to be a saint not to resent her, or want payback against her. But . . ."

"But what?" Brian prompted, reining in the anger that was pushing him to tell Michael that there was nothing anyone could say to convince him that Melanie deserved mercy or compassion, especially when she had shown herself completely incapable of granting it to anyone else.

"But Brian, she has J.R. She has my daughter, and if I don't . . . if you won't reconsider . . ."

Brian was silent for a moment, mind reeling a bit under the implications of what his best friend was telling him. "Let me get this straight," he said finally. "Lovely Melanie - the mother of your child - is threatening to take J.R. away from you, if I don't take action to make it up to her and make sure she's forgiven for everything she said and did. To . . . what? Force Lindsey to forgive her and take her back? To relinquish any claims I have to my son and allow her to take him back to Canada and keep him from me? Is that about the size of it, Mikey?"

Michael drew a deep breath. "That's pretty much what she wants. Oh, and for you to, um, compensate her for her losses. Financially. She seems to feel that the fact that she and Ted invested money they couldn't afford to lose in a pyramid scheme that you didn't invest in - because the FBI prevented it - somehow makes you responsible for their loss."

Brian paused a bit, looking out toward the ocean where he saw a dark figure - one of his security patrol, no doubt - standing at the edge of the waterline gazing off into the night. "And you're supposed to convince me to do this," he said finally. "She expects you to use our friendship to make sure I give her what she wants. Is that what you want to do, Michael?"

Another deep breath. "No. No, I don't want to do that, Brian. She's using J.R. as a weapon - against you. That's what this boils down to. She keeps insisting that the courts are not going to grant me any
access, because I've never been able to provide much financial support for her. And I don't know that she's not right about that. They may not be interested in anything I have to say, or any defense I might offer. But I do think it's interesting that she admitted that the only reason they haven't been living in poverty was the money that you provided, to support Gus. So it's not a stretch to realize that she's figured out that, if Lindsey and Gus are gone, the money goes with them. So this is . . ."

"It's okay, Mikey," Brian said softly. "I understand. This is her way of punishing you - and me, by extension. Of forcing you to try to manipulate me into giving her what she wants."

"Yeah. It is. And what I can't figure out is why I never realized it before. She loves J.R., Brian. I know she does. But she also . . . uses her. Like leverage, to get what she wants."

"Yeah. I think she did the same with Gus. But . . . listen, Michael. Are you listening?"

When Michael responded, there was a very faint but very welcome vein of laughter in his voice. "Yes, Asshole. I'm listening."

"Look, there's no way of knowing how all of this is going to turn out. The investigation is huge, and getting bigger and more complex every day, and lots of things are going to change by the time it's over." He smiled then and paused to light a cigarette. "But a few things are never going to change, and one of them is the fact that you're my best friend, and I love you. Always have and always will. And I'm not exactly going to wind up as a pauper living in a grass shack on some backwater beach somewhere. I'm Brian Kinney . . . and my money doesn't just talk; it sits up and sings fucking grand opera. So I want you to stop worrying about this, Mikey. Am I going to give in and give the Mistress of Manipulation what she wants? Hell, no! Lindsey is a grown woman, and she makes her own decisions - even if I think she's nuts sometimes - but if she's finally seen the light about her so-called significant other, I'm not going to step in and try to change her mind. I'm more likely to buy a fullspread ad in the Times, offering my congratulations . . . and an observation that it's about fucking time. And I'm not going to change my mind about Gus; he's my son, and - for some unfathomable reason - he seems to love me. I'm going to be a part of his life again, and Melanie is just going to have to accept that. Whether or not she remains in his life is up to her - and Lindsey."

He hesitated for a moment, listening carefully to gauge Michael's state of mind, but all he could hear was the sound of breathing, faintly uneven. So Michael was still unsettled, still determined to do the right thing - but scared out of his wits, nonetheless.

"So here's what's going to happen," he said, careful to use his most persuasive, most soothing vocal tones. "Just today, I met a man who knows the legal system and how to navigate through it as well as I know Justin's ass - and that's pretty damned well, you know. He's my new lawyer - a specialist in criminal law, but also a master of taking care of all the nasty details that come up in the course of this kind of investigation. Now our little Melanie has always been a pretty good attorney, good at working the system to her advantage. But trust me, Mikey. Compared to this guy, she's a fucking goldfish facing off against a barricuda. You're J.R.'s father, and there's nothing Melanie can do to change that. And you've never even considered giving up your parental rights, and I'm pretty sure that no arbitrary geographical division - like the U.S.-Canadian border - is going to change that. It's not like she's living in fucking Uzbekistan, now is it?"

"Yeah, but . . ."

"But what?"

"But all that sounds really expensive, Brian. You know, I don't have that kind . . ."
"Mikey, when I was fifteen years old and wound up bloody and beaten and damaged on your doorstep, did you - or your mother, or Vic - stop and consider how much it would cost to clean me up and put me back together again?"

"No, but . . ."

"And when Jack would get pissed off and throw me out of the house for days, sometimes weeks at a time, did you or any of your family stop to count how much it would cost to feed me and keep me warm and give me a roof over my head until the motherfucker decided to forgive and forget, until the next time?"

"No, but . . . we're not talking nickels and dimes here, Brian. Whatever it cost to take you in and bandage you up, it was nothing compared to . . ."

"It was never 'nothing', Michael. It was everything, then. So whatever I can do for you and J.R. now - in the grand scheme of things, it's nothing."

Michael sat back in the corner of his sofa, warm and relaxed as he felt something easing within his chest, a cold, rough-edged something that he had not even been entirely aware of until it was crumbling into nothingness, and he wished that he was standing face to face with the young man who was still, in some ways, the center of his existence as he realized that moments of truth - like this one - were exceedingly rare. Not to mention, exceedingly precious.

"I love you, Brian," he said, barely whispering.

"I know," came the expected response, accompanied by a smug little laugh. "Now listen up, Mikey. In the morning, I'm going to get in touch with this guy - his name is Liam Quinn, by the way - and have him call you. I want you to think about this, and decide exactly what you want, exactly what kind of arrangements you want to make. You discuss it with him, and he'll take it from there."

"But . . ."

"And if you mention what it's going to cost one more time, I'm personally going to kick your sweet little ass until it's black and blue, which is not going to make Zen Ben very happy. Now do you really want to have to watch your muscle-bound husband beat the shit out of the only true love your life - or are you going to shut up and do as you're told, like a good boy?"

"You're fucking unbelievable," Michael laughed.

"I know. So . . . are we clear?"

"Yeah. We're clear."

"Oh, and one more thing," said Brian, tongue firmly in cheek.

"Yeah? What?"

"If you get the chance, feel free to piss in her cornflakes."

Michael was still giggling when Brian disconnected.

When a soft laugh erupted from a tall figure standing at the edge of the darkness behind him, Brian shifted abruptly, uncomfortable to realize that he'd been completely unaware of the new arrival.

"Okay," said Chris McClaren. "Maybe I'm not entirely clueless about why anyone would want to
consider you a friend."

Brian grinned as he looked up at the FBI agent, who was little more than a silhouette, backlit by the silver pallele of the moonlight. "Should I feel flattered?"

McClaren settled into the chair to Brian's right. "You've never felt flattered in your entire life. You always think you deserve any accolades that come your way."

"True." Brian closed his eyes, and enjoyed the silken feel of the warm air against his skin. "What the fuck are you doing out here at this hour?"

"Just making rounds." It was flatly stated, with no inflection. Nevertheless, Brian heard something beneath the words, and turned to regard the agent with narrowed eyes, prompting McClaren to swallow a smile and wonder how many people knew how intuitive the ad man really was. Not many, he was pretty sure.

"That's different. Something . . . new? Something I don't know about?"

"Not really. Just a precaution."

"Which you never bothered with before. What's . . ."

"Nothing for you to worry about. Just leave it, Brian."

Brian's laugh was just a snicker. But it spoke volumes. "Do you not know me at all, McFed? Have you learned nothing about . . ."

McClaren sighed. "All right. But it really is nothing. Mostly. Got a tip - from an undercover in the Pitts - about a possible connection. To someone in this area. No names yet. And nothing substantial. Just better safe than sorry. You know?"

"And when were you planning to tell me?" There was no way to ignore the bright bite of anger in the question.

McClaren turned then to meet the gleam of resentment in Brian's gaze and refused to flinch away from it. "When there was something to tell. What's the matter, Brian? Don't you trust me?"

"You know what's at stake here," Brian retorted sharply. "Especially now. So why should I . . ."

"Because I do know what's at stake. Don't I?" The FBI agent shifted then and leaned forward abruptly, to claim Brian's lips with his own, to pour everything he was into the kind of kiss that is so much more than just a meeting of mouths; the kind that is more like a touching of hearts, a fleeting brush of souls. Then he drew back quickly and regarded the face of the man who was looking at him with so much pain and need and rage and fear exposed in eyes that almost never allowed anyone to see what resided behind the mask.

"And because you know what's at stake - for me."

He rose then and walked away into the night, and Brian was left to look up to stare at the stars, ignoring the liquid sting in his eyes as he realized that he did know - and that those few words were as close as the lawman would ever come to confirming a truth that was too rare and too precious and too deeply felt to verbalize. As declarations went, it didn't count for much, lacking in eloquence and style and passion, but it lacked nothing in substance and honesty, and they were both fully aware of what had been said, along with what never would be. Ultimately, it made no difference, as they understood it perfectly just the same.
Brian didn't linger; he rose and went into the house where Gus was waiting, where Justin was waiting. Where his life was waiting.

He knew it, and so did the man who was rapidly walking away into the night.

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tbc
Chapter 42

Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live; it is asking others to live as one wishes to live.
--- Oscar Wilde

It was early, relatively speaking, when Brian wandered downstairs the next morning, wearing nothing but the formfitting gym shorts he'd chosen to sleep in, as a concession to the presence of his son in his bed. He was still yawning, and scratching his belly when he made his way into the kitchen and perched on a barstool, bracing his arms on the bar as he peered, with eyes only half open, at the woman who was watching him, coffeepot in hand.

Trina grinned. "You look like shit."

He yawned again. "I never look like shit," he retorted.

She tilted her head and stared at him, eyes filled with warmth and laughter and - maybe - just a smidgen of envy. How, she wondered, could anybody stumble out of bed, still obviously half asleep and without so much as running smoothing fingers through thick, dark hair or even bothering to open one's eyes all the way, and still manage to look stunning enough to inspire onlookers with a sense of wonder - not to mention hunger? "Okay. So you couldn't look like shit if they dipped you in it, but you're certainly not up to your usual standards of sartorial elegance. Brian Kinney with bed-head! If you had photos, you could spearhead a whole new campaign for the advantages of au naturel."

His sleepy smile was, she decided, completely charming, even if the words coming out of his mouth were not. "For that, I'd have to take my clothes off and show my assets and . . . there is a kid running around here somewhere, isn't there?"

"There is,' she replied with a soft laugh. "Although he's not really running, at the moment. He's exercising his latent artistic genius."

Brian blinked. "His what?"

She nodded toward the deck as she handed him a cup of coffee, which he grabbed with desperation appropriate for a drowning man reaching for a flotation device.

After dumping a small mountain of sugar into the aromatic liquid, and taking a deep draught to ingest sufficient caffeine to allow his brain cells to reach a semi-functional state, he stood and walked to the window, where he went very still, obviously transfixed and enchanted by the vision before him.

Justin was teaching Gus how to paint, and they were laughing together - one sunshine smile reflecting the other. Justin's easel was set up at the edge of the deck, allowing him a clear line of sight to the headland and the lighthouse looming over it, while Gus's - and who could say how Gus had come by a pint-sized easel in the first place - was situated so that he had an unbroken view of a small sand ridge just beyond the edge of the deck, where Beau Soleil was sprawled across the surface, nose buried in a patch of seagrass. On Justin's canvas, there were faint scrawls and splashes of pale paint, almost like bursts of light, while Gus's bore swirls and pools of darker colors. As Brian
watched, Justin crouched on his knees, with his fingers loosely gripped around Gus's wrist, guiding the small hand that wielded a narrow brush loaded with dark ochre acrylic, and Gus was concentrating so intensely that his tongue was clinched between his teeth as his eyes were filled with a brilliant glow that could only be adoration. Justin's smile was so spontaneous, so loving, so blindingly bright, that it was a perfect explanation of the nickname which Debbie had given him so long ago.

Brian's breath caught in his throat; caught painfully, sharply, as if coated and ridged with rough ice. Then he felt his heart expand with a force that seemed to scorch him, like the eruption of a supernova, and he wasn't sure his chest was big enough to contain it. He swallowed - hard - and was suddenly unsure that this was something he wanted to see or to feel or know. Brian Kinney did not do emotional overload - did not react to adorable (could barely even bring himself to think the word).

Yet here he stood - dumbstruck and riveted to the spot, unwilling to look away and unable to control the racing in his heart. Was this what it was to love truly - to lose one's self so completely that the merest possibility of giving up a single moment, a single image, of what lay before him was so unthinkable, so unendurable that he knew he would sooner be boiled alive, or have his flesh flayed from his body a millimeter at a time than risk such a loss?

And yet - deep inside, in a place where no one had ever been allowed to enter - a shadow stirred and reached for the conscious level of his mind, and asked a question, age-old and ancient, a question he had seldom allowed himself to ask . . . and never once been able to answer. These two - so beautiful, so bright, so filled with life and joy - they would give him happiness beyond anything he had ever dared to imagine, but what . . . what could he possibly give them in return? The loveliness that dwelled within them, that would create an incandescent joy in his soul, was what they would bring to the life they would share; it was a part of them, a truth which lived in their hearts.

Brian Kinney knew a lot of things about life and perhaps not so many things about hearts, but he did know one thing for sure. He knew what lived in his own heart - and what didn't.

And there were yet other things that he did not know. Things suspected only, like shadows visible just at the corner of the eye that disappear when confronted directly. It remained to be seen whether such will-of-the-wisp phantoms were real and valid and deserving of attention, or whether they would simply fade away entirely with time. He didn't know yet, but he sensed that he dare not just ignore them. He lifted one hand and massaged his forehead with thumb and forefinger, and thought again about the shadows, both literal and figurative.

They were shadows that might very well fall on Gus and Justin, and that was a risk he would not take. He was Brian Kinney, and he didn't rely on wishful thinking or dreams of happily-ever-after. He did what needed doing, to resolve whatever problems came his way. Then he heard a burst of laughter from his son, and he felt it like a soothing balm against sunburned skin.

In the end, he would do what he had to do - but maybe not today.

When he moved to turn away, it was to find Trina standing at his side, watching his face, and he was mildly disconcerted to read . . . something in her eyes. Something that she did not verbalize; something that he was pretty sure she did not want to interpret or translate.

"Someone should paint that," she observed softly, providing him with an escape route from the darkness of his thoughts. He was grateful, but he wished he could be sure that she didn't understand exactly what she was doing.

"No need," he replied with a tiny smile. "It's all up here." And he tapped his temple with his forefinger.
"Yeah," she answered. "I bet it is. So, what time does your girlfriend arrive?"

The smile became a broad grin. "Plane gets in around noon, but I'd be real careful about referring to her as 'my girlfriend'. She'd take it as a terrible insult."

"Smart girl?"

"The smartest. And as good a friend as I'm ever likely to have in this world."

He went back to his stool, to secure another cup of coffee - wondering, as he often did, if anyone would ever figure out a way for addicts like himself to mainline the caffeine and just skip the drinking process entirely. It surprised him when Trina leaned forward to touch his face with gentle fingers. "I'm glad to know you've got one," she said softly. "It's different to have a friend - somebody who can see you as you are, and tolerate you anyway. Being lusted after - or loved - isn't always an answer to a prayer."

"Of course, it is," he retorted, "or it would be, if I believed in praying."

She laughed. "Well, far be it from me to interfere with your relationship to the Almighty, but I do believe I might have earned my own particular set of wings last night."

Brain simply stared at her, assuming that she would drop the other shoe when it suited her. She did. When she extracted an envelope from her handbag and laid it in front of him, he simply lifted his eyebrows, still waiting, causing her to sigh and roll her eyes in a perfect, non-verbal expression of annoyance.

"Don't bother to thank me," she said, opening the envelope and dumping out its contents. "Your 'fucking dolphin' awaits."

Brian just sat for a moment, not quite sure what to make of the brightly-colored tickets spread out before him.

"And by the way," she continued, "you owe me $96.00."

He picked up one of the small rectangles of glossy blue and yellow posterboard and looked at it, still not entirely sure what it was supposed to be; a ticket of some kind, obviously, since the bottom line of print consisted of the words 'Admit one'. But the name at the top was singularly unhelpful. What the hell was Branigan's Wharf anyway?

"I'm not . . ."

"Turn it over," she said with an impatient sigh, "and look at the picture on the back."

Judging by the blatant suspicion in his eyes as he glanced up at her, he was far from convinced that he should trust her instincts, but he did as he was told. There was a brief pause, and then he laughed. "You shelled out $96.00 for tickets to an amusement park? Why would you . . ."

"Look closer," she retorted, completely unperturbed. "Specifically, look at the carousel."

His sigh and eye-roll were classic Kinney, dramatic and deliberate, but he did look. And the slightly condescending chuckle died on his lips, as light flared in the depths of his eyes, prompting Trina to marvel at the sheer loveliness of the effect as she wondered if that was something that the people closest to him got to see often - or if it was something that happened only rarely - something that he couldn't control. She rather thought the latter was more likely to be true.
"Well, I'll be damned," he said with a grin. "Fucking dolphins indeed."

Her grin was brilliant.

"But still," he continued, "why so many? Why would we need eight tickets?"

"Well, she reasoned, "there's you and Snookums, and . . ."

"Snookums?" he interrupted, not quite able to cover up a tongue-in-cheek grin.

She simply tilted her head and stared at him as if wondering if he might be in need of special education. "Yes. Snookums. You got a problem with that? Then there's Gus and his grandfather, your lady friend and her daughter, and your bodyguards."

"You think we need bodyguards to go to a local street fair?"

"You think McClaren's going to let you go without them? He barely lets you go to the john by yourself."

"Ulterior motives," he drawled, his smile devolving into a characteristic smirk as he took a moment to remember such trips and McClaren's dual purposes for remaining at his side. Then he huffed a little sigh. Justin, he knew, was man enough, lover enough, and addiction enough to keep him fulfilled and sated and completely enthralled for the rest of his life (not to mention endlessly horny) but Chris McClaren had been - in his own way - a fabulous reminder of the joys of promiscuity. A burst of laughter from the porch drew his attention and reminded him why, in a very specific way, this was one thought he would not be sharing with his young lover any time soon.

"Hey!"

"Speak of the devil," said Trina with a smile, as she took a clean cup from the cupboard to pour a fresh dose of morning poison for the FBI agent as he eased onto the stool at Brian's side, using the towel draped around his neck to wipe away the sweat running down his face and sculpting his hair into random spikes and damp curls.

"Morning rounds?" drawled Brian, not quite able to resist a glance at the muscular torso and flat belly under wifebeater and running shorts wet enough to leave little to the imagination. "Perimeter secure for truth, justice, and the American Association of Fags United?"

Cobalt blue eyes did not quite allow themselves to roll. "Sometimes I think I should just stand aside and let some of these redneck queer-haters take their best shot at you. Just for a little while, to remind you of what you're missing."

Brian laughed, and leaned close enough to drop a quick but open-mouthed kiss on a sweaty shoulder. "But you won't," he murmured before sitting back and raising his voice. "Nevertheless, our wise and all-knowing Carolina goddess here has arranged a little excursion for our boys' club, only it will be boys plus two, in this case. We're going to take my son and our guests to ride a fucking dolphin at . . . " He picked up one of the tickets and squinted at its slightly gothic lettering before tossing it to McClaren, prompting Trina to wonder - in passing - if the legendary stud muffin might just be going near-sighted and exhibiting classic symptoms of narcissism by refusing to consider the possibility of a need for reading glasses. Brian, almost as if he could sense her thoughts, wasted a moment glowering at her before continuing. "Trina seems to think it's necessary for you to accompany us, but I don't think . . ."

"That's right," McClaren replied, leaning close so that he was staring directly into Brian's eyes. "You don't think. Not clearly enough, anyway. Trina's right. So if you want to go to this dog-and-pony
show, you go with protection, or you don't go at all."

For a moment, the FBI agent was certain that Brian was going to argue, but, in the end, he didn't. But he'd wanted to; there was no doubt about that, and it didn't require an intimate acquaintance with rocket science to figure out what had persuaded him to accept the inevitable. The sound of mingled laughter from the deck was evidence enough.

Both men sipped at their coffee in silence for a few minutes until Brian pushed to his feet and turned to confront his senior security supervisor. "Can I at least drive to the airport and pick up the new arrivals?"

"No."

"Goddammit, Chris, I . . ."

"I assume you'd like to have some spare time to spend with your friend, and your son and . . . whoever." Brian found it interesting - and notable - that the FBI man seemed to avoid mentioning Justin's name whenever he could. "But if you want to be able to spend the afternoon and evening with them, you're going to need to get your physical therapy session out of the way this morning."

"Shit!"

"Yeah. Not your favorite thing, I know, but if you think I'm going to volunteer to face Dr. Mengele for you and try to justify your decision to skip out on a therapy session, you're delusional."

Brian sighed. "All right, all right. Would you mind doing the honors then?"

"Why? I thought I'd just send Eugene in the SUV. I think he's getting a little bored, and . . . "

Brian's frown was not quite a glower, but it was close. "Then take him with you, but . . ."

"Do you know something I don't, Brian?" McClaren interrupted. "Such as a reason I should be concerned?"

Brian's smile was slightly brittle. "Nothing specific, except that if something should happen to Cynthia or her daughter, I'd be very unhappy. Extremely unhappy. Inconsolable even."

McClaren choked slightly on a mouthful of coffee, startled into a strangled laugh at the exaggerated drawl of Brian's statement. "Meaning you'd be cutting off my balls and serving them up on a plate of pasta?"

"With marinara sauce," Brian confirmed.

"Okay," Chris agreed. "Your wish is my command, Fearless Leader. Meanwhile, Jackson will be here at eleven, so be ready. I think he's come up with some new isometric exercises for you."

"Oh, joy!" muttered Brian. "Mengele-in-training."

"Meanwhile," said McClaren, clasping his hands like a good little choir boy with a pleading gaze for Trina, "could a poor, put-upon, overworked and underpaid civil servant get some breakfast?"

Trina huffed an exaggerated sigh. "Christ, I never realized that smart-assiness was contagious."

With an evil-eye glare that elicited a grin from both the young men seated at the counter, she turned to focus her attention on her cooking chores, just as the back door crashed open before the determined assault of a six-year-old responding to the mouthwatering aroma of French toast and
frying bacon, aromas which Brian was, of course, studiously ignoring. Trina had not yet managed to break down his lifelong resistance to the kind of victuals that southern women categorized as 'comfort food', but she was still working on it. It had become a mission for her - a goal she would not relinquish until convinced that she had no other choice - and she carefully concealed a smile when she saw his nostrils twitch as she delivered a heaping platter to the table of the built-in breakfast nook that overlooked the front of the greenhouse where Simon Redding was assembling a portable trellis to accommodate a star jasmine vine recently transplanted into a big copper tub at the corner of the building. Though it was still early, the handyman's shirt was wet with perspiration and plastered to his body.

"Looks like it's gonna be a scorcher," observed Justin, insinuating himself into Brian's personal space and resting his hand against the lusciously bare skin of broad shoulders, while watching as Redding paused to wipe his brow with a dingy handkerchief.

Brian barely avoided an eye-roll for his young lover, choosing instead to voice a completely deadpan comment. "Only dull people are brilliant at breakfast."*

"Oh, shit!" muttered McClaren, not quite under his breath. "Please tell me it's not going to be one of those days."

Trina laughed, while Justin just looked confused, eyes drifting from the snarky curl of Brian's lips to the disgruntled expression on the FBI agent's face. "One of which days?"

McClaren glanced at the antique brass ship's clock on a shelf by the window and sighed. "It's not ten o'clock yet, and he's quoting Oscar Wilde. Which I'm thinking doesn't bode well for the afternoon."

Justin frowned as he edged around Brian and moved toward the table where Trina had set out goblets of orange juice for him and Gus and was currently transferring a stack of French toast triangles to the little boy's plate, before pausing to watch with a fond smile as Gus proceeded to drown it all under a deluge of maple syrup. The hunger in Justin's eyes was blatant, but he kept glancing back over his shoulder, his gaze drifting from the smirk on Brian's lips to McClaren's sarcastic frown. "You're telling me you actually recognize an Oscar Wilde quote?" he asked finally, as he slid into the breakfast booth. "Without having to look it up? That's just . . . "

"Brilliant?" drawled McClaren. "Impressive? Amazing?"

"Lame," said Justin, flashing a cheeky grin toward his lover and eliciting a quick laugh from Trina.

McClaren very deliberately stared into his coffee, continuing his sotto voce commentary with a soft reference to enfants idiot, which Brian tried to ignore, although a quickly truncated snort indicated that he was not as successful as he might have hoped. The near glower that registered on Justin's face was even stronger evidence that he'd failed to conceal his amusement. Still, he quickly redeemed himself by getting to his feet and moving to the table where he wordlessly demanded - and got - a fast, hard, seering kiss from his young lover, followed by a forkful of syrup-laden French toast from his giggling son.

Then he sank into the booth and deliberately turned to catch the eye of the FBI agent. "I can resist everything . . . except temptation."**

This time the muttered comment was more guttural, less understandable, and considerably ruder, concluding with mumbled syllables that might have referenced "educated fuckers".

Trina moved back toward the stove, a small grin on her face, until she happened to turn toward the bar and catch a brief glimpse of the look in Chris McClaren's eyes as he rose to leave the room. She
tried then - tried hard - to resist the quick thought that flared in her mind - but couldn't.

*Someone always loses. Even in 'happily-ever-after', someone always loses.*

The narrow clapboard house had a nice lived-in look, thought Lindsey, although a close inspection revealed that it would have benefited from a fresh coat of paint and some new shutters. But overall, it was attractive in a retro way, perfectly in keeping with the ambiance of the neighborhood, which Brian always termed *faux chic* - when he was in a relatively tolerant mood - or *Stepford Pretentious*, when he wasn't, and she was slightly ashamed to realize that she knew what he meant. Though pleasant enough, with a measurable degree of curb appeal, the entire street, with its subtle emphasis on a symmetry just slightly too deliberate for natural order and the proliferation of art deco accents, was just that much too "twee" (and oh, my God, she had to make sure she never, never used that word in any conversation with the father of her only son or she would literally never hear the end of it), and just marginally too self-consciously posh, like a neighborhood filled with varieties of dwellings that could be instantly converted to dollhouses.

Only someone like Brian Kinney would ever be able to define exactly what he meant by the term "Stepford fagdom", but most people with a scintilla of common sense would recognize it when they saw it.

Lindsey glanced at her watch, hoping that she had timed her visit perfectly, in order to avoid coming face to face with the woman with whom she'd spent more than ten years of her life. A face-to-face with Melanie was not something she was ready to endure; not today, at any rate. Such a confrontation was unavoidable, she knew - was something she would not be able to put off forever. But before she felt strong enough and prepared enough to face that encounter, there were other things to be faced first.

Like this one.

Michael had been reticent and ill-at-ease when she'd phoned him, offering her a whispered warning that he couldn't speak freely, under the circumstances, but he had not argued when she'd stated that they needed to talk - and soon - though he had managed to suggest, in a round-about way, that she delay her visit for a couple of hours.

So here she was. It was still morning, but only barely as the sun was almost at its zenith, threading through the foliage of a gnarled old chestnut tree to dapple the street with bits of gold that danced before the onslaught of a chilly springtime breeze.

She moved toward the front porch, noting that the dusty rose color of the main body of the house was perhaps just a shade too cotton candy pink to contrast perfectly with the gray/blue of the trim, that the ceramic tiles underfoot on the front porch were cracked and crumbling in some spots and buckling and uneven in others, and that the wrought iron plant stand placed near the porch railing was just slightly frou-frou, and would have had Brian rolling his eyes over the exhibition of blatant bad taste. And when, she wondered, had Brian Kinney become her arbiter of style? Then she closed her eyes and pictured him in his dark Armani suit and crimson shirt with perfect silk tie and beautifully tailored French cuffs clasped with brushed platinum and ebony cuff links - and realized that her question was actually quite stupid. Brian had always been her fashion guru. Mastering the manners and mores of fashionable society was, of course, an educational process, which Brian had accomplished easily, with only a bit of help from her. But perfect taste - that was something one did not acquire; it was a gift, which could neither be imparted nor learned.

Brian had always had that gift and been completely unafraid to demonstrate it and use it to achieve
his goals - in life, in business, and in pursuit of whichever body might interest him at any given
moment.

He had even used it - once upon a magic summer - on her.

She paused at the foot of the steps and inhaled deeply, taking a moment to calm herself and take
stock of the situation. As she squared her shoulders and straightened her charcoal gray raw silk
blazer and the pearl-and-teal paisley scarf that peeked out beneath the collar, she heard raised voices
in the house, noting that one of them, especially, was instantly identifiable. Nobody, after all, in the
expanse that encompassed the gay lifestyle of Pittsburgh would ever mistake the not-so-dulcet tones
of Debbie Novotny.

And, unfortunately, it required no great sensitivity to realize that said tones were currently even less
dulcet than usual.

"Michael, you can't just ignore that kind of threat."

Michael's response was a low-pitched grumble, thin on clarity but thick with irritation.

Obviously, all was not well on the set of the Michael-and-Debbie show.

Lindsey swallowed a sigh, fairly certain that she already knew the cause behind the burgeoning
battle, as she heard Debbie continue. "Well, that's just not an . . ."

She rang the bell, and was grateful that the sound apparently interrupted the flow of Debbie's
incipient diatribe. However, she was less satisfied with the look on Michael's face when he opened
the door. He did not - quite - actually say, "Oh, shit!" But she heard it anyway.

"Have I come at a bad time?" she asked, displaying the country club manners that were as natural to
her as breathing, trying not to notice that he was as annoyed by her innate courtesy as by his mother's
blatant lack of anything remotely comparable.

"Well, Melanie's gone," he retorted, "if that's what you're asking. She left to drive back to Toronto."

"It's not," she answered, stepping across the threshold and looking over quickly to see the fires -
barely banked - glittering in Debbie's eyes. "But it's good to know." Then she smiled at Michael,
trying - and failing miserably - not to feel sorry for someone so obviously out of his depth and flailing
to remain afloat. He was so very ill-equipped to handle the slings and arrows that life seemed to
delight in tossing at him, not to mention the RPGs that his mother was aiming his way.

Debbie, by virtue of a massive effort that was reflected in the feral gleam in her eyes, maintained a
grim silence, obviously waiting to learn the purpose for Lindsey's visit before declaring her friend -
or foe.

"Would you like coffee, Lindsey?" called Ben from his place near the stove, and Lindsey was pretty
sure she had never been as glad in her life to hear a voice that might be classified as friendly. Or, at
least, not specifically hostile.

"Thanks, Ben. I'd love a cup. Even Starbucks gets old after a while."

"Then maybe you should take that as a sign that it's time to go home," said Debbie, clinging to
neutrality by her fingertips.

"Debbie," replied Lindsey, in ultra-polite mode, "I think I am home."
For a moment, nobody made a sound; it was as if her flat statement had dropped into a silence too profound to disturb.

But Debbie was not one to mince words, no matter how dire the consequences. "So," she said slowly, coldly "Brian Kinney strikes again."

"Ma," said Michael sharply, "you can't . . ."

"Don't you dare," Debbie almost snarled. "Don't you dare offer up excuses for him. This is all down to him, and you know it. He's cost you every dream you ever had, and now - Jesus Christ! - he's going to cost you your daughter, and you . . . you're just going to sit by and let it happen. How can you . . ."

"Stop it!"

To the surprise of everyone in the room, it was neither Michael nor Lindsey who spoke up to intervene on Brian's behalf.

It was Ben.

"Debbie," he said firmly, "no matter how much you try to twist this, you can't lay the blame on Brian. He didn't . . ."

"But don't you see that it always comes back to Brian," she raged. "Everything that goes wrong in Michael's life - always revolves around Brian. It was because of Brian that he lost David; that he never built a life for himself; that he almost died in that bomb blast. And now - now he's going to lose his daughter, because Melanie is going to make sure he doesn't stand a chance in a court of law, and . . ."

"No," said a smooth voice emanating from the open doorway behind Lindsey, "she's not."

Lindsey was closest to the door so she was the first to come face-to-face with the young stranger who was regarding her with a beautiful smile, prompting her to realize that she'd often heard the word "winsome" but never quite realized what it meant - until that moment.

"And just who the fuck are you?" Debbie demanded, not mollified in the least by the prettiness of the new arrival, nor the warmth of his expression.

He stepped forward and paused to close the door behind him. "I'm the man who's going to make sure that your gloomy scenario never happens. My name is Liam Quinn. Brian Kinney sent me."

"Jesus Christ!" said Michael. "How the fuck did you get here so fast?"

Quinn grinned. "When the Master says 'jump', one doesn't stop to ask for directions. He called me last night, Or - to be absolutely accurate - in the wee hours of the morning, to inform me of where I needed to go and how quickly I needed to get there. And it doesn't hurt that he has a chartered jet on stand-by."

"Great!" muttered Debbie. "Another Kinney flunky who can't wait to get screwed."

"Excuse me," said the young man, his very pleasant voice hardening suddenly, and reflecting a glint of ice, "but who - exactly - are you?"

"I'm Debbie Novotny, Michael's mother," she retorted, "and J.R.‘s grandmother, so I think that gives me the right . . ."
"In actual fact," he interrupted again, without even an elemental hint of apology in his tone, "it doesn't. Any action that needs taking will be at the discretion of Mr. Novotny, and his spouse, and - peripherally - the individual who pays my fees, and I think we all know who that is. You decide nothing, Mrs. Novotny; you dictate nothing, but you might be interested to know that Ms. Marcus is about to find herself at the center of a cyclone that is literally going to rock her world. She's used your naivete and your ignorance of the law to intimidate and threaten, and make you believe that she has advantages which are virtually non-existent. Thankfully, we are far beyond the days when gender alone was enough to constitute a deciding factor in child custody cases. Acceptance was a long time coming, but, believe it or not, it has finally been established that there are fathers who are perfectly capable of seeing to the needs of their children, sometimes even more capable and more dedicated than the female of the species. In this particular case, Ms. Marcus's history is rife with examples of the kind of behavior that judges tend to view with extreme misgivings.

"In addition," he continued, as Debbie's eyes grew larger and her mouth gaped wider, "you might wish to reconsider your somewhat sweeping statements about the negative impact of Mr. Kinney's actions on the lives of your son and his daughter, as it is extremely easy to demonstrate that both Michael and J.R. have benefited from the benevolence and support provided by Mr. Kinney, and that Ms. Marcus has willingly and flagrantly used her personal connection to Mr. Kinney's son to benefit her and her daughter, far beyond the bounds of propriety. And while I am familiar with your inclination to ignore the evidence - which is, by the way, right in front of your nose - concerning how Mr. Kinney has frequently intervened on behalf of you and the rest of his extended family in order to improve your lot in life and avoid the repercussions of bad choices, I feel compelled to point out that anyone with a modicum of motivation could have discovered, with very little effort, just how helpful he's been, leading me to conclude that you didn't make such an effort because you simply didn't want to know. I also feel compelled to observe that - as Mr. Kinney is very fond of pointing out - money really does talk, or - in his case - it actually rises to the level of a Maria Callas performance as Aida, when the man who controls it is willing to spread it around like fertilizer to support any cause he espouses. In other words, Mr. Kinney's wealth has provided aid and comfort to an astonishing variety of people he cares about - including you and yours - and I, frankly, can't comprehend why you seem so eager to forget that fact just because one loud-mouthed, greedy, self-centered bitch of a lawyer tries to compel you to look at life from her perspective."

He paused then - just to catch his breath - before favoring Ben with a smile that was only a bit come-hither. "And did someone mention coffee?"

By this point, Debbie was almost gasping for air, exhausted from trying to get a word in edgewise.

"Welcome, Mr. Quinn," said Ben with a huge grin. "Regular . . . or decaf?"

Michael and Debbie remained open-mouthed and silent, but Lindsey had to suppress an urge to break out a cheerleading routine. "I take it," she said softly, "you're the man who's going to see that my son's rights are protected?"

Quinn took a seat at the table and inhaled deeply, savoring the scent of freshly brewed, fully caffeinated coffee. "That's me," he replied. "And, of course, I know who you are. I saw you during the video-conference, but I'd have known you anywhere. Brian briefed me on what to expect, and he was dead right. The face of a Botticelli Madonna, indeed."

Lindsey bit her lip. "Did he really say that?"

"He really did."

Ben resisted an urge to grin as he heard Lindsey whisper a curse word. He wondered if she understood and accepted the fact that she would always love Brian, no matter how badly he might
behave at any given moment; then he wondered if she knew that the sentiment was mutual, even at the worst of times.

"So," said Quinn, after taking time to savor a few sips of coffee, "are we ready to sit down and discuss how this thing is going to go, or do we need to allow more wasted time for theatrics and crocodile tears?"

This time Ben couldn't help it. He laughed out loud, and, after a few seconds, both Michael and Lindsey joined in, leaving only Debbie to stew in her funk.

When everyone was finally seated around the kitchen table - each focused on their own cup of dark brew - no one seemed to know where to begin. For a few minutes, Liam Quinn seemed content to wait to be asked for guidelines to his master plan, but none of his potential clients were willing to press the issue. So he and Lindsey sat back, letting their eyes drift around the room and wondering what on earth had possessed the householders to hang a velvet cat painting on the wall of the adjacent living room, while Debbie thought that the kitchen shelves looked very bare and would benefit from a liberal supply of her ceramic owls. Ben, however, was concentrating on the fear he could read in his husband's eyes, and Michael . . . Michael could only stare at the young attorney - the lifeline provided by Brian Kinney. At that moment, he didn't care that the horrible painting his mother had insisted on hanging in his den was making a terrible impression on their guests, or that she was very likely plotting a major redecorating when he turned his back; he only cared about what Quinn might have to say, and how far Brian might be willing to go to keep his promise.

"Can she take my daughter away from me?" he asked finally, barely audible, barely breathing.

"No. I'll make sure of that."

"But she could have friends in the courts there. Contacts, advantages . . ."

"Mr. Novotny, I . . ."

"Just Michael, please."

Quinn grinned. "Not Mikey?"

Michael's smile was faint, but definitely real. "That's . . . reserved," he explained, with a little apologetic glance toward his husband.

Quinn's eyes - very lovely, parti-colored eyes, Michael noticed - were soft with understanding as he replied. "Right. Now, while I'm quite sure Ms. Marcus has tried to impress you with her knowledge of the Canadian courts and her importance there, the simple truth is that, for now, she's simply a student. Canadian law is very specific. Until she is eligible to sit for their bar exam, she cannot be considered a practicing attorney. And I had my staff check it out. She has several more months of classes before she can even apply to take the exam. In point of fact, all these contacts and intimate acquaintances she claims are just stuff and nonsense."

Michael nodded. "Even so, she can prove that I haven't provided much support for J.R. That won't look good, will it? And . . ."

Quinn lifted his hand to deflect the incipient lament. "Granted, there are problems, but you have time to make amends. This is not going to happen overnight. Also, Ms. Marcus, despite having a bark like a pit bull, is not going to let this deteriorate into a 'he said/she said' confrontation. She knows she's vulnerable, and you can be certain that she was hoping that you wouldn't figure that out. But now, we should assume that she understands that she's got an uphill battle on her hands. If I looked into
her situation, you can be double sure she looked into mine, so she's realized that her original tactics are not going to work. She's going to be scrambling madly for a new scheme." He paused then, and looked directly into Michael's eyes, before shifting to look into Debbie's. "And desperation breeds hostility, so you have to understand that you're the key here, Ms. Novotny. The weak link. Please don't make the mistake of assuming that she doesn't know that. She's had years to figure out that you're vulnerable to the kind of attack she's going to launch."

"Such as?" That was Ben, speaking up when it became obvious that Michael was having trouble finding the breath or the words.

Quinn shrugged. "What will you say when she threatens to take your daughter and steal away into the night? Just vanish, and take her where you'll never find her? What will you do?"

"We can't let her do that," said Debbie sharply. "We have to find a way to help her, to keep her here and let her know that we support her and . . ."

"And when you do that," he interrupted, completely unintimidated by her tone, "when you indicate a willingness to play the game by her rules, what do you suppose she'll demand? What will you have to do to convince her that no sacrifice is too great, in order to mollify her, to assuage her anger and stay in her good graces?"

"Whatever we have to." Debbie was adamant. "She's J.R.'s mother. Nothing else matters. We have to remember that, unless we want to lose her entirely."

Quinn nodded. "So you're going to allow her to dictate the terms of your life, including how you relate to your granddaughter, and who deserves your loyalty." He leaned forward then, and came close to invading Debbie's personal space, although he stopped just in time. Barely. "And, as part of the process, demand that you turn your back on Brian Kinney. So what happens then, the next time you need him to step in on your behalf? The next time that Michael or Hunter or Ben or Emmett - or any of you - need to be bailed out? The next time that you're teetering on the verge of losing your house, or Ted is facing jail time, or any of the thousand other examples of Brian playing lifeguard while you all sit around and pretend that you never noticed a thing - a game which you're incredibly good at, by the way. On the other hand, what - exactly - will you teach your granddaughter by allowing yourselves to be puppets on Ms. Marcus's strings?"

"Brian's a big boy," said Debbie firmly. "He can take care of himself."

Quinn paused and took a sip of coffee, before looking up once more to study Debbie's expression. "I suppose that's a good thing, in light of the fact that none of you have ever stepped up to pitch in. Except for young Taylor, of course, which explains a lot. But tell me, Mrs. Novotny, what exactly did he do to you - personally - to make you resent him so much?"

"Me?" she retorted. "It's not just me. Everybody resents Brian. He's spent his whole life pissing off everyone around him and proving himself to be the asshole king of the world."

Quinn turned then, to look into Michael's eyes, before turning again to stare at Lindsey. "Is that true?" he asked finally. "Is that how you all see him?"

Strangely, it was Ben who answered. "Actually, that's not how any of us see him. That's just the mask he wears."

"No, it's not," snapped Debbie. "That's who he . . ."

"Ma," said Michael suddenly, sharply, "shut up."
"Don't you open up a mouth to me, Michael Novotny. Don't you dare. You've never once looked at
him and seen the truth. Seen what he should have been - how he should have repaid what we did for
him. He should have . . ."

There were tears in Michael's eyes as he looked at his mother, his lips trembling as he realized what
she had not - quite - dared to say. "Should have what, Ma? Should have given his life for me, as
payback for what you did for him? Should have stopped being who he is, in order to make us
happy? Should have made you his mother-in-law, so you could enjoy all the perks of a family tie to
the man who would become the advertising king of Pittsburgh? Is that what this is all about, Ma? Is
that why you resent him so much, because he couldn't love me the way you thought he should?"

"Don't you dare speak to me like that," she snapped. "All I ever wanted was for you to have the life
you wanted to have - to be who you wanted to be. And we both know what that was, don't we,
Michael? You have no right to . . ."

Michael rose quickly to his feet, and braced his hands against his hips. "I've got every right, Ma.
There's so much that you don't know - so much that I never told you, mostly because Brian never
wanted me to make a big deal about it. He was the big brother I never had; the one who's stood up
for me and been there to catch me whenever I needed help, in ways that you never even suspected. I
know you've been good to me. I know I owe you more than I can ever repay. But you don't know
how much I owe Brian - or how much we all owe Brian - because you never knew the whole truth,
and I think now that I always realized that you didn't really want to know it, although I didn't know
why. Brian always took care of me, Ma, but he never wanted to talk about it. I think . . . I don't think
he believed that he deserved any credit for it; he just thought it was something that came natural to
him, because he was always bigger and tougher and stronger - and better at fighting back. Anyway,
that's why you never knew. Was he perfect? Hell, no! He's selfish and arrogant and cocky and
demanding . . . and a thousand other things that define just how imperfect he is. Except that, in his
own way, he is perfect, because he's true to who he is. He doesn't lie, and he doesn't pretend or make
excuses, and I don't know why we all expect him to be something he's not, because we should know
better. And now . . . now you think I should turn my back on him, because Melanie's got it in her
head that she's entitled to some kind of vengeance. Just because Gus loves his daddy. And because
Lindsey loves him too. Well, guess what, Ma! I love him too. He's Brian Kinney, for fuck's sake,
and I figure I'm going to love him until the day I die. He's earned that, and I don't know why you
can't see it, because he's earned it from you too. Ben knows that; I think he knew it even before I did.
So why can't you accept that? Because, if you can't . . ."

Debbie rose slowly, her face set and hard. "Go on. If I can't?"

Michael swallowed around a lump in his throat. "Then you can go and take your place in the enemy
camp. I'm sure Melanie will be delighted to have you on her side. She's a woman, after all, and that
seems to be the only thing that matters to you."

"She's J.R.'s mother." It was almost a primal scream.

Michael nodded. "And you're mine. So tell me, Ma. Where - exactly - do you plan to take a stand?"

Debbie's eyes were huge now, and filled with a strange combination of rage and heartache. "So that's
the way it is, is it? The great god Kinney wins again, and never mind the fact that he never once gave
you what you deserved - never even acknowledged that he should have loved you . . . the way you
loved him. That he should have . . ."

"Should have what? Pretended that I was the great love of his life? I wasn't, Ma, and you can't
change that, no matter how much you might want to. He gave me what he could. He always loved
me, and he always will, but not the way you wanted. No fairy tale happily-ever-after. So . . . should
he have lied about it, to make us happy? Do you really think I'm so stupid that I wouldn't have figured it out, in time? You and me, we fooled ourselves into thinking that it was because he wasn't capable of loving anybody but himself, but that wasn't true. It was never that he couldn't love somebody; it was just that he'd never found the right person. Until Justin."

She sat back down, apparently not noticing that tears were brimming in her eyes. "But it should have been you," she whispered. "It's not fair . . . that it wasn't you."

"Yeah," he retorted, more harshly that he'd intended. "Because life's always fair. Right? Because Hunter deserved a mother that sold him to the highest bidder, so he could carry his weight in the family. Because Brian deserved to be a punching bag for his fucking father, so Joan and Claire could stand by and watch while he took the beatings that spared them. Because Uncle Vic deserved to die of AIDS, and Ben deserves to be HIV positive. And most of all, because we all get to choose who we fall in love with. Don't we, Ma?"

And, for one of very few times in her life, Debbie Novotny was stricken speechless, as the truth poured over her like a towering tsunami, against which there was no defense.

"Oh, my God!" she whispered. "Is that what you really think of me, Michael? Is that how you really see me?"

Michael found that he could not speak, that he no longer had the will to provide an answer, so it was up to Ben to step forward on his behalf. "Wrong question, Debbie," he said, his voice gentle - almost apologetic. "The real issue is how you see yourself."

She turned then, to study the face of her son-in-law, to search his eyes for a truth she did not really want to see. "You agree with him."

He sighed. "I do." Although he knew it had not really been a question.

"Debbie," said Lindsey slowly, leaning forward to regard the older woman with a tentative gaze. "if everyone who ever wanted to be loved by Brian . . ." She hesitated then, and tried to swallow around the lump in her throat. "Love isn't something he can just turn on, like a light switch. It's not something that he can choose to feel, and if you condemn him for that . . . Is it right for us to decide that we have the right to hold him accountable just because he doesn't feel what we feel - can't give us what we want? Because he won't lie and pretend to be what we want him to be? Do you really think we have the right to expect that from him?"

There was a period of silence then, as each of them digested what they'd heard, and each tried to figure out what to say next.

Liam Quinn, of course - by his very nature - had no such problem.

"Okay, then," he said easily, his smooth tone cutting through the tension and pushing it to the verge of their perception, where he thought it belonged. "If we're done with the theatrics now, we can proceed to the practicalities - to planning out our strategy and finding the best way to handle this, for all concerned." He paused then and looked directly at Debbie. "However, there can be no ambiguity here, on which way you choose to swing. Ms. Novotny, you've voiced your misgivings plainly; now let me be equally blunt. I believe we have an excellent chance of prevailing in this case, but it's not going to be pretty. So we can't take any chances. You're either with us, or you're not. There can't be any uncertainty, because if Ms. Marcus gets an inkling about what we're doing, it could be disastrous. For your son, your granddaughter, Ms. Peterson . . . and Mr. Kinney. And I'm not willing to take that chance. So you have a choice to make, and no time to think it over. Decide. Now."
"But . . ."

"Now," he repeated, absolutely determined.

"But . . ."

Michael looked at Ben, and was overwhelmed by the look of love he read in those beautiful dark eyes, giving him the courage he needed to express his feelings. So he turned and stared at his mother, and his voice did not waver. "Now, Ma, or not at all."

Debbie allowed her eyes to drift from one face to the next, as a tug-of-war waged in her mind, between old prejudices and ingrained beliefs versus swelling hopes and unshakeable loyalties.

For most of her life, she had proceeded with all the determination and purpose of a guided missile, never pausing to question or entertain second thoughts. But that would not do for this moment in time. For once, she couldn't figure out which way to turn, or whether or not to turn at all. And she decided quickly that being indecisive was something she didn't like one bit.

She took a deep breath, and turned to stare out the window where a morning breeze was stirring the foliage of the overgrown rhododendrons surrounding the back yard. The sun was just breaking through the clouds and washing the scene in bright, almost liquid gold, and - for some reason - it made her think about Brian. Perfect, beautiful Brian - the man who should have loved her son above all things, should have given him the life he deserved, should have given him the thing he wanted most - the heart of Brian Kinney. Brian with his arrogant smirk and his complete lack of inhibition and pretentiousness. It was so miserably unfair. He should have been Michael's; that was just how it was supposed to be.

Debbie had never had many dreams of her own; dreams had been in short supply in her youth, and she'd occasionally wondered why the sweet fantasy of happily-ever-after had somehow skipped her generation. But she hadn't spared much time for lamenting. Instead, she had focused on her son, on what he should have, what she could give him. And the thing she had most wanted to give him was . . . Brian Kinney.

Only . . . Goddammit! The truth was a bitter pill to swallow. Brian had never been hers to give, and never would be. And she couldn't even claim that she hadn't known he was trouble from the very first time she'd seen him. She had, from the beginning; from the first moment she'd looked into his eyes and seen an unquenchable spark of mischief and confidence, disguising a vulnerability that very few would ever be allowed to see. Only . . . he'd been so young, and so beautiful, and she'd been so sure that she would be able to mold him and focus him and transform him into the man she hoped he would grow up to be. Which, of course, turned out to be ridiculously impossible. Nobody had ever molded Brian Kinney . . . except Brian Kinney. And now she had to decide if his refusal to accept the life she'd planned for him was enough to justify her turning her back on him, with her relationship with her granddaughter hanging in the balance.

He was supposed to turn out to be the answer to all her prayers; he was supposed to be perfect!

*Like you were perfect? She did not quite gasp when the thought flared in her mind, harsh, and sharp, and irresistible. When you walked out and left your brother to die - unforgiven and alone.*

*But I didn't mean it.*

She was shocked to realize that she'd almost spoken the words aloud, almost offered a verbal denial to the image in her mind - the image of Vic as she'd seen him last, when she'd poured out her fury and her frustrations in a scathing condemnation of all that he was. When she'd been infuriated that
he'd refused to fall on his knees in gratitude for the sacrifices she'd made. It was only later that she'd realize what a betrayal that had been. Not that he had betrayed her. On, no! That would have been far easier than accepting the unvarnished truth - the realization that she had betrayed him.

And she really hadn't meant all the bitter things she'd shouted at him when she'd stormed out of his house that fateful day. Only . . . what difference did that really make? She'd said them just the same, not realizing that she'd never have a chance to take them back.

_Until now._

She only barely resisted an urge to roll her eyes and snap at the voice in her mind, the one that sounded suspiciously like that of her late brother. But why would he . . .

She had heard of epiphanies - in theory, at least. But she'd never actually experienced one herself; that was the kind of thing that happened to philosophers and deep thinkers and intellectual poseurs - not middle-aged women with grown children and neither the time nor the patience for maulering. But there was absolutely no denying that she was experiencing something totally new and unexpected; she was caught in a painful realization - a sunburst dawning of truth. She had heard it all before - from a variety of sources. All the drivel about why she resented Brian, and why she held him to a different standard from the one that she applied to everyone else. She'd been told and told and told and never once conceded that the sources might just be right.

She closed her eyes and looked into her own heart, and saw the sad, sweet, loving smile of her brother, and heard him urge her to do the right thing - to open up the closed fist that was holding on to all that bitterness, all those lost, futile hopes, and simply let it all go. It had poisoned her for too long.

But maybe - in a way - this was her chance, an opportunity to stand up and make it right, because, much as she'd like to, she couldn't pretend that she didn't know what Vic would have said to her in this situation, while her son waited to hear what she would decide.

Vic had certainly known that she had never once backed away from a fight. The question now was whether or not this was going to be the first time.

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The short, plump teen-ager with the beautiful blonde curls and eyes the color of rich, dark chocolate, was very pretty - from a distance - and the flight attendant, also young, pretty and blonde, tried very hard not to notice the vacant quality of those eyes or the slightly odd placement of features in the slightly flattened face. Still pretty - even close up - but empty somehow, unfocused and disconcerting. Melissa Blaylock recognized the symptoms. Prior to recognizing her true calling - to fly the mostly friendly skies and see the world courtesy of Liberty Air - she had spent one semester at LSU, trying to prove that she would make a good nurse, before realizing that she was wasting her time; thus she had picked up a few random medical facts that she would probably have preferred not to know. Such as the name of the affliction that would forever make this young girl different - separate and apart - from her fellow teen-agers.

On the other hand, there was nothing even remotely unfocused about the slender, fashionably dressed woman seated beside the girl, and nothing in her manner that indicated a forgiving nature. Thus, when the flight attendant paused in the aisle to present a tray offering twin glasses of chardonnay to the woman and the man sitting across from her, she was extremely careful to make sure that her face revealed nothing of her thoughts about the teen-ager. Despite the marked difference in expressive qualities of the two female faces, there was more than sufficient similarity to proclaim close family connections, and the bright, almost sharp gleam of intelligence in the woman's eyes
indicated that she was not one to suffer fools gladly - if at all.

"Katy, are you sure you don't want something to drink?" asked Cynthia, stretching just a bit and allowing herself to enjoy the comfort of the first class seat. Not being one to pamper herself, she'd reserved coach seats for herself and her daughter, but when she'd checked in at the airport, she'd found that someone - and it wasn't too hard to figure out who - had intervened and upgraded the reservation - and expanded it to include one additional traveler.

"Of course, she does," said Lance Mathis. "She just doesn't want what you're willing to let her have."

"Meaning?"

The security chief leaned forward and spoke to Katy in a conspiratorial whisper. "What's your favorite soft drink, Sweetheart?"

Her smile was beautiful, withholding nothing of the easy joy in her heart. "Dr. Pepper."

Cynthia Whitney huffed a quick sigh and shook her head. "How about a nice cold glass of chocolate milk? Or apple juice maybe? Or . . ."


Cynthia chuckled. "Stop encouraging her," she grumbled to her fellow employee. Then she tried not to cave too quickly to the adorable pout on her daughter's face. "Dr. Pepper, huh?"

"Dr. Pepper." The two spoke in tandem again.

Kinnetic's second in command knew when she was beaten and believed in practicing grace in defeat, so she nodded to Melissa Blaylock. "One glass of Dr. Pepper, with lots of ice."

"Uh, oh," said Mathis with a sympathetic smile. "No swigging from the can, Girly."

Katy giggled, and he was even more charmed than he had been from the first moment he'd come face to face with the lovely teen-ager, and that was pretty damned charmed.

"You should feel flattered," observed Cynthia, as Katy turned back to press her nose against the window and watch the hills and valleys roll by far below. "She doesn't generally talk much to the male of the species. Too shy."

The girl turned back and rolled her eyes again. "Not shy, Aunt Tink. Just bored. Boys are silly - mostly."

Mathis grinned. "Aunt Tink?"

Cynthia took a deep breath, resisting an eye-roll of her own. "You can thank your boss for that one. Leave it to Brian to corrupt an innocent child."

"Brian waiting for us?" Katy asked, a pale shadow rising in her eyes. She did not have a well-developed sense of time, but she remembered that there had been a gap - a gap that felt like forever - when she had not been able to speak to Brian, when the daily phone calls from her Aunt Tink had not included a quick, lovely conversation with the man who always seemed to find time for her - for a silly little private joke and shared laughter - and she still worried that such a time might come again.

Katy did not like being deprived of her Brian, who was - as only she and her Aunt Tink seemed to
know - completely different from the Brian that the rest of the world would recognize.

"Yes, Katy," replied Cynthia gently. "He won't be at the airport, like I told you. But he'll be waiting for us at the beach, just like he promised."

With a happy smile, the teen-ager accepted her drink from the flight attendant and went back to watching the landscape below, fairly sure that she would not really see a Pegasus-type horse launching itself into the sky, but willing to be proven wrong.

Katy loved the old stories of heroes and knights and demons and dragons and beautiful fairies and handsome young demi-gods; she was even pretty sure that she was privileged to know one of them, although he'd never really taken flight or engaged in a battle on her behalf. Not with swords or six-guns anyway. But she knew what she knew, nonetheless.

"She's very fond of him, isn't she?" asked Mathis.

Cynthia grinned. "Fond? You have no idea how fond." She turned to meet his gaze and read his skepticism easily. "That surprises you, does it?"

He shrugged. "It does, a bit. I mean . . . there are plenty of qualities in Brian that I appreciate and admire - honesty, courage, candor . . ."

"Balls?" she interrupted, her grin growing brighter.

He managed not to blush - but only barely. "Yeah. That too. But he doesn't strike me as the kind of guy who'd be good with kids."

She nodded. "And you're right. He's not good with all kids, but he's very good with his own, and with Katy. And I have no idea why. Except . . ."

It was his turn to study her face and try to figure out the speculative gleam in her eyes. "Except what . . ."

"Except that there's absolutely no artifice in Katy. No pretensions. She is what she is, and she's never embarrassed about it, or reticent in speaking her piece. Sometimes I think they're a kind of kindred spirits. He thinks she's special, in a way that has nothing to do with her mental capacity."

"And what does she think of him?"

It was Katy who chose to answer, her eyes suddenly not nearly as vacant as they'd seemed before. "I think he's pretty - all of him."

Mathis smiled. "Guess nobody can really argue with that. Whatever else the world might think of him, they can't deny that he's pretty."

Katy's grin was impudent. "Right. Nice ass too."

Both Cynthia and Mathis choked on their chardonnay, and Katy turned back to her perusal of the world below, wearing a very self-satisfied smirk - worthy of the great Kinney himself. Later on, when she mistakenly assumed that Katy was asleep and couldn't hear her, Aunt Tink would comment wryly that maybe she should rethink the amount of time she allowed Katy to spend with Brian - that his smart-ass mouth was rubbing off on his young admirer - but Katy knew better. From her parents and her Aunt Tink, Katy had learned sweetness and serenity and a plethora of skills and attitudes that she would need for navigating the world successfully, especially given the degree of her differences from that world and its "normal" inhabitants. But Katy had learned something else from
Brian - something that had little to do with success but everything to do with happiness. From Brian, she had learned about spice and laughter and finding her own place in that world and the joy that could be hers. And she had no intention of ever letting it go and settling for a place to which other people might relegate her.

She drank her Dr. Pepper and settled comfortably in her seat, happy to doze until it was time to greet her very own personal knight in shining armor - although she was pretty sure he would roll his eyes and laugh at her if she ever dared to call him that.

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*An Ideal Husband* - Oscar Wilde

**Oscar Wilde

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tbc
Chapter 43

Somehow I know
Without asking why,
That you love me more in a minute
Than anyone could in a lifetime.

* Marry Me -- Amanda Marshall, Rob Misener

"Wow!" said Lance Mathis dryly, as he waited by the baggage carousel, observing the approach of the tall, slender figure threading his way through the crowd. "The boss is pulling out the big guns."

Chris McClaren didn't even blink. "It must be a pre-requisite for the job," he observed as he came to a stop and smiled down at Cynthia Whitney, his eyes never pausing for long, as they constantly examined the colorful and randomly shifting hodgepodge of people moving through the terminal.

"Pardon?" Cynthia was busy juggling a carry-on, a laptop, a purse, and hanging on to Katy's hand, so she appeared merely confused, rather than majorly annoyed.


Mathis's eyes flicked down, taking in the FBI agent's decidedly non-traditional tight jeans and dark Polo shirt and noting how the outfit emphasized every perfect physical feature. "You planning to apply for a position?" he asked, with a quick smirk.

"Dream on. I work under the direct oversight of the attorney general, you know."

"Yeah," Mathis snickered. "I've seen the attorney general. You do remember who I work under . . . don't you?"

It was McClaren's turn to try - unsuccessfully - to suppress a quick snort of laughter. "Not bad, Stud. You're not thinking of switching teams, are you?"

The snicker morphed into a sarcastic smirk. "You don't have to be queer to appreciate the view," he retorted. "Do you think Elizabeth Taylor didn't know Marilyn Monroe was major-league hot?"

The FBI agent grinned, although his tone seemed slightly distracted. "Gotta love a man who appreciates the classics."

Mathis opened his mouth to respond in kind, but then changed his mind, when he noted that McClaren's eyes had gone cold as his attention had shifted to a paunchy, florid-faced businessman with a receding hairline and an ill-fitting suit who was staring at Katy as she swung back and forth to the rhythm of the music from her iPod. The man twisted his lips into an ugly sneer as the soft denim purse that was slung over Katy's shoulder swung out with the motion of her body and brushed against his sleeve. He even went so far as to lean forward, obviously preparing to offer a caustic comment, but then he happened to look up and come eye-to-eye with the FBI agent, whose expression spoke volumes, daring the man to follow through on his intentions.
Mathis did not bother to stifle a smile when the man thought twice and abruptly moved away, walking to the other side of the carousel to await the arrival of his luggage, while carefully avoiding looking toward either Katy or her glowering protector again. Mission accomplished beautifully, without a single word being spoken.

The security chief favored his FBI counterpart with a quick grin, a wordless but very heartfelt, "Well done."

McClaren's acknowledgement of the compliment was equally non-verbal, as he turned to attend to the mechanics of his mission. His job was to protect those who were dear to Brian Kinney, and that protection was not limited to defense against physical assault; it was, in fact, not limited at all.

"Are you two quite finished flirting?" snapped Cynthia, too wrapped up in the trivialities of the moment to have noticed the potential hurtful episode, and rapidly losing patience with her male companions while Katy was busy ogling a young couple who were enthusiastically exploring each other's tonsils as they waited at baggage claim. "If so, maybe you could volunteer a little assistance, before my niece learns - up close and personal - about the mechanics of procreation."

McClaren's grin grew wider as he saw a flare of something he could not quite define in the security chief's eyes, and he debated - for just a moment - the idea of throwing oil on the flames of Cynthia's annoyance. But ultimately, he didn't, figuring - correctly - that they'd all been through enough pointless drama. Cynthia Whitney didn't need further complications - to the situation or to her life.

"Hey, Little Mermaid," said Mathis, reaching out to smooth a blonde curl away from Katy's face and referencing her all-time favorite Disney movie about which she was always ready to talk, "you haven't eaten much this morning, and I'm pretty sure there's a Chick-fil-A down the concourse. How about some nuggets and waffle fries?"

The teen-ager's smile was brilliant. "And carrot and raisin salad?"

"Anything you want," he answered, tucking her hand under his arm.

She risked a quick look at her Aunt Tink. "And a peppermint chocolate chip milkshake?" she asked, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial murmur.


Cynthia, of course, in full maternal mode, heard it all and gave her fellow employee a look which guaranteed that he would be the one dealing with the sugar/endorphin high that would inevitably follow such a meal.

He nodded and smiled and prepared to lead his young charge away then, but paused when McClaren stopped him with a firm grip on his forearm. "A quick reminder," said the FBI man softly, "for your own good. I won't go into details about what Brian threatened to do to me if anything happened to either Cynthia or her . . . niece, but I'm pretty sure you can figure it out for yourself. It's a good bet that we'd both wind up a couple of ball-less wonders, if anything should happen to his young friend there."

Very deliberately, Mathis lifted his hand and patted the holster concealed under his well-cut leather jacket. "Admittedly, I haven't known him for long, but then again it doesn't take much time to figure out that he's not a man you want to cross. Especially when he pays you big bucks for following his orders, whether he's remembered to give them to you, or not."
"Exactly," came the easy reply, "so she better be just fine. And - just in case . . ." McClaren turned and made a quick hand signal to a tall figure standing near the doorway leading out into the main concourse. "That's Eugene. He's got your back, and - more importantly - he's got hers."

"Get it to go," Cynthia called after them as Mathis and Katy walked away.

McClaren watched them go, a rare gleam of uncertainty in his eyes. "How long have they known each other?" he asked.

Cynthia glanced at her watch. "Oh, coming up on about six hours," she answered, and was pleased to see a quick expression of disbelief touch his face. "Katy is something of a force of nature, you know. She either makes friends very fast . . ." At this point, she could not quite suppress a sigh. "Or she doesn't make them at all, because some people are careful to keep their distance, like they're afraid her condition might be contagious."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Whitney," he said quickly, not quite sure if she would understand his meaning but compelled to speak anyway.

"Don't be," she replied quickly, attempting to camouflage any trace of the hurt that she must regularly feel on behalf of her beautiful, innocent daughter. McClaren was, of course, much too perceptive to fall for it, but he was kind enough to let it pass without further comment. "It's their loss - not hers." Then she favored the FBI agent with a quick smile. "And this will work out just fine. While they pig out on their saturated fats-and-sugar brunch in the back seat, you and I can have a semi-discreet discussion in the front." Her smile grew to a grin as she interpreted the quick change in his expression. "And please don't bother with that innocent, butter-wouldn't-melt-in-your-mouth, wide-eyed look. Granted that I don't know you all that well - yet - but I do know Brian Kinney, well enough, at least, to be sure that there's something he's not telling me."

He deliberately looked away, apparently focused on all the bright tumble of luggage now appearing at the entrance to the carousel. "What makes you think that?" he asked finally, absolutely non-committal.

"Oh, I don't know," she retorted. "Probably the same thing that's got your instincts kinking your gut into knots." She paused for a moment, her eyes suddenly unfocused. "It's not so much what he's saying. It's what he's keeping to himself."

She waited in silence while he retrieved two smart Samsonite bags from the conveyor, wondering if he would simply accept her observation without questioning further. But when he spoke up, she realized she should have known better.

"You can speak clearer than that," he commented as they moved toward the exit. "What is it you think he's avoiding?"

She huffed a quick sigh. "I'd love to be more specific, but . . . He's . . . I don't know but . . . I think he's waiting for something. And he's hesitant, as if he's keeping his opinions to himself. And that's just not Brian. You know?"

He appeared to be thinking about what she'd said, deliberately avoiding a knee-jerk response. "For example?" he asked finally, very softly.

"Okay," she answered, as they approached the entrance of the Chik-fil-A. "You may not be aware of this, but Brian, in his own way, is one of the most loyal individuals I've ever known, even if he has a unique way of showing it. But he never forgets debts of gratitude. And one of the biggest debts he feels he owes is to Remson Pharmaceuticals. There wouldn't be a Kinnetik if Remson hadn't taken a
chance on him and his ideas. Anyway, Remson has developed a brand new drug for treating Alzheimer's - a major breakthrough in the field - and FDA approval has just come through. So we're mounting a major new campaign, a multi-million dollar effort."

"And?" The paused together as they watched Katy and Mathis waiting in line to get their take-out orders.

"When Brian did the initial campaign for Remson - the one that launched their revolutionary new AIDS treatment - he personally oversaw every step of it. From selecting the models, writing the copy. Supervising the photo shoot. Even down to choosing the printer's font and the color of the lettering."

"And?" McClaren was trying not to show his impatience, but he was beginning to wonder if her rambling had any real destination in sight.

She drew a deep breath, pausing briefly to compose her thoughts. "This new campaign could well prove to be the biggest thing we've ever done, a global effort. And Brian's been working on it for more than a year, since the first clinical testing began. This - this is beyond big; it's the campaign that could take Kinnetik to unbelievable heights of international success. He's planned it out perfectly, developed the concept, written the copy, designed the entire campaign, including creating the ambiance - the 'feel' of it, if you will. That's a Brian Kinney term, and you'll just have to take my word for it because it's not something that can be quantified or defined. But... at the end of all that planning and preparation - literally months and months of work on his part, which continued even after he was injured - I came up with a list of candidates for models to represent the 'face' of the campaign, and I called Brian for the final decision, because Gregg and I - he's our art director - are having a major disagreement about which one we should use. I sent all the mock-ups, all the samples of the photographers' work, the models' portfolios... everything to Brian, so he could compare them before making his choice. And do you know what he told me?"

"Not a clue."

"He told me to use my own judgment."

McClaren frowned. "Sounds like he just trusts you to..."

Her eye-roll stopped him cold. "Trusts me?" she laughed. "Believe me, Agent McClaren, this has nothing to do with trust. He'd trust me with his life or with Gus's or Justin's. Trusting me is not an issue; he knows that. But when it comes to his professional performance, there's no such thing as trust. It's about control, and if you look up the term 'control freak' in a dictionary, you'll find a photo of Brian Kinney beside the definition. He simply does not allow anybody to get between him and his vision of what a campaign should be - not even the artists who interpret his concepts. He controls every detail, every nuance. So the idea that he would just step aside and allow me - or anyone - to do it for him is so alien that I'm wondering if I should go looking for a pod in his basement. You know?"

"Well," he said, uncertain of whether or not he should be concerned. Or - if he was honest - a little uneasy, not to mention astonished, that there might be something going on that he had failed to notice. "He's been a little busy, you know. With all the therapy and the treatments and..."
perfect outfit, I called to ask him which designer he had in mind. Because, when it comes to fashion, there is no one who knows more than Brian Kinney. So I was online, pulling up Vera Wang and Dolce and Gabbana and Badgeley Mischka and Carolina Herrera - looking for something that would really knock his socks off - and do you know what he said? He said, 'You know what I like, Tink. Surprise me.' I was so shocked I never even noticed when he hung up on me."

"And did you? Surprise him, I mean?"

She shrugged. "I picked out what I thought would best personify the image he would want to project, and I sent it for his approval. He replied with one word. 'Okay.' 'That's it. Just 'okay.' And it was this really gorgeous red silk, fitted dress with a brocade scarf and a sculpted suede jacket - the kind of thing that he normally would have raved over. The kind of thing he should have either loved at first sight, or hated enough to gag over. And I spent hours agonizing over the selection, because I wasn't quite sure the color was right. There are literally thousands of shades of red, you know, and when you say 'red', Agent McClaren, I'm pretty sure you don't give a second thought to which of them you're referencing. But for Brian? I was ready to bet that we'd have to go through a few dozen choices before the red of the chosen design matched up to the red he had in mind."

"And?"

"Two words this time. 'That's fine.' In a quick, flat tone which suggested that he barely even looked at it. Ergo . . ."

"Something's wrong." McClaren sounded like he needed no further convincing. "But I don't have a clue what it could be. As far as I can tell, everything's going well, although sometimes he seems . . ."

He paused then and was assailed by a series of odd images - flickering recollections of Brian's face at random moments, when something . . . indefinable seemed to rise in the depths of those incredibly expressive hazel eyes - eyes which could reveal so much in one moment and conceal so much in the next.

"Seems what?" she asked, determined to pick his brain for anything that might help her settle the uneasiness in her mind - and her stomach.

"Just . . . distracted, I guess. But he does that, doesn't he? It's not unusual for him to be physically present but mentally wandering around in his own private inner landscape."

Cynthia was studying his face, looking for a clue to what else he might be thinking. And there was something else. She sensed it immediately, and didn't hesitate to press on, to demand access to his thoughts. "And what else? Come on. You don't live inside the magnetic attraction of Brian Kinney without getting to know the signs. What else have you seen?"

His sigh was heavy, and he was obviously not the least bit happy with what he felt compelled to say.

"It's like he's studying everything around him. Like he's trying to . . . to memorize it all."

Her pause was brief as she considered what he'd said. Then she nodded. She didn't understand it any more than he did, but she knew, on an instinctive level, that he was right.

When the doorbell rang, Michael told himself that it was just his imagination, despite the quick rise of shadows in his husband's eyes. It was not possible that such an innocuous sound it had taken on the ominous tones of a funeral bell. It had not, after all, proven to be a complete harbinger of doom this morning in that it had announced the arrival of Lindsey, bearing a metaphorical gift of proffered
reconciliation and cooperation. It had also provided access for Liam Quinn, carrying with him all the assurances of Brian Kinney's unflappable certainty.

On the other hand, it had also admitted his mother, who was still - at this moment - silently glowering at the world, lingering over a cup of coffee long gone cold and not the least bit happy about the ultimatum with which she'd been presented by her son's new legal eagle. And, of course, earlier - in the wee small hours - it had heralded the arrival of a small, extremely virulent force of nature - a tempest that was obviously beyond calming in her attempt to find an alternative target to substitute for the one she could not reach in her moments of extreme fury. He was pretty sure that Melanie would not have objected to that description; she probably would rather have enjoyed it, imagining herself to be irresistible - and completely justified - in her rage.

It wasn't supposed to be intriguing; he wasn't supposed to take any satisfaction from his maundering. But . . . he did. There was no denying it.

Melanie had terrified him; no point in denying that. And his mother had delivered an emotional pounding that left him bruised and struggling to breathe. And yet he could not deny that Lindsey had managed to toss him a lifeline, an anchor to which he'd been able to cling as he floundered around in the intensity of the storm within a storm. And then Liam had walked in. Irish, of course; with a name like that, how could he be otherwise? Probably Catholic born and bred; maybe even devout. But Michael knew, in all certainty, that Christ Himself had never practiced calming troubled waters with a greater degree of success or greater panache.

And then, in the lovely afterglow of the initial conversation with Liam, Emmett had dropped in, bearing croissants and beignets from the French bakery down the street and a tub of his home-made apple butter to further reinforce the growing serenity of the morning, as he looked for company and comfort - and coffee strong enough to substitute as paint remover. He had been slightly put off, of course, by Debbie's continuing glower, but had quickly set about brewing cappuccino fit for a king, successfully ignoring her ominous silence. At that point, things had been looking up.

Debbie, of course, continued to project her impression of a looming tsunami - a whole different order of magnitude from the functions of normality that swirled around her, like rushing waters finding a path of least resistance around a boulder in midstream. She appeared to be determined to go on wrangling with her old, familiar demons, dismissing any attempt to soothe her wounded ego or draw her into the desultory conversation around the table - desultory except for Lindsey and Liam, who were deeply involved in the study and discussion of a group of documents the lawyer had pulled from his briefcase.

Michael was grateful - mostly - that Melanie had been long gone by the time Liam had arrived, thus avoiding a face-to-face confrontation between the two attorneys, but somehow, he had no doubt that the woman who was the mother of his only child would soon discover that she had met her match - in determination and in professional skill - and maybe even just a little bit more.

At any rate, he really shouldn't be experiencing such an extreme degree of dread over something as simple as answering the front door.

Until he actually opened it - and realized that his first instincts had been entirely correct.

Shit!

Which, said a snide little voice in his mind, was the perfect comment to make because that was exactly what Ted looked like.

When the accountant had looked into Michael's face as the door swung open, there had been a brief
moment when hope had flared in coffee-brown eyes. But it had faded almost immediately, leaving behind a dull, lackluster emptiness.

In recent years, appropriate to his professional status as Kinnetik's CFO, Ted had developed a well-defined sense of style, bordering on sophistication. As sophisticated, at least, as it was possible to be within the physical limitations of the person he was. He would never possess the kind of traffic-stopping beauty or eye-catching presence that Brian Kinney wore like a second skin; he would never exhibit the kind of grace and inherent style that was so natural to Brian, and so pursued by people who paid big bucks to look only half as good. Nevertheless, friends and acquaintances had come to expect a certain sartorial elegance in his appearance.

There was nothing of that in the man standing now in the doorway, looking as if he might have just spent the night in a homeless shelter - or a dumpster. Unshaven, uncombed, eyes red and swollen, face gaunt and pallid, dressed in sweatpants and a grungy Led Zeppelin hoodie that had definitely seen better days, he stood slumped and trembling, making no attempt to enter. Waiting to be invited in - or not.

And - for one tiny but endless moment - neither of them was sure which it might turn out to be.

But Michael was, above all, a creature of habit and a consistently soft heart, always excepting the fact that the only person he had ever managed to turn on - completely and irrevocably - was the one man who had always owned his heart (and he was eternally careful not to examine that fundamental truth too closely). In the end, he could only step back, opening the door to admit the new arrival.

"Jesus, Teddie!" he muttered as he moved, making no attempt to resist the urge to state the obvious. "You look like shit."

Ted nodded. "Appropriately enough, don't you think?" He followed Michael toward the kitchen, never lifting his gaze from his focus on the floor directly in front of his feet.

Thus, he did not actually see the five faces which turned to regard him as he came through the door, but he felt the ponderance of their regard like the weight of a heavy blanket.

He risked a quick visual sweep - a nervous, rapid flicker of his eyes, obviously intended to identify potential threats, or seek out possible allies. Although - of course - there were none of the latter.

Except - his attention settled on Debbie, quickly identifying the anger still residing like a deep, impenetrable shadow in her eyes, and he knew a fleeting moment of hope. Perhaps all was not quite lost - yet.

He had come here hoping that he might find Melanie still hanging around, delaying her departure, and - perhaps - willing to listen to his pleas for leniency and forgiveness or to be willing to overlook his transgressions in the interest of presenting a united front against the . . . He paused and felt a sick twisting in his gut. Had he actually come to a point at which he was ready to identify Brian Kinney and his band of merry men as . . . the enemy? He took a deep breath, reluctant to admit the possibility but seeing little in the way of alternatives. In the same vein, he had harbored some small hope that Ben - eternally at odds with Brian over his treatment of Michael, or, if one were relentlessly honest, over Michael's recently reborn and apparently deathless fascination and loyalty to Brian - might have been willing to offer some small spot of understanding for the actions Ted had felt compelled to take.

But a quick look at Michael's husband had quelled that idea in a hurry. Whatever resentment Ben might feel toward Brian was insufficient to enable him to overlook what he was apparently prepared to interpret as flagrant betrayal. Some things, it seemed, were beyond the realm of emotional preference.
Ben stood within the shadows, still leaning against the kitchen counter, choosing to focus on the contents of his coffee cup, after one brief scan of the new arrival. Still, there was something in his expression - something slightly out of character, maybe even a bit judgmental. But Ted was almost sure he must be imagining it, almost certain that the ultra-liberal professor would not really be entertaining the notion that Ted's appearance - slightly downtrodden, slightly pathetic, slightly reminiscent of a phrase about tired, poor, huddled masses, yearning to breathe free - was a deliberate, none-too-subtle bid for sympathy. Surely it was only a figment of imagination, but perhaps it was best not to dwell on that bit of speculation.

But Debbie - Debbie was looking confused and uncertain and directionless. Perhaps there was still hope. Perhaps all was not yet irretrievably lost.

"Coffee, Teddie?"

The accountant managed - but only just - to avoid cringing away from the frigid, detached quality of that beloved voice. Still beloved, even though time and random chance - and his own blatant stupidity - had cost him any hope for a return to the relationship he had once shared with Emmett.

"Yes. Thanks, Em."

Emmett moved forward to set a mug - bearing a cartoon sketch of Donald Duck and nephews involved in a game of miniature golf - in front of Ted, before pouring out a stream of steaming, ink-dark liquid.

"I don't believe we've been properly introduced," said the gorgeous young creature sitting beside Lindsey, briefcase open in front of him. The eyes - chameleon eyes, lingering somewhere between aquamarine and emerald - regarded Ted coolly, not exactly hostile, but not particularly welcoming either.

"You're Liam Quinn," Ted observed. "I know who you are, and why you're here."

"Oh, good," replied the young lawyer. "No need to waste time with idle pleasantries."

Ted stirred a heaping spoonful of sugar into his coffee, trying to come up with a suitably witty response. But in the end, he could not quite quell the upsurge of uncertainty in his tone as he replied. "Wasting no time, are you? Plotting out your campaign to preserve the power of the current regime, I suppose."

He fully expected a biting retort from the young lawyer, but it was Ben who answered as he took a seat at the table. "I'm a little puzzled, Ted. All things considered, I guess most of us understand why Melanie resents Brian, but - correct me if I'm wrong - didn't he provide the means and method for you to reclaim your life?"

Ted barely managed to suppress a scoff. "Right. The gospel according to Kinney."

He looked up and just happened to gaze directly into Emmett's green eyes, and then wished he hadn't. There was no mistaking the deep hurt reflected there. "Dear God, Teddie. How could you . . . :"

"How could I what?" Ted's voice was level, flat - almost without emotion, betraying nothing of the surge of desperation rising within him. Emmett, of all people, had to see the truth, had to understand why he had been compelled to do what he'd done. "How could I see him for what he is, for someone who's used everyone around him? Someone who's taken advantage of all of us, and our willingness to forgive him, and our eagerness to please him because he's the almighty Brian Kinney? It's all just
bullshit, but none of you are going to believe that. So you tell me, Emmett; what exactly do we owe the divine Brian? What do you . . ."

"Stop!"

Ted closed his mouth so abruptly that he almost bit his tongue and turned to confront the source of that command.

Debbie Novotny was getting to her feet and leaning forward, bracing her arms against the surface of the table.

"Stop it, Ted," she said slowly. "You're holding up a mirror . . . that I don't want to have to look in. Whatever else I might have done, I hope I've never denied that I . . . that we owe him. I couldn't do that. Could I?" Then she turned to meet Michael's gaze. "Is that . . . did I sound like that?"

Michael frowned, and looked toward Ben, obviously reluctant to answer.

"Yes," said Ben. "That's exactly how you sounded. And I . . . I gotta tell you - both of you - if anyone in this room has a bigger bone to pick with Brian than I've had, from time to time, I'd be damned surprised. And I know - shit, we all know - that he's just as flawed, just as human and imperfect as anybody, and maybe more than most. But I defy any of you to claim that he's ever stabbed you in the back. No denying that he's hurt you - he's hurt all of us any number of times - but whatever he's done, he's looked us all in the eye while he did it and never once tried to hide who he is. He's never sneaked around to betray us. And I don't think the same could be said of most of us."

There was a moment of heavy silence, and no one spoke until Liam Quinn cleared his throat. "Well said, Professor Bruckner. And now - we have strategies to plan, so there's a situation here that must be addressed before we can proceed. Namely, anyone who wants to be a part of the Brian Kinney defense team must decide now, as there's no neutral territory here." He first looked at Ted; then he turned to study Debbie's face, and there wasn't a single trace of warmth in his eyes, prompting Ted to realize that this was a man he would not want to confront in a court of law - or a dark alley, for that matter, despite the fact that he was as beautiful, in his way, as a cover girl.

"Ms. Novotny?" The young lawyer's tone was completely neutral, without a nuance of hostility, but it was also entirely implacable.

She nodded, after a brief hesitation.

"Please," he added firmly, "be certain. If I can't trust you - if Brian can't trust you, you need to speak up now. Because - and I promise you this - you do not want to find yourself in a position of having him discover that you've betrayed him - not now. Because - trust me on this - he has always forgiven you, all of you, for the times you've thrown him to the wolves, but this time, it means too much. There's too much at stake, and you might just find yourself coming face to face with a Brian Kinney you've never met before - someone that you really don't ever want to meet. So . . . are you sure?"

Debbie sank back into her chair. "I never stopped to think . . . I - I love Brian. I've always loved Brian, but I just - I wanted . . ."

"You wanted something he could never give you, something he was unwilling to lie about," said Ben softly, and the gentle look in her eyes said that she was astonished that he could understand that - and forgive her for it.

"Yes," she admitted. Then she looked toward Quinn, seeking reassurance. "And I don't want to lose my granddaughter. I thought I'd never have one, and I . . ."
The lawyer stared into her eyes for a moment, before favoring her with a tiny smile. "And you always had some strange notion that Brian might have . . ."

"Yeah," she said quickly, deliberately not looking up to meet Michael's gaze. "But that doesn't matter. I just . . . I don't want Michael to lose . . ."

Liam reached out and took her hand. "That's why I'm here, Ms. Novotny. Do you really think there's anything Brian wouldn't do to protect Michael's interests - and J.R.'s? Do you really distrust him that much?"

Debbie took a deep breath and looked directly into the young man's jewel-toned eyes. "How good are you?" she demanded.

And he laughed, gently squeezing her hand. "Oh, I'm good, Honey," he answered. "You won't believe how good I am when I put my mind to it."

Then he fell silent, and turned to look at Ted. "That just leaves you, Mr. Schmidt. Are you in or . . ."

Ted offered a nervous little chuckle. "What? You're just gonna trust me? Just take my word that I'm going to be a good little soldier and follow the orders of my commander-in-chief?"

"They might," answered Liam, with a nod toward the other people around the table, "but I won't. All I know of you is what Brian has told me, and - while he might be willing to take a chance on you - I'm not so trusting. So you don't get to just nod and say 'Okay'. You have to give me your word, and understand that going back on it will result in grave consequences."

"I already did that," Ted snapped. "That's what Brian demanded in order to allow me to continue to earn my salary - my word that I would knuckle under and follow his instructions to the letter. So what else . . ."

Quinn smiled. "In that case, you were dealing with Brian. Now, you're dealing with me, and, once you get to know me, you'll find that I'm a suspicious bastard who's very slow to trust. You've already left yourself vulnerable for the ridiculously bad judgment you've exercised during this debacle, but Brian - for whatever reason - has chosen not to pursue the avenues available to him, for payback. And I haven't tried to intervene - yet. But don't assume, Mr. Schmidt, that I wouldn't do so if you push your luck. And don't assume that he won't act, if he must. Loyalty can only forgive so much."

"Loyalty?" echoed Ted, his voice very cold. "Brian? What - I'm supposed to get on my knees and beg him to forgive me? Is that what you're telling me?"

Emmett, who had, until this moment, been hovering a bit, maintaining a grim wait-and-see attitude as he pretended to be engrossed in choosing a new pastry from the tray he had prepared, chose that moment to come forward and take a seat at the table, directly across from his one-time lover, in order to confront him eye-to-eye. "No," he said, responding to Quinn's inquiry but directing his words to Ted. "That's not it, is it, Teddie? Although the money's important to you, since you never quite got
over the undeniable truth that you were once an internet porn-king and a very rich man, and you aren't any more. But that's not the real issue here. The point of it all is that you were never able to force Brian to see you as you think you deserve to be seen: as the upper echelon superior sophisticate, the financial guru with his college degree and his society connections and his conservative values, as someone entitled to the respect and deference of those of us who can be safely relegated to the status of - what was it? - pieces of trash from Hazlehurst, Miss? So it doesn't really matter what he might have done for you, or how he might have rescued you and restored the life you'd lost. The only thing that matters is that he never acknowledged how fortunate he was that you were willing to lower yourself and deign to work for him. After all, he couldn't possibly have earned his own college degree by virtue of hard work or intense talent or natural intelligence - couldn't have deserved the respect of his associates and colleagues - right? He's just Brian Kinney, all flash and no substance, getting by on the luck of the draw - his looks and the incidental truth that he's still the undisputed king of Liberty Avenue and still the best fuck around. Right, Teddie?"

The accountant leapt to his feet. "Is that what you think of me, Emmett? Do you really think I'm that shallow and . . . and . . . fucked up? After everything I did, for you and for Michael and . . . and, above all, for him?"

"Well," said Quinn, "I certainly can't speak to your patronage - if that's an appropriate term - for everyone else here, but I can tell you exactly what you almost managed to do - for him. You risked $2,000,000.00 of his money, in an ill-advised investment scheme, and, so far as I can see, your only motive was to impress him with your cleverness, and grab a bit of swag for yourself in the process. You didn't even perform due diligence on the investment - based, I suppose, on your previous association with the hedge fund honcho. But I'm told by the powers-that-be that there've been huge indications - bright red flags - of problems at Hargrave-Correll for months, at least. So any effort on your part to look beneath the surface would have avoided this entire mess. At the same time I just have to ask you, Mr. Schmidt, whether or not you've stopped to visualize what would have happened if you'd succeeded in what you were trying to do? Granted, Brian is a rich man, comparatively speaking, but do you really think he - and Kinnetik - could have survived a loss like that? If the FBI hadn't intervened, that company that you're so proud of would be teetering on the edge of bankruptcy today, courtesy of your actions. And when you compound that betrayal with the fact that your indiscretions might have jeopardized the security of Brian's son . . . how exactly have you managed to arrive at the conclusion that you are the injured party here?"

"But that's not what I meant," Ted shouted, leaning forward to infringe on Quinn's personal space. "I only meant to make him see - to make him . . ."

"Sit down, Teddie."

Once again silenced in mid-tirade, Ted floundered, uncertain of who had spoken, and then, with the dawning of realization, wishing that he could have continued in his ignorance.

Michael Novotny wasn't one to step up and take charge. It just wasn't in his character. But now . . .

"Since I was fourteen years old," Michael continued, obviously off on some tangent that appeared to have no connection to this moment, this confrontation. And yet . . .

"That's how long he's been taking care of me. That's how long Brian has fought my battles for me, shielded me from so many things, even the consequences of my own foolishness. And in all that time, I've never once realized that maybe - sometimes - he might need someone to step up and watch his back. Maybe, sometimes, all of us who've been content to sit back and take advantage of his protection need to rethink our lives and our willingness to let him risk everything while we enjoy being safe and sound and risk nothing."
He leaned forward then and regarded Ted with eyes gone dark with passion and intense, relentless anger. "No more. You did what you did because you wanted to make him feel obligated; you wanted him to owe you, so then you wouldn't have to be a part of the fan club - menials like the rest of us who owe him more than we can ever repay. But all you succeeded in doing was adding to the debt you already owe."

"Michael, I . . ."

"Shut up, Ted. It's me who has the most to lose here; it's my connection to my daughter that's at stake, because if you haven't tumbled to the fact that Melanie is going to use every weapon at her disposal, including her entire bag of dirty tricks, to try to win this little battle, then you're not near as smart as you think you are. And you know why she's going to do that? Not because she thinks J.R. will be better off without me. Not because it's the wise or the prudent thing to do. Not because it's right. No. She'll do it because she knows that hurting me hurts Brian, and she's counting on my love for J.R. to convince me to take her side and walk away from the man who's always been the best friend I will ever have. So what does that say about the kind of mother she is, Teddie? And when you take her side - for the same reasons - what does it say about you?"

"But that's . . . that's not what I meant. Michael, you know that I'd never do anything to hurt you. I can help you. That's all I want to do. You have to know . . ."

Michael sighed. "Yeah. I do know. And it used to be enough. It used to matter. But it doesn't any more. Because the only way I can earn your 'help' is to stand with you - and Mel - against Brian. And that's not going to happen. Get out, Ted."

"Michael, please . . ."

Ben stood slowly, his hands shoved deep in his pockets so that his demeanor remained completely casual, but somehow, everyone in the room was immediately reminded of just how big - and physically imposing - Ben was. "You heard him, Ted."

"But I wouldn't . . ."

Michael had tears in his eyes, but they did nothing to temper the terrible resolve in his expression. "Sorry, Teddie. The risk is too great. I just can't be sure that your desire to hurt Brian - to make him pay for not giving you what you believe he should - isn't stronger than any loyalty you might feel to me - to us."

Ted took a deep breath and looked around at the group, focusing on each face in turn, and finding nothing in any of them to offer any hope of changing what had just happened. They were not without some measure of pity and regret, but it was not enough. They were no longer willing or able to believe in him.

It was staggering to realize how quickly his world had narrowed, to the point where the circle of personal trust around him was only large enough to enclose himself and Blake, the only one left who would stand with him against everyone else. All his other so-called friends, watching him, evaluating him - they were sitting in judgment now, all believing him to be capable of blatant disloyalty and dishonor. And that, of course, was nonsense. He was the one who had been betrayed, the one discarded and left behind.

He had lost everything, everyone else . . . to Brian Kinney.

He stumbled toward the door, blinded with pain - pain threaded through and transformed by fury.
This wasn't over. Someone would pay for this.

Cynthia relaxed against the leather seat of the SUV and let her eyes drift out toward the shoreline, where the sea glittered in the morning sunlight as Bob Seger's voice issued - soft and muted - from the radio.

*And I remember what she said to me,*
*How she swore that it never would end.*
*I remember how she held me oh so tight.*
*Wish I didn't know now what I didn't know then.*

*Against the wind,*
*We were running against the wind;*
*We were young and strong, and we were running*
*Against the wind.* 

She had no idea why she was suddenly compelled to reach out and change the station, but she felt better somehow when the slightly mournful melody shifted to some mindless pap from one of the endlessly interchangeable sweet young things so prevalent on current pop charts.

"Big difference from Pittsburgh," observed Chris McClaren, as they made a quick exit from the interstate and veered onto a coastal two-lane, with dunes and small piers and stretches of beach and tidal pools on their left, leading out toward the rolling expanse of broken surf.

"Yeah," she replied, shifting slightly to follow the twisting flight of a group of terns and then moving forward to gaze out toward the East where a group of sailboats were just visible above the horizon. "I always feel ridiculously small when looking out to sea."

The FBI agent smiled, his eyes concealed behind the impenetrable darkness of his Oakleys. "I can't imagine you feeling ridiculously small, anywhere."

Cynthia almost giggled, but managed - at the very last moment - to confine her amusement to a quick grin. "Are you flirting with me, Agent McClaren?"

He was less restrained, and allowed himself a quick chuckle. "I think you know better than that."

She didn't bother with trying to conceal the quick rush of sympathy that rose in her eyes. "Lethal, isn't he?"

McClaren chose to ignore the question, and she allowed him to do so.

"But all is not well," she continued. "Have you thought of anything else? Any hints as to what's bothering him?"

He shrugged. "He watches everything like a hawk. Looks into every aspect of the investigation - monitors everything. Sometimes offers suggestions for things that should be checked out and shows a lot of surprisingly good instincts for things that need investigating. But then, that's Brian, isn't it? He's got more insight than anyone ever expects."

"And the investigation? Anything new there?"

McClaren glanced back over his shoulder, realizing that Lance Mathis was perfectly capable of carrying on two conversations at once, and was currently monitoring what he and his front seat
passenger were saying while simultaneously paying close attention to Katy's slightly rambling speech. "I'd be very surprised if you didn't know as much about that as I do."

She smiled again. "True enough, but I've been on a plane for the last three hours, so if you have anything new . . ."

He shook his head. "Initial DNA analyses came through a little while ago, providing some extremely interesting information. Confirming some of our suspicions, and raising others. Young Nicholas, as he's commonly known, was a big help in getting us the items we needed for testing. In the process, I think he's made a couple of new friends who are going to move heaven and earth to help him out of the hole he's been thrown into, and I have an idea Brian is going to be reminded - often and intensely - of a debt he might owe to this kid, because the information he's provided, along with some new data that Jared and Sharon uncovered, have pointed us in a new direction. Toward a new source, who might just prove to be the mother lode of evidence, for every aspect of the case. Sometimes - many times, actually, in situations like this - it turns out that the most important discoveries happen when we follow the money. So that's what this will probably lead to - an avenue to use in an attempt to trace who paid for what, and to whom."

"Logical," she replied. "Although . . ."

"Although what?"

"Do you ever wonder why? I mean . . . why would the fact that Brian happens to fancy pretty boys instead of pretty girls enrage someone so much that they're willing to invest big money just to . . . what?"

"To show him the error of his ways?" he replied. "To re-educate him?"

"Do you think they really believe that? Do they really think that homosexuality is just some passing fetish? Or a virus, maybe - something they can cure or suppress - or immunize against? According to the last estimates I read, we're talking about more than seven percent of the population of the country. How can they possibly dismiss numbers like that as some kind of aberration? Something that needs curing? It's like declaring that every natural redhead is a genetic freak. Actually, it's worse than that, since only two or three percent of the people in the world are redheads."

McClaren laughed - a deep, rich rumble - and Cynthia could not help but observe that he was gay; he was, down to the last molecule, a walking definition of macho, and the fleeting image produced by her imagination - him and Brian Kinney wrapped up together in an intimate embrace - was sufficiently inspiring to make her reach for the button to roll down her window and allow a bracing breath of air to cool her face.

For his part, the FBI agent was somehow not surprised that the woman who was Brian's chosen surrogate would have such facts and figures instantly available in a memory that was apparently every bit as impressive as Brian believed.

In the back seat, Lance Mathis smiled; with each passing day, he grew more and more impressed with Cynthia Whitney - her mind, her wit, her strength, her courage, and - most of all, perhaps - her determination.

"So, Katy," he said, after having listened to her recitation of the meaning and the mystery of tidal pools, "what do you want to do when we get to the cottage?"

"Walk with Brian."
He studied her face, undeterred by the slightly odd proportions and easily capable of seeing the lovely innocence beneath any perceived distortion. "And?"

"And nothing really. Just walk. Make footprints in the wet sand. You ever notice how your weight makes dry spots grow around you when you walk on a wet beach?"

"Yeah," he replied, enchanted by her shy smile. "I've noticed."

"Brian showed me that. He says it's because the world notices when I pass by, even if stupid people don't."

Mathis blinked. Brian Kinney had actually told her that? Brian Kinney, who - if he was right, and he was pretty sure he was - would have been the last person - literally the last person - most people would have expected to show any inkling of understanding or empathy to someone like Katy. "He really said that?"

She nodded, and then busied herself with changing the settings on her iPod, looking for a new song to catch her fancy. But then she added one final comment. "He's bigger on the inside, you know."

Mathis simply frowned, obviously confused, but Chris McClaren burst out laughing, eliciting another smile from Cynthia.

"Miss Katy," he called as he turned to offer her a big grin, "I have a secret stash of DVDs that you're going to love!"

"What?" demanded Mathis, sensing that he was missing out on something.

"Don't run across too many Who fans these days," replied McClaren, "and we gotta stick together, hey? So, Katy, Nine . . . or Ten?"

"Ten, of course."

The FBI agent laughed again. "Of course. And now for the big question. Rose, Martha . . . or Donna?"

The teen-ager's smile was radiant. "Oh, puh-lease," she retorted with a perfect eye-roll. "You can't be serious. Is there anybody besides Captain Jack?" **

McClaren grinned. Of course - allowing for the slightly twisted influence of one Brian Kinney, he realized that he should have known. He turned then to make sure to catch the girl's eye. "You're absolutely right, Katy. He is bigger on the inside."

"Oi! McFed," she responded, as the SUV bucked over one of the numerous potholes that made a trip down the narrow coastal lane feel a bit like a roller coaster ride. "You might want to keep your eye on the road!"

It was Cynthia's turn to laugh. "In case you'd forgotten, he never knows when to keep his mouth shut. And she never forgets anything he tells her."

Still, the FBI agent found it hard to suppress his grin. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt like laughing. Young Katy, it seemed, was good for the soul.

Meanwhile, Lance Mathis sighed, deciding to postpone satisfying his curiosity until he could get a chance to speak with Cynthia in confidence. Looking clueless was never a good idea, especially in front of a smiling, slightly smug teen-ager and a smart-ass FBI agent.
Moments later, they were pulling into a private driveway, and Cynthia was getting her first good luck at Bailey's Landing and the breathtaking vista around it. For a moment, she was speechless; it was exquisitely beautiful, and it was the perfect setting for the man who stood watching as they drove up, his features touched with a small, intimate smile that was reserved for those most precious to him.

Not many people were ever allowed to see that smile.

She was out of the SUV and in his arms in one mad rush, and she wasn't entirely sure which of them was more delighted in the moment.

Justin was nearby, along with Gus and his grandfather, and there were plenty of other people around - security guards, no doubt, and staff members, and, around the side of the cottage, there were a couple of cargo-type vans where several men were stowing equipment into storage compartments in the rear of one of the vans while gardening supplies were being unloaded from the other. They seemed intent on their tasks, and no one bothered to pay much attention to the new arrivals.

Lots of activity, lots of people, lots of vague faces, and Cynthia supposed that, later on, she would process everything and sort out who was whom and whether or not she should know them and how they related to Brian and his entourage.

But for that moment, despite the joy of seeing Justin and Gus, and the eagerness to meet the people who were now so much a part of his life, it was only Brian that drew her eyes, only Brian that filled her thoughts.

Only Brian, who would never be her beloved, but would always love her without limits and always deserve and treasure the love she gave him in return.

For a full minute, she enjoyed his embrace, enjoyed the renewed sensation of his strength and the protection that he always offered. Then he was turning away, his face - that beautiful face, almost fully restored - lighting up as Katy rushed toward him.

"K-K-K-Katy!" he cried, bracing himself as she threw her body into his arms so he could lift her off her feet and swing her around, and if he grimaced just a bit, swallowing the twinges of discomfort generated by the motion, he made sure no one noticed. Except for Justin, of course, and Chris McClaren. The two of them always noticed, but elected - on pain of dental extraction as a means of retaliation - to keep their observations to themselves.

Cynthia, as always, wasn't really fooled either, but she was an old hand at knowing when and how to choose her battles - when to speak and when to shut up. Thus she said nothing - for the moment.

It was pandemonium for a while, as Justin and Gus rushed forward to welcome the new arrivals, and introductions were performed, while Katy and Gus had a squealing, freeform chase-and-tumble match with Beau Soleil.

Cynthia watched, mouth gaping, looking back and forth between the excited little terrier and her boss's face. "A dog," she said flatly, finally. "You . . . have a dog."

Brian's nostrils flared. "In the interest of absolute accuracy, Gus has a dog. I remain - as ever - canine-free."

"No, no, no," she retorted with a gleeful grin. "It doesn't work that way. He's your kid; he's six years old; he has a dog. Ergo - you have a dog."

Brian opened his mouth to offer up a snarky response, but then thought better of it. It was only rarely that Brian Kinney found himself floundering for a smart remark, and Cynthia felt a silly urge to crow
in triumph as she noted that no one seemed to find it the least bit remarkable when the dog accompanied the group when they tramped inside.

Brian Kinney - with a dog. She wondered for a moment if such a thing might be construed as a sign of the Apocalypse.

Thereafter, the entire group got involved in unloading and distributing luggage and moving to get settled in assigned rooms with Trina enjoying the role of hostess before leading them all to a lavish lunch buffet featuring local delicacies, a recently perfected variation of chicken Kiev, a mouthwatering asparagus-prosciutto tart, and her signature bread pudding with praline sauce, while outside the last of the portable equipment used in Brian's physical therapy was loaded into the medical van, and the exchange of gardening supplies continued.

Brian sat between Cynthia and Katy in the formal dining room, but it was mostly the teen-ager who dominated the conversation, demanding his constant attention. Somehow, though, no one seemed to mind - not even Justin, who was usually slightly discomfited when he was not the subject of Brian's focus. Even Gus, ordinarily prone to go so far as to climb into his father's lap if he felt even slightly ignored, seemed to sense that Brian's relationship to this young woman was something special, something almost incandescent.

Cynthia, of course, was happy to sit quietly and soak up the ambiance of the love between her amazing daughter and this amazing man.

After a while, carrying a champagne flute filled with a perfectly prepared mimosa, she rose from her place at the table - suitably stuffed - and wandered out to the deck, to enjoy the sweeping view. She settled herself into a low deck chair just as the two cargo vans at the side of the house pulled out and headed toward the road. She wasn't paying much attention and only turned toward them because the glint of sunlight off one of the side mirrors on the dark red vehicle caught her eye.

She sighed with contentment, lulled by the whisper of the surf and the lovely warmth of the breeze that caressed her skin, and sipped at her drink, reveling in the sound of her daughter's laughter, as Brian tried to cajole the teen-ager into taking a bite of the crabmeat au gratin that was one of Trina's specialties.

Beautiful day, and the beginning, she was sure, of a beautiful visit.

Except . . .

She frowned slightly, and tried to dismiss the tiny little nagging sensation of unease that had settled somewhere in her gut. She knew she was just being silly. Especially since she had no idea what might have caused the twinge in the first place.

She was still brooding, still puzzled, a few minutes later when Brian strode out of the house and dropped into the chair beside her, frowning slightly.

"What's up, Tink? No luck luring Stud Muffin into your bed?"

"Careful, CEO" she retorted. "That remark would constitute sexual harassment anywhere in the civilized world, except, of course, that you don't really qualify as civilized, since your first thought, in any situation, is always about sex. Also, any occupant of my bed is none of your business anyway, so don't go speculating."

Brian chuckled. "I don't need to speculate. I know you too well, including exactly what kind of package you find hard to resist." When he deliberately allowed his gaze to drift toward the window
where Lance Mathis was shaking his head in an attempt to resist Trina's offer of a second serving of dessert. "A very nice . . . package, by the way."

He was surprised when she went very still, eyes wide and filled with momentary uncertainty. "Should I be worried? Am I . . . missing something here?"

He laughed. "Not a thing. He's straight as an arrow, Cyn. And you know me well enough to be sure that I'm never wrong about that kind of thing."

Her smile was still a bit tremulous, and he knew that there was something else - that he'd been right in the beginning when he'd sensed that something was bothering her. "You didn't answer my question, you know."

She looked out toward the horizon and saw something break from the water's surface far out beyond the rough tumble of breakers - graceful and very fast - and was grateful for another opportunity to divert his attention. "Is that . . ."

Brian followed her gaze. "Dolphin, I think. Beautiful, but you're still not answering me."

She sighed, realizing that she should have known better. Diverting Brian was always easier said than done. "Because I don't know what to say. I don't know anything. I've just . . ."

"Got a feeling," Brian finished her sentence. It did not sound like a question.

"Yes, and don't finish my sentences for me. It makes us sound like an old married couple."

She laughed when a look of sheer horror touched his face; then she turned again to look out toward the front gate, where the red van was just pulling into the road as the white one paused for a moment as one of the security detail stepped up to speak to the driver. Nothing remarkable in either case - nothing there to raise an alarm, to be concerned about.

Nothing . . . familiar?

Only . . . there was something, something lingering just below the level of consciousness. Something that she was sure she should know, but could not bring into focus; something . . . out of context.

"You'll tell me if you figure it out," said Brian, laying back and closing his eyes, completely secure in his certainty. It was, after all, what she always did, and he didn't require a verbal response.

She wished she felt equally secure and relaxed. She even wished she knew why she didn't. Of course, she would tell him - when it came to her. If it came to her.

Well, shit!

The Club was a different place in the early morning hours - silent, even though it wasn't empty. To achieve the level of perfect service, of providing for every possible contingent desire of the members - almost before they even realized what they might want - it was necessary for the staff to begin work very early. They worked diligently, trying to anticipate every conceivable contingency, with few breaks and precious little in the way of social interaction. And they seldom discussed anything.

The place wasn't really haunted, of course; no non-corporeal spirits actually walked the hallowed halls. It only felt that way.
Only, in the case of a few longtime employees, perhaps the haunting was real, in part, but it was something about which none of them ever spoke. Some truths, it seemed, were best left unaddressed and unacknowledged.

This was true of Rachel Charles - who channeled her natural curiosity away from seeking answers to questions she had no right to ask and into finding new sources for the very best produce and supplies to help her reach new levels of culinary excellence and to locate copies of vintage cookbooks, with the same goal in mind. She suspected many things but actually knew very few and would have been happier to know none at all.

It was also true of Zachary Jefferson, who had manned the front gate for almost forty years and still remembered a time when most of the members would arrive for their extended luncheons and their fashionably late dinners in European limos driven by chauffeurs who wore dark suits and caps and lived by the three-monkey credo: see, hear, and speak no evil, or - more to the point - discretion in all things. Zachary had seen much over the years, but made a point of remembering very little.

It was also true of Morris Steadwell, who had filled the prestigious position of major domo of The Club for more than two decades but had been forced to step aside just after the dawn of the new century, for health reasons. No longer able to juggle the wide range of duties inherent in that stressful role, he had narrowed his focus to the oversight of the extensive and impressive wine cellar, becoming a sommelier of the first order. Though approaching his seventieth birthday, he still spent a couple of months each year traveling through the Loire valley and the Bordeaux and Cognac regions of France, always looking for the ultimate - the flawless bottle of wine. And if, during the performance of his duties, in the process of selecting and presenting - with appropriate je ne sais quoi - the perfect wine to accompany one of the perfect meals that were served, with discretion, of course, in one of the private dining suites, he happened to notice that the lady sitting within the heavily curtained alcove, beside the club member, smiling and accepting her companion's loving attention and lavish gifts, was not, in fact, the member's wife . . . well, that was really none of his concern, was it? It was just business, as usual.

And so it went, including, to some degree, every senior member of the staff. All possessed tiny little pieces of various puzzles, but none saw the whole picture - or wished to.

But none among them was as knowledgeable, as well informed, as Henry Flagg, AKA Cap'n Henry. None knew more, and none said less.

Tucked away in an area that was almost - but not quite - a garret in the attic, Henry's office was narrow, cluttered, and filled floor to ceiling with shelves, bookcases, and filing cabinets, leaving only enough room for one single-pedestal metal desk, a battered old secretarial chair, and a small deacon's bench. There was one narrow dormer-style window, almost obscured by the glossy foliage of a thriving pothos vine, and a tiny Coca-Cola fridge tucked into the corner beneath the only personal items in the room, a carefully arranged assortment of photographs - six of them, all in matching frames. Family photos, of an older woman with a halo of silver hair, and a young boy, pictured at various ages - toddler, child, teen-ager, and young man. Looking remarkably different in some of the shots, but all still recognizably the same person - a developing, younger version of the slender, silver-haired man who sat behind his desk and regarded Jared Hilliard and Sharon Briggs with the same degree of warmth he might have displayed toward a pair of serpents invading his private, professional space.

He made absolutely no attempt to pretend that he didn't have more urgent things to do than make time for this little interview. And yet . . . Henry Flagg had not survived - intact - in a world where rich, white men controlled the very air he breathed without figuring out a few things and developing a remarkably refined set of instincts.
He studied the faces of the young woman - Shirley Harper, according to the thin dossier on his desk - and her companion - ostensibly her brother - and felt something shift within his consciousness. Something fundamental. Something that made him wonder if he should be uneasy.

He smiled, and Jared Hilliard saw hints of the strong, handsome man that Henry Flagg must have been at one time. Like the face in those pictures. Extremely handsome and full of life. One of the photos - the newest of them, judging by the age of the subject - was a duplicate of another photo, which resided now in the file that Sharon Briggs was holding.

The two of them had talked a lot about what they were about to do, and they had agreed that this was the best course of action. But agreement between them was still no guarantee that they were right. It was a risk that they felt justified in taking, but, if they were wrong, they might very well lose a potentially priceless source of information.

Time to find out what would happen next.

"You know, Shirley," drawled Henry Flagg, "I didn't mean to alarm you. There was no need for you to bring... protection with you."

Briggs smiled. "I just thought you might need a character reference, Cap'n. Judging by what you said."

Flagg shook his head. "No, no, nothing like that. There was just some... confusion about your social security number. Probably just something as simple as transposed digits or a government snafu, don't you think?"

Jared Hilliard sat forward and regarded the older man with a speculative gaze. "You know, Mr. Flagg," he said softly, "you don't strike me as clueless. If we really wanted to avoid raising red flags, do you think we'd screw up something as elementary as a social security number?"

The elderly man sat back in his chair and folded his hands against his chest. "So... what now? Do you think I'm going to play the role of the befuddled old fool and pretend..."

"Actually, no," said Sharon. "That's not what we expect at all. In fact, rather the opposite. If we've guessed correctly, you've already begun to put two and two together and figure out that all is not as it seems."

He smiled. "If you mean that I'd already begun to wonder about you, specifically, Miss Harper, you'd be correct. You know, you're very good at blending in, becoming part of the background - and your culinary skills are quite remarkable - but, once in a while, you let something slip through which doesn't quite fit the profile you're projecting, a bit of an accent that doesn't quite ring true for a girl from the wrong side of the tracks, or, more often, a hint of something in your carriage, in your posture - a bit of a noble stature that hints of a different life, a different perspective."

"So, have you figured it out yet?"

Flagg shrugged. "Not specifically, no. But I figure it's all part and parcel of a series of odd things that have cropped up lately."

"Such as?"

"Such as strange vehicles parked in unexpected places around the area, especially in places that have good lines-of-sight to all the building's entrances, and to areas that might allow visual surveillance of the interior of the Club. Such as some unexpected nervousness among younger members of our staff - the kind of unease that might suggest that they've been questioned and then cautioned to say..."
nothing of the encounter. Such as one particular young staff member, one who has almost unlimited access to the inner circle of our organization, who has been pale and slightly disoriented and awkward of late, so awkward that he managed to damage a trayful of expensive stemware to such a degree that it had to be discarded. Such as a strange sensation that has become increasingly difficult to ignore - a sensation of being watched."

Hilliard grinned at the young woman who was supposed to be his sister. "Told you he'd begun to figure it out."

"What I can't figure out," said Flagg, "is why you seem to think that I won't pick up the phone and call security to have you escorted from the building, and . . ."

"Oh, I think you have," Sharon said firmly. "There are really only two viable possibilities, aren't there? Either we're working some kind of monumental scam, looking to score big money - in which case, you can't afford to throw us out until you get some idea of what kind of cards we're holding that make your precious club vulnerable. Or . . ."

"Or?"

"Or the time has come for the members of your exclusive little version of the Third Reich to face the music and pay up."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Jared settled back in his seat. "Yes, you do. Or, at least, you know part of it. More than anyone else here, you hold pieces of all the puzzles that could be put together to expose a sordid history of the actions of the people who hold the power here. You know where the money goes, and where the bodies are buried."

Flagg smiled and spread his hands in a classic gesture of openness and innocence. "Our financial records are literally an open book," he replied. "If you're IRS, then I must say you've gone to an awful lot of needless trouble when all you had to do was ask."

"We're not IRS," replied Briggs. "Although I've seen your tax records. They're quite impressive, actually. And a classic exercise in misdirection. But you should know, Mr. Flagg, that misdirection in tax filing is only effective so long as no one suspects enough to scratch the surface to see what lies beneath. Have you ever scratched the surface, for example?"

"I don't know what you mean."

Hilliard sighed. "Maybe you don't. But I suspect it's more a case of not looking, because you're afraid of what you might find."

"We can follow the money, you know. Are in the process of doing so right now, and it's only a matter of time before we find what we're looking for. But you could make it easier - save us a lot of time and trouble and, perhaps, save more than that. There are innocent people who might wind up paying the price for your silence."

Flagg regarded them coldly. "Who are you?" he demanded.

Briggs smiled. "We're the people who are going to sink this disaster you call the Club, Cap'n Henry. And you have to decide whether or not you want to go down with the ship."

"Police?" he asked.
She nodded.

"But . . . I don't really know anything. All I could tell you would just be conjecture. I don't . . ."

"In that case," said Hilliard, "maybe you should just listen to what we can tell you."

He then reached into a battered old brief case and pulled out a group of photographs - stylish, professionally composed images of Brian Kinney in his finest hours. Next came another group of photographs - lurid depictions of the damage inflicted on the same young man at the hands of his attackers.

Henry Flagg went pale as Hilliard described the injuries in detail.

"But what has this to do with me?" he asked finally, voice shaking.

It was Sharon Briggs who took over the narrative at that point, summarizing the statement that Brian had given to the FBI about his confrontation with the thugs in the warehouse, and the men who had stood and watched it all play out.

At that point, Hilliard spoke up. "You're a smart man, Mr. Flagg. You surely know about DNA evidence, and what it can prove. As it happens, we've recently managed to collect sufficient evidence to tie a number of your core members to what happened in that warehouse that night. They were the movers and shakers who put it into motion - who paid for it - and you, Mr. Flagg, can provide the data we need to trace that money. The case we're building is very strong, but you can make it stronger. You can make it foolproof."

The elderly man took a deep breath, and took a moment to remove his spectacles and clean them with an immaculate handkerchief. "As it happens, I do know about DNA evidence, Mr. Harper - if that's even your name. Which means I also know that it's not nearly as infallible as you claim. Mistakes are made, and, sometimes, they're deliberate. You're talking about an assault by thugs and vandals - animals. Why would I want to help you tie this kind of horror to the members of this Club, members who know nothing of such a nasty, horrible world? And why would such men get involved in something so tawdry?"

Hilliard picked up the most graphic, most livid photograph of Brian's face after the assault, and slapped it down on the desk. "Because he's gay, Mr. Flagg. Because he has the audacity to be beautiful and desirable and charming and has absolutely no desire to fuck his way through the pussies of the world. That's why."

"Then his soul is already damned to burn in hell. He's an abomination, and . . . and . . ." He put his glasses back on his nose. "Flaunting himself in the faces of decent people is what brought this down on him."

Sharon Briggs took a deep breath, and wished that she had not understood the depth of the pain that flared in Hilliard's eyes as he'd seen and interpreted the contempt that registered in the old man's face.

"So . . . what?" she said quickly. "You're actually saying that you think he deserved this?

The old man closed his eyes. "No," he admitted. "Nobody deserves something like that. But that's the reason it happened, isn't it? Because he refused to stay in the closet, where he'd have been safe?"

The undercover agent sighed, and wished, for just a moment, that she could disappear from this room, could avoid witnessing what was yet to come. But she couldn't. And she wouldn't deprive her partner of the satisfaction - grim and bitter as it was going to be - of playing their hold card.
"You really believe that?" asked Hilliard. "You really think hiding who you are will keep you safe? That living your life in such a way to avoid offending the homophobes is what a gay man needs to do in order to survive?"

He reached over and took the file that Sharon was holding, and pulled two items from it.

"Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. All it takes for the haters to find you is one little slip-up. One little indiscretion. One little mistake in judgment. For example, let me introduce you to a subject of an investigation that was done right here in Pittsburgh a few years ago. A young man - just a few years out of college and on the fast track for success in his profession - talented, intelligent, very gifted. Very handsome fellow. His friends sometimes commented that he looked a bit like Sidney Poitier."

Henry Flagg went very still, but he said nothing.

Hilliard's eyes were hard as he continued. "He was very careful to follow the paths laid out for him - by family and society, by church and state. Worked hard, climbed up through the ranks. Got engaged when he was in his mid twenties, because that's what a successful up-and-coming professional was expected to do, right? Beautiful fiancé, rosy future - everything coming up roses. And if the young man happened to have a special secret - something that he kept hidden away, deep in a closet - well, that was nobody's business, was it? Nobody ever had to know, especially not his very Christian family. Only . . . he knew; the young man knew, and sometimes - just once in while - he found himself in such dire need - for someone to trust, someone with whom he could be himself and shed the façade - that he would let his guard drop. Just a little bit. Just for a little while. And then, once the irresistible itch was scratched, everything would go back to normal; everything would be fine again, and he could go back to playing his role. Until the next time.

"Only, just by sheer bad luck, the time came when he made one small mistake; he assumed something. He revealed himself to the wrong person."

Jared leaned forward. "Would you like to meet our case subject, Mr. Flagg? Would you like to examine his case file?"

"No, I don't think . . ."

Jared slapped two photographs down on the desk, covering the ones of Brian Kinney, before and after. There was, however, a similarity between the two new images and the previous ones. These were also before and after.

"See anyone you know, Mr. Flagg?"

"Please." The old man's voice was barely a whisper. "Please, don't."

"Did you really not know, Mr. Flagg?" Jared demanded. "Or did you just pretend not to know, because it was easier that way?"

"You're wrong." But it wasn't really a statement. It was more like a plea.

"Daniel Henry Flagg," said Hilliard, his voice cold, relentless. "Only child of Henry and Grace Flagg. Graduated cum laude from Temple University with a bachelor's degree in architecture, hired immediately by the prestigious firm of Lacey, Morrison, and Gaunt and well on his way to a partnership within a few years. Engaged to Rachel Meadows, a teacher at Eden Christian Academy. He was a member of the Trinity Methodist Church - a deacon, actually. Well respected, admired - a staunch defender of Christian values. Only . . ."
"Please . . . stop."

"Only it was all a lie, wasn't it, Mr. Flagg? Because Daniel - your only son - was a homosexual. Wasn't he? That's what he could never admit, what you could never accept. And that's what got him killed."

"No!" The elderly black man leapt to his feet. "No! He was mugged. Attacked by a gang from the ghetto. By black thugs who just wanted his wallet and his car, and . . ."

Hilliard sighed. "Right. Black thugs who just wanted his wallet. Strange, don't you think, that these 'thugs' took the time to drag him off a city street corner - which just happened to be two doors down from a gay bar - into the basement of an abandoned storefront and spend a couple of hours beating him with chains, raping him with a tire iron, and then - for good measure - carving the word 'fag' into his abdomen? Not quite like any black gang members that I've ever come across."

"Jared," said Sharon softly. "That's enough."

The old man was huddled now, his face braced against his hands, trying not to look at the two photographs Hilliard had laid out for him. His son - his beautiful, perfect son - smiling at the camera and standing in front of the new car - the dark red BMW - that he'd just purchased. Proud, successful, Armani-clad. Beautiful, as always - and Henry had always managed to stifle that tiny little voice inside him that suggested that maybe - just maybe - Daniel was a tiny bit too beautiful.

The other picture was the antithesis of the first: Daniel - mutilated, bloody, torn and broken. Lifeless - and carved up like a piece of meat.

"Please," he said finally, all bravado gone. "Please just go away."

Hilliard said nothing, the adrenalin rush of confronting the old man's willful ignorance gone before an onslaught of empathy. One could not simply dismiss such anguish, even if it might have been partially deserved. Henry Flagg was not a bad man; he was just a product of the world that made him, and nothing that Jared Hilliard could say to him would ever be as harsh or as painful as his own realization of what his bigotry had cost him.

But Sharon Briggs knew that they could not afford to back down more. Hard as it was, there was more to be revealed.

"Mr. Flagg, did you ever ask to see the full case file about Daniel's murder?"

He shook his head. "Never saw the point. It was just a gang thing. They never found who did it."

"No," she agreed. "They didn't. But they did investigate. They did talk to witnesses, and to everyone who had come in contact with Daniel during the days leading up to the attack. Including one person that he seems to have encountered at Connections - the underground bar on Chilton Street."

Henry Flagg sighed. "You've made your point, you know. You don't have to keep harping on it, and I'd really rather not discuss it."

Briggs nodded. "Yes, I can see that, but you're missing the point here. Connections is a very . . . discreet place. It serves a very select clientele, and most people don't even know that it's a gay bar. Including the young man who happened to run in there a few nights before Daniel was attacked. It was pouring that night, and he just dashed in to wait out the storm and have a drink while he waited. And when Daniel saw him there, he . . . assumed. We think it was that assumption that got him killed."
Flagg was still slumped over the desk, still struggling for breath. Then he went rigid, before rousing himself to look up and study the face of the beautiful young woman who was looking at him with rare sympathy in her eyes.

"What do you mean?" he asked, barely audible.

It was Hilliard who laid the file out before him, and pointed to a paragraph half-way down the page - the transcription of an interview with someone Daniel had encountered earlier in the week.

The words were ugly, vile, and hateful, and Flagg just skimmed over them. He really didn't want to read the comments of someone who obviously hated his son, and felt no sympathy or regret over what had happened to him.

"I don't want to read that," he snapped.

"Of course, you don't," said Hilliard, "and you don't have to. But you might want to look at the name of the witness."

The old man looked down again, and found the name. It was just a common name - a name that would have meant nothing to almost anyone else in the world.

A name - that reduced his entire life to ashes.

He drew a deep, painful breath, and looked up directly into the hard, implacable eyes of Jared Hilliard, and asked one simple question.

"What do you want to know?"

"Yes, yes..."

"Well," said Justin, as he watched Gus and Katy squeal and cavort on the carousel, each of them atop a colorful dolphin, "was it worth it?"

Brian grinned. "Yeah. But don't tell Trina. I already pay her too much money."

Cynthia and Lance Mathis were standing shoulder to shoulder nearby, talking quietly and enjoying the children's banter, when Justin stepped forward and laced his arms around Brian's neck to pull him down for a long, deep kiss, much to the delight of many in the crowd - and the outrage of many others.

"Not that I'm complaining," whispered Brian when Justin pulled back and looked up into hazel eyes, exactly as if the two of them were alone in the world, "but what was that for?"

Justin's smile was achingly tender. "For being the one and only Brian Kinney. For being unlike anyone else in the world."

It was Brian's turn to initiate the deep, thorough kiss, and Justin's turn to question, once it was done. "And that?"

Brian's grin became a snort of laughter. "For putting up with the one and only Brian Kinney."

Justin sighed and burrowed his face into the softness of Brian's shirt. "Gus is a lucky kid, you know."

"Yeah," Brian scoffed. "So lucky that he has to have the FBI standing guard to keep him safe."
But Justin was not going to let his lover get away with that kind of pseudo-guilt. "No, he doesn't. The only protection Gus needs - now or ever - is you."

"Justin . . ."

"Will you please stop this shit!" Justin's voice was tinged, just slightly now, with impatience. "None of this is your fault, Brian. I know you've spent your whole life carrying the weight of everything - all the way back to original sin - on your shoulders, but you need to let it go. You don't have the first clue, do you? You have no idea how special you are."

The laugh came again, with a bit more edge. "Oh, yeah, I know exactly how special I am, as in . . ."

"Don't - you - dare!" Justin was still mere inches away - close enough for the two of them to share breath, but there was now no mistaking the flare of anger in his voice. "Brian, have you ever watched Katy, and seen how other people react to her, and - more importantly - how she reacts to them? Have you ever really watched?"

"I've watched." There was no warmth in that answer; it was filled with the ice of resentment, of bitterness.

"And yet . . ." Justin's tone was soft again, with a note of wonder. "How is she with you? Do you know that she holds on to everything you say to her? That she keeps it close to her - like a precious keepsake. Do you have any idea how rare that is? Katy doesn't see the public persona of Brian Kinney. She doesn't see the Stud of Liberty Avenue. She sees you - the real thing, the genuine, unvarnished Brian Kinney; and she loves you with her whole heart. So that means that you've got a lot to live up to."

Brian frowned and moved to step back.

"Oh, no, you don't." Justin was having none of it. "Because I see you too. You may be really good at hiding under that suit of armor, but once a person gets inside, they never step out again. You're stuck with us, Old Man."

For a moment, Brian simply stared at him, and Justin felt a momentary rush of unease as he saw something . . . something he could not quite identify, in that steady gaze. Then Brian smiled, and whatever it had been was gone. Just a figment of his imagination.

"Who you calling old?"

They were moving away from the carousel now. The kid and the retarded girl had ridden three times before they were satisfied, and the group - flanked by their security detail - was moving to one of the refreshment booths. The boy - who the hell named a kid 'Gus' in this day and time - was demanding cotton candy and fried ice cream, while the girl seemed content to just walk along, holding on to the pervert's hand, although she did favor him with a radiant smile when he suggested she might like a snow-cone. Kind of pathetic, that. She obviously didn't know any better than to trust someone like him, but it was a damn shame that the woman in the group didn't step in to get her away from the man who, in an ideal world, would never be allowed near any child, anywhere - including his own son.

The place was packed tonight - which was both advantage and disadvantage. It made it fairly easy to get lost in the crowd, to avoid being seen. But at the same time, there would be no opportunity to throw a little fear of God into the pervert.
A shame really.

Although . . . perhaps all was not entirely lost. The mission, as planned, was still progressing as it should, and there was no point in risking final success by rushing in. But perhaps it wouldn't be a bad idea to rattle some cages.

The security detail was perpetually on high alert; they never let their guard down. But it never hurt to play on the nerves of those charged with protection.

Sometimes, a little pandemonium was good for the soul.

Now, it was just a matter of getting in position, waiting for the right moment, and a tiny little bit of luck.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

"There you go, Girlfriend," said Brian, bending forward to hand Katy her multi-colored snow cone. "Your very own rainbow."

"Daddy," said Gus, eyes wide. "Can I have one of those?"

Brian grinned at his son, who was already holding a huge puff of pink cotton candy, and was still waiting on his serving of fried ice cream. "Your mother is so going to kill me."

Gus's grin was a mirror of his father's. "Not if she doesn't know."

Ron Peterson laughed, and Brian looked up to meet the man's eyes. Since he already knew the truth about the disease that was spreading through Peterson's body, it was fairly easy for him to note the signs of its progress. Peterson had lost weight just in the short time since they'd discussed his prognosis, and there were new lines around his mouth and eyes - formed, no doubt, as a result of the pain he was enduring. Nevertheless, there was genuine joy in his eyes as he returned Brian's gaze, and Brian was gratified that the older man could take such happiness from Gus's innocent delight.

The lady in the refreshment stand - a buxom blonde wearing way too much mascara, but sporting a beautiful, generous smile - seemed to be having trouble deciding who she most wanted to ogle, her eyes drifting first (naturally) to take in Brian's face and body; then on the Justin, to Mathis, and to McClaren. But then she settled on gazing at Katy, and something in her face softened, suggesting to Brian that she knew something of the tragedy of Down's Syndrome.

"If you're smart, Love," she said, addressing Brian, but still looking at Katy, "you'll move down the pier and take a seat in the grandstand area. They're about to set off a fireworks display, and that'll be the best spot to watch it."

Brian glanced at her nametag, and leaned forward to pass her a hefty tip. "Thanks, Janie."

She studied his face for a moment, before shifting her gaze to meet Justin's eyes. Then she smiled. "It never fails," she said with a gentle smile. "The beautiful ones are either taken or gay - or both."

Justin's smile was brilliant.

The group set off then down the pier, with the kids leading the way, Brian, Justin, and Cynthia behind them, while Mathis and McClaren brought up the rear. Other security and FBI people were scattered through the crowd around them, constantly on alert.

"By the way," said Justin, addressing both Cynthia and Brian, "I need a favor. Although I'm pretty
sure, it'll turn out that I'll be doing you a favor, in the end."

Cynthia grinned at Brian. "Why do I get the feeling we're about to be conned?"

"Because we are," Brian retorted. "So - spit it out, Sunshine. What do you want?"

"I've got this friend - back in Pittsburgh - who needs a job."

Brian frowned. "Artist?"

"No."

"Salesman?"

"No."

"Clerical?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"Jack of all trades," said Justin with a grin. "But mostly . . . food."

"I'm not sure I . . ."

"You just wait," Justin went on, very pleased with himself and wondering why he hadn't thought of this before. "If there was ever a match truly made in heaven, it was you, Brian, and Creole coffee."

Brian merely looked puzzled, as Cynthia laughed. She was pretty sure she had figured out where Justin was leading.

They arrived at the small grandstand, and took seats. It was not really planned that way, but somehow, Brian wound up at the center of a tiny circle, with Justin and Katy flanking him, and Gus sprawled across his lap. They chatted for a few minutes, as Justin sang the praises of the new friend he'd made in Pittsburgh as he'd waited for Brian to recover; then a loudspeaker sputtered and whined as a disembodied voice welcomed the crowd to the first fireworks celebration of the season.

It was not particularly impressive, but it was pretty enough, and it was certainly loud.

Gus and Katy oohed and aahed as bright crimson and gold fountains erupted overhead, following heavy explosions that sounded like artillery volleys.

At his spot near the front of the bleachers, Brian had just turned to lean over and plant a quick kiss on Justin's cheek, when there was another series of booms. Thus he saw what no one else noticed at first. A banner, hanging along the low fence to his left just exploded, blasted into tatters, as something small and lethal whizzed by the small group.

Then pandemonium ensued. Brian shouted - he would never remember exactly what he said but would always remember what he did. It felt like slow motion; he was sure, even as he moved, that he would be too late - that someone else, someone more precious to him than his own life, would pay the price for his foolishness. He grabbed Justin, Gus, and Katy and threw them down across the bleachers and covered them with his own body, while the crowd around them, just now realizing that something was wrong, that something was happening that shouldn't have happened, erupted in a panic and began to flee.
Seconds later, Brian felt a body drape itself across him, arms wrapping around him and pulling him close, as instructions were shouted and footsteps raced away, back along the dock.

"I got you, Brian," said Chris McClaren, spreading himself out to shelter the man who was his responsibility, even as Brian continued to shelter and protect those beneath him.

"I got you."

But Brian could take no comfort from that assurance - not until he could pull back and get a good look at the three squirming beneath him.

Not until he could know that they were safe. He could hear Justin screaming his name, could hear Gus and Katy crying out, but he could not move.

He could only stay where he was, forming a barrier between them and whoever it was who wanted to destroy them.

Nothing else mattered.

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* Against the Wind - Bob Seger
** References to recent Doctor Who characters and plot devices, created by the BBC
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b
Chapter 44

"Chapter 44"

Fairy tales do not tell children that dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children that dragons can be killed.

G. K. Chesterton

Whatever you do, Brian, you must keep this from Lindsey.

Brian, much more shaken than he wanted to admit, could only summon up a small smirk. "You do know that she'll have my balls for breakfast if she ever finds out."

Ron Peterson tried on a smile, which was tentative but determined. "Well, I'm not planning to tell her. Are you?"

Huge eyes - uncharacteristically solemn - dominated a small face as Gus shifted slightly from his place plastered against his father's side to look up and try to manufacture a smile to cover a tremor of uncertainty - a residual remnant of fear - and Brian felt something squeeze tight in his chest, so that he could not muster up his customary bravado in order to reassure the older man, or to promise that there would be no mention of the incident to Lindsey. Though he wanted to achieve his usual glib confidence, he could not quite achieve his goal as he was a bit preoccupied at the moment, fielding multiple assaults from different angles.

It was a bit surprising, he thought, that Peterson was managing to sound so calm, all things considered, although the older man was still deathly pale and trembling, but then, thought Brian, Peterson could afford to be calm. He didn't have an armload of infuriated blond-cum-recent-twinkdom-graduate, who was currently struggling to free himself from the constraint of that rock-hard arm in order to launch a punch hard enough to knock his lover flat on his shapely ass. There was absolutely no doubt that Justin was angry enough to do so, and was only refraining because he retained just enough presence of mind to remember that said lover had recently been severely injured and might not be sufficiently recovered to take the licks he so richly deserved.

That, however, was doing nothing to curb the vicious, sharp tongue that Justin was wielding so skillfully and so relentlessly.

"What the fuck did you think you were doing?" he was demanding, his voice a curious blend of icy condemnation and hot, blind rage. "Some maniac cuts loose with a fucking gun and your first instinct is to throw me down and cover me with your own body? How fucking stupid are you?"

But Brian remained unperturbed. "My first instinct," he replied, with no hint of remorse or regret, "was to make myself as small a target as possible, and - incidentally - to protect my son and my partner and an innocent child. And if you're waiting for me to apologize for that, then you're gonna have a hell of a wait."

Later - when the rage and fear subsided to a reasonable level - Justin would recall that Brian had used the term "my partner" to refer to him, and he would smile to realize that even Brian could let things slip in the heat of the moment and say more than he might otherwise admit. It would be the only pleasant detail of a terrifying memory.
Later - but for now he remained thoroughly pissed off.

Around them, there was a strange layer of silence, almost an invisible sound barrier, although voices rang out beyond it, as Chris McClaren shouted directions to his staffers, and Lance Mathis placed himself in a protective stance, with Cynthia and Katy tucked carefully between his body and the small crowd surrounding Brian.

"I ought to punch your face in," Justin continued, almost snarling, rising up on his toes and leaning in so that Brian had no choice but to meet his eyes directly and note the brilliance of the anger blazing in blue depths.

"I ought to . . ."

"Please, Justin. Don't."

It was a soft voice, barely audible above the confused din of a crowd still mostly caught up in the grip of blind panic, but it was more effective than a sonic boom. Justin went silent as Katy stared up at him, huge gray eyes awash with tears. "Please don't yell at him. He was only . . . he was just . . . He saves us, Justin. He always saves us."

Brian reached out and wrapped a gentle arm around the teen-ager's waist and pulled her close so he could murmur into her ear. "You all right, K-K-K-Katy?"

"You always save us." Her answer was no more than a whisper, but sure and absolute, nonetheless.

He stroked gentle fingers across a small bruise on her forehead, a bruise he himself had inflicted when he'd shoved her down beside Gus, in an effort to protect them both. The delicacy of the touch was an apology, but Katy knew what he'd done and why he'd done it, and let him know, in no uncertain terms, that no apology was needed. Body language, after all, spoke volumes, much louder than words, and the love in her eyes was steady, unyielding - and almost overwhelming.

Brian had to swallow hard around the lump in his throat and look away.

Justin, however, was still muttering, but only under his breath, so Brian leaned forward and touched his lips to his young lover's forehead. "Didn't you hear Katy? I always save you."

"Yeah . . . motherfucker!"

Cynthia, who had already - in the instinctive mindset of protective mothers the world over - gone over Katy's torso and limbs to make sure no damage had been done, was now regarding her boss with a mixture of gratitude and concern. "You sure you're okay?" she asked finally. "You're not just running on adrenaline, are you . . . and bleeding out somewhere under your clothes."

"I'm fine, and since when are you curious about what's under my clothes."

She confined her response to an exaggerated eye-roll.

Chris McClaren - who had done his own inspection of Brian's body followed by swift but thorough examinations of both Gus and Justin (much to the latter's displeasure) - had finished giving instructions to the security team surrounding the target group, and turned back to regard Brian with a steely gaze.

"See?" he snapped, his tone and his demeanor giving no quarter. "Next time, maybe you'll trust my judgment."
Brian turned a bit, and shifted just enough to be able to lift his son into his arms where Gus quickly buried his face against his father's shoulder. "So what are we supposed to do? Live the rest of our lives behind concrete walls? Hide away from life because there might be somebody out there who doesn't like who we are or what we do? Is that what I'm supposed to teach my kid?"

"You could teach him to be careful," snapped the FBI agent. "To listen to people who know how to protect you, and when it's foolish to take chances."

Brian tilted his head and stared at McClaren with a crooked smirk. "You mean teach him to hide. So - basically - the answer to my question is 'Yes'. If we want to be safe, we give up being free."

"No, Brian. You know better. It's just . . . these are not ordinary times. It's different right now."

"Yeah. Like it won't be different tomorrow. Like the uptight, upright, holier-than-thou masses are just going to wake up one day and have this great epiphany - see the error of their ways and realize that fags and dykes don't really deserve their hatred and condemnation - that we're all just children of the same God, Who loves us all equally. Right?"

McClaren knelt by the fence where the virtually shredded advertising banner was clinging by a few threads to the rough framework, and opened a pocket knife, with which he dug into the soft, weathered wood. "Do you really think this is the appropriate time or place for a debate about the philosophy of homophobes?"

Brian shrugged. "Do you really think the person who shot at us is still hanging around here waiting to be pinched by the Feds? These aren't the kind of people who stand up to be counted. He's long gone."

McClaren didn't argue. Instead, he focused on the task at hand, donning exam gloves to extract the bullet from the layered surface of the fence frame.

"You always carry a pocket knife?" asked Justin, momentarily distracted from his tirade.

The FBI agent bit back a wise-ass retort. "It's good to be prepared for anything in this job."

To everyone's surprise, Justin snickered, before leaning forward to whisper in Brian's ear, deliberately speaking just loud enough to be overhead by the target of the jibe. "You f*cked a Boy Scout. Aren't you proud?"

"One bullet," McClaren announced as he got to his feet, ignoring Justin's slightly juvenile taunting and studying the metallic object in his hand. "A twenty-two. Not exactly the weapon of choice for professional hit men."

"Meaning?" That was Brian, of course, as focused as a guided missile on the subject at hand, no matter what the circumstances.

"Meaning that this was probably just a pot shot. Somebody messing with your head."

"Ah, I get it. Out to teach the big queer a lesson, hmm?"

McClaren frowned and turned speculative eyes toward the face of the man who had inspired such hatred in his would-be assassin. "You always knew this was personal, Brian. It shouldn't surprise you that it still is."

"It doesn't." Brian's tone was sharp and steely.
The FBI agent looked deep into hazel eyes, searching for a clue to whatever it was that was really bothering Brian. "But?" he asked finally.

Brian allowed himself just a flicker of a sigh. "But it does surprise me that it seems to have followed us here. Much as they might enjoy watching me get my just desserts, these aren't the kind of people who get caught up in the passion of the moment and risk everything for a bit of personal satisfaction. Coming after me like this - it's a risk, and they don't do things without a reason."

McClaren nodded. "Agreed. So maybe they know you better than you think. Maybe they've figured out some of the fundamental truths about the legendary Brian Kinney."

"Yeah? Such as?"

But the agent had said all he meant to say, for the time being. So he just smiled and leaned forward to whisper a non-committal response. "Why don't you tell me?"

Brian glared. He did not like ambiguous comments; he especially did not like them when they hinted at something he was supposed to know, but didn't choose to acknowledge. "Now what the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

McClaren's smile became a smirk, accompanied by a quick wink, which only served to annoy Brian further.

And if Brian was annoyed, Justin was teetering on the verge of a complete meltdown.

Thus, he was quick to decide that he didn't much care for the general drift of the conversation, or for the vague insinuation that seemed to suggest that the FBI agent might know something about Brian - something that no one else had figured out - something that he didn't know.

Yes, it was definitely time to change the subject.

"Can we just go home now?" he asked, not caring that his plaint sounded a lot like a whine.

Brian turned his face to nestle against the soft skin beneath Gus's ear. "How about it, Bud? Had enough fucking dolphins for one day?"

"Yup." Gus's reply was succinct, with no nuance of uncertainty, but he was very careful to maintain his grip on his father's neck, to make sure that nothing and no one was going to pull him away from his primary source of strength and comfort.

It was very significant that not even Ron Peterson - ultimate wasp though he was - dared to venture an admonition about Brian's language.

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It was spring - almost midnight - and the view from the seventh-floor terrace of the upscale apartment building was spectacular. Indeed, the view was the most impressive thing about the flat, and the primary reason that Matthew Keller had purchased it in the first place. Mt. Washington was - according to the real estate people and the city's movers and shakers - the premier place to live in the entire Pittsburgh urban area, but the physician had never had much interest in living up to other people's expectations or being a resident of a fashionable ultra-chic community. He had, in fact, been singularly unimpressed with the apartment building and completely prepared to send his ultra-smart, stick-thin, sleek blonde realtor back to the drawing board, to continue her search for the perfect place for him - until he'd walked into the empty apartment just as the sun had disappeared beyond the western horizon, and found a fairy tale vista stretched out before him.
The view had done what all the exuberant sales pitches and glowing words and lectures about appreciating property values had failed to do. He was sold, without a single thought about the practical aspects or the potential comforts - all because of the singular beauty of the landscape that spread out into the night, like polished gemstones on a velvet blanket or - more accurately perhaps - like a reflection of the panorama of the heavens which could not, of course, actually be seen through the thin veil of industrial gasses that inevitably hovered above the city. Thus, he'd thought in some deeply buried crevice in his mind, he could gaze into a glittering sweep of starscape without ever actually having to raise his eyes.

He had moved in three days later, and never bothered to do much in the way of personal decorating, leaving it all to a professional designer who came with a high price tag, spotless credentials, and an exquisite sense of taste, but surprisingly little experience with incorporating personal touches into her projects; thus, "spare" would have been the term that most people would use to describe the apartment's style, although the stark quality was relieved somewhat by a couple of abstract works by Edward Avedisian, classified as color-field stripes by art experts - bold, striking exercises in form and brilliance that were somehow perfectly appropriate for an interior most notable for the contrast of black and white, for clean lines and an emphasis on creature comforts without any conscious notion about fashion - lots of leather, chrome, polished wood, and glass, and state-of-the-art appliances and technology. The paintings seemed appropriate - although it would have been difficult to define why - for the individual who somehow imprinted the flat with a singular personality without ever making much of an effort to do so.

The doctor was sitting hunched at the end of his exquisitely soft leather sofa, his phone cradled against his shoulder, as he rubbed his forehead with thumb and forefinger, his eyes unfocused as he stared unseeing into the middle of the modular coffee table, which was still littered with crumpled napkins bearing the logo of Fox's Pizza Den, along with a few crusts that were all that remained of a bacon/double cheeseburger deluxe and a half-empty Styrofoam container of chicken fry salad. Four empty bottles bearing Samuel Adams Boston Lager labels were scattered amid the clutter.

He listened carefully to the voice on the phone, his posture rigid and his mouth clinched tight, and took a deep breath before offering a response to what he'd heard. "Brian," he said finally, his voice almost strident and veined with impatience, "why haven't you talked to Turnage about this?"

Another pause, and then he surged to his feet, the sharp awkwardness of the motion making it obvious that he had not liked what he'd heard. "And what the fuck do you think I can do about it - from here? Brian, you have to talk to him, and I don't fucking mean tomorrow. I mean right n . . ."

He rolled his eyes and stared out into the night, actually biting his lip to suppress an urge to shout into the phone. "Listen to me, Shithead," he snapped finally, patience completely exhausted after listening to Brian's rant. "I don't give a rat's ass what you decide to tell your boy-toy about it, or how much you try to convince yourself that it's nothing to worry about. You can't know that, and neither can I. Not until you actually open up and tell Turnage the truth. Granted, he's the biggest asshole I've ever known - present company excluded - but that doesn't change the fact that he's as good at his job as I am - almost. So don't waste your time, or mine, explaining why you don't want to call him; just make the damn call. And then call me back, or - better yet - tell him to call me. And if you don't, then I'm going to . . ."

He fell silent as he registered the dial tone buzzing in his ear. "God damn it!" he snarled and hurled the phone across the room, taking some small, venal satisfaction in the fact that he managed to break a tall, claret-colored vase with the projectile. He'd never liked that vase anyway.

Jared Hilliard turned away from his contemplation of the view to raise an eyebrow toward his host.
"That motherfucker hung up on me." The explanation was not really necessary, as Hilliard had already figured out what had made the physician so angry - and so eloquent.

"You planning to tell me what that was all about," he asked, after taking a deep draught of his beer, "or are you going to hide behind doctor/patient privilege?"

Keller sighed. "You know I can't talk about it," he replied, his voice reflecting deep exhaustion as he moved forward to stand at the edge of the balcony and breathe in the lovely ambiance of the view. "Even if the thing I most want to do right now is go on network TV and tell the world what a complete ass he is."

Hilliard smiled. "Yeah. Too bad you love him so much."

The doctor went very still, and - for a single moment - Hilliard thought he might actually try to deny the truth of the observation. But he didn't. "Yeah. Too bad. Only . . ."

"Only what? You're not going to try to convince me that you don't, are you? Because I'm going to be insulted if you think I'm stupid enough to fall for that."

"No," Keller admitted. "I'm not going to do that. Only - it's not quite what you think it is. I do love him - just like he loves me. Almost as much as we hate each other - sometimes. I think we always will. But it's not something that's a part of our lives, because we both know we're no good for each other. We figured that out a long time ago. Trying to build some kind of life together would be a disaster. Sometimes, loving somebody just isn't enough."

Hilliard grinned. "I think you're too much alike - each of you with a t-rex sized ego, not to mention a libido to match."

Keller looked as if he wanted to object - maybe even argue - but, in the end, he didn't even try. "Is that a complaint?" he asked with a laugh, pressing a quick kiss to his companion's temple before turning away to fetch more beer.

Jared Hilliard elected to confine his response to a quiet chuckle as he turned back to his appreciation of the landscape with its multi-colored gemstone facets and tried not to notice how much the environment felt like a place he was meant to be, deliberately resisting any nuance of the word 'home'. He didn't believe in 'meant to be', and he was willing to bet good money that Keller didn't either.

But there was no denying that there was some kind of tactical sensation in the atmosphere of the place that seemed to stroke at his skin with silken fingers, eliciting a deep sense of comfort. A small voice - buried deep in his consciousness - was urging him to take to his heels and run as far and as fast as he could, but it was having trouble being heard above the purr of contentment rumbling in his mind.

Off to the East, he spotted a jumbo jet banking north to make its final approach to the airport and watched as it carved its path across the face of a bank of wispy clouds, illuminated by a wash of moonlight. He was suddenly reminded of a scrawny kid he'd known in high school, an awkward, brooding misfit with bad skin and thick, spiky hair, who kept to himself and never said much and spent most of his time sitting alone scribbling in a tattered notebook or fooling around with a battered old acoustic guitar; a kid who'd once admitted - while under the influence of a shared joint - that he wanted to grow up to be Alan Ginsberg. Instead, he had never had much of a chance to grow up at all, having died in Afghanistan, still young and callow with dreams unrealized. But during all that scribbling, he had produced a few scraps of verse, and Jared Hilliard had wondered, once or twice, whether or not that shy introvert might, with world enough and time, mature to become a new
version of Bob Dylan. And now - strangely - he was surprised to recall a few stray lines, something about man's impudence in daring to allow his cold, technical fingerprints to trespass upon the splendor of the mighty works of God.

Strange, he thought, that the young man himself was long gone, having died far too young to leave anything of himself behind. Yet, somehow, his words lingered here, on this terrace where Hilliard stood - he who had been nothing more than a passing acquaintance - gazing out into the night and remembering what the world had forgotten.

Can we ever know, he wondered, how the simplest things we do or say might leave an indelible mark on someone else's life - for better or for worse?

Keller was back suddenly, and it was as if he'd been transformed during his brief absence, into a man on a mission, and there was absolutely nothing altruistic in his demeanor. He had apparently changed his mind about the beer, deciding that he was hungry for something much more primal, as he grasped Hilliard and jerked him into his arms and proceeded to try to devour him.

Hilliard did not object, pausing only long enough to wonder how he'd been lucky enough to be in this place, at this time, with this man. Then he pulled back, to stare into those exquisite green eyes, and demand a clarification. "Is this . . . are you using this as a way to blow off some steam . . . and compensate for the man you really want?"

Keller's shout of laughter left little room for doubt. "This is not how I express anger, Bud. And don't expect me to believe that you sell yourself short. You know what a temptation you are."

It was Hilliard's turn to laugh. "Yeah, I do, but it's tough to discount his reputation. According to common gossip, once you've had Kinney, he pretty much ruins you for everyone else."

The doctor sighed, and wondered, for a moment, if he could get away with just changing the subject without having to address the issue directly. But he quickly realized that it would not be fair to do so, although a bit of diversion couldn't really hurt. "You don't really believe that bullshit." He leaned in to nuzzle into the softness beneath his companion's ear as he adjusted his stance to bring their bodies in perfect alignment, matching bulge for bulge, and wondered if Hilliard would just let it go and not demand an explicit answer to the question he had not - quite - asked. "It must be obvious," he whispered, "that I'm only thinking about one thing - and one man - right now, and it sure as hell isn't Brian Kinney."

For a single moment, Hilliard wanted to balk - to insist on a more in-depth discussion - but then he found that he was incapable of producing a coherent response, even though the stubborn little voice in the back of his mind recognized that Keller's response had not really been a response at all. Nevertheless, instead of voicing further objections, he chose to turn his head to reclaim the lips that were buried in the soft hollow of his throat. Since the time of his first encounter with the doctor, he had tried to convince himself that Keller's taste and scent were not really all that singular - that it was just a facet of his own fascination. But, when they were actually mouth to mouth - skin to skin - there was really no way of denying it; the man was virtually irresistible, and could easily become an addiction.

It was at that moment, just as the kisses were growing deeper, hungrier, more desperate, and sexual arousal was fast approaching a point of no return, that his cell phone rang.

"Fuck!" he muttered.

"Amen!" Keller tried to laugh, but couldn't quite bring it off.
Hilliard glanced at the name on the screen and sighed. "I better take this," he explained. "It's Briggs. Might be important."

The physician nodded, took one more quick, hard kiss, and moved off into the apartment, apparently to fetch more beer, and regain a bit of self control, while Hilliard answered the call.

He was still talking - although mostly in mono-syllables - when Keller returned, beer in hand, shirtless and barefoot, to sprawl across a thickly cushioned chaise and regard his companion with a shamelessly lustful gaze.

Fifteen minutes later, the phone call was still going on, and Hilliard could not quite suppress a sigh when he turned back toward the view, his forehead creased as he pondered the information he was hearing from his fellow undercover operative. Briggs had a lot to say, as she'd just completed her review of the preliminary findings of the confidential financial records of The Club, the ultra-secret ledgers provided by Henry Flagg. The elderly man had not been happy with his visitors - undoubtedly classifying them as sleazy conspirators and infiltrators - following the conference in his office; his old-school attitude had assured that he would never be comfortable with betraying his employers of many years, and no amount of rationalizing was going to change that. Even in the face of strong evidence that they had, in fact, betrayed him, he simply could not reconcile it in his mind so that he could feel justified in what he was compelled to do. He had, nevertheless, finally agreed - with notable reluctance - to cooperate with the investigation and provide access to the secret set of books, which might eventually offer proof of many things that he had long suspected or sensed, but never actually known, or wanted to know.

And it had all happened as the result of the mention of one name, buried deep in the cold case file of the police report concerning the death of his son.

A relatively simple name - Bradford J. Hobbs - which was, as it turned out, a name that most members of The Club would not even recognize, unlike, for example, Christopher Hobbs or Randolph Hobbs, Jr., or even - on a much smaller scale - Justin Taylor, all of whom were easily identifiable as the next generation of Club patrons, direct descendants of the Powers-That-Be. This particular young man had been, at most, a minor satellite of The Club's core of strength. Even the name had been an affectation, adopted in a vain hope of reinforcing a tenuous connection to a member of The Club's inner circle - a man who had never seen fit to respond in kind. The relationship - legitimate enough in a strictly official way - had never been formally acknowledged by the member. It had, nevertheless, been very genuine to the young man - real enough and vital enough to convince him to adopt the political and social bias of The Club's ultra-conservative philosophy and be a part of the ad hoc trial and verdict - in absentia, of course - of Henry Flagg's only son, a trial in which the defendant never stood a chance, as deviant sexuality, AKA Perversion - capitalization intended - was considered to be the cardinal sin, the ultimate capital offense in the court of this particular judge and jury. It made no difference that homosexuality was always treated as a non-issue, never publicly addressed. But the membership knew the unspoken truth of it and occasionally experienced tiny lapses in their control characterized by quick smug smiles, when events occurred that enabled them to flex the metaphorical muscles of their beliefs and congratulate themselves on small but significant victories. And even - once in a great while - victories not quite so small although never big enough to suit them.

Henry Flagg had never chosen to examine The Club's specific philosophy too closely - never wanted to see it for what it was - and was only now being forced to confront an ugly truth. As a black man who had lived through a large chunk of the twentieth century, who remembered the headlines and the ugly photographs of frightened children in Little Rock, surrounded by savage mobs, and the outrageous histrionics of white supremacists in Alabama and the vicious uproar surrounding Rosa Parks' incredible act of courage - he knew about bigotry, intimately; had been a victim of prejudice
and discrimination many times in his life. But he had never once allowed himself to consider the fundamental truths about bigotry - that it was inherently wrong, in whatever guise it might take: racial, cultural, religious, gender-based, sexual. He had been raised in a fundamentalist Christian home and taught, by religious parents - pillars of their church - that homophobia was an exception to the rule, was in no way as vile or cruel or indefensible as other varieties of intolerance. He had never seen it because he could not bear to see, could not bear to recognize an elemental force of the nature of the society in which he lived and the people to whom he had dedicated the labor of his life. Until Jared Hilliard and Sharon Briggs had forced him to see it and given him no choice but to realize what it meant.

It had been Briggs who had stumbled across the name in the cold-case file, and even then, she had not immediately realized its significance; it was just another name in an increasingly large and complex puzzle. Then she'd had a minor epiphany, when the investigative team who'd gone through all the old information had discovered that the name - Bradford J. Hobbs - was apparently an alias; that there was, in fact, no one by that name living in the Pittsburgh urban area. An expanded search had confirmed that the person named in the file was not a resident of the state of Pennsylvania either, and it was at that point that she had connected the dots and remembered the name that had figured in Brian's recovered memories. Then she'd realized that the discovery of the name was simply a fortuitous circumstance resulting from a suggestion by Jared Hilliard to delve into the history of key employees of The Club.

Her new partner, she conceded, had immaculate instincts.

Henry Flagg had simply stared at the two of them when they'd forced him to acknowledge the meaning of the information in the cold case file. Only extremely perceptive individuals could have sensed that, as he was forced to accept the truths they were showing him, he was simultaneously watching as his world crumbled around him. Luckily, both of the undercover agents were empathic enough to recognize the trauma and the tragedy of the moment, but it was Hilliard who was able to summon up the will to cut through the anguish and remnants of denial to address the bottom line.

"You're not really going to claim that you never noticed the kind of people you've spent your life working for - are you?" he'd asked.

Flagg had simply stared at his hands, clasped tight on his desk. "I was . . . it was never directed . . . at me."

But Hilliard had not been in the mood to allow that kind of deliberate evasion. "Yeah. I'm sure that's what all the bystanders in Germany said, while their neighbors were carted off to Auschwitz."

Flagg had flinched away from the harshness of the observation, a darkness swelling in his eyes - a glimpse of something . . . dying.

He had been compliant from that moment forward, though mostly silent, even agreeing to continue to play his role at The Club until the investigation could be completed, though Hilliard had his doubts; he wasn't sure that he himself could have pulled off that kind of subterfuge under these circumstances, even though he'd had intense training in undercover operations. But Flagg had discovered one thing that might see him through; he had discovered a powerful motive - a raison d'etre - to enable him to function as he must.

Guilt, thought Hilliard, was an incredibly powerful motivator; he hoped it would be enough. And he hoped - for a reason he could not quite fathom - that the old man might someday find it in his heart to forgive himself. He told himself that it shouldn't matter - that he shouldn't care.

But he did.
Briggs finally finished her summation of all she'd learned and much that she'd pieced together, fully expecting her partner to offer up some speculation of his own. But he didn't, and she began to wonder why.

"Hey, Bud," she said softly, sensing that his continuing silence might be cause for concern, "everything okay with you?"

He didn't even try to provide an answer, but he was touched that she was perceptive enough to suspect that something might be wrong. It was strange, he thought, that the two of them had managed to get quite close, in a remarkably short period of time - especially given the extreme diversity of their backgrounds. "Anything else?" he prompted, ignoring the question.

"Not much," she replied, deciding to sidestep the question he had not answered. "We do have one new item to investigate, something that came up in a routine check of Buddy Charles's family that might involve somebody living in the vicinity of the safe house. Probably nothing, but better to be safe now than sorry later, so McClaren's DC team is checking it out. I know Brian Kinney well enough to be sure that I don't want to have to face him if something goes wrong because we failed to touch every base."

"Makes sense," he agreed. "I may not know him as well as you do, but it didn't take long to figure out that I'd rather not be on his shit list. So what else?"

She sighed. "That's about it, except that I think it's safe to say we've barely scratched the surface. This . . . it's going to get ugly - really ugly - before it's done. So get some rest." Then she chuckled softly. "Or some ass. Whichever makes it all better."

"You sure got a dirty mouth for such an uptown girl," he retorted.

"Yeah," she replied wearily. "That's me all right. And tonight, I think I'm actually okay with that. I think I'll go home - to my parents' place - and let my daddy tell me that I should stop wasting my time in this dirty business and get back to jet-setting around the Riviera and doing volunteer work to raise money for children in Bangladesh, and taking my shar pei puppy to be groomed."

Her society background had quickly become a source of comic relief in helping them cope with the ugly things they were forced to confront in the course of their daily lives.

"Sounds like fun," he replied, "but you know you'd be bored stiff in a month."

"Maybe," she conceded, "but sometimes . . . Don't you get tired of it? Don't you just crave a good night's sleep, when you can forget everything you've seen and learned while you tried to do your job?"

He didn't disagree. "Yeah. Sometimes."

"So," she continued, "I think this is a good time to just take a little break. Have a drink. Listen to music. Dream a little dream. Dance a little dance. Make a little love."

He laughed softly. "If you start singing, this conversation is over."

She was silent for a moment, and he could almost hear the smile in her voice when she chose to speak. "Tell Matt I said he should help you forget your troubles and get happy."

"What makes you think . . ."

She laughed aloud then, almost cackling and obviously uninterested in maintaining a lady-like
demeanor. "Because you're not stupid enough to have let him walk away. Enjoy yourself, Jared. He has a reputation for being very . . . flexible."

He tried to come up with a suitable response, but, by the time he'd thought of a sufficiently cutting remark, she had hung up, still laughing.

Keller had tried not to eavesdrop - much - through the course of the conversation, sipping occasionally at a fresh bottle of Samuel Adams' best and waiting for his companion to finish up and indicate a willingness to return to their previous activity, but, as the minutes passed and he witnessed the changes of expression on Hilliard's face, he had come to realize that there was only a slight chance of them being able to pick up where they'd left off before the phone call.

He was proven right when Hilliard disconnected and glanced toward his own unopened bottle of lager with a sigh. "How about something a little stronger?"

Keller heard something unsettling in the simple question as green met blue at exactly the right time for him to notice a hard glint in Hilliard's eyes, a gleam blended of fury and bitterness and something else that he couldn't quite identify. He rose quickly and went back inside, emerging just moments later with glassware and a bottle of Glenlivet. "Single malt," he announced, unsmiling. "Good for what ails you."

Hilliard offered no response, simply accepting the highball glass with its three fingers of exquisitely smooth whisky and taking a hefty draught before turning back to his contemplation of the landscape.

"What's up?" asked Keller, leaning forward on the balcony railing and enjoying the sensation of his shoulder snuggled up against his companion's torso. "Any luck tracking the elusive Mr. Hobbs?"

"Not yet. But it's just a matter of time now. Hobbs, Sr., is going to be picked up sometime tomorrow. He'll be the first one brought in, since the DNA evidence that 'Young Nicholas' collected confirmed that he was there at the crime scene. The others will follow over the next couple of days. As for Mr. Hobbs, I doubt that he'll hold out well against a skilled interrogator. Although he'll be lawyering up before you can say 'Miranda'. But that won't change the fact that the evidence will give us access to his private records. We'll find the connection soon enough."

"And the others?"

Hilliard took another sip of whiskey. "Not much in the way of forensic evidence to back up Brian's version of what happened, but Taylor and Hobbs should be fairly easy to break. Neither one has ever had to deal with being the object of a police investigation; they won't deal well with the pressure, especially since they have no way of knowing just how much evidence might have turned up. The tough one, though - that'll be Stockwell. He knows procedure, knows how to play the game. The key to success is going to be breaking down the other two, and hoping they take him down with them."

"And the other guy? Brian did say there were four, didn't he?"

"Yeah. The fourth one was the guy who was smart enough to keep his mouth shut and stay in the shadows. All we've got on him is Brian's impression of thick silver hair. Still, the same strategy should apply. By concentrating on the weakest links, we should eventually get the names of all of them - with a little luck."

Keller sipped at his whiskey and leaned his head against the strong shoulder beside him. "In that case, why don't you sound happier? Did you expect more?"
Hilliard leaned forward, bracing his arms against the balcony railing. "No, not really. We don't have a lot of facts yet, but there's plenty to suggest that the private records are going to be a gold mine of information. There are already major indications of tie-ins to so-called businesses that are really just fronts for subversive groups, probably enough clandestine operations to keep the FBI busy for years. This isn't something that just happened in the last few years; it goes back a long way. The Club's been a big time mover and shaker - behind the scenes - for years. There are even hints that there might have been some connection with the thugs who bombed Babylon, enough to suggest that it wasn't nearly as random and disorganized as it first appeared."

Keller closed his eyes and felt a massive weight settle in his chest. "You mean . . ."

It was Hilliard's turn to wish he could change the subject, but he knew better. One did not evade that blade-sharp mind of Matthew Keller with impunity. "I mean that it's possible this is not the first time Brian's been a target."

"Shit!"

"Yeah. I know."

"No," Keller replied, his tone hard, almost brittle. "You don't. Not about this."

"What do you . . ."

"You've only just begun to know Brian," the doctor said softly, "so you won't understand what this could do to him. He's spent his whole life - his whole fucking life - blaming himself for every God-damned thing that ever went wrong around him. Everything. And now . . . people died in that explosion, Jared. And others were severely injured. Jesus! Michael Novotny almost died from his wounds. And now - now Brian's going to have to learn that it was all aimed at him? How the fuck do you think he's going to feel? How much guilt can one man carry on his shoulders, before he just . . . gives up? He's come close before, you know."

Hilliard was once more staring off into the darkness. "Did he? He doesn't strike me as the type."

"You should have seen him, when Justin was attacked. God! He was . . . I'm still not sure how he survived that. And he still blames himself - every fucking day. I don't know what this will do to him."

Hilliard's expression was pensive, filled with soft affection. "There you go - loving him again."

Keller forced a smile. "Jealous?"

Hilliard's smile was very gentle. "Part of me thinks I should be, but - somehow - I'm not. He's . . . one of a kind, isn't he?"

Keller nodded. "He is that, and I'd have a hard time explaining how we feel about each other. But . . . that's not what's got your knickers in a twist, is it?"

"Not exactly." The indirect lighting of the terrace made Hilliard's eyes seem suddenly, incredibly blue - even bluer than usual, which Keller would have judged damned near impossible if he wasn't seeing it himself. "It's just . . . You know, no matter how foolish it is, we all cling to the hope that . . . that there's really going to be a fairy tale ending - someday. That it's all going to turn out right - that good will triumph and evil will be defeated, and that all those people who condemn us and denounce us as degenerates and perverts are just cold-hearted monsters and radical right-wing cretins who deserve nothing but our contempt. But when you take a good look at the way of the world, you start to wonder . . . how is that ever going to happen, Matt?"
"I'm not following."

Hilliard drained the rest of his drink and poured himself a refill before answering, his face cold and hard, yet somehow reflecting a deep, visceral pain. "That old man - Flagg. I sat there and watched as he had to accept the truth about his son - a truth he's been denying for years and years - and I realized something. He was more devastated by the fact that his son was gay, than by the truth about the way he died. And I wanted to hate him for it, but I couldn't. Because this isn't a bad man. He's not evil or cruel or malicious. He's just . . . an ordinary man, who believes what he was taught to believe, by people he loved. People he trusted - the same people who learned about God and religion and right and wrong from their own parents and family and church. And I realized that they don't hate people like us - like Daniel Flagg or Brian Kinney - because they're disgusted by the idea of where we choose to stick our dicks or who we choose to fuck; they believe - they really believe that their God - their all-knowing, universal God - has judged us to be an abomination. If these people, who are supposed to be good, decent, charitable, Christian people, can really believe that - can completely discount the possibility that we're just as capable of love and loyalty and honor as they are - then how are we ever going to find that happy ending? How do we get . . . from here to there? In the face of that kind of ignorance, how do we get through to the other side?"

Keller turned and leaned forward, nestling his forehead against the soft skin under Hilliard's jaw. "How do you slay a dragon?" he asked, with a quick shrug. "One arrow, one blade, one cut at a time."

"Yeah? But dragons breathe fire, Darlin'. Remember?"

Keller's smile was pensive. "But not so much any more. As much as the ardent homophobes might deny it, they no longer have the unchallenged power to burn away those that stand up against them, simply by calling up their own version of 'shock and awe'. The definition of 'hate crime' has finally expanded, to include violence against people like us. I know that it doesn't really cure anything, and it doesn't guarantee victory in the end, but try to keep in mind how far we've come. In the days of our fathers and grandfathers, men like us only had two choices - to live in a closet or risk our lives every time we ventured out into the real world. But now - granted there are still huge risks. There are still Matthew Shepherds and Daniel Flaggs, and maybe there always will be, in some places. But far fewer now than ten years ago, and fewer still ten years from now. And it all happens because of people like you, who stand up and fight for what you believe. And people like Brian, who refuse to hide or apologize or pretend."

"Yeah," sighed Hilliard, "and look where that got him."

The doctor's smile was gentle, as was his touch as he lifted his hand to caress rich, dark skin along a perfect jaw-line. "You can't lose all hope just because some people are stupid, Jared, which is something that you can't cure. But most people are just ignorant. They can be educated. They can learn."

"Yeah? Well, they sure take their fucking time in the process."

The physician grinned. "Yeah. They do."

Hilliard turned to gaze deep into Keller's eyes, and the doctor was delighted to witness an almost instantaneous shift from pensive brooding to seductive speculation within those ice blue depths. "So," said the undercover agent slowly, "Briggs tells me you have quite a reputation."

Keller had to swallow around a sudden lump in his throat. "Does she now?"

"Yeah. She says you're famous for your flexibility."
The doctor's smile was slightly smug. "Perhaps I should demonstrate." The smile had happened slowly, but the subsequent move didn't, and Hilliard hardly had time to draw breath before he had a double armful of bare, warm, smooth, velvety skin, and lungs filled with that delectable, singular scent - the one that he'd been doing his best to ignore.

He had intended to offer up an answer, but discovered immediately that he had much better things to do with his lips and his tongue - and what was left of his mind - than talk.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

It had been a fantastic day - mostly - thought Brian as he settled himself more comfortably in the warm sand, bracing his back against an upright support of the old dock, and allowing Justin to shift and realign his body so that he was completely cradled against Brian's chest.

It was such a simple thing: the freedom to sit here, bathed in the tawny gold of the last light of day, listening to the rhythmic cadence of the incoming breakers and closing his arms around the lithe body of his beloved, and watching while Gus and Katy concentrated on finishing the elaborate sand castle that they'd spent the whole afternoon building - a vast palace with arches and towers and battlements and - of course - 'turts', carefully laid out in a shape vaguely reminiscent of Chateau Versailles. The structure would, inevitably, fall to the chaotic power of the incoming tide, always providing it survived the imminent attack of one energetic and very determined little dog, which was almost frothing at the mouth in its eagerness to dismantle what its master had built. But so far, vigilant attention from the small builders and constant oversight by a careful grandfather had prevented the mayhem the tiny animal was so eager to inflict.

Brian lit a cigarette and watched the smoke eddy for a moment before swirling away on the cusp of a freshet of air heavy with the scent and taste of salt, and smiled as Justin gave in to the exhaustion of a long day and turned to nestle his face into the soft velvet of the skin under Brian's jaw-line. For a moment, the older man had to fight off a ferocious impulse to leap to his feet and tear off down the beach - an instinctive rejection of the domestic image he was sure he must be presenting as he adjusted his posture to accommodate the weight of his young lover.

When, he wondered, had this happened? When had he become so comfortable with such a public display of affection - genuine affection, rather than simple sex? More than that - of an undeniable level of domesticity that seemed to define the new parameters of his life. Again, he had to struggle just to keep still, but then Justin sighed - a deep throaty hum that was almost a purr - and Brian relaxed again, almost conceding that it was worth it - almost - and he was suddenly amused by the idea that there was a huge difference between the flagrant public displays in which he'd once engaged - at Woody's and Babylon and in whatever alley or nook or bathhouse might be available - and this . . . whatever this was.

He looked down and threaded his fingers through silken strands of gold and realized exactly what this was; this was Justin, and it was like absolutely nothing else in his life.

A sudden cascade of laughter erupted from the children as they ran toward the shoreline to fetch water to fill the moat that Ron Peterson had fashioned around their castle. Their joyous shrieks were punctuated by shrill barks from Beau who was obviously torn between the desire to chase after them and a compulsion to wreak havoc on their creation. In the end, he was unable to resist joining in the fun and chose to dart around his companions and play tag with the spray of incoming breakers, while Cynthia and Lance Mathis, enjoying a quiet conversation and martinis on the deck, shouted their approval and applauded as the two children and the puppy performed a perfectly choreographed pas de trois at the edge of the surf.

Brian watched in silence and was filled with something that he had known only a very few times in
his life - a deep, unlimited swell of contentment, so pure and intense that it was almost frightening. Not because he didn't want it or couldn't accept it, but because everything inside him was screaming that it couldn't last, that he would, in the end, be destroyed by wanting what he had never been meant to have.

But for now, for this moment, he would simply float within his little cloud of euphoria and pretend that it would never leave him.

Payback, of course, would be a bitch of the first order, but that would come later. And he already knew what payback entailed; he had, after all, spent his entire life clutched tight within its grip.

A perfect day . . . almost.

He was careful not to move, so he would not disturb the warm body that was melded against him; careful not to frown so that the children - who watched him almost as obsessively as he watched them - would not be alarmed by something they might read in his eyes.

Almost perfect.

Off to his left, beyond the pier and near the first of the dunes that marched northward, Chris McClaren was standing, gazing out to sea, his eyes sweeping across the expanse of ocean, looking for . . . whatever it was that he spent his life looking for. Earlier, when Brian and Justin had walked out to the edge of the surf to share a private moment - and a joint - every member of the security detail charged with protecting Brian and his family had suddenly come up with some kind of urgent task requiring them to put distance between themselves and the two miscreants, and Brian had laughed and pointed out the merits of 'plausible deniability'. Every member, that was, save one. McClaren had simply walked up, regarded them with a lifted eyebrow, and continued his customary rounds.

At this hour, with the day almost done, the FBI agent had obviously decided that he needed a little time to himself. He had, after all, been at the center of the most distressing event of this otherwise almost perfect day, and Brian wondered if anyone else had sensed that the man behind the public persona had been bothered by what he'd been forced to do. Now, McClaren was mostly still, except for his eyes which regularly shifted to check on Brian's location and condition.

The consummate protector - who was now moving out toward the end of the small peninsula that divided this private stretch of beach from the next house up the way, where a group of young people - college-age by the look of them - was busy constructing a bonfire in front of their rental cottage. As night fell, there would undoubtedly be loud music, every variety of unhealthy food, kegs of beer, plentiful pot, and lithe, slender young bodies engaged in all the lovely interactions that individuals of that age ordinarily pursued, and Brian had smiled his approval, as well as no small amount of eager anticipation, when one of the federal staffers had briefed him on what was to be expected. The group had been thoroughly vetted, of course, by both the FBI and Brian's security people, so there was no real concern about their motives or actions, but McClaren was never one to assume anything. He would not interfere with what they were doing, but he would not turn his back either.

Brian wondered if he should consider himself extraordinarily lucky to have been assigned to the care of this particular agent - or just the opposite. He was pretty sure he knew what Justin would say.

He smiled as Justin roused slightly and took a deep breath before snuggling closer, completely content and secure within his lover's arms.

A perfect culmination of a perfect day - almost.
Only two things had happened to disrupt the easy harmony of the day - one relatively minor and one that could easily have escalated into all-out warfare, had Brian not stepped in to calm the troubled waters, by virtue of the kind of sheer determination that was generally reserved only for those few who had been unlucky enough to make him really, really angry. It was a side of himself that almost no one knew.

He shifted slightly to look out across the waters of the bay, remembering the phone call that had awakened him just as dawn was gilding the string of tiny islands that swept east and south out to sea, from the base of the headland.

"Why the fuck," Rick Turnage snarled, obviously seeing no need for any kind of formal greeting, "do I have to get a call from that prick, Keller, at the break of dawn, accusing me of neglecting my patient? Especially when he bitches me out for a problem that said patient has not even seen fit to mention. Care to explain yourself, Mr. Kinney?"

Brian, unruffled and unintimidated, confined his response to a single word. "No."

"No!" Turnage's tone was strident with outrage. "What do you mean n . . ."

"What I mean," Brian replied softly, as he eased out of the bed carefully to avoid waking both his son and his lover, "is that I'm not going to get into a shouting match with you and wake up the whole house. Just hang on a bit."

"Does it ever occur to you," Turnage continued, "that some of us have better things to do than wait on your convenience?"

Brian snickered as he walked downstairs and out onto the deck. "With what I'm paying you? I think demanding a few minutes of your time is reasonable."

Turnage hesitated, and Brian allowed himself a tiny triumphant smile as he took the time to grab his first nicotine fix of the day. "Now," he said finally, "what are you on about?"

"Was Keller right?" Turnage was not in the mood for conversation - polite or otherwise. "Are you having some kind of problem with . . ."

"I'm not sure." Equally uninterested in a prolonged discussion, Brian decided that he was not ready to explore this particular issue. "It may be nothing."

Turnage was slow to answer, and Brian was surprised to hear some measure of concern in the physician's voice when he spoke again. "Mr. Kinney, you can't just dismiss something like this. You have too much at stake, and all the bravado in the world won't change the fact that there still may be some major problems that haven't been addressed yet.

"Look." Turnage sounded suddenly, unutterably weary, and Brian realized that the man did care about his patients, quite a lot, in fact, even though he concealed it well beneath his façade of indifference and arrogance. "What they did to you . . . it would have killed a lot of people. Maybe even most people, and I doubt that anyone will ever know exactly how you managed to survive it. But one thing is certain. You can't afford to ignore the possibility that there may be long-term effects that could come back to haunt you. Maybe even for years. So if there's anything - anything at all - that suggests potential problems now, it needs to be checked out. Right now. Understood?"

"Yeah, okay. But . . ."

"No buts, Brian."
Brian allowed himself one rather dramatic sigh before replying. "All right. When?"

Turnage took a moment before responding, and it was obvious, when he did answer, that he was not happy with what he was forced to say. "Shit! I have a major reconstruction scheduled in two hours - something I can't postpone. And it will probably take most of the day."

Brian was surprised. "You still work week-ends, Doc? A big international celebrity like you? I'm . . . amazed."

"Some patients don't bother consulting a calendar to decide when they might need help, Mr. Kinney."

Brian paused briefly, remembering the things he had learned about Turnage - both the details of his very public life and the others that existed beneath the surface of the face he showed to the world. He couldn't be sure, of course, but he would have bet good money that the patient, in this case, was not some socialite from Palm Springs looking for a brow-lift; more likely, it was a child from some third-world slum, in desperate need of help. So - for now - he would not make an issue of the timing, except to pass it off with a characteristic snarky comment.

"So now who's stalling?" he asked finally.

Turnage did not deign to offer an answer. "I'll probably be home by eight. Come to my house."

"Why, Doctor," Brian drawled, "is this a ploy to lure me to your lair, away from prying eyes and . . . ."

"You really are an arrogant bastard." Turnage was obviously trying to suppress an urge to laugh - without much success. "And no, I have no interest in your shapely ass, except to make sure it reflects perfectly on my skills as a surgeon. But I don't want to put this off any longer than necessary. So . . . tonight. All right?"

"Okay, but not at eight. It'll have to be later. I have guests to . . . ."

"God damn it, Brian. This could be critical, and . . . ."


"You do realize that I might have plans of my own, don't you?"

That triggered Brian's sardonic chuckle. "You're a superstar, Doc. She'll wait."

The physician wasted another thirty seconds, just muttering to himself before reluctantly agreeing to the revised schedule. "All right, but if you think you can come dragging in here at midnight, don't bother. And make sure you're sober. If you're drunk - or high - you're just wasting my time and yours."

Brian sighed. "You're really determined to ruin my day, aren't you?"

"Not my primary purpose," the doctor retorted, "but, as a bonus, it's not bad."

The line went dead before Brian had a chance to utter the epithet that sprang to mind.

Justin was still deeply asleep, snoring softly, when Cynthia arrived at Brian's side, bearing gifts in the form of a pitcher of Trina's legendary margaritas and cocktail glasses.
"Can I tempt you?" she asked, settling beside him.

He couldn't resist the inevitable response. "Sorry, Darlin', but you don't have the right equipment."

She grinned. "Good thing I'm not an insecure little maiden, or you'd have crushed my ego a long time ago."

He accepted a glass of icy mango-colored slush and raised it toward her. "Your lack of insecurity is one of the traits that make you invaluable to me."

She nodded before taking a sip of her own drink and turning to look out toward the end of the peninsula, where Chris McClaren was now standing, a dark silhouette against the first stars of evening. Her eyes were suddenly full of glints of shadow and light. "And him? What makes him invaluable to you?"

Brian swallowed a sigh, noting the hard edge in her voice. "He was just doing his job, Tink."

"Yeah, well, he didn't have to enjoy it so much."

His answer was a soft snort of laughter. "Come on, Cynthia. You're smarter than that. Look again."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that, if you really thought he took any pleasure out of what he had to do, then he's a much better actor than I gave him credit for, and maybe you're not quite as sharp as I thought."

"But..."

"Don't waste your breath, Cynthia," said Justin suddenly, not bothering to move or even open his eyes, but demonstrating an intense level of annoyance using nothing more than clipped words and an icy tone. "He's not going to listen to any blasphemous comments about his Saint Christopher."

Brian could not quite swallow a grin. "Not a saint, Sunshine, but not Satan either."

"Why can't you see..."

"Why can't you?" Brian's voice was suddenly harsh, veined with impatience. "Because he and I shared a bed? He's not the first, is he? And unless you've been wearing a fucking chastity belt since you took off to New York, I'm thinking you might not have much room to talk. He was doing his job. What fucking part of that do you not understand? And maybe it's not pretty, and it might not be fair, but it's what he's compelled to do."

Justin sat up sharply, and turned to glare into Brian's face. "But he had no right to..."

"He had every right, unless it's better to take a chance on being wrong in order to avoid hurting someone's feelings. Is that how you think he should have played it?"

"But he didn't know for sure," said Cynthia quietly, hoping to calm the troubled waters threatening to develop into tsunami-class chaos around her.

Brian closed his eyes. "No. He didn't know. How could he know? So... what should he have done?" He paused then, looking first at Cynthia's face before turning to stare directly into Justin's eyes. "You tell me, Blondie. What - exactly - should he have done?"

"He was wrong." Justin's voice was flat, unyielding - the perfect vehicle for expressing the stubborn streak that was an innate part of his nature.
"So you believe," Brian replied coldly. "But what if he's not? Considering what's at stake, would you be willing to take that risk?"

The quarter horses were beautiful - both of them; one bay gelding, one chestnut mare. Neither could boast of thoroughbred bloodlines, but they were lovely, nonetheless, and well trained. When Simon Redding opened the rear gates of the horse trailer, they waited quietly for him to lead them out of the narrow enclosure and release them in the small, fenced area behind the cottage greenhouse. They remained quiet and patient, even when the two children waiting outside the fence erupted in squeals and shrill bursts of exuberant laughter, punctuated by leaps and cartwheels and spins and gleeful romps up and down the boards of the fence that rattled the whole structure.

Ron Peterson, who had arranged for Redding to bring the horses to the cottage as a surprise for Gus and Katy, was delighted with both the level of the horses' training and the children's boisterous reaction.

At the corner of the greenhouse, just outside the fence, Brian and Justin stood together, arms entwined and golden skin dappled by shadows from the bougainvillea vines trailing from the roof, sporting the first rosy blooms of the season. Brian's smile was brilliant, and Trina Thomas, from her vantage point at the kitchen window, paused to appreciate the view, noting in particular the lovely contrast of gleaming golden hair and dark auburn locks that took on shades of deep red in the brilliance of direct sunlight. Her eyes were soft as she watched Brian's arms circle Justin's waist to pull the younger man closer against his chest, and she wondered, for a moment, if the two of them had any idea how beautiful they were together. Then she laughed. This was Brian Kinney. Of course he knew.

She was, however, less sure about Justin.

From his place near the back corner of the paddock, Chris McClaren was also watching, a pensive brooding look on his face, as he listened - or pretended to - while Peterson and Redding discussed the pedigree and lineage of local horses. He was not contributing to the conversation, and Trina, with her characteristic sensitivity, noticed that he seemed distracted - almost uneasy - and she felt the weight of empathic understanding settle around her. The FBI agent, no matter how well he managed to conceal it, was living with a pain he could not completely hide.

Meanwhile, Gus and Katy had abandoned their attacks on the fence in order to commence a two-pronged assault on Brian.

"Daddy," Gus shrieked as he came racing toward his father, with Katy on his heels, "can I ride with you? I don't want Simon to just lead me around in the yard. I want to ride . . . with you."

"Me too," Katy added, slightly breathless with excitement.

"Guys," said Justin softly - reasonably, he thought, "I don't think it would be good for Brian's injuries. He's not really well yet, and . . ."

"Don't worry about it, Sonny Boy," Brian interrupted, favoring Justin with a look that could have curdled milk. "Of course, you can ride with me. And Katy too - but one at a time, OK?"

"Brian, you can't . . ."

"Or, if she doesn't want to wait - K-K-K-Katy can ride with Justin."
"Uhhhh, Brian?" Justin was striving for a calm demeanor, but the look in his eyes suggested that he was edging toward blind panic. "You know, I don't... I can't..."

"Can't what?"

Justin leaned in and whispered something directly into Brian's ear, which prompted Brian to pull back and stare at him with disbelief. "You're kidding."

Justin's cheeks reddened with an angry flush. "I am not. And where did you ever learn to ride a horse anyway? You're just as much a city boy as me."

Brian grinned. "Well, for one thing, I've fucked a couple of polo players in my time."

Justin huffed a sigh. "Of course you have."

"And for another, Lindsey's family had horses when she was growing up, so..."

Still smiling, Brian picked Gus up and set him on the top rail of the fence, then did the same for Katy, before opening the gate and moving into the paddock area.

"If Sunshine's not up to a ride," called McClaren, his smile saying all kinds of things that he would never actually voice, "I'll be glad to fill in for him and take Katy with me."

"Of course you will," muttered Justin. Then he added a sotto voce comment that Brian could not quite hear, but he was pretty sure it was something along the lines of, "Over my dead body."

Simon Redding moved back into the paddock to check the tack on the larger of the two horses - the bay gelding. He paused to turn as Brian approached and study the younger man's garb, which consisted of a frayed, faded Aerosmith t-shirt, cut-off jeans, and bare feet. The elderly man fumbled slightly as he adjusted the horse's bit, stunned by the thought that it was just not fair for a man to be able to appear in such shabby garments, and still look as if he had just stepped out of the pages of a glamorous magazine. With a quick sigh, he lifted one gnarled hand and ran it through thick salt-and-pepper grizzled hair before offering up what he considered a pertinent observation.

"Mr. Kinney, no offense, but you're not ready to mount up. You need jeans and boots, and..."

By virtue of a Herculean effort, Brian resisted an urge to resort to innuendo in a response about his readiness to 'mount up'. Instead, he played it straight. "Relax, Simon. I'm not planning on taking off on a trail ride. Just a couple of circuits in the paddock - to make sure I haven't forgotten how to handle the reins. It's been a while, and I want to be sure before I heft my son into the saddle with me. If we decide to go galloping down the beach, I'll get changed. Okay?"

Redding obviously still had his doubts, but chose to remain silent, confining his response to a steady gaze that could not quite mask his misgivings, and Brian, always more perceptive than even his closest friends realized, read something in those dark eyes with their surprising glints of amber - something he had not expected to see.

"I'll be careful. I promise."

"Hmmph! Just see that you are. If you get hurt, it's on me, you know."

Brian hesitated for a fraction of a second, fully aware of the handyman's attempt to divert him from a more elemental truth. Redding had not been prepared to care about Brian Kinney - one way or another; had certainly not expected to develop a fondness for him or feel any emotional connection to him, especially having been warned in advance about the man's singular proclivities. He was not
naïve enough to assume that he had never run into a gay man in his long lifetime, but he'd always felt fortunate that any he might have encountered had been discreet enough to keep their sexual preferences to themselves. Brian Kinney, apparently, had not even a nodding acquaintance with any notion of discretion, and Redding had expected to dislike him intensely, or - at best - to tolerate him in silence. He had certainly never anticipated that he might actually like someone who was the antithesis of everything he had ever been taught to respect or admire.

But he did. And he wasn't particularly happy about it.

To make matters worse, it didn't require a degree in rocket science for the younger man to recognize the connection, which accounted for the tiny smile that he was flashing at Redding. For his part, the caretaker counted himself lucky that the smile was the only response he got, which allowed him to cloak himself in his customary gruff exterior, but did not change the fact that - for one tiny moment, as their eyes met - each recognized a kindred spirit in the other.

Old, visceral pain always recognized itself in passing, even when buried in the most unlikely of companions.

Without a word, Redding grabbed the lead to steady the gelding for Brian to swing up into the saddle, just as Chris McClaren's cell phone rang.

Two things were immediately obvious - that this was definitely not Kinney's first rodeo, as evidenced by his easy posture astride the horse, and that the person calling McClaren had not phoned to deliver good news. The FBI agent's reaction would, in fact, have been comical, if it had not been so frightening when his face went bone white as he dropped the phone, simultaneously jerking his gun from his holster while leaping over the fence to race toward Brian.

At the same moment, faster than the eye could follow, but also - somehow - in a strange kind of suspended animation, the gelding shifted suddenly and reared up, its eyes wide and filled with a blind panic as it tossed its head and pawed the air, trying to dislodge the weight on its back.

For a single moment, there was a heavy silence, except for the horse's frantic breaths. McClaren was the first to break it.

"Shit!" His gun was steady in one hand as the other flailed to grab the panicked horse's reins. "Get back!"

No one moved at first, and it took a moment for any of them to realize to whom his command was directed, as Brian struggled to calm the horse down enough to allow him to maintain his seat in the saddle.

"What the fuck?" yelled Justin, scrambling over the fence and hurrying forward, as both Gus and Katy started to cry, prompting Ron Peterson to run to them and gather both in his arms in an attempt to console them.

By this time, McClaren had managed to wrap his hand around the gelding's lead, and Brian had succeeded in his efforts to settle the horse down, although it was obvious that he'd been extremely rattled by the experience, judging by the pallor of his face, which would probably have alarmed the FBI agent if he'd looked up enough to notice. But he didn't. He was much too focused on the man at whom he was leveling his gun.

Simon Redding just stood there, eyes wide and uncertain.

"I told you to get back," McClaren snapped. "Right now."
"I . . . I don't know what . . ."

"It's not complicated," retorted the FBI agent. "Get - away - from - him."

Justin, eyes huge and filled with shadow, was obviously torn between a desire to jump up and drag Brian off the horse and a need to berate the FBI agent for . . . well, he wasn't entirely sure what McClaren should be berated for, but he was sure he could figure it out PDQ.

Brian, however, though still somewhat shaken, was rational enough to expect an explanation. "Chris," he said calmly, "what's this about?"

McClaren's voice was perfectly level when he replied, but Justin was still certain that the man was concealing a bottomless well of rage. "It seems that our handyman cum jack-of-all-trades has not been entirely candid about his background. Isn't that right, Simon?"

The elderly caretaker cleared his throat prior to responding. "I don't know what you mean."

"Really? So if I asked you about your ties to the city of Pittsburgh, you'd be happy to explain?"

Something dark - and very old - moved in the man's eyes as he studied the FBI agent's face. "I'd answer whatever you asked, but I suspect you already know the whole story, don't you?"

McClaren's smile was cold. He had, by this time, lowered his gun, but he did not put it away, holding it loosely instead, but still at the ready. "I do. Your candor would have been more impressive, if you'd provided the information in the first place. And please don't insult my intelligence by claiming that you didn't realize it was important. The questions were put to you when you were interviewed, prior to granting you clearance to work here."

Redding shrugged. "What was I supposed to say, Agent McClaren? That I have family in Pittsburgh? So what? That I knew who Brian Kinney was before he ever came here? I expect half the country knows who Brian Kinney is. He's not exactly a shrinking violet, now is he?"

"Granted," said the FBI agent. "But half the country isn't related to the delinquents that tried to burn down his home, or to people who work for the movers and shakers who tried to have him killed."

"What?" Redding's eyes were huge now, and filled with dread. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Rachel Charles is your first cousin, isn't she?"

"She is."

"And you've always been very close to her son - Buddy - haven't you?"

Redding sighed. "Not close, exactly. But I . . . did what I could. The boy always needed . . ." He paused then, and rubbed his forehead with thumb and forefinger. "What's he done now?"

McClaren turned to look up at Brian, who was still leaning forward in the saddle, his breathing slightly rough. "You okay, Bud?"

"Yeah." Brian was almost whispering. "But look, Chris, how do you know he . . ."

"I don't," came the abrupt answer, "but I can't afford to take the chance."

"What chance? What do you . . ."
"Suppose it had been Gus on that horse when it decided it didn't want to be ridden? Or suppose you
didn't want to be ridden?"

"But it was just an accident. Just . . ."

"Could have been, but that wouldn't be much of a comfort if I was standing over your dead body
right now, would it? Or over your son's - or Justin's. So just shut the fuck up, Brian, and let me do
my job."

"Agent McClaren," said Simon Redding, "I didn't ask for this job. I've been working here - taking
care of this place - for many years, so why . . ."

"Because I don't like coincidences, Mr. Redding. Because the connection between you and the
Charles family was just a little too obscure to feel natural. Because your young cousin knew enough
to shoot his mouth off about where Brian is, and I'm wondering how he knew that, unless he got it
from you."

"I didn't tell him."

McClaren stared at the man for a moment, obviously considering how to proceed. Then he took a
deep breath. "Pack up your horses and your gear and get out of here. And you should count yourself
lucky that I'm willing to let it go at that. If you come within a mile of this place again, while Mr.
Kinney is still here, you're going to find out just how far I could take this, if I decided to pursue it.
And - if you're very smart, Mr. Redding - you will avoid contacting your Pittsburgh cousins for the
foreseeable future, because - and trust me when I say this - I will know about it."

Redding's eyes were huge now. "But you can't do that. This place is . . . I'm responsible for
everything here. I have to . . ."

"I'll contact the leasing agents immediately, to make other arrangements. So don't make me repeat
myself."

But the caretaker was obviously prepared to argue. "But you can't. I have to . . ."

Unexpectedly, it was Brian who intervened, sliding down from the saddle and stepping forward.
"Simon," he said softly, his words inaudible to anyone beyond the group of three, "it will be all
right." He looked at McClaren, and the tone of his voice indicated that he was giving an order - not
asking for a favor. "Nothing will be said that will prevent you from being able to come back here,
once we're gone."

"But . . ."

Brian smiled and leaned forward. "She'll still be here, when you come back."

Simon Redding almost gasped, hearing something in those few words that he had never expected to
hear from anyone. How could it be that this young stranger - this individual who would be called a
pervert and an abomination by most of the people in his own life - had managed to see and
understand something that no one else had ever guessed?

"Go on now," said McClaren firmly, "and we'll leave it at that. Unless I find out that you've been
lying to us, or that you were more involved than you claim."

Redding took a deep breath before looking up to meet Brian's eyes. Then he simply nodded and
turned away to reload the horses into their trailer, leaving Brian to deal with panic-stricken children,
and McClaren to face off against a furious young blond.
Still, no one said anything more until the caretaker had completed his tasks, loaded his truck, and driven away, while Brian, along with Cynthia and Trina, had concentrated on soothing Gus and Katy and distracting them with a box of beach toys pulled from the storage shed.

But Justin, although smart enough to keep quiet until Redding was gone, was not about to drop a subject near and dear to his heart.

"What the fuck was that all about?" he demanded, as soon as the handyman made good his departure. "You had no right to treat him like that. He's been nothing but helpful and supportive, and . . ."

But Chris McClaren had already had a hell of a morning, and he was not remotely inclined to allow Brian Kinney's young partner to use him for target practice.

"Mr. Taylor," he said sharply, "just in case you've forgotten, Mr. Kinney's safety is my responsibility. Mine - not yours, not the caretakers, or the staff's, or even his own security team's. Mine. And I invite you to consider something. Just suppose that the phone call that alerted me to Redding's connection to some rather dubious individuals in Pittsburgh had come a half-hour later. And just suppose that, during that time, he'd convinced Brian to allow him to take Gus out on one of those horses - the ones he'd guaranteed to be safe for the children - and it turned out that he wasn't at all the soft-hearted old caretaker that he seemed? What would it have done to Brian, if all the rage and hatred that was directed at him, that caused his injuries, were to be redirected at his son?

"Now, do I really think that Simon Redding is capable of that kind of evil? From what I've seen, I'd say no. But what if I'm wrong? What if you're wrong? You look at that child, Mr. Taylor - the one who is so much like his father, it's almost unbelievable - and you tell me how I would ever be able to live with myself if I simply assumed that the information I was given was just coincidental, that there was nothing to worry about, and my carelessness cost the life of that child. You tell me that - okay?"

It was extremely rare for Justin Taylor to be stricken speechless, but, for the moment, he couldn't think of a single thing to say.

McClaren turned to walk away, still shaken by the close call and uncertain about what had caused it; he thought it would be a good time to walk the perimeter. But he paused long enough to look over at Brian, to make sure that the children were recovering from their fright, and that the man himself was as unharmed as he seemed.

"You really all right?" he asked.

Brian's smile was, perhaps, a little less glib than usual. "Yeah. I really am."

"No more horses. Okay?"

"Okay."

McClaren simply nodded and turned away again.

"Chris?"

The FBI agent paused again, hearing something unusual, something unexpected, in Brian's voice. "Yeah?"

"Thanks."

It was just one word, quick and sharp and almost without inflection. And yet it spoke volumes. "Just
“doing my job.”

He made good his escape then, almost running as he headed down the beach. Behind him, Brian turned to look at Justin, noting the anger still simmering in the depths of beautiful blue eyes, and sighed. It would be pointless, he knew, to try to explain why he’d felt compelled to express his gratitude; Justin was not yet ready to listen to rational explanations, and the stony set of his jaw seemed to indicate that he might never be.

Perhaps it was time for a new focus, and building castles in the sand was a logical choice.

At least Gus and Katy would be quickly diverted, but Justin? Brian sighed again. Not so much.

The sea was gilded briefly by the final flares of sunlight, and the stars rushed in behind the fading day, as bold and brilliant as a Van Gogh canvas.

Yes, thought Brian. An almost perfect day, if he could just manage to ignore the anger still simmering in his young lover’s eyes, and if he could just forget, for a while, that he still had another angry individual to confront before the day was finally over.

But surely, he could relax his guard and enjoy the remainder of the evening.

A shout of laughter sounded from up the beach as the bonfire flared to life and the hard guitar beats of the Kings of Leon’s *Sex on Fire* rose in the gathering darkness.

Yes, he could be reasonably sure that the rest of the evening would be all right.

Cynthia favored him with a fond smile, and Justin decided - against all odds - to settle back against Brian’s chest and let the argument rest. For a while.

And if something in the back of his mind suggested that it was always dangerous to assume too much, he decided to ignore it - and enjoy the moment.

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tbc
Chapter 45

Ring the bells that still can ring;
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack, a crack in everything;
That's how the light gets in.

Anthem  -- Leonard Cohen

Officially, she didn't have an office. Streetwalkers, call girls, prostitutes, waitresses - even assistant chefs at prestigious private clubs - usually didn't, although, in the last instance, she did have a tiny cubbyhole in The Club's basement where she could prepare meal plans and research recipes and food sources, but definitely could not do anything that might reveal her true identity. In addition, even if she'd had an office in her official capacity as a detective with the Pittsburgh PD, it would have been too risky for her to be seen in the vicinity of police headquarters, barring the occasional 'bust' for suspicion of soliciting in her streetwalker/alter ego, or whatever trumped up charge her colleagues might come up with when they needed to speak to her face-to-face.

So Sharon Briggs had to make do and adapt to circumstances.

Loitering anywhere near the official seats of power would have been risky; being seen in the posh neighborhood where her very private townhouse was located, or where her parents lived, while still in character, would be just as dangerous. On the other hand, hanging around Liberty Avenue and its less than sophisticated environs was just another day in the life of inhabitants of the city's underbelly - an environment where she fit in perfectly.

It was more than convenient, especially since there was a private, virtually invisible entrance to the one building that provided exactly what she needed, a place where she could discard her public persona at the door - like a coat tossed onto a handy peg - and take refuge in a place where she could review the information from the case to her heart's content, without worrying about what anyone might see or think.

Lucky that Brian Kinney had an almost obsessive desire for privacy - sometimes.

She smiled when she thought about it: sometimes - when he had no interest in throwing his arrogance and defiance into the faces of whoever he might choose to offend, at any given moment. At any rate, the secluded, private entrance to the Kinnetic office building was easily accessible, but only so long as one knew exactly where it was and exactly how to use it.

She keyed in the appropriate pass codes in order to disengage the digital lock on the exterior door and temporarily suspend the intruder alarm, but only after taking a good look around to be sure that no one was watching and then checking the status on the security scanner to confirm that the alleyway around her was as deserted as it appeared. Never let it be said that Brian Kinney would tolerate anything less than state-of-the-art technology in his determination to protect his royal realm, of which Kinnetik was the crown jewel. Thus she was careful to make certain that none of the protocols had been breeched before she turned and waved a dismissing hand at the figure waiting in a dark vehicle at the end of the alley.
She moved inside quickly, just as her partner drove away into the night, intent on pursuing a few leads on his own - or something. Actually, she was not sure that what he was actually pursuing was not a gorgeous, arrogant, incredibly complex representative of the medical profession, but - if he was - it could not be argued that he had no right to a little down time of his own.

Nobody had worked harder to explore all the nooks and crannies of this investigation than Jared Hilliard, and everybody deserved a little break once in a while.

Including her, she thought ruefully. Only - unlike her current partner - she had not recently come across anyone with whom she wanted to share her intimate moments. Not for a very long time. But she didn't waste any time lamenting the solitude of her life, because she had more important things to do. Still, she couldn't resist a tiny smile as her mind wandered back to the semi-halcyon days of her youth, when she had believed in fairy tales, when she had been perfectly willing to see Brian Kinney as the hero of her own version of Sleeping Beauty, when she hadn't yet come to terms with who she really was - or who he really was. Days of innocence - or stupidity, said an immediately recognizable sardonic voice rising from her not quite sub-conscious mind. The smile became an impatient sigh, as she reminded herself that she needed to maintain her focus and remember that there were a few things that needed to be checked out, and that this was a perfect time for it. She had worked the early shift today, and concluded her duties at The Club with time to spare, and Rachel Charles - her landlady and housemate - would still be working for several more hours, leaving Sharon, AKA Shirley, enough free time to find a few answers to some puzzling questions.

When she stepped into the soft shadows of the private entry of the building, she tried to tell herself that she wasn't really feeling an actual, physical sensation of tension draining from her body; then she smiled. She could deny it all she liked, but denial changed nothing. The soft lighting, the pleasant warmth, the faint but distinctive fragrance of citrus blended with subtle spices - a natural aroma that attested to the exquisite taste of a man who would not tolerate any variety of artificial air freshener although he could, on occasion, be convinced to sample the delights of praline-scented candles - all of the details of the office provided a sense of welcome, of belonging, of comfort. A rare effect in a commercial establishment.

On the other hand, maybe it was just that it all spoke to her familiarity with its owner. This was Brian Kinney's domain - a place where she would always feel welcome, unless she ever screwed it up and found herself on his shit list, in which case all the pleasant scents, comfortable warmth, or easy lighting in the world would not compensate for the kind of cold fury that the man could generate, almost on demand. Thus, that shit list would forever remain a place where she definitely did not wish to be.

Here, secure within the environment that Brian provided, she could always relax, always abandon the public persona and simply be herself and bask in the moment. Such an effect was, of course, not a primary motivation for her desire to solve this case and protect the victim of such savagery, but as an added bonus, it was nothing to sneeze at.

She made her way into the primary security office and hung her leather jacket on a convenient peg by the door. As she’d expected, the office was minimally staffed; it was, after all, virtually the middle of the night, on a week-end. Thus, only one of Lance Mathis' staff members - a brawny young college student named Kyle Owens - was seated at the CCTV monitoring station, dividing his time between keen oversight of the security system's all-inclusive views of the premises and jotting down notes from an array of textbooks scattered across his desk. In addition, another man - uniformed and less brawny, but more intimidating somehow - was just making his exit through the doorway that led to the main section of the building. Sam Delaney was ready to make his rounds, his route and schedule completely random and thus impossible to anticipate or predict as motion sensors located at strategic points throughout the structure tracked his progress.
Briggs smiled. Lance Mathis had trained his people extremely well.

"Kyle," she said softly, by way of greeting.

"Ma'am," he replied politely, running one hand through thick ash blonde hair and flashing a smile that probably gained him a lot of attention from a lot of buxom young coeds, "you're getting to be a regular around here."

He did not actually know her name - better that way for all concerned - but he knew enough to maintain a respectful demeanor and to put two and two together and not come up with seven.

She smiled. "Best working conditions in the whole city," she explained, before heading toward the small coffee bar behind the desk. "Not to mention, the best coffee."

His smile broadened into a grin. "Hey. We work for Brian Kinney. Can you imagine anybody having the nerve to serve him anything less than the best?"

"Good point," she admitted. "Has any new data come through?"

"Two new files," he answered. "Big ones, by the look of them."

She paused, vaguely alarmed. "Kyle, you didn't look at them, did you?"

He put on a pout, and she almost laughed, because it made him look much more like a ten-year-old accused of stealing from the cookie jar than a young man on the brink of maturity and already on a short list for acceptance into an FBI training program. "No, Ma'am. Mr. Mathis made it clear that those files are strictly need-to-know, and I don't qualify. Besides, I don't have the encryption key, and don't really want it, if you know what I mean."

She turned to study his face - a quite lovely face, she thought, with high cheekbones and an adorable cleft chin, if such things even remotely interested her. They didn't, but she was certainly self-aware enough to note that it was rather a shame sometimes. Still, one couldn't manufacture interest where none existed, but she was curious at the note of sadness she'd heard in his voice. "What do you mean?"

He did not quite shudder, but she thought it was a near thing. "I can't . . . I don't understand how anyone could do the kind of things that these bastards did to him. And I'm not sure I want to, if you get my drift."

"I do," she answered gently, "but you're going into a profession that specializes in ugliness, Kyle, and you're not going to like a lot of things that you see. Have you thought of that? If I recall correctly, you want to study profiling - right? That's not exactly a walk in the park, you know."

This time his smile was slightly scapegrace. "I know. I'm a complete contradiction in terms, and it does bother me a little bit. In one way, I'd prefer never having to confront the kind of gruesome horror that compels monsters like these to do the things they do, but . . . if everyone feels that way and behaves that way, well . . . then who's going to stop them?"

She nodded, understanding exactly what he meant. Sometimes, all she really wanted to do was run to her home and bury her head under silken covers and never venture out into the ugliness again. Sometimes . . . but not tonight.

"Have you ever made an effort to talk to Chris McClaren?" she asked.

He turned back to his monitors, watching as Sam Delaney made his way across the front lobby to
test the primary entrance. "Not really," he replied, careful to keep his voice non-committal. "He's always been too busy."

Briggs grinned. "When they get back, you talk to him. I'm pretty sure he'll be glad to spare a moment, for you."

Exquisite eyes - parti-colored but leaning toward deep charcoal gray - turned to study her, obviously curious. But she just winked and went about her business, confident that McClaren and his very discriminating eye would be charmed by young Owens and his diffidence - among other things. Carrying her perfectly prepared coffee - one sugar and one dash of hazelnut creamer (she could only imagine Brian's shudder of distaste) - she entered the tiny office that had been set aside for this specific investigation and secured against busybody intervention by anyone not authorized to enter.

She took a moment to catch her breath and enjoy her coffee as she settled at one of the two beautifully-equipped work stations in the small office. It was rare for her to sit and take a moment to relax, and she was suddenly extremely aware of a bone-deep weariness that she seldom allowed herself to acknowledge.

Suppressing an urge to sigh, she quickly clicked the remote for the Bose system, calling up Regina Belle's lovely version of *Dream in Color*, as she logged in on the secure server and opened the new files forwarded from the FBI team. One glance confirmed that young Owens had been absolutely correct in his observation; both were enormous, which indicated that she and her partner had guessed correctly about Henry Flagg. He might very well provide all the evidence they needed to bring this investigation to a satisfactory close, and to bring down the mighty fortress that The Club perceived itself to be.

The first file was a massive spreadsheet tracing funds in and out of the various accounts overseen by Flagg, interesting primarily because of the vast sums involved and the speed at which it was shifted and disbursed. It was immediately obvious that this was no simple social organization, but tracing all the financial transfers, from a stunning plethora of sources to an equally complex array of destinations, was not something that she was equipped to do. That she would leave to the accountants and the computer gurus.

The second file was, perhaps, less factual or vital to the purpose of the investigation, but far more colorful and historically interesting, including various accounts of the history of the organization and the individuals who had been integral to its development and continued existence. There were even scraps of diary entries by the original founder and his descendants, and a quick perusal convinced Sharon that she would need to find the time, before the end of this investigation, to read through the manuscript, always providing she could decipher the faded and semi-flamboyant handwriting. The original documents had been scanned with meticulous attention to detail, but faded ink was still faded ink, and only CGI enhancement would make it more legible - an idea she might very well explore at a later date.

For now, she had to confine her study to more easily accessible, more immediate events and facts - things that might provide clues concerning the case and hints about new directions to take in the conduct of the investigation. Things like sponsorship of specific events and causes, as in strenuous, albeit discreet, opposition to Proposition 14, massive support of a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage, and a truly staggering financial commitment to the senatorial campaign of ultra-right wing city councilman Laurence Beddoes, who would, within a few years, become nationally known as a bosom buddy and political confidant of a certain female, gun-toting, deer-hunting, malaprop-prone, lip-sticked pit bull, who would also happen to be a transient semi-governor of a great state of the far North.
Briggs shuddered to imagine what might have happened had that campaign succeeded as she recalled the councilman's campaign pledges regarding Liberty Avenue. Luckily, the voters of Pennsylvania had recognized the threat and refused to be affected by attempts to promote homophobia, under the guise of "Christian family values". She sighed as she conceded that it remained to be seen whether or not the population of the whole country would prove to be that smart.

She sipped at her coffee, pausing to grab a couple of Advil from a bottle in the desk drawer, to beat back the beginning of a headache just flaring behind her eyes, and forced herself to concentrate on the information at hand. This was no time for philosophical speculation, even though what she was reading was almost impossible to swallow without some sort of constructed response. The assumptions and fundamental creed of this group was anathema to her - counter to everything she believed - but she could not deny that they were extremely clever in their attempts to disguise their bigotry as adherence to religious dogma and genuine concern for the welfare of the general public. Opposition to adoption by gay couples was voiced as philanthropic solicitude for the welfare of the children in question. The drive to prohibit gay marriage was predicated on the assumption that the fundamental family unit would be destroyed before a flood of depravity and immorality - that gays would, if given a chance, take over the world and pervert it for their own uses.

Further reading revealed that Club members were equally opposed to financial aid for the poor, government oversight of financial institutions, universal healthcare, liberal immigration laws, and foreign aid - unless, of course, it was distributed in order to assure an endless supply of fossil fuels.

As she read on, she began to wonder if there were any right-wing causes that The Club had not supported during its long life. It had been particularly active in efforts to prolong segregation, to support virulent anti-Communist witchhunts of the 50's, and to defeat the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. In addition, it had funded demonstrations opposing Pro-Choice and gay rights and gun control and supporting capital punishment.

She sighed. "A long and glorious history," she muttered, "if your name happens to be Joe McCarthy."

"You do know," said a disembodied voice from the shadowed hallway, "that talking to yourself is the first sign of dementia."

She smiled. "Are you spying on me, Emmett?"

The tall, slender nelly-bottom swept into the office with a characteristic swish. "Don't be silly, mon ami. Maybe - if you were wearing one of those fabulous, trademark Sharon Briggs fashions to-die-for, I might stoop to snoop, but drab little kitchen-maid scrubs? Not remotely my style, Darling."

Sharon let her eyes sweep down his body, noting tight, beige leather pants and a tangerine-colored silk shirt, and her smile became a broad grin. "Point taken," she admitted. "Now what the hell are you doing here? Shouldn't you be getting ready for the early rush at Babylon?"

"It's a little too early yet," said Drew Boyd, stepping in behind the man who had increasingly become the focal point of his life. "And with Cynthia temporarily out of the picture, we make it a point to stop by here every evening. Just to touch base, and . . ."

"And?" she prodded, when it became obvious he was not planning to complete the thought.

"And," said Emmett gently, "to remind anyone who might be interested - or tempted - that Brian Kinney doesn't stand alone. That there are others willing to step forward."
The undercover policewoman nodded, and turned back to her computer screen, wondering whether or not she should voice the question that was crying out to be asked.

"What about Ted?" There was, she figured, no point in beating around the bush.

Emmett did not meet her eyes. "His access has been restricted."

She nodded, easily identifying the despair that lay beneath his clipped response. "And how are you dealing with that?"

Emmett dropped into a chair at the adjacent desk and regarded her with a tiny frown. "I don't know," he admitted. "I would never have believed that I'd doubt him. But sometimes, I don't think I know who he is anymore. I mean, for years and years - and even more years, Brian was our..." He sighed, and clasped his hands in front of him, pausing for a moment to inspect the status of his manicure and consider his choice of words. "He was our scapegoat," he said finally, very flatly. "He was our whipping boy, for everything that ever went wrong. If life sucked, we could always find something to blame Brian for. If our feelings were hurt, or if Michael was upset because he didn't think Brian was paying enough attention to him, or if we wanted to do something but Brian was the only one of us who could afford it. In short, whatever ugly, bothersome circumstance happened in our lives, we could always take comfort from blaming Brian. And don't misunderstand me; sometimes he deserved it, because, well, you know as well as I do, Sharon, that he can be the world's biggest asshole - when he wants to be. But it really didn't matter if he deserved it or not, because we blamed him anyway. For everything, even if he might not have anything to do with the original cause, but it... it was always a comfort. And Brian... he never even seemed to notice. Although now I think I know better. I think he always noticed, and just chose to take whatever we dished out. Because he could. Because he was strong enough, tough enough to deal with it, and let us take comfort from it." His smile was slightly tenuous. "How sick is that - really? But now, it's not the same anymore. Because there's no way to deny that Brian has earned the right to be treated better. And Ted... it's almost as if he can't stand the thought that we should have known better - that we were wrong, that Brian was better than that."

She turned once more to stare at her computer, but her mind was still caught up in mulling over what he'd said. "You mean that his belief in himself depended on being able to feel superior to Brian?"

Emmett huffed a sigh. "Yeah. In a way. Morally superior, anyway. Maybe even intellectually, in a strange, limited way. And now..."

"Now," said Drew Boyd, not bothering to hide a nuance of anger, "he's having to deal with the fact that his so-called superiority was all in his mind."

"Drew," said Emmett gently, "Ted's just... confused. He's a good man. He really is, but..."

"Yeah," replied the football player, without a single nuance of sympathy. "A good man. The very same good man that once called you... what was it? A piece of trash from Hazlehurst, Mississippi - was that it? At a time when you were trying to help him shake off a drug addiction."

"Yeah," Emmett admitted. "But he didn't mean it."

Drew moved closer and laid a gentle hand on Emmett's shoulder. "After the fact, maybe he remembered that he didn't mean it. But at the time he said it, he did, and I think you'll realize that, if you think about it a bit. He was using something against you - something that you felt inside - that he'd picked up from knowing you so well, and that's just dirty pool, in my book. You don't say something like that to someone unless it's coming from your heart, as you say it. And his attitude
toward Brian was genuine too. Because it's always easy to offer regrets, after the fact. I'm not about to try to defend the Brian of the past; I didn't know him then, did I? But I know him now, and what I see when I look at him is a man who refuses to pretend to be anything other than what he is. I have no doubt that he can be arrogant and annoying as shit, but anyone who is that honest, that frank about who he is, deserves a lot more than playing target for people who need an outlet for their frustration.

"But Drew," Emmett replied softly, "I did it too."

"And are you proud of it?"

"No, but . . ."

"And would you do it again?"

"God, no."

"Okay then. One final question. Given the chance, would Ted do it again?"

Emmett's silence spoke volumes.

"I rest my case," Drew said softly, as he dropped a kiss on the top of Emmett's head.

Sharon Briggs was regarding them both with fond smiles. "I thought football players were supposed to be dumb jocks," she laughed.

Emmett just smiled, but Boyd responded with a quick snicker. "I'm going to let that pass, since I've yet to figure just which one of your personalities is the real thing - socialite or psycho. But, assuming that you're engaged in reviewing information for the case, could you use some help?"

"If it's safe to assume that Babylon will survive your absence for a couple of hours, I could use some extra eyes and, maybe, a different perspective. There's an awful lot of data here." Grateful for the assistance, she transferred several sub-files to the computer on the desk where Emmett was seated before returning to her swift but thorough review of the data already showing on her monitor.

As it happened, it was only a matter of minutes before Emmett spotted something interesting - something that might prove valuable, hiding, so to speak, in plain sight.

"Did you take a look at some of the older membership lists?" he asked, nodding toward a spreadsheet displaying a column of names and addresses, dated 1996.

She rose and moved to stand behind him, leaning forward to read the notation that he'd highlighted.

R. J. Peterson III, 229 Claridge Rd, Mt. Lebanon, Pa.

"Well, I'll be damned," she said with a grin. "I wouldn't have thought he was the type."

"Maybe he wasn't," Emmett answered. "His name isn't on the current roster, is it?"

"No. I'd have noticed."

"In that case, it might be safe to assume there were some philosophical differences that resulted in a parting of the ways."

Briggs once more looked at the name and address that had caught his attention. "Same address, I think. But it would be, wouldn't it? Family home, old money, and all." She paused, mentally
exploring the possibilities. "I know he's had some problems coming to terms with the gay issue, but I find it hard to believe that he could have anything in common with these cretins. I don't think Lindsey could have come from that kind of environment, do you?"

Emmett took a deep breath. "I don't know, Honey. Have you met her mother? She's pretty . . .
toxic."

Briggs laughed. "Then maybe the membership was her idea."

Emmett nodded. "Wouldn't surprise me. That woman makes my dick shrivel up and go looking for a place to hide."

Drew Boyd grinned, slipping an arm around Emmett's shoulders, obviously determined to keep "that woman" as far away from his companion as possible, as he added, "The old man might have just been one of those husbands who goes along with whatever the little wifey wants. But - given how he's been behaving during this whole debacle - I think he might have mellowed. Or something might have happened that provided a wake-up call."

She sank back into her chair. "Is Lindsey still at the hotel?"

"For now," Emmett answered. "Pending something more permanent."

"Such as?"

Emmett grinned. "What do you think?"

She didn't have to think very long to come up with an elementary truth. "I think that Brian Kinney has already instructed you to look for a better place for her and his son."

Emmett nodded. "Pending her approval, of course."

"Had any luck?"

He sighed. "Not yet. House-hunting is time consuming, and I've been a little busy. Lindsey has looked around a bit, on her own, but Brian isn't comfortable with leaving her to find the right place." He grinned abruptly. "He might have grown up a lot, but he's still a primo control freak, and no way is he going to sit back and let someone else scope out the perfect place for Lindsey and Gus. Still, I do need to find something, ASAP, considering that he is definitely not famous for his patience. He also mentioned it to Cynthia, but she's had her hands full running Kinnetik, especially since Teddie is - well, you know."

Briggs thought for a moment; then she scribbled something down on a notepad and passed it to him.

"What's this?"

"Realtor," she answered. "He oversees the townhouse complex where I live, when I manage to dispense with all the alter-egos and find my way home. It's quiet, elegant, very exclusive, beautifully designed - a gated community where the security is state of the art. There's a big park with lots of playgrounds for the neighborhood kids and a community center with pool and tennis courts and gym, and some of the best private schools in the state are nearby. Then it was her turn to grin. "It might be a bit on the conventional side, for our avant garde Mr. Kinney, but I'll bet Lindsey would love it, and so would Gus."

Emmett grinned. "I think you just said the magic word. If Gus loves it, his daddy will just have to grin and bear it."
"I wonder," said Briggs, softly sitting back in her chair, her eyes unfocused and lost in the shadows around them. "Do you suppose he'd talk to us? Ron Peterson, I mean. Do you think he'd be able to sever all those good-old-boy connections and fill in some blanks for us?"

"Depends on how you approach him," said Emmett. Then he smiled. "Or who asks him."

Abruptly, Briggs stood up and grabbed her handbag from the desk, already moving toward the door.

"Where are you . . ."

"Never too late for a visit with an old friend," she called back over her shoulder as she disappeared into the hallway.

"She's very focused, isn't she?" remarked Boyd, settling into the chair she'd vacated.

"Ummm." Emmett was thoughtful. "Yeah. She is. Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"She has a tendency to ignore details that don't quite fit into her view of the way things ought to be."

"Such as?"

Emmett smiled. "Well, I've only heard this second-hand, you understand. I wasn't around at the time. But I don't think she and Lindsey were ever exactly friends."

"No? Why not?"

The smile faltered, and then reformed, as a gigantic grin. "Let's just say that there was one major, Colossus-sized bone of contention between them."

"Which was . . ."

"Yep. You guessed it. In the gospel according to Michael Novotny, they fought a huge, take-no-prisoners, world-class war over something that neither one of them ever had a prayer of having. Namely, one arrogant, smug, self-serving bastard named Brian Kinney."

"Oh. You mean he . . . he never told them . . ."

The grin became a snort of laughter. "Oh, he told them, all right. That's never changed. Brian's never tried to hide who he is. Only they thought - they both thought - that he just hadn't met the right girl - the one who could change him, make him see the light and become the man he was meant to be, the man they both wanted him to be. And that was despite the fact that Lindsey, at least, already knew how she swung. It didn't make much sense, really, but he was like some kind of . . . challenge to them. Like the brass ring they were both determined to grab, even though he had no interest in being grabbed."

"And he just let them fight it out?"

Emmett, by this time, was laughing steadily. "Let them? Shit, I'd bet good money that he got off on it. I mean, think about it, Drew; who wouldn't? Two beautiful, intelligent, cultured women, fighting over the self-proclaimed stud of Liberty Avenue. I know his ego never really needed stroking, but he had to get a kick out of it, didn't he?"

"So . . . what? This is going to be a rematch?"
"Oh, I doubt that," Emmett replied. "He doesn't have the patience for that kind of nonsense any more. But it ought to be interesting, nevertheless."

Drew nodded, and spent a moment thinking over all he'd heard. "Soooo," he said finally, "do you think he ever sampled the merchandise?"

Emmett grinned. "I don't think Brian Kinney ever - ever - turned his back on anything without finding out - at least once - what exactly he was going to be missing."

"So you think he managed to get it up for Lindsey?"

"Drew," Emmett replied with a droll smirk. "He was twenty years old. He could have gotten it up for a knothole in a hickory tree, for God's sake."

The football player chuckled. "Sooooo . . . Lindsey?"

Emmett nodded. "I think so. He's never said exactly; nor has she. But, once in a while, one of them will make some remark that seems to suggest . . . something. He once referred to her as 'midsummer madness'. Not completely sure what that meant, but sometimes, there's something . . . Can't quite define it, can I, but it's there anyway. And he's still . . ."

"Still what?"

Emmett sighed. "In some ways - maybe in all ways - for Lindsey, he's still the one that got away."

Boyd fell silent again, his eyes dark and filled with speculation. "Tough on her partner," he observed.

"Yeah," Emmett agreed, "that was Melanie's initial reason for hating Brian, because he got there first - either figuratively or literally, and I'm not sure that even Melanie knows which. And then there was the whole thing about Lindsey wanting him to be Gus's father, when Melanie had a different idea. Seems she has a bunch of first cousins, and she'd made up her mind that one of them should be the sperm donor, or - if that didn't work out - even an anonymous contribution from a sperm bank, but Lindsey . . . well, you can probably guess what she said to that. She was determined that she was going to have Brian Kinney's child, no matter what, and Melanie couldn't convince her otherwise. So reason number two, on a list that ultimately proved to be infinite. Still, despite all that, Melanie had her chance. Don't make the mistake of thinking that Brian deliberately caused the rift between Lindsey and Melanie, even if he didn't always make an effort to try to resolve it. But Mel chose to make Brian an issue, when Lindsey would have eventually resigned herself to letting him go."

"Really?"

Again, Emmett sighed. "Well, mostly. Maybe."

Unexpectedly, Boyd laughed. "He really is a loose cannon, isn't he?"

"Yeah." Emmett's voice revealed a strange, slightly abashed nuance of pride and approval, threaded through a foundation of rueful but steady resolve. "He really is."

Boyd leaned forward and studied the expression in lovely green eyes. "And you really like him, don't you?"

Emmett's smile was warm and natural. "Yeah, I do."

Then he paused, and his eyes went wide as he sat up straight, almost stiff. "Oh, my God!" he
breathed. "My God! I do. I really, really do. And that's just . . . amazing."

And totally unexpected. He really liked Brian Kinney - not tolerated, not indulged, not envied, not lusted after (well, not only lusted after).

He liked Brian Kinney, and was only just now realizing it. Somewhere, between where they'd been just a few months ago and where they were now, Brian had stopped being a close acquaintance and become a friend. A very good friend. Or even . . . could it really be that, at some strange moment when Emmett had not been paying attention, Brian Kinney had become family?

What on earth was the world coming to?

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

The "loose cannon" in question was currently engaged in trying to find new and original insults to fling at his physical therapist who, Brian was convinced, had missed his true calling as a willing and eager assistant to the Marquis de Sade.

"Can you explain to me," he snarled, as Jackson concentrated on working the muscles of his lower back, "why I'm lying here grunting and sweating and - ouch, Goddamit! - enduring the tortures of the damned, on a Saturday evening when I should be out enjoying the spring warmth of the beach and the pleasure of ogling my lover's gorgeous ass?"

Jackson did not answer immediately, focusing instead on a particularly stubborn knot at the base of his patient's spine. "Two reasons," he said finally, after achieving his goal of eliciting another harsh grunt from Brian. "A - this is Saturday, which means it's not part of the regular schedule, which means that - just this once - you have to accommodate yourself to my schedule, rather than the other way around. I do have a life, you know - stuff that happens outside the orbit of the great and powerful Brian Kinney. And B - because your narcissistic ego manages to overcome your flagrant hedonistic tendencies sufficiently to insist that you submit to this so-called torture, in order to make sure that your body is as perfect in fact as it is in your mind."

With deceptive ease, the therapist shifted Brian and rolled him over on his side in order to concentrate on a tender area low on his hip. "Ouch!" Brian snapped, suddenly remembering something from the earliest days of his involuntary exile. "Hey, wasn't I originally supposed to have a female therapist? Why are you even here?"

"If you'd prefer a woman . . ."

The grin was immediate, and only slightly lecherous. "Never gonna happen. But at least a woman wouldn't throw me around like a sack of potatoes."

Jackson's smile was somewhat lopsided. "I'd have figured you'd like being 'thrown around'."

"Not my style, Mate," the patient retorted. "But seriously, didn't somebody tell me my therapist would be . . ."

"Yeah. Somebody did. Her name is Janet Lormand, and she was scheduled to do your therapy. But she had an accident - nailed by a hit-and-run driver on the I-40 - and wound up in intensive care. Still recovering, I hear, so she sure wasn't in any shape to deal with you and your attitude."

Brian glared. "This pillow stinks."

Jackson shifted slightly to concentrate on the tendons and muscles of the upper thigh. "Yeah, you said that already - a few hundred times. Tell you what. If you behave yourself and let me finish up
here - without a major queen-out - I promise I'll buy you a brand new pillow of your very own, before your therapy is finished."

"I do not queen out. Ever."

Jackson opted to ignore the disclaimer, his silence more than adequate to express his disdain.

"Now that's something you don't see every day," said Cynthia from the doorway where she stood smiling while breathing deep to enjoy the heady aroma of the Brandy Alexander which Trina had prepared for her.

If she'd hoped to get a rise out of Brian, she was doomed to disappointment. "Nothing you haven't seen before," he replied. " Comes with the territory."

She grinned. "One of the perks, actually. Money, power, prestige . . . and an occasional glimpse of the legendary package. What more could a woman want?"

For a moment, he debated whether or not to be annoyed; then he smiled. "Since you're not streaking in here with a towel in a panic to cover up the family jewels, I'm assuming that Katy and Gus are otherwise occupied."

"Mr. Peterson is educating them about tidal pools, while Gus is tossing shells at sea gulls and Katy is paying attention with one ear, while simultaneously demonstrating how to dance with her custom-designed Mary Poppins umbrella," she answered, moving into the room and settling into a ridiculously comfortable, faded old armchair. "And they're having a ball. It's a shame he was born rich. He'd have made a hell of a teacher."

"He made a pretty fair investment banker," Brian retorted, before pausing to take a deep, pained breath and glaring his resentment at his unrepentant torturer.

Cynthia studied her boss's face, reading something in his expression - pre-glare - and was briefly astonished - and inordinately pleased - to realize that she had finally achieved success in something she had once expected to remain forever beyond her reach; she had finally learned to 'read' Brian Kinney, not exactly like a book, perhaps, but well enough to sense when he was keeping something to himself. And better - just maybe - than almost anyone else, up to and including the young man who had managed to become the center of Brian's existence.

Then she smiled. Yes - definitely better than Justin, a truth that was proven by the fact that said young man did not yet understand what he had achieved.

"He's changed," she said softly. "Hasn't he?"

Brian turned to study her face, knowing, somehow, that - even though it had been phrased in the form of a question - it wasn't actually a request for information. More a search for confirmation. "Yeah. He has."

"A pretty big change, if I'm any judge."

His smile this time was rueful. "Gigantic."

She debated pushing for more information, but decided against it. The look in his eyes was sufficient proof that he had said all he meant to say. Then he changed the subject - bluntly, as was his wont - and the moment was past.

"When you get back," he said firmly, "I want you to get in touch with the halfway house, the one
over on McMillan Avenue. Justin will give you the number." He smiled then, and she was mildly amused to spot a nuance of embarrassment in his eyes. "Apparently, there's a resident there who will prove to be completely indispensable to our operation."

"Justin's new best friend?"

"Yeah. Although I think I'll reserve judgment until I see for myself, but . . ."

"What exactly am I supposed to do with the guy?" she asked, as a distant rumble of thunder vibrated against the bay window behind her.

"Put him to work. According to Justin, he makes the best coffee in the civilized world. Better than Emmett. Even better than Trina. If that's true . . ."

She laughed softly. "You want me to hire him, for his coffee."

Brian shrugged. "I've hired people for less."

Remembering a parade of pretty - but transient - faces, she could not disagree.

"Okay. You're the boss. And speaking of that . . ."

Jackson repositioned Brian again, back onto his stomach where he could bury his face in the squishy surface of the much-maligned pillow. "Yeah," he sighed. "I know. How much trouble is he giving you?"

She sipped at her drink, and had to resist an urge to roll her eyes to express her delight over the ambrosial taste. "He's not. Not overtly, anyway. Mostly, he's just . . . silent. It's like having a ghost on the premises. Normally, he doesn't actually speak to me at all. Everything is done via e-mail memo, and mostly through a third party."

"But he's doing his job?"

"What's left of it," she sighed. Then she took a deep breath. "You do realize that you're still paying him a small fortune for . . ."

"For basic computer data entry?" he interrupted. "Yeah. I know."

"And so does he," she pointed out. "He's got to be wondering, Brian. Look, I know he hasn't done anything to deserve a break, but . . ."

"Leave it, Tink," he said finally, suppressing a gasp as Jackson hit a particularly tender spot. "I still haven't decided - I still don't know where to go from here. He fucked up this time; that's for sure. But other times . . . other times, he's come through for me, so I need time to think."

"Okay," she said with a smile, somehow relieved that it wasn't easy for him to dismiss old loyalties and make decisions based entirely on recent events. Once more, she wondered if any of the so-called experts on the life and times of Brian Kinney really knew him as well as they thought they did.

She stood and stepped forward, just close enough to lay a quick, barely-there caress on his shoulder, which elicited a fleeting look of surprise on his face, followed by an even more fleeting expression of indulgence.

"They're lighting a bonfire next door, and playing Nickelback and Aerosmith at a volume guaranteed to lead to hearing loss," she said as she turned to go. "A perfect opportunity to witness the
quintessential American orgy, providing the storm holds off long enough." Another thunderous rumbling emphasized her point. "You coming out soon?"

"Yeah," he grunted, as Jackson continued to work on knotted muscles. "Just as soon as the Grand Inquisitor is finished inflicting maximum torture for minimal benefit."

The therapist continued his work, unperturbed, but did look up and glance at Cynthia with a long-suffering grimace. "About ten minutes, Ms. Whitney," he assured her.

She nodded and moved toward the door, where she paused, sensing . . . something. Then Brian groaned and snarled a few well-chosen curse words, and whatever it was that had glimmered for a moment in her peripheral consciousness simply danced away from her grasp.

She shrugged and continued on her way, savoring her drink and wondering where Lance Mathis had gotten off to, to enjoy his own sample of liquid ambrosia.

Ah, yes. There he was, leaning against the railing of the deck, gazing off toward the East where the stars were disappearing before the encroachment of clouds moving in from the North. Tendrils of swirling mist were just rising above the deeper waters of the bay, and he appeared to be studying the growing cloud, perhaps trying to gauge whether or not it would move ashore. He was doing what he was expected to do: watching - always watching.

He turned to greet her as she called his name, and - back in the torture chamber - Brian listened for a moment to the murmur of voices, and managed to ignore another jolt of pain in his spinal column long enough to enjoy a tiny surge of satisfaction.

In life, as he knew better than most, things didn't always work out well. Shit! That was probably the understatement of the century. But - once in a while, if the gods were not feeling particularly vengeful, or if the laws of probability were sufficiently distracted - luck stole a moment to step in and nudge random chance in the right direction.

It wasn't a particularly emphatic affirmation of the joys of life, but, given what life had done to him lately, he would take whatever he could get.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~
I was cryin' when I met you.
Now I'm tryin' to forget you.
Your love is sweet misery.
I was cryin' just to get you.
Now I'm dyin' cause I let you
Do what you do to me. *

The music was not quite painfully loud to those sprawled on the deck of the cottage or patrolling its perimeter, especially those accustomed to the deafening thumpa-thumpa of Babylon at maximum volume, but Chris McClaren was pretty sure that the revelers dancing now around the bonfire at the neighboring beach house were only insulated from the discomfort by blood alcohol levels which had long since bade a cheerful farewell to legal limits for intoxication. This was attested to by the constantly escalating state of undress of many of the participants in the revel, and the vocal renderings of three young men, all apparently convinced that they had been cheated of their rightful claim to musical glory by the bitter heartlessness of life and only needed a break in order to out-Tyler the consistently amazing on-key bellow of the Aerosmith front man, as the shriek of their disharmony succeeded only in drowning out the lead singer's voice.
Luckily, they were far enough away from the secure compound that their words and actions were nothing more than a noisy din to the two children who were still happily interacting with the adults on the deck, pigging out on the corn dogs and fries and milkshakes that Trina had provided for them, as opposed to the barbequed ribs, baked beans, slaw and German potato salad that the adults had scarfed down. Even Brian had overeaten - just a bit.

Gus was semi-hyper by the time the meal was done, and Brian floundered for a bit, looking for a way to calm him down, but a huge box of Legos which Trina dug out of a closet solved the problem. Thus, the child entertained himself with designing and assembling some kind of angular vehicle, while Katy patiently explained to Brian that her umbrella - bright red and sequin-crusted and ribbon-bedecked - was her own unique version of what Mary Poppins should have carried, instead of that dowdy old black thing.

To the delight of both Cynthia and Justin, Brian was appropriately vocal in expressing his appreciation of her creative skills. And Katy, of course, was beaming.

The conversation on the deck grew desultory and sporadic as the evening wore on, and everybody was content to watch the growing light show in the clouds out over the ocean. The mist was moving in now, obscuring the promontory and the lighthouse, as the steady flicker of lightening off to the northeast suggested that the weather was on the verge of shifting and that the neighboring bonfire might be short-lived.

It had been a long, busy day, and Gus finally settled himself into the narrow niche at his father's side, apparently content to claim his place within the circle of Brian's arm and allow Justin, seated astride Brian's lap, to share sinfully rich bites of Black Forest cake with both father and son. If anyone among the group found it odd that the little boy could be so completely relaxed and accepting of the relationship between Brian and Justin without any reservations, obviously seeing it as natural and right and in keeping with the way things ought to be, it went unmentioned if not unnoticed. What did not escape the notice of anyone present was that Brian seemed more relaxed, more content . . . Cynthia even allowed herself to think the word, happier . . . than anyone had seen him in a very long time.

Everyone present felt slightly comforted - lighter and easier - for watching his interactions with his son and his lover and experiencing the warmth of his smile, and Cynthia was reminded of a comment she'd once heard Ted Schmidt make - a comment that was half admiration and half-snark, but true enough either way.

As Brian Kinney goes, so goes the world.

Trina had just emerged from the cottage with another round of her delicious brandy concoction and hot chocolate for the children when there was a strange, piercing whistle, and a loud but oddly muffled whumphf-ing sound, followed by a raucous eruption of shouts and screams from the direction of the bonfire next door, and everyone on the deck jumped up and looked around to see what had happened.

One glance was all it took to figure it out - the what, if not the why and how.

Situated against the dilapidated fence that marked the border between the two properties, a ramshackle storage building leaned against a rusted framework - a sad sagging structure, composed of a ragtag collection of metal and wood, that had been used as a repository for a clutter of items that the owners of the adjacent property had discarded over the years. Old machine parts, broken tools, scraps of fishing nets, rusted pails, torn canvas, rumpled panels of metal sheeting, a plethora of useless items - and old barrels, sealed up but gradually rusting away. Some empty, some not.
The young crowd had merely been exhibiting the exuberance of youth and freedom - drinking, carousing - make-out sessions resulting in the occasional fuck - and, in the spirit of the moment, opening up a few packs of fireworks, bought to celebrate the holiday week-end and tossed into the fire, without a single thought of consequences.

Even at that, the resultant whizzes and bangs and sparks and flares would have been a minor concern, resulting in nothing worse than an occasional patch of burned skin from a firecracker exploding at an inconvenient moment or a flashfire rising from a spark falling into a nest of oversprayed hair or - at worst - a blaze erupting in a patch of sea grass. Except, of course - in an almost inevitable prime example of the principles of Murphy's Law - one of the items in question, a slightly over-sized bottle rocket, erupted from the bonfire like a guided missile and streaked directly across the yard before threading through a gap in the metal framework of the old shed where it impacted against a stack of broken lawn chairs and showered sparks into the rear corner, directly atop the group of barrels and their leaking chemical contents.

The resulting explosion was loud, startling, and sufficiently impressive to cause windows to rattle in both houses as the ground shook. Flames erupted into the night and leapt skyward as the young crowd began to scream and shout for help, most of them lacking the presence of mind to make any kind of attempt to assess or control the damage.

At the same time, the group gathered on the deck in the adjacent house, including Brian and his guests, all recognized the need for immediate action to prevent a true disaster, and raced forward, pausing only to gather up appropriate equipment to attempt to put out the fire, while some of the security patrol called in for emergency aid.

Brian hesitated just long enough to instruct Gus and Katy to get inside and stay there, before racing off toward the fire, his first priority to make sure that Justin and Cynthia, both of whom had taken off ahead of him, were not at risk. A determined effort allowed him to catch up to Justin and make him understand, with one sharp word, that protecting Cynthia was his primary responsibility; then he plunged into the effort to extinguish the fire and calm the young people who were on the verge of a full-fledged riot.

Most of the college students, both male and female, were frightened out of their wits and in dire need of intervention. But they were still young, strong, hot-blooded, and hormonally-driven, and they were panicked, but not stupid. Given a choice, several among them, especially those of the female persuasion, decided that - if they needed to be rescued - it might as well be by someone tall and strong and well-built and possessing movie-star good looks. Thus, Brian and Chris McLaren and Lance Mathis all came in for their share of damsel-in-distress style swooning, which - after resolution of the initial chaos - caused both Cynthia and Trina Thomas to roll their eyes in good-natured amusement, once the emergency was contained and it became obvious that there was no danger of further explosions.

When the rest of the crowd had been soothed and quieted, several of the more adventurous (and less fully clothed) young women were still clinging to their rescuers with exaggerated expressions of gratitude.

Most of the rescue squad reacted with grins and chuckles or - in the cases of the security pros - quiet but distinct smiles.

Justin, however, was definitely not amused, and made a deliberate show of stalking forward to rescue his lover from the clutches of a striking young blonde wearing only a bikini bottom and a fall of thick hair. He was even less amused when Chris McLaren didn't bother to hide his slightly venal grin when the girl proved stubborn and had to be pried loose from her conquering hero.
Brian just laughed.

Then - as if the gods had a perverse sense of humor - there was a tiny brunette with huge green eyes who apparently decided that Justin was more to her taste than the older, brawnier types who had rushed forward to intervene. With a shrill cry - and timely tears - she raced into his arms and promptly fell into a boneless faint. Or so it seemed.

Brian laughed harder.

Given the level of hysteria and the difficulty of reassuring the crowd, and the determination of so many of the buxom young women to express their deathless gratitude and their refusal to take "No" for an answer in response to their invitations to demonstrate the degree of their appreciation in very graphic ways, it was quite a while before anyone was able to escape and return to the cottage, where - it was to be hoped - Trina would supply more of her sublime brandy concoction.

It was proving to be a long, eventful night. And it was not over yet, as the first fitful raindrops began to fall and the mist moved in off the sea.

There had been too much noise, and too much running, and now there was no noise at all, and it was impossible to see where everyone had gone.

Trina had been there, but she was gone now. So were Justin and Gramps and Miss Cynthia.

But most of all - so was Daddy.

He had been there just moments before - before the world had gone too bright, and then too dark; too loud and then too silent.

And Katy too. Katy had been nearby; he had seen her. But then she had turned and run, somewhere. But he didn't exactly know where. He was pretty sure she had not gone back into the house, where everything was warm and there was hot chocolate in the kitchen and video games and puzzles and toys to play with. Where there were the stairs where Justin had helped him slide down the banister - when Daddy wasn't looking, of course; there was the big bed where he slept between Daddy and Justin and wondered if things happened - if Daddy and Justin did things together when he wasn't there, like Mama and Mommie did in their big bed at home. He had sneaked in and watched a couple of times, creeping out of his bedroom in the dead of night when nobody knew that he was there. Knowing - somehow - that he was not supposed to be there, he had been careful to be very quiet, but, in the end, he didn't really see what all the big deal was.

His friend, David - the one who lived across the street and had a battery-powered Jeep that Gus would have killed for - had gotten in a lot of trouble when he'd hidden under his parents bed one night, and crawled out to stare while his mom and dad played 'doctor'. Although that didn't make much sense to Gus, because he couldn't figure out why anybody would want to pretend to be a doctor or a patient.

But right now, he thought he'd be glad to watch Justin and Daddy play "Doctor", or play whatever they liked. If they'd just come pick him up, and Daddy could then carry him up to the bedroom. Maybe he could take a bath in the big old-fashioned tub; maybe Daddy would even take one with him. Sometimes he did, and when he asked Daddy questions - like why there was a nest of dark hair around Daddy's tallywacker and whether or not his would get to be as big as Daddy's some day - Daddy never got all flustered and upset. He'd just laugh and answer whatever questions he was asked.
Of course, Daddy never called it a 'tallywacker' either. That was Mommie's word. Mama's, on the other hand, was a lot shorter, but he didn't think he was supposed to say 'dick', although he wasn't sure why.

Anyway, with Daddy, it was no big deal. Daddy was really good at not making 'big deals' about silly stuff.

Gus loved his parents - all of them. But sometimes Mommie got really sad, and Mama, well, sometimes she seemed to be awfully mad about things, even though she wouldn't say what exactly.

But right now - he'd be glad to see any of them.

He had meant to do what Daddy told him - meant to go where he was supposed to go and be safe. But everything had gotten all mixed up and he'd sort of forgotten for a while what it was he was supposed to do.

It had only been a few minutes, so he couldn't really be lost - could he?

He knew he had made a big mistake - knew he should have just gone in the house and waited for everybody to come back, but then he'd spotted the puppy racing off into the night. And he couldn't just let the poor little thing go off alone, could he? What if it got lost and never found its way home? What if some bad man decided to steal it?

The puppy belonged to him; Gramps had told him that - had made him understand that it was his job to look after the little thing.

So he couldn't just run away and hide, could he? He had to find the dog, or Gramps would be really mad at him.

But now - how mad was Daddy going to be? Daddy hardly ever got mad at him, almost never yelled or got all red in the face. Not like Mama, who yelled a lot. But he was pretty sure that Daddy could get mad, pretty sure that he'd seen him mad a couple of times, although he had never once yelled at Gus. But he'd yelled at other people sometimes, so it was a sure thing that he could get mad, if something called for it.

But this wasn't really a big deal, was it? He hadn't been gone long, so he couldn't be that far away, so it couldn't be a big deal, could it?

At first, he had heard all the noise from the people at the house next door, and the shouts as everyone hurried to try to put out the fire. And he had tried then to make himself heard, calling for his daddy first; then Justin and Gramps, and even Katy. But his voice had been too small then, and afterwards, when all the shouting died away, he had felt a heaviness around him, something that made him believe he should not disturb the silence, that there might be something out there in the darkness that might find him, before he managed to make his way back to his daddy's arms.

But he wasn't really afraid, was he? What was there to be afraid of?

Only . . . it was really dark now, and he had slipped in the sand and fallen and couldn't quite figure out which way he had been going before he fell. And now it was raining, big drops that were cold when they soaked into his shirt. And the storm was coming too - big, rumbling rolls of thunder and bright, bright lightening - bright enough to light up the sky but too bright - almost blinding - and too quick to guide him home.

He didn't much like storms.
Distantly, there was the sound of the ocean, and somewhere there were still voices and a distant clatter, but there was a layer of mist now too, and the sound was all messed up, so he couldn't tell where the water was, and he couldn't see the gleam from the lighthouse any more.

And there was something else too. Something that sounded like the hard beat of wings, or raindrops maybe, pounding on something hard as stone, or quick footsteps . . . or something. And, on top of that, there was the whisper of the wind, or maybe it was just shifting sand. Or . . . somebody breathing?

He couldn't tell. And there was one more thing, just visible out of the corner of his eye - something that glinted in the darkness, spinning and dipping, and moving toward him.

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"This is my private number, Sugar," drawled the blond co-ed, still trying to insinuate herself between Brian and Justin, even after the rescue party had attempted to beat a hasty retreat to the quiet refuge of the Bailey cottage. Bright green eyes, heavily fringed, swept down and then back up Brian's body, as if looking for a place to tuck the card she was clutching in fingers tipped in bright scarlet claws, then smiling when she couldn't locate a pocket and chose instead to try to slide it into the waistband of his shorts.

Justin, however, was prepared for her, and deftly moved to intercept her groping hands. "Down, Scarlet," he almost snarled. "What are you - the unknown Hilton sister? He's off the market. Understand?"

She arched one sculpted eyebrow as she favored him with a dismissive glance. "For you? Are you kidding me?"

Justin blinked, and gaped when Brian spoke up to answer. "No. He's not kidding you. And he's right."

"Shit!" The Scarlet O'Hara drawl was suddenly history, replaced by a decidedly Flatbush twang. "I should have known. But if you change your mind . . ."

"He won't," said Justin quickly, folding his arms and confronting her with a self-satisfied smirk. Then her smile shifted to become slightly predatory as she turned to Justin and took a good, hard appreciative look. "On the other hand, maybe a little three-way action would heat up your love life."

It was Justin's turn to smile and lean forward to whisper in her ear. "The only way our love life could get any hotter would be if we could spontaneously combust. Now, say good-bye, Sugar, and go find yourself some other stud to ride your sweet little ass."

Brian was watching them both, his lips folded and his eyes glinting with reflected firelight, prompting Justin to wonder what he was thinking, but the wondering was short-lived.

"Bye now, Honey," said Brian as he stepped forward and nudged her toward the young crowd still milling around the yard as a flurry of fat, warm raindrops pattered around them. "Better hurry or you're going to get wet."

She stepped closer and raised her face to wink at him. "I look wonderful wet."

He laughed. "I bet you do. Now go find somebody who'll care."

She was still grumbling as she walked away and paused at the edge of the yard to look back, hoping
perhaps that she was being watched with at least some small measure of longing. But no such luck. The two she’d left behind were far too focused on the business at hand as they tried to devour each other, and she was only too aware of a hot rush in her loins as she visualized exactly how that proposed threesome would have played out.

She turned away and hurried forward, intent on finding a companion to help her answer the need that was pulsing inside her.

Long before she moved out of sight, she was forgotten, as Brian and Justin lost themselves in each other, until the rain began to fall in earnest, and they pulled apart under the onslaught of the deluge and went racing for the house, laughing like happy children.

Until they leapt to the deck and came face to face with Chris McClaren, whose eyes were dark and shadowed and filled with something totally unexpected. One did not, after all, ever associate the FBI agent with uncertainty.

"What?" Brian snapped, all laughter forgotten, something cold and sharp moving deep in his belly. MacClaren did not scare easily; he rarely even scared at all, so . . .

"Just . . . be calm, Brian. It's not time to panic."

"Don't patronize me, McFed! What's wrong?"

McClaren took a deep breath. "Trina can't find the kids."

"What?"

"She thought they were playing in the den, but they're not. And no sign of them upstairs - yet. We're still looking, of course, but . . ."

Brian's eyes were suddenly filled with glints of ice. "Did you forget," he asked softly, "about your first priority? Didn't I make myself clear that . . ."

"Look," the FBI agent said quickly, grabbing Brian's arm as he tried to pull away to rush into the house. "We've barely begun to search, and you know how kids are. They're probably just hiding in a closet and laughing their asses off while the stupid grown-ups go berserk trying to find them."

But Cynthia arrived just as he finished speaking, and the expression on her face indicated that she was unconvinced. "That might be true for most kids," she said coldly. "Maybe even for Gus, since laughing at other people's stupidity is probably part of his genetic code."

Brian didn't even flinch, or bother to disagree.

"But not Katy," she continued. "She wouldn't. She's seen panic before. She knows it all too well, and she wouldn't be a part of causing it."

"But . . ."

"She wouldn't," Cynthia repeated, her tone leaving no room for argument. "And with all due respect, Agent McClaren, you might know everything about criminals and terrorists and profiling, but when it comes to these kids, you don't know shit, so . . ."

"All right," he responded, holding up his hands to signify his concession to her superior knowledge. "But where would they have gone, and why?"
Brian turned to look out into the storm which was just breaking in earnest. "Where's the dog?" he asked suddenly.

"What?" McClaren seemed confused.

"The dog," Brian repeated. "If the dog ran off . . ."

"Shit! I never thought about that."

"Trina? Flashlights!" Brian demanded, as thunder rumbled overhead.

"Look, Brian," the FBI agent said sharply, "we'll find them. I promise you, but you need to . . ."

"Get the fuck out of my way, Chris."

For one tense, silent moment, both Cynthia and Justin found it difficult to draw breath, wondering if McClaren was going to dare to challenge the ultimatum. And for another moment, it almost seemed that he would. Then he simply nodded, and stepped out of the way as all the adults on the deck grabbed flashlights from the box Trina had placed on the table and tore off around the house.

It was the first time any of them had cause to regret that the compound was so large and set so far back from the main road, as that meant that there was a lot of ground to cover in a search. In addition, there were outbuildings, small hillocks and dunes, a couple of narrow ditches, scattered patches of native shrubbery and sea grass, and several natural outcroppings along the side of the property that abutted the promontory where the lighthouse had been built. Lots of places to hide, although there was no reason to assume that the children would be hiding.

Unless they were frightened.

Brian did not - could not - allow himself to think that, or to speculate about worst-case scenarios or the ferocity of the storm breaking around them. He simply confined his actions to focusing on the area around him and visualizing the moment when he would find his son and scoop him up into his arms. There would be no anger, no recriminations, no punishment. There would only be the restoration of breath and hope.

The rain was cold against his bare skin, but he barely noticed. Off to his left, Justin moved on a parallel course, flashlight sweeping before him, and some remote little portion of Brian's mind noted that the blond was drenched to the skin and shivering slightly. But there was no time for such fundamental concerns.

Gus was missing. His son was missing, and he knew - logically - that it was nothing more than a case of the kid chasing off after his dog. But the insidious little voice deep inside him would not be silenced - the one that insisted on pointing out that anyone who really wanted to hurt him - to destroy him - might reason that nothing would devastate him more than his son suffering in his stead.

But he could not think about that. Could not let himself be distracted by the fear that lurked within him, waiting to overwhelm him with despair and bottomless grief.

Gus would be fine; Katy would be fine.

They had to be. He assured himself - for the fourth time - that they could not have escaped from the compound. The gate had been manned constantly, and someone would have seen them if they tried to get out.

Unless the guard was distracted.
He was really beginning to despise that ugly little voice.

Above and around him, thunder rumbled louder, and the murmur of the rain had become a roar, louder even than the staccato beating of his heart.

Off to his right, there was a muffled shout, and he twisted quickly to see Lance Mathis go to his knees, scrabbling for something in the sand.

Brian was there first, with Justin and Cynthia at his heels, to see Mathis holding up a bright pink flip-flop, adorned with rhinestoned daisies.

"That's Katy's," said Cynthia, shouting to be heard over the downpour.

"Keep looking," called McClaren, veering right, toward the front fence line.

Once more, the searchers spread out, encouraged to believe that they were headed in the right direction, even though a harsh wind was rising now, and the storm growing steadily stronger.

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He wasn't sure he would ever manage to tell anyone how scared he'd been, when the shadow had moved toward him. It had been much bigger than him, and shaped funny, and he had almost turned to run away. But then, he'd remembered that he didn't know which way to run, so he'd simply stayed still - and begun to cry.

But he thought he was safe now, snuggled up against the sand with thick foliage at his back offering some small shelter from the wind and the rain, resting against the warmth of the back of his rescuer. Snuggled up and getting warm. And hoping. He had thought everything would be fine when he'd realized who it was that had found him. He had been so happy, so relieved, but then the storm had gotten worse, and they had run and found this place and fallen against the sandy stones, and he had tried to ask if everything was all right, and if Daddy was coming soon, but there had been no answer.

He couldn't figure out what he might have done wrong, so he'd waited a little while, and tried again. Still nothing.

"Are you mad at me?" he'd asked, finally.

The silence had gone unbroken, and he had felt tears well in his eyes again, desperately trying now to hold on to hope, and not knowing what else to do but sit and wait.

Daddy would come soon - wouldn't he? Everything would be all right, when Daddy came.

He knew it.

But the thunder was louder now, and the wind was beginning to howl, and he didn't know if they could hold on where they were for much longer.

What if the storm took them? What if Daddy didn't come? What if . . .

The lightening flashed, painfully bright, and the boom of the thunder hurt his ears, and then he felt something move, and he bent his head to look out to find out what it was that had grabbed at him.

He was trying not to cry, but it was getting harder. He had thought it would be enough not to be alone, but he'd been wrong.
"Katy?" he whispered finally, desperately. "What is that?"

Brian was holding on to his rational, reasonable mindset, but only just. They were almost to the edge of the property, and, except for the errant shoe, they had found nothing. With every flash of lightening, he'd lifted his eyes from the ground to gaze around him, trying desperately to catch a glimpse of something - something that would send a signal, that would point him toward wherever he needed to be.

But everything, in the actinic brilliance, was almost without color, like a black-and-white photo negative with details lost in the stark dazzle. There had been nothing, and there was still nothing, except . . .

He went very still, and looked over toward Justin. "Did you see something?" he shouted.

Justin just looked confused. "Like what?"

"I'm not sure, just . . ."

Lightening flashed again, and Brian spun quickly, allowing his eyes to wander, seeking whatever it was that had tugged at him moments before. White sand, black stones, silver rain, dark, light, dark . . . and one quick glimpse - of brilliant red.

He didn't speak; he just took off running, and dropped to his knees before a tiny little niche at the edge of a small dune, a pocket surrounded by tough sea grass, and almost completely covered by one slightly bedraggled but still easily recognizable bright red umbrella.

Gus was crying when Brian lifted the edge of the rain barrier and found beautiful dark eyes staring up at him. Drawing breath for what felt like the first time in hours, he pulled his son from his tiny, relatively cozy little nest, tucking the slender body against his chest, and holding almost too tightly, as if he'd never let go again. Then he spotted Beau, the puppy, happy and wriggling with excitement.

Then he looked at Katy. Beautiful, lovely K-K-Kat-Katy - so still and limp, her face half-buried in loose sand, and a dark stain, black in the glare of lightening, at her temple. Brian's heart was suddenly thundering as he leaned forward and laid his hand against the ivory silk of her throat, almost gasping with relief as he felt the flutter of her pulse.

*Cryin'- Steven Tyler, Joe Perry, Taylor Rhodes
Chapter 46

One need not be a chamber to be haunted;
One need not be a house;
The brain has corridors surpassing
Material place.

-- Emily Dickinson

It was only the shank of the evening, although - come to think of it - that was a thoroughly stupid cliché; what did it even mean anyway?

Lindsey glanced at the ornate ormolu clock on the carved mantle that attempted - without much success - to make the artificial fireplace look less artificial. The faux flames were like the chorus of a tired song, repeating a fixed pattern endlessly, like a metronome abandoned to repeat itself forever. The ticking of the clock - another anachronism as the clock was as digital as everything else in the room - was just an annoying accompaniment to the rhythmic flickers.

Nine o'clock.

She frowned. Nine o'clock - literally barely sunset for all those gorgeous young fags just now heading out for Babylon or the glamorous lezzies currently settling down at the bar at Bangles. She allowed herself a tiny, rueful smile as she realized that she was guilty of vast over-simplification of the subject, for it was unarguably true that not every homosexual in the city could lay claim to physical beauty. On the other hand, it was equally true that most of those who were not so blessed rarely ventured into the rarefied atmosphere of the elite places where their more outgoing - and comely - counterparts went to be seen - and to score.

She glanced at the clock again, and wondered when it had happened. When had she ceased to be a member of the young and beautiful set - the crowd that existed in a state of perpetual motion, always moving from one party to the next, or one adventure to the next. Or even one beautiful moment to the next. When had she left that all behind and become a . . .

Oh, my God! I'm a hausfrau - a person who lives in someone else's shadow, on the fringe of someone else's life!

She eased down into the lush softness of the chintz-upholstered armchair, lying back and propping her feet on the matching ottoman, snuggling into her teal blue, raw silk robe and luxuriating in its plush velour lining, seeking a surfeit of physical comfort to ease the fundamental malaise of mind and body. With one glance, however, she realized that she'd chosen badly, for, in this position, she could not ignore her own reflection in the faux-antique cheval mirror tucked in the corner near the fireplace, and it showed her exactly what she did not want to see.

She stared at her image, noting the pallor of her skin and the limpness of her hair, along with the weary lines of her body.

When had this happened? When had the vibrant, enthusiastic, exuberant, youthful Lindsey Peterson become this . . . this washed-out shell of the woman she'd been, this pale, fading memory?

And she tried - she really tried - not to hear the little voice deep in her mind, the one that dated the transformation to the day when she'd given up her place in the world as Lindsey Peterson and
become Lindsey Peterson-Marcus.

But that wasn't fair. Melanie had never tried to force her into the shadows, or to take her identity from her. Except . . .

Except that, in a way, she had, because from that day forward, life had ceased to be an exercise in spontaneity and appreciating the joy of the moment, and become a sequence of days spent anticipating what Melanie would say, and how she would react to every new detail of their lives. It had no longer been acceptable to do things simply because they felt good or made her happy; in order to be worth doing, such endeavors had to be something that would fall into the range of acceptability for Melanie and make them both happy, and . . . God! It shouldn't hurt so much to admit that there weren't very many things that brought joy to Melanie. In fact . . .

She sat up abruptly. No, she would not explore that thought any further. She would not contemplate the ugliness of the idea that Melanie was only happy when she had reason to find fault.

But, in the final analysis, there was no denying that she was growing more and more tired of feeling old and worn out, even though she had already realized that it was all in her head. It wasn't really late, and the day had not been a huge disappointment so she should not be wallowing in a defeatist funk. She had accomplished quite a lot, actually, and believed that tomorrow would be even better. So what the hell was this?

She smiled then as she remembered her conversation with Gus, and his excited recitation of all the things he had done during his visit with his daddy and Justin and Gramps, and his anticipation of all the things that were yet to come. Then her father had confirmed that the trip had turned out to be a great adventure for the two of them, and a lovely opportunity to build a family bond where none had existed previously.

She had wondered briefly why she sensed a bit of melancholy in his tone as he expressed his gratitude for this opportunity, but then he had proceeded to share a few droll comments about his interaction with Brian, and she had been happy to realize that he had managed somehow to cast off all the preconceptions he had carried for so many years and begun to see the man behind the outrageous, provocative Kinney façade. Of course, Brian had probably not made much of an effort to make it easy to distinguish substance from illusion, but . . . she smiled in the understanding that making things easier for those who had never made much effort to determine the reality of the man was not something Brian had ever done.

Take him or leave him. It was a hell of an attitude, and she knew it - had always known it. But it was also quintessentially Brian Kinney, and it always would be, and now, maybe - just maybe - her father had come to understand that it was not necessarily such a bad philosophy to live by. It was just unique - like Brian himself.

Thus, the idea that these two men, who had impacted her life more than any others ever would or could, had discovered some kind of common ground that they could occupy without conflict was very comforting, even if a little voice deep inside her insisted that it was slightly pathetic for her to feel that way. Still, her father and the father of her only biological child were currently inhabiting the same house, doting on the same little boy, and - temporarily at least - not trying to kill each other.

Maybe it wasn't much, but, under the circumstances of the last few days, she would take comfort where she could find it.

And begin - just maybe - to accept truths she could not change, and stop expecting comfort where none would ever exist.
She looked down then, noting the bold, abstract patterns on the cover of the art magazine she'd been thumbing through earlier, eagerly anticipating the review column which included a couple of paragraphs concerning Justin's latest showing. But it wasn't the magazine and its somewhat garish colors that caught her eye. Instead, it was the ring on her finger, a simple triple braid, comprised of three different colors of gold, woven into a complex knot and accented by a ribbon of diamond baguettes.

It was not a terribly expensive ring; not nearly as impressive as one she might have had should she have opted for a traditional marriage and a socially prominent young groom. But it was very tasteful in that she had designed it herself, with a bit of help from a young man who had remained nameless, in order to preserve peace in the Marcus-Peterson household. She smiled again, in the certainty that one could fault Brian Kinney for many things, but his taste - in art or fashion or any combination of the two - was impeccable.

She loved the design of her wedding ring, which was, of course, a twin of the one that Melanie wore. But she was now forced to entertain the possibility that it was time to put it away and concede that it might no longer be appropriate to wear it. To preserve the symbol after the connection was gone seemed like a kind of blasphemy.

Blasphemy indeed, when she remembered how special their connection had been, and how long they had struggled to forge it and then protect it.

And now . . .

Right! Now the strands that had bound them so tightly were fraying, one thin thread at a time, and soon - soon there would be only broken links and broken memories, unless something happened to repair the rift.

She studied the shape of her ring, and then glanced up into the mirror, to come face to face with a reality she really did not want to confront.

What did she want? That was the true question, wasn't it? And it didn't appear to matter much if what she wanted was possible to obtain; it was the wanting itself that mattered.

Did she want Melanie or did she not? Did she want to turn back the clock and reclaim yesterday? And even if she did, would she be able to overlook everything that had happened between them and find a way to resign it to the past and keep it there and forget the bitter taste of betrayal that she'd experienced when confronted by a truth she could no longer deny?

She had always known that Melanie resented Brian with every fiber of her being, and that she would continue to do so, no matter what he might have done to devise a way for the two women to build a life together. The undeniable fact was that - from Melanie's perspective - he could never do enough to justify her trust or forgiveness.

Not, of course, that Lindsey herself was as pure or innocent as the driven snow - God! What was up with all the clichés tonight? Still - cliché or not - she would never make such a claim. Even as she'd denied it - loudly and repeatedly through the years - she had known that her complex, almost indefinable feelings for Brian Kinney had always been a bone of contention between her and her wife. Furthermore, she knew that they always would be, unless she voluntarily and irrevocably rejected them and brutally shut down her fondness for a man who would never return her affection. Not, at least, in the way she had always wanted.

Damn! She was a Lesbian; always had been. But she also knew the truth. For Brian, she might have found a way . . . but there was no point in going there because, no matter what she might have been
willing to do, the bottom line was that he would never have allowed it, just as surely as she would never be able to explain it, even to herself. And Lindsey knew that, beyond all doubt. The problem, as she also knew, was that Melanie had figured it out as well, and never managed to let it go - had, in fact, made it her own personal raison d'etre, and used it as fuel for the feud that permeated their lives and their marriage.

And Lindsey - she drew a deep uneven breath - had allowed it. Then she closed her eyes as she felt a harsh blast of truth almost overwhelm her. More than allowed it; she had, in fact, encouraged it, and she needed to understand why. The truth was not as simple as it might have appeared. She could not excuse it as an exercise in her longing for Brian to acknowledge deep feelings for her, for the truth was that Brian did love her; she knew that. He loved her as the friend of his childhood, and as the mother of his son; maybe even as a sister-in-arms. But he was a promiscuous, arrogant, self-centered rogue, whose only real sexual interest lay in fucking every fuckable man in the Western Hemisphere - and a few beyond that - and she had always known it, making him . . . safe? Of course, that had all shifted into a whole, new, undiscovered universe with the arrival of Justin in his life, but nothing would change the effect he had on lots of the women who orbited his magnetic center like planets around a super star. Desirable, drool-worthy and completely unattainable, and thus an innocent participant in the little games she had played with Melanie?

Brian Kinney - innocent! She smiled. Imagine that!

And then, unwanted, unbidden, she remembered the photograph of him as he'd been rushed into the emergency room on the night of the attack, and the memory brought on a small epiphany; in his own unique way, Brian had always been innocent. For all his brashness and narcissism, he had never harbored even the tiniest trace of the kind of vicious malice that had been directed toward him by the cretins who had almost killed him.

Which led, inevitably, to a truth that Lindsey did not want to acknowledge - did not even want to know - but knew just the same. As an outspoken champion of gay and lesbian rights and a vigorous defender of civil liberties, Melanie would never defend such horrific actions and would be as passionate as anyone in demanding that the homophobes responsible be convicted and suffer dire consequences for their actions. But . . . Lindsey knew that somewhere - deep in the darkest part of her heart - Melanie had not been able to suppress some tiny little blurb of satisfaction that it had been Brian who was the target of the attack. In venting her less than compassionate feelings at the hospital, in a classic moment of indiscretion, she had come close to revealing that ugly truth; somehow, the fact that it had not been Michael or Justin or Emmett or Ben or Ted had been an unacknowledged but entirely genuine source of comfort for her.

Melanie would never admit it; Lindsey would never mention it.

But it was true nonetheless.

And how, she asked herself, could she live with that? Though Melanie would never exhibit the kind of malice that the attackers had displayed, there was within her, nevertheless, an ugly, step-child relation - a dark, hidden specter that incorporated a willingness to gloat over the fact that Brian had been vulnerable, had been a victim. Lindsey didn't want to know that; didn't want to admit it. But she couldn't run away from it, no matter how she tried. She could not un-know it, and didn't think she'd ever be able to forget it. Or forgive it. But the question remained.

Forcing herself to deal with elemental truths that both she and Melanie had managed to ignore for all the years they'd spent together, she went over it in her mind. As hard as they'd tried to believe otherwise, they had never been truly independent and self-sufficient; it had always been Brian's money and his willingness to contribute in order to make sure his son was raised in comfort, which
had allowed them to rise above poverty-level existence. His money, his support. Even the mortgage
that had allowed them to purchase their first home had come about due to his influence on the lender,
and all this at a time when her own parents had refused to provide any kind of support for her or her
child, due to their objections to her sexual orientation; Melanie's had been just as bad, or maybe even
worse. And though they had both worked, neither had ever been hugely successful in their
professions, earning enough to profess independence, but never really earning enough to achieve it.
Thus, they had continued to live well - actually very well - by taking what Brian gave, and using it as
needed, never actually conceding that it hadn't only supported Gus; it had supported them all. And if
- in some unguarded moment - any member of the fucked-up, extended family that encompassed
Kinneys and Novotnys and Petersons and Honeycutts and a dozen other sub-clans, might have
pointed out the glaring but unmentionable truth, the only answer had always been a quickly
mumbled observation that "He didn't need the money, did he? He'd only waste it on booze and blond
boy-ass, wouldn't he?"

As if that was reason enough. That thought had risen in her mind, almost every time it had happened.
But she had never stepped up and spoken in his defense, which made her better than Melanie - how
exactly?

And in return for his generosity and his willingness to ignore that strange attitude, Melanie had stood
back and watched what had happened to Brian, although only in a philosophical sense; morally
outraged, yes - but only in a non-specific fashion, without any nuance of personal attachment. She
had been horrified at what had been done, but not so much at whom it had been done to, and that
was . . . Lindsey wasn't even sure how to phrase it, but even if she could figure out how to say it
without it turning her stomach to acid, would she ever be able to . . .

Could she live with it?

She had not even begun to formulate an answer when there was a knock at the door.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

There was a breathless moment, dragging on towards forever, until Katy began to stir - pale and
disoriented, at first, but definitely alive and breathing. And only then, when it was clear that she was
actually beginning to revive, did everyone around her begin to breathe as well.

It took a while for the group to make their way back into the house, mostly because Katy - still only
semi-conscious - had wrapped her arms around Brian's neck, clinging like a limpet and refusing to be
dislodged - by anyone. Thus, in order to maneuver himself into a position to move at all, Brian had to
first convince Gus to release his death-grip on his father's arm and accept Justin's offer to carry him
while Brian struggled to lift Katy and brace her head against his shoulder. The lingering effects of his
injuries served to make the process more complicated than it should have been, but Lance Mathis
stepped up and helped to support and settle her as Cynthia stood by, wanting nothing more than to
pull her daughter to her and push everyone else away, but knowing that she would not be able to
support Katy's weight. Thus she simply stood with her hands covering her mouth, trying very hard
not to cry.

As Brian rose to his feet, he paused to gaze into his assistant's eyes, to allow her to read the warmth
and determination in his expression. "She'll be okay, Tink," he said gently. "I promise."

Cynthia took a deep breath, realizing in that moment that she might very well know many kinds of
love in her life but certain that she would never find truer devotion than that provided by the bond
between her and her best friend/confidante/boss/companion - and whatever other term might apply to
Brian. She knew he could not really guarantee the truth of his reassurance, but she also knew that, if
strength of will could affect reality, fate itself would not dare to step up and oppose him.
Her smile was weak and barely there, but she hoped he understood all the gratitude it was meant to convey.

"Eugene!" shouted McClaren, moving off to clear the path ahead of them and signal Trina to prepare a place under the sheltered portion of the deck for the little girl. The rain had slackened somewhat, but was still falling in sporadic gusts. "Go next door, and find the Halloran kid. He's a medical resident. Get him over here - now!"

"How do you know that?" asked Justin, cuddling Gus against his chest and making sure to stay close enough to Brian to allow the boy to reach out and touch his father, should he feel the need to do so.

The FBI agent managed - just barely - not to roll his eyes. "My primary job is to protect Brian Kinney. No matter what else might enter into it, nothing is more important than that, so do you really think I'd let a group move into a neighboring cottage without finding out who they are, what they're doing here, and everything else about them?"

"Should call you 'Big Brother'," Justin muttered, but he could not deny that he was grateful for the research the fed had done and the obvious level of his devotion to doing his job. Of course, he was not above wishing that the man was more troll than fox - but he knew he was being unreasonable.

Then he glanced at McClaren who was standing now at the edge of the deck, his eyes surveying the area all around them, but somehow never losing his focus on the figure at the center of the tableau. Justin wondered if Brian could feel the FBI agent's gaze, but one quick glance at the man in question provided an immediate answer, making him feel foolish in the bargain. On the day that Brian Kinney did not notice the attention of someone who looked like Chris McClaren, it would surely be the undeniable sign of the Apocalypse.

Still, just as Justin began to narrow his eyes, to express his displeasure, Brian shifted to favor his young partner with a smile that spoke volumes - volumes to which no one else would ever have access. It was enough to make him forget why he'd even considered getting cross in the first place.

Justin sighed, and then noticed that Gus was staring at him with huge, tear-filled eyes, so frightened that his breathing was uneven, almost gasping.

"It's okay, Gus-Gus," he whispered. "Katy's going to be fine."

"And Daddy?" The voice was tiny, barely audible.

Justin stumbled, almost blind-sided by a bright, painful epiphany.

Despite the fact that no one had ever explained it to him - in the belief that they were sheltering him from the ugly truth - Gus had figured out that what had happened to Brian had been no random accident. Evil men had tried to destroy his daddy, and his worry about what might happen to Katy was just a random concern in comparison to his fear for his father.

Pausing just long enough to direct a quick look toward Brian - a look that he hope conveyed reassurance and a request for patience - Justin stopped and sank to his knees, standing Gus up in front of him so he could look directly into the child's eyes - eyes that were a carbon copy of the ones that lit up Justin's life every single day.

"Gus," he said softly, "I want you to look around, and notice all the people that are here. The FBI agents, like McClaren, and the security team, like Lance Mathis. And people like me and your Gramps and Cynthia and Trina. Do you know why we're here?"

Gus simply shrugged. Then he lifted his head and mumbled a tentative answer. "Vacation?"
Justin grinned. "Well, maybe for you and me . . . and a few others. But for the rest, most all of them are here for just one reason. To protect your daddy. To make sure that he's safe, and he has the chance to get well and be strong, and to keep anything bad from happening to him again. Understand?"

The little boy nodded, but the shadows in his eyes did not dissipate.

"What is it?" Justin asked. "What's bother . . ."

"Why do they hate him, Jus? What they did to him . . . they had to hate him to do that. Didn't they?"

Justin looked up and saw that Brian had arrived at the deck and was seated now on a lounge chair, allowing a slender, dark-haired young man in cut-off jeans to examine Katy, who was still clinging to Brian as if he were her only lifeline. Still, frequent glances toward where Gus and Justin were crouched revealed that Brian was keenly aware of the conversation taking place there - and intensely concerned.

For Justin's part, he was wishing that the two of them could switch places, because he wasn't sure how he should answer Gus' question. Or even if he should answer it at all. Wasn't this something best left to the boy's Daddy?

But Gus hadn't asked his daddy. He had asked Justin, and he was now standing very still, hardly daring to breathe, waiting for a response.

Justin took a deep breath. "Yes, Gus. They had to hate him a lot, and I know that's really scary for you. I wish I could explain it to you, so you could understand why they would feel that way, but the truth is that there isn't really a good explanation. Your daddy is different from a lot of other people - different enough that some of those other people feel threatened by him. And . . ."

"You mean, because he's gay," Gus interrupted.

Justin smiled. "Do you even know what that means?"

Gus simply tilted his head and regarded Justin with a little twitch that was not quite an eye-roll, an expression that was so immediately recognizable as Brian Kinney that Justin felt something flutter in his chest. "It means he loves you, like he never loved Mommie."

Justin's smile grew wider. A bit of an over-simplification, he thought, but accurate enough.

"But I still don't understand why people would hate him for that," the little boy continued.

"I know you don't," Justin answered. "But that kind of hate isn't logical, Gus. It doesn't make sense to people who don't think that way, so - in a sense - it's good that you don't understand it. I hope you never do. But just know that the people who are capable of doing things like this are not the big, bad, bold, brave defenders of the faith that they pretend to be; they're cowards, every one of them, and the thing about cowards is that they lose their powers, once people see them for what they really are.

"Yes, they hurt your daddy once, and I know that scares you. But look at him, Gus. Look at your daddy now. What do you see?"

The child twisted slightly, to gaze at his father, who just so happened to be looking straight back at him, beautiful lips soft and smiling.

"What do you see?" Justin repeated.
"I see Daddy - the man who loves me more than anything, and makes me feel better than anybody."

Justin nodded. "Yes. Because he does love you that much, and because he's the strongest man I've ever known. They surprised him once, Gus, but that only worked one time. He'll be ready for them if they ever try to surprise him again."

"You promise?"

Across the yard, Brian watched, and felt a surge of some shadowed emotion deep inside him, understanding, without knowing the details, that something important was happening between the young man who had changed his world and the child he had never expected to love so completely. Something important that somehow revolved around him, but had to play out without his direct intervention. At the same time, he wondered if anyone except him had noticed the exquisite loveliness of the moment and its two participants.

For his part, Justin felt his heart break just a little, as he watched this beautiful little boy - this carbon copy of the man who was the center of his own existence - trying so hard to be brave and to cover up the fear that raged inside him. There was really no simple answer to the question the boy had asked - but he would give one anyway.

"Yeah. I promise."

For an impossibly long, time-suspended moment, Gus just stared at him, probing, looking deep, wanting to believe but not quite sure that he could. Then he grinned. "Okay." And he was gone, running across the sand, up the steps, and into his father's arms, as Katy, fully revived now, shifted to make room for him.

Justin remained where he was for a moment, remembering an evening when Brian had tried to deny that he was a caring, loving father - tried to conceal himself behind the brutal, painful memories of his own father, and floundered in the attempt. A night when Justin had assured him that he was not Jack Kinney - that he loved Gus and should not doubt himself.

"I didn't think I would . . ."

That had been Brian's response - not denying exactly, but not entirely believing either.

Justin watched the interplay between father and son, and had never been more motivated to show his lover how wrong he'd been. It was almost impossible for him to resist a towering urge to run grab a canvas and his paints, and capture the image before him before it could slip away into the stream of time and become lost - an image that should offer the kind of proof that even the eternally skeptical Brian Kinney could not refute.

Kevin Halloran, bare-chested, bare-footed, tanned and long-legged and crowned by a thatch of sun-streaked hair, did not look much like the kind of professional one would encounter in the local ER, but, in this case, looks were completely deceiving - although not sufficiently irrelevant to escape the ever-discerning eye of Brian Kinney. For once, however, his interest was confined to a single sweeping glance, accompanied by a brief moment of regret for the phenomenon of ships-passing-in-the-night. The fact that his disappointment didn't even rate a sigh was indicative of the degree of his concern for the little girl on whom the young physician was focused, and, perhaps, his awareness of the keen scrutiny of a pair of intensely blue eyes.

Cynthia, however, hadn't even registered the young doctor's physical beauty, and could not quite release her misgivings. "Are you really a doctor?" she asked, in a tone that even Brian found slightly intimidating.
Halloran did not waste the time or effort to offer her a reassuring smile. "I may not look the part," he admitted, while shining a light into Katy's eyes to gauge the reaction of her pupils, "but I really am. Chief resident, actually, at St. Michael's. You can check if you like."

Instead of bothering with a response, Brian simply looked toward Chris McClaren who nodded to indicate his confirmation.

"So how is she?" asked Brian, completely ignoring the comely shape of the young resident's perfect bottom. Well - almost.

"As far as I can see," Halloran answered, "she's okay. The bruise on her temple shows that she hit her head pretty hard. Hard enough to knock her out for sure. But without further tests, I can't be 100% sure that there's no residual damage. You need to take her to the nearest ER - get an x-ray, at least. Or a CT scan."

Brian looked again at McClaren, who nodded and turned to issue instructions to a subordinate.

"Katy," Brian said softly, as he shifted to kneel beside her and look directly into her eyes, "do you remember what happened?"

Her smile was shaky, and it was obvious that she was still frightened and in some pain, as Cynthia moved closer to embrace her. Still, even in such a moment, the little girl found sanctuary in the dark eyes focused so completely on her; she reached out and touched Brian's face.

"When everything went . . . crazy, I was heading for the house - like you told us. But then I saw the puppy running away. I think the explosion scared him. And I knew how Gus would feel if he lost the dog, so I went after him, but . . . everything got all fuzzy. There was so much noise, at first, and then, when it got all quiet, the fog came in, and I couldn't tell where anything was. That was when the storm came closer, and . . . I couldn't find the dog - or anything else. I couldn't see, except . . ." She looked up then, staring at Brian, and he saw the shadows in her eyes shift and thicken. "There was . . . someone. Everything happened so fast, and it was all mixed up. The lightening was so bright, and the wind started to push me and try to jerk my umbrella out of my hand when the rain started. And then - I don't remember the rest, except that I turned . . . and there was Gus, and the puppy running toward him. I just wanted to reach him, to get him under my umbrella. But when I went to grab him, I tried to shift to the side, and I stumbled and . . . and then - I don't know. I just . . . fell and hit my head, I guess. But . . ."

Brian leaned forward and touched his lips to her forehead. "That's enough, Katy. You did great, but now you need to rest and . . ."

"But there was someone, Brian. Honest to God, there was. I couldn't see anything except a big shadow, but I know . . . I know someone was nearby - watching. Just watching."

Brian and Cynthia exchanged quick glances, speaking not at all but saying much.

"Mathis!" Brian shouted. "You take Katy and Cynthia to the hospital, and take a security team with you."

"Yes, Sir."

Brian rose and spared one moment to fix his chief of security with a stern gaze. "And if anything happens to either one of them . . ."

"Save your breath, Boss. It will be over my dead body."
"It better be."

Brian was reassured by the determination he read in his employee's eyes. Then he turned to seek out McClaren.

"McFed!"

The FBI agent was standing at the edge of the deck, conferring with a group of his subordinates, but he was quick to recognize the latent rage - barely controlled - in Brian's voice; thus he wasted no time in turning to respond.

"How the fuck could this have happened?" Brian demanded, his tone hard and cold and without patience.

"Brian, just calm down. You're jumping to conclusions, based on the ramblings of a hysterical child."

"Ummm, excuse me, Sir," said the young resident, with a look that was more film star than medical student, as he gathered up his equipment and closed his medical bag, "but she's not the least bit hysterical. In fact, considering what she went through, I'd say she was surprisingly calm. If I were you, I'd listen to her."

Brian took a half-heartbeat to favor the extremely attractive, scantily-clad young man with an appreciative smile, which was returned with sufficient warmth to inspire Justin to step forward and place himself directly between the two in order to disrupt the line-of-sight.

But McClaren was decidedly, intensely not pleased. "But she's not sure of what she saw, and - with the explosion and the storm - I just don't see how . . ."

"I don't give a flying fuck," Brian snarled, "what you see or don't see. I want this place searched. Every inch of it." Then he turned toward Justin and Gus, his eyes gone cold and dark and marble-hard. "And tomorrow, you two . . ." He nodded toward his lover and his son before turning to point toward Cynthia and Katy and Ron Peterson, "and all of you go home."

"Now wait a minute, Brian," Justin started. "You can't . . ."

"I just did." The response was sharp and unequivocal. "This has gone on long enough. It's stupid for all of you to be here, because . . . this is the front line of the battle, no matter how you look at it. And if you're here, then these idiots have to divide their attention and try to protect everybody, instead of only having to watch me. You're going. You're all going. On a private jet and in the company of a full security team."

"Brian!" Justin was shouting now, ignoring everyone around them as he handed Gus off to Trina Thomas and rushed forward to invade Brian's space. "What the fuck are you doing? Don't you ever learn. You can't order me . . ."

Justin was stricken silent as he saw the sweet smile that Brian deliberately directed toward him. "I can't?"

"God dammit, Brian! I'm not going to let you do this. I'm not . . ."

"Justin."

"No! You are not going to . . ."
"Justin." Quiet now. Not yelling. Not even angry any more. Just waiting for the rage to release its hold on Justin, as reason was restored.

And when the fury did drain away, it happened in the blink of an eye - gone as quickly as it had come. Gone with the welling of tears. "Brian." Whispered now, and heartbroken. "Please don't."

"Listen to me." And the love in Brian's eyes said that there was no one else in the world except the two of them, regardless of the crowd standing in silence, watching. "Are you listening?"

"Yes. I'm listening."

"Haven't you learned anything at all from all this?" Brian asked gently. "You said that I had to learn to trust you, to believe in you. But it works both ways, Sunshine. You have to believe too. You have to trust me enough to let me finish it. You have to trust me enough to go on with your life, to do the things you need to do to get ready for what comes next. And you have to give me the freedom to do the same. You have to trust me to come back to you."

Justin went completely still, barely daring to breathe, his eyes huge and filled with shadow, as he studied Brian's face. "I need you to say it," he said softly. "I will believe in you, but you have to say it."

Brian pulled his young lover close, and kissed the velvet softness at the nape of his neck. "I promise," he whispered. "I will come back to you."

Justin closed his eyes, fighting to still the wild beat of his heart, fighting to turn away from all his doubts and uncertainties - fighting to believe.

He clung to Brian - like a lifeline - and, in the desperate heat of that moment, only Chris McClaren had an unobstructed view of Brian's face. As a result, he was the only one to spot the quick, bright, metallic gleam of fear that flared in beautiful hazel eyes, and the shadow of infinite sadness that swallowed it. He did not speak, but the look on his face said that he knew a lie when he heard one, even when he would have preferred not to see it.

"I promise, Justin. I do . . . but you have to go. You all have to go." There wasn't a single nuance of uncertainty in Brian's voice.

Justin trembled, shaking like aspen in a rising wind, and found that he had no strength left to protest or argue. He could only nod, and take comfort from the strength and steadiness of the arms that held him, and note in passing a strange surge of gratitude - unacknowledged, obviously - that circumstances prevented him from seeing the look on Brian's face.

"Now," said Brian very gently, soft lips nuzzling against the hollow below Justin's ear, "I want you to go with Katy and Cynthia. To make sure they're taken care of. Okay?"

"But . . . you're not coming?"

"No. I've got something else to take care of."

"Something more important than Katy and Cynthia? Like what?"

Brian's voice shifted, hardened, and there was the ring of steel in it. "Like making sure something like this can't ever happen again. Now just do as I say, OK?"

"But I . . . I want to stay with you. I want . . ."
"Please." It was barely a whisper this time. "For me?"

Justin closed his eyes tightly, desperate to fight off the tears that threatened to overflow. He would do what Brian wanted him to do. Because it was what Brian wanted. That was reason enough. And he would ignore the tiny little red alert that was shrieking in his mind. Time enough to deal with that . . . whenever.

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Lindsey considered just ignoring the knock, reasoning that she could always claim to have been relaxing in the over-sized bathtub or sitting on the balcony enjoying the spring evening if anyone ever questioned her on it.

But the knock came a second time, sharper and heavier, and she was suddenly quite sure that whoever might be paying her a visit was not going to give up and slink away into the night.

Deciding that she was being foolish by expecting every new occurrence to be bad news, she went to the door, pausing only to make sure she was decent.

Too pale, said her always mouthy self-critic, as she glanced into the mirror and paused to smooth wayward strands back from her forehead.

Too pale.

She should have known the words would linger around her, eager to haunt her even before she'd had a chance to forget them.

She was certainly too pale to compete with the stunning image of the woman standing at her door.

Sharon Briggs had always been beautiful - a darker, slightly less voluptuous version of Halle Berry, wearing a tiara of thick, spiky hair, glinting with rich auburn highlights. She had changed very little in the time since they'd first met at a sorority mixer; she was still stunningly lovely, even without the designer fashions that had been her standard uniform during their university years. Even in drab, almost shapeless work clothes, she was still vibrant and compelling, and her smile was infectious, despite being slightly lopsided.

"Can I buy you a drink?" she asked, holding up a bottle of Iron Horse Sauvignon Blanc. "It's not quite Dom Perignon, but it'll do, in a pinch."

Lindsey smiled. "Now how on earth did you remember my weakness for sauvignon blanc?" she asked, stepping back and opening the door wider.

Sharon's smile became a smirk. "You'd be surprised what I remember about you."

Totally unsure of how to respond to such an ambiguous comment, Lindsey gestured for the undercover cop to have a seat, while she went to fetch a couple of goblets.

"Have you heard from Brian?" asked Briggs, settling on the sofa.

Lindsey sank into an arm chair positioned so the two of them were face to face and watched as the dark-skinned woman produced a corkscrew from her handbag and proceeded to open the wine.

"Yes," replied Lindsey. "Our son is there with him - having a ball, I think."
Briggs nodded, sitting back to give the wine a chance to breathe before pouring. "It must be hard for you," she observed softly.

Lindsey did not pretend to misunderstand. "Sometimes. Gus really loves his father. And Brian - well, I think the whole world would be astonished to find out that Brian Kinney could love a child the way he loves Gus. But my situation is . . ."

"Awkward?" suggested Briggs, when it was obvious that Lindsey could not quite find the right word.

"Yeah. Awkward."

Briggs leaned forward and studied the classic features of the blond. "You still love him - in a way. Don't you?"

To her own surprise, Lindsey laughed. "Exactly the same way that you do," she replied.

After a moment, Sharon joined in the laughter. "I think we should drink to that," she replied. "The women who loved too well - and completely unwisely."

"Tell me," said Lindsey, leaning forward and studying the lovely, delicate features of her visitor's face. "Did you really believe . . ."

"Of course, I did," Briggs interrupted, topaz glints of amusement and affection sparkling in her eyes. "Just like you - and every other woman who ever fooled herself into thinking that she could be the one - the one to win his heart and claim her place in his bed and save him from himself."

She leaned forward then to pour out generous servings of the wine. "The hell with breathing," she observed, passing one glass to Lindsey and hoisting her own. "To all the deluded women who convinced themselves that Brian Kinney needed saving."

Lindsey grinned. "Hear, hear! And to all of us who finally - with the assistance of the self-same Mr. Kinney - learned how to be true to ourselves!"

Briggs closed her eyes to savor the lovely, smooth flavor of the wine. Then she looked up and watched as Lindsey settled herself more comfortably in the arm chair. "But he didn't really have to teach you, did he? You already knew."

The blond smiled. "I did - except when it came to Brian. Until recently . . . well - let's not go there. Suffice to say that, for a very long time, I thought Brian Kinney was the only man who would ever get into my pants."

"And he did. Didn't he?"

Lindsey looked up and met Sharon's gaze without flinching, wondering why she was not outraged by the question. "Yeah. He did. Just once - but once was enough to raise a lot of questions for me. It was a while before I figured it out."

"Figured out what?"

Lindsey sighed. "It wasn't that he was a man, or that he had a big, beautiful cock - which he did, by the way. It was just that . . . he was Brian. I didn't fall in love with his sex; I just loved the person he was. It wasn't easy to learn to separate loving him, from the whole physical love-making lust."

Briggs leaned forward. "But he was good . . . wasn't he?"
Lindsey grinned. 'He's Brian - Fucking - Kinney, and lust should be his middle name. What do you think?"

"I think I'm pea-green with envy." Her smile, however, was brief. "And I think that I might be
beginning to understand now - why Melanie always hated him."

"Yeah," Lindsey replied with a sigh. "So can I. But that's . . . that's not really how it was."

"Meaning what? Is that really the bottom line here? Was it Brian and the fucked-up feelings between
the two of you that ruined your relationship with your wife?"

"Oh, you can be sure of one thing," said Lindsey. "Ignoring my feelings for the moment, there is
absolutely nothing fucked-up or uncertain about how Brian feels about me. He's always known
exactly how he feels, and he's never pretended otherwise. I won't say he doesn't love me; I believe he
does, but . . . not the way I wanted. Not what I let myself dream of. It's love in his own way and on
his own terms, and he's never given a flying fuck whose bed I share."

"Kind of tough on the ego, huh?"

'Yeah, it is." Lindsey took another sip of wine before trying to formulate a coherent explanation for
her response. "I've been sitting here for hours - maybe even for days - trying to figure it all out for
myself, and I'm still not sure I know much." She smiled, but it was rueful. "Do you ever wish they'd
invent a safe cigarette? Seems to me there's nothing quite like smoking to help clear the mind?
Stupid, huh?"

Briggs grinned, and wondered if she should pull out one of the carefully-rolled joints that she kept
stashed in a hidden compartment in her purse. But the moment passed, and she dismissed it as
temporary insanity. This was still Lindsey Peterson, of the Social Register Petzersons, and she was
still a member of the Pittsburgh P.D., albeit something of a renegade - a la Brian Kinney. She smiled
at that notion.

Lindsey was quiet for a moment, but when she spoke again, it was obvious that she was still
examining the same thoughts, idling in the same place. "There is really only one thing that I'm
entirely sure of; whatever happened to screw up my marriage, it wasn't Brian who caused it. That's
not to say that he wasn't a part of it - because he was. But not because he tried to break it up; not
because he did anything to interfere. In fact, he probably tried harder than anybody to do what was
needed to help us find our way through. He sure as hell never asked me to love him; he never even
did much to make me feel that way. And he can be such a total shit sometimes, that even I wonder
why I put up with it. But . . . this is going to sound insane, but . . . in his own weird, oddball way,
he's the most unselfish person I've ever known. He does what he does, what his own unique sense of
right and wrong says that he should do, because it's what he believes in, and it's really strange that
he's right more often than he's wrong. I won't even try to tell you that there weren't times when he
was a major bone of contention, but . . . it was never because he was trying to break us up. In fact, I
think he was trying to keep us together. Not because he gave a shit about protecting our 'great love
affair', but because he believed that us being together and loving each other was what was best for
Gus. So I guess, it really wasn't about being unselfish, so much as it was about protecting his son.
Not a completely noble cause, maybe, but better than most.

"At any rate, what I'm trying to say is that it wasn't what Brian did that cost me my relationship with
Melanie. It was . . . it was what we did. Melanie . . . and me. Because it was always within my
power to change it. Brian wouldn't have done anything to stop me, since he didn't wedge himself
between us in the first place. He proved that when he gave up his parental rights to Gus - which
wasn't easy for him. But he did it - for Gus." She sighed and went very still for a moment, before
looking up and meeting Sharon Briggs eyes with great determination. "It was me. I kept him close
enough to use as my . . . shield. My excuse. My justification for everything that went wrong. I . . .
God, I can't believe I'm actually going to admit this, but . . . I used him to obscure things that I didn't
really want to know. Things about my marriage. Things . . . about me."

Lindsey was startled when Briggs responded with a bright burst of laughter. "Congratulations, Linz.
I'd have bet good money that you would never take a good look at that dirty little secret."

Lindsey sat up straight and regarded her old acquaintance with a small degree of disbelief. "Now
how on earth could you have known about my 'dirty little secret'? We were never that close, you and
I."

"Close? No, we weren't. And there were some pretty good reasons for that. Sorority princesses we
both might have been, but still rising from different worlds. You were born to old money and classic
bloodlines, Peterson. I was an upstart - a black girl whose parents lucked into wealth. Oh - nobody
ever quite dared to say that to my face, but it was what you all believed."

"No, I . . ."

"Oh, don't get all defensive. I know that idea offends your liberal sensibilities - that you would never
have put it that way. But there was still some tiny little measure of class distinction, even in that era
of bleeding hearts. And I came into the whole thing with an advantage. Learning to accept
homophobia against my sexual identity was easier for me than for you. Because I learned from my
parents, who faced a similar gauntlet when they dared to succeed in the privileged world of white
wealth. Not that I didn't do my own share of resisting, for a while. But I learned faster how to deal
with pre-existing prejudices, because of family tradition - for lack of a better term."

Lindsey smiled, and leaned forward to pour herself another serving of wine. "But that wasn't our
only problem - was it?"

Briggs laughed again. "You do realize that he would be crowing like a rooster at dawn, to hear that
each of us resented the other because of our attachment to Brian Kinney."

Lindsey nodded. "So - down to the bare facts. Did you and he ever . . ."

"No," Briggs answered, "but - as you have probably already guessed - it wasn't me who put the
brakes on. Something that he knew, probably before I did. All he had to do was pop the buttons on
his 501's, and I'd have been on my knees - one way or another, and however he wanted. Thus - my
curiosity. If I'd actually sampled the goods, I'd hardly have asked - and especially not you."

Lindsey sipped and smiled. "So, we basically wasted years of our lives being jealous of each other -
for absolutely no reason, since he obviously couldn't have cared less."

Briggs lifted her glass. "We should form a support group. Call it FIBC."

"FIBC?"

"Feathers-in-Brian's-cap."

Lindsey laughed. "In that case, it should probably be VFIBC."

Briggs raised one eyebrow.

"Virgin-Feathers-in-Brian's-Cap."

"Virgin?"
The blond grinned. "One instance of midsummer madness does not a change-of-heart make. He screwed me - once - and it was the only time I ever saw him non-plussed."

"Meaning?"

Lindsey sank back and took another sip of her wine. "Brian is never at a loss for words, and he doesn't mince them, except . . . when he doesn't want to be a nasty prick, but can't think of any way to avoid it."

"I'm sorry. I still don't get it. Why would he . . ."

Now it was Lindsey's smile that was lopsided. "How do you tell a girl that you just fucked through the floor that . . . she didn't exactly make the earth move for you? Oh, he didn't have any trouble reaching a climax. He was a twenty-one-year-old sex machine, and that wasn't an issue. But it was just friction and hormones. Nothing remotely life-changing, and he couldn't pretend otherwise. Even Brian wasn't quite brash enough to admit that, without a little blush."

Briggs choked on her wine. "He blushed? Brian Kinney actually . . . blushed?"

"He did. And that's when he coined the phrase, 'Midsummer madness'. I think it was probably the kindest put-down he ever came up with. But it was definitely a cold shower for me. I'm not going to claim that I wouldn't have . . . repeated the performance if he'd ever shown the slightest interest - his reputation as a walking, talking wet dream is well-deserved - but I'd have died before I let him know that."

"And he didn't - show any interest, I mean." It wasn't really a question.

"No," Lindsey admitted with a rueful sigh. "He didn't."

Briggs's gaze was sympathetic. "He should come with a warning label. That goes without saying. But you're not really blaming him for what happened between you and Melanie, are you?"

"I'm pretty sure we've already covered that. Much as I'd like to blame him - it's practically a national pastime, you know - I can't. And I won't. This wasn't about Brian - or Sam. Or anybody else, except Melanie and me."

Briggs bit her tongue, almost hard enough to draw blood, to avoid asking about 'Sam'.

"And what happens now?" she asked instead. "Do you think you can get past all this?"

Lindsey looked down, once more studying the unique shape of her wedding ring. "I don't think that's the question. I don't think it's about whether or not we can; I think it's about whether or not I want to."

She hesitated for a moment before looking up to meet Briggs' dark eyes. "I don't think I like the person I've become during the last few years. I seem to have misplaced part of me."

Briggs did not allow herself to express the feeling of relief that surged through her. She did not want Lindsey to realize that the conclusion she had just reached was a reflection of what other people had been thinking for a very long time. Despite the fact that the two of them had never been close, never shared intimacies, and never managed to set aside their differences - especially those generated by one Brian Kinney - she had always admired her sorority sister, for her liberal philosophy and her generous spirit, and she had mourned the changes in that bright personality as the years had gone by.

"Then perhaps it's time you reclaimed it," she said softly. "Tell me - are you still the bleeding-heart
liberal you used to be? The one who would have gone toe-to-toe with the Establishment, to right a
wrong and demand justice?"

Lindsey bit her lip, looking - for just a moment - like Brian Kinney contemplating a secret truth. "Is
that who I was?" she asked. "Is that how you saw me?"

"Yep. And that's how I'd like to see you again, because I could use your help, Linz. It would be the
right thing to do. And it might just help Brian."

"Oh, that's dirty pool, Briggs," Lindsey replied with a laugh. "Who do I have to betray?"

Briggs took a deep breath. "Well, I, um, I rather wish you hadn't phrased it like that?"

"OK, now you're beginning to scare me. What, exactly, are you after?"

"What do you know about an organization called 'The Club'?"

Lindsey's eyes widened briefly, and Briggs wondered if she'd made a terrible mistake. Thus the
laughter caught her completely by surprise.

"Is that what this is all about?" Lindsey demanded. "You've come around here, buttering me up and
trying to sweet talk me into . . . what? Playing traitor to my dad, because of his supposed allegiance
to that 'Good Old Boys' Network'. Is that what you're trying to do?"

Briggs shrugged. "OK, so I'm busted. I knew it was a risk, but we need information."

"Such as?"

"Such as whatever you - or he - could tell us. It's not just a harmless social club, Lindsey; it's much
more . . ."

"Which is exactly why my father walked out, within a few days of walking in for the first time." She
regarded Briggs with a steady gaze, her eyes intensely blue and threaded with bright glints that might
have been anger. "Listen, Briggs. I won't lie to you and claim that my father is a paragon of liberal
ideals, or the type to wax poetic over Lesbian love affairs. He had a very hard time accepting my
lifestyle, especially since my mother turned out to be queen of the homophobes. And if I'm
completely honest, I'm still not entirely sure why he seems to have had a change of heart lately."

She took another sip of her wine. "But I can guarantee this. He was never the type of man to
condone the kind of vicious bigotry that was leveled at Brian. He's a good man, fundamentally. Just
a bit confused by his conservative background, and unprepared to deal with the world as it is now."

"OK," said Briggs slowly. "So does that mean that he'll be willing to talk to us? Or even to lend a
helping hand in the investigation?"

"What kind of helping hand?"

Briggs stared into her wineglass, her eyes dark with speculation. "Initially, just information about the
structure and background of the place. Everything we've learned so far has been from the perspective
of employees, or outsiders looking in, and it would help if we could get a closer look. Some of the
members are under intense scrutiny, based on evidence we've gathered, and soon, they're going to be
questioned and investigated more deeply. We'll probably learn a lot more then, especially from those
who are unaccustomed to dealing with police procedures. But there are still too many unanswered
questions, and some of the true powerbrokers might just slip through the cracks, unless we can close
them. No matter how reprehensible you and I might find their actions to be, there is a fanatic brand of
loyalty in this kind of group. It's almost a brotherhood, and some of its members possess a fierce, misguided sense of honor; they'd literally die before betraying one of the brethren."

"But my father isn't an insider," Lindsey answered steadily, "and he's certainly not a 'brother'. I told you; he didn't hang around, once he realized who and what they were."

"Uh-huh." Briggs smiled. "I'm beginning to understand that wish for that cigarette. But look, Lindsey. Given your mother's . . . philosophy, I'd guess he'd have chosen to walk away, quietly. Am I wrong?"

Lindsey chuckled. "Tell me, have you been studying my father? Because, if so, you'd know he's not really the type to make a scene and confront those who don't think like him. He doesn't even confront my mother, or, at least, he never used to. I'm not sure . . . about now."

"So, the bottom line is that he never told the members of The Club that he thought they were a bunch of narrow-minded, Neanderthal bigots."

"No. I'm sure he didn't. Although he did express his disenchantment to my mother, who was not particularly happy with him."

"But - as a result of his reticence - he could go back. Couldn't he?"

Lindsey went very still. "Sharon, you're talking about people who may very well have been responsible for what happened to Brian. Right? Do you really think I'd risk my father getting involved in . . ."

"Why don't you let him decide?" Briggs' voice was firm - without apology.

"But . . ."

"He's not a child, Lindsey. Shouldn't he have the right to speak for himself?"

Lindsey's eyes were cold, ice-flecked. "What exactly do you want him to do?"

Briggs stood up and walked to the window to watch a wisp of cloud thicken and rise to obscure the face of the moon. "The Club is having its annual founder's celebration next week, which is just a fancy camouflage for their primary fund-raising drive, along with the ultra-exclusive membership review, when they open their ranks - very narrowly, of course - to prospective new members. The guest list is very impressive and includes names which are subjects of interest in our investigation."

"And?"

Briggs sighed. "And here's the truth, Lindsey, or, at least, the Truth According to My Gut. I think we're on the verge of breaking this case wide open. I think we're about to bag ourselves some major movers and shakers in the world of organized bigotry. But . . . I don't think we've got the leader of the pack yet. I think there's someone else - someone we haven't identified. Someone who may be protected by the hierarchy beneath him. So what we need is someone who can slip inside, who can see things without pre-existing bias. Someone with a fresh viewpoint."

Lindsey took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "Someone like my father."

"Yes."

The silence stretched thick and unbroken, until Lindsey rose and moved toward the fireplace, suddenly very cold and filled with dread. "Tell me something. If it were your father, would you be
willing?"

Briggs turned to stare at her old acquaintance, noting how lovingly the flicker of firelight caressed the classic profile. "Honestly? No, I wouldn't. But I would understand that it wasn't really my choice to make."

Lindsey leaned forward and braced her forehead against the mantle. "I'm scared, Sharon. And I have this strange feeling that, if I ask him, he'll do it for all the wrong reasons."

"What does that mean?"

Lindsey turned to meet the gaze of dark, topaz-tinted eyes. "I don't have a fucking clue."

Briggs blinked, and surprised herself with her next question. "Are you . . . are you going back to Melanie?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I want to know."

"And how does that bear on the case?"

Briggs smiled, and stepped forward to reach out and smooth a stray lock of hair away from Lindsey's face.

"It doesn't."

Lindsey wasn't sure why she felt a soft breath catch in her throat, or why her smile was tentative, almost tremulous. "You know," she said, turning slightly so that Sharon's fingers caressed her jawline, "the wine is very good. But I've got a bottle of Makers' Mark bourbon that would be even better. Are you . . . off duty?"

Briggs turned and moved back to the sofa, where she sat down, removed her shoes, propped her feet on the coffee table, wriggled her toes, and sank back against silken cushions with an appreciative sigh.

"I am now."

Lindsey's smile deepened and steadied, as she rose to fetch the bottle of the remarkably good whiskey to which Brian had introduced her.

She was just returning, with a tray and two glasses, when there was another knock at the door, and she wondered - again - why every unexpected development felt like a bad omen, and whether it would always be so.

Sharon Briggs was watching her, offering up a lovely smile to indicate that she understood and shared Lindsey's misgivings as she went to answer the door.

Misgivings that - in retrospect - would turn out to be mere shadows of what was actually waiting beyond the door.

"Lindsey, I need to talk to you. This crap has gone on long enough."

Melanie, looking weary and frazzled, pushed forward, shouldering her way through the door without waiting for Lindsey to step aside, but coming to an abrupt halt when she realized who was looking up at her from the sofa.
"What the fuck is she doing here?"

Lindsey's initial response was composed of two words - half mumble, half groan. "Oh, shit!"

The tail lights of the SUV flared just as the car disappeared around the turn that would take it to the main road, and Brian released a breath he hadn't even realized he was holding. But Chris McClaren had noticed, and turned to face the man who was his primary responsibility. He managed to retain his stoic demeanor, his face stony and expressionless, but he wondered if Brian could see through the façade and recognize the dread beneath it.

For he knew what was coming.

"Do I have to say it?" The words were as sharp and cold as ice pellets, driven by a polar wind.

"No."

"Then explain it to me. My son could have been killed tonight. On your watch."

"I know."

"If that had happened, do you have any idea what your life would have been worth?"

McClaren took a deep breath. "In fact, I do. But more importantly, I know what your life would have been worth."

"Don't play word games with me, Chris. How could this have happened?"

And there it was. Beneath the fury and the bravado and the fierce protectiveness, there was the most elemental emotion of all. Brian Kinney was angry and outraged and appalled, but, most of all, he was afraid.

"I don't know." There was no way to evade the truth, or avoid the consequences, and the only way to survive this confrontation was to deal with pure, undiluted truth. "All I can do is move heaven and earth to make sure that it won't happen again."

Brian stepped forward, moving deliberately into the FBI agent's personal space. "I want to . . . I need . . ."

"I know." It was just a whisper, a gentle breath against Brian's face. "You can take a swing at me, if you like."

Brian turned his head, and something flared in the depths of his eyes. "And you're just going to stand there . . . and take it?"

McClaren's smile was barely there - a shadow of his customary sardonic grin. "Well, I didn't exactly say that, now did I?"

Brian hesitated, and folded his lips. "We could have an old-fashioned, knock-down, drag-out fist fight."

"We could, but, given the fact that you're still showing some scars, I might mess up all the work done by your sociopathic plastic surgeon, and he wouldn't be very happy with either one of us."

Brian nodded. "You might, but - then again - I'm pretty pissed off. Pissed off enough, maybe, to
McClaren stepped closer - close enough to nuzzle his lips against the side of Brian's throat. "And here I was thinking that you were kind of fond of my ass."

Unexpectedly, Brian laughed. It wasn't much of a laugh, but it was decidedly better than nothing. "Not fond enough," he said finally.

McClaren stepped back, and there was no amusement in his eyes as he met Brian's gaze squarely. "You're sending them away. Tomorrow - right?"

"Yep."

"They'll be safe. I swear to you. And if I'm wrong, then my life is yours, to do with however you please."

Brian simply stared at him for a moment, weighing the emotions he could read in the blue orbs that returned his gaze so steadily. Then he nodded, and McClaren smiled. "I notice that you didn't say anything about protecting yourself."

"I'm a big boy." Brian's response was flat, without inflection.

"I hate to belabor the point," McClaren observed, "but you were a big boy before this, and look how well that worked for you then."

"Once burned," Brian retorted.

"Shit! When the eternally glib Brian Kinney starts talking in clichés, things have really gone to shit."

Brian regarded him with cold eyes. "Please tell me you haven't just figured that out."

McClaren suppressed a sigh. "All right. I get that you're pissed. Now can we put it behind us, and get back on track here? I need to talk to my team, and you - you need to shut the fuck up and let me do my job."

Slowly - reluctantly - Brian nodded. "Just make sure . . ."

"Drop it . . . please. Now, am I forgiven?"

"Not even close."

"Goddammit, Brian. I . . ."

"You don't get it, do you?"

McClaren went very still, hearing a strange note buried in the elegant tones of that controlled voice. "Get what?"

"I pay for my own mistakes. I pay. No one else - ever."

The FBI agent felt something shift deep in his chest, and wondered if anyone, anywhere - even those who believed so strongly that they could read Brian Kinney like an open book - had ever been allowed to witness this particular, deeply-buried truth find its way to the surface of this complex, deeply conflicted man. "Is that what this is all about, Brian? Is all of it - everything that happened to you, or ever will happen to you - is it all some kind of penance? Some kind of price you have to pay for . . . for what? For being who you are? How is that . . ."
"No. Not for being who I am."

"Then what? How . . ."

"For not being who I needed to be. For not . . ."

"Not what?"

A heavy, thick silence - a stillness that seemed to encompass everything and everyone around them. Heavy, stifling - and gone, as Brian flashed a trademark smirky grin. "Not any of your business. Now, don't you have a team to harass?"

McClaren - unfooled, but resigned - nodded. "And what are you going to do?"

Brian glanced at the watch he had only recently begun to wear on a regular basis. "I'm going to put my son - and his dog - to bed and then - maybe - drink myself into a stupor. Or something."

McClaren nodded and turned to tend to the unpleasant business of discovering who had been responsible for the lapse in security, but then he paused and took a moment to look back at Brian, sensing something that he couldn't pinpoint in the man's demeanor or his voice. Something . . . troubling. But, whatever it was, it was there and gone too quickly for him to identify it.

"You just behave yourself," he said finally.

"I always do."

Somehow, the reassurance did not make the FBI agent feel any better.

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It was nearing eleven when the dark BMW shot out of the semi-detached garage and was past the gatehouse and into the lane before the on-duty guards had a chance to even challenge it, and Chris McClaren stood watching it vanish into the night, cursing himself for his own blindness. He knew that he should have anticipated this, should have realized that Brian was being far too docile, too cooperative. Too Un-Brian.

"What the fuck?" Agent Delia Perkins had been finishing up her turn at the gate, waiting for her relief in just a few minutes, and McClaren was pretty sure that Brian would have taken that fact into account. It had been an eventful day, and the staffers were all a bit overwrought and weary of the whole thing, and Brian would have known that as well as anyone.

"Where the hell is he going?" she asked, her customary lovely southern accent lost beneath a burst of strident anxiety.

"I don't know," McClaren admitted, "but I will soon enough." He touched the Blue Tooth device in his ear and spoke to Howard Woolsey who was currently manning the computer surveillance system. "Have you got him yet?"

"Yep. LoJack fully operational. He's on the coast road, heading North. Going like a bat out of hell, too."

"Typical. Don't lose him." McClaren ran toward the garage. "I'm going after him."

"Well, you better hurry, or you'll never catch him."

The FBI agent paused just long enough to grab a helmet from a shelf beside the garage door,
momentarily glad that he had not given in to an urge some hours earlier, to shed jeans and boots and grab a chance for a quick swim. The Harley was in its customary place, waiting under a tarp, fully gassed and ready. It had not been used much during their stay, less practical in the beach environment than the pair of four-wheelers used by the staff for regular patrols. But, for now, it would be perfect for his needs.

"I'll worry about him," he assured Woolsey. "You guys just make sure that everything here is secured - or you'll have to deal with him - when I drag him back."

"Everything's fine here, Boss."

McClaren didn't waste time stating the obvious. He simply leapt on the bike, and roared out into the night.

Brian knew he should feel guilty for pulling this double-cross. He also knew that McClaren would be in pursuit almost instantly. So there was no time to lose.

He was late already, but - no matter how cranky the man might prove to be - Turnage would not turn him away when he showed up at the doctor's door. He was sure of that. Despite being a major drama-queen of the first order - a term which Brian believed had absolutely nothing to do with sexual orientation - Turnage was a world-class physician, and he would not ignore the needs or potential problems of his patient.

Even when he had (correctly) judged said patient to be an arrogant, narcissistic bastard who delighted in causing trouble.

Brian smiled. He wondered if anyone would be surprised to realize that he knew exactly how most people thought of him.

Probably not.

The smile didn't last long, as he reviewed the events of the day and the night, and thought about the things that lay ahead of him - the tasks he had to perform.

Whether he wanted to or not.

But first, there was something he had to find out. Hence the visit to the doctor, and the necessity for going alone. There were simply some things that he was not prepared to share - with anybody. Not now. Maybe not ever. That was yet to be decided.

When his cell phone rang, he didn't even bother looking at the caller ID. "Save your breath," he almost snarled as he answered the call. "I needed some time."

He had expected to hear Chris McClaren shouting at him about being an idiot; thus, the silence that was the initial response to his greeting took him by surprise.

Somehow, though, the electronically disguised voice that spoke next was not as much of a surprise as he'd have thought it would be.

"You got lucky tonight, Little Pervert. Next time, you won't." There was a pause, then an ugly laugh. "He looks too much like you for his own good."

And then the line went dead.
He took a moment - only a moment - to catch his breath before hitting his speed dial.

"Where the fuck are you?" answered McClaren, still on blue-tooth, and straining to hear over the noise of the Harley engine.

"Never mind that. I need you to get somebody to trace the last call that came in on my phone. I assume you can do that."

McClaren's pause was brief, obviously not eager to admit that Brian's cell phone had been monitored since the beginning of the investigation.

"Already processing," he confessed finally. "Why?"

"Because I just got a call from our uninvited guest."

"What?"

Brian had to take a moment, to draw a deep breath. "Katy was right, Chris. Someone was there. Someone who wants to hurt my son."

"Brian . . ."

"Do you understand me? You've got to . . ."

"Brian. Gus is safe. I swear it. Everything is locked down. And - whether you're willing to face it or not - it's not really Gus that they want to hurt. It's you, so . . ."

"Yeah?" Brian's voice was harsh, and sharp as a blade. "And what - exactly - would be the best way to do that?"

This time, it was McClaren who paused. "Okay. I see your point. But nobody's going to get to him tonight, Brian. Or to anyone else who matters to you. So where the fuck . . ."

"Just trace that call, and find that motherfucker. I won't be gone long."

The line went dead then, and McClaren swallowed a few choice curse words. Then he decided that he'd do well just to get over it and get on with his job. He'd catch up soon, and when he did . . . He wondered when - not if - his patience with Brian would be sufficiently exhausted to cause him to do his best to give the man a black eye.

Probably sooner than later.

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"You're late."

Brian took a seat at the end of the exam table and regarded the doctor steadily, no hint of apology rising in dark, shadowed eyes. "I know. It was unavoidable."

"And if I hadn't answered the door?"

Perfectly shaped lips lifted in a faint smile. "But you did."

Turnage sighed. "Where's your entourage?"
"I sent them off on a wild goose chase. What do you care?"

The physician leaned closer, his eyes examining every square inch of Brian's face, but it was a clinical inspection - something Brian was not particularly comfortable with. "Judging by the damage done to you during the attack," replied Turnage, "I'd hate to think I've been wasting my time and my skill only to have you become a target again."

"Why, Doctor, I didn't know you cared."

"I don't."

Brian just smiled.

Turnage moved away, and opened a drawer in the credenza that covered the entire wall of the small office.

"You do understand that this is not my specialty," he said sternly. "That anything I find will be strictly preliminary."

"I do. But I assume that you could probably tell me if I have nothing to worry about."

Turnage turned to stare at him, obviously slightly surprised. "You don't strike me as the kind of man who doubts himself, Mr. Kinney. So . . . what do you expect to learn?"

"The truth," Brian replied, holding the doctor's gaze without flinching. "You don't strike me as the kind of man who would mince words. If it's nothing, you'll say so."

"And if it's something?"

Brian did not smile. "You'll say so. So just . . . get on with it."

Turnage looked thoughtful; then he nodded, and turned back to the cabinet, gathering the necessary equipment, while Brian took a moment to compose himself, taking a deep breath and determined to face whatever might be at hand.

In the end, the exam did not take long, and, exactly as he'd expected, the physician could not give him any kind of definitive answer.

He could however provide some speculation, even though he was obviously reluctant to do so.

"Verdict?" Brian asked finally, when Turnage was spending an inordinately long time recording his observations.

The physician took a deep breath. "Well, for what it's worth, you're right. It's not just your imagination. However, I can't tell you exactly what it is, although . . ."

"Come on, Doc. Just spit it out, will you? Whatever you tell me, it probably won't be as bad as what I'm thinking."

Turnage sighed. "As I told you before, I can't be sure. We need a specialist, and I don't mean in a week or a month. I mean now. As in tomorrow. Too much time has passed already."

Brian nodded. "So what is it you're trying not to tell me?"

Turnage took a seat behind his desk and regarded Brian steadily. "First of all, you need to understand that this is - God! This is beyond rare. If I'm right."
"Just . . . say it."

"Have you ever heard of something called AION?"

Brian huffed an impatient sigh. "Spare me the acronym. What is it?"

"Anterior Ischemic Optic Neuropathy."

"Which means?"

Turnage folded his hands on his desk. "It means you could be right. Despite the fact that this condition is very rarely associated with physical trauma, it is possible."

"And?"

The doctor rose quickly, his body language expressing an anger that he refused to allow to bleed into his voice. "And what? What do you want me to say, Brian? I told you - it's not my field. I can't give you a valid prognosis. You know that."

Brian stood too and stepped forward, deliberately intruding on the physician's personal space. "I'm not planning to sue if you get it wrong, Doc. But I want to know what you think. I want to know what's at risk."

"You already know that."

"Say it."

Turnage moved away, turning to look out toward the horizon, to watch as moonlight frosted the ocean's waves with silver froth. "You could go blind. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

Brian's smile was bittersweet. "I just wanted to see if you were brave enough to tell me."

This time, Turnage made no attempt to camouflage his anger. "Or did you just want to show me that you were brave enough to hear it?"

Brian was turning to walk away when he had a moment of epiphany, suddenly realizing what Turnage could not bring himself to say. His anger was not directed toward Brian's insistence on hearing the truth; it was, instead, rage at the futility of the situation.

Rick Turnage was not accustomed to feeling helpless.

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tbc
Chapter 47

First love is a kind of vaccination which saves a man from catching the complaint a second time.

-- Honore de Balzac

The breeze had sharpened as the night deepened, and by the time Brian made his exit from Turnage's house, it was cool enough to make him wish he'd grabbed a jacket in his haste to escape from the cottage. So he paused to light a cigarette, taking advantage of the temporary shelter provided by the covered entryway.

At least, he observed, it had stopped raining, and the moon was now draping the landscape in a coat of silver light and shadow - a lovely chiaroscuro portrait of shifting possibilities.

He stood still for a moment, wondering where the fuck that thought had come from. Was he going soft - even poetic - as he moved irrevocably toward middle age?

Shit!

Then he spotted the figure poised at the edge of the driveway, sitting astride a powerful Harley and watching him with narrowed eyes.

Shit!

"I don't like being stalked," he muttered as he walked toward the car.

"And I don't like being played." McClaren climbed off the bike and turned to face the man who had become his primary responsibility, as well as his focus in life - in more ways than one. He placed his hands on his hips and did not bother to try to hide his anger. "What the fuck did you think you were doing, Brian? Christ! Didn't you learn anything from . . ."

"I don't need a babysitter."

"Wrong, Shithead! A babysitter is exactly what you do need, until you stop playing stupid games and start facing the truth. You're not invincible, Brian. You're not bullet-proof or immortal. And there are people out there - close by, apparently - who want to kill you. What's it going to take to . . ."

"And if they manage to kill you? Won't they win then?"

"Maybe. They'll succeed in shutting me up, for sure. But they still won't force me to change, to become someone or something I'm not. Don't you get it? Can't you . . ."
McClaren stepped forward then, and grabbed Brian's biceps, his hands hard and bruising. "And if that happens, what will it do to Gus? Or to Justin? Christ, Brian, why can't you see . . ."

Brian shoved violently against the FBI agent's chest, freeing himself with one massive thrust. "What I see," he replied, "is that they'll be safe. They'll hurt - for a while. I know that. But, in the end, they'll be safe."

McClaren went very still then, the sharp blades of his rational mind struggling to cut through the confusion and the massive layers of camouflage with which Brian characteristically concealed his own deepest truths. And he saw - finally. Saw, and wanted to weep.

Thus his voice was a pale specter of his usual robust tone when he decided to speak again. "And what if it's one of them? Either one of them?"

Brian had gone still as well, and there was a darkness in his eyes unlike anything McClaren had ever seen there before. "That's when they win. Because then . . . then there's nothing left."

And McClaren heard - as clearly as if some supreme omniscient being had leaned forward from the sky to speak in his ear - the fundamental truth Brian had wrapped up tight in his own perceptions and tucked away at the core of his soul, the truth that he himself would never verbalize: that neither Justin nor Gus would be destroyed by the loss of Brian, because losing Brian would be the best thing that could happen to them. Because however much they might love him, it was a love he had not earned and did not deserve, and never would. He was perfectly comfortable - endlessly gratified - by the notion that he could inspire lust, adulation, sexual hunger, and intense jealousy, but love . . . that had never been part of the equation that made up Brian Kinney, and Chris McClaren was pretty sure, in that moment of epiphany, that, in the dark shadows of Brian's self-image, it never would.

The world could be a very dark place sometimes.

Brian moved away, heading for his car and feeling the chill of the night more keenly as the wind off the water frisked around him, like a wayward child at play, and McClaren felt the loss of more than just physical contact. Brian was withdrawing - slowly, of course, in increments of inches - but he was definitely moving back, looking for convenient shadows.

"Wait!" The FBI agent's tone was as brisk as the wind, and as cold. "Why did you come here? Why did you need to see Turnage?"

Brian spun back, and his face was sharp, etched with barely-restrained fury. "Did it ever occur to you that I might want to speak to my doctor, in private? That some things are just none of your . . ."

"No. It didn't. Because they're not. If it concerns you - or your health - it's my business."

"No, it's . . ."

"Just tell me, Brian. No matter how much you might disagree, there are some things that you simply can't handle on your own. So tell me. I know there's something wrong - something beyond the injuries you've been treated for. I've known for a while, so save us both a lot of trouble - and tell me."

Brian hesitated for a moment before turning away and sliding into the BMW's leather seat. "I have to see another specialist. Turnage will call tomorrow for an appointment. So far, it might be nothing, and I don't want to speculate."

McClaren sighed. "And when it's not nothing? Will you tell me then?"
"Probably won't have a choice."

"No. You won't."

"Did you find out anything? About the call?"

"They're still tracing it down, but I can already tell you what they'll find."

"As in . . . nothing?"

"More or less. Probably made from a prepaid cell, using some kind of electronic device to disguise the voice. We might get lucky and track down where it was bought, and then, if we can pinpoint the time of the sale, go over security footage and come up with something. Maybe."

Brian nodded. "You heard what was said?"

McClaren found that he did not really want to look into Brian's eyes as he remembered that ugly voice and the words it spoke. "They gave me the gist of it."

To his own surprise, Brian dredged up a wry snicker. "It's a beautiful world we live in, isn't it?"

Unexpectedly, the FBI agent stepped forward and pulled Brian out of the car, manhandling him without much effort, and setting him against the BMW's rear passenger door, prompting Brian to recall that the man was a lot stronger than he looked. McClaren just stood there for a moment, his hands still bracing Brian's shoulders, and when he smiled, Brian noted glints of fire and ice in the depths of those blue eyes and wondered briefly whether or not he should be alarmed.

"You're never going to let me in. Are you?" It was barely a whisper. "Never going to let me see everything that you are."

Then it was Brian's turn to smile. "What makes you think there's anything more than what you've already seen? I'm a superficial bastard, you know - hardly worth your in-depth analysis."

Complete stillness for the space of a heartbeat. Then McClaren nodded. "Yeah. That's what I thought."

He leaned forward quickly and pressed a hard, demanding kiss against Brian's mouth, pressing just hard enough and lasting just long enough to encourage Brian to think - for a split second - about opening his lips and granting deeper access, and, for that tiny moment, the FBI agent allowed himself to savor the taste and breathe the scent that was so uniquely Brian Kinney, understanding that his window of opportunity was closing fast, growing thinner with every tick of the clock, and would soon be restricted to nothing but memory. Then he made a little sound in his throat, a rumbling sound that might have been a moan - or might not - and backed away just as abruptly as he'd leaned in.

"What was that for?" Brian, for once, sounded genuinely puzzled.

"Just making sure," came the answer, as the FBI agent moved away and picked up his helmet.

"Of what?"

A tiny sigh, and a quick bite of the lip. "That your immune system is functioning perfectly."

With that - and a flicker of a scapegrace smile - McClaren was on the bike and cranking it up, and there was no more chance for communication as the howl of the engine exploded into the night.

But, for a moment, Brian just stood there, wondering what the hell the kiss - and the comment - had
Melanie stood in the middle of the room, shoulders squared, eyes filled with dark sparks. "I said, 'What is she . . .'

"And I heard you the first time," Lindsey interrupted, her voice heavy with weariness.

"So answer the question."

The resentment that flared in the depths of Lindsey's eyes was more than a warning; it was almost a Red Alert that transformed shades of cobalt blue to glints of ice. "I would answer," she said softly, "if I thought it was your place to ask. But it isn't. You couldn't be bothered to call and let me know you were coming by? You couldn't even pick up the phone to check on Gus, so why should I . . ."

"What . . ." Melanie paused, and swallowed hard, summoning up the breath and the will to hold her temper and speak more calmly. "Why would she be here?"

"Officer Briggs," Lindsey said slowly, "is a member of the Pittsburgh PD, in case you've forgotten. And she's part of the investigation into the attack on Brian."

The lawyer's eyes narrowed; then she strode forward and leaned over to lay one hand on the mostly empty wine bottle. "Investigation, huh? Carried on under the influence of an expensive wine, which just happens to be one of your favorites, Linz. Police procedures must have changed significantly since I last had dealings with the local cops. Last I heard, 'Ms. Briggs' and her ilk were more likely to ply you with cheap beer and hip-hop music."

Sharon Briggs rose abruptly, and was instantly gratified to discover that - at her full height - she had a four inch advantage on Melanie Marcus, enabling her to look down her nose at the obviously annoyed attorney. "My . . . ilk? And what ilk would that be, Ms. Marcus? Exactly? Are we talking about a homey influence - with me in dreadlocks, sprinkling my regular speech with Ebonics and packing a bag full of fried chicken and watermelon? Or perhaps it would have been more acceptable if I'd come in a yarmulke, carrying a screw-top bottle of Mogen David and some matzo balls?"

Melanie's fists were suddenly clinched, and she was obviously fighting to suppress an urge to snarl, but she wasn't fighting very hard. "How dare you?"

"How dare I what? Sling ugly stereotypical racial slurs at you, while you obviously feel free to indulge in the same without fear of reprisal?"

"I wasn't . . ."

"Yes, Mel. You were." And the tone of Lindsey's voice said that there would be no argument on this score. "Comes under the heading of 'turn about's fair play'. Now, what do you want? It's late, and I'm . . ."

"I want to know where - and how - our son is, and when . . . when you're going to put all this foolishness aside and come home like you should." Melanie had deliberately turned her back on Sharon Briggs in an effort to rein in her temper and focus her attention and her efforts on the only person she really wanted to address. The effort, however, was only marginally successful, judging from the strident quality of her voice. "Or are you going to let Brian finally get what he's always wanted. Are you going to let him destroy what we've built together? Is that what this is going to be all about, in the end?"
Lindsey let herself sink down onto the ottoman that was fortuitously located right behind her, as her knees seemed suddenly insufficient to support her. "Jesus, Mel! Do you hear yourself? Do you even remember that our wedding would never have happened - without Brian? That we would have lost each other - almost before we came together - if Brian hadn't stepped in to . . ."

"Oh, puh-leeze!" Melanie, patience exhausted, dropped all pretense of camouflaging her anger. "Please tell me we are not going to start singing the praises of 'St. Brian' again. You know him, Lindsey. You know he never does anything for anyone except himself. If he helped us, it was because he didn't want to be bothered with having to take care of Gus. Or you. Why can't you wake up and realize that he figured out that I was the best shot for getting rid of you and your baggage?"

Even Sharon Briggs - completely peripheral to this phase of the conversation - felt the stillness that suddenly permeated the room, as if all the air had been sucked from it, leaving only a dark void in its place.

"My . . . baggage?" Lindsey said, in a voice barely louder than a whisper. "Is that what my son is - to you? Baggage?"

"Not to me," cried Melanie, too outraged now to pay close attention to the look in her partner's eyes. "To him. That's all he ever was to Brian, and you know it. He doesn't love Gus. The same way he doesn't love you, and it's way past time for you to grow up and accept that."

Lindsey looked up, and found an unexpected expression of warmth and empathy from the undercover officer, her chef's attire looking slightly ludicrous in this semi-elegant setting. The blond rose slowly, taking a deep breath and pausing to organize her thoughts before offering a response. "From your perspective," she said finally in an eerily calm voice, "I'm sure you're right. You have a very unique definition of love, I think. No. Brian doesn't love me the way a man loves a woman. Or the way he loves Justin, or Gus. And he never will. And I won't even bother to address your belief that he doesn't love either of them, because - frankly - that's none of your business. And you happen to be dead wrong. But I'll tell you how much he does love me - and Gus. He loves us both enough to pretend to be unaware that the money he's provided for all these years is far more than I needed to support Gus. It also supported me - and you - and our daughter. He loves me - and Gus - enough to accept your resentment toward him and ignore your constant attempts to drive a wedge between him and his son. He loves us enough to put up with you, at your worst. What's really too bad . . . is that you apparently don't love us enough to return the favor."

Melanie opened her mouth, rage blazing in her eyes, and found that she couldn't summon up a single, coherent word to say that would refute the accusation against her.

She was right about Brian; she knew she was right. She had always been right. But, in the grip of desperation, she couldn't come up with the facts she needed to document it. And perhaps the bottom line was that there might not be sufficient proof, for Lindsey might go right on believing what she wanted to believe and ignoring all the rest, demonstrating a 'facts-be-damned' attitude that nothing would ever manage to dislodge.

Brian Kinney was costing her everything - her life; her wife; her son. He was winning, and she was turning into . . . No; that was wrong. She wasn't turning into anything; it was him. It was always him. He was turning her into a loser - a victim of his manipulation.

She could not - would not allow it, but, for this moment, she couldn't think of a way to turn the tide in her favor.

Eyes grim and filled with barely contained fury, she glared at her partner for a few, silent moments. Then she turned and stalked out of the suite, arms swinging and spine so rigid that she looked like a
majorette setting the pace for a marching band.

The silence behind her was thick, almost acrid with the taste of bitterness.

Until Sharon Briggs settled back into her chair and regarded Lindsey with a sardonic smile. "Didn't you say something about good whiskey? Or should I run down to my muscle car and fetch a pitcher of Kool-Aid?"

It wasn't funny; it shouldn't have been funny. Stereotypes were never funny.

And yet Lindsey laughed. Then she laughed harder and was grateful when Briggs joined in, even though, if pressed, Lindsey could not have explained what she was laughing at, or why it felt so liberating.

Brian and Chris talked very little when they returned to the house. It was not that they had nothing to say to each other; it was, in fact, exactly the opposite. There was plenty that needed saying, but neither one had any idea of how to go about broaching the necessary subjects or clearing the air.

So the only exchange between them was a brief but thorough report on Katy's condition, as offered by the security team at the hospital, a reassurance that the technical experts were actively pursuing the origin of the phone call Brian had received, and a completely unnecessary precautionary remark from Brian, reminding McClaren that the appointment which Rick Turnage would be making for him - with the unidentified 'specialist' - was not a subject for open discussion or idle commentary.

Thereafter, they spent a few moments staring at each other, oddly comfortable with the silence, and it was uncertain which of them was more surprised when Brian reached out and stroked his thumb through the stubble on McClaren's jaw line in a fleeting but tender caress. Then he simply turned away and hurried into the house, suddenly eager to reach the generous stash of premium quality weed semi-concealed in that discreet little cabinet in the study - the one that everyone in the household knew about but no one bothered to acknowledge.

He doubted that anyone would deny him a bit of chemical comfort for surviving the tribulations of this interminable day.

Behind him, standing on the edge of the deck with pale moonlight pooling around him, Chris McClaren simply stood motionless for a while, staring into nothingess long after Brian had disappeared into the dark interior of the cottage. He spent some time wondering if he had been mistaken - wondering if a simple touch could possibly convey as much as he'd thought he'd heard in that singular moment, without a single word actually being spoken. Wondering if he'd been right in thinking that it was the only kind of good-bye he should ever expect to receive, but no less real, no less fundamental, than the actual words would have been.

Brian wasn't gone yet, but he was going, and the FBI agent knew that he'd been warned to prepare.

Brian - being Brian - had not lingered, had not displayed any ambiguity, which did not mean that he was any less aware than his counterpart; it only meant that he was less disconcerted by having to flounder through uncharted territory. Brian Kinney simply didn't do disconcerted.

And there was that promise of physical, mental, and emotional release that awaited him in the lovely privacy of his office.

But . . . first things first.
He climbed the stairs quickly and made his way to the room that he and Justin shared - the room that now housed his only child. He was overly cautious as he approached the bed, making sure not to disturb the boy's much-needed sleep, and spent several moments simply staring down at Gus, who was snuggled into a rolled-up quilt, with Beau tucked up against him. Someone - Trina, probably - had turned on a light in the adjacent bathroom and left the door just slightly ajar so that the bedroom was not completely dark, and Brian found that watching his son sleep in the gentle reflection was something he would probably never tire of. The little boy - his little boy - was smiling as he shifted slightly, and Brian suddenly felt a lump in his throat that he couldn't quite swallow. His child; who could have imagined that he would have a son of his own? Beyond that, who could have guessed that he would love this tiny being so deeply that the idea of losing him or seeing him harmed in any way would be something he couldn't bear to contemplate?

He leaned forward and skimmed his hand over the dark, spiky hair that was so much like his own, and noted lovely details: the sprinkling of freckles that emphasized the adorable, slightly pug nose; the tiny shadow that marked the suggestion of a cleft in the strong chin; the thick, lush arc of dark lashes against creamy skin; the sweet curve of soft lips, pursed in a tiny pout.

"God!" he whispered finally, barely audible. "You are so beautiful."

He was careful not to speak too loudly. Gus, after all, might not appreciate that particular adjective at this stage of his life. He might even grow up to regard that word as an insult to his masculinity.

Gus might grow up to like . . . girls.

But that was a bridge that need not be crossed just yet. And Brian smiled. There was also the absolute truth of the fact that - when this lovely boy did grow up - he was going to be a primo heartbreaker, and, right now, it didn't seem to matter much whether the victims were male, female - or both. It was a petty thought, and he knew it, but the notion of a new generation of broken hearts a la Kinney put him in the mood for a bit of celebration, and he knew exactly where to find it.

He tucked the quilt more tightly around his son's slender body, dropped a kiss on that tousled, spiky hair, and even soothed the dog with a quick stroke, until it settled more comfortably against Gus's body.

Then he went downstairs where he retrieved his treasured stash, and rolled a joint quickly, his fingers deft and sure from long experience.

He waited until he was outside and moving toward the greenhouse before lighting up and enjoying the first deep drag, the sheer physical pleasure of it inspiring him to contemplate some small nuance of pity for those who had never savored the experience. He couldn't claim to be approaching a state of mellow relaxation - yet - but he would get there soon enough.

He was taken by surprise when he almost stumbled across Trina Thomas as he stepped through the open French door of the greenhouse entrance.

Trina was on her knees, her fingertips tracing through a bright drift of spiky crimson and rose and blush pink flowers, lush and glistening with water droplets in the reflected glow of the security lights scattered randomly along the paths through the structure. A basket at her side was overflowing with perfect samples of the riotously thick blossoms.

Brian took another drag from his joint before fixing her with a sardonic smile. "What are you doing? I don't think I pay you enough to take on the gardening chores - at midnight."

She managed to dredge up a small grin, but it was framed with a cautious weariness. "Well, you got
that right," she replied, deftly plucking a faded blossom from the low free-form planter bed that covered an eight-foot sprawl. "But actually, this is a kind of therapy for me. I find it soothing, and . . . well, this batch of blooms is . . . it's . . ." She fell silent for a moment, before regarding him with a slight nuance of defiance. "You're going to think it's silly, I'm sure, but I kind of . . . promised Simon that I'd take care of this one."

Brian went very still. "You talked . . . to Redding?"

"Yep."

"Why would you . . ."

"Begging your pardon, Master," she retorted, making absolutely no effort to suppress the sarcasm, "but I wasn't aware that your contracted use of my services entitled you to dictate who I get to talk to."

Brian considered it for a moment; then he nodded, but his concession did nothing to melt the ice in his eyes. "You're right. Of course. But there is the matter of him being a security risk, not to mention a potential threat to my . . ."

"The operative word," she interrupted, "being 'potential'." She plucked one more imperfect blossom from the batch in front of her before rising to her feet and tossing the discards into a rubbish bin. Then she turned to regard him with steady resolve.

"I understand why it was necessary to send him away. I really do. And if it were my son at risk - or my lover - I'd probably have done the same. But that doesn't mean that I believe it was the right thing to do. You don't know him, Brian. How could you? But . . ." She paused then, obviously searching for the right words to justify her opinion.

"Do you know what these are?" she asked finally, her hands spreading out to encompass the huge mass of blossoms at her feet.

"Horticulture isn't my thing," he replied, taking another drag of his narcotic of choice and not bothering to wonder where she was going with this. She would get to her point in her own good time and her own fashion. If he had learned nothing else about this enigmatic woman, he had learned that.

"Yeah," she agreed. "I've noticed. Anyway, these are snapdragons, Brian. Very old-fashioned. Not particularly exotic. Fairly common, even. Except in this case, for these specific blossoms are not common at all. Snapdragons are now grown all over the place. They're generally treated as annuals, because they're so readily available that it's hardly worth trying to preserve them through the winter. You just let them die out when they're finished blooming, and plant a new batch when it's time to get ready for the next spring. But not these."

"Okay," he replied, when she paused, as he moved into a shadowy corner of the greenhouse and sprawled on his favorite lounger. "What's so different about these?"

"This particular batch has been here sheltered, cared for . . . preserved, if you will, for decades."

Brian blinked. "Decades?"

"Yep. For that matter, so have several other specimens here, including many of the clematis vines and some of the bougainvillea. But these particular ones - the snapdragons - are special."

Brian took another drag and then - to her surprise and maybe even his own - he offered it to Trina. Even more surprising - to them both - she accepted the offer.
"If you break out in a chorus of 'My Favorite Things'," he remarked, "this conversation is officially over."

She laughed. She frequently had no idea why she actually liked this young man so much, but this was not one of those moments.

She sank into a chair and regarded him with a smile. "This," she said, her hands sweeping around to indicate the entire contents of the greenhouse, "is all an homage to a very special young woman. Granted, it's not your ordinary, run-of-the-mill monument, but it's the only one he was ever allowed to offer her."

"Redding?"

"Yep. He was a poor, relatively uneducated black man, hired by Old Man Bailey - the original founding father of this place - because he was good with his hands, because he was a hard worker, and because he knew a bit about farming, and because he 'knew his place'. That's how white supremacists used to express their approval for black men who continued to play the role that white society wrote for them. Simon was one of those black men who sort of . . . slipped through the cracks of the civil rights movement. Born a bit too early, maybe, to be comfortable on the cutting edge of the change, and a little too late to be one of the crowd that got grandfathered in. He just kind of . . . hovered between the extremes. Nothing in the way of family support to see that he got a good education, and not really gifted intellectually - not gifted enough, anyway, to capture the attention of a rising liberal influence hungry for young black causes to champion. Although, if you ever got a chance to talk to him - to really hear what he said and what he thought, I think he'd have surprised you. But, like many of those in his generation, he just stood by and watched history sail on without him. He did his job, kept his head down, avoided controversy, would probably have lived out his life without ever once wandering out into the whole racial/cultural/bigotry complexity except . . . " She sighed, and took another hit off the joint before passing it back to Brian.

"Her name was Lillian, and believe this, if you never believe anything else, young Master Kinney: fate can be a cruel bitch. Because here was this handsome, healthy, young black man - reasonably content with his lot in life even if the rebellious youth of his time insisted that he shouldn't be - who went to work one day, just as he had every other day for a number of years, and arrived at the house only to be introduced - hat in hand, of course - to the new mistress of the place. He was the hired hand, and she was the lady of the manor.

"I don't know the details. I don't even know if anything ever really happened between them - and don't give me that smart-ass look, because you know exactly what I mean. She was not exactly welcomed with open arms by the local society ladies. Creole origins and a dark beauty that did not entirely rule out some questions about her racial background . . . well, you can guess the rest. Add to that the fact that she had a wicked sense of humor, and a tendency to ignore the local social mores and laugh at herself and everyone else around her, and . . . well, you can certainly figure the rest out for yourself, since you've never wasted a moment worrying about trivialities like what other people think of you.

"She was like that. You'd have liked her, and she'd probably have tried to adopt you."

He waited then, but she seemed to have lost her train of thought. "So what does this have to do with . . ."

"This place . . . it was special. To her. To both of them, actually. And it's still special to him. I understand why the FBI and your security people felt compelled to take action - to eliminate a possible threat to you. But Simon . . . I don't believe that he would have used this place like that. I don't believe he would have violated something that he holds so precious. They built this flower bed
the year before she died, working together to plant the snapdragons in this private spot, which was the only place that they were ever able to relax and forget about prying eyes and wagging tongues. Here, they could enjoy each other's company and practice what they both loved - growing beautiful things. And these flowers are a monument to the time they had together. They keep coming back, year after year after year, because he's made sure that they do. That's why he's been here all the years since she's been gone - not just because it's his job and what he gets paid to do. He does this for her. Preserving this place. Preserving what's left of her. Preserving his memories. He wouldn't defile it by being a part of something so ugly as the attack on you, simply because you happen to love someone society disapproves of. If anyone in the world could understand that - understand you and your life - it's Simon. So . . . even though I know that you did what you had to do, I will also do what I must. He called - just the once - and asked. So I'll tend her flowers, until he can come back to do it himself."

"He told you all this?"

She laughed. "Not in so many words. He never said much, beyond a few little stray comments over the years. But there were rumors, of course. This is a small southern town; gossip is its lifeblood. Plus, I saw some of it for myself. I went to school with Lillian's older daughter, and I came here a few times when I was a girl. While the pillars of local society never did really accept her, all the young people loved Lillian. She had no pretensions - and no patience with those who did. And Simon was . . . he was just always there. Just a presence in her life. Never said much. Made himself scarce mostly. But you could see it in his eyes sometimes, when he let himself look at her, and - once in a great while, if you were very lucky and paid special attention - you could see it in hers."

Brian studied her face, and was somehow not surprised to spot a tracing of tears on the lovely café au lait smoothness of her cheek.

"So . . . you don't think they ever . . ."

"No way of knowing for sure, of course, but . . . no. I don't."

Brian took a drag. "Some people would say that was really stupid of them. Both of them."

"Yes," she agreed. "Some people would." She turned then to stare at him. "But not you."

He smiled, and looked, for just a moment, like he wanted to argue. But then he didn't; he grew quiet, listening to the soft susurrations of the night wind, noting how the foliage around them shifted in the shadows, sending coins of light and shadow dancing across the graveled surface of the greenhouse, and let his smile grow to indicate a gentle indulgence. "No. Not me."

He didn't stop to analyze why he felt that way; he didn't even stop to ask himself an even more important question, for he had finally achieved what he'd gone looking for. He had reached the desirable state of mellow, so he didn't waste time wondering about anything.

Later, though, he might. Maybe he would ask himself how it was that the people who purported to know him best - to know him like the proverbial back of their own hands - would have scoffed at his reply to her comment, would have refused to even consider the possibility that Brian Kinney might know anything about the simple beauty and precious quality of love unrealized, cloistered and preserved in a space forever unreachable. He smiled and refused to dwell on that observation, or wonder how it was that this lovely woman, an acquaintance of only a few weeks and a refugee, in her own way, from a completely different world, could see him so clearly.

It was, he conceded, an intriguing question which he might examine - someday - he thought, as the
object of his musings favored him with a remarkably sweet smile before rising to retrieve the basket of lovely blossoms she had gathered and then stepping forward to drop a gentle kiss on Brian's forehead while trailing a quick caress through the thickness of his hair.

Neither spoke again, as both realized that they had said all that needed saying.

Midnight had come and gone by the time the SUV made the turn through the gate and pulled up in front of the garage. Katy was fast asleep, cradled in her mother's arms, and did not even stir when Lance Mathis lifted her and carried her into the house, with Cynthia walking alongside, never losing contact, her hand continuously stroking the silky strands of her daughter's blond locks.

Justin, from his place in the front seat, watched in silence as the group made its way up onto the deck and into the cottage, while Howie and Delia exited from the escort vehicle, and Eugene walked back to the gatehouse to report to Chris McClaren - and when in God's name did that man ever sleep? Or was he just one of the walking dead, a creature of the night with no need for the restorative properties of slumber?

Justin remained seated for a while, looking out through the window to the shore, where the tide was going out now, leaving a dark, uneven shadow on the sand.

The house was dark - silent - but it was not completely still. A moving shadow at an upstairs window indicated that Ron Peterson was still awake, and lights were still on at the rear of the house.

Gus would be sleeping, of course. His grandfather had let him call to tell Justin 'Good night' when he'd finally been convinced that it was bedtime, or, more likely, when he just couldn't keep his eyes open any longer, and Justin had promised massive castle-building efforts for the morning.

Just minutes later, Brian had called to speak to Cynthia who had forgotten to grab her cell phone in the rush of the emergency, and the sharp tension in his voice had not eased until she'd delivered the good news that Katy was going to be just fine, and would sport nothing worse than a spectacular bruise as a souvenir of her misadventure - a badge of valor which the teen-ager was looking forward to displaying for the entire household.

It had been chaos at the ER - something that was apparently a normal condition on a week-end night - and they had all been grateful for the presence of Kevin Halloran, who had elected to follow them to the hospital in his own car and run interference in order to avoid unnecessary delays and dispense with red tape. Although FBI credentials ordinarily opened doors quickly and efficiently, emergency medical settings were frequently chaotic and disorganized, and completely unimpressed by security protocols and government hierarchies. In the end, having a member of the emergency staff on hand to step in on their behalf proved to be an invaluable asset. Justin had been appreciative, of course, but had not enjoyed having to wait to speak to Brian as Halloran took center stage to deliver a brief but thorough report summing up Katy's condition.

Justin had managed to control his impatience - barely - knowing that the young doctor was the kind of tender morsel who would, under normal circumstances, have inspired him to utilize all his seductive wiles to get Brian as far away from temptation as possible; he had not failed to notice the tiny, subversive sparks of interest in the medical student's eyes when he'd responded to Brian's admiring gaze back at the cottage. Still, it would be churlish in the extreme to demonstrate the measure of his distrust when Halloran had been instrumental in getting Katy the treatment she needed in a timely fashion. Nevertheless, he would make sure that there would be no further contact between the handsome young doctor and the Stud of Liberty Avenue. He was grateful for the help - but he was not stupid.
After Brian had been sufficiently reassured, Justin had finally managed to find a private moment for a bit of personal conversation, but their connection had been sporadic and halting and finally faltered altogether, and they had decided to end the call in a mutual display of irritation.

Still, it had not ended badly.

"I'll be waiting for you," Brian had assured him. "In the greenhouse."

Justin had managed - just barely - not to run out into the parking lot and launch himself into a flurry of handsprings. He loved Gus; he loved him more than he could express - almost as much, he thought, as Brian did. But that did not change the fact that the child's presence in their bed had served as a wet blanket when it came to their sex life.

He was hungry; he wanted - no, he needed a huge dose of that legendary Brian Kinney cock, 'huge' being the operative word.

Quickly, noting that his breathing was already unsteady and that there was a growing pressure in his crotch, he climbed out of the car and hurried toward the house, taking a moment to zip into the study and retrieve and program his iPod, along with a few other supplies. He knew exactly what he was going to do - and what kind of accompaniment he needed to pull it off - 'off' being the operative word.

Then he thought about it for a moment, and decided that he needed a few more props, in order to achieve the effect he wanted, for he realized that he didn't want to be the only one hard and hungry and panting with need. He wanted Brian to feel the same; he wanted to be needed, desired, and craved.

He wanted Brian Kinney almost on his knees - almost begging.

Almost.

He hurried to gather the rest of his supplies before heading out the door, making a quick detour to the gatehouse where Chris McClaren turned to look at him with lifted brow. It was immediately obvious that he'd noted the variety of items that Justin was balancing in his arms and realized that something was definitely up, but he chose to say nothing, simply waiting for Justin to explain the purpose of his visit.

"If you value your life," said Justin, refusing to explain anything but making his purpose very clear, "do not come anywhere near the greenhouse for the next, ummm, hour - or so."

The FBI agent snickered. "Yeah. Right. Enjoy yourself, Stud Muffin. But just . . . just take care. Make sure he's all right before you spring your little ambush."

Though every nerve in his body, not to mention every instinct in his mind, was screaming at him to turn around and rush away to find what he had been thinking about for many long hours, something else whispered to him, taunted him - insisted that there was something more here, something he needed to discover - and he went very still.

"Why wouldn't he be all right?"

McClaren shrugged. "Rough day. You know."

"He's had plenty of rough days lately. But he's fine. He'll always be fine."

McClaren reached out suddenly and gripped Justin's wrist, hard enough to bruise. "Are you really so
sure about that? Do you just automatically accept what you see on the surface, and never look any deeper? Never try to understand the things he doesn't say? Some motherfucker called him tonight - to taunt him, to make sure that he understood how close he came to losing his son. That's the world he lives in; that's the world he has to exist in. So you need . . . you need to find his truth. The real truth."

"Jesus!" Justin felt something seize up in his chest, as he realized exactly what such a call would have done to Brian.

"Yeah. Now do you understand, Justin? Now do you see?"

Swallowing a burst of nausea that threatened to overwhelm him, Justin managed to produce a lopsided smile, albeit a very small one. "You called me 'Justin'. Should I be scared?"

"Of course, you should be scared, Twink. Did you hear what I said?"

Justin took a deep breath, struggling to hang on to the bravado that was the only thing making it possible to him to remain calm - relatively. "Of course I heard it. Do you think I don't know what it does to him - what he feels whenever he's confronted with anything that supports his conviction that he's responsible for every bad thing that happens or might happen? To Gus - or to me? Or to anybody that he fucking cares about? Do you really think I'm that stupid, or that he'd waste his time on somebody who was? I know all about it; trust me. I do, but . . ."

Justin paused, suddenly unable to speak around the lump in his throat.

"But what?" The FBI agent prompted, sounding slightly pensive, slightly less belligerent than before, but still impatient enough to insist on a deeper explanation.

Justin was slow to answer, reluctant to speak at all, but finally choosing to do so, apparently realizing that he was not going to be given an alternative. "But if I let him see it - if I let him know how much it scares me - then he goes hyper-defensive, super-controlling on me, and tries to push me so far away that I wouldn't feel the fall-out if he went down under a nuclear explosion. I can't let him do that, Chris. Do you understand that? He may not admit it - may never allow himself to know it - but I can't live without him. I tried; I really did, but . . . in the end, without him, my life is empty and cold and meaningless. And here's the part that he's never going to concede: it's the same for him. Neither one of us is ever going to be complete without the other. So - for now - I do what he needs me to do, and if that means playing the role that he writes for me, then that's how I play it. God knows, it ain't perfect, but it works. It gets us through the bad times."

Acting strictly on instinct and putting caution and reason aside, the FBI agent pulled the younger man close and stared down into his eyes. "God damn!" he muttered. "Do you have any idea how beautiful you are? So fucking beautiful that it hurts to look at you. And I do know how he feels about you, no matter how much I wish I didn't. In fact, nobody knows it better than me. But here's a basic truth, Justin - hard to put into words but true just the same. You have to be bigger - bigger than he thinks you are. You have to look deeper. You have to see better, because - no matter how much he denies it - he's living with more pain than he can handle. Today . . . today was almost too much. And if you can't figure that out, if you don't manage to push through all the crap and see the man he is - inside - then . . ."

"Then what?" Justin's instinct was to jerk free and snarl his defiance. But something else - something deeper and more visceral than his momentary annoyance - held him still. "Then what?" he repeated - louder and sharper.

It was uncertain which of them was more surprised when McClaren leaned forward and covered Justin's lips with his own - just for one, fleeting, harsh, breath-taking moment. It was so quick, so
reflexive, that it was over before Justin could even think of reacting. "Then," McClaren whispered, pulling away just a bit, "you lose him. And he loses everything. Dig in, Justin, and dig deep. You're strong enough, and I think you love him enough. But don't fool yourself into thinking it's going to be easy. Brian Kinney is never easy. He never will be."

Justin's eyes were huge and glossy with unshed tears. Then he smiled. "But worth it?" he asked softly.

McClaren grinned and stepped back. "Oh, yeah."

Justin shifted slightly, but he did not run. He simply stood there for a moment, looking up into the shadowed depths of cobalt blue eyes, steely with resolve. Then he smiled. "Okay. I can hardly believe it, but - for once - we agree on something."

"Yeah. We do."

Justin moved then, racing away into the night and hurrying toward the only refuge he would ever really need and the only man who would ever be able to provide it, realizing as he ran that some things would never change; Chris McClaren would still never make his Christmas card list, and that was unlikely to change - ever. But maybe - someday - at some random moment, he might spare a thought for the FBI agent and remember a debt he owed and a cost that he had not been required to pay, because someone else had paid it for him.

Maybe. Occasionally. But not tonight.

Justin was careful to approach the greenhouse in silence, tamping down on an almost uncontrollable urge to break into a sprint and leap forward to claim that which made his life worthwhile. But he forced himself to slow down, suppressing his own impatience to achieve an unexpected level of serenity. As much as he wanted to throw himself into Brian's arms and devour Brian's lips and body, he also wanted to watch for a moment, to savor the anticipation, to revel in the certainty of his welcome within those sheltering arms.

The greenhouse was always a peaceful place - warm and welcoming and beautiful - but, at night, thick with shadows, it took on an additional persona. It became a place of mystery, of soft, uncertain focus where a tiny sidestep might very well allow fantasy to shift into reality. The play of light and shadow made it seem to linger just on the edges of possibility, a product of perception as much as fact.

He paused in the deep gloom just outside the spill of the pale glow of the path lighting, and found himself barely able to breathe as he took in the details of the beautiful tableau laid out before him. The corner of the structure where Brian was sprawled out on a cushioned lounge was more secluded and heavily shadowed than the rest of the interior, and Justin wondered - fleetingly - if that arrangement might be deliberate. A quick, sweeping glance around the interior of the greenhouse confirmed that there was no direct line-of-sight from that corner to any observation point within the cottage. Interesting - and extremely convenient, he thought with a smile that contained not a single trace of innocence.

The chill of the night air, along with the dampness of the ocean-side setting, should have been intense enough to compel Brian to clothe himself against the physical discomfort, but, once more, the greenhouse provided sufficient shelter to allow him to disregard such a need, insulating him with layers of lush foliage and sheets of glass. Thus, the corner was comparatively warm and protected.
from the elements, and he was clad accordingly - jeans that hugged that perfect ass, fitting exactly as jeans should always fit on such a body - and nothing else. The sculpted surfaces of his chest, his arms, his shoulders were all revealed by the gentle glow of the interior illumination, slightly misted by tendrils of smoke from the joint in his hand; his head was turned slightly to the right so that his profile was clean and perfect against the dark foliage that climbed the trellis behind him, and off to his left, just within a drift of shadow, the lyrical splash of the multi-tiered fountain caught occasional glimmers of ambient light, reflecting soft flickers of radiance to touch his face and even spark glints of auburn from the thick thatch of his hair as he nestled against a plush pillow.

He had always been beautiful; that was a given. But he had never been more so than he was at that exact moment.

Justin paused, fighting to swallow around a huge lump - the kind that always formed in his throat when he was caught unawares, at moments when he had allowed himself to forget the stunning physical perfection of his partner and stumbled across an unexpected vision of that loveliness, a beauty so stunning, so heart-wrenching that his mind was suddenly empty of everything except the painful certainty of how much he loved this man, and how dark his life would become should he ever lose him.

He spent a moment savoring the view, tasting the rich sensation of the tableau on his tongue, like fine, distinctive wine, before managing to shake off the spell of enchantment and recall the details of his campaign of seduction. He didn't really want to hurry, but certain details of his plan precluded dawdling.

Thus he moved quietly, taking care to arrange his supplies for both security and ease of access while Brian remained still, eyes closed and chest moving in a soft rhythm as he concentrated on the virtuoso acoustic guitar work and singular, slightly roughened voice of Eric Clapton.

Justin hesitated again, just to listen.

*Then we'd go running on faith;
All of our dreams would come true,
And our world will be right
When love comes over me and you.*

The voice, the cadence, the lyrics - everything about the song seemed to slip under his guard to inhabit a special, hidden place in his heart, and he wondered if the same might be true for Brian; he even wondered if that might account for his lover's preference for Clapton unplugged - a preference that would probably have surprised most of Brian's friends, as he was much more likely to be associated with heavy metal and hard rock and his affection for Billy Idol - or jazz of the coolest persuasion. It was vaguely distracting to realize how few people would recognize the deeper, more complex details of the man none of them knew as well as they thought they did - a man who had a compelling affinity for rogue individualists like Oscar Wilde or James Joyce or J. D. Salinger, while dismissing Hemingway as a "lightweight"; a man who could quote Dylan Thomas on virtually any subject if he wanted to - but almost never did; a man who had a snide affinity for Lewis Carroll's specific, amazing brand of lunacy and never bothered to explain why; a man who could contemplate the intricacy of Bob Dylan's efforts, and recognize the innate difference between the works of genius and the drivel written just to please the masses.

A man unlike any other; a man that very few would ever understand.

Another intriguing topic - for another day - but for now, time was awastin', and Blue Bell Cookies 'n Cream ice cream - "best in the world," according to Trina, barring the Butter Crunch version which was, unfortunately, off limits for Brian - was waiting in a small cooler in a niche by the doorway,
hopefully softening just enough to be drippable and smearable across a tantalizingly beautiful naked chest, and liquid enough to invite an eager tongue to retrieve it or use it to paint sensual swirls on golden skin.

But for now . . . he needed a bit of stage setting.

He managed to move quickly and silently across the shadowed interior of the greenhouse and switch out his pre-programmed iPod for the one that had been providing mood music for Brian's current bout of lethargy.

Then he took his position and waited for his cue.

There was absolutely nothing lethargic about the hard, driving blast of heavy guitar, thumped through with hard drumbeats, a la Foreigner, that shattered the peaceful ambiance of the night; nor was there anything remotely laid-back or lazy about Justin's movements as he leapt into a pool of light just a few feet away from the grotto in which Brian was reclining, and began to systematically, sensually, and provocatively strip off his clothing to the coarse beat of one of the band's biggest hits.

Brian stared for a moment; then he grinned, his expression as feral as an alpine wolf in winter, as Justin pantomimed the lyrics of the song, grinding his hips in perfect harmony. The grin grew wider - and hungrier - as Brian realized, not for the first time, that his young lover could have been a professional erotic dancer if he'd wanted. His breathing grew labored as he watched Justin draw closer, and use his shirt like a veil to tantalize, draping it around his torso like a ribbon, and then trailing it through his fingers, revealing skin as pale and creamy as silk.

"Now it's up to you;
We can make a secret rendezvous,
Just me and you;
I'll show you loving like you never knew.
That's why . . .
I'm hot blooded." **

Brian shifted slightly to get a better view, and a stray beam of light revealed that his 501s were actually unbuttoned, and there was no indication that he had bothered with underwear when he'd changed into the well-worn jeans. The upper edge of a dark, lush triangle of pubic hair was a stark contrast against golden skin. Brian Kinney, after all, did not tolerate tan lines. As Justin twisted with the rhythm of the music, running his hands down across his chest and then further down, skimming past his waist, and stroking across his belly and the triangle of creamy skin revealed by his open fly, his eyes were riveted to the tantalizing bulge beneath Brian's fingers. The blond tried to concentrate on his own agenda, on generating enough heat to intensify the sparks of lust he read in passion-dark eyes, but found that he was as much intrigued and inspired as his intended victim. It was difficult to control his breathing and to resist the growing urge to stop dancing and start something more tactile.

"Are you old enough?
Will you be ready when I call your bluff?
Is my timing right?
Did you save your love for me tonight?"**

The dancer gyrated slowly, turning so that he was looking back over his shoulder, biting his lip to control the urge to smile while watching Brian watch him, watching Brian want him, watching Brian . . .

Shit! Watching Brian's hand slip down inside his jeans and wrap around the massive throbbing bulge concealed in the shadows of his crotch. This was not going the way Justin had planned it out. It was
Brian who was supposed to be so hard and aching that he could barely breathe; it was Brian who was supposed to go boneless and mindless with hunger; it was Brian who should be on the verge of explosive decompression in his need for the touch of Justin's dick; it should be Brian. Not Justin.

But there was absolutely no denying the huge, aching throb in his own groin as he watched long, deft fingers delve further into that dark triangle and begin to move in a distinctive, unmistakable rhythm.

"No!" Unable to restrain the urge, Justin jumped forward and jerked Brian's hand free of its place between his legs.

And immediately, the lust in those night-dark, pupil-blown eyes was sparked with glints of fury. "What the fuck are you doing?" Brian demanded, his voice rough, almost hoarse.

"That," answered Justin, soft and breathless, "is mine. Not yours to play with."

Brian went very still. "You staking a claim, Sunshine?"

Justin felt a tiny tremor of unease deep in his chest, as he realized that he wasn't sure just what he was hearing in his lover's tone - derision, skepticism, amusement . . . or defiance.

"Yes. That belongs to me." Then he grinned. "Unless you decide otherwise."

The stillness lasted for a few more seconds - or a few more lifetimes. Justin would never be sure which. Until Brian smiled, allowing the remnants of any anger he might have felt to just slide away into oblivion. But the message - though unspoken and unacknowledged - had still been clear enough.

Brian Kinney could only be claimed . . . if Brian Kinney decided to allow it.

Justin briefly considered lodging a dispute, but, in the end, he didn't. Other things - more pertinent to the moment - demanded his immediate attention.

The song was building to its crescendo as he unbuttoned his own jeans and let them fall, turning as he did so to take advantage of the drift of the soft light against his body which touched him like a fine mist, emphasizing the pallor of his skin against the dark foliage around him. The effect was definitely not lost on the man who lay watching him.

Then he moved forward, deliberately displaying the tube of lubricant that he'd extracted from his pocket; he knelt at the bottom of Brian's lounge chair before scooting forward to settle himself astride his lover's thighs. Looking directly into Brian's eyes, he began to prepare himself, his breath growing short as he lifted himself up and watched Brian studying the angle of his body and his fingers as he slowly, repeatedly pushed into the sweet darkness of his own channel.

Brian swallowed - just once - but it was enough to make Justin smile. It did not, however, prepare him for Brian's quick movement that grabbed him by the biceps and jerked him forward until he could feel the hardness of Brian's groin thrusting up against him. "And that?" said Brian, in a harsh whisper. "Is that mine?"

And there was then no more time for thinking or arguing or claiming territory - or words. There was only the need, the all-consuming need.

Justin lifted up to wrap his hands in the fabric of Brian's jeans and yanked them down and off in one hard jerk. Then he dropped to his knees and buried his face in that thick thatch of pubic hair, nuzzling for a moment before wrapping his mouth around the thick throb of that perfect dick and licking voraciously, like he couldn't get enough of its sharp, musky taste, coating it first with a
generous slick of his saliva and then, with one twist of his hand, lubing it from base to tip before leveraging his body up and over, to reposition himself, hovering for just a heartbeat to look down at the sheer perfection of the body laid out beneath him before sliding down hard and fast, impaling himself and then going as still as stone, allowing himself time to adjust while reveling in every twitch and throb of the massive organ that filled him to capacity.

Brian was not quite as successful in achieving complete stillness. Though he managed to suppress an almost irresistible urge to thrust up into that luscious voracious heat, he could not prevent the tremor that shook him as he bit down hard on his lower lip to stifle the guttural groan that rose in his throat. At the same time, he arched his back and gripped his hands on Justin's thighs, hard enough to bruise.

"So," he managed to mutter through clinched teeth, "is this the plan then? Fucking hard to Foreigner?"

And at that instant, as if planned, the hard-driving thrust of the rock number ended, followed by a quick beat of silence.

"No," Justin whispered. "The plan is . . ."

The music that rose around them then was gentle, beautiful, a sweet velvet stroke against silken skin.

"Strumming my pain with his fingers,
Singing my life with his words."***

"Fucking soft . . . to Flack."

Brian laughed, but it was a gentle sound, as subtle and warm as the light glowing in his dark eyes as he watched Justin edge forward and lean down to fit his body, skin-to-skin, slick and clinging against Brian's torso while he set up an easy, delicious rhythm, clinching and unclinching on the throbbing hardness within him.

Justin was primed and ready to allow Brian's forceful nature to take over, to set the pace which would grow harder and faster, and then harder and faster again. Thus he was astonished when that didn't happen. Not immediately, anyway.

In Brian Kinney vernacular, they had fucked hundreds, perhaps even thousands of times but they had never fucked like this.

Their bodies moved together, keeping time with the soft beat of the music, as Justin leaned forward and explored Brian's mouth, allowing his own to be explored in turn, as Brian moved his hands to span Justin's ass, to balance him and caress him, but not - for the moment - to brace him for deeper penetration and harder action. As Justin lifted and settled, grinding crotch to crotch to intensify the slow friction between them, Brian shifted slightly, adjusting his angle so that every upstroke allowed him to nudge against that perfect, magic nub within Justin's passage, setting off sparks of pure euphoria with every thrust.

Justin pulled away a bit, so he could gaze down into the eyes that were looking up at him, totally open and unmasked for once, filled with passion and hunger and need and a vulnerability that was normally concealed beneath layers of bravado and pride. It was an exchange unlike any other they'd ever shared, and Justin went totally still, as Roberta picked her moment.

"He sang as if he knew me
In all my dark despair,
And then he looked right through me
"As if I wasn't there."***

"Promise me you won't," Justin whispered, pushing down and clinching tight and feeling - once more - the incredible sensation of being filled by Brian - being owned by Brian. "Promise me you'll never look through me, that you'll always see me."

Going completely still for the space of a heartbeat, Brian caught his bottom lip between his teeth in a burst of sheer panic, before realizing that the comment was just a reaction to the lyric. The request was clear enough in itself; it carried no hidden purpose. It was, however, enough to drive him to renew his claim, his ownership of the body that surrounded him, staking its own claim in return.

He tightened his grip on that sweet, perfect ass and thrust upwards, claiming more, slipping deeper.

"I will always see you." His voice was hoarse, almost guttural and veined with something that might have sounded like desperation, for anyone sufficiently detached to notice and identify. Which Justin, of course, was not. "I will always see you, just as you are right here. Right now. Mine. Completely mine."

And, at that exact point in time, it was true - true enough, at least, that Brian saw no need to look beyond that moment - no reason to explore a future that might never happen. Thus, he drove ever deeper, setting a new pace, reaching for new plateaus of joining, burying himself and his consciousness within the perfect refuge that was Justin.

As they soared together, climbed higher and higher together, and ultimately exploded together, falling into new levels of mind-blowing physical ecstasy and plunging into a sensation of oneness, of union, that they had never achieved before, neither was capable of coherent thought, but both sensed that they had reached a new place, a new degree of togetherness.

A new connection, unparalleled in their history and formed within the framework of one infinite moment.

Brian - had he been capable of speech - would have acknowledged it as "the best fuck ever", which it was, but they both knew that it was much more than that.

It was at least an hour before they recovered enough to investigate the delights of Blue Bell Cookies 'n' Cream and explore, with eager fingers and facile tongues and warm, shared laughter, the possibilities it presented.

Meanwhile, in the deepest hours of the night, the FBI and security teams continued their patrols, guarding against whatever might lurk in the darkness beyond the perimeter, waiting for an opportunity. It was rare for the primary agent on site to walk night patrol, but it was even more rare for a breach such as the one experienced earlier to occur at this particular level of protection, so any attempt at getting a normal night's sleep would have been futile for Chris McClaren, who opted to spend the night guarding the beachfront. During the long hours of his patrol, he avoided the areas closest to the cottage and welcomed the crash of the waves and the moan of the night wind.

The sounds of the ocean were loud enough - almost - to block out everything else, and the roughhewn, granite-like surface of the cliffs to the South were a fair approximation of the complete lack of expression on the FBI agent's face. As dawn approached, there were occasional spurts of rain, which would have obscured any traces of tears on that stoic visage, just in case there had been any tears in need of obscuring.

Which there weren't. Of course.
FBI agents in general - and Chris McClaren in particular - did not weep; did not allow themselves to react to pain or loss, did not even acknowledge that such reactions were remotely possible.

Nevertheless, he thought, as the wind chafed his skin and misted his face with stray drops of salt water, it was proving to be a very long night.

Emmett leaned against the bar and watched the crowd on the dance floor sing along and grind hips and torsos in time with Poison's hard driving version of *Look What the Cat Dragged In* as he sipped his third Cosmo of the night and decided that being the boss - or acting in his stead - was no fucking fun at all. On an ordinary night, when Brian would be exercising his territorial rights - either downing shots of JB at the bar, or grinding against a luscious piece of blond boy-ass on one of the platforms or giving a how-to demonstration in the backroom or his VIP suite or even sitting in his office, smoking a pricy joint and venting his anger about whatever might have upset him . . . anyway, on such a night - with God in His heaven and all right with the world - Emmett could have been falling-down, can't-feel-my-tongue, who-cares-whose-hand-is-down-my-pants drunk by this hour.

But none of that was happening on this night, and three Cosmos were hardly enough to give rise to even a tiny little buzz.

On the other hand, the big, beautiful hand and lusciously-muscled arm that was fixed around his waist was almost enough of a consolation to compensate for the lack. Almost.

He took a moment to review the recent events of his life, still not entirely sure that he had taken it all in, and he smiled when he realized that most people would find this particular venue completely inappropriate for this kind of reflection. Logically, one did not immerse one's consciousness in the mind-blowing thumpa-thumpa of Babylon at its wildest in order to contemplate changes in lifestyle. But that - somehow - was exactly what Emmett was doing; was, to some degree, what he'd always done. He functioned best here, in the place that seemed tailor-made for him. He conceded that it would make no sense to anyone else, but it made perfect sense to him.

His life today was just settling into its new configuration, and he was still reeling, just a bit. In some ways, it had happened so quickly that it had felt like a whirlwind; in others, it had been years in coming. And now, here he was. Standing on the edge of a new, committed relationship with a man who had become the center of his universe, achieving an astonishing degree of professional success with both his catering business and his new position as confidante/designate of Brian Kinney, earning the respect of local business leaders and society movers and shakers, and the co-owner of a new home - so new to him and his partner that it was still primarily furnished with packing crates - except for the bed, of course. That had been the very first piece of furniture purchased for the classic townhouse.

Not too shabby, he thought, for a "piece of trash from Hazlehurst, Mississippi". It was a measure of how far he'd come that he could now contemplate the memory of that phrase and its origin, and not cringe away from it.

He could still hardly believe how rapidly things had changed.

It had only been a few months since he and Calvin Culpepper had reached a mutual decision to let go of their natural reticence enough to begin to explore the limits of their relationship, both uncertain of how far things might go, and he still wondered, occasionally, what might have happened if things...
had not shifted so radically, if the world had not drifted into a dramatic new orbit to turn on an unexpected axis and bring Drew Boyd back into his life.

Emmett still felt that he owed Calvin a huge apology, although the southerner had not seemed particularly surprised nor annoyed by the way things had worked out. Apparently, he had known the truth of Emmett's heart even before Emmett did.

Emmett turned then and allowed his green eyes, only slightly awash with unsated lust, to drift down the magnificent body posed beside him, leaning against the bar with easy grace. Drew - being Drew - read his thoughts perfectly and confined his response to a gentle smile.

God! That smile was almost enough to send him racing toward the stairs where he would drag his companion behind him, up to the sanctuary of Brian's office which was, for all intents and purposes, now his office where he could have his way with that fabulous body. Although, for some reason, he had never actually gone through with it - had never actually done the deed in that office.

He wasn't entirely sure why.

Then he sighed and sipped his Cosmo. Yes, he was; he knew exactly why. Because it was Brian’s office, and some stubborn, stupid little voice in the back of his mind insisted that it would be a violation.

A violation. How stupid was that - and how hard would Brian Kinney laugh to hear such a ridiculously romantic notion!

Another sip; another sigh, and he turned to find Drew watching him with tender, sympathetic eyes that reflected so much love that it almost made his heart skip a beat. He wasn't sure what he had done to deserve that level of devotion, but he planned to make sure that he continued to do it, providing he could figure out what it was.

For his part, Drew reminded himself - as he did at least twice a day, every day - to count his blessings and be grateful that he had managed to find his way through the stupidity of his own 'gay adolescence' - a term that Emmett had coined and explained when Drew had been abominably ignorant about what was happening to him - and find that Emmett was still there and only semi-attached to someone else.

The former quarterback owed a huge debt of gratitude to Calvin Culpepper, the man who had filled in for him, who had held Emmett's hand and warmed his bed and saved the place that Drew had left vacant in the haste of his departure to explore his strange, enchanting new world. And then, when Drew had finished his journey to adulthood, Culpepper had stepped aside, knowing instinctively that his term of occupancy was over - that he had been nothing more than a renter whose lease had been terminated. He had held Emmett's heart in trust and returned it at exactly the right moment to its rightful owner.

Culpepper, displaying the kind of graciousness that was considered to be stereotypical of southern gentlemen, had been diffident and charming, soft-spoken and retiring, and assured both Emmett and Drew that he was fine with the way things worked out - that he had expected it all along.

Emmett, apparently relieved by the easy resolution and grateful for the lack of a dramatic, nasty confrontation, had accepted those assurances, thanking his former companion for his understanding. Drew had echoed those thanks, appreciating the man's kindness. But he had seen what Emmett had not. When Emmett had turned to walk away, to step into the new life that was awaiting the two of them, Drew had happened to be looking straight at Culpepper and seen the quick flare of deep pain in the southerner's eyes. It had been gone almost before it formed, but it had been very real and very
Drew, at that point, had stepped forward to shake Calvin Culpepper's hand and to murmur a soft, heartfelt expression of thanks - and sympathy.

One day he would find an opportunity to express his gratitude properly. With a prime filet at LeMont, perhaps, or a bottle of Dom Perignon. Or, with a little luck, with an introduction to some lovely young thing with a fondness for a Mississippi drawl. But whatever he did, it would only be a gesture; there was no way any gift could ever express the degree of his gratitude. Emmett, of course, would not recognize the deeper significance of the gesture, but he would be touched nonetheless, and that was the only thing that mattered, in the end.

He smiled as Emmett sipped, before tossing off the remainder of his shot of Chivas. He loved Emmett; he knew that now, and knew that he was finally ready to deal with it and that Emmett had been wise to push him away when they'd first been together. If he had never explored, never learned about the temptations and gratifications of his new reality, he would never have recognized the value of the treasure that was now his to claim.

On the other hand, he would rather drink acid than swill that nasty pink shit that Emmett thrived on. He was happy to be half of a loving, intimate, sentimental, committed relationship with his nelly-bottom boyfriend, but he drank like Brian Kinney, and he occasionally wondered if the two of them might have other things in common.

It was just an idle thought - much the way people of all sexual persuasions cast appreciative glances toward Brad Pitt or John Barrowman or the latest celebrity underwear model; it made no difference at all whether or not the object of speculation was straight or gay, available or spoken for, interested or not. It was just a factor of life, and, in this case, Drew was pretty sure that his boyfriend - the loyal and totally faithful love of his life - was equally curious. No one - barring the dead and certain individuals of the Lesbianic persuasion - passed within the orbit of Brian Kinney without feeling at least some tiny nuance of curiosity.

The man was a legend, and all reports indicated that he had earned that status.

It was certainly food for idle speculation, but nothing more than that for the two of them. Drew wasn't entirely sure at what point they had achieved a committed status; all he knew for sure was that it existed. It was real. It was Emmett and Drew - now and forever, or as close to forever as time, tide and the vagaries of the human condition allowed.

Emmett drained the last of his drink, slapped his glass down on the bar with a resounding clink, and nestled close against his partner's side, pushing his face into the dark softness beneath Drew's jaw-line and breathing deeply to inhale the man's slightly musky distinctive scent. "Penny for 'em," he whispered.

Drew grinned. "Oh, they're worth a lot more than that, Baby, but this might not be the right time - or place - unless you want to take a trip to the back room, but . . ." He nibbled for a moment at Emmett's temple. "Our bed is so much softer, and lets me thrust so much deeper into your hot little ass, so . . ." 

Emmett pulled back with a grin and mimed fanning himself. "If you don't shut up, you're going to be shoving into that hot little ass right here on the fucking bar."

Drew's grin grew wider as he leaned forward to claim that soft, bee-stung mouth that was at the beginning and end of every dream he'd had for the last few months, as he visualized the lovely warmth that was waiting for them at home. It was never going to make the cover of House Beautiful
The Architectural Digest, and it wasn't anywhere near the same league as the penthouse he had once purchased as a gift for his new bride, but it was what Emmett had wanted. Moreover, it was a place where each of them could feel at home as equal partners. It would be foolish in the extreme for anyone to pretend that they were on equal financial footing; it was Drew who had signed the multi-million dollar NFL contract, retiring only after a severe shoulder injury had put an end to his glory days on the football field; thus it was Drew who would be financially secure for the rest of his life whether or not he ever worked again. Without much of a stretch, he could easily have bought and sold downtown Pittsburgh, so he assumed most of the financial responsibilities for their partnership - unofficial as of yet, but not, perhaps, for long. But it was Emmett who provided the emotional grounding for their union, who transformed the relatively small townhouse into the perfectly lovely (if slightly more colorful than Drew might have preferred) home they both wanted, and who left his indelible mark on the unbreakable ties that bound them together.

Drew Boyd was a lucky man, and he knew it, and he was just on the verge of demonstrating the depth of his knowledge with a suitably intimate PDA when he paused, noticing a sharp, jerky, graceless movement disrupting the easy rhythm of the crowd on the dance floor. Then he took a deep breath in order to suppress an urge to roll his eyes and growl - all at the same time.

"You've got company," he whispered, realizing that he was not really surprised, that he had, in fact, been expecting something like this since the phone call he'd received earlier from Lance Mathis. According to the information provided by his cousin, it had been a red-letter day for all the members of Brian's entourage, including his security team, and it was only logical to expect that there might be further developments. Even on the home front. Not necessarily connected to the events at the beach house, but still part of the general picture.

Emmett, noting and easily interpreting the quick flash of irritation in his partner's eyes, gestured for the Latino bartender to bring him another Cosmo before turning to greet the newcomers, trying - without a lot of success - to make his smile look genuine and warm.

He had hardly seen Teddie at all in the weeks since Brian's departure, barring the train wreck at Debbie Novotny's house and an occasional across-the-room nod - perfunctory and chilly - exchanged during chance encounters at Babylon. And he had seen even less of his old friend's current companion. Barring the occasional Dyke Night, Babylon was a bar for gay men. Few women felt welcome there, although some did drop in occasionally to enjoy the view since, as Debbie was prone to say, there were few things in life more beautiful than physically perfect gay men in their prime.

Ted Schmidt, unfortunately, had never exactly been a member of that select group, though not from lack of aspiration. Even more unfortunately, he had recognized that harsh truth early in life and resented it - and those who effortlessly achieved what he could only envy - bitterly, although he was careful to conceal that bitterness beneath a penchant for sarcasm and an assumption of intellectual disdain.

Emmett sometimes wondered if his old friend really believed that anyone was fooled by his act, but, in the end, he had never made an issue of it, assuming that the pretense was a source of comfort for the accountant - real or imagined.

On the other hand, Emmett knew the truth of it perfectly well. He had always noticed when Ted would flinch away from the casual, callous comments which relegated him to the status of an onlooker in the formation of the gay pecking order; he had seen and identified the longing in the man's eyes when he watched the Brians and the Justins and the Drews and other equally luscious gay blades savor the fruits of victory only available to the physically beautiful - longing which would quickly, inevitably morph into the kind of scorn that is only fueled by envy - the kind that everyone
recognizes but no one talks about.

Emmett had always understood the reality, but he had been too soft-hearted to speak of it. Drew Boyd, however, was not so handicapped by emotional vulnerability or old loyalties. He might have been able to summon up some measure of sympathy for Schmidt if he had not also seen and diagnosed the man's pettiness and spiteful attitude, his not-so-subtle tendency to treat Emmett with a jocular disdain that was not nearly as jocular as he pretended, and - ultimately - the venomous nature of his behavior during this painful episode in the life of a man who was supposed to be both employer and friend. What had happened to Brian Kinney was so horrible, so heinous, that any attempt to take advantage of the circumstances, or of him at a time when he was so vulnerable and so damaged, was beneath contempt, as far as Drew was concerned, and he would be happy to take advantage of an opportunity to share his opinion with the man himself. Except for the fact that it would displease Emmett.

So he would keep his mouth shut - for the moment. On the other hand, even Emmett's potential emotional investment was not sufficient protection for Melanie Marcus. Because of her flagrant greed, antagonistic demeanor, and generally obnoxious behavior, she had given up any right she might have had to claim immunity from verbal assault.

"Emmett!" snapped the prime target herself, her voice sharp and icy. "We need to talk."

Emmett managed a smile, although it lacked warmth. "And good evening to you too, Ms. Marcus. So nice of you to drop in, and . . ."

"Emmett, please." Ted's bark indicated that he was obviously not in the mood for pleasantries. "This is serious, and since Michael and Ben and Debbie have all decided to buy the bullshit that's being dished out by Justin and Cynthia, and everybody has drunk the Kool-Ade, so to speak, regarding Brian's unwillingness to accept the truth, you - well - you might be the only one left who can see the situation clearly and help us turn this disaster around."

"Meaning," drawled Drew with a tiny smirk, "that he's the only one who might be willing to buy into your version of 'Whatever Happened to Brian Kinney?' and speak on your behalf, before the proverbial axe falls. Right?"

"Emmett," said Melanie, deliberately turning her body so that she was gazing directly into Emmett's eyes but completely excluding his companion. "I don't think I have to remind you that I've been a good friend to you in the past. I was there for you. More than once, I had to help you pick yourself up, and fight your way back to regain your self-respect. I stood by you. Remember that? And now . . ."

"Now what?" Emmett's voice was very flat, completely non-committal. "Now . . . are you calling in a debt, Melanie?"

"Of course not," she purred, favoring him with a smile that she obviously considered winning, although all who witnessed it would have labeled it very differently. "That's not how friendship works, is it? It's just that I'm . . . I'm sort of . . . out of my depth here. On unfamiliar territory, so to speak, so I . . ." She fell silent abruptly, noting something in Emmett's face that made her uncertain of how to proceed.

Drew Boyd, however, was not uncertain in the least as he made a tiny, mostly unsuccessful effort to hide his smile when he leaned forward to offer a private comment, meant for Emmett alone - perhaps - but not quite inaudible to the new arrivals. "My, how the mighty have fallen!"

"Don't you have someone's balls to go play with?" asked Ted, his voice thick with acidic
condescension. "Or are you too busy playing guard dog these days?"

"My," echoed Melanie with an ugly smile, "how the mighty have fallen!"

It was obvious then that both Melanie and Ted - in the guise of co-conspirators - expected both Emmett and Drew to crumble in the face of their wicked verbal assault, but it was not to be. Both were slightly astonished when their targets exchanged quick glances, then burst out laughing, until the former football player leaned forward - still smiling - to look directly into Melanie's eyes, then shifted his gaze to regard Ted with cool contempt. "Do you really think Emmett needs me to protect him? From you?" The raw disdain in his tone provided a clearer answer than any spoken word would have, and his grin grew wider as he saw Ted shift slightly away, obviously realizing that - physically - he was in the unfortunate position of looking like a squirrel confronting a mountain lion.

Drew laughed again.

"Can we talk - in private?" That was Melanie again, still determined to set the ground rules for the discussion she was determined to have.

Emmett hesitated just long enough to accept his new drink from the bartender, before replying. "My office?" he asked finally.

"Your office?" A perfect example of typical Ted-speak, with just enough emphasis on the pronoun to indicate his snide opinion of Emmett's use of the term.

But Emmett remained unperturbed. "For the moment."

"Pending the return of the king." Melanie's tone was caustic.

"Exactly." Once more, Emmett was perfectly satisfied to acknowledge an obvious truth.

Drew simply stood at the bar and watched as his partner led the way up the stairs to the office known to every patron of Babylon as 'Brian's Lair'.

Emmett paused for a single moment as he swept into the owner's suite. It would be considerate of him to behave graciously to his guests, to seat them on the little sofa against the rear wall and offer them refreshment and to seat himself there in the comfy armchair and play host, playing to the concept of one big happy family.

Only he wasn't feeling very familial. He was slightly surprised that Ted - who had always claimed to know him so very well - had not yet figured out that the emotion that had been driving him throughout the aftermath of the attack on Brian was not pride or ambition or duty or self-satisfaction; it was anger, and he couldn't think of two people more deserving of feeling the lash of its power than the two following him into the room, undoubtedly using these moments to gird their loins and prepare their arguments, completely unaware that - barring a miracle - they were doomed to failure.

Squaring his shoulders and suppressing a grim smile, Emmett moved around the desk and sank into the exquisite suede comfort of Brian's executive chair as Ted and Melanie, without awaiting an invitation, settled into the two smaller chairs arranged side by side in front of the desk.

"So," Emmett said slowly, touching a control in a recessed panel to adjust the lighting in the room, "what can I do for you?"

Ted grinned. "Mel would probably like a martini, and I could use a cold tonic."
Emmett nodded. "All available at the bar, once we're done here. So let's get to it, shall we? What's up?"

Ted restricted his response to a slow blink, while Melanie took a deep breath, swallowing her first impulse to verbalize her resentment at being treated like a petitioner. On the other hand, she realized, she actually was the petitioner in this case, and it was probably best not to piss off the man who was in a position to help her through this mess.

"Emmett," she said slowly, "have you talked to Michael at all since this whole mess began?"

He shrugged. "I talk to Michael almost every day, but I assume you're talking about a specific topic of conversation. What exactly . . ."

"Oh, yes, I am," she said quickly. "Notably, I'm talking about my daughter, and what he plans to do concerning our custody agreement. Not to mention what he might know about my . . . about Lindsey's part in all this."

Emmett studied her face for a moment, before clasping his hands in front of him and taking a moment to compose a response that would address the real issue at hand. "I'm guessing that you've been informed of the identity of the attorney that Brian has retained on behalf of Michael . . . and Lindsey. Now, keep in mind that I don't know a single thing about the Who's Who of the legal profession, but this . . . what's his name again - Liam Quinn? He seems to have a stellar reputation, even here in provincial old Pittsburgh. So I guess you've got a right to be nervous. I'd probably be petrified if I . . ."

"I am not petrified," Melanie said coldly. "He's just a glorified ambulance chaser, and no shyster is going to scare me. What I am is appalled - that Michael would stoop to this, and allow himself to be manipulated by Brian so that he winds up using our daughter as a weapon against me, in an attempt to force my hand so that I have to knuckle under and do whatever Brian wants me to do. Do you really think I should just give in to these demands? Just let Michael and Lindsey be controlled by Master Kinney, and sacrifice everything that's important to me so that he can play his little manipulative games and run his little world as he sees fit?"

"Is that what you think is happening here?" Emmett sounded genuinely curious.

"What else?" she demanded. "Emmett, Michael has always listened to you. You're as close to him - in some ways - as Brian is, and he needs . . . he needs someone to provide perspective. Someone who isn't so blinded by love for St. Brian that he can see the truth and recognize Brian's manipulations for what they are. He's using this - all this - for his own gain and screwing the rest of us over. And Michael is playing right into his hands, which is, of course, not really surprising, considering that Michael has always been in love with Brian."

"You really believe that?" Emmett asked, startled by her vehemence. "What about Ben?"

"You don't believe it?" she almost snarled. "Face it, Em. If Brian curled his little finger just so, Michael would dump Ben in a New York minute and get down on his hands and knees begging to be fucked by the Liberty Avenue Prime Stud. Surely you don't disagree. And that's the kind of blindness I'm going to have to fight. Brian uses Michael like a puppet, and I need someone - like you - to make him see reason."

Emmett did not answer; instead he turned his gaze to Ted, to try to read the expression in the accountant's night-dark eyes. "And you, Teddie? Is that also what you see?"

"Well," Ted replied, obviously trying to choose his words carefully, aiming for greater subtlety, "I
think that Brian himself is being influenced - played, if you will - so Mel and I are sort of . . . coming at the issue from two different directions, but the bottom line is that we both agree that this is just out of control, and nobody seems to want to listen to reason.

"I mean, look at all that's happened, Emmett. Leaving out all the uproar and horror and confusion of the original attack on Brian, everything that's happened since then has been directed toward driving wedges between him and the people who have served him best in the past, people who have been invaluables in allowing him to live the way he's always wanted to live. Granted, he and Mel have never been bosom buddies - and never will be - but her devotion to Lindsey and to Gus made it possible for Brian to walk away from any responsibilities he might have had toward the two of them. And then there's the whole issue of J.R. Michael has always been perfectly content to be allowed to be a part of his daughter's life without ever making much of a real contribution. He was more than willing to allow Mel to do whatever had to be done to see to their child's well-being, while he was free to concentrate on his comic book and playing wifey to Ben."

"Wifey?" Emmett echoed with a small, slightly catty smile.

"Oh, you know what I mean. Even Michael identifies himself as 'half drama queen'. And parenthood, for him, has always been more about playing house than taking on responsibilities."

"Uh - huh! But that still doesn't address your role in this little drama, does it? So what do you think Brian should . . ."

"He's closing himself off, Emmett." This time, there was no disguising the anger and the resentment and the bitter envy driving the complaint. "I've always been there for him. I bailed him out and watched his back and took huge risks to . . . to put him in a financial position that would have been the envy of the corporate world, and just, just look what he's done. He won't even talk to me any more; he won't even listen to my side of things, won't even let me tell him . . ."

"Tell him what?" Emmett asked, his voice so calm it was almost without inflection. "Tell him how you deliberately ignored his instructions and risked everything he owned in an attempt to ingratiate yourself to him so completely that he would be forever in your debt - that he would owe you such intense gratitude that he would never be able to repay it? Is that how you want to build the relationship between the two of you, Ted? Do you really believe - even if your scheme had worked out the way you wanted - that you were ever going to make him love you and respect you so intensely that he would make you the most important thing in his life? Is that really what mattered so much to you?"

Emmett rose then and leaned forward across the desk. "If that's what you wanted, Ted, then you need to realize one thing. Whatever you hoped to gain - you already had it. He trusted you; he cared about you. In the upside-down, crazy-ass Brian Kinney fashion, he even loved you, though he'd have died before admitting it. As for who bailed out whom, we seem to have different memories on that score. So now the question becomes, what the fuck are you doing sitting here, pointing out how I should step up and run interference for you and make him realize that you did it all for the love of Brian, when the truth is . . ."

He sat back down then, swallowing hard to control the anger roiling in his core. "The truth is that you had everything you could possibly want, and you fucked up and threw it away. And now, when you've lost your own money - and the FBI is the only thing that prevented you from losing his as well - now you expect him to smile and forgive you because, of course, you were only doing it for him.

"You were doing it for yourself, Teddie. And anybody who claims to believe differently . . ."

Emmett turned icy green eyes toward Melanie Marcus, "is simply playing you, to perpetuate their
"I assume that little barb is meant for me," she snapped.

Emmett smiled. "Oh, don't kid yourself, Mel. If you think that little 'barb' even begins to cover what I have to say to you, better think again. You are . . . unbelievable. On the other hand, maybe you're not, because you're only doing what all of us - every single one of us has done since time out of mind. We've all looked at Brian and seen exactly what we wanted to see, conveniently ignoring everything that didn't fit our preconceptions. The difference is that some of us - finally - have seen the truth, while you go right on wearing your blinders. You claim that you've been the one taking responsibility for Lindsey and Gus, and for J.R., because that makes you feel proud of yourself, doesn't it? But the simple truth is that it's Brian - it's always been Brian who carried that load. Not just his money - although there's been plenty of that - but his willingness to let you play your little charade and claim your moral victories, just because he thought it would be better for all concerned to maintain his low profile, and let your little melodrama proceed. Tell me something, Mel. Have you ever once stopped and figured out how many times he saved your ass? How many advantages you guys have because he provided them? How often he's played the scapegoat, provided a target for your outrageous accusations, allowed you to take credit for the things he's done? Do you even realize you're doing it?"

He looked back toward Ted, and could not fail to note the deep rage rising within the accountant's eyes. This was a waste of time; he'd known it from the beginning. But he was determined to finish it now, to make himself clear.

"So now, dear, old friends," he said softly, "we come to where the rock meets the hard place. Mel, I hope you're not naïve enough to believe that Liam Quinn hasn't made himself completely aware of everything that's happened since Gus was born. Not to mention J.R. Not to mention your current unlicensed status in Canada and your financial dependence on the funds that Brian provided - supposedly for Gus's support.

"At the same time, Lindsey has also been forced to open her eyes and come nose-to-nose with truths she never wanted to see. But she sees them now, and I doubt she'll ever be able to avoid seeing them again.

"And Ted, the same undoubtedly applies to you as far as Quinn is concerned. In point of fact, in your case, I'm pretty sure that the only reason you're not occupying a jail cell rather than your sweet little love-nest with Blake, is because Brian has chosen not to take legal action, which would seem to indicate that he still cares about you enough to let it go - for now. But if I were you, I wouldn't just assume that he'll continue to feel that way. Your actions from here on out could change everything.

"Oh, and, by the way, casually dismissing the attack on Brian that started all this is just . . . I don't even know how to say it. Except that it makes me realize something - something I really didn't want to know, I guess. I think I've been as big a fool as anyone, because . . . Teddie, I . . . I'm beginning to think that I never knew you at all."

Ted rose quickly and leaned forward, bracing his fists on the desk. "That's enough," he snapped. "I don't need you and your cheap southern-fried wisdom, Auntie Em. I know exactly how to get myself back in Brian's good graces. It doesn't take rocket science to figure it out because we all know what a whore he is. His philosophy has always revolved around 'What have you done for me lately?', and it always will. Loyalty doesn't even enter into it. So when this is all over and done, don't bother to come sniveling back with an apology when he sees the light and remembers who he really owes his gratitude to. When that day comes, he won't even remember your name. And neither will I."

Melanie got to her feet abruptly and headed for the door, but she paused as she reached it,
exchanging glances with Ted who favored her with an encouraging smile. She looked back at Emmett, and her expression was ugly, filled with contempt. "Better enjoy the perks of Kinney fandom," she announced, "while you can. When he comes back, you'll just be the kind of shit he scrapes off his shoe."

Emmett grinned. "Thanks for the reminder, Honey. I need to get the cleaning crew in here. Something really stinks."

He was laughing when the two of them stormed out the door, and he was still laughing when he picked up the phone and informed the general manager that they were to be escorted off the premises and instructed never to return.

It was petty, and he knew it.

But it felt pretty damned good anyway, and it was a perfect excuse for another Cosmo, which he would enjoy wrapped in the loving arms of his hunky partner.

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*Running on Faith - Jerry Lynn Williams
** Hot Blooded - Lou Gramm, Mick Jones
*** Killing Me Softly with His Song - Charles Fox, Norman Gimbel

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tbc
When one burns one's bridges, what a very nice fire it makes.

-- Dylan Thomas

With the coming of the new day, everyone in residence at the beach-house was kind enough to pretend not to notice that both Brian and Justin were semi-sleep-deprived and drowsy to the point of having to stifle yawns repeatedly. Well - almost everyone. Neither Chris McClaren nor Cynthia bothered to hide an occasional smirk at the expense of either of the two, when one or the other of them would assume an entirely too complacent expression at finding himself the object of a slightly smug, not altogether platonic leer from his partner in crime. Gus and Katy, of course, sensed nothing and saw no reason to lower the volume of their shrieks of joy as they raced out to greet the morning tide while the rest of the household seemed unperturbed, taking it in stride as just another day existing in the periphery of The Life of Brian.

But it wasn't really just another day, of course, and they were all painfully aware of that particular truth. This was the day when Brian was sending everyone away, except for those charged with his security, and Justin, in particular, was torn between a desire to spare his lover the trauma of unnecessary conflict and a determination - a need - to retain his place at Brian's side. He knew that Brian was right - logically. He really did have things that he needed to do in order to prepare for the life they would build together. He had an apartment - or a 'dump' as Brian called it, sight unseen - to clear out and possessions to ship and a gallery owner to schmooze into working with him on new commitments. He still had projects to complete and contracts to fulfill and fences to mend.

And then there was the question of where the two of them would live - not exactly a blazing priority but pertinent nonetheless.

Justin loved the loft, recognizing it - occasionally almost sanctifying it - as the site of his initiation into the relationship that would prove to be the most important in his life, and he was fundamentally grateful that Brian would never even consider selling it. For him, it would always hold special significance in that it was the place where he had been 'deflowered' - a term that would have inspired a sarcastic smirk from Brian, who would forever refuse to romanticize the occasion, in that he still referred to that night as their 'first fuck and rim job', and he probably always would. But Justin knew the truth; in that beautiful setting, in that lovely, ridiculously plush bed with its 1000 thread-count sheets, he had gladly given up his virginity and taken the first step on a journey that would ultimately lead him here - to this man who was the nucleus of his existence. Furthermore, he was almost certain that Brian knew it too, even though he would never admit it. In addition, it was the place - more than any other - that embodied the individual who had created it, designed it, built it, and filled it with the essence of who he was. In many ways, the loft was Brian - beautiful, unique, elegant, passionate, exclusive, private, and more than a little unfathomable - and it would always be home to them both. On the other hand, it was simply not large enough to accommodate all their needs, especially if Brian was determined to play a larger role in Gus's life, which appeared inevitable at this point.

In addition, Justin would need a studio of his own, a private place where he could paint or brood or express himself or work out occasional bouts of anger or frustration - inevitable in a relationship with Brian Kinney - a place which would either be a part of their home or close enough to allow him to
use it at odd hours and have access whenever inspiration struck.

Thus, there were lots of arrangements to make and changes to research and details to investigate, so he had retrieved a notepad from Brian's desk and was constantly jotting down cryptic notes to himself, in the loopy, distinctive scrawl that Brian had once dubbed 'Taylor-glyphics' after an unsuccessful attempt to decipher a perfectly simple grocery list. Perfectly simple, that is, from Justin's point of view. Brian would beg to differ.

At any rate, Justin was very busy, muttering away, Google-ing everything from real estate listings in Pittsburgh to art reviews of his show to moving services and checking his email, which was how he discovered that two more of his paintings had sold at premium prices, and that the gallery was delighted and already hinting about another show in the autumn.

Still, he would celebrate later. Right now, he had important stuff to do.

Brian, on the other hand, was looking particularly relaxed, seated at the head of the table, clad in the casual elegance of perfectly fitted Seven jeans and a Tommy Hilfiger shirt that reflected sparks of green in his eyes as he listened to Trina explain why he should forego his usual dietary constraints and indulge in eggs Benedict and buttermilk biscuits with home-made peach butter. He was listening, but he was also favoring her with his characteristic sardonic smile, so that any half-way perceptive tout would review the evidence at hand and advise betting against the house in this case. The ridiculously rich, succulent, savory eggs would be enjoyed by many members of the household this morning, but Brian Kinney would not be among that number.

Instead, he enjoyed a visual feast as he watched Gus and Katy dig into stacks of golden pancakes, adorned with swirls of butter and puddles of maple syrup, as they giggled at each other, unaware and uncaring of dribbles and crumbs collecting in the corners of cherubic mouths and clinging to sweet little chins. At the same time, Justin had temporarily put aside his constant listing and compulsive Googling and was indulging his normal voracious appetite, sampling everything that Trina served him and rolling his eyes in appreciation, while Brian sipped at his coffee and continued to watch.

Cynthia, savoring her own breakfast, did not fail to notice the fleeting glimmer in her boss's eyes - a glimmer that might have indicated nothing more than the joy of the moment, or the satisfaction of being in the perfect place to observe such sheer beauty. Might - or might not.

She took another bite of her eggs and tried to ignore a strange uneasiness rising in her belly. Maybe she was wrong; she hoped she was wrong. There shouldn't be even the tiniest nuance of incipient heartbreak in his eyes. Because the worst was over. Wasn't it?

"The plane will be ready at one," announced McClaren, fresh from his morning briefing and taking a seat at the bar to accept his own plate of eggs along with a cup of industrial strength poison from Trina. "So you'll need to be packed up and ready to go by 11:30. Just in case the traffic sucks."

"Brian," said Cynthia, turning to study his face and not bothering to try to conceal the misgivings she was feeling. "We could . . ."

"No," he said firmly. "You're going. You're all going."

"But that's . . ." That was Justin - of course - who understood why he needed to go, but still couldn't bring himself to agree with the command without offering some kind of resistance. Thus he fell silent, frustrated with his inability to find the right words that might convince Brian to reconsider.

For his part, Brian sighed, his eyes soft with regret and understanding as he regarded first his lover and then his assistant with feigned patience - patience that would not prove to be infinite, as they both knew. "Look, this is non-negotiable. You don't need to be here, and I don't want you here. I
have this one last procedure to endure in Dr. Mengele's Chamber of Tortures, and then a few more days of therapy, and I won't have time to spend with any of you while all this is going on. You've both got better things to do than sit around and listen to me bitch. Which I will; you know me well enough to know that. Then I'm done, and it's back to beautiful, downtown Pittsburgh where I would prefer not to walk in to the kind of chaos that your presence there would prevent. So let's just do the reasonable thing here. You go do what you need to do so I can come home without having to face a shit-load of problems when I get there. It's best for everybody."

"But . . ."

"Justin!" And just like that, the patience was gone, and Brian was no longer smiling, as his eyes narrowed and grew cold. "I'm not going to argue with you. For once - just once - just do as I say."

"Once?" scoffed Justin. "You gotta be kidding me."

"No. You're getting on that plane. You're all getting on . . ."

"But, Daaadddeeeeee!" It was rather amazing that every single adult in the room was instantly focused on something - indeed on anything - except father and child, as they all attempted to suppress smiles. There was no possibility that anyone who had ever dealt with a child on a mission - determined to have his way no matter how adamant the opposition - would fail to recognize the perfect execution of the little boy's protest, in a ploy designed to produce the greatest possible chance of success. Nor would they fail to realize that the process would almost certainly prove to be a prime example of the old irresistible force/immovable object dynamic.

"Gus, don't . . ."

"Daddy, please don't send me away. Please. I want to stay with . . ."

Brian rose quickly and moved to kneel at Gus's side, as Katy shifted slightly to make room for him, and some of the other adults in the room took up a new subject of conversation to allow some semblance of privacy between father and son. "Gus," he repeated, firmly but very gently, "I know you want to stay. And I know you've been having a wonderful time with Katy and Gramps and Justin, but . . ."

"And you," Gus interrupted, looking up into Brian's eyes and allowing just a hint of a tremor to touch his full lower lip, and Brian had to bite down on an urge to smile in acknowledgement of the truth of the old adage - like father, like son. The kid definitely knew how to play to his audience, and, in one way, had even surpassed the achievements of his father in that he had learned how to manipulate his old man - something that Brian himself had never actually managed to do no matter how much charm he'd employed in the effort.

But the charm itself was identical.

"And me," Brian conceded, touched - but not budging. "But it's time to go home. I'll be busy all week long so I wouldn't have time for you. And it's not like you're not going to get to spend more time with Katy. In fact, if Cynthia agrees, I'm pretty sure we could arrange a trip to Katy's parents' farm sometime soon. And guess what - they've got horses."

"Horses?" A quick flare of interest was enough to momentarily dispel the shadows in the child's eyes.

"Yup," said Katy, licking a big dollop of syrup off her spoon. "Even a pony that would be just your size."
Gus turned to look at Cynthia, obviously still unconvinced. "Really?"

Cynthia grinned. "Would your daddy lie to you?"

Gus cocked his head and thought for a moment. "Yep. If he had to."

Her grin became a laugh. "You are most definitely your father's son, Little Man. But in this case, he's right. They do have horses, and there's a lovely pinto pony named Rascal that would be just perfect for you. And yes, I will ask when I take Katy home if you can come for a visit. I'm sure her parents will love to have you." Then she looked up, and there was a glint of something deeper, something unvoiced but very real in her eyes when she spoke to Brian. "And I think it goes without saying that you'd be welcome to come and stay as long as you like, Brian. I assume you know that."

He nodded absently, maintaining his focus on his son. "So does that sound all right with you, Gus?"

The little boy was looking down again, deliberately not meeting his father's gaze. "Yeah. It's okay, I guess."

"But still not exactly what you were hoping for, right?" Brian leaned down and touched his lips against the nape of Gus's neck. "So . . . aren't you missing your mommie? Because I know for sure that she's missing you. Don't you think she'd be happy to have you home?"


"Only what?" Brian was very careful to keep his tone soft and sympathetic, but Gus simply shook his head, unsure of how to respond.

Brian took a deep breath, struggling to find the right words. "Only you don't miss some of the things that have been happening at home lately. Right?"

Gus nodded. "Daddy?" The little voice was - if anything - even smaller and more tentative than before, and Brian felt a heavy, smothering ache forming deep in his chest.

"Yes?"

"Am I . . . are we . . ."

Small, perfect teeth bit down on a generous lower lip.

"Come on, Gus," said Brian, leaning closer, close enough for a whisper to be heard. "Whatever it is, you can tell me. Don't you know that by now?"

The boy nodded. "It's just . . . sometimes, I'm . . . I'm not supposed to ask, but . . ."

Brian waited, but the child seemed unable to continue without a bit of prompting. "But what?"

Suddenly, Gus turned and buried his face against his father's chest, tiny hands clutching in the soft fabric of the designer shirt, expressing a desperation he seemed loathe to verbalize. He murmured something so softly that even Brian could not decipher it.


"I don't want you to be gone any more." There it was then. Spoken in a broken gasp, filled with need and determination and fear, like a terrified cry in the darkness of the night. "I . . . I hate it when you're not there. When I'm not there."
Brian's smile was achingly tender and almost successful in covering up the combination of deep, almost physical anguish and towering anger in his eyes. "You mean when you're in Toronto?"

But the effort to speak of his dismay had taken the boy's last trace of courage and strength, and he could only nod now, already wondering if he should have spoken at all.

"It's okay, Gus," said his father, gathering him close and stroking his hair. "You're not going back. I promise. You're not going to have to go back - ever."

"Hate T'ronto," the child admitted.

"I know. Me too."

"But what about Mommie?"

Brian lifted his eyes and saw Ron Peterson watching him, waiting for him, allowing him to set the terms by which Lindsey would be bound. It was not, of course, politically correct by any stretch of the imagination, but - under these circumstances and in defense of this child - it was the right thing to do.

"Mommie won't be going back either," Brian said firmly, his tone allowing no possibility of doubt. "In fact, I'm pretty sure that Mommie is busy looking for a new house right now. In Pittsburgh."

"Close to you?" Gus was still buried against Brian's chest, still not daring to look up.

"Yeah, Sonny Boy. Close to me."

The child stirred then, and lifted his eyes to stare deeply into those that were almost a mirror of his own. "Is that . . . okay with you? Mama always says that you . . . that you didn't . . ."

"That I didn't what?" Once more, the calm tone was almost successful in camouflaging the harsh vein of resentment that ran beneath it.

"That you didn't want me around too much. That I'm too much trouble and I . . . cramp your style. I don't know what that means, but I . . . if you really don't . . ."

"Gus, I will always want you around - the closer the better. Now, maybe it won't always be possible, and maybe, when you're all grown up you'll be sick of having your old man anywhere near you, but I won't ever stop wanting you close to me - close enough for me to always be able to get to you quickly so I can help you fix your toys, or dry your tears, or find you if you're lost, or kill the monsters under your bed or . . . whatever. Understand?"

Gus nodded, and shifted so that Brian had to settle onto his backside to allow his son to crawl up into his lap, but the look in the child's eyes still whispered of something more - some question not yet asked.

"What else, Gus?" Brian asked, settling into the corner so that his son could nestle against him more comfortably.

The child edged still closer to his father, reaching up to wrap his arm around Brian's throat. "Mama said that I . . ." He stopped then, and struggled to swallow, and Brian could easily hear the catch in his voice and sense the uncertainty in his manner.

"That you what? Come on. You can tell me; I promise I won't be mad at you."
"She said that I'd have to choose - some day. That I'd have to choose between you and them, and that it was going to hurt Mommie real bad - that she would get her heart broke if she didn't make me understand that you . . . that you don't really care about me. That she had to make sure that I'd choose them, because you . . . you wouldn't . . . you'd never really want me, or give up anything for me. That I was just . . ."

"Gus." Firm, unyielding, but still - somehow - filled with love. "Do you believe that?"

The little boy looked up again, meeting his father's gaze directly. "No. I never did."

Brian nodded, and Gus wondered for a moment why his daddy's eyes were suddenly shining so brightly. "That's good then, because you are not just anything, and you never will be. I would never force you to make a choice like that, and I'll make sure that nobody else ever does either. I promise. Do you understand me?"

"Yeah, but . . ."

"No more buts, Sonny Boy. You will never have to make that choice."

"You promise? You really promise?"

"Yep."

"Pinky swear promise?"

"Yep."

"Cross your heart and ho . . ."

"Yep. And I need you to remember something for me, OK?"

"OK. Like what?"

"Like I never - never - make promises I can't keep."

He paused then, carefully studying his son's beautiful face, knowing that there was yet one more question that needed asking, even if the answer might prove to be extremely painful.

"Gus," he said finally, "what about your mama - and J.R? I want to help you - to make everything better for you, but I need to be sure that you can deal with whatever might happen, if things don't go exactly as planned."

The boy looked down, obviously reluctant to meet his father's gaze. "I don't know what to say. I don't think . . . I think Mama doesn't like me much any more. She did once, I think. She used to, but it's like J.R. is the only one that matters to her now. I think she used to . . ."

"Used to what?"

"Used to love me. Before J.R. and . . . and before I started to look . . . to look so much like you."

Brian nodded, once more threading his fingers through his son's hair. "I'm so sorry, Gus."

But the child was too smart to accept a too easy solution and looked up with a lopsided smile. "Why? You didn't do anything to be sorry for. And I'm glad I look like you."

It was a lovely moment between father and son, and if there was the tiniest little sound - like an
almost breathless gasp of disbelief from someone who realized that Brian Kinney had just broken one of his own cardinal rules - nobody bothered to notice.

Brian simply nodded, and pulled his son tight against his heart, and there was a solid beat of silence then, before Gus threw his arms around his father's neck and hugged tightly enough to begin to cut off Brian's breath. Still, Brian just held him, content to wait for the boy to feel comfortable enough to let go.

Which he did, if only just in time to prevent Brian from gasping for air, and it was at that juncture that Brian took note of the steady flow of conversation around them and realized that he was a very lucky man. The exchange between him and his young son had been painful for both of them - and would have been even more painful, in retrospect, for having happened under intense scrutiny. But Cynthia and Mathis, Trina and McClaren and others among the security staff had all pitched in to make sure that hadn't happened, as they had all carried on a spirited discussion, debating the quality of the beachfront here as opposed to those of other locations, and the merits of local seafood and whether or not it compared favorably to that of the Chesapeake or the Gulf and the properties of maple syrup as it contrasted to the local cane variety. He was pretty sure, nevertheless, that every one of them could probably have quoted the private conversation verbatim, if necessary, but he was equally certain that none of them ever would.

Only Justin and Ron Peterson, both involved - to different degrees - in the inner circle of the situation, had remained quiet, listening carefully, but never intruding, and the glossiness of Justin's eyes as he watched Brian cuddle his son to his chest indicated that he had clearly understood the importance and the subtler meanings of all he'd heard.

"Hey, Gus," he said brightly, stepping forward and lifting the child from his father's lap, "if you're finished eating, why don't we go and search for a few more shells, to top off your collection. And when you guys get all settled in your new house, Daddy and I will come and help you fix up a display case for them in your room. Okay?"

Gus looked to his father. "Okay, Daddy?"

"Okay, Sonny Boy. Take Beau with you, but make sure he doesn't wander off. The pilots of that private jet wouldn't like it if they had to wait for us to find a run-away mutt."

Chris McClaren opened his mouth as if to dispute the suggestion that such a thing might even be possible, but then he thought better of it and chose not to speak at all.

Ron Peterson was less reticent, but waited until Justin had persuaded Katy to join him and his little companion on their shell search before voicing his concerns.

He remained silent until Brian reseated himself at the head of the table, accepting a coffee refill from Trina before turning to regard his son's grandfather with an air of expectancy, as everyone else suddenly remembered some urgent chore that required their presence elsewhere. Except for McClaren, who continued to enjoy his breakfast and his coffee. He did not turn to look at the two men now seated at opposite ends of the table, but his posture and demeanor said - as clearly as any spoken words could have - that he was not going to excuse himself or pretend not to listen, and that the two of them would just have to deal with it.

Brian took a deep breath, but did not allow himself a sigh of impatience. "Let me guess," he said as he met Peterson's gaze. "You think I shouldn't interfere between Lindsey and her . . . whatever the fuck Melanie is."

Peterson gave a slight shrug. "I'm more concerned with you making promises that you might not be
"able to keep. You can't guarantee that he won't have to make that choice - someday."

"Yes, I can."

"I won't allow you to coerce my daughter, Brian. She has the right . . ."

"Coerce?" Brian interrupted with a venal smile. "You think I'd have to coerce her? Or that I'd be able to? Tell me something, Mr. Peterson. Do you fucking know your daughter at all? Because it doesn't sound like you do. If I had any doubts about what she'd do - which I don't, by the way - but if I did, all I'd have to do is inform her about the conversation I just had with my son, and that would be the end of it. I know she loved Melanie; maybe she still loves Melanie, but that won't change anything. She is not going to stand by and allow Gus to be hurt by Melanie's psychotic need to control their lives."

Peterson chose not to meet the challenge in Brian's eyes. Instead, he looked down at his own hands, clasped tightly on the table. "And if you're wrong?"

"I'm not."

"But if you are?"

Brian did not answer immediately, waiting until the older man turned to meet his eyes - and flinched just slightly. "You know what, Mr. Peterson? The world, in general, and bigots with narrow minds and inflated opinions of themselves specifically, often assume that men like me - fags, queers, pansies, cocksuckers, perverts, call us whatever you like - are a bunch of frightened little pussies that run from trouble. And maybe that's even true of some of us. But it's definitely not true of all of us, and if they're smart, the bastards will learn to think twice before they cross a line that can't be uncrossed."

"I'm sorry. I don't quite know . . ."

"It's simple," Brian replied very softly. "I take care of my own. No matter what. Meaning that nobody is going to get away with harming my son - or his mother. So are we clear on that?"

"Even if that person is . . ."

"Nobody." There was not a single nuance of uncertainty in Brian's voice.

Then he finished his coffee, rose and made his exit, stopping to speak to Cynthia in the hallway before continuing out into the brightness of the morning, to spend a few last moments with his son and his lover, leaving Ron Peterson to think about what he'd said."

Lindsey's father continued to sit for a while, trying to regulate his breathing, trying to tell himself that he had no real cause for concern. But he was still worried. He knew that he had not been the father that Lindsey needed him to be, knew that he had fallen far short of her expectations. And now - now he would probably not have time enough to right the wrongs he'd done, so he was left with a bit of a quandary. Maybe Lindsey would not need to be protected; she was strong, after all, and determined and very smart, and fiercely protective of her son. So maybe she'd be fine without a protector.

But what if she wasn't? What if she found herself in need of a white knight to stand beside her, to defend her and her child?

Could he trust Brian Kinney to be that defender? And how was it that he was even considering that possibility? He had, after all, spent years resenting this individual, and blaming him for what he and his wife always termed 'Lindsey's affliction'. After all, if Kinney had done the right thing, the
honorable thing, then he and Lindsey would have been man and wife, and . . . and . . .

And both completely miserable. He wondered abruptly why he had never realized that before.

Belatedly, he noticed that Chris McClaren was still sitting at the bar, pushing bits of food around his plate but mostly just gazing out through the kitchen window overlooking the bright open space where Gus and Justin and Katy were just visible at the edge of the surf.

"Do you think he meant that?" asked the older man, certain that the FBI agent would understand what he was asking.

McClaren's eyes were uncharacteristically dark. "I think he always means it."

"And how far do you think he'd go . . . in order to keep his promise?"

"As far as he had to." Again, there was no trace of doubt in the man's tone.


"You have to trust him, Mr. Peterson. If your daughter and grandson need protecting, that's the man who'll do the job - or die trying."

"But he's . . ."

"Queer?" The laughter was there in the timber of his voice, beneath the vein of irony. "So am I, in case you haven't noticed. But you should be aware of one thing, Sir. In a dark alley, with precious lives at stake, you really don't want to come up against either one of us."

"You trust him?"

"I do."

"Whatever he does - will it be legal?"

Now the grin was forming, as light finally erupted in eyes sparking with silver glints. "Mostly. Probably. If possible."

"And you're all right with that? Aren't you supposed to be all about law and order?"

McClaren's grin shifted slightly, and became a sardonic smile. "A logical assumption, but slightly off-target. Law and order is certainly a good principle to strive for," he replied. "But right and wrong is the primary concern."

"And if he breaks the law?"

"He's already had plenty of cause to do that, and he hasn't. Not really. So I think we can assume that he won't - if he has a choice."

"But . . ."

McClaren drained the last of his coffee and stood up. Then he turned to study the older man's face, and Peterson was suddenly quite sure that he had no secrets which this enigmatic young individual had not already discovered. "All things considered," the FBI agent said slowly, "don't you have more important things to worry about? He'll do what has to be done. That'll have to be enough for you."
And Peterson suddenly felt all the fight, all the resistance drain out of him. He had done all that he
could to make things right and was nearing the end of his road.

Now it would be up to Brian Kinney to continue the journey on his behalf, and the elderly man -
thinner with every passing day but still not showing overt signs of the disease which was consuming
him - thought that maybe, just maybe, he would be able to sleep well from now on, for as many
nights as he had left, and he was only slightly amazed to discover that he owed that sense of peace -
of rightness - to the outrageous, relentless, completely incomprehensible young scoundrel who had
fathered his only grandson.

Holy shit! Who would ever have believed that he could consign his precious daughter and her
amazing son to the tender mercies of Brian Kinney? Holy shit!

Now - where had he put his sandals? He was already packed and ready to catch the plane, so there
was no reason why he could not spend his remaining hours here at the beach, enjoying the
combination of the lovely sunlight and the lyrical sound of the children's laughter as they cavorted
across the sand, playing with Brian and Justin while Peterson bagged lots of shells to add to his
grandson's collection.

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It was a blustery morning in Pittsburgh, but, then again, most mornings in Pittsburgh were blustery,
except for those in the deepest part of high summer, when the air would be thick with the smell of
sweat and hot rubber and local humidity. In the past, the entire city would have been forced to
hunker down under the caustic metallic tang of molten metal and steel all year long, whether wind-
driven or thick and still, especially during July and August; that time, however, was long gone. All in
all, thought Debbie, blustery was probably better.

The city was cleaner these days, quieter and less polluted, but sometimes it still felt a little strange,
like a changeling had slipped in during some long night and replaced an old, familiar, slightly grimy
acquaintance. There were even those who claimed that it was now exceptionally beautiful - a
showplace of a perfectly evolved American city. Most of the older residents would listen to such
observations with a subtle eye-roll. Yes, there was much to be said for the progress of recent years,
but it was only the very young and the late-comers to the area who either never knew or chose to
ignore the fact that the changes had not come as a result of deliberate enlightenment but as a dire
consequence to economic upheaval and the death of a narrowly-focused industrial way of life.

So, it was all well and good to wax lyrical about the beauty of the city and the benefits of its new
direction, but it felt a lot like a betrayal to fail to pay tribute to the sacrifices made to achieve it. One
might, after all, find beauty in a cemetery, but that did not change the reality of what lay beneath the
surface. So . . . beautiful? Yes, but not without a measure of melancholy, a sober awareness that
Debbie usually chose to ignore. But now, today . . .

She sat at the kitchen table, stirring two big dollops of sugar into her coffee, debating whether or not
she really wanted to take up a serving fork and fetch herself another generous slice of monkey bread,
while she listened to the whistle of the wind racing down the alley behind the house, rattling garbage
can lids and metal fencing as it tore along its path toward the greater openness of Liberty Avenue.
Dust and tiny particles of stone gave rise to a constant staccato rhythm against the rear windows, as if
attempting to gain access, and Debbie shivered at the repetitive clatter. It was not a pleasant sound,
and she was almost dead certain that it was only the first symptom of a morning that was not going to
be any more pleasant than that intrusive bluster.
She continued to sit, almost motionless, slightly lost in memory, recalling days when she and her brother, Vic, had spent mornings raking up dead weeds and leaves and cleaning up the clutter of the tiny yard that overlooked the alley, and sometimes - when he was still very young - Michael would join them, although he generally spent more time taking running leaps into the piles of leaves than actually doing any work. But the memories were very sweet, nonetheless, as were most memories of Michael. He had always been a sweet child, which - of course - had proven to be part of the problem, when 'sweet' had turned out to be 'too sweet for his own good'. At which point, as if by some divine intervention, Brian Kinney had stepped into the picture - Michael's savior and his nemesis. Vic had recognized both aspects of the role the newcomer would play in her son's life even before she did. Brian Kinney - hero and villain, all wrapped up in one luscious, young body. And how long had it been, she wondered, since she'd bothered to remember both sides of that coin rather than concentrating on just the one - the dark one?

Vic had been dead for several years now, and where, she wondered, had the time gone? How had she - Debbie Novotny, of the bright copper hair and the scarlet nails and the brilliant lipstick and the colorful, vulgar clothing - when had she stopped being the vibrant young thing that always managed to light up every room she chose to enter - and become this . . . this shadow of the person she'd once been? And when had she begun to develop an ability to see only those things that she wanted to see and ignore everything else?

She didn't care much for the woman she had become, the woman who had answered the phone earlier that morning and listened to the caller's shrill ranting and allowed herself to be bullied and pushed and manipulated into a place where she hadn't wanted to go, even though, in the end, she hadn't exactly adhered to the letter of her instructions, so maybe she wasn't - quite - a total wimp . . . yet.

"Should have just said no," she muttered to herself, reaching out and breaking off a thick chunk of the sticky monkey bread and never mind the subtleties of knife or fork. She took a big bite and slurped a strong draught of coffee and considered getting up to turn the TV on. Maybe a bit of the Lifetime channel would help to soothe her nerves and put her in a more receptive frame of mind for dealing with . . . Shit! She wasn't even sure what to call it. Melodrama? Soap opera? Greek tragedy? Farce?

She suddenly thought about Brian Kinney and pictured the expression on his face if he should overhear her musings. Then she managed a shaky smile, as she had no doubt how he would characterize this whole debacle.

But Brian wasn't here. For the moment, even Michael wasn't here - with or without reinforcements. For now, to face the first stage of this situation, she was all alone, although she allowed herself a small hope that some faint trace of her brother's ghost might just take a moment to settle on her shoulder and take her hand. She could really use a guardian angel right now.

She thought again that she should have just refused to co-operate, but that would only have served to delay the inevitable. Thus she had done everything she could to hedge her bets - to take all possible precautions to assure that everything didn't just collapse around her ears, as her soon-to-arrive visitor had no doubt intended.

She poured another cup of coffee, and wished - for just a moment - that she had one of Brian's uber-expensive joints. Then she debated dumping a jigger or two of brandy into her cup, and never mind that it was still only mid-morning. Nothing like a bit of false courage to see one through a crisis.

Then she took a deep breath, wondering - again - when she had become this tremulous mass of uncertainty - a quivering, vulnerable target who could not figure out how to defend herself.
When the doorbell rang fifteen minutes later, she was still wondering, and still no closer to figuring out an answer.

As she opened the door and observed the individual waiting on her porch, she was forced to acknowledge that her own weakness and uncertainty and need were only underscored by the contrast of the blatant aggressiveness of her visitor. She was so anxious that she found it difficult to look the new arrival directly in the eye, choosing instead to study the surface of her door and note that the red paint once so carefully applied by Emmett had begun to fade and blister in the aftermath of a string of grueling winters.

"Well? Did you call him?"

Debbie barely managed to suppress a sigh. "Yes, Mel. I called him."

"And?"

Debbie stared at the young woman who was the mother of her granddaughter - very possibly the only grandchild she would ever have - and knew that it was only a trick of the skittish morning light and uneasy shadows from nearby tree limbs twisting in the wind that made Melanie's eyes look like restless, bottomless pools of dark water. But it was unnerving, nonetheless. "Come in and have some coffee," she said finally, moving back toward the table, striving to regain some measure of self control.

"I don't have any time to waste, Debbie" snapped the attorney. "Is he . . ."

"Yes, I'm sure he's on his way. But . . ." The redhead heard the note of desperation in her own voice and paused, deciding suddenly that she was tired of playing the spineless cowering weakling that other people seemed to expect her to be. "But I'd like to speak to you first, Melanie. Please. Sit down and have some coffee."

If the lawyer was surprised by the sudden resolve in the older woman's tone, she gave no sign of it. But she wouldn't, of course. Melanie had many years of practice in manipulation and the art of confrontation, and she would not give up any advantage without a fierce battle. "So speak," she answered impatiently, as she took a seat and accepted a chipped mug adorned with multi-color stylized tropical fish. She drank the coffee black - of course.

"Why didn't you bring J.R.? Where is she?" Debbie asked, folding her arms and staring at her visitor.

"Where she's safe." The response was every bit as deliberate and cold as Debbie had expected it to be. "Where she'll be cared for, as she needs to be."

"And when," Debbie said as she leaned back and studied the face of her visitor, "has she ever been less than cared for, when she's here?"

"Oh, I don't know." Melanie's voice was thick with sarcasm. "Maybe whenever Lord and Master Brian decided that she was taking too much attention away from him and his little clone."

Debbie could not quite suppress a startled gasp. Surely, she'd heard incorrectly. Surely, she'd been mistaken when she'd understood Melanie to refer to the little boy who had spent his entire life loving her as his mother as a clone, and when she'd identified the emotion underlying that term as bitter resentment.

"That's not true, Melanie," she said slowly but firmly. "God knows, Brian Kinney is no saint, and I've been the first to say so, many, many, many times. But he's never done anything to try to hurt J.R. He wouldn't. No matter that he's . . ."
"That he's what?" It was almost a snarl. "A cold-blooded, swaggering, self-centered, heartless, narcissistic scumbag who cares about nothing or no one but himself? Someone who uses the people around him and then just throws them away when he doesn't need them, when it's not convenient to have them around any more? Would that be an accurate description? Because most of those terms are quotes of things you've said about him, Debbie. I'm only repeating your words. So . . . what? Tell me if I'm wrong. Tell me he hasn't done everything he can to wreck my marriage. And to interfere in J.R.'s life too. You want to know where my daughter is? She's in Florida, with my parents, where she'll be treated like the princess she deserves to be, instead of like the poor little step-daughter - unwanted and unnoticed because she doesn't carry those perfect Kinney genes."

Debbie closed her eyes and felt a huge black sense of dread rise within her. She knew that Melanie was not exaggerating. She herself had - on many occasions - made similar accusations against Brian. She had never been shy about raising her voice and trying to bull-doze her way through every occasion, to force him to follow her lead, and she had been viciously vocal in her criticism every time he had defied her; had refused to behave as she dictated he should; had stood up to her and taken her verbal abuse, usually without any response except for a cold glint in his eyes or - sometimes - with an enigmatic smile that she'd never quite managed to translate.

At the same time, she had hardly ever stopped to explore the reasons behind his actions or to understand his motivation. She had always believed that she was right in her judgments and that his selfishness was a part of who he was; that the times when she'd seen him act in a way that defied explanation, that seemed to contradict the arrogant, egotistical character that he usually displayed; the times when he'd stepped in to defend Michael, for example, or to stand up to a bully, or to prevent some extreme miscarriage of justice - those had just been flukes, exceptions that proved the rule. And if such things had happened a lot more times than anyone ever bothered to acknowledge - well, that was all part and parcel of the identity he wore like designer clothing, wasn't it? It didn't change the character of the man he had grown to be. Did it?

She took a big swallow of coffee and tried not to hear the tiny voice in her mind that was laughing at her now and reminding her that she had often prided herself on the unfailing accuracy of her bullshit detector, the very same one that she now felt compelled to ignore.

For she could not bring herself to discount the fact that there was another truth here - one that had to take precedence no matter what anyone else might claim. Though Michael was J.R.'s biological father, Melanie was a lawyer; more than that, she was a legal barracuda, according to everyone who'd ever had to deal with her on a professional basis, and Debbie was certain that the woman's threats to take J.R. away and remove her from Michaels's life were very real, leaving Michael with no legal recourse. Thus, his daughter - and Debbie's only grandchild - would be forever taken beyond their reach, unless they could find some way to placate Melanie. She wanted to believe that there were alternatives, but she could not quite bring herself to release her fears.

Losing her granddaughter was something she could not endure, for herself or for her son, and if that meant that Brian had to be thrown under the bus . . . She swallowed a sigh, as that obstinate ugly little voice reminded her that it would certainly not be the first time.

"Please, Mel," she said softly, cringing away from the sniveling sound of her own voice, but willing to try anything - anything at all - to avoid the nightmare that loomed before them. "You know how much J.R. means to Michael, and to me. Please don't take her away from us."

Melanie's smile was slightly less cold and smug as she interpreted what she was hearing as a confirmation for her expectations. She had always known how to push Debbie's buttons, and controlling Debbie was the key to controlling Michael. "You just don't get it, do you? Listen, Debbie. I know you love her, but that - by itself - is just not enough. I need help here. That's what
you guys don't seem to understand. Brian is taking everything away from me - my wife, my home. My whole life. If something isn't done, if nobody steps in to fix this mess, then I won't have any choice. Without Lindsey and Gus and . . . well, without . . . alternative resources, I won't be able to stay in Toronto. I won't even be able to stay here - not by myself. The only practical choice for me will be to go back to my family and start over. To take my daughter to Florida permanently and re-establish my profession there, and depend on my family to help me rebuild my life, for me and her. Unless, of course, Michael can come up with the wherewithal to help me provide for her, which we both know isn't going to happen. He's never going to have the means, and I won't have her growing up in a ghetto, playing in the streets around Liberty Avenue, just so you and your son can have access to her. Not while Lindsey comes out of this smelling like a rose and able to give everything to her . . ."

Debbie took another deep breath, and felt the darkness shift within her again. She had told herself that she might have imagined it - that the venom she'd sensed in Melanie's voice when she'd referred to Gus as 'Brian's little clone' - had been a mistake. That the woman could not possibly feel that much vicious resentment toward the child who had - until recently - been a central, beloved part of her own family. But there was no way to fool herself now. Melanie had not quite completed her sentence and called Gus whatever ugly expletive she'd intended to use, but the intent and the bitterness had been clear.

It was a huge risk, and she knew it. But she couldn't just remain silent. "Lindsey and her . . . what?"

The rage that flared in Melanie's eyes was towering. "Her little Kinney heir."

"Is that . . ." Debbie had to pause to swallow around the lump in her throat. "Is that all he is to you now?"

If Melanie had been paying attention at all, she might have heard the first faint tinkle of ice in that tone - the first faint suggestion that she might have stepped too far over the line - but she wasn't. She was much too intent on her own agenda and much too focused on concentrating the maximum amount of acid into her tone. "St. Brian is buying them. He's using that big, fat checkbook to take title of their lives, and Lindsey's letting him do it. So what do you suppose comes next? Well, that's pretty obvious, isn't it? First, he's going to find her a perfect little cottage, on a perfect little street, where she can play at her perfect little job in some chic little studio featuring pretentious artists painting avant garde expressionist drivel. Then he'll make arrangements so she can send her kid - or rather, his kid, because that's the only thing that will really matter - to a perfect, exclusive, little school, while mother and son spend their lives expressing their undying gratitude and worshipping at the feet of the Mighty Kinney. He'll use his money to make sure that he owns them, while she forgets all about me and our daughter. While we're left out in the cold, with our lives falling apart around us, standing on the outside looking in and wondering whatever happened to the life we used to share."

Debbie's eyes were huge, by this time, filled with both despair and disbelief. "Melanie," she said softly, reasonably, or so she thought, "you're an attorney. A smart, educated, successful woman, so don't you think that's a bit of an exaggeration? And while it's true that Michael may never have the kind of money that Brian has, he'll do his very best to make sure that . . ."

"That what? That I can shop at Wal-Mart to buy her clothes? That I can send her to some run-down, inner city public school where she can rub elbows with slum kids, and make sure that her grades are good enough to get her into some community college when the time comes, so she can get a job as a data entry clerk in some grumpy little office? Is that what I'm supposed to settle for, for my daughter? Like you settled for Michael? And meanwhile, Lindsey and Gus shop at Neiman Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue, and he gets the benefit of a private school education and a degree from Princeton, if that's what he wants? Is that how it's supposed to work?"
Debbie found that she couldn't think of a rational way to answer that question; for one of very few times in her life, she was completely speechless, with no idea of what she might say next. But then she realized that she didn't have to fumble for a response, because, suddenly, there was someone else in the room, someone more intimately involved in the conflict but less driven by desperation and less intimidated by the level of vitriol in the tirade.

"So," said Ben, as a swirl of rough breeze punctuated the swift opening swing of the door, "let me see if I understand this correctly. The issue is less about providing for J.R.'s needs than it is about making sure that Gus doesn't have any material advantages over his sister?"

"She's not his sister," Melanie snapped, turning to face Ben and Michael as they stood side by side in the entryway. "Lindsey has made that very clear. Gus is the son of Brian Kinney and Lindsey Peterson, which definitely means he is no relation of mine."

Michael moved forward abruptly, and Ben watched him closely, noting that his knees were trembling so violently that he desperately needed to sit down - to avoid falling down. "I thought you loved Gus," said the young biological father softly as he dropped heavily into a chair. "I always believed you thought of him as your son."

"I did," she retorted, "until Brian took that away from me. He's the one who . . ."

"Who what?" asked Ben, genuinely interested. "What exactly is it that you think he did to make it impossible for you to continue to parent Gus?"

Melanie's face went very still, and her eyes were suddenly bright with rage. "He drew his line in the sand, and Lindsey walked across it like she was marching down the aisle. Which, in a way, I guess she was, because that's what he always was to her - the one that got away; the one that she'd always run back to, given half a chance."

But Ben was shaking his head. "I'm sorry, Mel, but I don't believe that. Granted, I was never as close to the two of you as Michael or Emmett or Ted, but I always thought that she loved you very much. That she . . ."

"But not enough," she snapped. "Not enough to stand up for me against motherfucking Brian Kinney. Not enough to take my side - and my daughter's side - when he . . ."

"When he what?" Michael had been hunched in his chair, staring down at his clasped hands, but now he looked up, gazing directly into her face, and his eyes were filled with an uneasy blend of despair and revulsion, an emotion so intense that it was gradually overcoming the nauseating knot of fear that was still clinched in his gut. "When he didn't just lie down and die after getting brutalized and mutilated? When he refused to kneel under to the vicious bastards who tried to kill him? When he stood up to defend himself against the scheming and manipulations of all his so-called friends and buddies who saw their chance to jump in and take advantage of him when he was injured? Is that what he did that you find so impossible to forgive? Tell me the truth here, Mel. Is it really Lindsey and her help that you need so you can build a life for J.R., or is it just the money she gets from Brian that lets you live the lifestyle you think you deserve? Isn't that really what this is all about?"

"How dare you!" she snarled, leaping to her feet and noting with a savage surge of satisfaction that Michael flinched away from her as she moved. "You think you can speak to me like that, and then expect me to have pity on your sorry ass and allow you anywhere near my daughter? You know what, Mikey?" The sneer was deliberate. "I hope you took lots of photos the last time you saw her, because you're never going to get another chance. I was really stupid, I guess, to think that it would do any good to ask you to see me here. I was just hoping we could talk together - reasonably. Without getting Brian's high-priced mouthpieces involved. Because . . ." She paused and hitched a
coarse breath. "Because I thought we used to be friends. Because we've shared J.R., and it's just wrong for it all to end like this. If you'd just listen to what I tell you, and realize that you're being played. That Brian is using his influence and your affection for him so he can take away the things that should matter to you. The people you should love. You know me, Michael. You know I've always done my best to protect you, and to make sure J.R. knows and loves her daddy. That's why I wanted to meet you here - in a place that's special to you - special to all of us. That's why . . .

"You know, Ms. Marcus," said a steady, slightly sardonic voice from the area just outside the still open doorway, "you really need to work on your communication skills. The pattern gets a little old, when you start with all that _sturm und drang_ and threat after threat after threat, which might work perfectly well in an attempt to frighten children or intimidate those who have no familiarity with the rules of law, but then, when you begin to see that you're not succeeding in terrorizing your audience, you change horses in midstream, and it's suddenly all about how much you've done for them and what a devoted friend you've been." A tall, slender figure in an impeccable Ralph Lauren pinstripe suit stepped into the room out of the brittle morning sunlight and stood studying her with a relaxed smile, while a stray sunbeam flashed copper-gold in his hair. "On the other hand, in the process of speaking to someone who is capable of finding his own behind with either hand, you might want to dial your stridency down a notch and consider a more eloquent approach. You might also want to make certain, when you're trying to sneak around in the shadows and coerce individuals into accepting your own version of legal conclusions, that they don't have legal counsel around to argue your claims."

Liam Quinn moved into the room and settled himself at the table, his smile remaining bright and steady. "Just in case you haven't figured it out, I'm . . ."

"I know who you are," she almost snarled. "You're Brian's legal lapdog."

Quinn's smile remained unperturbed. "Charmingly put, but accurate enough. But then, you already know that, don't you? Unless you're going to try to plead ignorance and claim that you were never presented with the appropriate documents to advise about a hearing which is scheduled for day after tomorrow, in Judge Falterman's court. Because not having received such documents would be the only way to claim that you didn't know that I not only represent Mr. Kinney in his dealings with you vis a vis your relationship with his son. I also represent Mr. Novotny, in whatever capacity he might need representation. And I think we both know what that will entail. And while it's true that those documents were not presented in the form of a summons, they were nonetheless delivered into your hands, in the presence of other staff members of the law firm where you are currently employed, legal clerks who could be compelled to testify - under oath - if necessary.

"So let's be frank, shall we? Before you bother to launch into an explanation about why you summoned Michael here - to a clandestine meeting in his mother's house, where he would have no access to counsel, let me just suggest that you save your breath. You brought him here to have a go at making him believe that you've already got everything rigged up to make sure that you're the only person whose rights are going to be upheld in a court of law, and to muddy the waters concerning Canadian regulations, so that he'll think you have advantages that you don't really have." He turned to smile at Debbie, and was relieved to note that the ice he had previously noticed in her eyes was beginning to melt. "But we both know that's just a bluff, don't we? Much as you might like to believe it, there is nothing you can do to prevent Michael from having his day in court, along with others more peripherally involved, and the simple truth is that neither you nor your daughter is a Canadian citizen, which entails something else that you never bothered to tell Mr. Novotny - mainly that any change of citizenship in her case would require his specific, notarized agreement."

"Now just wait . . ."
"No, Mel," said Michael, taking a deep breath and rising to his feet and trying very hard to stop trembling. He was still enormously frightened, and that wasn't something that he was going to be able to conceal from anyone in the room. But he and Ben had talked about this very thing in the course of their walk to his childhood home. Actually, it had been Ben who had done most of the talking; Michael had been too panicked to string together consecutive thoughts into orderly sentences. And he still was, but he knew that Ben had been right. If they didn't step up now and take action to control Melanie's attempts at manipulation and browbeating, there would never be an end to it. It was time for action. "No more waiting for you to set all the boundaries. No matter what you think, you didn't make J.R. on your own. She's not a clone of you, any more than Gus is a clone of Brian. She's a person, and she's our daughter too, and if you can't or won't accept that . . ."

"What?" Melanie's face was a mask of raw rage. "You really think you're going to beat me at this game? You really think you're strong enough to . . ."

"No," Michael replied firmly, coldly. Then he turned to gaze at Liam Quinn, hoping for some sign of support and reassurance and getting it. "But he is."

Melanie went very still; then she turned to study the other attorney's expression, and she felt a tiny nuance of unease as she correctly interpreted the look of supreme confidence in his eyes.

She smiled as she picked up her purse and turned away, not bothering to look at him to gauge his reaction. "You run a good bluff, Quinn. I'll give you that. But we both know that nothing is that simple. You've convinced these amateurs that you're already in control, but, unless you happen to be carrying around a restraining order that you can serve on me, as an officer of the court, that's not going to fly, is it? You've got nothing, and, by the time you do, well . . . let's just say that I don't plan to hang around to give you an opportunity."

Then she moved toward the door, her smile remarkably reminiscent of a cat in cream.

"No, wait," shouted Debbie. "Melanie, you can't . . ."

"Sorry, but you just fucked yourself over for good, Debbie, and don't say I didn't warn you."

"Quinn?" That was Ben, who wasn't staring at Melanie in horror - like Debbie - or in sick dread, like Michael. He was staring instead at Liam Quinn who was . . . smiling?

"Actually, Ms. Marcus," said Quinn, just as Melanie pulled open the door, "you might want to . . . rethink your exit line."

The smile on Melanie's face faltered, as she came face to face with a member of the U.S. marshall's staff, who was just standing there on the porch, apparently waiting for her to make her exit. She was momentarily confused, but not for long, as she looked down to stare at the sheaf of legal documents he was holding.

The officer, a healthy, robust individual with rosy cheeks and a surprisingly friendly smile, tipped his hat and handed her the small pack of papers. "Ma'am," he said politely, "you've been served. If you like, I'll be happy to explain the meaning of each of these items, so there are no misunderstandings."

"I'm a lawyer, you . . ." She did not - quite - call him a name, but they both knew that it was a near thing. "I know what they are."

The officer remained unperturbed. "Yes, Ma'am. I'm sure you do. You have a nice day."

And he turned and strolled away, whistling under his breath.
"It's Sunday morning," Melanie muttered. "How the fuck . . ."

But she didn't really need an answer. She had used the phrase often enough herself, in listing all the reasons why Brian Kinney and his minions could do things that nobody else seemed able to manage.

"Money talks." She was still muttering, as she shoved the papers into her handbag and moved to step out into the roughened wind, wanting nothing more than to get away - from the Novotny's household, from that bastard lawyer, from Pittsburgh, and - most of all - from the shambles of her life. But it was not to be - not quite yet.

"Just to make everything perfectly clear," said Liam Quinn, stepping out onto the porch behind her but carefully maintaining the minimum distance that most people would define as personal space, "I suggest that you actually look over what you were given. That's not just a subpoena. There's also a restraining order preventing you from moving your daughter across state lines or international borders until a custody hearing can be held and any dispute resolved by the court. Also - just in case you're wondering - a similar order has been served to your parents in Miami. For the time being, Jenny Rebecca is to reside in their home, pending final resolution of these issues."

"You can't do that," she snapped. "The courts wouldn't . . ."

"Yes," he replied steadily, "they would. When there are strong indications of the possibility of flight to avoid legal action. Not to mention questions concerning adjacent custodial matters and efforts by either party at coercion. Furthermore, the fact that J.R.'s location was known to us should serve to make you aware that precautions have been taken to make sure that she's safe and sound - and not in danger of being whisked away into the night. I promise you, that's not going to happen." He paused then, and leaned forward so that he could speak privately, but there was no trace of uncertainty in either his voice or his eyes. "And you might want to think about one more thing. This is not going to be a simple matter, Ms. Marcus. While Mr. Kinney has never made an issue of how the support he provided for his son was used, don't make the mistake of thinking that there are no records concerning the use of those funds. The records are very detailed and very revealing. And that, by the way, is not an assumption. I've already seen them. So you might just want to reconsider your position in all this. Being an attorney can certainly be a big advantage in a case like this, but it also carries certain responsibilities, doesn't it? Because it makes it a bit difficult for you to claim that you didn't understand the significance of how that money was used. Doesn't it?"

"How do you know about all this? Who . . ."

"Does it matter? The only important thing is for you to consider your options carefully. Don't you think?"

She looked up at him then and was momentarily startled by the beautiful glimmer of his eyes - but only for a split second, until her fury overwhelmed any other impression - the fury of impotence, of helplessness, of frustration, and - most of all - of the recognition of betrayal, as well as the identity of the traitor. There was, after all, only one person with the intimate knowledge to have provided the necessary information. "Just so we're totally clear on this, are you threatening me, Mr. Quinn?" Her voice was as hard and frigid as polar ice.

If she expected him to cower away from her rage or be disconcerted by her accusation, she was in for a big surprise. Instead, he laughed. "Indeed I am, Ms. Marcus. And you'd be smart to pay close attention."

"You can't do this to me." It was almost a primal scream.

"Oh, yes, I can," he answered with a smile, "and it'll make no difference to me. I get paid either
way." The smile became a wolf's head grin. "Do you?"

Then he stepped back into the house and closed the door in her face, only then turning to face the three individuals who were watching him with huge, frightened eyes.

His smile was comforting - not to mention beautiful - and they were all relieved to see it, but it wasn't bright enough to assuage every trace of concern.

"Quinn." Michael was not quite successful in keeping his voice steady. "Are you sure about this? Is everything really going to be all right?"

"Michael, I . . ."

"Don't do that," snapped Debbie. "Don't launch into some patronizing bullshit that's meant to make us believe that there's nothing to worry about. This is not nothing. This matters, and Brian might be used to playing in the big leagues and taking risks like this, but we're not, so . . ."

"Debbie," said the young attorney firmly, "you've got to make a choice here, and no one else can make it for you. If you allow Ms. Marcus to dictate the terms of any future you might share with your granddaughter, then you're choosing to drink the Kool-Ade, and, once it's done, it's done for good. Then there's really nothing more that anyone can do for you. Not even Brian."

He smiled then, and his eyes were filled with a glint of gentle warmth - warmth that pledged his best efforts but refrained from making guarantees. "On the other hand, Brian trusts me. Now, you're going to have to decide for yourself whether or not you feel the same."

For a moment, everything in the house went still, weighted down by a heavy chill with only the unsettling rattle of the wind to break the silence. Then Michael turned to look up into his husband's eyes, seeking - and finding what he needed there. He simply turned back to face Liam Quinn and offered him a small smile. "So, can you find your ass with less than two hands?"

The lawyer laughed and lifted a single forefinger, and Michael told himself that it was reassurance enough. It really wasn't, of course, but - for the moment - it would have to do.

"What is it about Pittsburgh?" Quinn asked, shrugging slightly against the chill. "Do you guys have to do everything at the crack of dawn? I'm starving. Any chance of a bite of breakfast?"

Debbie broke out laughing. "Does this look like a diner to you?"

"Everything in Pittsburgh looks like a diner to me," he retorted.

"God! Brian must have loved you."

"Yeah, he did." Liam was happy to admit it as he moved back to the table.

Debbie paused, and favored him with a speculative grin. "Literally?"

"Ma!" Michael was regarding her with characteristic irritation, before turning to grin at Quinn. "You'll have to excuse my mother - the world's biggest fag hag."

"Hey," she retorted. "I'm just curious. It is Brian, after all. How many times have you known him to turn his back on an irresistible ass like that?"

Quinn laughed. "Well, my ass thanks you for the compliment. And if I had to guess at an answer, I'd say never - not, at least, until a certain other irresistible 'ass' - of the blond persuasion - came along to
distract him."

It was Ben's turn to smile. "Oh, I see you've met Justin."

Michael grinned. "Bet he loved you."

Quinn stared down at the plate Debbie set before him, and wondered if anybody could really eat such a huge piece of ... whatever gooey concoction it was that he was being offered. "Actually," he said finally, "other than the obligatory glare, which translated to a shorthand version of 'Private property - keep out', he didn't pay much attention."

"Justin?" Debbie was obviously skeptical. "Our little Justin?"

The lawyer smiled, and Ben noticed that there was a pale element of melancholy in his beautiful eyes. "I think he was just . . . "

Michael laughed. "Horny. You can call it whatever you like, but that's the bottom line. With Justin and Brian, it always is. Neither one ever able to get enough of the other."

Quinn merely nodded and picked up his fork, offering no verbal response, but Ben could still see a faint vein of longing in that charming smile, and he wondered - not for the first time - how it was that the people who claimed to know Justin and Brian best actually often seemed not to know them at all.

He could not quantify or qualify whatever it was that Liam Quinn had seen in the interaction between Brian and Justin, but he was willing to bet his last dollar that it had not been anything as simple or shallow as lust. Lust, after all, did not inspire the kind of gentle yearning that had glimmered so sweetly in those gem-stone eyes.

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The opalescent fragments of morning mist had burned away completely by the time the travelers had assembled to make their departure, and the sun was a huge disc of beaten gold as it soared upwards beyond the remnants of a cloud bank. Out beyond the breakers that were flinging themselves at the sward of golden beach, a trio of cormorants wheeled across the bright reflection of the water, taking advantage of the lift of a fretful wind to make their way toward the cliff face and the nests concealed in the crevasses of its broken surface.

Gus and Katy were currently enthralled with the birds and the powerful rhythm of their wings and laughed together as they discussed how it must feel to swoop through the air like a roller coaster without rails or wheels. Both had already said their farewells to the household, and Katy had been a godsend in keeping Gus from brooding too much over being separated from his father. Well, Katy ... and the brand new state-of-the-art handheld game module that Brian had dropped into his son's hands as he'd knelt to wrap that small, sturdy body in his arms while simultaneously burying his face in the sweet warmth of the boy's throat.

The toy had certainly served as a distraction, but, if Brian had counted on it to dissipate every trace of the anguish arising from the prospective separation of father and son, he'd been ridiculously optimistic. The crisis was past by now, and there were only tear tracks remaining on the young boy's face to give evidence of the sobs and soft wails that had reduced Gus to a quivering mass of misery when he had thrown himself into his father's arms and begged to be allowed to stay. It had taken many minutes of soft reassurances and patient recitations of all the reasons why his staying would be a very bad idea before he'd reluctantly conceded defeat. But he had refused to smile until Katy had pulled him out into the sunlight to follow the flight of the majestic sea birds.
Only Brian had been quick enough and perceptive enough to notice the fleeting V for victory gesture she'd flashed him when Gus had finally deigned to smile, and he had rewarded her with an enthusiastic, albeit discreet thumbs up. But then he'd realized that there was someone else who noticed, after all, although she'd given no overt sign. Katy's Aunt Tink always noticed, which was only to be expected since there were very few things about Katy that Cynthia failed to notice - a condition that was both an inherent, changeless factor of Katy's world and a source of infinite comfort to both woman and girl.

"He'll be fine," Cynthia said softly, trying to peer through the dark lenses that Brian was wearing, but her attempt to gauge the look in his eyes was futile. His face was smooth and almost without expression, and the hazel depths seemed opaque and filled with shadow.

"Will you?"

"Yep."

"Brian, what is it? What's going on?"

Brian tilted his head down and peered over the top of his designer glasses. "Cynthia, listen to me. Are you listening?"

She glared at him. "One of these days you're going to ask me that, and I'm going to punch you right in the nose. Of course, I'm listening. When have I ever not been listening?"

"In that case, you need to stop over-analyzing everything, and get the fuck back to Pittsburgh, where I expect you to do things exactly the way I want them done! Okay?"

"And how, exactly, am I supposed to figure out just how you want them done?" she snapped. "Check my horoscope? Read tea leaves? Or maybe I should just read your mind."

"Why not? You do it all the time."

"But not with your blessing," she retorted, wondering briefly if he knew how adorable he looked when he bit his lip to keep from smiling. Then she almost rolled her eyes in response to her own naiveté; of course, he knew. He was Brian Fucking Kinney, after all. "You know, if I'd even hinted at such a thing a couple of months ago, you'd have had my head on a plate. Look, Brian, I know why I'm good at the job you pay me to do. I'm smart, and I'm energetic, and I'm thorough and pretty much fearless, not to mention bold as brass. And I never forget a thing, but what I'm not is the one thing you've never wanted me to be. I'm not intuitive, because you don't rely on my intuition, because you always rely on your own. So why - now - are you . . ."

But he didn't allow her to finish, leaning forward and touching his forehead to hers as he lifted his hand to cover her mouth, silencing her words. "Maybe it's just time for you to grow up, Tink. Kinnetik is growing by leaps and bounds, and there's no way that one person - even with Einstein-caliber intuition - is going to be able to run it all. So just take my word for it. Sometimes, I'm going to need a little help. Okay?"

By virtue of a truly Herculean effort, Cynthia managed to limit her physical response to a single blink and thus avoid betraying her degree of shock and dismay over such a casual declaration.

Brian Kinney had just admitted that he could not continue to run his company by virtue of the exercise of his own immaculate instincts; Brian Kinney had just admitted that he needed help, despite the fact that the Brian Kinney that she had known throughout her adult life would have literally, until very recently, cut out his tongue before making such a confession. She had been concerned before,
sensing that something unexpected was lurking beneath the surface of his customary self-confidence, but now she was no longer concerned. Nor was she disturbed, or alarmed, or dismayed, as she had skipped over all those stages to get to this ultimate emotional point; now, she was petrified.

But she could not let him see that. That, she knew intuitively - and wasn't that the height of irony - would be a huge mistake. She had to hold on to her aplomb and cling to an air of serenity.

So she just nodded, and if something stirred in his eyes to suggest that he was not quite as convinced as she'd have liked to believe, she managed to ignore it and summon up a sardonic smile.

"Now," he said firmly, "if you could just help convince Gus to get in the car so I can have a few minutes to say good-bye to Justin . . ."

She nodded again, grateful that no verbal response was necessary since she was pretty sure that she could not come up with a single spoken word. But perhaps, she thought - mentally grasping at straws - she was just over-reacting. Maybe she'd imagined those undercurrents that were triggering red alerts in her mind, but a quick look around only served to confirm her suspicions, as she zeroed in on the frown on Chris McLaren's face and the shadows in his eyes. She knew then that she wasn't the only one sensing trouble, but still, she realized that, all things considered, she should consider herself lucky; it was a stroke of good fortune that no one other than the FBI agent had overheard and interpreted the meaning of Brian's comments. If it had been Justin, no power under heaven would have been sufficient to compel him to swallow his concerns and get on a plane to go back to Pittsburgh.

Cynthia watched as Brian's young lover finished collecting the last of his art supplies and packing them away into his portfolio, pausing just once to gaze out toward the morning glitter of the sea before turning to lose himself in contemplation of the man who was the focus of his existence. Obviously, for those two, there was suddenly no one else on the planet. There were only Justin and Brian, alone within the infinity of their shared moment.

Determined to give them an opportunity to explore their moment of privacy, Cynthia walked to the edge of the deck and down into the yard, moving around the corner of the greenhouse in order to summon the two children away from their enthusiastic and energetic birdwatching. Both were reluctant, preferring to continue their bobbing and weaving across the sand in pursuit of their visual prey, but they obeyed nonetheless, albeit in fits and starts. She smiled as they moved toward her, and suppressed an impulse to urge them to hurry when they stopped beside the equipment van where Jackson was pulling out a collection of metal weights and calibrated bars - new 'instruments of torture', according to Brian. The therapist paused in his efforts just long enough to exchange good-byes with the kids, and Cynthia noticed that he looked very different today. Ordinarily, sometimes several times a day, depending on Brian's therapy schedule, he arrived at the cottage dressed in dark-colored scrubs, or other equally casual togs. But today, he was in uniform - dark trousers and a long-sleeved white shirt bearing a company insignia. He looked very nice - tall and well-built and tanned, with a pleasant, youthful face and a semi-shaggy thatch of thick, dirty blond hair - and she wondered, for just a moment, why she had not noticed his good looks before, or maybe, why she was only noticing them now. But it was only a quick, idle speculation, and, in the process of rounding up the children and finishing preparations for departure, the observation slipped her mind.

For his part, he went on unloading his equipment after wishing them all a safe journey.

There was a considerable amount of hustle and noise going on around the cottage, as luggage was loaded, and last minute checks were done to make sure that nothing had been left behind and Trina presented boxes of treats to make sure no one went hungry during the flight - and never mind that there was almost certainly a fully stocked kitchen on the plane. But in one small area, away from the
confusion and turmoil, there was only stillness, and the soft, slow, lingering touch of bodies and lips and fingertips.

At the entrance to the greenhouse, Brian and Justin stood pressed against each other, rediscovering that they had little need of words; verbal language had never been particularly important to their communication. Their bodies spoke quite eloquently.

But, in the end, there were a few things that needed verbalizing.

"I could wait, you know." Justin's voice was barely more than a whisper. "I could wait until your treatment is done, and then you could come with me to New York - to help me pack up and make the transition to Pittsburgh."

Brian rolled his lips before nuzzling against a thick swatch of bright gold hair. "I need to concentrate on getting past this," he said softly. "And I can't concentrate on anything when you're around, except how much I want to fuck you through the floor. You're a distraction that . . ."

"But I could replace Jackson." Justin's grin was brilliant. "Want to bet that I couldn't find ways to make your therapy the highlight of your day? Every hour of the day?"

"I never bet against a sure thing," Brian laughed.

"You know, you could, at least, take off the sunglasses. I want to see your eyes."

Brian smiled, and readjusted the expensive shades

"Too bad," he retorted. "One of those anti-inflammatory concoctions that I have to take a hundred times a day makes my eyes super sensitive to light, so - for now - you'll just have to take my word that they're just as gorgeous as ever."

And it was Justin's turn to grin. "Modesty becomes you so," he observed.

Brian snickered, before wrapping his arms around Justin's waist and bracing his hands against the sensuous swell of that spectacular ass. "I know you don't want to go, any more than I really want to let you go. But I need you to do this for me, Sunshine. There are already too many distractions - too many loose ends that need tying up and too many risks I'm not willing to take. If I know that you and Gus are safe, then McFed and Company can concentrate on catching the bad guys and making sure they don't succeed in getting another crack at me. So please, Justin, please - I'm asking you to do this. For me. And for us and all our bright tomorrows. The ones I was never able to believe in, until now."

"I hate you," Justin whispered, not even bothering to try to conceal the tears welling in his eyes. "You don't play fair. You tell me this now? When you're packing me up and shipping me out - like I'm the hired help that needs to go open up the summer house, or something. That's when you decide to say this - to mention that you finally admit that we might actually have bright tomorrows? I hate you."

"I know."

"Tell me." That, at least, was not a whisper; in fact, it was almost a bark. "I need to hear it, to have it to keep with me when I'm all alone."

Brian laughed. "Now who's not playing fair?"

"Please." Back to the whisper.
Brian leaned forward, threading his fingers through thick blond locks, and touched his lips to soft eyelids. "I love you," he murmured. "I will always love you, and I need you to always remember that."

Justin nodded and turned his head to join his lips to Brian's, in a kiss that started slow and sweet and slowly, inevitably became so much more.

"Do you need to hear it?" he asked finally, pulling away just enough to be able to speak.

"Always."

"You're my life, Brian. Without you, there's nothing. I'll love you forever."

He was suddenly wrapped tight in Brian's arms, with his face cradled in the soft darkness beneath that sculpted chin, and thus he did not see the quick, there-and-gone flicker of anguish that flared in the depths of hazel eyes. By the time he pulled back to look up to trace the lines of that beloved face, there was only love and adoration looking down at him, wrapped up in an almost perfect serenity.

"Now go," Brian said firmly. "Go, while I can still let you."

Justin reached up to press one more kiss against the soft skin below Brian's jawline before starting to back away.

"No," Brian called softly, his voice no longer quite steady. "Not like that. Don't back away. Just turn around and go."

And Justin went.

Brian, on the other hand, did not move. Did not even breathe, as Chris McClaren walked around the side of the house and paused briefly, understanding somehow that this was a moment that deserved to go uninterrupted.

But he was also a realist, knowing that few things in life work out as they should.

"Brian," he said softly, "Turnage is on the phone. He says it's urgent."

Brian's smile was tremulous. "Of course, it is. But . . . " He shifted then to regard the FBI agent with a defiant glare. "I need a minute."

He turned quickly and hurried toward the back of the house, entering through the kitchen door and racing up the back stairs, until he reached the small balcony that ran along the upper hallway. It was in shadow at this time of the day, and if he remained near the doorway, he would not call attention to himself as he looked down over the driveway and the individuals loading up for their departure.

Only then did he remove his sunglasses, taking a moment to rub his eyes and blink against the glare of the morning before allowing himself to stare at the young man who was now standing alone, looking out toward the sea. Everyone else was caught up in the rush of the moment, but Justin seemed isolated, untouched by the bedlam and lost in his own private thoughts. Lost in his memories, Brian was sure, for he could see where Justin was gazing - at the places where they had shared kisses and lovemaking and danced together and laughed together. Loved together.

From his private vantage point, he studied every feature - memorizing the shape and depth of those incredibly blue eyes and the thick sweep of lashes, the not-quite-cleft of the chin and the lovely elongated dimples, the sensual curl of silken lips, the way the sunlight stroked through the thatch of golden hair and emphasized the ivory pallor of the perfectly balanced face, and the angular curve of
the jaw emphasizing the sweet shape of the mouth as it settled into that exquisite little half-smile that
was not quite a pout. Then hazel eyes drifted lower, to feast on the long, elegant lines of the torso
and the luscious perfection of the patch of pale skin that peeked out from beneath the tail of the shirt,
providing hints of the treasures that waited beneath layers of clothing.

Brian stood there, motionless, watching. Watching while Justin finally turned and waved good-byes
to the staff, with a hug for Trina. Watching while he and Gus and Katy mock-wrestled over who
would sit where. Watching while his young lover took a deep breath, looked around once more, and
climbed into the car.

Watching even as the small motorcade drove away.

And watching still, even when it was gone.

"Brian." McClaren was not prepared to force the issue, but knew they could not sit idly by and allow
Brian to continue to delay the inevitable.

"Yeah."

"Turnage is still holding, and not happy about it."

"Tell him to join the crowd."

With an impatient shift, the FBI agent stepped forward and grabbed Brian's biceps, pulling him
around so that he had no choice but to look him in the eye. "What the fuck are you doing?" he
demanded. "You're acting like you're never going to see him again. Why would you . . . ."

But he never finished the question, found that he couldn't bring himself to do so as he watched this
incredibly brash young man, this man who had defied the odds and fought back against every
contingency, simply crumble against him.

He didn't understand how or why, but he did realize one thing. However brash and thoughtless his
comment had been, it had not been the wild, ridiculous shot in the dark he had intended it to be. For
whatever reason, Brian Kinney believed that his speculation had been perfectly on target - that it was
perfectly possible that he might never see his Justin again.

Justin tried not to stare back at the house like a lovesick kid, but he couldn't quite bring himself to
look away. He'd hoped that he might be able to catch another glimpse of Brian before leaving, but he
hadn't, and now he was trying to find consolation by telling himself that Brian had not come out to
watch him leave because it was just too painful.

God knew it was painful enough for him, so maybe that wasn't too far-fetched.

Cynthia, of course, was busy trying to convince Gus and Katy to quiet down, but Justin's silence and
the look in his eyes was intense enough to grab her attention and prompt her to offer him a gentle
smile, as she leaned over to touch his hand. "He'll be back soon," she said softly. "And it's not like
we won't have plenty to do until he gets home. It's all going to be . . . ."

"Cynthia," he interrupted, still looking back over his shoulder and speaking very softly, "you know
Brian better than almost anybody. In some ways, maybe even better than me."

She nodded. "We've been together for a long time."
He turned then, and she almost flinched away from the flash of pain in his eyes. "So tell me the truth. Something's wrong, isn't it?"

"What makes you say that?" It sounded weak, and she knew it, but she needed to play for time, to try to figure out how to answer, without really answering.

But he surprised her and smiled. "Spoken like his faithful Girl Friday. You don't have to tell me; I already know. Something is wrong. I just don't know what, and neither do you. Maybe nobody does, and I'm not sure that's not the scariest thing of all."

She turned then to look back toward the cottage, not bothering to deny what he'd said, because she knew it wouldn't do any good, mostly because he was right; something was wrong. But until Brian was ready to confide in them, there was nothing they could do but wait.

As the SUV pulled out into the road, she caught a glimpse of the beach house, caught in a flare of sunlight in high relief against the dark roughness of the promontory, with Jackson moving toward the deck, pushing a gurney carrying a plastic carry-all, and she felt a faint flicker of memory stir in her mind. But it was only a flicker, lost before it formed, and she didn't dwell on it since Gus chose that exact moment to wrap a chunk of bright pink bubble gum in a lock of Katy's hair, resulting in the kind of pandemonium that children excel in creating.

The result was chaos, of course, but it was chaos threaded with laughter and the insouciance of childhood innocence, and provided some much-needed relief from darker musings.

As they drove away, all grew quiet behind them, although a distant shadow was forming on the horizon far out to sea, the first harbinger of a rising storm.

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tbc
Chapter 49

Maybe I didn't treat you
Quite as good as I should have;
Maybe I didn't love you
Quite as often as I could have.
Little things I should have said and done,
I just never took the time,
But you were always on my mind,
You were always on my mind

-- You Were Always on My Mind -- Wayne Carson Thompson; Johnny Christopher; Mark James

It would have been more logical - not to mention more professional - to meet at the clinic; the medical equipment there would have facilitated a more thorough evaluation of the patient's condition, and that was a fact that none of them could dispute. Yet, all three had agreed - tacitly - that a conference at Turnage's beach house was preferable, although not a single one could have explained why.

For Turnage, of course, there was the inescapable logic of not having to leave the comfort of his home and go to the trouble of getting into his car, driving down the road, and opening up his office, but the simple truth was that the drive was less than a mile in distance, and there would be virtually no traffic on a Sunday afternoon, so any objection was completely ludicrous.

Still, he had not even offered.

Of course, none of the three would deign to point out that the pitcher of perfectly blended vodka martinis, prepared by Ramon, the doctor's houseboy/butler/jack-of-all-trades, and set up on the credenza in Turnage's private office was sufficient justification for selecting a domestic venue for their little conference - but none of them refused the invitation to imbibe either, once Dr. Griffin had completed his initial physical review of the patient's injuries.

Brian had acquiesced to the examination in relatively good grace (for Brian) only grumbling a bit and taking advantage of an opportunity to point out that there was absolutely no reason why a potential problem with his vision should necessitate a look and a grope at his cock, balls, perfect ass, and associated nether regions.

Griffin, however, had ignored both grumbling and innuendo and proceeded to complete the exam, leaving nothing to chance, using his own instruments which he carried with him in a hand-tooled leather bag and looking, throughout the procedure, so perfect for the role of a distinguished medical guru that he might almost have been a caricature, with his mane of thick, silver hair, pale, perfect skin, classic profile, serene gray eyes, and glasses perched at the end of his nose so he could look through them or over them as required. Brian wondered briefly, why a world-famous ophthalmologist would need glasses at all; then he smiled as the answer occurred to him. Even the world-famous could be subject to a nuance of conceit, and this was almost certainly about image. He relaxed a bit then; he wasn't sure why diagnosing such a purely human failing in such a stellar individual made him feel a bit less intimidated (yes, even Brian Kinney occasionally felt intimidated) but it did.
Once the exam was completed, Brian and Rick Turnage, both casually smart in designer jeans and polo shirts, slouched comfortably in plush easy chairs in the lounge area of Turnage's sprawling office, sipping their perfect martinis, while Andrew Griffin, slightly more upscale in linen slacks and a button-down Abercrombie & Finch shirt, enjoyed his own drink as he scrolled through document after document of medical data and test results, pausing occasionally to refer to visual files on the laptop open on an adjacent desk and additional data from a CT monitor.

The two physicians exchanged questions and comments, confining their conversation to the kind of medical jargon that Brian would have found intensely annoying, if he'd been paying attention. But he wasn't, choosing to concentrate instead on the seascape visible through a broad sweep of windows and the group of bronzed, young surfers cavorting in the shallows just offshore - one in particular: tall, tan, muscular, with broad shoulders, a slender waist, long, shapely legs, and thick, dark curls framing a classically handsome face - Lord Byron in a Speed-O. He smiled as that metaphor occurred to him, realizing how ridiculous such an observation would sound to all his acquaintances who would sneer at the very idea that Brian Kinney would even entertain such a notion. Nevertheless, the young exhibitionist (no doubt about that, even at this distance) was a perfectly suitable inspiration for the comparison, flashing brilliant smiles toward a group of girls sunbathing on the beach, and reminding Brian of a Welsh actor he'd once seen in a play about the scapegrace poet - a beautiful creature with eyes as transcendentally blue as a twilight sky, a perfect cleft chin, and a mop of dark, thick, silken curls. From his first glimpse of the leading man, he'd realized that some actors were simply born to play certain roles, and the young man romping through the surf had a look about him that called up images of that lovely memory. This kid was probably a manual laborer or a student at a local college who wouldn't know the difference between a canto of Don Juan and a verse of Green Eggs and Ham, but he certainly looked the part, thus providing a reminder about how deceptive such looks could be. Brian had, after all, enjoyed an intimate encounter with the actor in question, at a private party following the final curtain of the play - and beyond. It had been a memorable occasion, and the two had gotten along tremendously, but the actor had demonstrated - repeatedly - that though there was an incredible degree of erotic poetry in his physical presence, there was none at all in his soul. They had spent a memorable week-end together, enjoying frequent, amazing, mind-blowing sex and laughing as they arrived at the conclusion that though the young man certainly shared certain libertine interests with the infamous poet, he could not have composed a decent sonnet to save his life. Limericks were more his style - the bawdier the better.

Brian sank more comfortably into his chair and sipped at his martini while he watched the group on the beach, although - in truth - he realized that he was probably imagining the resemblance, since he couldn't really see the young man very well.

He closed his eyes and amused himself briefly by trying to figure out just how long it had been since that encounter. The actor's name had been Geoffrey Evans - he was vaguely surprised to realize that he remembered it - and their time together had been a bright interlude, the two of them sharing an eagerness to sample the pleasures of New York's gay community, and Brian was slightly disconcerted to realize that he had not thought about the young man or that week-end in almost ten years. Nor had he seen the actor again, except for a couple of fleeting glimpses on some cable television program shot in Wales, although there'd never been the slightest doubt about recognizing him, no matter how fleeting such glimpses had been; those eyes and that body remained, now and forever, unmistakable. Evans had been - probably still was - the most beautiful physical specimen he'd ever met . . . almost. He frowned as he wondered why it should suddenly bother him that he would almost certainly never see Geoffrey Evans again.

Because, said an ugly, vindictive, little voice in his mind, it's easier to wonder about never seeing that face again than to actually confront the possibility of never seeing the one you can't bear to lose.

He glanced at the ship's clock on the mantle and realized that Justin would be in Pittsburgh by now.
Probably already at his mother's townhouse, or maybe even at the loft, making lists and plans and
arrangements for packing up and transferring his possessions from New York.

Brian frowned. He should really put a stop to that; he should tell Justin that it was silly to do this -
that they'd been foolish to let themselves believe in happily-ever-after, but . . . He sighed. Not quite
yet.

He sat up straight and shifted to confront the two physicians, as he roused himself from his brooding
and realized that they had fallen silent and were now waiting for him to notice.

Both were attempting to maintain professional demeanors, but Brian had learned a lot during his bout
with cancer about reading the minds of those charged with his medical care. "So," he said softly,
"let's have it."

"Well," said Griffin, "first you have to understand that this is not like diagnosing chicken pox.
There's no specific lab test that can provide a definitive diagnosis, and there are still plenty of gray
areas that might later come into play. So anything we tell you . . ."

Brian folded his lips together and took a deep breath. "Yeah. I understand. But could we please just
dispense with the caveats and get to the bottom line?"

Griffin sat back and took off his glasses, using a spotless linen handkerchief to polish them as he
regarded Brian with a solemn gaze. "You were the one who originally raised this issue, weren't you?
The one who sensed that something was not quite as it should be." He paused to riffle through the
file in front of him, looking for a specific note. "You described it as 'an inability to focus on close
objects' - which is a rather singular way to express the problem. You could have simply said, 'I can't
see.' But you didn't, which seems to suggest that you realize that it's more complicated than a simple
change in eyesight. It's also obvious that you're an intelligent, well educated man - the kind who
would have done a lot of research before even broaching the subject of possible complications from
your injuries. So it only stands to reason that you'd have already done some preliminary investigation
and reached some informed conclusions of your own. Care to share your speculations?"

Brian's smile was without warmth. "Isn't that what I'm paying you for? Or maybe I'm not going to
have to pay you at all. Experimental subjects don't usually have to pay to be guinea pigs, do they,
and, since it seems highly unlikely that you just happened to be in the neighborhood when I brought
these questions up, I'm thinking that the possibility of this condition being something more than a
fluke or a figment of my imagination is intriguing enough for you to consider coming to take a look
without worrying about who's paying whom - right? So the only really pertinent question would
seem to be, why are you here, Doctor?"

It was nothing more than a throw-away comment, a typical Brian-Kinney smart-ass remark; yet the
quick flicker that flared in the ophthalmologist's eyes suggested that Brian might have actually come
up with a morsel of truth in his musings.

If nothing else, the not-so-rambling dialogue raised the physician's estimation of the mental acuity of
his patient and forced him to realize that baiting Kinney and engaging in obfuscation was a complete
waste of time.

"Fair enough," he said finally. "For the moment, let's just say that you interest me. Okay?"

"And I called him," explained Rick Turnage. "Isn't that good enough for you?"

Brian confined his response to a smirk that was not quite a sneer, along with a nod and a gesture for
Griffin to continue, thus indicating that he had no intention of indulging in speculation when those
who should be able to provide actual facts were sitting right in front of him.

The ophthalmologist was frowning when he resumed speaking, indicating that he didn't care much for being interrogated or put on the spot so effectively. "Keeping in mind that nothing has been proven yet, I do feel that it's wise to explore the possibility that we may be dealing with an extremely rare condition here. Vision problems can certainly result from severe physical trauma - especially from head injuries. But the symptoms you're displaying are unusual. Of course, we're a long way from being able to confirm anything. There are still many tests and exams to do, including a specific exam using a new narrow-focus macro-scanner that I've developed for use in cases like yours. Unfortunately, the scanner is a prototype, and you'll have to travel to my research facility for us to use it, but I think it's critical that you do so. And better sooner than later."

Brian thought for a moment. Then he nodded. "All right. When the Grand Inquisitor here has finished inflicting his specific brand of torture on me, I'll pay you a visit - in due time."

Griffin then turned a quizzical eye toward the plastic surgeon who responded with a noncommittal shrug. "One small procedure left to do - scheduled for Tuesday morning - and a bit more therapy to restore him to fighting trim. A week or so, at most."

"Good then," Griffin replied, deliberately ignoring Brian's caveat and summing up, as if the matter was settled. "So we can . . ."

"But not," Brian interrupted, leaning forward so that he was almost invading the ophthalmologist's personal space, "until you share your conclusions with me. If I'm going to submit to your experimental procedures, you're going to have to tell me why I should."

Griffin and Turnage exchanged glances, and the surgeon could not quite control a smirk. "I did warn you," he said quietly, and Griffin could only nod.

"Okay, Mr. Kinney. I . . ."

"Call me Brian. My father and I have absolutely nothing in common."

"Really?"

"Really. Especially since he's dead."

Griffin's smile was lopsided, since he obviously couldn't figure out how to respond to that so he opted to just forge ahead. "Brian then. In the course of your research, I'm going to assume that you came across something called Anterior Ischemic Optic Neuropathy."

Brian glanced toward Turnage, his face almost without expression. "Let's just concede that I came across the term some place, which means it's only slightly less foreign to me than something spoken in high Mandarin."

Griffin stood up and walked toward the window, his eyes caught by the same group of surfers who had so fascinated Brian, and he spent a moment wondering if those fine, young specimens had any idea of how fortunate they were. Then he spent another moment hoping that they'd never have to find out.

"AION," he continued, his tone shifting automatically into lecture mode, "is a condition that would not ordinarily concern you. It's a degeneration of optic pathways that's commonly associated with elderly patients, especially those who suffer from chronic diseases such as diabetes or Huntington's. Unfortunately, in the last few years, a small number of cases have occurred in younger patients." He turned to study Brian's face, noting that the young man had paled slightly but was otherwise showing
no signs of distress. "And the number appears to be increasing. In these cases, the condition develops after instances of severe physical trauma, in patients who required massive fluid resuscitation, prolonged intubation, and high ventilatory intervention and showed evidence of global hypoperfusion and systemic inflammatory response. In truth, we don't yet know why this happens, except that it is believed to be a consequence of the heroic measures required to treat such trauma. It's also associated with severe hypothermia, hemorrhagic shock, and intracranial hypertension, all symptoms which you displayed when you were first brought in for treatment. It's also postulated that crowding of the optical nerve fibers within the optic canal, caused by resuscitation-induced edema - or a small sideral canal at the lamina cribrosa might produce venous outflow obstruction and increase pressure within the nerve.

"The symptoms you're displaying - particularly the rapid, incremental development of bilateral nonreactive mydriasis . . ." He paused and allowed himself a smug little smile when Brian frowned, not quite able to hide his confusion. "More commonly known as blown pupils. And the results of your fundoscopic exam which show indications of bilateral optic atrophy with spared vasculature and arterial narrowing of the left eye, along with white vascular cords in the right, lead me to believe that a diagnosis of AION is a viable possibility. Especially since none of your CT scans showed any evidence of cerebral infarction. Sometimes, reaching a diagnosis can be as much about reading the indicators that don't show up, as the ones that do. Although I must still caution you that there are other avenues that need pursuing before we can be positive. Nevertheless . . ."

Brian remained quiet for several moments, obviously waiting to see if the physician had anything more to add. Only when it became clear that nothing more would be offered did he clear his throat to speak. "Nevertheless, you're convinced, aren't you?"

Griffin did not answer quickly, choosing instead to regard his patient with a speculative gaze before deciding how to proceed. Then he nodded. "I am, but others might disagree. It's not a common diagnosis, and . . ."

"Turnage seems to believe that you're the best in your field," Brian interrupted, apparently not in the mood for disclaimers. "Are you?"

Again the pause, but this one was shorter. "Yes."

Brian's smile was brilliant - and immediate. "Good. I hate false modesty. So - all of this would be very interesting, if I spoke the ophthalmic equipment of ancient Sanskrit. But I don't, so I'm thinking that it's best for me to take your word for all the symptomatic analysis. Which means that, ultimately, I only have two questions. What's my prognosis . . . and how do you cure it?"

"You're fond of cutting to the chase, aren't you?" asked Griffin with a snarky little smile.

"Actually, I'm not," replied Brian, happy to display a bit of snark of his own. "But . . ."

"Brian," interjected Rick Turnage, "you do realize that this is all highly speculative. Dr. Griffin is internationally renowned, but his work is . . ."

"Mostly experimental?"

Turnage was not quite successful in an effort to suppress the flash of irritation in his eyes, or the sardonic smile that acknowledged that he'd expected Brian to understand what had gone mostly unspoken.

"Yes, I get that." Brian deliberately removed the sunglasses that were now serving a dual purpose - to protect him from the painful glare of unfiltered light and to conceal the thinness of the hazel ring
around his pupils. "But you still haven't answered my questions."

The physicians once more exchanged guarded glances.

Brian took a deep, impatient breath. "Please don't treat me like I'm mentally challenged. I assure you that I'm not, and that there's nothing you can say that's going to send me into bouts of hysterics. Just . . . say it."

Griffin's smile was genuine this time - and approving. "If we seem hesitant, it's not because we doubt your ability to comprehend, Brian. But unfortunately, medicine is still not an exact science, much as we might wish otherwise. Given that the number of variables in any living body is almost infinite, it's likely that it never will be. And the bottom line, in this case, is that we simply don't know. If we go strictly by the numbers - keeping in mind that the numbers in cases like this are exceptionally small - the likelihood is that your vision will continue to fail, until you are left completely blind. But we can't know that for sure, and, even if it does pan out that way, there is no way of knowing how long the process will take. It could happen in a week, a month, a year . . . Based on previous cases, my best guess would be something between six weeks and three months. But again, keep in mind that the sampling available to us is just too small to make truly educated guesses.

"On the other hand, there is a possibility - albeit a slim one - that the deterioration will simply stop, that your eyes will adapt to the changes, the pupils will revert to normal size, and you'll be left with nothing more serious than the need for corrective lenses."

Brian looked once more out toward the beach, where the surfers and the sunbathers had decided to mingle and were setting up a volleyball net and Lord Byron in a Speed-O was looking ever more Greek-god-like as he leaned against a boulder and chatted up a shapely bikini-clad redhead. "But you don't think so," he said finally, savoring the view and trying not to think about a world in which he would never again be able to do so.

Griffin sighed. "No. I don't think so."

Brian took another moment to appreciate the way the sun bathed the young surfer's skin in shades of bronze and touched his hair with sparks of auburn. Then he turned back to study the faces of the two physicians. "And the second question?"

Neither replied.

Brian huffed a small sigh. "Let me guess. There's no cure."

Griffin hesitated. "There's no established cure."

Rick Turnage was looking straight at Brian at that moment, and turned away abruptly to conceal a smile, completely amazed at how expressive those hazel eyes could be in spite of the blown pupils. Brian was terrified but still managing - somehow - to hide how frightened he was, using a layer of amusement to camouflage the fear, and almost succeeding.

"And that's why you're here," said the patient with a tiny, scapegrace smile. He then turned and looked at Turnage, his expression almost unreadable. "I was pretty sure you didn't have to go all the way to Denver to find an eye specialist."

Turnage blinked. "How the hell did you know . . ."

Brian leaned forward and tapped the metal emblems on the key ring on Griffin's bag. "The Broncos or the Nuggets - either one by itself I could put down to coincidence. But both? Gotta be a local boy."
Griffin nodded. "Yes. My practice - and my facility - is just outside Denver, although I did just happen to be in the area. Well, almost."

Brian grinned. "D.C? Baltimore?"

The ophthalmologist's smile was only slightly grudging. "Miami, actually. A little vacation for me and my wife."

"Sorry to interrupt your plans," Brian retorted.

It was uncertain who was more surprised when Griffin laughed - including Griffin. "No, you're not," he said easily. "You've spent your whole life interrupting other people's plans, and I doubt that's going to change any time soon. Besides, this was just too . . ."

It was Brian's turn to laugh when the physician fell silent. "Irresistible?"

Griffin nodded. "Which you've certainly been called before, but not, I suspect, in this context."

"Right," Brian admitted, and the laughter was abruptly gone from his eyes. "So, tell me what - exactly - you do in your facility?"

"It's a surgical clinic."

"And?"

The ophthalmologist's smile was thin, almost weary. "And a research center, a place where we look for answers - for cures - for patients like you."

Brian nodded. "So - basically - it's housing for your lab rats."

"Well, that's a little harsh, don't you think?" snapped Turnage. "Dr. Griffin is trying to . . ."

"Complete his research," Brian interrupted, his voice strangely neutral, almost without inflection.

Turnage opened his mouth to continue his protest, but it was Griffin who stepped in and spoke up. "Yes," he said firmly. "That's exactly what I'm trying to do. Should I apologize for that?"

"No." Brian did not sound angry or disturbed, and both physicians wondered why. "You shouldn't. But - so far - you haven't said anything to persuade me that I should be a willing participant in your little maze."

Griffin moved slowly forward until he was standing directly in front of Brian, looking down into those startlingly dark eyes. Then he leaned forward and spoke in a near whisper. "Because you don't want to lose the ability to look out that window and appreciate the view, or to look into your own mirror and do the same. Because beauty isn't just a word to you, Brian. It's been a companion for you throughout your life, and it means something to you. And finally, because there is a face - I don't know who's, but you do - that you don't want to have to see only in your memories, and a man you don't want to have to walk away from, condemning yourself to living only in his."

"You will go blind, Brian. Although there's no definitive proof of that yet, I know it just the same, and I am the only one who will care enough to find a way to fix you. Not because I care about you personally, because I don't. I don't even know you, although I'll admit to liking what I see. But liking you has nothing to do with it; I'd do the same if you were the worst kind of psychopathic fascist bigot - because it's my job, and my purpose in life. Because it's what I was meant to do."
"Now, I won't hold your hand, or indulge in the kind of flattery that you're probably used to. I don't give a shit if half the free world thinks that you're sex on a stick and the hottest stud ever to come out of Pittsburgh (although I confess to wondering if that's an oxymoron) or how many pretty young things you've deflowered. The only part of you that interests me is your eyes, and that interest has nothing to do with the fact that they're drop-dead gorgeous. I just want to make them function the way they're supposed to. That's all. Got it?"

Brian had listened to the doctor's little speech without any reaction other than a tilt of his head, and, when it was finished, he folded his lips together and deliberately slid his sunglasses back into place over his eyes. Then he smiled. "Got it, Doc. It's always a pleasure dealing with a true professional."

Then he got up and walked out of the house, making his exit through the French doors that led to the terrace - and the beach - leaving the two physicians to stare after him in complete silence.

He was grinning as he started down the path toward the shoreline, knowing that he had done exactly what he'd intended to do. It was always better to leave an audience a little bit uncertain, a little unsure of what had just happened.

Meanwhile, he thought he might as well take a walk - and enjoy the view.

She walked slowly across the well-groomed lawn, noticing how the multiple trunks of the massive birch tree at the front corner of the property intercepted the sun's late afternoon rays to paint lovely patterns of light and shadow across the double arched windows framing the great room of the townhouse. It was a simple detail, and it certainly wouldn't have been sufficient to convince her to buy the property, but it didn't hurt either. Besides, she'd already reached that decision, with only one issue left to resolve.

Brightwood Falls #43. She even liked the sound of the address, although she recognized that it was just a tiny bit pretentious, since there were no falls anywhere around, although there was a river barely visible through the stand of trees just past the turnaround at the end of the road, and the forest surrounding the subdivision was lovely enough, but not really bright, although - given the heavy presence of maple, ash, and sycamore she could see in the thick woods across the way - they probably would be come September. Still, she liked the name, and realized that it was mildly amazing that she could be pleased by something so simple, but not nearly as amazing as the other elementary truth she had only just recognized.

She reckoned it was probably a good thing that epiphanies didn't happen often, and seemed to choose times and places appropriate to the mood of the moment.

For more than ten years of her life - encompassing her entire relationship with Melanie Marcus - she had chosen to believe that she was living in a perpetual state of compromise, and that it was what she really wanted - what made her happy. The truth was much simpler - and more alarming. The truth was that she had been 'settling' through all that time, in allowing Melanie to set the tone and establish the ambiance of the places they'd called home and the style in which they'd lived. Not that she hadn't spoken up to express her opinions or her tastes; she had. But somehow - with only minor exceptions - she'd usually been overruled, and it had been done in such a way that she'd been manipulated into believing that it would have been selfish of her to insist, that concession was the only mature way to proceed.

She looked up at the façade of the townhouse which would become hers if she signed on the dotted line, examining all the details and noting all the things that she found appealing, and realizing that the very things she loved most were the things that Melanie would dislike most intensely. Thus, if the
two of them were still a couple and house-hunting together, this specific dwelling would have been immediately stricken from the list of possibilities with one firm penstroke. It would have been deemed unsuitable for consideration since it would not have fallen within Melanie's definition of acceptable compromise, and Melanie's definition would, in the end, be the only one that mattered.

Lindsey took a deep breath and moved out across the stretch of spring grass to take a seat in a lovely old porch swing hanging from the lowest limb of a towering elm tree. Then she looked around, taking stock and noting the specific features she found so pleasant. Stretched across the front of the house and spreading out around the section which protruded from the basic structure, forming a shallow L, was a curved flower bed spilling over with masses of phlox and buttercups and California poppies, mounds of pastel impatiens and ranunculus, and brilliant spikes of salvia, all nestled against the skirts of bright rose and pink and ivory-colored azaleas. In the corner, at the spot where the projection joined the main structure, an angular trellis stood against the brick, providing support for a lush climbing rose which would bloom as summer approached, draping the wall in drifts of deep scarlet.

Lindsey smiled, realizing that Brian would take one look at it and burst into his trademark derisive laughter. It was not sleek or modern or haute couture or avant garde; it was lovely; it was romantic; it was pretty. And he would know immediately, as Melanie never would or could, that it was the perfect setting for Lindsey and her son - a place where they would feel perfectly at home and content.

She continued her inspection, her eyes drifting from detail to detail: tinted, mullioned windows, a flagstone path leading to a paneled front door crowned with a stained glass fanlight, a brace of carriage-style sconces bracketing the entry, and a herringbone pattern of old Chicago brick framing a row of narrow windows topped with beveled glass transoms, all contrasting perfectly against shutters painted a deep forest green. On the second floor, dormer windows supported wrought iron planter boxes, fronting roomy bedrooms beneath a steep-pitched slate roof with a small balcony carved into one end, overlooking a stand of lilacs, currently wrapped in veils of pale lavender, in the side yard, set against a wooden gate providing passage through a high brick fence that surrounded a shallow, cozy back yard featuring a deck, a playground, and a small lap pool. All in all, a wonderful home, with design features reminiscent of fond memories to provide an ideal setting for a happy, secure family life, while incorporating all the modern conveniences of the latest technology. Lovely and perfect - for her and her beautiful little boy who would be known, from this time forward, as Gus Peterson Kinney, whether Brian liked it or not. It was time to do the right thing if she truly expected her life to be as perfect as it possibly could.

Perfect.

So perfect that she looked up toward the top of the old tree and made herself a promise. Never again would she allow someone else to dictate how she lived, because that was not love. That was domination, no matter how carefully one phrased it or buried it under the guise of 'compromise'.

Of course, it was also 'perfect' in another way - as in perfectly and completely beyond her means. But that, she acknowledged, was not an issue unless she chose to make it one. There was no way to pretend that her income could even come close to covering the cost of this house - not today, and probably not ever, no matter how successful she might be in her profession. Therefore, she had a choice to make. She could refuse Brian's help, and accept the fact that she would never be able to provide such a home for Gus or for herself. Or she could swallow her pride and do the practical thing. She could let Brian pay for it, although she would insist that it be on her own terms.

What she would not do, ever again, was allow him to foot the bill for everything while everyone - herself included - pretended that his contribution was just an incidental circumstance, a trifle in the
grand scheme of things. She would no longer allow that. Melanie had spent all the years of Gus's life enjoying the lifestyle that Brian's money provided and never once acknowledging how much they depended on it. Thus, she knew what she had to do.

She would accept Brian's assistance, for two reasons - for the sake of her son, for whom she would gladly give up anything, including her pride, and because she herself had no desire to go back to living in relative squalor. She had been born into a rich family and enjoyed a privileged life throughout her childhood. But when she and Melanie had chosen to move in together and become partners, she had learned, for the first time, what it meant to be without resources, when her parents had refused to support her 'deviant' lifestyle. For a while, she had embraced the bohemian elements of their new existence, but it had not taken long for her to realize that she had given up a lot in order to be true to her sexual identity and her mate, and that the journey from filet mignon and lobster bisque to Hamburger Helper and tuna surprise was not exactly the stuff of dreams. She'd never blamed Melanie for it, nor been tempted to go back into the closet to regain access to her parents' approval - and assets. But she'd also never really learned to settle for living in reduced circumstances. Champagne taste meeting beer budget was not exactly a blueprint for contentment.

But then, fate had taken a hand, when she'd made a decision - for once overriding Melanie's reluctance - to ask Brian to be the sperm donor for their child. Nobody had anticipated the bond that would form between the two biological parents or how firm that connection would turn out to be, wrapped up as it was in the deep love both felt for the child, but it was certain that, from that moment on, everything had changed. She had always known how Brian felt about Melanie; he'd never made a secret of his opinion. And vice versa; Melanie was equally outspoken - so it was no surprise that he would not have lifted a finger to remedy their financial difficulties in the earlier years of their partnership, until a baby became a reality. Once the pregnancy was confirmed, however, Brian had been the one who stepped up and opened doors for them.

Including the doors to the first home she and Melanie had bought together - the one for which her parents had refused to put up a single dime; the one for which Lindsey's share of the down payment had amounted to $10,000, which she had handed over to Melanie without offering any information about where it had come from, and which Melanie had accepted with no request for an explanation of its source, even though she had been present when Lindsey's mother had announced that she and her husband did not feel that contributing to such an 'unnatural environment' would be the right thing or the 'Christian thing' to do.

That was when Melanie had developed the skill of practicing obliviousness, which she would perfect over the years, ultimately raising it to an art form.

In the end, Melanie had selected the house and almost everything in it, even though Lindsey had shoudered half the cost. At the time of the purchase, Lindsey had not actually disliked the house, although it had certainly not been her first choice of all those they'd been shown. Still, she had voiced no major objections to Melanie's decision, and finally accepted the fact that the only area in which Melanie seemed willing to defer to Lindsey's expertise had been in the selection of artistic accents, since Lindsey was the 'professional' in that field. But even there, the attorney had always managed to voice just enough opposition and show just enough disdain for Lindsey's original choices that Lindsey had finally sighed and conceded that the clash of tastes wasn't worth a major confrontation, so they had always wound up going with option two or three - consistently abandoning Lindsey's original preferences.

The pattern of their lives had developed at a slow, steady pace, until it pervaded everything, so that, at the end of every dispute, every disagreement, Lindsey had simply accepted what she had begun to see as inevitable, and - with not a word being spoken - she had slowly learned to hate that house, because she had come to feel that it was not her home - that it was, instead, the dwelling of Melanie
Marcus and some blond stranger who might look like her and sound like her and even act like her to some degree, but actually knew nothing of her heart or her character or her truest desires.

It had hurt, of course, when they had chosen to escape Pittsburgh and its environs and move to Toronto, feeling compelled to walk away from the place where they had started their marriage and the home to which Gus had come when he was born, but it had never been the actual house that she mourned; instead it had been the idea of the home it should have been.

So she had come now - through a circuitous route - back to a familiar position, much like the place she'd started from. If she wanted to live in this house, it would only be possible if Brian picked up the tab, although she would insist on repaying his investment. Of course, she would probably never be able to pay it off, and he would never accept a penny of interest on it, and any default on her part would result in exactly no change in her life, but still, a monthly stipend would allow her to hang on to some small fragment of her dignity and feel as if she was contributing something meaningful to the support of her child.

Providing, of course, that her little boy approved, and that was the only question remaining to be answered. It was also the reason she was here now, awaiting the arrival of her son, along with several others.

She couldn't wait to see Gus, and to show him the house and gauge his reaction to it.

The 'others' however, were less eagerly anticipated.

The house was still partially furnished, with movers scheduled in within a few days to pack up the last of the furniture, but the realtor had handed over the keys without a single qualm - another example, no doubt, of the power of money. Kinney money, to be exact - "door opening" money, which easily provided access to the more public areas of the house in order to accommodate a small meeting - a meeting Lindsey would prefer to skip. Still, she knew there was no avoiding it. Thus, she sighed and stood up, smoothing her dark skirt with her hands and adjusting the smoke and burgundy - colored scarf around her neck, as she looped the strap of her Gucci handbag over her shoulder just as the deliberately anonymous SUV pulled into the driveway, closely followed by a dark sedan with tinted windows. Just seconds later, another vehicle - almost identical - arrived, and Lindsey wondered why they didn't just plaster the cars with signs proclaiming them as FBI property, for she was sure that wouldn't be any more obvious.

She moved forward eagerly, knowing that Gus would be first out. That was a certainty, and it suited her perfectly. She had talked to him every day, of course, and both her father and Brian had sent photos via email and iPhone, but it was not enough. She wondered sometimes if all mothers felt as she did - physically and emotionally dependent on the sweet sight of their children's faces. As a drug of choice, it was preferable to all others, not to mention more profoundly addictive.

Then her thoughts were drawn - inevitably - to J.R. and she had to pause for a moment, leaning forward to brace her hands against her knees and draw a deep, calming breath. She knew that, due to her actions during this debacle, she had surrendered all hope of ever being allowed to be a part of that darling little girl's life, a condition that would not be changed by how much she might love and miss the child or even by how much J.R. might love and miss her. The genuine caring and devotion that existed between the two of them would make no difference - would be as insubstantial as a single grain of sand caught up in the scirocco-style maelstrom of Melanie's thirst for vengeance.

The little girl would pay for what Melanie would choose to see as Lindsey's betrayal, and there was absolutely nothing that Lindsey could do about it. Or anyone else either.

Except . . . she sighed, knowing it wasn't fair. Knowing that Brian couldn't possibly solve all the
world's problems and that it was wrong to expect him to.

But still . . .

She put on a big smile as the car door opened. There would be time enough later for dark thoughts and regrets and dealing with lost hopes. But this, right now, was her welcome home to her darling son, and nothing was going to spoil that.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

She sat at the dining table and stared out through the French doors to where Gus and his new best friend - AKA Beau Soleil, courtesy of Brian Kinney - were playing tag by racing around and through haphazard arrangements of vari-colored ceramic and clay pots, overflowing with masses of lavender-tinted hydrangeas, bright yellow daffodils, blue and white irises, bright hyacinths and tulips, and the cream and crimson trumpets of vibrant lilies. It was perfectly obvious that she should never have worried about her son's reaction to the house; he - and his companion - had fallen immediately and irrevocably in love with the place. The lap pool, which he was currently avoiding like a concrete version of the plague, would be a concern, of course - might even require a protective enclosure, since Brian would exhibit his customary compulsive tendencies when it came to protecting the people and things that he loved. But that was just a detail. The important thing was the fact that both mother and child loved the house.

Lindsey turned away from the view and picked up the Starbucks cup that Alexandra Corey had presented to her as they'd all gathered around the dining table - and how, she wondered, had the woman known about her ridiculous weakness for Caffé Mocha, a concoction that was more confection than coffee? She thought she should have been annoyed, especially since both her father and Agent Corey were sipping at their cups of plain, strong coffee with obvious relish. It shouldn't have made her feel like a child at the grown-up's table; she knew that. But it did, nevertheless. She sighed and turned slightly, just enough to be able to catch glimpses of Gus as he ran and played, and Lance Mathis as he leaned against the corner of the fence near the gate, standing guard. It should have bothered her - that she was comforted by the presence of a security guard to watch over her son, not to mention the two FBI agents who were patrolling the property. She should have resented the necessity, but she didn't. She was much too busy being grateful for the peace of mind their presence provided.

Ron Peterson was also enjoying the view, not to mention the sound track, as Gus burst into bouts of periodic laughter while the dog yipped or growled or howled, according to its own unique take on the actions at any given moment. But he was also taking advantage of the opportunity to watch his daughter's face as she delighted in the simple pleasure of having her son returned to her. His beautiful daughter. How long had it been, he wondered suddenly, since he had thought of her in those terms, and what the hell had been wrong with him that he had let himself forget how beautiful, how special she was?

He knew the answer, of course, although he didn't want to dwell on it. For years, he had been unable to think about Lindsey without also thinking about her partner in life - a woman he had never liked and never accepted. He felt guilty about that; he really did, since Gus still referred to Melanie as 'Mama'. Gus had accepted her, and she had apparently loved Gus as well, although he had some reservations about that. Her behavior since the birth of her own biological daughter had raised some doubts - doubts which he was pretty sure that Lindsey shared. Doubts which must be very painful for her.

He sipped at his coffee before offering a gentle smile to his daughter, as a thought occurred to him. Had it really been Lindsey's sexual orientation which he had rejected so profoundly, or had it simply
been Melanie Marcus? He wasn't even sure he wanted to know the answer to that question. But then he frowned as his thoughts drifted to his wife, and her beliefs and attitudes. There had never been any uncertainty in Nancy's mind about how she should feel about Lindsey or her 'unnatural perversion' or her unfortunate choice of partners. In truth, there had rarely been any uncertainty, about anything, in Nancy's mind. She considered herself an arbiter of good taste and Christian values, which she had demonstrated during the 80's, when the AIDS epidemic had made its disastrous debut on the stage of world events. According to Nancy, the disease was a masterstroke, delivered by the Hand of God, in that it was 'killing all the right people'.

He tried not to remember the look on his daughter's face when she'd overheard that comment from her mother. At that time, only nine years old, she had not announced her own sexual orientation - possibly had not even realized it yet for herself; she had nevertheless been appalled and horrified by her mother's cavalier dismissal of the suffering and dying of the victims of the horrible disease. Later in life, when she had grown enough to be confidant of her own beliefs and her right to them, she would speak up and tell her mother that she had never been able to forget or forgive that statement, correctly labeling it as the kind of vile, ignorant homophobia that could only be practiced by bigots and fascists without a single scrap of the compassion that was supposed to be a trait of the followers of Christ.

And what had he done, during all that ugly turmoil? He sighed again, and took another sip of coffee. He had done what he always did. Nothing. Going toe to toe with Nancy had just never seemed to be worth the effort. At the time, he had not recognized his reluctance to engage as a failure to defend his daughter. But he did now. The only problem was that it was probably too late.

But he could at least offer support in this hour of need. He could admit that he understood how he had failed her, and confess that he had never really liked Melanie. But he had always loved his daughter, and perhaps he could explain that his objections to Melanie had been caused - at least in part - by his dislike of the way she'd treated Lindsey. He needed to make sure that his daughter understood all of that, no matter how he'd felt about her chosen spouse, even though it probably didn't matter any longer, because Melanie appeared to be losing her status as a factor in Lindsey's life.

He turned then to look at the young woman sitting across from him, and just happened to catch a glimpse of a faint spark in her eyes as she glanced toward Lindsey. Then he looked away quickly, not wanting to be caught gawking, and found himself suppressing a tiny huff of laughter. Never let it be said that his daughter did anything the easy way.

"Agent Corey," said Lindsey suddenly, dabbing a napkin at a spot of whipped cream on her bottom lip, "I assume there's something you need to tell us - something so important that you felt the need to impose on my reunion with my son . . ." She paused for a moment to favor her father with an apologetic smile. "Something that involves my father, I suspect, so please . . ."

"You're correct," replied Corey firmly, "and I actually regret the imposition." Then it was her turn to offer the slightly formulaic apologetic smile. "Despite our reputation to the contrary, all FBI agents are not insensitive louts. But there are things in motion, things that are part of the investigation into Mr. Kinney's attack, that need addressing. And frankly, we could use some help, especially in one particular area."

Lindsey was quiet for a moment, before shifting slightly to face the fourth participant in this impromptu little gathering. "Sharon, I'm still not convinced that this is such a good . . ."

"Don't you think," Briggs interrupted, deliberately looking down at her own hands and refusing to meet Lindsey's gaze, "that your father should be allowed to make that decision for himself?"
"Not when he doesn't know the risks."

Briggs looked over at Ron Peterson, and was surprised to find a kindred glint of amusement in his eyes. The man knew his daughter, and knew that she was not about to back down from any fight. Apparently, too many years of being manipulated had left her with a new commitment to speaking her mind and rejecting any attempt at coercion.

"But that's why we're here," said Corey. "To explain the risks and what's at stake."

"But you can't . . ."

"Lindsey," said the man himself, "I'm not a child, and you're not my mother. I want to hear what Agent Corey has to say."

Lindsey rolled her eyes. "Of course, you do. You know, just once in my life, I'd like to have a man actually pay attention to what I have to say. Just once."

"Who else doesn't listen?" he laughed.

Her eyes narrowed. "As if you didn't know. He probably put you up to this."

"No. He didn't."

"Uh, huh."

"Lindsey?"

"What?" Her tone was not quite white hot with fury, but it was close.

"I promise you. Brian didn't say a word to me about anything Agent Corey might want to discuss."

Lindsey elected to swallow any further comments, although the look in her eyes still suggested that she was not fully convinced.

"Agent Corey," said Ron Peterson, fully aware that his daughter was still skeptical, but realizing that she'd either deal with it - or not. It was her choice. "Tell me what's going on."

Corey nodded. "Very well. What's 'going on', Mr. Peterson, is that we've unearthed some pretty compelling evidence to indicate that the attack on Mr. Kinney was not the random act of violence we originally believed it to be. It was, in fact, meticulously planned and carefully executed - the product of a concentrated effort by a very motivated group of individuals."

Peterson sipped at his coffee, but his eyes never wandered away from his study of Corey's face, until he deliberately shifted to examine Sharon Briggs' expression. Then he smiled. "Now why do I get the distinct impression that you're about to tell me something I'm not going to enjoy hearing?"

It was Corey's turn to smile, although there was no real humor in her eyes. "Because it's never easy to learn ugly truths about people you know - even if they're people you don't particularly like. It's hard to find out that individuals you have dealt with - personally or in business - are not what you expect them to be?"

"Ms. Corey," he said suddenly, "can we just get on with this? I assure you that I'm not this wide-eyed Pollyanna that you seem to think I am. I don't look at the world through rose-colored glasses, and I consider myself a fair judge of character, including knowing how capable most of humanity is of ugly bigotry and cruelty."

"But that's why we're here," said Corey. "To explain the risks and what's at stake."

"But you can't . . ."

"Lindsey," said the man himself, "I'm not a child, and you're not my mother. I want to hear what Agent Corey has to say."

Lindsey rolled her eyes. "Of course, you do. You know, just once in my life, I'd like to have a man actually pay attention to what I have to say. Just once."

"Who else doesn't listen?" he laughed.

Her eyes narrowed. "As if you didn't know. He probably put you up to this."

"No. He didn't."

"Uh, huh."

"Lindsey?"

"What?" Her tone was not quite white hot with fury, but it was close.

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"Maybe you do," she responded. She reached down then and removed a thick file from her briefcase before turning to regard Lindsey with a steady determination. "Ms. Peterson," she said softly, "there is no need for you to see what's in this file."

Lindsey bristled. "But . . ."

"I promise," Corey interrupted, "that it's nothing you haven't seen before. In fact, since you saw it, in the flesh, so to speak, this is just a pale reflection of the reality. But you don't want to see it again. We both know that."

"Then why should my father have to . . ."

"Because it's the only way to demonstrate the true character of the people who did this, and he needs to understand that. You already do."

The look on Lindsey's face spoke volumes, telling everyone in the room that she really did not want to give in - that she didn't want her father to have to endure what she knew awaited him within that file. But, in the end, she just nodded, exchanged a single, meaningful look with Sharon Briggs, and left the room.

No one spoke until she appeared in the garden and sank to her knees to enter into an animated conversation with her son.

Ron Peterson spoke first. "Enough beating around the bush, Agent Corey. Show me what you came here to show me."

Corey nodded, but did not immediately hand him the file. Instead, she took a moment to try to explain her reasoning in bringing all of this to his attention.

"Mr. Peterson, you were, at one time, an active member of a group known simply as The Club, which purports to be nothing more than an exclusive social group with conservative political values - a men's club formed by individuals with old money, coming from old blue-bloodlines and anxious to preserve historical social traditions. Yes?"

Peterson simply nodded, choosing to bide his time before offering any other response.

"Would it surprise you to learn that we've uncovered compelling evidence to indicate that The Club and some of its members were involved in the attack on Brian Kinney?"

Lindsey's father did not answer for a moment, choosing instead to look outside and watch his grandson rolling around in the grass with his exuberant pup.

"It would," he replied finally, "but not because I wouldn't expect blatant homophobia from them. I would. But I'm more than surprised at the idea that they would lower themselves to get their hands dirty in dealing with someone like Brian. To a man, every one of them would consider him beneath their notice, or contempt."

Sharon Briggs' smile was cold. "And you'd be exactly right - under ordinary circumstances. But Brian made some very elemental mistakes. He stuck his nose in where it didn't belong, according to their perceptions. He interfered in the affairs of his betters. And then there was the truly cardinal sin - the one for which there could be no absolution."

"Which was what, exactly?"

Alexandra Corey leaned forward and laid the file she'd pulled from her briefcase onto the table. "In a
word, he cost them money. A lot of money. And this . . . this file will show you how they wrought
revenge for his actions."

Peterson sat for a moment, simply looking down at the blank, manila surface of the folder, knowing
with absolute certainty that he really didn't want to open that file. "But I still don't see what this has to
do with me. Even if you're right, I've had no contact with The Club for years, so I'd have no real
access to . . ."

"Oh, come on, Mr. Peterson," said Briggs, a dark ironic gleam flaring in her topaz eyes. "You're a
member of the elite, and that's a door that never really closes. Right? Especially right now, given the
current political climate. But aside from that, in a few days, their annual Founders' Day Festival will
begin, and, although it's a given that nobody can just walk in off the street and apply for membership
in this particular version of the Good Old Boys Club, it's also true that being a member is like joining
the priesthood; once you're in, you're in forever, unless you do something truly unforgivable to get
yourself excommunicated - like vote Democrat or support banking reforms or join the ACLU.
Anyway, during this so-called celebration, they're always eager to reclaim members who may have
drifted away over the years, because - well, there are all those lovely fees and membership dues,
aren't there? It's one part party and two parts fundraiser. And we just happen to know - because we
made it our business to find out - that invitations have already gone out to previous members, inviting
them to re-enlist, so to speak. And your name just happened to be on that list. So here's the real point
of this conversation. We have people in place all around The Club; we've managed to infiltrate or co-
opt our way in to virtually every level, except one. We have servants, and drivers, and waiters and
clerks and menials of all varieties." She paused and flashed Alex Corey a bright grin. "We even have
a chef. But that still leaves one level that we haven't managed to breach. The membership, with its
inviolable class loyalty, remains closed to us, and unless we can find a way in, any justice we
manage to achieve in this investigation is likely going to be limited to the minions at the bottom of the
power grid, the thugs who take orders and do as they're told, while the Powers That Be who planned
it and paid for it and enjoyed the benefits are going to go scot-free and never be held accountable. Is
that what you want to see happen here?"

He drew a deep breath. "So that's what you want from me. You want me to step back into the place I
once occupied there, in order to spy on these people and betray any loyalty I might owe to them. Is
that right?"

It was Briggs who leaned forward and flipped open the cover of the file folder, exposing the
photograph that lay on top of the stack of documents there - a lurid, neon-bright photograph that
could only be a construct, a . . . what did the young people call it these days . . . photo-shopped
example of the worst kind of sensationalist image. There was so much blood, so much visceral
damage - mutilated body and torn skin and exposed bone and mangled sinews - so much horror-film
excess that it couldn't be real. It couldn't. That couldn't really be Brian Kinney, bludgeoned and
butchered and left for dead. Brian Kinney, whose beauty even the most ardent homophobe could not
deny; Brian Kinney, the father of his grandson. It just couldn't be. In truth, it couldn't even be a
human being. It had to be a construct, a compilation of torn guts and mutilated body parts, a costume
suitable for the worst kind of macabre Halloween theatrics. Didn't it?

"Before you start going on about privilege and class loyalty," said Alexandra Corey in a voice that
was almost a snarl, "you look at that, Mr. Peterson, and see what they were capable of doing. You
look at what their money and their upper class superiority and their vicious bigotry created. And then
you can talk to us about honor and whatever twisted kind of loyalty you think you might owe."

Peterson wanted to come up with a suitable answer to refute her claims and defuse her anger, but he
couldn't. He was much too busy stumbling away from the table and reeling into the kitchen, looking
for a suitable place in which he could throw up.
Corey and Briggs simply remained in their places, waiting for him to regain his composure and control of his esophagus. It took a while.

When he returned to the room and resumed his seat, his face was pale and drawn, and his eyes were touched with new shadows. He folded his hands in front of him, to still the tremor in his fingers, and spent a moment trying to regulate his breathing before turning to face Agent Corey.

"Just tell me what you want me to do."

Sharon Briggs thought that it was to his credit that he didn't ask if the photo was real.

Agent Corey's smile was sympathetic. "I realize that some might consider this . . ." She gestured toward the photograph which was - thankfully - once more hidden within the file, "a dirty trick, Mr. Peterson. So I want you to be very sure, because there could be some measure of risk. We wouldn't want . . ."

"Are you protecting my daughter and my grandson?" he demanded.

She nodded. "Brian Kinney is satisfied with our efforts. That should be good enough for you. But still . . ."

"Whatever I might have once felt toward Brian," he said softly, "that doesn't change the fact that he's the father of my grandson, and nobody - absolutely nobody - should have to suffer what he lived through. So you just tell me where to look and what to do, Agent Corey, and consider it done."

"Very good," said Sharon Briggs, and her eyes, for the first time since the beginning of this meeting, regarded Peterson with a measure of warmth and approval. "We'll work up a package for you, so you know exactly what to expect and what to do to find the information we need."

Peterson nodded and rose. "Excellent. I assume you'll be in touch."

"Of course."

From outside, there was a burst of laughter shared between mother and son, and Peterson moved toward the door. Then he paused and turned back to face his co-conspirators. "One thing," he said slowly, reluctantly. "It would be better if our little arrangement could remain strictly between us. Understand?"

"We're not likely to advertise it," agreed Corey. "It's never a good idea to betray the existence of one's covert assets."

He nodded, but still looked worried, and it was Sharon Briggs who recognized the source of his concern. "You're thinking about Mrs. Peterson, aren't you?"

She was quick to spot the warm flare of gratitude in his eyes. "Don't worry about it," she assured him. "We can be very discreet."

Peterson spent a moment thinking about how his wife would react should she find out about his co-operation with the authorities and hoped that the undercover officer was as good as her word.

"Now, Ladies," he said with a smile, "if you'll excuse me, I'm going to take my daughter and my grandson out to dinner at Red Lobster where he's just discovered that the popcorn shrimp with mac and cheese is his favorite thing in the entire world, until the next thing that catches his fancy, and where I think Lindsey and I can do some serious damage to a couple of Lobsteritas."
Then he was gone, and Alexandra turned to exchange smiles with Sharon Briggs. "Think he'll come through?"

Briggs took a deep breath. "Yeah, I think he will. He was actually pretty brave, you know. Since he's never seen anything like that in his life, just to be able to take it all in and offer his support is pretty damned impressive."

Corey nodded, and decided that - all in all - she was favorably impressed with a lot of people in a place she had once referred to as "Provincial Little Pittsburgh".

There was a lesson to be learned in that conclusion, but she couldn't spare the time to think about it. It had been a long day, and Red Lobster shrimp Bruschetta and a mango mai-tai didn't sound half bad.

"How is he?" Justin made no attempt to pretend patience or camaraderie. He was tired; he was hungry; he was horny (as always when Brian was unavailable). He'd been running on fumes and adrenalin all day, and he still had a lot of arrangements to complete before he could kick back and rest. He was due to meet Cynthia at the hospital in less than two hours to pick up Cedric Lasseigne from his appointment at the clinic; the gallery had left him three urgent messages just within the last two hours, which he had yet to return; one of the artists at Kinnetik had told him about a fabulous house out in Remington Forest that was not yet listed with a realtor, but would be put up for sale any day now and needed checking out before anyone else could snap it up; and his mother was insisting that he come to dinner - with Tucker.

But all of that paled in comparison to an uncontrollable urge to get one over on the infamous, endlessly annoying Chris McClaren, who sounded . . . odd.

"He's doing okay, Justin, for someone who was under the knife this morning. According to Turnage, the procedure went well, and he'll probably sleep for the next couple of hours. Then he should be ready for a meal and a brief afternoon session with Jackson. Now, if you're OK with all that, then I promise that, sometime today - before the sun goes down - I'll try to remember to have him call you."

"Does he have his cell phone?" Justin asked, his tone saying every snarky thing that his actual words did not.

McClaren didn't bother to try to suppress a sigh of impatience. "Since you just dialed that number, and I just answered it, what do you think?"

"I think he's going to have your ass for breakfast when he finds out you took his cell."

"Probably would, if I had been the one to take it. But it wasn't me. It was one of the surgical nurses, and I don't think her ass - although it might very well be on offer - will hold any interest for him, unless he's suddenly decided to turn over a new leaf and play for the opposition."

When Justin didn't immediately produce a snappy comeback, the FBI agent sensed something - felt something just a wee bit off, which matched up perfectly with his own growing sense of unease. "Justin," he said, just slightly tentative, "is something . . ."

"No. Not really." He paused briefly, and wondered when he and his arch enemy had begun to understand each other so well that they could complete each other's questions. "It's just . . . he didn't call me this morning. Or yesterday either. I mean, it's not that I didn't talk to him; he answered when I called, but . . . but he sounded different. He's not . . . I mean, is there anything going on? Anything
new, I mean, that I don't already. . ."

McClaren grimaced, suddenly grateful that this conversation was not taking place face-to-face. He did not actually know much about the new development in Brian's health, and understood that it was not his place to report it, but that didn't keep him from feeling guilty in keeping the truth from the young man who would probably be the individual most affected by it. "You know Brian," he said finally, trying to sound both supportive and dismissive at the same time. "Whatever's going on in his head, he'll share, when he's ready. So just . . ."

"Yeah. OK. Just tell him . . . tell him to call me. I've got a few questions I need to go over with him, and there are some things I need to clarify before . . . Well, just before."

"Right. I'll tell him."

The FBI agent was quiet for a few moments after ending the call and setting the phone down on the coffee table in the front room. He stood quietly for a while, looking out toward the beach, noting that the college kids were still in residence next door, all busy assembling bags and ice chests and gear for some kind of outing. Since a sleek-looking cutter was beating its way toward the shore through choppy surf, banking sharply against a wind blowing out of the North, it was a pretty good bet that they were planning to spend the afternoon exploring nearby islands. For a moment, he envied them, as he speculated on what they might find out there beyond the breakers and what kind of mischief they might indulge.

A brief but very enticing image of young Dr. Kevin Halloran flared in his mind, and while he didn't fool himself into thinking that his Gay-dar was quite on a par with Brian Kinney's, he had definitely not imagined the interest in that young man's eyes when he'd watched Brian being - well - Brian. The resident might like girls just fine - thank you very much - but he also had a friendly eye for a perfect, masculine physique. And McClaren conceded, with a rueful smile, that he could definitely use the distraction of exploring such a well-muscled young body to keep him from dwelling too much on what was not going to happen any more with Brian Kinney.

But not right now. Now, there was something . . . Dammit! He wished he knew what it was that was bothering him so much, and why he felt like some dark cloud was lingering just over the horizon, hovering and waiting for a chance to rush forward and engulf them all in a tsunami of operatic proportions.

"Chris!"

"Yeah?" He moved toward the kitchen, where Trina Thomas was bent double, scrambling to find something in the bottom of the refrigerator.

"Your boss just called." Her voice was muffled as she didn't bother to emerge from the chilly depths of the massive old Frigidaire. "You have to take a run down to Phil's Wholesale, out on the River View Bypass."

"I have to what?" He settled on a barstool, and noted that - for a woman, and a fairly statuesque one, at that - she had a nice ass.

She straightened up and fixed him with a cold stare, obviously aware of where his eyes had been focused. "Did I stutter?"

"No, but . . ." He paused as she returned to her exploration. "Excuse me, but what in hell are you doing?"
She straightened up again, placing her hands on her hips, and taking a deep breath. "I'm mining for asparagus, if you must know."

McClaren blinked. "You're . . . what?"

Trina huffed an impatient sigh. "His royal nibs in there . . ." She nodded toward Brian's office where the patient, still recovering from his surgical procedure, was sleeping on the sofa, tucked under a hand-made quilt that he was particularly fond of, "wants asparagus and crab salad for his dinner. And that's great, except that the asparagus I bought at the market two days ago has wilted and died, and I wouldn't serve it to my dog."

"So," he drawled, "let him eat cake."

He knew it was a mistake the moment he said it, but it was too late to take it back as she turned to fix him with an angry glare. "Listen, McFed." He managed not to flinch away from her caustic adoption of Brian's favorite name for him - but only barely. "You may be the big expert around here in security and defensive perimeters and witness protection, and God knows, we've got enough medical experts on call to run an entire department up at Johns Hopkins. But when it comes to Brian's fundamental needs to help him recover from all this crap he's endured and regain his health, the true authority is me. In case you haven't noticed, he hardly eats, and when he does, it's only because I've managed to come up with something unique enough and mouthwatering enough to intrigue him. So when he asks for something specific, something that strikes his fancy and whets his appetite, then you can bet your last dollar I'm going to provide whatever it is he wants. Comprende?"

"Okay, okay. I didn't mean anything by it. So send someone to buy some frigging asparagus."

Again, she sighed. "As if I'm going to trust any of you city boys to know an asparagus from an armadillo." She went into the pantry to fetch her handbag. "I'm going to the farmer's market. And while I'm out, I'll stop in at the bakery to pick up those croissants he likes, and at the fish market to pick up some fresh crabmeat. And the winery, to stock up on that pinot noir he likes and some more Sam Adams Boston Lager. God, the liquor store is going to go into withdrawal symptoms when he's gone. And while I'm at it, I might as well fetch the groceries we'll need for the rest of the week."

McClaren heard something then - something disturbing in her tone - and looked up just in time to catch a shadow moving in her dark eyes. His voice was gentle when he offered his response. "You're really going to miss him, aren't you?"

She rolled her eyes. "Now why on earth would I miss someone who just soaks up all the light in any room he's in, and runs everybody nuts trying to please him, and gets everything he wants just by flashing that smile that takes your breath away, and just . . ." She paused and looked at him and wasn't quite fast enough to blink away the tear in her eye before he could see it.

"Colors your world?" he guessed.

Her smile was lopsided. "Yeah. Colors your world."

The FBI agent studied her face for a moment, debating whether or not to verbalize what was on his mind. Then he stopped debating and took the plunge. "You could go with him, you know. I know he offered, and I'm pretty sure you know that he wasn't joking. Despite being one of the biggest pricks I've ever known, he doesn't make promises he can't keep."

She grinned. "Except when it serves his purpose."

He laughed softly. "Yeah. Except then."
She moved across the room and stood looking out toward the bay. "I know," she said finally. "But this . . ."

"This is home," he guessed, when she hesitated.

"Yeah. This is home."

He nodded. "Makes it hard, I know. But maybe you should rethink it. Because sometimes, I think, home is like . . ." He grinned, and ducked his head to cover a twinge of embarrassment. "Have you read Hemingway, Trina? He once wrote that, for those who live there when they're young, Paris is 'a moveable feast'. Maybe home is a little like that; it goes where you go, as long as you're there with people you love."

She stared at him, mouth slightly agape, before tilting her head and offering her own bit of snarky commentary. "I swear, if you start quoting Dylan Thomas or Oscar Wilde, this conversation is going to end on a very ugly note."

He laughed. "Nope. You'll have to go to Brian for that. Now, what was all that about me needing to go to . . . where was it?"

"Phil's Wholesale. It's that discount store in the Glynnmeadow Shopping Center, out near Exit 16."

"And why would I need to . . ."

She sighed impatiently. "Your boss says they have security tapes there that might show the person that bought that cell phone - the one that made that call to Brian. But it's an older model camera, and it's not connected to any computer system, so it can't be uploaded. Agent Corey wants you to go take a look, since you'd have a better shot at recognizing any familiar faces that might show up there."

He frowned, knowing that he was the logical choice to go. No one else here had studied all the files of all the suspected conspirators and their associates and other possible connections. He would have to go. And it certainly wasn't as if he wasn't often away from the house, on various errands and in doing research for the investigation. So it wasn't a big deal.

He just couldn't quite figure out why it was bothering him so much.

Trina was staring at him, eyes narrowed and lips pursed as if she could tell that he was perplexed about something. "What is it?" she demanded finally. "Is there some reason you're still sitting here, when that tape might provide some pretty good clues about who tried to kill him?"

He sighed. "No. No reason. So you gonna be gone for a while?"

"No longer than I have to," she retorted. Then that look on her face intensified. "Why? Is there some reason . . ."

"No. No reason. Just . . ." He looked toward the office. "What if he wakes up and needs something?"

"He's not an invalid, Chris," she explained gently, "and he wouldn't appreciate it if we treated him like one. Besides, Jackson's due here any minute now, which is perfect, since it'll give Brian a target to work out his frustrations on, so peace will be restored - mostly - by the time we get back. So you coming?"

"Yeah," he replied, reaching for a shirt to slip on over the wife-beater he chose to wear around the cottage. "I'm just going to let Delia know that we're leaving, so someone can be posted closer to the
"Yeah. I know. I'm paranoid. But that's what I get paid to do."

Trina smiled, and decided not to argue. He was, after all, the protection expert.

McClaren spared the time for one quick detour, to allow him to look in on the patient, who was still sleeping off the effects of the mild anesthesia Turnage had used for his minor procedure.

The FBI agent moved into the room and stood for a moment, feasting his eyes on the peaceful vision of Brian nestled into the sofa cushions, with his face braced against his forearm. McClaren smiled, noting how strips of sunlight fell through the blinds behind the desk and painted gold strips across Brian's profile and torso and sparked auburn glints in his hair; he wanted to stop staring, but found that he could not drag his eyes away, lost in a sense of wonder over the singular beauty of the man laid out before him who was, somehow, more beautiful in sleep than when he was awake and making a conscious effort to dazzle the world around him. The injuries from the attack were all repaired now, except for the one bandage remaining low on his jaw - a remnant of the morning's minor surgery - and McClaren had to fight to resist the urge to reach out and touch that sculpted face, understanding on an elemental level that he no longer had the right to do so.

He stepped back quickly, as Brian shifted and drew a deep breath, before nuzzling more deeply into the pillow beneath him. A tiny grimace of discomfort flickered across that nearly perfect face, but it was gone almost before it formed, and McClaren concluded that the patient was not really in much pain; he was simply reacting to a fleeting nuance of discomfort.

Soon this would be over, one way or another. Soon, he would no longer have a reason to be a part of Brian Kinney's life. Soon . . . but not soon enough. He knew that, and wished he didn't.

After allowing himself to lean forward and touch one silky lock of dark hair, he turned away and hurried out of the room and out of the house, intent on doing his job, on concentrating on the investigation, on anything except exploring or acknowledging his feelings for this stubborn, hard-headed, enigmatic man - feelings he would never allow himself to express or admit. Feelings that he was pretty sure he would never manage to leave behind.

He spoke to his assistant, and then stood in the driveway for a moment, as the security staff shifted according to his instructions, adjusting their patrol routes so that at least one person would be in position at all times to monitor the cottage visually and be within shouting distance should Brian waken and need assistance. Still, he breathed a sigh of relief as he saw Jackson's van turn in from the main road. He knew it was illogical to be uneasy about leaving Brian alone, but then - there was very little in his feelings about Brian that was logical, and he was pretty sure there never would be.

He allowed himself a quick, marginally embarrassed little smile as he decided that he deserved a little treat. Fuck the SUV and the surveillance sedan; he'd take the BMW and indulge in a bit of fantasy during the drive - Brian Kinney at his side, dozing, smiling in the grip of a pleasant dream, bare-chested and beautiful.

Delia Perkins was standing near the gate, watching as Chris and Trina drove away in separate vehicles and caught a glimpse of her boss's face as he passed. She had things to do; she always had things to do, especially if she wanted to be considered for the promotion that might be coming up in a few months. Still, she took a moment to wonder what on earth might have put that odd, wistful little smile on McClaren's face? The man was something of an enigma, and not just to her. She didn't think anybody knew him very well, but she was absolutely sure of one thing: Chris McClaren just didn't do wistful.
The sun had begun its inevitable slide toward the horizon by the time Justin jumped out of the taxi at the main entrance to Allegheny General. When he'd made his grand exit from his life in Pittsburgh to go seek his fortune in New York, he had done the sensible thing and sold his car. It had not been easy, since, like every other young male in the country, he'd begun to identify himself - at least in part - with the vehicle he'd been driving. It was just a part of American culture everywhere - except New York City, which was a whole different world; a world of taxis and subways; a world where people actually walked from Point A to Point B; a world where a sexy young man was not validated by his ownership of a Porsche or a BMW or a vintage Corvette. He had adapted to the new ambiance quickly, growing adept at hailing taxis and leaping through subway doors that were on the verge of closing, or squeezing aboard a downtown bus that was already completely full.

And then he'd met Steven and slowly but surely been drafted into a different world, the world of privilege and pride of place, where he soon discovered that the opportunity to be chauffeured from place to place and thus avoid the pandemonium and frustration that was endemic to the Big Apple was one of the most gratifying pleasures in life, even when it came at the expense of having to listen to a nasty little voice in his mind taunting him with remarks about pretentiousness and the risk of becoming a member of that elite group that somehow stood head and shoulders above everyone else, with no discernible justification for doing so except the possession of lots of lovely money.

He had not spent much time pondering the change, mostly because that self-same ugly little voice occasionally took inordinate pleasure in speaking up at odd, awkward moments to remind him that there were those who could legitimately lay claim to a rightful place in that rarefied atmosphere, but would rather cut off a limb than venture there.

It was one thing, after all, to earn the right to look down on homophobes and hypocrites and posturing sociopaths; it was something else again to assume that right based on nothing more than the size of a bank account or the celebrity of one's name.

Anyway, he would now have to readjust himself and rejoin the throngs of young American men who loved their cars almost as much as they loved their mates, regardless of gender. The thought brought a quick smile to his face, as he remembered spotting a sleek, silver Camaro convertible on a showroom floor down on Market Street.

He closed his eyes for a moment and visualized car-shopping with Brian, and all the lovely, myriad ways his lover would find to break in the sports car and test its suitability for all sorts of things. With that thought, he broke into a broad smile, which only got brighter when he realized something else: for the first time in his life, he would be able to buy a car for himself. Not in a total cash transaction, of course. Proceeds from his show had been very good, but not quite that good. But he would have enough to make a substantial down payment and a verifiable prospect for additional income to justify the bank offering him the loan.

Brian would object, of course - would insist on paying the balance and offer perfectly logical reasons for why he should do so. But Justin was going to take great pleasure in being able to decline the offer. Few indeed were the people were ever able to resist Brian's determination and say, "No", and Justin was delighted at the prospect.

So . . . car-shopping on the menu. As soon as Brian was home to stay.

Until then, he'd have to deal with the outrageously exorbitant rates charged by the local taxi companies or the generosity of friends. Like now.

Cynthia would undoubtedly be arriving at any minute, to meet him and his friend Cedric, and drive them back to Kinnetik, where Cedric would sign all the necessary paperwork to enable him to start his new job as a member of the janitorial staff - all courtesy, of course, of Brian Kinney. It was not a
prestigious position, and Justin was fairly certain that the elderly man's skills and education and intelligence should qualify him for a much better job, probably even in a professional capacity, but - for now - it would do, especially since Cedric appeared unwilling to discuss other possibilities. He had at first been suspicious and reluctant when Justin had told him about Brian's offer; then he'd been overwhelmed. Finally, he'd decided to put aside his doubts and celebrate his good fortune, especially when he learned that the compensation, modest as it was, included a studio apartment tucked away in the top floor of the building. It was truly tiny, and included only a main room, a narrow bathroom with a shower, and a cramped little L-shaped kitchen area. Truly not much, but it would be private. Since his release from the hospital, he had been forced to share quarters in the half-way house, and the idea of finally having a bit of space to call his own seemed more important than whatever wage he might earn.

Justin prowled through the crowd that was gathered around the hospital entrance, and began to wonder why so many people were clustered near the doorway and farther around the building, toward the ER reception area. It was a typical week-day afternoon, and there should have been just the humdrum, every day comings and goings of visitors and tradesmen and medical staffers changing shifts. Instead, there was a crush of pedestrians, all trying to make their way inside, and now that he was not lost in his own thoughts, he could see a line of emergency vehicles converging on the emergency entrance, and blink at the intrusive flash of red lights revolving and bathing the hospital's ivory walls in scarlet.

"Hey," he said, leaning in to speak to a security guard standing near the front doors, "what's going on?"

"Big explosion out on the 16th Street Bridge. Lots of damage; lots of people hurt."

"What kind of explosion?" Justin felt panic stir in his gut. The bridge wasn't terribly close to the area of Liberty Avenue that housed Kinnetik and the loft and the homes of all his friends, but it wasn't that far away either.

"Nobody knows much yet. TV news is reporting that it might have been a big rig carrying dangerous chemicals, but it could be anything, you know."

Justin was very still, considering what the man had said and what he hadn't.

Since he'd spent a lot of time in New York lately, and absorbed a certain amount of the mentality of a city that knew, firsthand, what it was to be a victim of a terrorist attack, he was perhaps just slightly more apt to edge toward certain uncomfortable speculations than the average American. But not much. The entire country had watched as those twin towers had collapsed, so now, whenever any violent tragedy happened in a major American city, there was a tendency to leap first, and look afterwards.

Which meant, of course, that no one would deliberately use that one, particular word, though every one would think it.

"Justin! Justin!"

The blond young man turned to greet his friend, and was amazed at how grateful he was for the distraction. For his part, Cedric was obviously concerned about the chaos erupting around them, but the external turmoil did not touch the serenity in his eyes. Justin saw it and easily identified it, and felt himself relax further. Cedric Lasseigne had certainly lived through his share of tragedy and trauma. He had endured Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, as well as plenty of hurricane-sized upheavals in his own life. If he could do that and still face the world bravely, without flinching, then Justin knew he could do the same.
"So, old man," Justin said with an easy smile as he hugged the elderly man and relieved him of the canvas bag draped over his shoulder, "what did the doctor have to say?"

Cedric shrugged. "I'm good to go. Free to dust and sweep and clean the windows and swab the decks, and watch your Mr. Kinney charm his way through swarms of nubile young men."

Justin laughed. "You haven't even met him yet, and you already have his number. He's going to love you."

"Or not." The tone was stern, but there was a definite twinkle in slightly faded gray eyes. "So what's going on out here?"

It was Justin's turn to shrug, although he was not quite as sanguine as he tried to appear. "Life in the big city," he answered, as he looked around and noticed the arrival of two more ambulances, escorted by police cars with sirens blaring. He deliberately turned away, not wanting to watch as the carnage was revealed. "Let's see if we can find our ride."

Cedric merely nodded, but he stood for a moment, studying the face of his young friend as he heard something - something just slightly off kilter in Justin's voice. The young man was uneasy, bothered about something, and the elderly refugee from Louisiana Cajun country did not think it had anything to do with what was going on around them.

Cynthia was literally gritting her teeth in frustration as she tried to find a way into the hospital parking lot. This was supposed to be a quick little side-trip - a favor to Justin in retrieving the elderly man that Brian had hired, sight unseen. She had been to the bank, to take care of more of the endless details involved in safeguarding Kinnetik's funds, and to the corporate law firm to sign off on a new contract with a fledgling cable company, but she still had a mountain of work on her desk that had to be done before she could retire to her home and lose herself in a bathtub-sized Margarita.

In truth, she always had a mountain of work on her desk, which was both good and bad. Bad in that she could never feel that she was truly finished with any job, and good, because she knew that she was needed, that Brian couldn't get along without her, for which he paid her extremely well.

So the work was a blessing, she supposed, which she would like to get back to before the day was completely done.

She had not realized that she was driving into the equivalent of a war zone until she'd made the turn onto Allegheny Boulevard and been confronted with a gargantuan traffic jam.

After a few futile efforts to work her way toward the hospital's main entrance, she finally settled for parking her dark gray Audi on a narrow strip of grass just past the emergency access lane, and pulled her cell phone from her purse in order to let Justin know where to find her. She dialed and waited, hoping that he would hear the ring amidst all the confusion going on in the parking lot.

No answer. She disconnected, tucking her phone back into her purse before getting out of the car to look around and try to spot that mop of bright blond hair as two ambulances tore past her and swerved into the turn leading toward the emergency entrance. Though she cringed away from the idea of watching a train wreck in progress, she couldn't help but stare, as both vehicles came to a screeching stop, and uniformed paramedics leaped out of the rear doors only to turn and lean back in to grab stretchers on which patients were lying, broken and bleeding.

It was a horrible sight, although . . . something was not quite right. Not quite as it should be, because
. . . it wasn't dark. Why, she wondered, did her mind insist that it should be dark?

Why did her mind insist that she'd been here before - seen it all before - only it had been dark then?

*And everything, everyone had smelled of smoke and ash, because - of course - because Babylon was burning.*

She gasped, caught up in the flames and horrors of blood-bright memory.

She blinked and tried to clear her eyes - to see what was really here rather than what was rising in her mind as she watched two of the ambulance workers successfully maneuver a gurney out of the rear of the ambulance, pausing to adjust the IV apparatus that was attached and tuck a blanket more tightly around the patient. One of the two, a tall, good-looking guy with a thick thatch of dirty blond hair, was trying, without much success, to wipe drops of dark blood from the side of his face, and only managing to smear it on the front of his white shirt with its logo patch. He looked . . . Cynthia went very still. He looked . . . Oh, my God!

She had to make a call. She had to make a call right now. Where was her God-dammed phone? And why, oh, why, oh, why was she just seeing it now, and realizing that she should have known - should have remembered before?

*Dear God! Brian!*

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

A senior FBI agent should not have to spend his time scrolling through blurry tapes from an antiquated security camera; that should be a job for some low-life clerk with nothing better to do. Although - come to think of it - what exactly did he have to do that was so much better?

He was annoyed and irritable and . . . itchy. Not a very professional description, of course, but accurate enough, even though he couldn't quite figure out what was bothering him.

He was just finishing up the second of four reels of tape when his cell rang, and he listened as Trina Thomas recited a litany of the shortcomings of a local produce vendor that 'wouldn't know a decent stalk of asparagus if it bit him in the ass', the arrogance of a certain young scoundrel who 'didn't pay her enough for this stupid job', and the inefficiency of a postal clerk who had lost the piece of certified mail that had been addressed to Brian and subsequently 'could not find her own ass with both hands and a magnifying glass'.

Trina was not happy that she was not going to get back to the cottage until much later than she'd promised and would then, no doubt, have to listen to the Lord and Master bitch about her tardiness.

McClaren just laughed and assured her that there was no problem. Brian was probably still asleep. Probably. And he didn't allow himself to dwell on why that assumption caused him to feel uneasy.

Kinney jitters, he thought with a rueful smile. Who'd have dreamed that a seasoned, skilled, veteran FBI agent could succumb to such foolishness?

He loaded the third tape, and began to watch, glancing up occasionally to note the march of dark clouds across the sky, closing in from the West and painting the entire landscape a strange shade of gold, eerie and still. It was as he looked back from a moment studying the progress of the storm that he caught a glimpse of something that seemed just slightly . . . off. But it was fast and blurred and indistinct, and not very revealing.
He paused the tape and rewound it. And played it again, and saw . . . just there. Just at the edge of
the screen, a quick, barely glimpsed image of a partial profile of a face mostly concealed by a
trucker-style cap. A face that he could not identify, until . . . He straightened abruptly. If he'd been
looking away at that exact moment, he never would have seen it, for it was only when the customer
reached out to receive his change that he was visible. Only for a second.

But it was enough, except . . . oh, dear Jesus!

He clamped down hard on the gorge rising within him, and the paralyzing fear that the recognition
had come too late.

He ran out of the office without a word to anyone, leaving the store personnel gaping and grumbling
about the rudeness of city folk. But it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. He was shouting into his cell
phone before he made it to the car, but nothing - not the assurances of his staff nor the voice of hope
in his mind nor the desperation in his heart could reassure him.

Dear God! Brian!

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 tbc
"Chapter 50"

_Bitterness is like cancer. It eats upon the host. But anger is like fire. It burns it all clean._

-- Maya Angelou

"Time to rise and shine, Stud Muffin. Wakey, wakey!"

"Fuck off!"

"Now is that any way to talk to the man who's going to make your day? Don't be rude."

"Okay. Please fuck off."

Jackson put his hands on his hips and stood for a moment looking down at his patient, debating the best way to proceed. It was a good thing, he reasoned, that he was not easily intimidated by pretty boy grumpiness and bravado.

And where, he wondered, had that thought come from?

Another look at the young man curled up in his cozy little quilt-lined nest, who had shifted to present his profile - not to mention the curve of his backside - to anyone rude enough to be watching, prompted him to realize that there really was no way to deny that Kinney was 'pretty'; pretty enough to give rise to thoughts of what he might have looked like if he'd been born minus that very prominent bulge between his legs.

Pretty. Kissable.

Jackson's grin was more than a bit prurient. Eminently fuckable.

Dangerous.

It was just the luck of the draw that it hadn't worked out that way. Unfortunate, because that would, he thought with a small smile, have made things simpler for almost everybody.

"Come on, Brian. You know I can't just let you off the hook. I need to check you over, and you need to put in a few minutes on the machine, so that I can inform His Eminance, Master Turnage - honestly - that you're on the road to recovery and will survive to fight another day."

Brian's response was nothing more than a guttural rumble, expressing his bad mood perfectly but divulging nothing more.

The therapist wandered over to the window, watching as the security staff walked their predetermined beat, occasionally pausing to talk to each other as they constantly looked around, taking in everything and leaving nothing to chance. He had arrived at exactly the right moment, when both Trina and the senior field agent were departing, and just as Delia Perkins, under orders from her superior, was preparing to go into the house to stand vigil until Brian was completely recovered from his post-surgical stupor. She had seemed glad to be relieved of that responsibility when he'd driven up to the doorway, and he had favored her with a sympathetic smile. He knew such a posting must be difficult for a young, healthy, red-blooded, American woman with all the
normal sexual urges of others of her age and gender, especially in the presence of a specimen like Kinney who was not renowned for either his discretion or his respect for other people's boundaries, as demonstrated by his tendency to stroll around in minimal clothing which left little to the imagination. As the only young woman in this strange, communal entourage, she must feel constantly tested in her ability to perform her duties and maintain a professional demeanor. Thus, it was easy to understand her preference to maintain her distance and join her fellow staffers in staring over toward the neighboring cottage where the young college crowd was finishing up their preparations for their evening cruise in a happy jumble of firm, tanned young bodies. Jackson glanced over that way to confirm that thought, just in time to watch a couple of shapely co-eds stripping out of cover-ups to flash bright bits of string bikini as they hurried forward to try to assist in getting their ride properly moored to the remnants of the old pier.

A very nice view, and it was fairly obvious that the individuals - most of whom were young and male - charged with the protection of Brian Kinney were equally enthralled. Not so much, of course, that they were actually neglecting their duties, but enough to keep them a bit preoccupied, a bit unfocused. Still, they were professionals, and they knew their jobs, so nothing untoward was going to develop on their watch, since none of them relished the idea of having to answer to the powers-that-be if something did.

But now that Jackson was in the house, each of them felt just the slightest easing of the pressure they endured constantly in maintaining their vigil. This had turned into a high profile case, and their actions - successful or not - would be closely scrutinized in determining their futures and assessing their competence.

So, with the therapist on the job, they could concentrate their attention on their patrol, and leave the direct supervision of their primary charge to the medical staffer.

The therapist turned away from his evaluation of the team deployment to reassess his patient's condition and take another look around. Trina was gone, and judging by the stack of canvas bags she'd been carrying when she left, it would be one of those mammoth shopping trips that took hours to complete. That, in itself, was not a big deal, as she was often out on her daily domestic errands.

But McClaren was also gone, and that was unusual. Jackson had no idea what had called the chief agent away, but he supposed it didn't matter one way or the other. It did, however, make a big difference in the work environment, since he had never before been alone with his patient. Not really. Oh, they had been alone in a room certainly; maybe even alone in the house for a few minutes here or there, but never really alone, without the possibility of someone strolling in unannounced at any moment. So this was a first - and maybe an only.

Maybe he could finally take advantage of the opportunity to have a little talk, he thought. Ordinarily, there was so little time. Of course, that was still true, but maybe, with a little luck, he could ask the questions that he'd been longing to ask every since he'd been given this assignment, and see if the answers would make any sense to him. Maybe. If he could get the man to wake up.

But he still had a few last minute preparations to make, so he'd let Brian enjoy his sleep for just a bit longer, to rest up for the ordeal ahead of him, for Jackson did not fool himself. The service he provided was necessary and beneficial, but it was not pleasant. Of course, today he could just . . . but no; that would be a huge red flag. Sticking to the regular routine would be the best course of action, with a few added embellishments.

He made some final adjustments on the CPM machine to set it at the right angle and strength level for Brian's workout, before opening his supply case to retrieve a massage oil that he thought the patient would enjoy. It was a new product, something that provided maximum benefit for easing muscles
and tendons without the kind of flowery scent that Brian disliked so intensely - something that would ease Brian into a relaxed frame of mind following his work-out, ready to retreat back into the welcoming arms of restful sleep.

But that was for later.

For now, there was only one more thing he needed to do, and he hurried into the kitchen to prepare.

In a matter of minutes, all was ready, but still he lingered for just a moment, smiling as he paused to look into the depths of his canvas tote bag to make sure his preparations were perfect and that he'd had forgotten nothing, that his big surprise was ready and waiting, exactly as he'd planned for so long and for which he'd waited so patiently.

Then he took a deep breath. Time to go to work.

For his whole life, Simon Redding had led a peripheral existence.

Oh, that's not how he would have described it himself. He was, after all, a simple man who didn't spend much time contemplating philosophy or his place in the grand scheme of things. But he would have conceded, if pressed, that he'd circled around the edges of other people's perceptions, without ever making much of an impression.

Except once - but that was a story that was not for sharing. When he allowed himself to dwell on it - which he didn't do often - he consoled himself that the one meaningful connection of his entire life was completely private, unknown to any but its two principals. And for the most part, he was right. There were a few people who speculated a bit, who might think that they knew the truth of it, but most of them were deluded.

Only Simon himself knew the whole truth, since he was alone now - the sole survivor of his story - and it was not a tale he ever intended to share.

Nevertheless, it was a story - a truth that he carried within him constantly - that had a huge impact on his life and how he looked at the world. Particularly, to his own reluctant amusement, how he looked at Brian Kinney.

Simon did not understand homosexuality. It was not a part of the lexicon of his existence, although he knew full well how his parents, his siblings, and his extended family would feel about it. The word "abomination" was a term in rather common usage in Simon's world. So was the word "love", but somehow, he didn't think his interpretation of either of those words was the same as that of most of the people around him.

He had not been happy to be banned from the cottage where he had spent so much of his life, but, in the end, it hadn't really made much of a difference. He had no need for the physical reminders that the house provided; his memory functioned perfectly without prompts.

She was there, in every part of his life. She was always there and always forbidden. That had been true during the tragically short years of her life, and was still true today. And that, he supposed, was why he couldn't find it in his heart to condemn young Brian Kinney for loving someone he wasn't supposed to love. Or even for taking action to have Simon banned from the beach house, for Simon understood that the young man was only doing whatever he had to do to protect those more precious to him than his own life.

Simon had to admit that, under identical circumstances, he would have done the same.
Of course, he missed being there, and he missed taking care of all the things that he maintained in memory of her. But he would go right on with his life, content to be peripheral to everyone else's existence, remaining always slightly out of focus, slightly left of center.

Only now, he found himself caught up in a conundrum, even though he did not really know the meaning of the word.

There was a task that needed doing; he knew that. But it was a task that should not have fallen to him, a task meant for someone else. It had boiled down to a question of right and wrong, as opposed to a choice of speaking up to defend what many would find indefensible and standing aside to allow nature and fate to take its course.

He took a drag off a cigarette and stood at the end of the old pier at the southern edge of the marina and pondered. He knew what needed doing; he just didn't know if he could do it, or even if he should do it. It was ultimately none of his business. Over the years, he had made sure to stay out of the affairs of all those who had wandered into the lovely ambiance of the beach house before wandering out again. Most of them, he had neither liked nor disliked, as they had never been real to him. They'd been ghosts, minor spirits engaged in minor hauntings of the place that was already so intensely haunted, for him, that he barely noticed any other presences, and he had no compelling reason to change that policy now. And yet . . .

Unbidden, an image formed in his mind - a vision of youth and beauty, but vastly different from the vision that usually defined those words for him. He had never thought of a man in such terms, so it was necessary for him to adjust his thought processes and expand his horizon in order to encompass a new range of possibilities. But one thing did not require any rethinking. He could easily visualize that young countenance and the permanent changes it would endure as a reaction to the horrors lingering now within the shadows of the hours rapidly approaching.

He drew a deep breath and turned to go to his truck. This incident would probably turn out to be an exercise in futility, for there was no way Kinney's protectors were going to let him get anywhere near the subject of his interest. He knew that. But he also knew that he had to try, in order to be able to live with himself if the future turned out as he expected.

No one had ever approached him about the task that needed doing. Never even mentioned the possibility. As always, he had remained below the radar, unnoticed, unconsidered. Peripheral, but now . . . perhaps the time had come to step forward, to claim a place within the light, even if he had no intention of remaining there for long.

The old GMC motor started easily, at first crank as usual, and he was almost disappointed that it was performing as expected. A faulty starter or a broken fuel pump or a malfunctioning clutch would have made the decision for him, taking it out of his hands. But the purr of the motor whispered to him, telling him that he'd just lost his final excuse.

He pulled out of the parking area slowly, careful to allow plenty of time for oncoming traffic to clear his path, his mind filled with equal parts dread and determination. He made it to the main highway just as the sun brushed against the horizon, bathing the world in a glow that seemed full of promise. But this particular promise was false; he knew that, and it was time to make sure that others learned it as well.

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Justin and Cedric were beginning to feel the frustration of trying to deal with a crowd that was edging steadily toward hysteria, as the shadows of the poplars lining the hospital's parking lot grew longer, merging finally with the thick gloom of the area beneath the low bridge that curved around
the side of the hospital to span a narrow stream that flowed west, to empty eventually into the Allegheny. The garish crimson brilliance of emergency lights continued to flash spasmodically, adding to the fingernails-on-a-blackboard sensations of the setting, as whispers and murmurs among the people milling around near the doors grew in volume, and were now rapidly becoming angry demands for information and shouts of resentment. When they had decided to go looking for Cynthia, rather than just standing near the front of the building and hoping she would find them, they had banked on the crowd thinning out as they moved away from the main entrance, but that had not happened. More and more panicky individuals were arriving with every passing moment, loitering and growing steadily more impatient as they were denied entrance to the building, and now there were vans from local television channels and a steady influx of emergency personnel of all persuasions adding to the chaos. Rumors were running rampant - toxic gasses, anthrax, terrorists on the freeways, poison in the water supply, aliens in the stratosphere - growing wilder with the approach of darkness.

After a few minutes of futile attempts to circumnavigate the throng, and one completely frustrating effort to forge a path through it, Justin elected to find a quiet spot and try to contact Cynthia via his cell phone only to discover that service was temporarily unavailable. The entire area appeared to be caught up in a bubble of disaster as the trauma of the incident at the bridge mushroomed and panic spread like wildfire through the city, resulting in overloaded cell towers and even a massive strain on land lines.

"Sorry, Cedric," Justin said gruffly, staring at the screen of his iPhone as if he'd like to smash it into microscopic pieces. "It looks like we're stuck, and there's no way to reach anybody. Unless we can work our way out of here and get to a spot where we can hail a taxi to get us to Kinnetik. God knows where Cynthia might be stuck in all this pandemonium."

But it was at that moment that he heard a familiar voice calling his name. Well, perhaps 'calling' was not precisely the right word. "Screeching' would have been more accurate.

"Justinnnnnnn."

"What?" he shouted, turning to watch Cynthia as she pushed and shoved her way through the crowd, in a totally uncharacteristic manner. "What are you doing, and . . ."

"Is your phone working?" she demanded, ignoring both his question and the look of shock on his face.

"No. I don't think anybody is going to have cell service for a while, given . . ." But he fell silent when he saw the sheer, raw panic in her eyes. "Cynthia, what the hell . . ."

"Listen to me, Justin, and listen well because I don't have time to repeat it. One of us has got to find a working phone line."

"And how do we manage that? Cynthia, there's no way . . ."

"Justin, for once in your life, just shut up and do as you're told, because when I tell you that Brian's life could depend on this, I'm not joking."

He would later reflect on how amazing it was that a man could go from being completely comfortable at one moment and frozen to his core in the next, all because of a tiny string of random words, and for a single instant, he felt himself clutched in a vice-like grip of paralysis, unable to reason or move or breathe, as it struck him that she wasn't joking. He didn't understand what she meant, or how she could know whatever it was she knew, but realized that it didn't matter anyway. It was enough that she did know.
"Tell me what to do."

"Find a phone that works," she said quickly. "That's the only thing that matters. A land line is probably the best bet, so let's split up and double our chance of finding one. If you locate one, you need to get in touch with McClaren. You can try Brian first, but it's the FBI detail we really need, because they're the only ones that can protect him. And God help me, if I've remembered too late, I don't know how I'll ever . . ." She paused for a single second, striving for composure, and when she resumed speaking, her tone was coldly clinical and very precise. "Try McClaren's cell, or Delia Perkins, maybe. Or, if worse comes to worse, call Emmett and have him try to raise Trina on the beach house landline. He should have that number."

"And what do I tell them? Who is . . ."

She raised a hand to silence him. "Just listen, okay? Repeat it word for word, if you have to, because this is important. Someone is going to try to kill him, and I know who. We have to make sure that they know too."

And with that, she told him the rest, wasting no time on explaining the process of how it had come to her. The process was unimportant. Her memory - that remarkable, occasionally unbelievable eidetic memory - had kicked in, albeit belatedly, and Justin's blood ran cold when he realized the gravity of the threat.

"Cedric," he said when she'd finished sharing her revelation, "you need to find yourself a safe place where you can rest and wait for me. I'll find you when . . ."

But Cedric Lasseigne was having none of it. "Justin," he said firmly, pausing only to offer a tiny, encouraging smile to Cynthia, "do you know what I spent most of my time doing while I was in Rehab here?"

"Playing chess?" Justin guessed, his patience nearing exhaustion.

"No. Playing explorer. I familiarized myself with every nook and cranny, every store room, every back passage, and . . ."

"Yeah, that's good. But I gotta go. I'll find . . ."

"And," said the elderly man firmly, turning and heading back toward the hospital, moving with surprising speed and agility for someone his age, "every lounge area, conference room, auditorium, and administrative office complex where they still have public telephones."

Justin stopped arguing and eagerly fell into step behind his companion, pausing only long enough to flash a V for victory sign at Cynthia as she turned away to search for other alternatives.

There was no time for anything more.

The air was warm and sweetly scented with a fragrance that called to mind sunsets on tropical beaches and deep scarlet blossoms trembling before gentle winds that would move on to caress perfect, golden, mostly bare bodies. White surf exploding in bursts of foam against stretches of crystal sand and distant laughter threading through the sound of the breakers.

Paradise - and never more so than when body to body with the slender figure pressed against him, every curve matching up perfectly to the flesh held close, every bulge couched perfectly in a corresponding cavity. A perfect match.
The sounds were like background music, and the aroma was pleasing, exotic, but not nearly so pleasing or exotic as the lovely stretch of skin beneath his exploring hands. He had no need to open his eyes, for his fingertips saw perfectly as they traced the planes of the sculpted chest, pausing to tweak nipples just hardening to fat nubs before moving onward and upward to touch the velvet softness of the hollows of the throat, and further still to trace the lines of that beautiful, perfectly symmetrical face and then drifting upward to stroke silky hair that would glint pure gold as the sun sank into the fiery brilliance of the sea's reflection.

The taste against his tongue was incredible, intoxicating like the finest brandy. He could feel the tremor of the skin beneath his lips as his lover swallowed, shivering slightly under the kisses being nuzzled into the dark hollows under that beautiful jaw line, and he felt himself harden - unbelievably even harder than before - and had to shift his body, to press himself more directly against the groin that was thrusting up against him, steel to steel, throbbing, pulsing, begging and demanding all at once.

"Justin!" He could barely form the word, his throat clinched tight with the intensity of his need, but he knew that it said enough, meant enough. That he needed say no more as his hands once more moved forcefully, deliberately downward, skimming over hot, willing skin, as a brilliant flare of light penetrated his eyelids, flickering with . . . wait . . . flickering? Since when did sunsets . . .

Brian opened his eyes and had to suppress a groan. "Why is there a fucking candle burning in my face?"

"It's not in your face," replied Jackson calmly. "It's half way across the room."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"To put it bluntly," said the therapist, "it helps with the smell in here. You could use a shower, Boytoy."

Brian shifted onto his back and stared up at the brawny individual looking down at him, nose wrinkled above a disparaging grin. "You are so fucking fired," he said wearily.

"Too late," Jackson retorted. "This is my last week. Now, if you can drag your mind out your wet dream long enough, you need to spend a few minutes on the machine, just to get the blood pumping and the muscles loose. Then, if you're a good boy, you're in for a real treat. I'm going to perform my superb, unforgettable, first class full body massage, and, believe me, I'm so good at this that, by the time I'm done, you'll be so relaxed that you won't even remember the shape of Justin's ass for the rest of the day."

"Humph! Nobody's that good."

"On the machine," the therapist commanded. "And now would be good. I don't have all day, you know."

Reluctantly, Brian sat up and glanced toward the candle flickering on the table near the door. "What's that smell?" he demanded.

"Cinnamon, according to the label. There are a couple more burning in the kitchen and the lounge. I think Trina set them out. Apparently, she doesn't appreciate your body odor either."

Brian shrugged. "Yeah, well, all I smell is that sweet shit, and it's nauseating. So . . ."

"Just do your work-out," Jackson insisted. "Once you're on the table for your rubdown, I'll blow them out. OK? And I've got a surprise for you, if you behave yourself."
Brian was in the process of rising, but something in the therapist's tone caused him to pause and study the man's face. "What's up, Jax?" he asked with a small smile. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were flirting with me."

Jackson went very still; then his face reddened as he saw the bright gleam of amusement in Brian's eyes. "Asshole," he muttered.

"Don't worry, Buddy," laughed Brian. "Your virtue is safe with me."

Jackson chose to ignore the twinge of irritation as he helped Brian get in position on the CPM equipment and begin his repetitions. He remained silent for a time, but then reconsidered and decided to press what might turn out to be a momentary advantage. "How do you know?" he asked finally, as his patient continued for his work-out, muscles pumping now and a fine sweat breaking out on his face.

"How do I know what?" Brian asked, his breathing still natural and unlabored.

"That I'm not flirting with you."

Brian was quiet for a moment, and Jackson wondered if he might have gone too far already, and given offense too quickly. "It's called Gay-dar, Jax." When the answer came, it did not appear to be couched in any kind of resentment. "And nobody's is better than mine."

"But how do you know, for sure?"

Brian looked up then, and Jackson noticed a cold gleam deep in those hazel eyes - an icy spark that he found vaguely alarming. "In your case, it's easy."

"How do you mean?"

Brian smiled again, but it did not reach his eyes. "Most people like to touch me. Women, boys, fags. Even dykes and straight men - although not so much if they figure out that I'm gay. Probably makes them feel threatened. But you . . . you don't. I mean, you have to touch me, because of your job. But you don't enjoy it."

"You're right. It's my job." Jackson tried not to sound defensive, but knew that he wasn't entirely successful.

Brian concentrated on his work-out for a while, not bothering to offer any kind of response. But Jackson couldn't seem to leave it alone. "Does it bother you?" he asked finally. "That I'm . . . not interested, I mean?"

"I know what you mean, and no. It doesn't bother me."

The therapist made a couple of notations in Brian's chart and paused to adjust a setting on the machine as Brian continued in his efforts, apparently convinced that the conversation was over as the seconds passed.

"Why not?"

Brian paused abruptly, then slowly began to disengage from the equipment before reaching for a towel to wipe sweat from his face. "Why does it matter?" he asked finally. "Are you bothered by the fact that I'm not interested in you?"

"No. Of course not."
"Bu-u-u-u -t . . ." Brian drawled the word, as he leaned forward to be able to look directly into Jackson's deep green eyes. "What's this about, Jax? What are you really trying to ask me?"

The therapist took a deep breath. "That's enough workout for today. Climb up on the table."

"No. Not until . . ."

"Come on, Brian. I promise you'll enjoy it, and it'll make things easier."

For a moment, Brian looked skeptical, but then he shrugged slightly and did as he'd been asked, settling onto the well-padded massage table and bracing his forehead against crossed arms. He flinched slightly when he felt the cool ointment pooling in the small of his back, but then Jackson began to work it into his skin and muscles with long, firm strokes, almost strong enough to be painful but ultimately pleasing.

"So . . . ask your question," he said after a few minutes.

"Just one?" Jackson chuckled.

"You only have one." There was no uncertainty in Brian's voice.

The therapist drew a deep breath. "Yeah. I guess you're right. So why don't you explain it to me. How does a guy like you, a guy that's got everything going for him - brains, looks, talent, money, nerve, every single fucking thing - how does a guy like that choose to be a fag, to take it up the ass from some other guy? I just don't . . ."

"No. You don't." Brian's tone was level, almost serene, and almost completely lacking in any sense of outrage. "And you never will. First of all, because you assume it's a choice. It's not a choice; it's a fact of life. A physical trait - like having hazel eyes. And secondly, there's the fact that - generally speaking - I don't take it up the ass. But that's more information than you want or need. So now it's my turn, and I only have one question for you. Why the fuck do you care what I do, or who I do it with?"

Jackson shifted to work directly on Brian's shoulders and was marginally pleased to note a certain tightness in them, indicating that his patient might not be quite as unruffled as he wanted to appear. But the skin remained firm and pliant, almost velvet soft, and Jackson surprised himself by realizing that it was quite pleasing to the touch. A thought he really, really didn't want to have.

"I don't," he answered finally, easily, "and to prove it, I've got a surprise for you."

Jackson gave a quick squeeze to the nape of Brian's neck before moving away. "Hey, is that all?" Brian protested. "I thought you were going to make all my dreams come true. Talk about premature ejac . . ."

He fell silent when something soft and fluffy hit him in the back of the head, before demanding, "What the fuck?"

"I brought you a present," came the answer, as the therapist moved back in and urged Brian to lift his head to accommodate a brand new, pristine, perfectly proportioned pillow, encased in a silky pillowcase. "I decided I'd heard enough of your bitching about the old one."

For a moment, Brian looked pensive, almost undecided. Then he simply smiled and buried his face in the pillow's lovely fluff as Jackson resumed his massage. "Better?" he asked, after a moment.

"Oh, yeah." Brian was almost purring. "I'm thinking I could spend the night right here, and it doesn't
mature in the least that you're a homophobic prick, at heart."

He shifted again, breathing deeply, only slightly bothered now by the lingering fragrance of the candles, which seemed a bit stronger than before, but not disturbingly so. The hands on his back stroked steadily, coaxing him toward relaxation, toward sleep, sleep that was coming on quickly. Really quickly.

But he wasn't worried, because he had certainly earned the right to rest over the last few weeks, and right now, nothing else seemed so enticing, so intoxicating as the idea of slipping back into the comfort of sleep, letting the dreams take him again and sinking into the incredible warmth of his imagination where Justin was waiting, where there were no limitations, where everything was possible.

But now . . . something was different. He tried to ease back into to his beautiful dream, to taste and touch and feel the lust and the joy of it, but he couldn't quite reach it. He couldn't quite reach anything, because the light was fading. It was growing dark, and his body was so heavy - so heavy that he wondered if he could move at all.

Something felt . . . odd, different, but not completely unfamiliar. He'd felt this before, a long, long time ago, but he couldn't quite remember when or why. Something wasn't as it should be. Something was wrong, and he felt a cold chill touch him. He knew then. Only he knew just that much too late.

Distantly, somewhere - but he couldn't be bothered to figure out where - a telephone was ringing, and somewhere else there was a faint whisper - words that might have mattered, but he couldn't be bothered to listen. The darkness was there now, and he had fought it long enough. Time to rest, only . . . he wished it weren't so cold.

Jackson watched carefully as his patient trembled under his hands, as dark, thick lashes closed, then fluttered slightly, then closed again one last time. For a moment, he was tempted to take it a step further, to finish it in this moment. With just a bit of pressure, a little weight applied in exactly the right place, it would be over. But then common sense set in, and he knew that it wouldn't matter anyway. It was as good as done, and any extra investment of time right now would take away from his own margin of safety. Then he invested another moment thinking of reclaiming the pillow and tucking it back into his case, but that, he decided, was taking a little too much for granted. Best to leave well enough alone.

"Good night, sweet prince," he whispered, as he stepped back and regarded the product of his handiwork, shuddering when he had to fight off a weird urge - an almost irresistible urge - to lean forward and drop a kiss on that broad shoulder, and felt a deep sense of validation in realizing that such an impulse was proof positive of how potentially dangerous this man was. "Too bad for you, Fucker, because it does matter."

He turned and walked away then, pausing only long enough to depress the play button on the antiquated CD player on Trina's desk in the alcove near the kitchen, adjusting the volume to a level just loud enough to drown out any faltering voice that might be raised within the next few minutes, although he knew such an occurrence to be unlikely. He allowed himself a small smile as he recognized the singer and the song, finding it both suitable and ironic that the smoky, rough-whisky voice of Melissa Etheridge would be the last thing Brian heard before the darkness consumed him so completely that he couldn't hear anything at all. He didn't really know Brian's opinion of the lesbian's music, but he thought it pretty obvious that she would not be a favorite. Ultimately, it didn't matter anyway.

The daylight was going as he left the house, remembering to extinguish the candles as he went since they had already served their purpose, and hesitating for just a second to appreciate the lyrics that
drifted through the shadowed house behind him.

I've been here sleeping all these years.
There comes a time we all know,
There's a place that we must go
Into the soul, into the heart,
Into the dark*

He was careful to keep his movements casual and unhurried, thus making sure that Delia Perkins would have no reason to doubt his assurance that the patient was sleeping comfortably so there was no need for her to go rushing inside to see to his welfare. He even allowed himself a small smile as he saw her walk by the window and glance inside where Brian appeared to be luxuriating in the afterglow of a perfect massage.

At long last, this day - this long-awaited day, this day that he'd begun to think might never happen - was almost over.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Despite having a well deserved reputation as a diva/drag queen, Emmett Honeycutt only rarely allowed himself to devolve into an emotional mess, but he was at that point now, all-the-way there, intensely there, wrapped up tight in multiple layers of agitation and threatening to descend completely into blatant hysteria. And the really sad thing about it was that he had no rational idea why. Except that something was really, really wrong; that much he did know.

Justin's wild, static-filled, truncated phone call had been woefully short on facts but miles long with nuances of potential disaster that a functional mind could not easily dismiss.

"Get in touch with somebody - anybody - at the beach house, and have them make sure that Brian is all right and that nobody is left alone with him. Nobody - and that includes Jesus Christ Himself."

"But . . ."

"No buts, Emmett. You don't have to understand it; you just have to do it."

And with that, he'd been gone, leaving Emmett open-mouthed, but only for a second, for, in the end, Justin had been right; he didn't have to understand it. It was enough that his young friend had asked.

But it was not quite true that he didn't understand it. Somewhere in his gut, beneath the layers of rational thought and logic, he knew one thing. He had watched once as Brian Kinney fought for his life and almost lost the battle. He would not stand by and allow it to happen again. And that was the bare bones of what was happening here; Brian Kinney was in danger, and nothing else was important.

And when, asked a sardonic little voice in his head, had Brian become so vital to his life that he would do anything, risk anything, brave anything, to keep that from happening.

And now, his frustration level was rising by the moment, threatening to engulf him.

He had tried Brian's cell first. Busy signal, four times, until it had gone silent. Then he'd dialed it again, and it had simply rung for a moment before going to voice mail. He hadn't bothered to leave a message, knowing instinctively that it would be a useless gesture.

Then he'd tried the land line, which rang and rang and rang. Six tries.
Then he'd switched and tried Chris McClaren's cell number. Busy - over and over again.

And back to the land line, which was still ringing in his ear.

And he knew, somehow - just knew that the ring was pealing out in a house where no one was there to hear it . . . or able to hear it.

When the ring count reached fourteen, he picked up a crystal paperweight - Lalique, he thought - and flung it against the wall where it shattered into fine splinters. It made a nice, satisfactory hole in the raw silk panel, but it didn't do a thing to ease his frustration. Nothing, as it turned out, could do that, not even the luscious body of his beautiful partner bounding through the door to see what the hell was going on with his significant other.

There was simply no solace to be found for Emmett. Not until it was over. Not until someone answered that God-dammed phone.

Five minutes. Chris McClaren would never have dreamed that such a short time could feel like eternity. It would take him five more minutes to reach the beach house, but an annoying, relentless little voice in his head kept insisting that it was already too late - that it had been too late when he'd begun the journey. The light was fading rapidly now, night coming on with a vengeance as the last brilliant burst of sunlight flared from the western horizon, and stars sprang into sharp relief out over the sea.

He had taken too long to review the tapes, too long to spot the anomaly which, of course, seemed so obvious now. And now . . . he took the curve onto the beach road on two wheels and then had to fight for control of the BMW as the tires spun in drifts of loose sand along the edge of the lane.

Everything was coming together now, but it would mean nothing if it all fell into place just minutes too late.

He'd been fielding calls since he'd torn out of the parking lot at the discount store, and everything he'd heard had confirmed his suspicions. But nothing had served to ease the hard thump of his heart against his rib cage; not since he'd recognized that face on that tape, and especially not since Delia Perkins had answered his frantic call.

"Where's Jackson?" he'd demanded, not even bothering with a 'hello'.

"Gone," she'd replied, but her voice was strained and she was breathing heavily.

"How long?"

"Five minutes, I guess. Look, Boss, I can't talk right now. We've got a situation here."

McClaren had barely suppressed a gasp of horror. "Is he . . ." He found that he couldn't bring himself to say the word.

"I gotta go," she snapped, "or somebody's going to just give up and shoot the crazy bastard."

"What? Who?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me," he'd shouted. But too late. She was already gone.
Then he'd tried the house phone and the gatehouse phone. Nothing.

Then Delia again. No response. But at that point, it didn't matter any more, because he was pulling into the driveway, only to be forced to stop short by the crowd milling around in the yard, all circling one central figure who was shouting and refusing to quiet down.

"Dammit! You don't understand. I need to get to him. You need to get to him."

When McClaren leapt from the car and raced across the yard, Simon Redding seemed to realize that the time had come - that the torch could be passed, as he met the FBI agent's hard gaze.

"You need to get to him."

McClaren didn't take time to respond, beyond a quick nod. Then he was sprinting toward the house, willing himself to move faster, willing time to slow down to allow him to be there earlier - to be there in time.

He crashed through the front door, with Delia Perkins at his heels, thoroughly confused but enormously frightened by the grim look on her boss's face.

Neither of them knew what to expect, and they paused just inside, eyes scanning for anything out of place. But there was nothing. The cottage was warm and peaceful, even welcoming with Melissa Etheridge crooning softly in the background.

Oh, you say you just don't feel quite right today.
Does that mean that you're slipping away?
How would I know?**

Otherwise, everything was silent, pleasant, almost soothing - a sensation that was emphasized by the warm, enticing fragrance that McClaren could not quite place. Familiar, but unexpected, and unexpected - under these circumstances - was cause for alarm.

"The office," he said quickly. "That's where he was when I left."

Delia didn't waste time trying to argue, although her expression clearly said that she had no idea why he was so disturbed. They had stopped Redding before he could get into the house, so there should be no cause for . . .

The thought died as McClaren threw himself across the room to get to Brian, who was lying stretched out on his belly on the massage table, his face partially buried in a thick, fluffy pillow. There should have been nothing alarming about his position; she often slept the same way herself, with arms tucked up under her pillow. But this - somehow this was different; this was . . . wrong.

"Oh, fuck!" McClaren didn't waste time trying to rouse Brian with words. He simply wrapped his arms around the limp torso and jerked him off the table, sending both of them crashing to the floor in a welter of sprawled limbs.

"What is it?" she demanded, struggling to speak around the lump in her throat. "What's wrong?"

"He's not breathing," he answered, shifting Brian to lay him on his back and clear his airway, and noting in passing that those incredible lips were not nearly so luscious when tinted blue.

Perkins took a deep breath. "But there's not a mark on him." That much was painfully obvious, given that the man was wearing almost nothing. "What do we do?"
McClaren paused for a moment, something tickling in his mind, something that might make sense of this. If Brian had been strangled, or even smothered with that pillow, there would be marks on his body. Bruises at the very least. Brian Kinney would not have gone down without a fight. Of course, there was the possibility that he'd been poisoned, in which case there might be nothing to be done.

But McClaren wouldn't accept that. Couldn't accept it. This had been done in a stealthy manner, right under the noses of the people charged with protection of the victim, and, if poison had been an option, why hadn't it been attempted before?

The answer, when it occurred to him, was not comforting. Nothing had been attempted because the perp had never before had sufficient access or time to be able to complete his clandestine assault.

"Call 911," he directed, his eyes moving around the room, looking for something - anything - that might help him understand what had happened here. "And check to see if that kid - the resident - is next door. Maybe he'll have some idea of . . ."

And that was when he saw it - sitting on the bookcase by the door, completely innocuous, nothing to draw attention, except that it didn't belong there. It was not the kind of thing that Brian Kinney would use.

The label was slightly garish, and the words were legible even at this distance. "Lucinda's Candles - Cinnamon Buns."

Brian liked candles; he probably had plenty of them tucked into nooks and crannies around his house. There were even some here, in this room. But the candles that he favored all had one thing in common; they were all unscented.

Scented candles were romantic, and that pretty much explained it all.

So why . . . McClaren sniffed to sample the air, and realized what he was smelling.

And then he realized why.

He grabbed the pillow which had fallen to the floor when he'd pulled Brian off the table, and held it up to his face, taking a deep breath. And there it was, camouflaged under the heavy cinnamon scent in the air, but recognizable enough if one knew what to look for.

"What is it?" demanded Perkins, rushing back into the room after completing her 911 call and sending a subordinate to search next door for young Dr. Halloran. She was still shaken, and obviously confused, but also certain that there was some point in what he was doing. Chris McClaren did not do things without a reason.

"Nuts," he answered, jumping to his feet and hurrying to the desk. "The pillow's full of peanut dust."

"So?" In the urgency of the moment, the younger agent couldn't quite grasp the context of the remark.

"He's allergic to peanuts. Violently."

Perkins flushed slightly, chagrinned to realize that she should have remembered that, but had forgotten in the extreme stress of the moment. She didn't spare a thought to how this would impact on McClaren's assessment of her performance during this assignment, but later on, she would remember it and regret her lapse.

"Oh, my God. What can we . . ."
By this time, McClaren was hastily opening the top drawer of the desk, scrambling inside, looking for what he knew was there, what he'd seen himself only a couple of days ago when he'd gone rummaging for a spare thumb drive for his laptop, what had to be there. Only it wasn't there, and he was suddenly certain that he knew why - and where it would be found, providing he ever got the chance to check.

No point in wasting time lamenting over what was obviously gone. Instead, he spun away from the desk and went sprinting through the doorway, down the hall, and up the stairs, hoping against hope that the person who had engineered everything had either not known about or hadn't had time to access the vital item that should be tucked away in the bedside table in Brian's room.

"What are you doing?" Perkins' shout was shrill with desperation as she knelt beside Brian, looking in vain for some indication that it was not too late. But there was no sign; he was not breathing, and her fingers, pressed into the hollow beneath his jaw, could find no trace of a heartbeat. Nevertheless, adhering to established procedures, she rearranged his body and started CPR compressions, just as she'd been trained to do.

Oh, God. Were they too late? And how could this have happened?

It was at that moment that McClaren raced back through the door, his eyes trained on the object in his hand as he attempted to prepare it for use.

"Epi pen," he explained, somewhat unnecessarily. "He always has a couple of them around, just in case."

He administered the injection quickly, efficiently, as Perkins continued her efforts. And it was at that moment, when he knew that he had done all he could, that Brian's destiny was now in hands other than his own, that he felt the cold chill expand inside him, rendering him breathless, almost frozen with fear. He was unable to resist the urge to reach out and grasp Brian's hand and clasp it tight against his own heart.

It was not the action of a senior FBI agent. It was not professional, but it was, nevertheless, the only thing he could do.

The drone of the jet engines was faint in the cabin, but steady. Even comforting in some primal way, like the heartbeat of a parent for a frightened child held close against the terrors of the night - a reassurance that it was safe to sleep and ignore the darkness.

Justin wished he could believe it, wished he could accept that reassurance and bury himself in the blanket that had been provided for him. But it was useless. He'd been trying - had even managed to nod off once or twice, but sleep, on this night, was not a refuge for him. Instead, it was the repository of harsh, jagged, broken dreams.

For the sixth time - or maybe the eighth, he wasn't sure - he sat up abruptly and threw off the velvety softness of the down-filled coverlet, and turned to study the face of the individual seated beside him.

He didn't think he'd ever be able to express his appreciation for what Emmett had done; he was virtually certain that there were very few people who would have been capable of taking such action at all.

It was undeniable that it took a ridiculously generous man to be able to drop everything - literally - at a moment's notice and sprint out of an office, down a staircase, out of Pittsburgh's hottest gay
nightclub and into a waiting police car, to be driven at breakneck speed through the city in order to make it to the airport just in time to be bundled aboard an FBI jet already queued for take-off. Left behind had been such important items as clothing, personal effects, business commitments, not to mention one frustrated, semi-speechless boyfriend/life partner. Emmett had come with no luggage, no briefcase - not even a toothbrush. But he had managed to bring the things that Justin needed most - his affection and his lovely supportive spirit. But the day had taken its toll on him, and he was dozing now, slumped in the roomy, first-class style seat, with his head braced against the window, seatbelt snugly fastened. Emmett, despite a determined, carefully developed aura of sophistication, was not a blasé flyer, his nervousness undoubtedly a remnant of the events of one particularly memorable experience aboard a commercial airliner. Still, he had managed to calm himself sufficiently to grab a nap, and Justin was careful not to disturb him.

He stretched a bit and glanced over toward the only other person in the cabin. He was not surprised to find Alexandra Corey scanning through files on her laptop, and none too patiently if he was an accurate judge of her demeanor. Of course, he doubted that anyone could really read this woman with any degree of certainty, but the pinched set of her mouth and the hard gleam in her eyes would have discouraged a casual approach from anybody who happened to venture too close.

Like Justin, she glanced often toward the digital clock displayed on the front bulkhead, despite the fact that the time was undoubtedly displayed on her computer screen, not to mention the perfectly serviceable, moderately expensive watch she wore on her wrist. It was somehow comforting to realize that, in her own way, she was just as nervous, just as anxious as the young man who sat watching her.

Well - almost. He sighed and realized that his thoughts were bordering on stupidity. No one - anywhere - could possibly be as nervous . . . no, scratch that. Not nervous. Terrified. No one could be as terrified as he was now.

Twenty-seven minutes.

The amount of time remaining until they would touch down, having trimmed three minutes from the expected duration of the trip due to favorable tail winds. At that point they would scramble out of the jet into a waiting FBI vehicle to go tearing across the city to get to the hospital, with every single one of them hoping that they were in time - that they were not too late.

He wouldn't glance at that clock again. He wouldn't. He . . .

Twenty-six minutes.

Justin closed his eyes, regretting that he had gulped down a brandy when he'd come on board, under the misguided notion that it would calm his nerves. It hadn't. Instead, it was sitting in his stomach now, like a frozen ball of ice with no intention of melting. How long ago had that been?

Agent Corey had played hostess when he and Emmett had arrived and handed out snifters of the surprisingly fine liqueur, before settling into her spot behind a small, well-equipped workstation while nursing her own drink. They'd hardly spoken at all since then

Eighty-eight minutes ago.

Time, he thought, was behaving oddly, either not passing at all - frozen, interminable, infinite - or passing in great dizzying chunks, depending on what he was feeling and thinking. How long had it been, for example, since that terrifying phone call?

One hundred and twenty-nine minutes.
Or a lifetime, depending on how one looked at it. Chris McClaren's voice had been hard, unyielding, and he'd spoken only six words. "You need to get here - now!"

Justin thought he might have been more frightened at some point in his life, but he really couldn't remember when. Even when he'd flown back from New Zealand, not knowing what he might find at the end of his journey, he had not allowed himself to anticipate the worst. But now . . . Chris McClaren just didn't do panic. He was the man who would be cool in the face of Armageddon, facing down Satan's legions with cool logic and determination. But Justin couldn't deny what he'd heard in the man's voice: fear - blatant, full-out, over-the-top fear. As for Justin, he'd gone almost catatonic at the sound of those words, spoken in that tone, and it had been his enormous good fortune that it had happened in Emmett's office, so that he was able to trust his friend to manage everything - calling Alexandra Corey and insisting that she arrange the FBI flight and allow the two of them to accompany her, overcoming her reservations by sheer force of will; contacting Carl to arrange for a police transport to the airport; calling in Mathis and Cynthia for a security update and Drew to fill in for him while they were gone; handling everything, in fact - all completed while Justin sat motionless, dazed and lingering on the verge of incoherence.

Everything from the moment he'd dropped the phone, causing Emmett to have to leap forward to recover it, to the time when they'd actually boarded the plane now felt like nothing more than a blur.

They'd strapped themselves in, braced for take-off, and been advised by Corey that she had no new information. Brian had been found unconscious and unresponsive, suffering from anaphylactic shock, and rushed to the hospital. That was all anyone knew. Since then, it had been a waiting game.

Except for that one moment - as clear and pure and perfect as polished, faceted crystal. 

Fifty-three minutes ago.

The look on Alexandra Corey's face had spoken clearly, even though she hadn't said a word when Justin's phone rang. The call should have gone to her, and they all knew it, but that didn't prevent Justin from answering on the first ring.

"He's alive. That's all I know for now. He wasn't breathing when we found him, but they managed . . . they managed to bring him back, but there's no way to know . . . Anyway, just . . . hurry."

And that had been it. McClaren had said no more, but, for that moment, it had been enough. Enough to allow Justin to regain a spark of hope, to cling to the possibility, to take comfort from the fact that Brian's heart was still beating, that blood still raced through arteries and veins and warmed that body - that he would be in time. That he would get to hold that hand while it was still warm and pliable; that he would get to kiss that mouth again, while it was still soft and tender beneath his lips; that he would get to whisper into those ears and plead not to be left alone.

If nothing else, that he would, at least, get to say good-bye.

Twenty-four minutes - and counting.

It occurred to him at that moment that he hadn't even asked who had done this, or how it had happened, and he supposed that he should be curious. That he should be demanding answers and explanations. But he wouldn't. Not now, although some tiny little corner of his mind whispered that someone was sure as hell going to pay for this later. But for now, it didn't matter. He didn't care who or how, or even why.

The only thing that mattered was the next breath, the next heartbeat - one more moment holding death at arm's length. Nothing else seemed important.
Twenty-three minutes - the blink of an eye . . . or forever, depending on how you looked at it.

Chris McClaren and Delia Perkins were standing outside the ICU cubicle where Brian Kinney was fighting for his life, although, Delia observed with a sigh, he didn't look like he was fighting. He simply looked beautiful - exactly the way he always looked beautiful - and how long, she wondered, had she been fighting to suppress that observation and see him as just any other man.

But she looked again, watching the slow rise and fall of that perfectly sculpted chest and knew that she had lost the battle. Gay or straight, metro-sexual, bi-sexual, or asexual, Brian Kinney was beautiful, and it simply wasn't fair that there were people who wanted to kill him for exactly that reason.

What kind of a world are we living in? And why was she suddenly so disturbed by that thought? It wasn't, she reasoned, that she hadn't known it before. She was an FBI agent, for God's sake. Highly placed and on the fast track for advancement, so she knew all about the vile, ugly underbelly of life. But this - this was different. This wasn't about greed for money or power or political position; it wasn't about personal vendettas; it wasn't even about religious differences - not really. This was just about hatred - unreasoning, irrational, baseless and bottomless - and she suddenly found herself questioning if she really had the spine and the guts to face up to this sort of thing. Then she took a deep breath, realizing something else; whether she had the strength or courage or not didn't really matter, because somebody had to do it, and she - apparently - had been elected.

Along with her companion. She sighed again. Another reason for lamenting the random luck which made some men available - and some not.

Chris McClaren was leaning against the wall, arms crossed, and one foot - Nike-clad - braced against the door frame. Having adopted casual dress for the duration of this mission, he had not bothered to change into the dark suit and tie that was standard for most agency operations. The beach setting in general - and Brian Kinney in particular - was simply not conducive to any degree of formality. Nevertheless, the look in his eyes and the grim set of his jaw line were clear indicators of his fierce determination to perform the tasks assigned to him and accomplish his goal of protecting the client in a completely professional manner. Tight Levis and a Banana Republic polo shirt did not change that and had the added advantage of making him look decidedly appetizing.

Perkins allowed herself a moment to appreciate the view, and tried not to think about what it would do to him if he should fail to achieve his chief objective. If Brian Kinney did not survive . . . She looked up quickly and was immensely grateful to spot a familiar figure racing toward them from the ICU entrance, with a couple of companions behind him, trying and failing to keep up with his headlong rush. Dealing with the arrival of Justin Taylor made it impossible to continue with her original train of thought.

Still, she was caught completely off guard when Taylor sprinted past her and crashed into the man at her side, wrapping his fists in the dark fabric of McClaren's shirt.

"I left him with you," snarled the young blond. "You were supposed to keep him safe."

"Justin," snapped Delia Perkins, reaching out and trying to jerk him away from McClaren. "He wasn't there. When it happened, he wasn't . . ."

"But he should have been." Justin was not about to be diverted from his primary target, as he continued to glare at the senior agent. "You should have been."
Emmett Honeycutt and Alexandra Corey arrived at that moment, both slightly out of breath from their attempts to keep Justin in sight. Both chose - wisely, thought Perkins - to keep silent and allow the conversation to play out without their interference.

For his part, McClaren did not argue. Instead, he simply nodded.

"When this is over," said Justin, his voice hard and hoarse, "you better have one hell of an excuse."

The FBI agent straightened up and squared his shoulders as he looked down at that angry young face. "No excuses. That would be inappropriate, wouldn't it? But I will explain it to you - as best I can."

Justin's eyes were ablaze with anger and an almost irresistible hunger to exact some kind of payback, and he lingered there for a moment, obviously fighting for a measure of self control. In the end, it was Perkins who managed to help him achieve it.

"Think about it, Justin," she said softly. "You're about to go to his side. Do you really want him to open his eyes and see you like this? So furious that you've practically got steam shooting out your ears? If you're the first thing he sees, when he regains consciousness, wouldn't it be better . . ." She fell silent, wondering if she'd overstepped her bounds when she saw a hard glitter of resentment in his eyes, but it was gone almost before it formed.

He swallowed hard, and looked down at where his hands were still clasped tight in the fabric of McClaren's shirt. Then slowly, deliberately, he opened his fingers and stepped away. It was at that moment that he shifted to look through the door, and the rigid lines on his face softened, as all the bitterness and anger and impatience simply drained out of him, leaving only his fear and his need and - most of all - his love. He did not wait for permission to move toward the bed, and it was doubtful that anyone could have stopped him, even if they'd been foolish enough to make the effort.

But he did not, as might have been expected, throw himself upon the figure that lay still and silent in the hospital bed, attached to the myriad machines around him with a stunning variety of tubes and wires and coils and clips and . . . It was as if Brian was encased in a cage of metal and plastic and glass, none of it pleasing to the touch or welcoming to an invading hand. But none of that mattered in the end.

Justin fell to his knees beside the bed, and grasped the hand that lay loose and cool atop the blankets, careful to avoid dislodging the needles that were taped in place, buried in the veins, carrying the vital solutions that were serving only one purpose - to keep that heart beating, to assure that the next breath would be drawn. With infinite gentleness, the young man drew that pale, almost boneless hand to his lips and kissed each finger in turn, before turning it over and moving on to the palm, the heel of the thumb, and the inside of the wrist.

"Brian." It was just a whisper, meant for no one's ears except - ironically - the person who probably could not hear it. "I'm here, Brian. And I need you to know something. Just one thing, if you never know anything else. You have to stay with me, Brian. You can't leave me, because . . ." He paused then, to try to swallow around the lump in his throat and to draw breath that seemed to be fighting off his efforts to inhale. He laid his head down, infinitely tender, against the back of that motionless hand, and, when he spoke again, it was almost without sound, nothing more than a faint breath of words formed by lips gone dry and cold. "Because I can't make it without you. If you love me, Brian, you have to come back to me."

"Justin." The voice was hesitant, tentative, almost apologetic, but surprisingly firm. "Please be careful. One needle dislodged, one IV cannula tilted the wrong way, and . . ."
Justin straightened up slowly and turned to regard Kevin Halloran with pale, haunted eyes. "Did you . . . " He paused, barely able to summon breath to continue. "Did you save his life?"

The young resident's smile was pensive. "I wish I could take the credit, but I think I'd have been too late. It was McClaren who saved him, with help from Delia. He gave him the shot that reversed the effect of the allergen, and she got him breathing again. By the time I got there, he was comatose, but alive."

"And now?"

The young man, who would one day become a renowned neurosurgeon, could only offer a small sigh. "Comatose, but alive."

Justin managed to get to his feet, so he could stand and look down at Brian's face, which was - somehow - more beautiful in this moment than he had ever seen it. "Will he . . . " He wanted to ask - really wanted to ask - but couldn't.

Fortunately, Kevin Halloran was merciful enough to spare him the necessity. "You should probably wait to talk to Dr. Wainwright. He's the chief of internal medicine who's in charge of his case. But he's not here right now, and, if you really want my opinion, I'd have to say that nobody can really give you the answer you're looking for, Justin. Not yet. We've done everything that can be done, and he's on every kind of monitor you can imagine. So far, there's nothing to suggest that the damage was irrevocable, but, in the end, it's going to be up to Brian."

"How long was he . . . "

Again, the young doctor didn't wait to hear the word that Justin obviously didn't want to speak. "No way to know for sure. A few minutes, we think. But it might have been longer."

"And if it was?"

Halloran took a deep breath. "A lack of oxygen can cause some serious damage, Justin."

"You mean brain damage." It was not a question.

"Among other things."

"So he could be . . . "

"He could," replied the resident, "but there's no indication of that. Not yet."

"So all we can do is wait." Again, it was not a question.

Halloran nodded. "Wait, and sit here and talk to him. There's no proof, of course, that he'll even hear you, or that it will do any good if he does, but . . ."

"But what?"

"But it can't hurt." The resident's smile was very gentle. "And if there's even a one-in-a-million chance that it might help, I'm thinking you'd want to take it."

Justin took a moment to glance around, noting the cold sterility of the cubicle and the faces of the small crowd staring at him through the glass of the doorway. "I thought there were rules about this kind of thing. In an ICU, I mean. I figured they'd throw me out. So why would you let . . . "

Halloran's smile became a quick, bright grin. "Because my mother is the charge nurse on this unit,
and because . . ." He turned then to gaze down at Brian Kinney, and the expression of longing in his eyes was plain for anyone to see, although he was careful to mask it quickly. Then he looked up and met Justin's gaze squarely. "Well, just because."

Justin smiled and felt an unaccustomed urge to offer the young doctor a bit of sympathy, although he was careful to keep it to himself. One did not, after all, offer encouragement to the competition, especially when the competition looked like Kevin Halloran. Still, he was grateful for the resident's understanding and assistance. Blatantly ignoring the questioning looks from the group of observers assembled at the door, he pulled a chair from the corner and set it beside the bed, where he settled in to wait and - just in case - to say all the things that he'd always meant to say to Brian but somehow never managed to screw up enough courage or find the right moment.

The moment, it seemed, was at hand.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

He had been here before; he was sure of that. But it had been different then. He would have sighed if such a thing were possible, but he knew it wasn't. Wherever his body might be - here or elsewhere - controlling it was beyond him for the moment. Maybe even forever. He wasn't keen to remember his last visit, although he did entertain a vague, barely coherent flicker of thought that wondered how often he would come here. How often he would die. Because that was the one thing that he was certain of; he had died - again.

One day, it would stick. Maybe today.

Except . . . if this was hell, he probably wouldn't be feeling quite so laid back. He doubted that hell was supposed to be quite so relaxing, although he was vaguely aware of some measure of discomfort lingering below the level of conscious thought. He was also pretty sure that it wasn't supposed to be cool, and there was definitely a stirring in the air, the caress of a soft breeze against his face that carried traces of faint chemical odors, but also a soft nuance of something pleasant, something familiar. Also, there probably wouldn't be music in hell either, although he could visualize the sturm und drang of Metallica, maybe, or Black Sabbath. That one might be particularly appropriate, but this . . .

He listened just long enough to identify what he was hearing, before reconsidering his judgment. He had always had a bit of a soft spot for James Taylor, even though he would never have admitted it to the rank and file of Kinney acquaintances. It did not, after all, really fit his public image, but then again, given his tendency to give less than a shit about other people's opinions, he realized that it didn't really make any difference. He didn't, of course, like all of the singer's efforts. He remembered flinching at the ebullient treacle sweetness of "How Sweet It Is to Be Loved by You" and the sentimental twang of "Country Roads", but he'd always had a particular fondness for "Something In The Way She Moves" - with gender adjustments, of course, but this one - this one he could endure, if only it weren't quite so evocative, raising memories best left unraised.

He was vaguely aware of shadows moving around him, of a world turning without his active participation, of life going on - leaving without him? - as the lyrics of the song, not quite disembodied and not quite distant enough, drifted across the surface of his mind.

"To love is just a word I've heard when things are being said;
Stories my poor head has told me cannot stand the cold,
And in between what might have been and what has come to pass,
A misbegotten guess, alas, and bits of broken glass."

The voice was mellow, at least, and if the lyrics were a tad bit sentimental for his taste, the delivery
itself wasn't half-bad as the vocalist caressed the tender ballad with his voice and allowed visions of
sadness and loss to permeate his performance. It wasn't ordinarily Brian's style; he was never one
for the kind of love songs written by the broken-hearted. But still, this one managed to get under the
protective shell he normally wore, so that he found it . . . okay, he guessed - less melodic wallowing
than an appreciation of precious memory - so perhaps he could tolerate it, for a while.

"Where do your golden rainbows end,
And why is this song so sad?
Dreaming the dreams I dream, my friend,
Loving the love I love to love, to love . . ." ***

But he had a sudden urge to push himself up and out of this vast, gray nothing as the meaning of
those words touched him, thrusting into him with the force of a sword wielded by a bad boy knight of
the Round Table; Mordred, perhaps, Arthur's nemesis, but, whatever the source, it made him come
to an urgent halt and fight to achieve some distance from the path he'd been following. Whatever lay
beyond this place might be bad - really, really bad - but he didn't really think it could be worse than
having to endure the thoughts those lyrics inspired. Only it was just too hard - moving, holding
himself closed and protected, stepping clear of anything that wanted to touch him - and besides,
there was something else tugging at him, something else demanding his attention, something softer,
sweeter, close and intimate and impossible to resist.

". . . standing there, under that streetlight, I watched you coming toward me, and , and I . . . oh, my
God, Brian, how can I make you see it? How can I make you understand what you did to me in the
first second I saw you. I know what I meant to you; I could see it in your eyes. It was lust. And that
was all it was then - for you. But for me, it was the first time I ever knew that there was someone like
you, someone waiting to send my whole world spinning . . ." The words grew softer, as if the
speaker was pulling away, but he was pretty sure it was only in his mind. The speaker wasn't the one
who was drifting into the gray nothingness. He himself was the one trying to fade away, to step back
and disappear into the fog. And the speaker? The speaker would still be there . . . once he'd finished
. . . doing whatever it was that he was doing. He thought he shifted, but probably not. The words
were like a tone poem, illuminating dark corners of his thoughts, bringing light, bringing painful
awareness, bringing . . . "my gateway into a new life. You were . . . you were my everything, Brian.
And I knew it. I know you think that's stupid. You think that love doesn't happen like that. Hell,
maybe you still think that love doesn't happen at all. I mean, just because you're finally able to say it
doesn't mean . . ." More drifting, mostly because the words were becoming a bit tiresome. Not quite
a whine - and he didn't know why that thought made him want to smile - but a bit of a complaint,
and that was borderline remarkable, given the circumstances - that one could speak of love with
such conviction, but still hang on to the right to express irritation with the beloved, that was . . ." but
you never let me see it, do you, so I can't know for sure that you're feeling what I felt that very first
night. And you don't even have to say it; I know you still don't believe me. But it doesn't matter,
because . . . because I believe me, Brian. I know the truth, I know that you were always meant to be
the one . . ."

There was a natural cadence in the voice now, like a timed chorus, and he knew he shouldn't listen,
that listening, hearing, understanding would take him to a place he probably shouldn't go, a place
he would never want to leave. So he tried not to hear it. Maybe he'd start thinking about a trip to
Australia, since he'd never actually managed to get there, because of . . . well, just because, and he'd
heard all kind of stories about the beaches there and . . . Shit! Why couldn't he show some tiny little
bit of interest in what he would find on those beaches, and why, oh why did that voice insist on . . .
"hope that you know it too, somewhere deep inside you . . . so you can hold on and use it to pull you
back to me. Because . . . because without you, there's no me, Brian. I need you to know that. I need
you to believe it. I can't live without you, you stupid prick. Haven't you seen that yet? Didn't you see
what it did to me when you turned away from me and sent me running off to New York? And yes,
just in case you think I never figured it out, I know that it was what you planned to do. You think you're the only one that can figure things out. I learned how to put together the puzzle of Brian Kinney a long time ago. So . . . what? You think I was happy in the Big Apple - that I was this big, bad, successful Picasso-wannabe - that I'd have been content to spend the rest of my life like . . ." *He shouldn't be listening. This was the thing that he had been trying to run away from - forever; the thing that he couldn't let himself believe, because he knew he couldn't be the man he needed to be to earn that kind of loyalty - that kind of commitment. He just needed to sleep - just sleep. Was that asking too . . . "empty, Brian. That's what I am without you. And that's what you are without me, whether you want to believe it or not. So . . . so you need to just stop this crap. Stop daydreaming and fucking around in your x-rated porn fantasy. Because you don't have to do that. All you have to do . . . is open your eyes, and it'll all be there, waiting for you. I'm here. I'm always going to be here."

The voice fell silent, James Taylor stopped singing, and the gray emptiness settled around him, allowing him to slip back into the dark arms of sleep, hoping that the worst was over.

*He had absolutely no sense of time, but he was pretty sure his respite was brief. The voice came back. Of course, it did. Had he really expected anything else? He found that he couldn't actually call to mind many details about his life or the people that filled it, but he did know one thing for certain: Justin Taylor never, never gave up on anything that really mattered to him.

". . . shouldn't worry about Gus. I talked to Lindsey before I left, and she thought it best not to tell him anything about this. Until you're recovered, anyway. Which should happen just any time now, unless you're planning to scare us even worse than we're already scared. Do you really want to do that, Brian? Imagine his face; imagine Gus, and how he'd feel if . . . I know - you never intended to love Gus. You were just going to be the sperm donor, but life . . . it doesn't always work the way you think it will, does it? And you learned that . . ." *And of course, with that kind of prompt, it was impossibly not to call up an image of his son, accompanied by a not-quite-random speculation of whether or not he had looked like that - so innocent, so bright, so beautiful - when he was that age, and, if he had, why had it been so impossible for his parents to . . . No, he thought it would be easier to listen to the words, and that was a substantial surprise . . . "Emmett's here too, you know. Makes me wonder if you have any idea how much he cares about you. Just as much, I think, as you care about him, even though neither one of you would ever admit it. He's the one who got me here; I was so fucked up, so terrified and stunned and panicked that I couldn't even think of who to call, or where to go, or how to reach you. But Emmett knew. Once all this is over, you need to make him a permanent employee - someone to help Cynthia, who works way too hard just to try to do what you need done. You're not easy to work for, you know, with your prima donna attitudes and your demanding nature, and . . . well, you probably already know that, and don't give a shit, but you need to think about it. You . . . wear people out, Brian. They get so caught up in being what you need them to be, that they forget how to . . ."

*That, of course, was just flagrantly untrue, or - well, maybe not untrue exactly, but a huge exaggeration. He didn't demand more of the people around him than he demanded of himself . . . and why did that thought suddenly feel like an admission of guilt? And why couldn't he just drift off into sleep and not . . . "people who love you, and you have no idea, because you never let yourself know it. You never let yourself believe that you deserve their love." *The words were interrupted by a soft, barely-there sigh. "Just like you never let yourself believe that you deserve my love. You do, you know, but I've almost given up on finding a way to make you believe it. So here's the deal: you don't have to believe it; you don't have to accept it. You just have to come back to me, Brian, because, whether or not you deserve it doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is that I love you - more than you will ever know. So much that I can't live without you, and I will never find a reason to be happy again, if you don't come back to me. It'll be all your fault, when I turn into a bitter, cruel, vicious old man, and . . ."
There was a sudden, faint beeping sound behind the voice, and then a soft succession of piano notes, before a new voice rose, singing a new song.

*Once in every life,*
*Someone comes along,*
*And you came to me.*
*It was almost like a song.*

"... my mother won't ever forgive you either, if I give up my art and my life to become a confirmed hermit and live ..."

"Justin!"

_Not enough,* he realized instantly, _as he hadn't really managed to make a sound - not even so much as a breath - just a tiny movement of his lips that failed to halt the flow of words that continued to ..."

"... sitting and watching life go by, mourning everything we should have had - could have had. What we should have been together, you and ..."

"Justin!" _Still not much - just a tiny susurration of air, but better._

Still, it took almost five seconds for Justin to realize that the word - little more than a fragment of his imagination - had actually been spoken, had actually fallen from Brian's lips.

"Brian? Oh, my God, Brian, what - what do you ..."

"Just please, shut ... the - fuck ... up ... and if you make me listen to any more ... country music, we are ... done. I am never ... waking up again."

And with that said, he promptly fell back asleep, but it was really sleep this time, instead of the coma it had been.

He hadn't opened his eyes, hadn't really moved at all, but it was enough. It was Brian; no one hearing the sheer snideness of the words could have mistaken it for anything other than classic Brian-Kinney snark, and Justin thought he had never heard anything more beautiful.

He buried his face against the hand he was clasping, unable, for a moment, to summon up a reply as tears welled in his eyes and poured down his face. He was aware - but only vaguely - of medical staffers rushing into the room, probably in reaction to the bells and whistles sounding from various monitors arranged around the bed. He thought they might even have tried to convince him to move away from the patient, but that - well, that just wasn't going to happen, and he was pretty sure that it was Kevin Halloran that he had to thank for being left to his clinging.

It was a terribly long five minutes, as doctors and nurses and various technicians buzzed in and out to check and double-check the readings of the various instruments, and there was little that Justin could do to help. In fact, he realized, his presence was probably a hindrance, but still he remained adamant. He wasn't moving. He could, however, do one thing to help. Shifting only a little, he retrieved the universal remote and switched off the piped-in music which was, apparently, a feed from a local radio station featuring a blend of soft pop and country music. Until Brian had pointed it out - in his own inimitable way - Justin hadn't even noticed it as it was just background sound, played so softly that it was barely even audible.

He grinned, as he realized that he had inadvertently stumbled across the surest way of reaching through the dark levels of coma to awaken this wonderful, contrary, indomitable man. The key had been to get on his last nerve, and Justin wanted to laugh at the irony, but instead, he had to fight off
another round of tears. In the end, it didn't matter; nothing mattered, except that it had worked, and he could tell, from the smile on Halloran's face, that the crisis was past. Brian was sleeping. Just sleeping, and the tiny smirk he was wearing was real - not just an accidental arrangement of features.

Ignoring the staff members still gathered around the bed, Justin got to his feet and leaned forward to claim the lips that he knew to be his for the claiming, Brian's bad mood notwithstanding. The kiss was intense, thorough, and became intimate - even passionate - when Brian shifted enough to open his mouth and welcome the tongue that was insisting on entrance, although he never actually awakened. Several of the spectators might have initially had some notion of stepping in to intervene, but ultimately, they didn't. Maybe it was the stern set of Halloran's face that stopped them, or maybe it was their own embarrassment at witnessing such intimacy between two men. But mostly, it was simply that they all understood that it was a privilege to be allowed to be present for such a complete, unequivocal expression of love, and the fact that it was between two men didn't seem to matter in the least.

They waited in silence, and a few of them happened to glance out the window and recognize the lovely juxtaposition of this moment between lovers and morning breaking pure and beautiful over the vast expanse of the Atlantic.

In the course of his life, he was sure he had spent more uncomfortable nights, but he actually couldn't remember when. After hours of shifting from one uncomfortable seat to another in the ICU waiting room, he had wandered down to the cafeteria and treated himself to bad coffee and even worse . . . calling it pastry was a huge disservice to the baking industry. If asked, Emmett would have denied the possibility of creating a Danish that actually tasted like cardboard, but someone in the dark depths of the hospital kitchen had actually succeeded in that onerous task.

He had returned to his lonely vigil, and spent a few minutes trying - without much success - to chat with Chris McClaren who had not left his post at Brian's door all during the night. Others had rotated; Delia Perkins had been relieved during the wee hours, and her replacement - a dour young man with sky-high cheekbones and a face that looked as if it might crack if he tried to smile - had left several times, apparently running errands at McClaren's command. He had gone for coffee frequently; had fetched a newspaper and files and documents; had excused himself several times, probably for bathroom breaks, and had even sought and found a couple of straight-back chairs that he arranged by the doorway so that the two on-guard agents could stand guard while sitting. He sat; McClaren did not.

Other agents were posted at various sites around the hospital, some stationery - as in the two posted at the primary entrance, and the two near the ER front desk. Another team patrolled the grounds. Some had been pulled in from their regular post at the beach house; others had been reassigned from a local field office. The FBI did not react with bland acceptance when someone under their protection was assaulted so successfully. All had been relieved at some point during the interminable night; all but one. And Emmett wondered how McClaren would react if anyone attempted to send him away from his post; not well, he was sure.

It was an intense sense of duty that kept him there, thought Emmett, but it was also something more personal. And Emmett felt a deep ache of sympathy for the agent. He knew a thing or three about unrequited love - enough, at least, to recognize it when he saw it, although he was absolutely certain that neither the lover nor his beloved would ever admit the truth of it.

Another example of collateral damage in the extended saga of Brian Kinney.

Sometimes, Emmett was jealous of Brian. Shit! If everyone were unflinchingly honest, they'd all be
forced to admit to being jealous of Brian, at one time or another, and probably repeatedly. But Emmett felt fortunate in that he also realized that most people never saw the dark side of what it was to be Brian. He thought about it sometimes - what it must feel like to be so desired, so lusted after, so brilliant, not to mention so bloody sexy - but he also knew that the self-imposed distance, the cold determination to remain unchained, and, above all, the monumental self-doubt that had to be locked away, kept hidden and safe from prying eyes or greedy hands - those were just some of the costs that Brian paid on a daily basis. And Emmett knew with absolute certainty that he would never speak to anyone about that doubt, as he also knew that, if he did, no one would ever believe him.

Definitely not worth it, he decided.

He found Trina in the waiting room when he'd finished taking a walk through the hospital's endless corridors, and decided immediately that the woman should be nominated for sainthood, as she was carrying a huge thermos filled with coffee fit for the gods, and a plastic container of fresh beignets and still warm blueberry muffins. Alexandra Corey joined them just as they were settling into a sectional sofa in the corner and looking forward to breakfast and - hopefully - an update on Brian's condition. It had been a long, mostly silent night, but the new day was at hand, and maybe . . .

The light pouring through the east-facing windows was still pearly with dawn mist when disturbing sounds erupted from the ICU, and both Emmett and Agent Corey leapt to their feet to race for the doorway. Only Trina remained where she was, limiting her reaction to a tilt of her head and a quick inhalation; she knew those voices, and she thought it better to wait to decide how to react. This was either going to be very good - or very bad, and she didn't want to leap to any conclusion, only to be proven wrong. Instead, she closed her eyes and murmured a brief prayer. It was not logical, she thought, that she should have grown so fond of a young stranger in so short a period of time - especially one who incorporated a lot of the less-than-stellar qualities of a scoundrel and a rogue - but there it was, nonetheless. She didn't want to lose Brian Kinney to the viciousness of a society filled with homophobes, but it was ultimately out of her hands. So she would sit here and pour coffee - and hope.

Emmett however was not capable of such a prosaic attitude. He went racing through the ICU main entrance, barely aware of Agent Corey at his side, and came to an abrupt stop as he was confronted with an unexpected tableau. One did not, after all, ordinarily visualize an FBI agent - in his physical prime - being manhandled by a beautiful, blond twink with blood in his eye. McClaren had obviously been slammed against the wall, and Justin was standing before him, quivering with rage, one fist poised and ready to strike, as the other hand was gripping his adversary's throat, tight enough to make breathing difficult - or maybe impossible.

"Now," Justin was not quite shouting. "Since he's awake, and the doctor says the worst is over, now you explain it to me. How the fuck could you let this happen? You were supposed to protect him. You were supposed to stay with him, and keep him safe, and you . . . you fucked it up, Asshole. How could you . . ."

"Mr. Taylor." Unexpectedly, it was Alexandra Corey who spoke up . . . and stepped up, wrapping her hands around Justin's arm and trying to pull him back and away from his target. "It wasn't his fault. It was mine."

Justin blinked rapidly, looking confused. Looking lost, thought Chris McClaren, who was really trying to be angry at Brian's fuckbuddy (and who was he kidding by referring to the kid with that term) but couldn't quite manage it. He knew why Justin blamed him for what had happened to Brian; he knew, because he agreed. He blamed himself, no matter what kind of bullshit his boss was prepared to shovel in order to give him some kind of perpetual get-out-of-jail-free card.
"What do you mean?" asked Justin, not convinced yet, and not ready to let go of his anger, but backing off just a bit and easing his grip just enough to allow his adversary to breathe without a struggle.

"We vetted everyone, Justin. The Bureau ran checks on everybody who would have any contact with Brian, or any access to him - every member of Turnage's staff, everyone at the clinic, even the trades people who would provide goods and services at the cottage. Everyone. Only . . ."

"Only somehow," Justin interrupted, voice dripping with venom, "you missed one. So are you going to tell me what happened - and why - or should I just . . ."

"Justin," said Emmett gently, "I understand why you're upset." He stepped closer and leaned forward to whisper in his young friend's ear. "You almost lost him, and I really do know what that would do to you. But I also know that Agent McClaren saved his life. Now maybe you're right; maybe he's responsible for risking it in the first place. But - in the end - he saved him. Do you really want to bust his chops for it . . . and then have to explain it all to Brian when he wakes up? You do remember what a pain in the ass he can be whenever he thinks somebody's being over-protective, don't you?"

Justin was very still, his eyes still drilling into McClaren's - blue on blue, ice on ice. "I'd still like to beat you to a bloody pulp," he said through gritted teeth.

McClaren did not flinch. "I know."

Taking a deep, shaky breath, Justin finally stepped away. "And I still want answers."

"And you'll have them," Agent Corey assured him. "But not yet. Brian is the one who has the right to hear it first, and it's up to him to decide if you're allowed to listen in. It's really his story, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but . . ."

"But nothing." That was McClaren, cold and determined. "Brian's choice, and nobody is going to take that away from him. With all the crap that's been happening around us, I think we all got a little caught up in the chaos and managed to forget that basic fact. It's always going to be Brian's choice."

Justin wanted to argue, wanted to claim proprietary rights and a place at the head of the table. But, in the end, he couldn't, because - loathe as he was to admit it - McClaren was right. It was Brian's choice, and he couldn't quite suppress a sigh as a little voice in the back of his mind insisted that it always would be.

"Come on, Baby," said Emmett with a gentle smile. "If I'm not mistaken, there's a young doctor over there - fabulous bubble butt under those gruesome scrubs, by the way - waiting to speak to us. Let's go have breakfast and get all the scoop so we can call home and reassure everybody, because you must know that, if you delay calling, Cynthia is going to have your ass on a plate, and Michael . . . well, Michael is probably already in the middle of a major queen-out. So can we please . . ."

He fell silent, deeply moved by the fear and uncertainty he could still read in Justin's eyes, but still certain that he was right, that it must ultimately be Brian's call.

With no other alternative, they all moved to the waiting room to listen to Dr. Halloran's briefing; all but Chris McClaren, who remained at his post, with a quick nod to his boss - a nod that spoke volumes.

Someone had gotten to Brian Kinney while he was under the protection of the FBI in general and Chris McClaren specifically. It was a major fuck up; it would only happen again over his dead body, and that was a promise.
* -- Into the Dark -- Melissa Etheridge
** -- How Would I Know? -- Melissa Etheridge
***-- Long Ago and Far Away -- James Taylor
****-- It Was Almost Like a Song -- Archie Jordon, Hal David

tbc
Chapter 51

The prince is never going to come. Everybody knows that; and maybe Sleeping Beauty's dead.

-- The Vampire Lestat -- Anne Rice

It had been a long, exhausting four days for everyone, and each of them had scrambled to find ways to deal with it.

The security team was tense and jumpy, all laboring under a burden of guilt which was mostly illogical, as none of them had actually failed to perform as expected or according to policy. But that didn't seem to make much difference. Whenever any of them managed to push free of the shadow of what might-have-been-and-almost-was and begin to move toward a new day with optimism and self-confidence, they would come face-to-face with the recollection of the look on Chris McClaren's face during that interminable night when he'd believed that the man whose life had been entrusted to him would not survive the attack. As he struggled through those endless hours, it had probably not mattered that he and Kinney had established a strange relationship that went far beyond professional obligations; probably. It had only mattered that he believed that his blunder had cost this extraordinary man his life. And 'extraordinary', they had all conceded, was the perfect descriptive for Brian Kinney; even those who privately disagreed with his so-called 'life choices' dared not dispute that term.

It was, perhaps, a measure of the times, if not actually a measure of FBI formal attitudes, that there were only a couple who would have counted themselves among that number and that they were very careful to keep such thoughts to themselves. None of them, whether Kinney fans or not, were certain that they would ever manage to put this nightmarish incident behind them; they had come perilously close to being at the center of a particularly nasty and very public investigation of the failure of a protection detail, and they were all fairly certain that they would not have emerged unscathed, no matter how innocent their individual actions might have been. But they were all absolutely positive about one thing: Chris McClaren would never be able to consign it to his past. He would live with it, because he had no other choice. But he would never forget, and most of them figured that he was not the only one.

Trina reacted as she would always react to such emotional devastation. She spent a few hours weeping over wrongs that could not be righted, then set about cooking and feeding everyone within reach, including the primary figure in this melodrama. Though Brian remained secluded in the hospital for the duration - in ICU for the first twenty-four hours before being transferred into a private room with round-the-clock security thereafter - the woman who had, somehow, taken on the duties of an alternative mother-figure - extremely alternative, according to Brian - took one look at the pale slab of mystery meat and the lumpy glob of potatoes on his plate when his first post-ICU meal was brought in and declared that domesticated pigs would refuse to eat such slop. Thereafter, he received three meals each day, plus snacks and nibbles, hand-delivered by either Trina herself, or her delegate, as in whichever hapless FBI agent or security staffer happened to stumble across her path when she was looking for an available body. It didn't really matter who delivered the food; everyone at the beach house was so cowed by the matron of the manor that Brian was catered to with all the attention to detail and exemplary service that would have been provided by a 5-star restaurant, including perfectly folded linen napkins, Wallace sterling, Minton china, Baccarat crystal, and a selection of fine wine - which went 'unseen' by the nursing staff, since it was presented in bottles.
labeled as 'sparkling cider'. He breakfasted on Eggs Benedict, blintz soufflé, or melt-in-your-mouth brioche, lunched on gazpacho, grilled prawns with cilantro sauce, or sourdough bruschetta, and dined on chicken Cordon Bleu, Beef Bourguignon, or prime rib with appropriately elegant side dishes and magnificent desserts, and had recourse to a small stash of plastic-wrapped trays of petit fours and baklava should he feel the urge to indulge his sweet tooth, which was not quite as nonexistent as he sometimes wished.

Justin and Emmett, of course, shared the bounty, as did the entire security team, so all were happy, from a gastronomic standpoint, and Trina was kept busy, which was the important thing for her, for - like the rest of them - she was struggling to deal with a burden of guilt while trying to explain to herself why she had been stupid enough to leave Brian alone with a homicidal maniac. The fact that nobody had realized that Jackson qualified as such did nothing to alleviate her brooding.

At any rate, within two days the entire staff and patient population of the hospital were petulant and pea green with envy, and several of the principles had begun to avoid stepping onto a scale, subscribing to the theory that ignorance was bliss.

None of that, of course, applied to Brian who favored Trina with enigmatic smiles whenever she showed up at his bedside - which happened often - but that didn't change the fact that he spent more time playing with his food than actually eating it, and the same was true of Chris McClaren, who smoked more than usual and may have indulged in a few extra glasses of wine, but ate very little, and then only in the interest of keeping his strength up.

Others, however, were enthusiastic enough to make up for their lack of interest; Emmett, for example, was so impressed that he spent hours alternating between going over the handwritten cards that comprised Trina's recipe file and trying to convince her that she really needed to come back to Pittsburgh with him so they could open up a restaurant together. And Justin enjoyed his customary voracious appetite that was rarely influenced by his emotional status - good or bad. He was always hungry and he always ate heartily, using food as a comfort zone - a temperamental barrier to ward off the evils that he knew to be lurking around him. He ate; he dozed periodically - and he watched Brian; the combination seemed to work well enough to keep him centered and moderately content. Moderately.

Brian, of course, had no comment to make concerning the food or those who consumed it, as seemed to be his wont these days, but he noticed everything, nonetheless.

For most of the first three days, McClaren and Alexandra Corey spent at least half of their waking hours closeted in a private boardroom provided by the hospital administrator, researching and assembling case data, coordinating information, and organizing their facts in order to determine how to proceed from this point. Neither spoke much to subordinates or associates or anyone else, although McClaren did make a point of checking in with Brian periodically during the day and even more frequently during the night. Everyone around him wondered if he had found some magic potion to enable him to ignore a need for sleep, as he was there instantly when anything out of the ordinary happened, even during the long, silent wee hours of the morning. After the third such event - a minor dust-up occasioned by a malfunctioning blood pressure monitor - Justin stopped asking how the FBI agent always managed to be around for the tiniest little hint of an emergency. Obviously, he was just there, and he would continue to be there until he decided there was no longer a need for him to be there. Justin wondered sometimes if such a time would ever come.

But even at those odd hours, the two principal figures - guarded and guardian - seldom exchanged more than a few words - minimal conversation which still, somehow, achieved primal and very private communication. Everyone around them watched, noting expressions and inflections and phrasing, and pondered and wondered, but understood very little, and neither Brian nor his
counterpart appeared eager to provide enlightenment, as nobody was quite sure of whether to identify them as adversaries or allies.

After a while, everyone just gave up on any hope of insight; even Justin seemed to know when to admit defeat.

As for Justin's other priorities, he simply established his place at Brian's side and refused to be budged or persuaded to move aside. Even the medical staff eventually accepted that they could either maneuver around him or simply give up in their efforts to perform their duties; there was no middle ground - no compromise. And ultimately, they all had to concede that his presence was at least as necessary to the patient's recovery as any of their medical treatments. Even though the two of them seldom talked together. Justin talked, of course; by his very nature, not talking was not within the realm of possibility. But Brian mostly just listened - and watched. His eyes seldom moved away from the figure seated at his bedside; thus, he expressed more with the steadiness of his gaze than he would ever have admitted vocally.

Something in his eyes suggested that he didn't like it that his focus provided clues to the degree of his need, but he seemed unable to shake off the compulsion.

On the fourth day, everything would change.

By the time the stage was fully set and everything prepared according to the strict specifications of the FBI movers and shakers, Brian Kinney was fighting to maintain his control, not to mention his patience. Though he hadn't said much during the period of time required for his recovery, his mind had functioned in a constant state of overdrive.

His protectors had been caught with their pants down, and that was bad enough. But the simple, undeniable truth was that he himself had been played - successfully and almost fatally, and that was something that didn't sit well at all. He'd spent a lifetime learning to read people - a protective skill that was vital to his survival, both as a gay man and a successful businessman. To be forced to realize that he had been blind-sided was something he was not handling well.

Every time he thought about Jackson, and the conversations they had shared, he had to fight off an urge to leap from his bed, grab a gun from one of his defenders, and go find the bastard himself. Brian was not a total stranger to violence; he had defended himself on more than one occasion, occasionally with a surprising degree of brutality. But he'd never before felt a desire to kill someone. Maybe, he thought, if he should come face-to-face with his assailant, he wouldn't be able to follow through, but he wouldn't have bet good money on that possibility.

Thus, when the entire cast of this ongoing drama was finally assembled, taking positions around the moderately spacious private hospital room - the kind only offered to patients who were not bound by the stringent conditions of insurance company limitations - Brian, despite a demeanor that appeared almost serene, was hanging on to his last degree of patience by virtue of Herculean efforts.

By and large, acquaintances would not have noticed; he was, after all, a master of the cool exterior, but neither Justin nor McClaren were so easily fooled, so both of them watched his face - that perfect, beautiful, now completely restored face - and wondered how long his reticence would last.

As it happened - not long.
"Have you caught him?"

It was so quietly spoken that it was barely more than a whisper. And yet, everyone gathered for this meeting - now numbering well over a dozen if one included the medical staff and the various individuals standing by on the conference call - heard it clearly, and heard something concealed beneath it as well, something cold and calculated - something deadly.

"Not yet," admitted Alexandra Corey, with a quick glance toward her second-in-command, as he moved forward to stand directly in front of the patient, squaring his shoulders and waiting. Like a man taking his place before a firing squad, thought Corey. "But it's only . . ."

Delia Perkins was suddenly very glad that she was not the one who had to step up and stand front and center, providing a target for the fury coming in almost visible waves off the man who was the focus of their investigation.

"A matter of time," Brian interrupted, his voice still very controlled, but beneath the deadly calm, something else lurked, something barely contained.

"Yes." That was McClaren, every bit as self-possessed and controlled as his interrogator.

"And how do you know that?" Still quiet. Still deadly.

"Because we closed off every avenue of escape. So quickly that he had no hope of sneaking through. He's contained."

"Every avenue?" Brian actually managed to dredge up a smile, but still there was no humor, no trace of warmth in his eyes. "As in every highway, byway, airport, boat dock, bike path, hiking trail, or goat track?"

"Yes."

"That," Brian continued softly, "just might be stupidest thing anyone ever said to me. This isn't Manhattan, McFed, where you can close off the bridges and the ferries and the tunnels and train stations and public piers and airports and assume that - with a little luck - you've managed to contain your perp. This is a rural area, sprawled along miles of rough seacoast, with a thousand acres of wilderness scattered through the mountains. If a man wants to go to ground, there probably aren't many better places in the world. Shit! I'd bet big money that there are fucking hermits holed up out there in the wilds that haven't been seen or heard from in thirty years. So maybe you'd like to explain to me just how the fuck you think that he's 'contained'."

By the time he'd finished speaking, his voice was no longer soft, and nobody looking at that perfect face would have made the mistake of finding it 'pretty'. At that moment, it was almost terrifying, filled with outrage and a towering hunger for vengeance.

"Brian," said Corey, "we've studied his records. He's not really the type to . . ."

"You have no idea what type he is," he retorted. "If you did, this never would have happened. And that's because you've never had to deal with being hated for . . . You know what? That doesn't matter. That's not important. But you better know this, Agent Corey. You better find a way to understand that there's nothing stronger than hatred like this - that it can motivate a man to do all kinds of things that you would never believe he could do."

He paused then to draw a deep breath. "But - for now - I'm prepared to pretend that I believe your bullshit assurances, in order to get to the heart of the matter." He looked up then, and his eyes met those of Chris McClaren - hazel on blue, steel on steel. "You vetted him. Hell! You vetted
everybody that got within a mile of me and mine." He paused then, drawing another breath, more ragged than the last. "Now I want to know how you missed it. How he got close enough to . . ." He paused again, and his voice dropped to a whisper, filled with fury and pure, raw venom. "He was close enough to . . ." Another pause, another breath. "He could have killed my son or Justin, and almost did kill me. So I want to know how it happened. How did you miss that?"

McClaren was instantly conscious of a deep, intense stillness that encompassed both the room and every person close enough to listen in. "I fucked up," he said softly, firmly. "I didn't see what I should have seen."

For a moment, Brian simply stared at him, and the anger smoldering within the icy depths of his eyes was relentless, unforgiving. Then - for an instant so brief it might not have existed at all - there was the tiniest flicker of . . . McClaren couldn't really identify it, but he decided that he would take it as permission to continue to do his job, to live his life without spending the rest of his days looking over his shoulder in dread of the inevitable revenge of Brian Kinney.

Brian did not say anything to indicate a shift in his attitude, but he did nod, giving tacit permission for McClaren to present his explanation. There was no guarantee, of course, that it would be accepted, but permission granted, nevertheless.

"So," said the FBI agent with a diffident smile, "time to face the music, is it?"

If he was hoping for some small sign of encouragement or indulgence from the primary focus of his attention, he was doomed to disappointment.

So he took a deep breath and discarded the smile. "There's no denying that it was a stroke of luck that we got to you in time to prevent Jackson from succeeding in his effort to kill you. For me, it was a simple matter of coming across one semi-clear image on a badly degraded surveillance tape and recognizing his face as he was leaving a convenience store where he'd purchased the burn phone that he used to make one of his calls to you. It was the only place on the tape which revealed more than a portion of his face, and it only lasted a half-second, but it was enough. Subsequently, we recovered records from local cell towers of calls made on that phone that provided a lot of extremely interesting data - but we'll get to that later. That was my own bumbling contribution to our discovery of the danger, but your big debt of gratitude should be to Simon Redding, which is saying a lot since we treated him like Public Enemy #1 when we found out about his family ties to some of Pittsburgh's less outstanding citizens. In his case, he just happened to be in the right place at the right time to overhear a conversation that led him to the same conclusion I reached when I saw that tape.

"Luckily, Simon's something of a jack of all trades, with a lot of different jobs. He says he likes it that way - that it allows him to be free to pick and choose what he wants to do - and what he doesn't want to do. Anyway, it just so happens that he does repair and maintenance work on the automobiles that compose the Seaside Rental fleet, several of which are leased out to Orthopedia, Inc, as part of the employment package for their therapists. Jackson was one of those employees, even though he didn't use it on the job. When he was working, he always drove the equipment van. Also, the lease had originally been drawn up for the use of the woman who was originally scheduled to be your therapist, Brian - the one Jackson replaced when she was involved in a bad car crash, so we didn't have any record of the lease. Anyway, the day before he made his attempt on your life, he returned the vehicle to the leasing company, telling them he wouldn't be needing it any more since he was finishing up his term of employment the next day. Redding just happened to be at the garage at the time, and overheard what Jackson said and - perhaps more importantly - how he said it. According to Redding, the man sounded like he'd just won the lottery, gloating about taking advantage of his successful conclusion of his assignment. Of course, he didn't explain what he meant by that, obviously assuming that no one would ever put two and two together, to connect him to what would
happen to Brian.

"Luckily - or unluckily, depending on how you look at it - he didn't notice that Redding was there, taking it all in. And, for his part, Redding didn't put it all together right away. He was confused by what he'd overheard, and it took him a while to connect the dots. But in the end, he knew all he needed to know - which was that Brian had been the target of a vicious attack, and that he was still in danger. So, ultimately, he was smarter than we were; he didn't understand the why and how of it, but he figured that it didn't matter that he didn't know the details. He just knew what he had to do, despite the fact that . . . well, let's face it; the way we treated him when we showed him the door didn't provide much motivation for him to try to intervene to help us - or to help Brian - but, in the end, that's what he chose to do." McClaren was looking directly into Brian's eyes, and did not miss the quick gleam that flashed in those blue depths.

Mr. Simon Redding might think that he was done with the high melodrama of Brian Kinney and his entourage, but he was wrong. Kinney would never, never leave debts unpaid.

McClaren shifted a bit, directing his next remarks toward the speaker phone sitting on the table at Brian's bedside. "At any rate, the ruckus he stirred up alerted everybody that something was definitely wrong, so that everything was already in motion by the time I got back to the house. Then, once we'd done everything that we could do, to get Brian the treatment he needed to save his life, I got a frantic phone call from Mr. Kinney's very own, self-appointed, ridiculously over protective guardian angel."

Brian lifted one inquisitive eyebrow.

"Care to take it from there, Ms. Whitney?" asked the FBI agent, raising his voice a bit to make sure it carried to the speakerphone.

Cynthia's sigh was double-octave and quite loud, as she looked around her office and struggled not to squirm under the combined gazes of Lance Mathis, Carl Horvath, and Liam Quinn, sparing a thought to note not only who was present, but - just as significantly, who was not. "Well, isn't that the classic definition of 'a day late and a dollar short'?" she said, trying without much success to still the tremor in her voice. "I've never in my life felt like such a fool. For as long as I can remember, I've congratulated myself on being vastly superior to the masses - and never bothering to try very hard to hide it - because of this God-damned so-called perfect memory, and, when I needed it most, it almost screwed everything up - permanently. You almost died, Brian, because my stupid brain refused to kick in and allow me to recall where I'd seen Jackson before. I didn't tumble to it until I was standing in the hospital parking lot here in the Pitts and watching an EMT unloading a stretcher from an ambulance. And that's when it hit me - that I had seen exactly the same thing before - only it had been Jackson in the role of the technician, looking exactly like he looked when I saw him unloading equipment from the van the day we left you. I remembered seeing him in the chaos after the bombing at Babylon. He was one of the ones who brought in the last of the wounded, the ones that were mostly DOA, because it was too late. God, Brian, how could I have been so stupid? How could I . . ."

"Tink." It was the first word Brian had uttered since McClaren had begun his explanation.

"Please don't," she said quietly, and the tears that were flowing from her eyes echoed in the tremor in her voice. "I don't want to hear it. I don't want to have to sit here and listen while you try to comfort me. You almost died, Brian. You - not me - and I can't tell you how sorry I . . ."

"If you don't shut up," he said firmly, "I'm going to have to fire you, and then who's going to take care of my shit? So just stop it now."
"But I almost . . ."

"Almost doesn't count." He looked up then, and his eyes met those of Alexandra Corey who was amazed that she had to struggle not to recoil from the ice she saw reflected there. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt intimidated, by anybody. She had faced off against U.S. Senators and Supreme Court justices and 4-star generals without ever once feeling an urge to flinch.

Thus, her unease in the face of this individual bordered on the ridiculous, but that didn't change the fact that she'd have done almost anything to assuage his anger and ease the pain he couldn't quite manage to hide.

At the same time, the infamously opinionated Dr. Turnage was glaring at her, obviously just a heartbeat away from throwing everyone out of the room to see to the needs of his patient. Despite his reputation as a martinet and a prima donna, he could be an irresistible force of nature and an absolute tyrant when it came to defending the physical well-being of those under his care, and the constant, accelerating beep of a heart monitor did nothing to alleviate the tension building in the room. Brenda Herring, on the other hand, was a model of serene concern as she stepped forward and adjusted a setting on the IV drip, eliciting a faint smile from her patient. It wasn't much, of course, but it was better than the frosty glare he'd been wearing since the interview began, and the annoying beat of the monitor slowed marginally as he managed to compose his thoughts.

"What I'm waiting to hear," he said softly, once the nurse had finished her task and stepped away, "is who he really is, and how he managed to slip through all of the FBI's so-called defenses. So far, I've heard explanations - of a sort - for why he didn't succeed in his efforts - barely. But nothing about who he is and how he got so close. Am I supposed to believe he was just some run-of-the-mill ambulance attendant with homicidal tendencies who managed to fly under the radar and maneuver through all your safeguards in order to . . ."

"No," said Corey abruptly, raising a hand to ward off the rest of what looked like it might turn into a tirade. "He wasn't an assassin-for-hire; he's been working toward this for a while, but we . . . we missed the connection."

"So-o-o-o." Brian deliberately drew the word out, his expression suggesting that he had waited as long as he intended to. "Who was he?"

"His name really is Jackson. Thomas Bradford Jackson."

Brian's eyes widened slightly, and flashed ice cold. "Bradford."

"Yes."

"As in . . . 'Brad'." It was not a question.

"Probably. Although we can't be sure yet. Still, from the data we've gleaned from our sources in Pittsburgh, it seems likely."

"And how, exactly, is it that the physical therapist assigned to me by my plastic surgeon has any connection to what happened in Pittsburgh?"

McClaren was the one who answered. "He probably had nothing to do with the original attack on you. He'd been gone several months by that time. But he probably was involved in an earlier attack. We've got no solid proof yet, but it appears that he was definitely there when Babylon was bombed, so we're working that angle."

The room was suddenly very still, except for Justin who drew a hoarse breath and shifted closer to
Brian, as if to take shelter in the radiated warmth from his body. For his part, Brian was literally frozen, not even breathing for a full thirty seconds.

"Babylon," he said finally, wrapping a protective arm around Justin without even noticing what he was doing. "Are you telling me . . . ?

"We're not telling you anything yet," said Corey. "Because we don't know anything yet - for sure. We're just giving you the raw data, so you can maybe help us to put the pieces together."

Again, the room went silent, as Brian considered what she'd said, and everyone breathed a tiny sigh of relief when he spoke again, obviously deciding to put aside his misgivings - for the moment. "So who the hell is this fucker, and why would he . . ."

"When he was there - living in Pittsburgh - he went by the name Hobbs. Bradford J. Hobbs."

"Hobbs?" That was Justin, leaping to his feet, all pretense of serenity forgotten. "As in . . ."

"Yes," McClaren said quickly, not liking the near panic he saw rising in the blond's eyes, and equally unhappy with the flare of guilt he easily identified in Brian's. "The very same."

"But how . . ." Justin did not quite shrug away from Brian's comforting caress, but, for just a moment, it appeared that he might.

"Randolph Hobbs - grandfather of your high school acquaintance, Justin - has quite a reputation as a lady's man. Seems he's got a thing for younger women. Apparently, a few years ago, he found himself a new wife. She was from Georgia - a true southern belle, according to the gossip, and they got married the day after his last divorce was final - his fifth marriage, her third. She was very pretty, had even spent some time in Hollywood back in the 70's, where she made a few B-movies. She snagged herself a rich Georgia businessman for her first husband. Thomas Jackson - Jackson's father. Later, he left her for a younger model, so she moved on and spent a few years living on a generous alimony settlement, before finding herself another husband with an even larger fortune. That one lasted two years. Seems she's a prime example of the classic trophy wife who happened to have a couple of kids from her first marriage. One daughter, who lives somewhere in Europe, and is apparently estranged from the rest of the family, and Jackson, who must have thought he'd died and gone to heaven when his mother married into a family like the Hobbs. He grew up in the suburbs of Atlanta. Came from money, of course, but never had much of a relationship with his father, or any particularly strong family ties with anyone else. Never especially bright or talented; something of a reputation as a loner. He kept his nose clean during his youth - no criminal record of any kind, which is why he didn't show up on our radar when regular background checks were run - but he did have some interesting social and educational contacts. Some discreet ties with several ultra-conservative fraternal organizations - a member of the Chosen Sons of the Confederacy, the Heritage Society, a social club - supposedly - called the White Knights - which is a pretty good clue as to what kind of groups they were, by the way. We're still checking them out, but there are plenty of rumors of involvement with white supremacy survivalists and philosophical racial elitism - but nothing definite, nothing criminal, although very suggestive of a particularly ugly mindset, if you get my drift. But even in those circles, he kept a low profile - off the map, so to speak. Nothing to raise any red flags."

"Nazis," observed Brian.

"They probably wouldn't have liked that word very much - professing such old school American patriotism and all - but it's pretty damned accurate. Anyway, when his mother married Hobbs, Jackson must have felt like he'd finally caught the brass ring - immediate entrée into an old, wealthy, prestigious, and pristinely white family. At the time of the wedding, he was in school at Ohio State - his father's alma mater - in a premed program. But he was struggling, on the verge of flunking out.
Apparently didn't have the intellect or the chops to deal with the academic requirements. So he dropped out and transferred into a program for EMT training at Columbus State College. Once he was finished with the classwork, he needed field experience to complete the program, and that's when Pittsburgh came into the picture. Although he was officially employed by Midwest Emergency Services - with home offices in Columbus - his actual on-the-job service was done in the Pittsburgh branch. But that didn't show up on his employment history. When we vetted him, the records simply indicated that he was living and working in Columbus. Adding to the problem was the fact that he decided - when he moved in with his mother and her Sugar-Daddy husband - that he wanted to take on the family name, probably so the old man would be flattered by his loyalty, although that doesn't seem to have worked very well. Apparently, the only time Hobbs, Sr., was glad to claim a relationship with his step-son was when he had need of his services, and we're not talking medical expertise here. But anyway, while Jackson was in Pittsburgh, he changed his name. Thomas Bradford Jackson transformed himself into Bradford J. Hobbs, apparently rejecting all ties to his father by dropping the name completely. He never made it official, of course. There would have been legal records of that, but it just served to confuse the issue more."

"So," said Brian slowly, "he was there the night that Babylon was bombed."

"Yes."

"That's what Cynthia remembered."

"Yes."

Brian looked up then, and McClaren was physically stricken by the pain he read in the depths of those dark eyes. "So you're exploring the possibility that the attack on me . . . had something to do with the bombing at Babylon."

McClaren closed his eyes briefly, wishing that - just this once - Brian could have been less intuitive and more obtuse. "Yes," he admitted. "We'd be foolish to overlook the link between the two events."

"As in . . . me."

McClaren nodded. "As in you."

Brian took a deep breath. "So how did this Hobbs-wannabe worm his way into a position as my therapist? Shouldn't somebody have noticed . . ."

"It was just bad luck, Brian. Old man Hobbs got rid of Wife # 5 in record time, and there was no reason to connect her or her offspring with any of the ugliness he might have been involved in, even after we recognized the possible connection between him and the attack. She took off for the Sweet Life on the Riviera, and Jackson was no longer a member of the extended family. Although he did, apparently, keep in touch with the old man, but when his mother left, he wasn't exactly welcome in the inner sanctum any more, especially when Wife # 6 settled in, so he went back to Columbus, took some additional classes to get licensed as a therapist, and got a job with the branch of Orthopedia there."

He sighed. "And that's where just plain old luck - good for him, bad for you - came into the mix. Dr. Turnage's clinic has been a client of Orthopedia for years. Through certain sources in Pittsburgh . . ."

McClaren hesitated, not wanting to go into details with so many interested parties present, and was marginally relieved when he read the expression in Brian's eyes that indicated a willingness to accept his discretion - for the moment. "Those who'd managed to find out where you were going, realizing that you would need therapy, got in touch with him so he could check out the medical records of potential clients. That's how he found out that you were going to be utilizing the service. After that, it
was simply a matter of getting Jackson transferred here, to replace the woman who was originally scheduled to be your therapist."

McClaren had been hoping that Brian would not think to question that particular bit of information. Of course, he should have known better.

"What did they do to her?"

The FBI agent did not try to evade the question, but he didn't elaborate either. "She'll live."

Brian closed his eyes and resisted an urge to lift his hand to massage his aching head. He was grateful when he felt a glass of icy water pressed into his hand, and he looked up to find Emmett regarding him with eyes deeply shadowed with an awareness of his pain. To his own surprise - and Emmett's astonishment - he reached up to grasp his friend's bicep with a gentle squeeze. "So how does this all tie together?" he asked, after taking a sip of his water. "Are you telling me that Jackson was acting on behalf of his mother's ex? Is this all just conjecture or is there - somewhere within this monumental fuck-up - some kind of evidence to . . ."

"Not to worry, Mr. Kinney," said Alexandra Corey firmly, offering him a genuine smile - her first of the night. "In regard to the Hobbs family, we've got our proof."

"Such as?"

Her smile grew wider. "For one thing, DNA doesn't lie. And for another, it's a time-honored process in FBI investigations to follow the money, and - in this case - that's every bit as damning as the blood trail."

"So the Hobbs - father and son - are in custody then?"

"Not quite yet," she admitted. "But they soon will be. They're both under constant surveillance, so there's no way they're going to do a runner. Meanwhile, we're setting up the final stages of our little coup."

Brian turned toward McClaren, one eyebrow lifted, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The FBI agent regarded him steadily. No smile; no light in his eyes. "We're not going to settle for just catching one or two of the fringe characters, Brian, or the low man on the totem pole, like Jackson, who, by the way, had a reservation on a red-eye flight to LaGuardia for the night you were attacked. A flight he didn't make, so it's pretty obvious that his plans didn't work out exactly as he planned. Anyway, we're going to get them all - the muscle, the thugs, the money men, and - above all - the movers and shakers that set out to make this happen in the first place. And we're going to make sure that they never bother you or anyone else again. It's been a long, difficult, winding road to follow, but we're almost there now. The final pieces are in place to wrap everything up tight."

Brian was silent for a moment, lost in thought. Then he looked up, his eyes fixed on McClaren's face, even though his arm remained firmly wrapped around Justin's shoulder.

"OK. So tell me . . . where did this money trail lead?"

The FBI agent smiled, but the expression did not touch his eyes which remained cold and full of shadow. "As to that, have you ever heard of an organization called Landmark?" He didn't really wait for an answer. "No? Strangely enough, as it turns out, neither had I, nor any of the rest of my colleagues, which is a pretty impressive achievement all by itself. You gotta give 'em credit for cleverness and an instinct for self-preservation that almost qualifies as paranoia." Then his smile broadened, and there was an almost unholy gleam of satisfaction that flared within the ice field of his
eyes. "But we learn quickly, Mr. Kinney. And so will you."

When the phone call was finished, following a quick announcement from Agent Corey that the rest of the meeting would be restricted to those with a Need-To-Know clearance, which obviously didn't include the cast assembled in Pittsburgh, only Cynthia and Lance Mathis remained in her office, and she sat for a few minutes - totally drained and wondering how she would manage to get through the rest of the day. A day that would almost certainly not get any easier as it went on.

She had meetings scheduled with the chairman of the board of Iconics and the CEO of Remson Pharmaceuticals, lunch with Dylan Court, the shortstop for the Pirates who had been suggested as the new model for Brown Athletics underwear (and wouldn't Brian hate it that he wasn't around for that); a review of proposals for a massive campaign for a state-wide travel agency offering a fantastic new program featuring European cruises, and a staff meeting to go over budgetary issues concerning older campaigns that had proved less successful than expected. Brian Kinney was not a proponent of pouring good money after bad, and not one for calling on draconian measures to extend terms that should be allowed to expire naturally.

One of those campaigns in particular would prove to be problematic; of that she was certain. Sovereign House - the Philly-based publisher of *Libretto* magazine and a handful of other artistic periodicals - had been a Kinnetik client for just over two years, and it had been a thorn in Brian's side, practically from the beginning. It had, however, enjoyed the protection and the particular interest of the Kinnetik CFO, who had worked out the original contract and continued to suggest new ideas to promote the company's products, so no one had pushed too hard to resolve the situation. It was, after all, a small account, requiring only minimal investments of time and money to fulfill professional obligations on the part of the ad agency. But the owners had consistently refused to accept any suggestions, from Brian or any of his subordinates, on how to improve the firm's products or image or generate new areas of interest to increase sales; they had, in fact, rejected all such proposals and resisted any effort to inject innovation into their antiquated advertising campaigns. In addition, they had protested several charges billed to them, finding the content of the ads to be "inappropriate to our cultural image" and even going so far as to refuse to pay for a small campaign on local cable television channels, claiming that the 15-second spots lacked "the restraint and elegance traditionally associated with our endeavors".

That had been the final straw for Brian.

His response, when Cynthia had reported the reasons for the conflict, had been succinct. "Fuck it. Turn the account over for collection and dissolve the contract. I'm sure legal can come up with a few dozen pertinent precedents, and then they can sink into the oblivion of their own making - with appropriate restraint and elegance."

And that was that; the master had spoken, and one did not ever force him to repeat himself, not unless one had masochistic tendencies.

Of course, Ted would not take it well; that went without saying. But then he probably wouldn't say much. He would confine his expression of anger to looks that could kill, all directed toward Cynthia, as he usually did these days.

There was no doubt that - if looks *could* kill - she would have been dead many times over in recent weeks.

Still, there was no avoiding the certainty that the prospects did not offer any hope of salvaging the day.
"You okay, Tink?" Lance Mathis was watching her, smiling gently, and she did not fail to recognize that he seemed to have taken a particular delight in adopting Brian's pet name for her.

But she was too overwhelmed to bother to call him on it, although the brief eye-roll as she looked up at him spoke volumes. "Oh, sure, I'm just peachy. Aside from the fact that I almost managed to get my best friend killed, and actually did manage to dither around long enough to let the murderer take to his heels and escape into the great unknown. Why wouldn't I be fine?"

"You heard Brian, Cynthia. And you know better than to think he's resorting to some kind of sentimental nonsense. We both know that's not his style. He needs you. Maybe more than he needs anybody else. Because you don't wait to figure out what he wants you to do. You don't wait for his guidance or his permission. You just go ahead and do what you know needs doing, and I don't think anybody else in his life can make that claim. Because they're all too busy figuring out what they need from him - what they want. Even Justin. You're the only one that doesn't do that."

He paused and then gave her a quick smile. "Well, you . . . and McClaren maybe. But with him, it's complicated. He does what he does because he thinks he knows better, which may or may not be true. And because he's just as lovesick over Brian as the rest of the pack, even though he'll never admit that, and he'd never let it go any further, even if Brian was willing. Which he's not. For the two of them, Justin is like a monumental wall they'll never manage to get around, although I'm not entirely sure that they shouldn't, but that's not my call to make. Nevertheless, the two of you are the only ones who have the courage and the determination to refuse to worry about what Brian thinks or feels or wants - and simply do what he needs to have done. Even when he doesn't like it. Even when he might want to kill you for it. And if you think that Brian doesn't know that, then you're not nearly as smart as I think you are, or as he knows you are."

Her eyes were huge and very glossy. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"It should," said another voice, low and pleasant and almost without inflection. "It speaks to how much he believes in you. And to your capacity for loyalty. It takes a lot of courage to love someone enough to defy them in their own best interest."

"Mr. Quinn," said Cynthia. "I thought you'd gone."

"I came back," he said with a shrug, dropping bonelessly into one of her lovely wingback chairs. "I have a couple of matters to raise. Private matters that don't concern Detective Horvath. Or maybe one of them does, but I don't work for the police. I work for Brian Kinney, and I need to be able to answer his questions when he asks them."

"Such as?" Cynthia looked intrigued, and focusing on Quinn's beautiful face was hardly a hardship, although Lance Mathis didn't look too thrilled with the prospect.

"So what's up with their plans to involve Ron Peterson in their little scheme?"

Mathis blinked. "How do you even know about that? I don't think I'd know about it, if one of my staff members wasn't currently operating undercover, along with one of Pittsburgh's finest."

"Kinney," explained Quinn. "I swear, the man's got an intelligence network that the KGB would have envied. But in this case, I'd guess that he got it directly from Ms. Peterson, and he's worried that her father might be at risk if he gets involved with The Club and its highbrow patrons."

"Highbrow?" Cynthia echoed. "Is that really what he called them?"

Quinn grinned. "No. But I wouldn't want to quote what he really said, in polite company."
Mathis smiled. "She's been working for Brian Fucking Kinney since Kinnetik was just a twinkle in
his eye. You really think she's going to be offended by a few cuss words?"

"What I think," Quinn replied softly, "is that the lady has to put up with enough crap already, and I
don't intend to add to it. I meant what I said before, you know." He looked directly at Cynthia, and
she was touched by the warmth in his eyes. "He's lucky to have you."

Then he looked up at Mathis. "So, what do you know about Mr. Peterson's role in all this?"

"Not much. But I don't think he'll be in any real danger. The in-depth information - the details that
are going to bring down The Club and its movers and shakers - is not going to come from Peterson.
It's rising from the bottom of the organization, so to speak. These fuckers - sorry, Tink - have
convinced themselves that they're invincible, and that God is on their side. So much so that they
haven't even considered the possibility that they might be vulnerable to an attack from within."

"Let me guess," said Quinn with a smile. "The so-called 'money trail'?"

"Yes."

"Bookkeepers? Secretaries? Servants?"

"All of the above."

"So Peterson . . ."

"Just an observer. He might be called upon to add a bit of frosting to the cake, but I doubt there'll be
much to it."

Quinn nodded. "So if Brian asks for my assurance that the man won't be in any danger . . ."

Mathis glanced toward Cynthia, who spotted the uncertainty in his eyes.

"One thing you should know, Mr. Quinn," she said firmly, "is that you never make promises to
Brian Kinney unless you're 100% certain you can keep them. You tell him the truth, even at those
times when he doesn't want to hear it. Even when the risk of being wrong is minimal."

He considered her words for a moment. Then he nodded. "Why do I get the feeling that I really
would like to be around to see him lose his temper one of these days?"

Cynthia laughed. "Stick around long enough, and you will. The Kinney temper is like a tidal wave.
You never know where or when, but ultimately, it's inevitable. Now, you said you had 'a couple' of
issues to raise, so what else?"

Quinn managed to look sympathetic without actually changing his facial expression. "I need to see
Ted Schmidt's personnel file."

Cynthia went very still. "Are you sure that's necessary?" she asked finally.

"Yes. I'm sure."

"But . . ."

"Ms. Whitney, I get paid - and paid very well, by the way - to protect my clients. And that's what I
intend to do, even when I don't particularly like what has to be done."

"There's no employment contract," she explained, as she stood up and moved toward Brian's office.
"You understand that, right?"

He smiled. "There's always an employment contract. It just isn't always in the form of a written document."

She could have played dumb and pretended not to understand him, but she didn't bother, and a quick glance toward Lance Mathis revealed that he shared her reticence.

There was no point in disputing an elemental truth. When a person worked for Brian Kinney, it was with the understanding that the employer/employee relationship was based upon one fundamental, inviolable commitment.

One rule.

You don't fuck over the Boss.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

"So," said Brian, settling back against a stack of pillows and trying to ignore the ache at the base of his skull, as Rick Turnage and his medical entourage filed out of the room, "Landmark. What is it, and how is it involved, with me and with Babylon?"

"Details are still sketchy," answered Alexandra Corey, "but not for much longer."

"How did you uncover it?"

McClaren settled into a chair at the side of the bed and regarded Brian with a slightly sardonic smile. "You need to give your boy, Hilliard, a raise. Turns out he and Ms. Briggs managed to dig up the definitive source of evidence."

"Such as?"

The FBI agent turned to gaze out the window, but not quite quickly enough to prevent Brian from identifying a shadow of sadness in his eyes. "If you want to tap into the truth of a man's heart, you need to find the source of his grief. That's what they did. Turns out that the guy who's been handling The Club's accounting for over two decades was a victim of the same kind of ugliness they turned on you. Only he didn't know it; he had to be shown."

He turned back toward Brian and didn't bother trying to suppress a sigh. "Exposing that kind of secret isn't easy, for anybody."

"Is Briggs all right?"

McClaren's eyes smiled, even though his lips did not. "Another old college chum, huh? I sometimes wonder if there are any beautiful women in Pennsylvania that you didn't recruit during your university days. She's still under deep cover, I expect, so I don't know when she'd be available to talk to you. But I'll let her know you're asking."

"Thanks. And I didn't recruit her."

Emmett chuckled softly. "No? Then answer me this. Did you ever meet a woman who didn't think she could cure you of your affliction and turn you straight?"

"Once," Brian retorted, with a smirk, and everyone in the room knew instantly who he was talking about. "So," he continued, deliberately putting Melanie out of his thoughts, "what exactly did this
money trail reveal?"

"Starting points." McClaren's response was terse.

"Meaning what exactly?"

"The Club's accountant has twenty years worth of records about donations, income, receipts, disbursements, projects, political campaigns and causes, but most of it appears to be fairly mundane at first glance. Because it's set up that way. It starts out pretty straightforward; then it branches, and branches again and again. Ad infinitum. So in the end, it's like a vine that curls and coils and spreads and looks impossible to follow."

"So how do you . . ."

McClaren allowed himself a tiny smile. "I said it looks impossible to follow. Not that it actually is. All you need is the right kind of bloodhound."

Alexander Corey grinned. "She'll be delighted to know you called her a dog."

"Another FBI super asset?" asked Justin, still tucked up against Brian's side; still reeling slightly from new revelations about old enemies.

"We call her Medusa," replied Corey. "In this guise anyway."

"Why would anyone want to be called that?" Justin looked genuinely puzzled.

"Well, you know the story about the original, right?" said McClaren. "How no one could look at her and survive? Same thing here, but in reverse since she's the one doing the looking. If you have things to hide, tucked up somewhere in a software application, you really don't want Priscilla Young to catch even a tiny glimpse of you, because - once she does - you're very, very dead."

"She's that good then?"

"She's that good," confirmed Corey. "The best I've ever seen, and that's saying something considering that the Bureau has access to the best minds in the business."

Brian smiled. "Speaking of recruiting . . ."

"Don't even think about it," Corey said quickly, firmly. Wondering if he was joking; hoping he was joking. The Bureau had power and prestige to offer, which constituted a considerable advantage over private industry - usually. But Kinney had money, a willingness to use it, and . . . well, Kinney. All together, that provided some pretty powerful incentives.

"So when can we expect this whole thing to wrap up?"

McClaren's frown was only slightly tainted with uncertainty. "Briggs is scheduled to pick up the last of the accounting records today, so Young should be able to start her tracing immediately. A lot depends on how complex the records are, and how clever the encryption, but she usually gets results PDQ. After that, the big fundraiser for The Club is coming up next week-end, and we're hoping everything is in place by then so we can tie it all up in one neat package. With a big red bow."


"Yeah," McClaren replied sharply, his eyes moving to meet those of the man in question, completely
Justin's eyes were ablaze with anger, but nobody was looking his way to notice - not even Brian who was momentarily unable to look away from the FBI agent who was staring at him.

The silence in the room was suddenly deafening.

Henry Flagg realized that he had spent more time looking around at all the esoteric objects in his office in the past week, than he'd spent in more than twenty years.

It was a little bit humbling to come face to face with the fact that, in the long run, he didn't have very much to show for all the time and work he'd invested in this place.

It was even more humbling to realize that his observations of his office were a fair analogy for observations of his life.

He was only now beginning to comprehend how much he'd lost over the years. One year in particular.

"Tell me, Ms. Harper - if that's even your name - is the young man who came with you the other day really your brother?"

Sharon Briggs, wrapped up tight in her Shirley Harper persona, complete with apron and chef's hat, shook her head. "No. He's not. And you're right. It's not my real name."

He nodded, and then turned to look out the window, noting as he did so that his variegated pothos vine was flourishing, almost obscuring the surface of the glass, and dappling the entire room in restless shadow. All around him, his plants were thriving. He had nursed them lovingly over the years, watering, fertilizing, dividing, transplanting, and they had repaid his careful attention with glowing good health. He wished that other things in his life had fared as well. "Do you suppose," he asked softly, "that anyone ever called him 'beautiful'?"

It was her time to smile. "I think you can bet on it."

"And how do you suppose he reacted to that word?"

She shifted in her chair, leaning forward to try to catch his eye, but he refused to look her way. "If you're asking me if he's gay," she replied, "the truth is that I don't know. " She was lying, of course, but absolutely determined to preserve Hilliard's privacy. "But I think I know him well enough to say that he'd take such a comment as it was intended. It's a compliment, isn't it?"

"Is it?" His voice was even softer now. "That's what people used to call my son. All sorts of people. Women, girls - even some men."

"And how did he react to it?"

"He didn't." His sigh was rough and loud. "He knew better. He knew . . . I wouldn't like it."

"Mr. Flagg," she said gently, "did you love your son?"

"I did," he said, after a pregnant pause. "I just didn't know how much, until . . . until it was too late to tell him."

She smiled and nodded toward the stack of ledgers assembled on his desk. "You're telling him now."
He nodded. "I am. But not with those."

"I'm sorry. I thought . . ."

"If you tried to carry those books out of this office, well . . . first off, you'd need a fork lift to manage it. Secondly, you'd never get out the door without being taken down by security. And thirdly, it would take you months, perhaps even years, to extract any useful information from them, even with the help of a forensic accountant with extraordinary skills. I may look like a simple black servant, but I'm not. I've spent many years learning the art of subterfuge, in order to prepare a set of books that would fool any casual observer, as well as any not-so-casual tax auditor. Those ledgers are here just to demonstrate how easily I could have resorted to trickery and obfuscation, appearing to co-operate while actually doing everything possible to hide the truth. I could have hired a lawyer. To protect me, and I'm still wondering if I should have. You know you don't seem particularly appreciative for . . ."

"You want me to be grateful and appreciate what you're doing? Maybe I would have, if you'd acted in time to prevent the ugly things that have happened. Your silence . . ." But she elected to close her mouth then, trying her best to remember that this man had also lost much - maybe the most of any of them, even if he hadn't yet realized the entire truth.

At any rate, he chose to ignore her outburst and back away - at least temporarily - from his own observation and return to the discussion of the critical details at hand. To that end, he turned away from her and opened a small drawer in the credenza behind his desk, to extract two items: a thumb drive and a small spiral notebook.

"Providing you have someone who's gifted in computer use, this should be all you'll need. The thumb drive contains all the pertinent information from all these ledgers, and the notebook gives you the codes to decipher the encryptions."

"So," she said slowly, "this stack is just to impress me, to show me that you're doing us a favor by cooperating? Is that your idea of doing the right thing - of earning your son's forgiveness?"

"Did you know?" she continued, not waiting for an answer she was pretty sure she wasn't going to get anyway, as she accepted the two small items, took a moment to flip through the pages of the notebook and note columns of letters, numbers, and symbols which meant nothing to her but would - hopefully - provide insight for those who would delve into it. She then tucked them into a deep pocket beneath her apron. "Did you know what the noble patrons of your precious club were doing?"

"I knew some of it," he admitted, after a moment's thought. "I didn't know all of it."

"And if you had?"

He took a deep breath. "I hated what my son was, Ms. Harper. I hated what it did to him, and to our family. It tore us apart. And everything I knew, everything I'd ever been taught in my life, made me believe that it was an abomination - that it was my responsibility to see that he was cured. And saved. But I . . . I never once dreamed that it would cost him his life, that he would be taken from us so that there was never a chance to ask for forgiveness."

Her eyes, previously filled with warmth and sympathy, were suddenly ice-flecked. "So, even in the face of everything that happened to him, you still think he had something to be forgiven for?"

"No." The word was sharp and hard, like the sound of a gunshot. "No, he didn't. But I did. And now, that will never happen, will it? That opportunity is gone forever."
"Maybe," she conceded, "but that shouldn't keep you from trying to earn it." She hesitated for a moment, obviously considering whether or not to proceed. Then she took a deep breath. "I knew your son, Mr. Flagg. We were both in Professor Goodwin's history classes. He was . . ."

"What?" Flagg demanded, when she hesitated. "He was what?"

"He was beautiful, and frankly, I don't give a damn whether you like that term or not. He was. Beautiful of face and form. But beautiful in other ways as well. The tragedy of it all - for you - is that you were so busy being ashamed of the simple physical trait of his sexual orientation that you never bothered to look below the surface and get to know the man he was. He was a good man who would have led a good life, if only people who think like you hadn't taken it upon themselves to end it."

"But I . . . I never would have done something like that."

"No? And what if he hadn't been your son? What if he'd just been some stranger, someone in whom you had no interest and no concern? Someone like Brian Kinney, who has a lot in common with your son - with one big difference. He managed to survive, and he's going to fight back. For himself, and for all those like your son, who never got the opportunity, and against all those people - like you - who just decide to turn away, to not see what they don't want to know about, because it's not their concern, is it? And right and wrong doesn't even enter into it. The victims, after all, they're not like you. They earn their punishment, don't they?"

"I don't know what else I can do," Flagg sighed. "You do realize that my life will never be the same. That what I'm doing will be the end of everything I've known. I know it's just a bastion of social pretension - a silly throwback to a time when money and power bought respect and prestige. But it's also been the focus of my life, my security, my . . ."

"It killed your son. Don't you understand that yet? This is not just some silly gentlemen's club, where the good old rich boys can sit around and reminisce about the lovely golden days when servants knew their places and commoners tugged their forelocks to show their respect. Behind the façade of genteel tradition, this place is a hotbed of racism and bigotry and homophobia. Is that what you're defending?"

"I didn't know."

She smiled and rose to her feet. "No. You didn't want to know. And you didn't need to, did you? As long as you minded your own business and remembered your place, you were exempt from all the ugliness. Too bad for you that your cooperation didn't buy the same protection for your queer son."

"Will I have to testify?" he asked, clasping his hands on the desk in front of him.

"Probably."

"Will I be . . . protected?"

She hesitated as she turned toward the door. "And if I said no, what then?"

"I . . ."

"Don't worry, Mr. Flagg. The FBI lives up to its obligations. There might even be a possibility of getting you into Witness Protection, if it's deemed necessary. Then you can start a whole new life, and nobody will ever have to know your shame. You can pretend you never had a son at all, much less a useless little faggot."

He wanted to tell her she was wrong; he wanted to tell her he'd never have used that word to
describe the young man who had, at one time, been the center of his life.

He wanted to - but he couldn't.

"When . . . when will all this happen? Will I know in advance? Will I . . ."

"If necessary, we'll escort you from the premises when the time comes. But if it were me, I think I'd arrange to take off for a few days. Come up with a great aunt who needs hip surgery, or something. And I'd do it now." Her smile was not pretty. "Our computer people are very gifted . . . and very fast."

"You're not very forgiving, are you?"

Her smile was not pretty. "I'm not the one you need forgiveness from, Mr. Flagg. Unfortunately for you, I think that boat has sailed. But if you make a genuine effort - a real attempt to burrow down under all that ugly, homophobic garbage you've been wrapped in all your life, you might just come out of this as a better person. Then, if your Christian faith is more than just lip service you pay to some protestant sect that talks about Christian values but actually has none, you might be able to believe that your son will hear . . . and understand."

With that she was gone, and he tried not to feel like his entire life had just walked out the door with her.

A gentle breeze moved into the room from the open window, and the leaves of his plush array of houseplants stirred and rustled in the wind, and he wondered if he could figure out some excuse to take them with him. They might, after all, be the only friends he had left when all was over.

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Brian took a deep, thoroughly satisfying drag from the cigarette he had persuaded McClaren to provide for him - the first one he'd had since Jackson's almost successful attempt on his life - and looked up to watch the sun stream through thick sweeps of the white and deep rose-colored blossoms that covered the trees surrounding the second-floor terrace where he'd found a quiet nook in which to indulge one of his favorite vices.

"You do know you're not supposed to be doing that, don't you?"

He smiled, not bothering to look around to identify the speaker. He had, after all, been expecting this particular arrival.

"What are these trees?" he asked, taking a moment to appreciate the lush beauty of the setting and never once realizing that the golden quality of the sunlight that haloed around him defined and accentuated his own natural perfection of face and form.

"Crepe myrtles," came the response, with the voice encompassing a verbal shrug. "Surely you've seen them before."

Brian nodded. "Just never bothered to ask about a name."

Simon Redding chuckled. "Now why do I think that's something you've done plenty of times in your life?"

Brian turned to regard his visitor with a scapegrace grin. "I don't know. Why do you?"

The older man considered delivering an acidic retort, but, in the end, he didn't. He wouldn't claim to
approve of everything that Brian Kinney was, but he did appreciate candor, and he was pretty sure he would get plenty of that from this enigmatic young scoundrel. "So," he said after taking the time to light his own cigarette, "want to tell me why I'm here, instead of being out and about and enjoying the leisure of my day off?"

Brian turned once more to gaze out into the hospital grounds, which were lush and beautiful with spring foliage, and very different from medical establishments in harsher climates. It was as if nature's bounty sought to compensate for the grimmer aspects of such a place. It didn't really work, he thought; underneath all the splendor, there was still the faintest scent of sickness and death, but at least it served to divert the mind - for a few minutes anyway.

"You came back," he said finally, very softly. "After everything that happened, you chose to come back. I'm not sure I'd have done that. I'm not sure . . ."

To his surprise, Redding laughed. "Yes, you are. The difference is that you never would have let them run you off in the first place. You're so in-your-face determined that you never back off. Let me tell you something, Brian. I've spent my whole life living under the radar, so to speak. It's how I survived - how I chose to survive - and I'm not going to apologize for it. It isn't necessarily the right way, or the best way, but it worked for me, because that's the person I am. But you? You don't know how to hide. And I can admire that, without really understanding it. It works for you, but it also puts you at risk. You and . . ."

"And everyone around me," said Brian with a sigh. "That's what you were going to say, isn't it?"

"Brian, I'm . . ."

"No. Don't say it. Don't apologize. Because, when you get right down to the bottom of it all, you're right. My determination might very well cost me more than I could stand to pay."

Redding took a moment to study that spectacularly beautiful young face, and felt a deep, abiding sadness touch him. "You're not talking about your own life, are you?"

"No."

The older man nodded, and took a deep drag of his cigarette. "What are you going to do?"

Brian straightened, and adjusted the sash of his dark silk robe. "Whatever I have to."

"Can I give you some advice?"

Brian chuckled. "Well, if you don't, you'll be the only person east of the Mississippi who hasn't. So . . . fire away."

"All those years ago, I did the right thing," Redding said softly. "From every perspective, it was the right thing. She was married. She had children. She was . . . white. And I . . . I had nothing to give her, nothing that I thought was worthy of the sacrifice she'd have had to make."

He fell silent then, his eyes staring out into the morning but no longer seeing what lay before him.

"And?" Brian prompted, when it appeared the older man would not continue.

"And she still died, and I was still alone. If I hadn't done 'the right thing', things might have worked out differently. We might have managed to build a life together. But that didn't happen, and now . . . now I'll never know what might have been."
"So, what? I should just seize the moment and grab what I want and . . ."

"You should remember that you can do all the right things, the unselfish things, and God can still take away the things you love most. You can't control life, you know, yours or theirs. In the end, it's a downstream journey and, much as you'd like to believe otherwise, you can't fight the current."

"Very poetic."

Redding smiled. "You're an asshole, you know that?"

"Part of my charm."

The smile became a rough rumble of laughter.

"I wanted to thank you."

Redding turned to meet Brian's eyes. "You're welcome."

"And to ask if there's anything . . ."

"Unless you'd like me to rearrange the features of that pretty face, you'll stop right there. I didn't do it in order to get some kind of reward."

"No? Then why did you do it?"

"Because it was the right thing to do. Sometimes, it's just that simple."

Brian took a final drag of his cigarette before looking up to watch an errant wind ruffle through the abundant foliage of the crepe myrtle trees. "Yeah. Sometimes it is."

"You ready to tell me the rest of the story?"

Chris McClaren leaned against the balcony railing and clasped his hands, enjoying the natural warmth of the morning sun, which would, as the day wore on, become much too warm for comfort. "What makes you think there's any more?"

Brian lifted one hand to shade his eyes as he looked up to follow the spiraling path of a hawk soaring overhead. "Because I'd rather not believe that the mighty FBI is capable of that kind of stupidity."

McClaren pulled a crumpled pack of Marlboros from his pocket and offered one to Brian as he took the last one in the pack for himself. "Why do you . . ."

"Oh, puh-lease! Stop playing stupid. All of that 'we didn't realize' and 'we were surprised to learn' and 'there was no way to predict'. If that kind of oversight happened in all your investigations, this country would have been over-run with terrorists and Mafia drug lords and God knows what else a long time ago. So how was this case different? How did this happen?"

The FBI agent smiled. "You're annoying at the best of times, Brian. But you're even more annoying when you're right."

"So are you going to explain it or . . ."

"We went into this blind, Brian. This is . . . it's not just big. This is about way more than some ongoing drama in provincial little Pittsburgh. The truth is that we thought we were dealing with a bit
of local homophobia, a stand-alone event that just happened to occur in an area which had been the scene of a growing number of hate crimes. And the powers that be - the ones I take orders from and even the ones that they take orders from - seized upon this particular case to try to focus attention on the problem. But when we began to dig, to try to pull up motives and tangible information . . . frankly, Brian, we didn't have a clue what we'd stumbled on. And we're still learning. As it turns out, this isn't just about the local homophobes grabbing an opportunity to thrash and throttle the hometown pretty boy. It's much bigger than that, much deeper. And it goes back a long way."

"How long?"

"Years at least."

"And Babylon?"

McClaren nodded. "Yes."

"So what you're telling me . . ." Brian paused, and almost choked on the smoke he'd just inhaled. "Babylon happened because of . . ."

"No." In one amazingly quick motion, McClaren had stepped up and grabbed Brian and used one hand to force them face to face, almost touching. "No. Babylon was not because of you. If anything, the reverse is true. You were because of Babylon. It's a big iceberg, Brian, and so far, we've barely uncovered the tip. When we know more, I'll tell you, but until then, you just need to understand that these people wanted to destroy you because you refused to allow Babylon to die, because you refused to bend over and take it up the ass like a pretty little faggot."

Unexpectedly, Brian grinned. "You've sure got a way with words, McFed."

But McClaren did not smile, because there was no reflecting smile in Brian's eyes.

"What are you going to do?"

Brian stepped away abruptly to return to his observation of his surroundings, but the FBI agent did not miss the fact that he'd been quick to look away in an attempt to hide the shadows rising in his eyes.

"Send everyone home, finish up with Turnage, and move on to the next phase."

"Meaning what?"

"Not your business."

It was McClaren's turn to grin. "Not your choice to make, my friend. You are my business, until Alexandra Corey - and the Attorney General - say otherwise."

"I have things to do," Brian replied. "Private things."

"Uh, huh!"

"You don't get a say in this."

"Uh, huh!"

"Goddammit, Chris, I . . ."

"This must be serious."
"Why?"

"You called me 'Chris'. You never call me by name."

"I can think of plenty of other things to call you."

The FBI smiled. "And I don't give a damn what you call me. You're not going to steal away like a thief in the night, Brian. Where you go, I go."

Brian sighed. "You know what?"

"What?"

"There's not going to be a fairy tale ending to all this. No riding off into the sunset for the handsome prince and his pretty little faggot."

"No?" McClaren took a final drag from his cigarette before snuffing it out in the big concrete urn beside him. "So tell me, which one are you?"

Despite himself, Brian grinned. "Asshole!"

"Hey. I'm the easy one," replied the FBI agent. "With me, you can rant and curse and demand all you like, and I'm just going to go on doing what I have to do. So I'm not the problem here."

"Meaning what?"

McClaren leaned forward to brace his forearms against the balcony railing, and watched a squirrel leaping up through the branches of a towering sycamore tree. "Meaning, who's going to tell Justin?"
Chapter 52

He would not stay for me, and who can wonder?
He would not stay for me to stand and gaze.
I shook his hand, and tore my heart in sunder,
And went with half my life about my ways.

-- A. E. Housman

Brian sat in the conspicuously ultra-chic wingback chair that was situated in the corner of his hospital room and gazed out on the beautifully manicured grounds of the institution. One glance would have been enough to confirm - if he'd had any doubts - that he was definitely not in Pittsburgh any more.

Not that Pittsburgh did not have its share of well-maintained, perfectly landscaped public buildings. No. Virtually every city in Pennsylvania could point with pride to settings noted for horticultural brilliance. Thus, the difference was not in the degree of effort expended nor funds invested nor imaginative design exercised; it was not a question of excellence, but rather a matter of exuberance. One simply could not plan or engineer the euphoric explosion of life renewing itself that occurred so spontaneously and naturally under the nurturing rays of a southern sun in the spring.

Yes, he knew it was a thoroughly stupid thought, just as he knew that - come August - that benevolent light would intensify to such a degree that it would become hard-edged and deadly. But for now, for this singular moment of spring, he could appreciate the eruption of life - the outburst of color and riotous health of a thousand different varieties of flowers which he could not have named to save his life.

It was literally a pageant of renewal, of new life, new hope, new promises . . . if one should choose to allow them.

He deliberately turned away from the window, reaching for his coffee cup and wishing desperately for something stronger.

Nearby, perched on the freshly-made bed, enjoying the silkiness of sheets that had never seen the inside of a Medline warehouse, Justin watched his lover stretch as sunlight streamed obliquely through the window, sparking glints of auburn in Brian's hair and tracing gold across the contours of his face - perfect contours, restored thanks to the natural healing power of the patient and the undeniable skill of the surgeon who had taken on the task of restoration. Brian had been very lucky.

Life wasn't fair. If Justin hadn't known that already, he'd have known it now. That a man could look like this, could come back from the kind of mutilation he had endured and emerge even more beautiful than before . . . Justin rather thought that this particular chain of events proved the existence of a benevolent God, although he knew that the uber-Christians of the ultra-right would disagree whole-heartedly. They would see this exquisitely beautiful man as the Anti-Christ, the devil wearing an angel's face.

Then he laughed. He could live with that, and he was pretty sure that Brian could too, although he did spare a moment to wonder if it would ever bother Brian at all to be so judged.

Then he laughed again, at the silliness of the thought.

"What's so funny, Sunshine?"
Justin slid off the bed, adopting a deliberate, provocative slink as he moved forward and lowered himself - very gently - to straddle Brian's lap. The instantaneous physical response pressing against his crotch and the sly lip bite that was so intensely Brian Kinney encouraged him to nestle closer. "Life is sweet," he murmured, burying his face in the velvety darkness below his lover's jaw-line.

Moving with an ease that was almost as fluid and natural as that he would have exhibited prior to his injuries, Brian shifted and turned to devour the lush, bee-stung lips that hovered before him, and the two of them forgot everything in that moment. It mattered not in the least that they were framed against the bright glare of morning, centered behind a field of glass and bathed in a wash of sunlight - visible and beautiful to anyone eager enough or curious enough or wise enough to take advantage of the opportunity to enjoy the view.

Brian deliberately drew a deep breath, inhaling the essence of the incredible sweetness pressed against him, noting - somewhere beneath the conscious layers of his mind - that no one else in the world smelled like Justin. He was grateful that it was a natural fragrance, owing nothing to chemistry or pharmaceutical enhancement. Eau de Justin. Bottling it would reap fortunes; but then it would no longer be exclusively, unmistakably Justin, so he thought that was a revenue source best left unexplored. He had read somewhere - probably in one of his off-the-wall, iconoclastic fictional explorations of possibilities - that male pheromones would become more and more intense and impossible to resist as years and decades and centuries passed. He didn't find it hard to believe; he was holding the proof of that postulation in his arms.

Arms he was steadily tightening.

When he shifted just enough to pull away slightly, he looked up and found himself drowning in tides of deep blue. "I want you," he whispered. "I want to be inside you."

Justin's laugh was guttural, almost harsh. "There's no lock on the fucking door."

Brian grinned. "Says the man who is the star attraction of Babylon's nightly backroom floorshow."

"Was," answered Justin, licking at his lover's lower lip. "Was the star attraction. These days, I'm privately engaged."

Brian considered for a moment. Then he nodded. "Yeah. You are. But guess what. The door from the hallway might not lock, but the one to the bathroom does. Ergo ..." He paused for one deep, tongue-thrusting, mind-blowing kiss, "no nasty old letch is going to catch sight of your gorgeous little ass - except me, of course."

Justin smirked, a slightly venal gleam flaring in crystal blue eyes. "But you're not exactly at full strength these days, you know. Are you sure you can . . ."

It was Brian's turn to laugh. "The day I can't stand you against a shower wall and fuck your brains out is the day I take a swan dive from the top of the Chrysler building. So don't just sit there, Sunshine." The laugh became an unapologetic leer. "Get in there and assume the position."

Justin grinned and did as he was told.

The combination shower/tub enclosure was, of course, nowhere near the size of the huge glass cylinder at the loft, but it would do for starters. Justin quickly adjusted the temperature of the streaming water to the super-hot setting that Brian always preferred and shucked his own clothes efficiently, not bothering to put on any kind of striptease. He had better things to do. But divesting Brian of his robe and silk pajamas . . . aah, that was something else altogether. Justin slowed his frantic movements to an easy deliberate pace, his hands warm, caressing, lightly stroking and teasing.
as he loosened the sash of the robe and eased it down Brian's shoulders, gradually exposing the deep V of flesh - paler than usual, but still perfect. At that point, growing physical need took over, and clothing became nothing but a barrier to be instantly discarded, at least one piece of it irretrievably damaged. Only when Brian was leaning against the shower wall, tall and bare and beautiful, enjoying the steady beat of steaming water against his chest, did Justin pause to appreciate the result of his frenzy.

He knelt, still and motionless, and looked up to take in every detail of the body towering over him.

Perfection restored - long, lean lines, beautiful musculature, creamy skin, flawless face with perfect, symmetrical features, without blemishes or marks or scars. Except one.

Justin reached up and touched the roughened scarlet abrasion that stood out so starkly on the creamy expanse of skin below Brian's ribcage. His fingers explored gently, as he lifted his eyes to examine the expression on that sculpted face. For his part, Brian was simply looking back, content to enjoy the visual feast while basking in his lover's careful scrutiny.

"Ugly, isn't it?" The Kinney drawl was just a bit more intense than usual.

Justin's smile was gentle. "It's like Elizabeth Taylor's mole."

Brian blinked. "Say what?"

"The contrast just emphasizes the perfection of all the rest."

Brian folded his lips, but there was a bright flicker of laughter in his eyes.

"But that's not why you kept it."

No response except for a winsome smile, accompanied by a classic Kinney eyebrow-lift.

It was at that point that Justin decided it was time to stop talking, stop considering, and start doing.

Brian gasped as his young lover leaned forward and swallowed his massive erection, taking obvious enjoyment in the contour and the taste and the sheer size of the organ. He took a moment to remember the first blow job Justin had ever performed on him; it had been incredibly sweet and a bit awkward - even clumsy - but somehow even more enjoyable for that. But Justin had always been a quick study, had always learned rapidly and well and had not required a great deal of practice or instruction to achieve perfection in this endeavor as in so many others.

A combination of rhythmic sucking and complex tongue action - a particularly delicious talent of the younger man's - not to mention the intimate strokes of fingers exploring and probing the dark, tight entrance to his body, quickly brought Brian to the edge of orgasm. But he was not ready yet; he had much more in mind than a quick, explosive climax. He pushed Justin away roughly, lifted him to his feet, steadied him (Brian not being the only one close to explosive decompression) and maneuvered them both out of the shower, using his feet to spread his robe across the tile floor - creating a cushion for his lover's back.

Then he lowered Justin carefully, taking time to retrieve a bottle of liquid soap from the counter, and grabbing more towels for additional padding. In the end, they managed to create a cozy little nest for themselves

"Slow down, Sunshine," he whispered, as he knelt between Justin's knees and leaned forward, fitting himself to his young lover, crotch to crotch. "When I said I wanted to be inside you, I wasn't talking about your mouth." He then lifted up enough to be able to drop a line of quick kisses down the inside
of Justin's thigh, pausing to explore the soft blond curls circling a painfully hard cock before pulling back to lavish the same attention on the other thigh. By the time he completed that second exploratory journey, Justin was writhing with need and moaning softly. Brian chuckled as he dipped two fingers in the slick, liquid soap, and divided his attention between preparing Justin to receive the mass of his erection, and licking and suckling at that beautiful, slightly arched cock.

"That's . . . enough," Justin gasped, as he felt the deliberate stroke of Brian's fingers against his prostate. "If you don't fuck me - right now - I'm going to explode all over you."

Brian's laugh was soft and slightly breathless, but he wasted no time setting himself in position to obey, draping Justin's knees over his shoulders to obtain maximum penetration and contact, while still able to lean forward to cover that irresistible mouth with his own.

"Open for me, Sunshine," he whispered, as he pressed forward and felt the tight-swollen head of his cock overcome the resistance of that puckered ring of constricted muscle to slip into the silken passage that reached for him, ready to swallow him. "Let me in."

Justin groaned, then caught his lips between his teeth, reality exploding into sparks of incredible light as Brian pressed forward, gently, easily, but inexorably sliding in, filling Justin, probing deeper, exploring further, joining them together as no one else ever could or would.

Abruptly, Justin pushed Brian back just enough to be able to meet his eyes. "Mine!" he growled, emphasizing the word by a fierce tightening of his abdominal muscles, creating pressure that shot through Brian's body like an electrical charge. "Always . . . and forever . . . mine." Each word underscored by a perfect contortion of that perfect body.

Brian went very still and remained that way for several breathless seconds, staring down into eyes that would not allow him to dodge the question or pretend he didn't know what he was being asked.

A lifetime aversion to commitment in any form teetered in the balance, weighing against a love that he wanted to deny, needed to deny, but - ultimately - could not deny.

At last, he nodded. "Yours," he whispered, pushing in, sliding deeper, claiming territory no one before him had ever touched, and making sure, with each withdrawal, to stroke that ultra-sensitive nub that sent sparks exploding like a chain of fireworks through Justin's loins. "Just yours."

Later, he would remember the rush within him as he'd lingered on that brink, remember those words . . . and wonder what he'd been thinking; wonder what he'd done.

But not now. Now there was only Justin, around him, beneath him - devouring him, engulfing him, encompassing his entire world in the incredibly beautiful heat of the moment.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

It was at roughly that same moment that Dr. Rick Turnage strode into the hospital room, prepared to amaze and confound his patient, any attendant friends and acquaintances, and his entourage of interns, residents, nurses, students, and associates with the degree of his accomplishment and his skill. Brenda Herring brought up the rear of the small procession, too busy examining Brian's medical chart to pay much attention to the group around her or her employer's histrionics.

No expectant audience, however, was sitting in the room, waiting with bated breath for the surgeon's appearance. In fact, it appeared to be empty.

Thus, there was no one present to look up as he and his retinue entered; no one to notice his arrival and respond with eager anticipation, although - in truth - expecting anything 'eager' from Brian
Kinney would have been pushing the envelope beyond the scope of possibility. Still, the physician wasn't accustomed to playing to an empty house. Especially when . . . it only took two seconds to realize that the room was not really empty after all; the sounds emerging from the in-suite bathroom confirmed that. Not to mention the grins on the faces of several of the interns and associates in his group.

Kinney had been in residence for most of the week, and it had taken far less time than that for the entire staff - along with a sizable percentage of the patient population - to figure out exactly who and what he was. Some were delighted; some were appalled, but no one was indifferent.

Turnage opened his mouth to demand that his patient present himself for immediate evaluation, but he was just a beat too slow, as a young, strong, vibrant voice rose in a raucous semi-howl. "Brian, God, Brian! Harder, harder . . . now, now, now, n-o-o-o-w-w-w-w!"

The only response was a deep, long drawn-out guttural rumble that was not quite a laugh and not quite a growl, but something half-way between the two.

Next came a brief silence, and then . . . harsh, shuddering breaths, followed by shared laughter.

Squaring his shoulders, Turnage stepped forward, fist raised to bang on the bathroom door, but once again, he was forestalled, as the door from the hallway swung open, nudged by the heavy-laden cart that Trina Thomas and Emmett Honeycutt pushed into the room, accompanied by a cloud of mouthwatering fragrance that made everyone present realize that lunchtime couldn't come soon enough and probably wouldn't offer anything as delectable as whatever it was lurking under the silver covers on this cart..

Trina paused and regarded Turnage and his retinue with raised eyebrows. "Where's Brian?"

Turnage was not one to be out-snarked. "That seems to be the question of the hour."

Simultaneously, Emmett yelled out, "Cut it out, you two, and put your pants on. You aren't going to believe what Trina and I have created for your culinary delight. The French may never recover from the shame."

At that point, the opening of the bathroom door, exposing the muscular frame of Brian Kinney - bare-chested and towel-wrapped - took away some of the impact of Emmett's announcement and Turnage's annoyance.

"Present and accounted for," said Brian with a grin, "and hungry."

Trina and Emmett smiled, their expression speaking volumes to reveal that they both knew perfectly well what Brian and company had been up to, and how they had worked up an appetite, but neither chose to voice the observation. Brenda Herring pretended to be unaware as well, but had a hard time suppressing a quirky grin of her own.

Justin, shielded by the broader physique of his lover, just managed to wriggle into a pair of jeans that were only one size too small, before following Brian out of the bathroom.

"What's for lunch?" Neither medical need, a potential audience, nor any sense of embarrassment or impending doom would ever be enough to suppress Justin's appetite.

Emmett stood very straight, doing his best impression of a French maitre D. "Poulet Moliere a la Trina and Emmett," he announced. Then he grinned. "We've been collaborating."

"Do I get wine with that?" asked Brian with a smile, noting - but ignoring - the intensity of the frown
on Rick Turnage's face.

"No," snapped the surgeon. "You do not. And, if you could bring yourself to spare a few minutes of your time, I need to run a few more tests, to make sure . . ."

"Doc," drawled Brian, moving forward and settling on the edge of his bed, and pulling Justin along with him, "you've already tested everything except my sperm count." Then he grinned. "Which is just fine, and you can ask Justin if you don't trust my judgment. So what else . . ."

But Turnage was not in the mood to play games, and did not like being an object of ridicule, even in the most incidental manner. "Do you really want me to go into that?" he asked, surprisingly softly. "Because I can, if that's really . . ."

Brenda Herring moved to the side of the bed, her expression - while sympathetic - informing the patient that Turnage was definitely not kidding.

"No," snapped Brian abruptly, shifting his weight so he was sitting braced against the stack of pillows on his bed. "No. Let's keep this between you and me. Everybody else . . . out."

"Now wait . . ." That was Justin.

"Now wait . . ." That was Emmett.

"Now wait . . ." That was a chorus of voices rising from the surgeon's retinue.

Turnage sighed, recognizing the futility of resistance and giving up any hope for entertaining his entourage. "Five minutes," he conceded gruffly. "That's all I need."

It was a dazzling red-headed intern, complete with pouty lips and generous cleavage, who made a point of stepping forward to fluff the patient's pillows and claim his attention. "Too bad," she said with a smile. "I was really looking forward to this . . . examination."

Brian grinned - thoroughly pleased with himself - while Justin glared, eyes filled with shards of ice.

"Down, Tiger," laughed Emmett. "Trust me when I tell you that you're not his type."

Her pout was textbook, and Turnage could not quite suppress an urge to smile, as Brian's grin morphed into easy laughter. Spotting something in the young woman's eyes that reminded him of a certain blonde member of his circle of intimate acquaintances, Brian leaned forward and tucked a strand of hair behind her ears. "But if anyone could ever convince me otherwise, it would be someone like you."

She grinned, and dropped a quick kiss on his cheek. Justin, by this time, was livid.

"Five minutes," Turnage repeated, losing patience.

The group - protesting volubly - allowed itself to be escorted to the corridor by Nurse Herring, who remained in the room and made sure to close the door behind them completely, eliminating any possibility for eavesdropping. In the hallway, everyone lingered for a moment, talking among themselves, uncertain of what to do next. Except for Justin, of course, who didn't talk, didn't discuss, didn't do anything but glare at the closed door and fume.

Within the room, there was an uneasy silence.

"Was this really necessary?" Brian asked finally, choosing to look out toward the glowing morning
rather than meet Turnage's eyes, noticing that the nurse resumed her stance at his bedside. He deliberately ignored the softness of the smile on her face.

The surgeon ignored both question and tone, choosing instead to step forward and subject his patient to a brief, physical examination, his fingers skimming over newly healed skin and probing areas still slightly sensitive, before using his stethoscope to monitor Brian's heartbeat. But it was obviously only a ploy to allow him to get close enough to study deeply shadowed hazel eyes.

"To answer your question," he said finally, very softly, "no, it probably wasn't necessary. Because you already know what I'm going to say. Don't you?"

Brian sighed. "Is that your subtle way of asking me if I've noticed that it's getting worse?"

The surgeon shrugged. "I don't worry much about subtlety. And neither do you. And you don't need me to tell you that it's getting worse."

Brian paused for a moment, before turning to look up directly into eyes that might just rival Justin's for blue intensity. "So, what's next?"

"Colorado."

Brian chuckled. "You act as if it's a foregone conclusion. Don't I get a say in this?"

Turnage did not flinch away from the icy glare that belied the laughter. "No. Because your pride and your stubbornness won't save you now, Brian. You can't will this away. If you don't act - and act now - you're going to lose your sight. And I have an idea you're too proud to allow anybody to know about that, so - for now - I'm keeping quiet. But . . ."

"I don't see that you have a choice, Doc. There are laws about . . ."

Turnage leaned forward, deliberately pressing his hand against the puckered scar that was so brilliant against Brian's pale skin, a scar that was still sensitive enough to cause Brian to gasp slightly.

"Fuck the laws!" Turnage hissed. "You, Mr. Kinney, are the best work I've ever done. You're my fucking David. My Pieta, and I'll be damned if I'll stand by and let you just throw it away. You push me too hard, and I'll have that little blond pit bull on you in a New York minute. So your only logical choice is . . . don't push me."

At that point, Brenda Herring stepped forward, her eyes warm with concern and affection. "He's right, Brian. You need to do what he says, not because he's going to do something stupid and enlist reinforcements to convince you, but because, as usual, he's right, which may be annoying as hell, but that doesn't change the truth of the matter. You need to do this, and you need to do it now. Every hour you delay . . ."

"What?" said a new voice, as a tall figure strode into the room. "Every hour he delays . . . what?"

"Do you have any appreciation for the concept of privacy, Agent McClaren?" demanded Turnage. "Or doctor/patient confidentiality?"

"Sure." The answer was easily given, and completely unconcerned. "But in this case, it doesn't apply. Until the day that I'm no longer responsible for protecting his life, he doesn't get to have any secrets from me."

Brian looked mutinous, but didn't bother to voice his objection, knowing his complaints would be noted - and ignored.
"So," continued the FBI agent, "what is it that he needs to do, now?"

Turnage answered, but deliberately addressed his response to Brian. "I spoke to Andrew Griffin last night, and he's all set up to receive you at the clinic and begin the battery of tests he needs to run before he can finalize plans for your treatment."

Brian looked up and surprised a look of something that might have been alarm - and might not - in Chris McClaren's eyes. He smiled just a bit, before turning to regard the surgeon sternly. "How long will the tests take?"

Turnage shrugged. "You have to remember that these are tests that Griffin himself devised. Nobody else does them, or even knows exactly how to do them, so I can only give you an estimate. Based on what he's told me, I'd say 72 hours, more or less."

"And after that?"

"After that, what?"

"You said he has to 'finalize plans for treatment'. How long will that take?"

"Christ, Brian!" snapped Turnage. "How the fuck do I know?"

But Brian was not going to be deterred. "Best guess, Doc. I need to know."

"Why?" In terms of stubbornness, Brian Kinney had met his match. "Why do you need to know? If you're going to let him treat you, then you just have to accept . . . ."

"I'll accept what I have to," Brian replied, "but there are things I still have to do. So I need to know - both the time frame . . . and the odds."

Turnage looked - for just a moment - like he was going to slip into one of the emotional tempests that he frequently used to manipulate associates and subordinates. But in the end, he didn't - not because he felt any reluctance to inflict his bad temper on those around him, but because he figured (correctly) that it wouldn't work on this group. So instead, he sat down on the edge of the bed and regarded his patient with a rare candor.

"Don't do this, Brian," he said slowly. "Don't push the people who care about you away, out of some kind of perverted notion that you have to do this to save them. You're not saving them; you're only hurting them."

But Brian's eyes were hard and cold as he studied the surgeon's face. "You an expert on that, too, Doc?"

Brenda Herring stirred, looking as if she was on the verge of intervening, of putting a stop to this line of questioning, but Turnage didn't give her the chance. "As a matter of fact," he replied, "I am."

Brian looked up then, hearing something in the man's voice that surprised him and intrigued him. He knew that others resented the physician for his arrogance and his overbearing manner, but those things had never really bothered Brian much; in some ways, he and the doctor had a lot in common. But he had never expected Turnage to lower his personal barriers and expose anything of his private nature. So this - whatever it turned out to be - might be worth hearing.

"Do you realize," the surgeon continued, turning so he could look out into the glorious beauty of the spring morning, "that I'm on the verge of being the most famous, most successful plastic surgeon in the country? And it wouldn't be too much of a stretch to extend that to the entire world. I've spent my
whole professional life striving for that, always reaching with all my strength and concentration and will power to get to the next level. And now - here I am. I'm at the peak of my profession, and that means that I can do anything I want. My picture is on the cover of the most prestigious medical journals, and I get a fistful of invitations every single day, to address international conferences and join the boards of the most exclusive, highly regarded medical institutions. For my work with disfigured children in Latin America, I've got more honors and awards than I've got room to display. I've got more money than God, a stock portfolio that Warren Buffet might envy, a number of houses scattered around the globe, my own private jet, and a little black book that includes phone numbers for movie stars and Vogue cover girls who just love the prestige of being seen on the arm of a world famous surgeon. It's so much classier than swanning around with the latest matinee idol, isn't it?"

Brian, interested despite himself, drew a deep breath. "And?"

The physician paused and appeared to be considering whether or not to answer. Then he looked up, his eyes hard and demanding, as he addressed both his own nurse and the FBI agent regarding him with thinly veiled hostility. "Would you both excuse us, please!"

When McClaren looked as if he were about to protest, Turnage's gaze grew colder. "Honestly, Agent McClaren. Unless you think I'm going to grab him and take him with me in a suicide pact as we fly through the window, I don't think you have anything to worry about. Do you? I mean, if I wanted to kill him, I've had plenty of chances to do it in such a way that he'd have died on the operating table, and you lot would have never known why. Right?"

McClaren hesitated, but allowed himself to be drawn toward the door by Nurse Herring, although the glints of anger in his eyes made it clear that he was not happy about it.

Only then, when they were alone, did the surgeon offer an answer to Brian's question, an answer so softly spoken that Brian could barely hear it. "The thing is that . . . it's not enough. It doesn't make up for what I gave up to get it."

"What did you give up?"

Turnage's smile was more than a bit rueful. "Two ex-wives, neither of which was a particularly great loss." He flushed slightly and avoided meeting Brian's eyes. "I have a weakness for voluptuous bodies with pretty faces and miniscule IQ's. And please don't ask me to explain why. I just . . . I never had time for anyone who could challenge me. I always thought that kind of thing was just an obstacle to keep me from reaching my goal. But I also have two children, Brian. I see them once in a while, and they're usually very polite. They've been well trained to say all the right things and behave in the right way, but it has nothing to do with how they feel about me. Daddy is, after all, King Midas - the source of the beach house in the Hamptons and the apartment on Park Avenue, country club memberships and Italian sports cars and French designer fashions. In short, all things posh and beautiful, so they know better than to mention that they have no clue who I really am and no interest in learning. Neither of them is stupid; they have my genes, after all. But they're exactly what their mother brought them up to be - vain and shallow and materialistic. When they grow up, they'll do charity work, of course, but not because they care about the plight of the less fortunate. They'll do it because it's what's expected - what society decrees should be done by the rich and famous, but they won't give a damn what it really means. And I realize now that it's too late to introduce myself to them, and too late to make a difference in their lives.

"I also have a twin sister - the person who was the center of my world throughout my childhood. The person who was always there for me, who loved me better and knew me better than anyone else ever could.

"I've only seen her once in the last eight years." He paused, and there was just the slightest hitch in
his voice when he continued. "What I did to damage that . . . well, it doesn't really matter what I did. It only matters that I did it, that I turned away from all of them, in pursuit of what I thought I wanted. I always thought that there would be time - once I'd achieved success - to go back and make it right. But . . ." He sighed and shifted then to look directly into Brian's eyes. "You always think you'll have time to fix things - later. But you just . . . you run out of time, Brian, and it happens when you're not even looking."

Brian smiled, but it lacked his customary sardonic wit. "I'm told - by self-proclaimed friends who claim to know - that it's never too late."

"Yeah, well, your friends are stupid."

This time, Brian laughed aloud, sharply and brightly enough to be heard in the hallway where more than one ear was as close to the door as one could get without being accused of flagrant eavesdropping. Justin Taylor and Chris McClaren exchanged wide-eyed looks of confusion, while Brenda Herring allowed herself a tiny smile.

"So," said Brian, suddenly much more relaxed and comfortable in the surgeon's company than he'd ever been before, "that's why you get involved in the charity work, isn't it? To make up for what you've lost in your private life."

Turnage grinned, trying to regain some measure of his customary air of confidence. "Don't be silly. I do it because I'm such a fucking great humanitarian."

Brian laughed again, louder still, generating something approaching panic in the hallway, and making it almost impossible for his listeners to resist an urge to charge into the room.

The two of them grew quiet for a time, and both were surprised that it was a comfortable silence, without rancor.

"You never answered my questions," Brian pointed out after a while.

Turnage sighed. "That's because I don't have the answers. And yes, before you can say it, I absolutely despise being in that position. I don't know the odds, because I'm not the expert here. What I do know is that, in his own way, Griffin is every bit as capable and determined as I am." Then he smiled. "A God complex isn't always such a bad thing, you know. So the bottom line is that he will fix this, if it can be fixed."

"Timeline?" Brian replied. "I need to know."

"Best guess. If you go do the tests he needs, you'll probably have a week or two before he's ready to proceed with treatment. But don't, under any circumstances, try to delay beyond that. I've done everything I can for you, Brian. Your body is perfect again - barring your one stupid little souvenir - which I could still fix if you ever change your mind. But it would be a shame if you let yourself get to the point where you can't look in the mirror and enjoy the view."

"And the treatment? How long for that?"

Turnage sighed again. "I don't even know what the treatment entails. I know there are surgical aspects to it, but beyond that . . . it's all experimental, bordering on revolutionary. So weeks, at least. Months, more likely."

Brian nodded, eyes shadowed and darker than they should be. "And no guarantee that it'll work."

It was not a question. "No," admitted Turnage. "But if you don't do it, then you will lose your vision."
There's no doubt about that.

"All right," replied Brian quietly. "Set it up so I can go directly there when I get out of here." Then he grinned. "Do I get to use your jet again?"

This time it was Turnage who was startled into a burst of laughter. "Jesus! Of course, you get to use the jet, but only because I've got a vested interest in seeing you make a full recovery. Don't get it in your head that it has anything to do with a compulsion to kindness. And so help me God, if you ever repeat any part of this conversation to Keller, you're going to lose a lot more than your sight. I wonder if anybody ever succeeds in telling you no?"

But the smile on Brian's face faltered then, and he didn't offer an answer.

"You're not going to tell him," the doctor said softly, "are you?"

Again, no answer, but then, Turnage realized he really didn't expect or need one. He already knew.

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"So tell me," drawled the acidic voice as Ted held his cell phone to his ear, "are you even allowed to talk to me, considering that you're currently lurking in the king's castle?"

The accountant suppressed a sigh. "I am not lurking, Melanie. I'm working. And it's nobody's business who I talk to on my cell phone."

"Are you sure?" she scoffed. "How do you know your office isn't bugged?"

There was just the tiniest hint of a hesitation before he answered. "He wouldn't do that."

"Are you sure?" she scoffed. "How do you know your office isn't bugged?"

"I've never thought he was a hero," he snapped, ignoring the insistent little buzz in the back of his mind that insisted on reminding him that - for him, at least - Brian had, occasionally, played such a role. He went on, speaking a bit louder in order to drown out that annoying little whisper. "I just have to find a way to show him that his belief in the almighty Cynthia is misguided, and that I'm the one who has his best interests at heart. After all, I'm the one who's still here working when everyone else left hours ago. So I just have to make him see that I've always been the one."

Her sigh was more impatient than sympathetic. "Teddy, how in the world do you think you'll manage to do that? Cynthia is always going to be there, saying exactly what he wants to hear and stroking that mighty ego. That's what she does, you know. If you really want to get back in his good graces, that's what you have to do. Get down on your knees and worship at his Gucci-loafered feet. If you're really willing to go to any length to be granted access to the crumbs that fall from his table. Personally, I don't know why you even want to. It's not like you really need him, and he certainly doesn't deserve . . ."

"Mel, stop!" he said quickly, his voice harsh, almost strident, as he decided to address the question of what Brian might deserve and ignore, as best he could, the question of his own needs. "Look, I know he's treated both of us badly. We have every right to resent what he's done to us, but . . ."


"It's not like he had to twist our arms, is it?" he interrupted. "We made our own choices."
"Yeah," she snarled, "but who went down with the fucking ship, while Lord Kinney sits aboard his cozy little yacht and watches us drown?"

"I know. Really, I know, only . . ."

"If you're actually going to sit there and defend him," she said, her voice gone ice cold, "then I'm not going to listen to it. I've got better things to do, like trying to figure out a way to keep that bastard from using his fucking money to force me to let Michael interfere in my daughter's life. But then I guess I should have expected this, shouldn't I? After all, you don't really have much to lose, do you? No child that can be used against you, and not much in the way of personal ties that might make you vulnerable. After all, if Blake decides that he's had enough of your bitching and whining and chooses to opt out of your little domestic arrangement, there's always someone else waiting in the wings, isn't there? Hell, maybe you can coax Emmett back to your bed; he's usually willing. Oh, but wait! He's got his big, bad NFL stud muffin now, doesn't he? But don't sweat it, Teddie. Fidelity has never been in the picture for you guys, has it, and, if worse comes to worst, you can always take up semi-permanent residence under Brian's desk so you can be ready to suck him off whenever he needs it. Right?"

He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead to ward off the headache he felt stirring at the base of his skull. "Mel, you shouldn't say things in the heat of anger that you'll regret later. And maybe you should stop and think about your own personal history, before you start ranting about anybody's failures in fidelity. You know you don't mean that."

"The fuck I don't. And don't you dare lecture me about fidelity. Lindsey betrayed me - first with the fucking artist and then - then by defending him, by taking his side against me, by giving in to her longing to spend her life by his side. And I'm tired of having to waltz around and bow to everyone's perceptions of the mighty Kinney. I don't understand how you can delude yourself into thinking you'll ever worm your way back into his good graces. For God's sake, Ted, you committed the one true cardinal sin; you outing his precious Gus to the world. And if anything happens to that kid because of what you did - anything at all - then you're a dead man. That's the bottom line."

Ted drew a deep breath. "You know, I didn't exactly do that alone. And I thought that Gus . . . I thought you cared about him too. But maybe you just can't get around how much he reminds you of Brian. More with every passing day, I think. But the bottom line is that you're wrong. I'll find my way back. All I have to do is show him how much he needs me, how much I can do for him, how much better off he is with me, than without me. And I already know how to do that."

She was silent for a moment, obviously considering her response, and resisting an urge to explain or defend her shifting allegiance to the child who had once been one of the most important people in her life. "You're delusional, Ted," she said finally, wearily. "You don't cross Brian Kinney and come back from it. He's no good at forgiveness."

Ted sighed, suddenly besieged by memories he would have preferred not to have. "Isn't he?" he replied. "Sometimes I . . . I wonder if he's not better at it than any of us."

This time, she actually snorted, obviously running out of patience. "And what - exactly - have we all done to need forgiving?"

The accountant almost gave her an answer - a list that he knew she would resent intensely and dispute angrily. But she could dispute all she wished; that would not change the truth of it. He sometimes wished that he were blessed with a less brutally honest memory, because he would really prefer to forget some things, particularly whatever debts he and his friends and acquaintances might owe to Brian Kinney. It should be easy to forget them, because it was a certainty that Brian himself would never bring them up. So why couldn't he do it? Why couldn't he just let them go, and forget
all the details, the little circumstances that seemed unimportant in themselves, but loomed so large when added together? And then he wondered - but only briefly - how Melanie's memory could be so selective. The answer, of course, lay in the vitriolic nature of her perceptions of Brian. But while she had evidently found a way to deny fundamental truths, he was not so skilled in the art of denial; he could not refuse to remember that, when all the extraneous emotional trivia was set aside, Melanie had reaped major blessings from many of Brian's actions, and it shouldn't matter that the benefits to her had been incidental, or that Brian would probably not have bothered to spit on her if she combusted spontaneously. Should it?

He drew a deep breath, knowing what he needed to do, but finding that he had little taste for it. Nevertheless, it had to be done if he were to have any hope of succeeding in his campaign to regain what he'd lost. He couldn't afford to waste his time worrying about these details. He had a goal to achieve, and he knew exactly how to do it, for he knew - better than most - that Brian had more than one Achilles heel. Yes, Justin and Gus were the center of the man's life, but he had other weaknesses. His first priority might be the well-being of the people he loved most, but he also had a profound fondness for his privacy, his luxurious lifestyle, and the thing that provided him the opportunity to have it all.

Brian Kinney liked money. And Ted Schmidt was deep into a complex plan to make sure that his employer would always have plenty of it - a plan that he considered fool-proof.

True, Brian might never love Ted, which mattered not at all. Ted didn't need his love - had never even spared a thought about how to obtain it. Well, almost never. But Brian would be eternally grateful to anyone who could insure that his lifestyle choices never be limited by a lack of funding.

Brian Kinney was going to wind up an exceptionally rich man, and Ted Schmidt was going to be the person who made it happen, with a little luck.

But if he were going to succeed in his plans, if he had any hope of regaining what he'd lost, he had to make some hard choices. After all, loyalty to a friend or acquaintance could not compare to loyalty to himself and the person who would control his future. Could it?

"Look, Mel," he said slowly, "I know how you feel about Brian. And I understand it completely. You blame him for all the bad things that happened in your marriage and your life. But he wasn't holding a gun to your head, was he? You were glad enough to use the money he provided to enable all of you to live a better life, weren't you? You only objected when things didn't go your way, and . . ."

"Okay, Ted," she said dryly, "I get it. In order to worm your way back into his inner circle, you've got to distance yourself from anyone who's on his shit list. Right?"

"No, of course not, but . . ."

"But," she interrupted sharply, "maybe it would be better if we didn't see each other for a while. Or appear to be conspiring against the Master. Right?"

"Well," he said softly, "when you put it that way . . ."

There was a pause then, and both hesitated to say more, sensing that they were standing at a crossroads, and their next step might be critical to whatever the future would hold. "You're fooling yourself, Teddie," she said finally, slightly surprised that she was really feeling a sense of loss, of friendship betrayed. "He's never going to give you what you want. Never. You might have managed to convince yourself that you were a charter member of his private club, but you never were. And you never will be."
She fell silent with a sigh, realizing that she was wasting her breath. No matter what she did or how much she might deserve his loyalty, she would never be able to compete with the golden boy, aka fucking Brian Kinney - the man who had taken away her partner, her son . . . her life.

This would just be one more thing she could blame him for; by this time, that list was almost infinite.

"Please, Mel," he said softly, "don't be that way. We're still friends. Nothing can change that. It's just better if . . ."

"I haven't been in a closet since I was a kid, Ted. And I'm sure as hell not going to go back into one now, just so we can keep our friendship on the QT. So it looks like you've got a choice to make."

He didn't say anything; he tried to not even breathe too loudly.


"Mel . . ."

But he was too late. She was gone.

He sat motionless for a while, fighting an urge to call her back, to grovel and beg. He didn't have that many friends; not true friends anyway. Lots of acquaintances; lots of people who turned to him for favors and advice and financial guidance, but not true friends, people who had no interest in using him. But Melanie . . . He closed his eyes and huffed a small sigh. In some ways, she had used him too, as a buffer against the slings and arrows flung at anyone who dared to stand against Brian Kinney, and - as a result - he had garnered more than his share of bruises.

He would miss her, though - miss having someone to run to whenever he had another complaint about Brian, because he had always known that she would inevitably take his side. Never once had she suggested that he might want to rethink his viewpoint. That, in itself, had been reassuring.

But there were other things that would more than make up for losing a sympathetic ear.

Moving slowly, he reached down and unlocked the bottom drawer of the credenza behind his desk and extracted a thin manila folder. Remembering her semi-snarky observation - and only feeling a little bit paranoid - he was careful to shield the contents of the file with his body, as he went over the information provided there once more. Looking for the catch, for the detail that would render his plans untenable.

But there was nothing. Perhaps it wasn't quite as certain as he wanted to believe, but he honestly couldn't see how it could fail, especially when he considered the source. Always providing that he could convince Brian to trust him again, to allow him to proceed with the plan. Of course, Brian could choose to take care of the details himself, if Ted divulged everything, showed him the full scope of the project. But the accountant was counting on the fact that Brian had never had much interest in handling the nuts and bolts of financial dealings - had always preferred to leave such matters in the hands of his financial advisers. Like Ted. But that had been before - before one fatal mistake had torn down the trust that had existed between them.

He had to rebuild that trust, and this . . . this would provide the building blocks to do that.

He closed his eyes, offering up a silent prayer of thanks, for he knew he'd been incredibly lucky. He had been in need of a miracle, and he had stumbled across exactly that. He didn't bother trying to fool himself into thinking that he had discovered this potential treasure by virtue of his cleverness or his skills; he had simply been in the right place at the right time, and - for once in his life - known the right people. Even Brian would not be able to deny that, although he might have some initial
misgivings. But those would surely be dismissed as trivial once the man realized what a bonanza awaited him.

Now, Ted just had to watch his timing, and get everything in place. It had to be perfect.

When his cell phone rang again, he almost ignored it, fearful that Melanie might have reconsidered. He honestly regretted that his relationship with her might prove to be a casualty of the plan he was hatching, but, for the moment, her action - equivalent to walking out in a huff - might be to his advantage.

But it wasn't Melanie on the phone. It was Blake, who sounded just slightly put out when Ted decided to answer after a half-dozen rings. "Where are you? I thought we were going to the Lodge for dinner."

"Oh, shit! I'm sorry, Honey. I got busy and . . ." 

"Ted, it's after eight, and you left the house at seven this morning. What on earth can be so important that you . . ."

"Look, Blake, I'm not ready to go into it, OK? This is just . . . it's something I have to do, if I'm ever going to be able to get my life back."

Blake was silent for a moment, except for a heavy breath. "Your life? That's funny. I had this weird idea that I was your life, Ted. Isn't that what you told me, back when you had some interest in building our future together? Now - now, you seem to be obsessed with the idea that you can rewrite the past somehow. And that . . . that can't be done, Ted. You can't go back and unmake a mistake. The only thing you can do is try to avoid making the same mistake again. Brian is . . ."

"Is what? Is going to just magically forgive and forget and allow me back into his life? Is going to trust me again? You don't know Brian, Blake, and I don't know why you'd assume that you do. You've never been close to him, and you don't know how it feels to . . ."

"To what? To betray someone who believed in you. Better think again, Ted. I know that feeling better than anybody."

"That isn't what I did."

Another beat of silence. Then Blake sighed, and when he spoke again, his voice was heavy with grief. "Teddie, if you want this whole mess resolved, you have to first be honest with yourself. Using anger and resentment as a refuge against your own feelings, and spending all your time placing blame . . . it's not going to solve anything, and ultimately, it's only going to result in more anguish for you. I want to help you get through this; I really do. But I can't help if you refuse to look at the whole picture."

"You think this was my fault." Ted's reply was icy, strident with rage. "You think he was right not to trust me, and to blame me for . . ."

"I think he had a right to hold you accountable, Ted. And so do you. That's what this is all about. Deep in your heart, you know you made a mistake, even though you never meant to. Your motives were above reproach, but . . . I'm sorry, but your emotions got in the way, and you acted without thinking things through. And now, now you're so desperate to excuse yourself, to cover your failings and rewrite what happened, that you're doing it again. You're refusing to man up and . . ."

"Man up?" Ted laughed, but there was no joy in it. "Is that really what you're saying to me. The ultimate twink is going to tell me to 'man up'? That would be funny, if it weren't so pathetic. You
know who you remind me of right now? Emmett Honeycutt. Neither one of you have the balls to take control of a situation. And you think you know anything about Brian Kinney? You don't have a clue - no more than Emmett does. Emmett's just fooling himself into thinking he means anything to Brian. Brian uses people; that's what he does. And when he doesn't need them any more, he just throws them out with yesterday's garbage. That's what's in store for Emmett. But I'll be damned if I allow that to happen to me. I'm going to show him - and you. He's going to learn just how much he needs me, and you . . ."

He paused to draw a deep breath. "I guess you just have to figure out which side your bread is buttered on. I really thought I was taking good care of you, but I guess . . ."

"Really?" Ted was surprised when Blake interrupted him. "Is that really what you thought, Teddie? Because I thought that we were taking good care of each other."

When the line went dead, Ted had to fight off an urge to throw his uber-expensive I-phone across the room. Then he had to fight off an equally powerful urge to get up, go into Brian's office and retrieve a full bottle of Chivas Regal from the perpetually well-stocked bar and proceed to empty it methodically.

But he didn't. He couldn't afford to fall off the wagon at this point. He had too much to lose.

And he hadn't really lost Blake; he was sure of that. Blake would come around in time. If nothing else, he would be enticed back into Ted's arms by the overpowering smell of success, once his plans came to fruition. Nothing was a more powerful aphrodisiac than power, after all.

Blake would sulk for a while, but, in the end, he would understand his errors; he would understand that his partner was blameless, a victim of the evil machinations of that scheming woman and those of Brian's entourage who supported her. He would applaud when Ted emerged triumphant from the battle that lay ahead.

Blake would see the light; he would understand. He must. Otherwise - well, otherwise didn't bear thinking about.

Ted returned to his compulsive perusal of the information in his ultra-secret file, visions of Brian's look of amazement and undying gratitude in his head as he examined his options.

He could hardly wait.

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In Toronto, spring was still an ephemeral wisp of promise, not yet realized beyond an occasional bright, comfortable afternoon. And night was still a relentless process of darkness leaching away any scrap of the warmth of the day.

Melanie knew she should have gone home already, that lingering here in her office was not going to remedy anything, especially since the only way it felt like "her" office was because everyone else was already gone. As much as she liked to maintain that she was still the same person, personally and professionally, the simple truth was that the Canadian government did not consider her sufficiently trained to practice law in Canadian courts. For the moment, she was limited to assisting the licensed barristers of the firm, and it mattered not at all that she was brighter, more knowledgeable, and better trained than 75% of them.

Adding insult to injury, she was currently earning less than half of what she had pulled down in Pittsburgh.
It hadn't mattered in the past. Lindsey's income had offset some of the loss, and . . . well, she didn't dwell too much on where the rest of the money had come from. It had come, and it had served its purpose, in providing a good, comfortable life for her and her partner and their children, in a pleasant, spacious family home.

And now - now she was left facing the bitter truth that she could not afford to continue to pay the rent on the house they had shared.

She loved that house. It had been perfect for them, just as their life had been almost perfect.

And now . . . Brian had taken it all from her, and the thought of him gloating over her losses was almost as painful as the losses themselves.

She didn't waste any time evaluating the logic she'd used in arriving at her decision to blame him for everything. It was his fault; it had always been his fault.

She spent a few minutes thinking about something that she almost never allowed herself to think about: what her life would have been like had she never heard of Brian Kinney - how different her marriage to Lindsey would have been if he had never infected her lovely, high society wife with a hopeless need for his approval (and an equally hopeless lust for his affection); how perfect it would have been to watch her son being born if his biological father had been some nameless, faceless sperm donor instead of the infamous Stud of Liberty Avenue. Deliberately, she stopped at that point, ignoring how great the financial burdens would have been without Brian's contributions. That was something she didn't wish to acknowledge.

And now - now she had to deal with the barracuda Brian had found to challenge her in court. The name Liam Quinn had meant nothing to her at first, but it sure as hell meant plenty now. She had spent the entire day researching Brian's new attorney - a man known to many in legal circles as "The Shark" - and she wanted to believe that what she had learned hadn't frightened her. But she couldn't quite pull it off.

She had gradually come to the reluctant conclusion that her options were becoming more and more limited. If she couldn't get any help from those who'd previously supported her in her guerilla warfare with Brian (and she wasn't particularly optimistic, especially after her conversation with Ted) she was going to have to resort to more extreme means.

If only there were some plausible course of action that didn't involve taking her daughter and disappearing into some Godforsaken backwater village in the perpetually twilit regions of Alaska. Otherwise . . . well, there was also what she privately termed the Eastern option; she'd never had the slightest interest in exploring her ethnic origins, but, in the end, she might have no other choice. Brian Kinney was proving to have very long arms, but even he couldn't reach into the staunch fortresses of Tel Aviv. Only - she really didn't want to go to Israel, even though her nemesis had once pointed out that she'd have been a perfect candidate for Mossad training as a toddler. And she had to admit that the idea held a certain appeal, given what she'd like to be able to do to those who made her life miserable.

But she knew she was being silly. Mossad and motherhood definitely did not mix, in the first place - and she was too old, in the second. Another painful admission

Besides, she didn't want to go to Israel. She didn't like sand.

So - reluctantly - she needed to find another way, another approach. Another source of assistance. She rubbed her temples with rough fingers, understanding that she really had no choice. She needed an ally, and there was only one who would even consider listening to her appeal; one with whom she
still had an automatic "in"; one who, through an incredible ability to practice self-delusion, might be able to withstand the systematic assaults perpetrated by Brian's relentless lawyer.

She took a deep breath before dialing a familiar number.

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Dinner had been surprisingly good - thanks to Emmett and his determination to always be prepared for anything. Even though he was currently hundreds of miles away, playing nanny to both Brian and Justin, he had not failed to prepare for his absence. The proof, of course, lay in the freezer that resided in the pantry of the lovely townhouse recently purchased by star quarterback Drew Boyd. It had, of course, been Drew's money which had paid for the residence, but the ambiance had all been courtesy of the taste - only semi-flamboyant -of his young lover, and Drew saw no reason not to avail himself of the fruits of Emmett's compulsion to dote on the man he was beginning to identify as the love of his life. That doting, fortunately, included making sure that Drew never went without an exquisitely prepared meal and never had cause to go looking to find someone to cook it for him.

Thus, on this lovely spring evening, feeling his solitude a bit too keenly, Drew had extended an invitation to members of Emmett's circle - and one newcomer - to join him for dinner.

Preparation had consisted of little more than thawing and warming the dishes Emmett had prepared weeks ago, but the looks of satisfaction on the faces of the diners indicated that nothing more had been required. The main dish - Beef Carbonnade with Sauce Bordelaise- was a relatively new result of Emmett's culinary experiments, enjoyed by all, but the true hit of the night was a concoction that had come to be known as Emmett's signature creation - a vegetable dish called corn maque choux. Neither Drew nor Emmett knew exactly what the term 'maque choux' might mean; while it was a dish well known in New Orleans and Cajun country, Emmett claimed that the term was actually Indian in origin. But in the end, it didn't matter that no one understood the meaning of the words. It only mattered that it was truly a dish to die for, and Liam Quinn obviously agreed, having gone back for seconds and then thirds before the meal had ended.

A savory side dish of potatoes lyonnaise - also a product of Emmett's advance preparations - a huge salad provided by Debbie, and the mocha cheesecake that Michael and Ben had picked up from their favorite bakery rounded out the meal perfectly, and Quinn had contributed three bottles of Cakebread 2008 Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon, which might not quite measure up to the finest French reds, but came very close. In addition, it had a lovely rich black cherry/black current bouquet which all of the diners enjoyed immensely.

As they all sat back from the table, well stuffed and trying not to groan, it was Quinn who raised his glass of the excellent vintage, took a moment to appreciate the aroma, and offered up a toast to the absent chef.

"To Emmett!" he proclaimed.

Debbie, Michael, Ben, and Drew all lifted their glasses, and the light in Drew's eyes was bright and more than a bit proprietary.

"I honestly haven't enjoyed a better meal in months," the lawyer continued.

"Yeah?" said Drew with a smile. "He'll consider that a challenge, you know. If he can't make you run screaming for the nearest gym to compensate for inches gained, he'll take it as a personal failure."

Quinn laughed. "I can see that Pittsburgh could be hazardous to my health."
"So," said Debbie, pleasantly sated and only slightly resentful that she had overindulged in something not drowning in marinara sauce, "does that mean you'll be staying on?"

The lawyer smiled, but there was something not quite right - not quite warm - in his eyes. "I doubt it, Mrs. Novotny. Most of my work is in New York and Washington. And when I say that there are hazards here, I'm not just talking about my waistline."

Ben and Drew - and even Michael - were perceptive enough to avoid further questioning, but subtlety had never been Debbie's strong suit. "What else? This is a great city, and - with your connection to Brian - you're already part of the in crowd. So what's . . ."

Liam Quinn thought he'd never in his life been so glad to hear a phone ring, even if it wasn't his own. The harmonic ringtone - Gloria Gaynor's *I Will Survive* - was enough to break Debbie's train of thought so that she fell silent mid-question.

It was Michael who fished his cell out of his pocket.

With one "hello" and one split second of silence, it was obvious that the caller was not someone he'd expected to hear from. Another second and a slow blink and it was equally obvious that he was alarmed, bordering on frightened.

Everyone had gone silent - fortunately - so no clatter of voices betrayed the fact that Michael was not alone.

"Melanie," he said finally, on a soft, broken exhale, "I'm not sure we're supposed to be . . ."

He paused, obviously interrupted, which gave Liam Quinn the opportunity to lean forward, extract the phone from Michael's clinched fingers, lay it on the table, and engage speaker mode. A quick look of resentment, followed by reluctant acquiescence, was Michael's only response.

". . . pected that you would bow down and let Brian's mouthpiece run roughshod all over you and keep you from even talking to me, even though I'm the mother of your only child, Michael. Probably the only one you're ever going to have. But that's not important, is it? Because I'm not Brian fucking Kinney - your one true love. Tell me, Michael, does Ben know that - in your heart - there's only one man who'll ever be enough for you? Only one man who can demand that you bend over and . . ."

"Stop, Mel." Michael's voice was hoarse and harsh, and broken with tears waiting to be shed. "Just stop. You think I haven't thought about all of this - that I've somehow forgotten that you're J.R.'s mother and that I need to be a part of your life if I've any hope of being a part of hers. You can't really believe I don't know that."

"Then what are you doing?" she demanded, not allowing him a moment to think. "Why are you turning your back on me, on us?"

"I'm not," he sighed. "I love my daughter, and I'll do anything I can - for her and for you - in order to give her a good life. I honestly don't know what you expect from me, Mel, or why . . ."

"I expect you to remember where your loyalty lies," she retorted. Then she did pause to draw a deep breath. "And I expect you to help me put my life back together. For her and for me. It can still be OK, Michael, because . . . because they'll listen to you. Even he will listen to you."

Michael lifted his eyes then to meet the steady gaze of Liam Quinn, who hesitated only briefly before nodding his encouragement; Michael suppressed a sigh, understanding that whatever Melanie had to say needed to be heard - by him and by the man who would ultimately represent him in court. But that didn't make him feel any less guilty for allowing her to continue. "Mel, what do you expect me
to do? I'm sorry, but you know Lindsey isn't going to listen to me. And I don't know what I'd say to her, even if she would. You have to realize . . ."

"Oh, don't strain yourself, Michael." Her voice now was almost a snarl. "I know full well that they've all convinced you that I don't deserve any sympathy or mercy in this mess; that Lindsey and Gus have been victims of my greed and arrogance, and that Brian . . . Jesus! That Brian has behaved like some kind of fucking saint. And if you're stupid enough to believe that bullshit, then I feel sorry for you. But that doesn't change anything where J.R. is concerned. Listen to me now. In order to get her - not to mention my so-called partner and her mini-Brian - to a safe place, I had to give up my ability to earn the kind of money required to keep us all in the manner we enjoyed before. As I'm certain your legal beagle has told you, I can't even practice law here in Toronto - not until I've completed a new course of study here and re-qualified, assuming that I can pass the bar exam here, and that'll take at least another year. And since Lindsey took to her heels and abandoned me, my income has been drastically reduced. Now, how am I supposed to support our daughter? Do you want us living in some tacky, rat-infested housing project, with me working two jobs to put food on the table and hiring some illiterate high school drop-out to babysit her? Is that what you want?"

Michael sighed. "No, of course I don't. And I'll do anything to prevent that. But, Mel, you also know that I don't have the kind of money that you used to get from . . ."

Her laugh was bitter. "From Brian? You think I don't know that, Mikey? She never said it, but I'm not stupid enough that I didn't know. And I'm sure you all think it was because he loved his son - and Lindsey - so much, but that wasn't it, you know. It was about power - his power over us. With Brian, it's always about power."

Michael was silent for a moment, meeting Quinn's gaze again, and noting a quizzical look in the lawyer's eyes. "Then tell me what you want me to do, Mel. I will do anything I can - anything - but I just don't know . . ."

"He loves you, you know." She did not sound like she was happy to admit such a thing. "Not like he loves Justin, of course; that's more like an obsession, accompanied by a certificate of title. But he really does love you. It might be the purest, most unselfish feeling he's ever had. Which means that he'd do almost anything for you. If you asked him nicely."

"And exactly what . . ." Michael had to pause to swallow around the lump in his throat, "what do you want me to ask him?"

She was not so quick to answer this time, and Liam Quinn wondered if he was the only person who understood that she was trying to find a way to swallow her pride. "If you make him see . . . you know, Gus will still think of J.R. as his sister, no matter what happens between me and Lindsey. If he sees that, then will he really want his pride and joy to have to watch his sister grow up in poverty?"

"There is another way, Mel." Michael was a bit surprised to find a tiny thread of steel running through his tone. "You could come back here. You have a good professional reputation here, and there are plenty of law firms that would be glad to hire you. And Ben and I would be glad to contribute to help you cover J.R.'s expenses. That way, you wouldn't . . ."

"Wouldn't what? Wouldn't be beholden to the Mighty Kinney? True enough, I guess. But it also means that he gets everything to work out his way. He gets me and my daughter out of his life, takes Lindsey and Gus away from me, and walks away from this entire debacle without ever paying the price for his . . ."

"For his what, Mel? Are you actually still determined to act as if he betrayed you? Do you ever stop
and remember what happened to him - how he looked when they brought him into that hospital that night? What on earth could he have done - could anyone have done - to deserve that?"

He was surprised when she sighed. "I should have known that you'd see it that way. Faithful little Mikey, always hanging around waiting for him to toss you a bone. Are you ever going to grow some backbone and . . ."" 

"I think," he said firmly, "I just did. I've already told you that I'll be there for my daughter and for you. But I won't betray my best friend either. Because that's what he is, Mel. Whether you believe it or not doesn't change the truth. I let myself forget that once, and I won't do it again. It almost destroyed us both. But look, I don't want to fight you over this; I just want what's best for J.R., and now you have to decide if that's what you want too. Which means more to you - defying Brian and getting some kind of petty revenge against him, or giving our daughter the best life you can? That's what you have to decide."

"And what if I decide that her future is best served by exploring our ethnic roots? My father has plenty of ties in Israel, Michael. Just think about that, when you're reassuring yourself that you're doing the right thing, the noble thing, by standing up for your childhood hero. Think of what you're risking; then ask yourself if he'd do the same for you. Maybe that'll console you enough so it won't matter that your daughter could wind up on the other side of the world and far beyond your reach."

She hung up then, slamming the phone down to the accompaniment of a particularly vile curse.

For a moment, no one at the table spoke, and Michael went deathly white as he closed his eyes and fought to breathe.

Ben moved quickly, leaning over to wrap comforting arms around his husband's shoulders and press gentle lips against his temple, but it still took a few moments for Michael to regain some modicum of control, while Debbie sat wringing her hands, for once at a loss for words - or maybe just questioning whether or not she should speak her mind in present company.

Finally, Michael took a deep breath, and looked up, his eyes shadowed with dread as he zeroed in on Liam Quinn's solemn expression. "Can she do that?" he asked.

"No," Liam answered quickly. "That's already been addressed. In the first place, Brian was quick to realize that she would probably resort to this kind of threat, and, in the second, that was one of the first things I checked out when he retained me to represent you. Frankly, I doubt she'd really try it. I've done some background checks on Ms. Marcus, and it's pretty obvious that she's fond of her creature comforts. That's not to say that she isn't devoted to certain causes; she is. But she's never really shown much interest in practicing her religion or exploring her ethnic/religious origins."

"But none of that really matters in these circumstances. The courts have already issued an injunction preventing her from leaving the country with J.R. - which is only a matter of form, since you share custody. No one can legally transport a child across international borders without the consent of both custodial parents. Their passports have already been flagged."

"But J.R. . . ."

"Is still in Florida with her grandparents. And likely to stay there for a while, I think. Remember, Ms. Marcus was only allowed to take her to Toronto in the first place because you agreed to it. Under the circumstances, she'd find it difficult to do it again."

Michael sighed. "God! I didn't want to disrupt their home. I just want my daughter to be safe and happy and not too far away. If Mel finds a way to . . ."
"She won't, Michael."

"But if she does . . ."

"Look," Liam said firmly, "the only possible way she could manage that would be to go outside the law, and, if she does that, she forfeits her license to practice in this country - and most others. Do you really think she'd risk that? From what I've seen, her whole life has been about pulling herself up and gaining the respect of clients and peers. She won't."

Michael finally nodded. "But if she does," he said softly, "I'm going to hold you accountable."

Quinn smiled. "I can live with that."

"And so will Brian."

A quick flicker of something flashed in the attorney's eyes, but he kept smiling, as he got to his feet. "I'll just make one phone call, shall I? To make sure all the precautions are in place."

"Yes." Debbie was eager to have him seek privacy elsewhere - and grant the same to her and her son. "You do that."

Quinn - being nobody's fool - was pretty sure he could guess how the conversation would go in his absence, but he moved away anyway. It was not part of his job description to run interference between Debbie Novotny and her offspring; that he would leave to Michael himself and his spouse, who was looking like a lowering thundercloud as Quinn left the room.

The lawyer found his way into a cozy den, a room with raw silk walls in hues reminiscent of fine whiskey or brandy, and took a seat in a leather chair with a splendid view of the brilliantly illuminated free-form swimming pool beyond the broad sweep of glass doors. He lifted his phone to dial the number of his assistant, knowing that she would be instantly available to follow his instructions, no matter the time of day or her circumstances at the moment. Her fiancé had often bemoaned the fact that they would probably never get a chance to reproduce as their lovemaking was almost always interrupted by a demand from her boss.

But not this time, for his phone rang before he could dial.

"Liam Quinn."

"Good evening, Counselor."

The attorney settled back into the silken softness of the leather upholstery, and took a deep breath before answering. "Agent McClaren. How can I help you?"

"Me? Why would I need your help? Your client, however - that's a different thing."

"Sorry." Quinn was not quite successful in suppressing a smile. "What does Brian need?"

McClaren did not answer immediately, and Quinn heard the rasp of a match. "You know that'll kill you one day, don't you?"

"Yeah, well, blame your client. Before this, I'd kicked the habit - almost."

"Then you know he's a dangerous man."

"Yeah, I do." It was obvious in the laconic tone of his voice that he knew full well that Quinn was not really talking about the health risks of tobacco.
"So . . . what does he want?"

"How do you feel about conspiracies?"

Quinn laughed. "Depends on what I have to do, and who I'm conspiring against."

"You alone?"

Quinn hesitated, not quite sure he wanted to answer that question, and not quite sure why. "For the moment. Why?"

"Because this has to stay between us, or he's going to have both our heads on a plate. Understood?"

"Yes. What do I have to . . ."

"He's going to be in one place for a few days, but needs to appear to be in another. And because of the nature of where he's supposed to be, you're going to need to be out of sight - elsewhere - as well."

Quinn thought about it for a moment. "You're going to have to be a little more specific than that."

McClaren did not - quite - laugh. "Okay. Here's the scoop. For all intents and purposes, he's going to be in Washington, appearing before an FBI sub-committee investigating the details of his attack. And for that, he'd probably want you at his side. Ergo . . ."

"Okay. Now where's he really going to be?"

"He'd consider that a need-to-know situation."

"Yeah, well, if I'm going to contribute to the subterfuge, I need to know why. So I repeat - where's he going to be?"

The FBI agent hesitated, but only briefly. "A medical clinic in Colorado. They're going to run a series of tests."

"What kind of tests?"

"If he wants you to know that, he'll tell you."

It was Quinn's turn to hesitate. "If I come to the clinic, would I have access to him?"

"Don't see why not. He's not having surgery or anything; it's just tests."

The lawyer huffed a soft breath. "Tests, huh? Tests that he doesn't want anyone to know about so . . . I repeat, what kind of tests?"

There was a long pause, a heavy silence without any indication that it would end anytime soon.

"So," Quinn continued finally, "you're not going to answer me."

"It's not my story to tell." Succinct, sharp, unyielding.

"You take trust issues very seriously, don't you?"

"My job." Again, volunteering nothing.

"All right," Quinn agreed with a small sigh. "I do need to talk to him about several questions that
have come up, so... any reason we can't kill two birds with one stone?"

"Don't see why not."

"So I will have access?"

"Yep."

"And..."

"And what?"

"How about you? Will I have access to you?"

Liam Quinn could almost hear the smile that touched that sculpted face, and the answer was an unexpected slow drawl. "Now why, Counselor, would you need access to me?"

The attorney chuckled. "You protect him your way, and I'll protect him mine. But I think it's better if we at least try to work together."

And Chris McLaren wondered why he found that idea vaguely alarming.

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"All set," McLaren reported, as he re-entered the hospital room, "legal beagle and all." Brian was sitting up against a stack of pillows, going over documents faxed by Cynthia for his approval, but he looked up then, his expression projecting a silent question. The FBI agent said nothing more, but the look in his eyes spoke volumes - reassuring volumes.

"All set for what?" That was Justin, only slightly interested, but playing his role perfectly as expected, keeping an eye on everything that might remotely impact Brian Kinney.

Since the blond was currently standing at the window, studying the sharp shifting patterns of black and white in the silhouette of a weeping willow against a rising full moon, only the FBI agent had a clear view of Brian's face; thus, only he noticed the very slight narrowing of shadowed hazel eyes as the patient prepared to answer. "Washington," he said finally, very softly.

Justin's quick turn to face his lover was lacking anything of his usual grace, as was the squawk he made before finding his voice to echo the word. "Washington? What the fuck's in Washington?"

"Cherry trees, the White House - rich, corrupt politicians." Brian's response was flat, almost disinterested.

"For you, smart ass," Justin deadpanned with a huff that betrayed his lack of patience. "What's in Washington for you?"

Brian looked to McLaren, his face partially averted so that only the FBI agent was able to see and translate the plea in those dark eyes. A quick flash of anger in his own face informed Brian, in no uncertain terms, that he was going to owe his primary bodyguard a huge debt of gratitude.

"Well," drawled McLaren, "while I'm sure Stud Muffin here could find all kinds of ways for the two of you to play tourist and enjoy the amenities - like a leisurely fuck on the roof of the Kennedy Center or in the cockpit of the Enola Gay at the Smithsonian - in this particular case he won't have time or opportunity. He's got to appear before an FBI investigative sub-committee bright and early day after tomorrow."
"But I thought the investigation was happening in Pittsburgh," Justin protested, ignoring McClaren and speaking directly to Brian.

"So it is." The FBI agent replied, deliberately stepping forward so that Justin could not quite avoid seeing him. "On the local level. But there are bigger issues involved. Brian's attack was just the tip of the iceberg, and the powers-that-be want to make sure they don't miss anything. The deeper this investigation goes, the bigger the names involved and the darker the purpose. So they want to talk to Brian personally."

Justin didn't look particularly pleased, but decided - with only a quick flash of irritation in his eyes - to drop his objection and move on to more pleasant topics. "So where are we staying? The Saint Regis? The Hay-Adams?"

Brian's smile was that of an adult indulging a child - and guaranteed to annoy his young lover. "We," he said, very deliberately, "are not staying anywhere, since I am the one going to Washington, where the FBI is going to tuck me away in some luxury penthouse/safehouse for VIP witnesses under their protection, and you're going back to Pittsburgh, where you have lots of things to do."

"Now wait . . ."

"Come on, Sunshine. You know you have commitments waiting for you - paintings that you need to finish; a new studio to suss out. And . . ." He paused and smiled a very special smile - the one reserved for Justin and no one else, "a new life to plan for us, together. We're going to need a house, you know."

"Britin?" Blue eyes were suddenly alight with hope.

But that could not be. Brian - almost against his will - had kept an eye on the country house after he'd sold it and knew that there was no going back, since it had been converted into a very successful bed and breakfast, and its new owners were raking in bigbucks from it. "Not possible," he admitted. "But there are plenty of other places. Or - if you like - maybe we could find a perfect spot and build our own little Xanadu. You could even design it, if you like."

Justin's eyes were suddenly huge. "Me? Really?"

"You. Really. And don't even think about claiming that you've never thought about doing something like that, because I know you too well to buy that. So you need to go to Washington, and I need to go to Washington where I'll be closeted morning to night with a bunch of stern, fat old men who'll bore me to tears until I can shake free and come home - to you. Just knowing that you're waiting for me - that's what I'll need to help me get through it."

Justin looked up then and saw that Chris McClaren was pretending to watch the last scenes of the Law and Order, SVU episode playing on the flatscreen TV, but his posture betrayed the fact that he was actually listening to what should have been a private conversation. Justin sighed, and added an eye-roll for emphasis. "They won't all be stern, fat old men, will they?"

Brian grinned. "Now be reasonable, Sunshine. You wouldn't begrudge me a little eye-candy, would you? Just a bit of sweetness to keep me from going stir-crazy."

"Yeah?" Justin gave in with a crooked smile. "I guess I can live with that."

And for one brief, barely there moment, McClaren turned and allowed his eyes to meet those of the man whose life he was sworn to protect - the man who could never be any more than that. The glance said nothing; it also said everything.
"When are you going?"

"Turnage is supposed to release me in the morning, and the feds take over from there."

"So they're going to fly you to DC on a government jet?" Justin turned to McClaren for confirmation.

"Something like that," replied the FBI agent.

"And why am I only hearing about this now?"

McClaren decided to indulge in an eye-roll of his own. "Because the powers-that-be don't feel obliged to keep the rest of us in the loop until they're ready to crack their whip. We only just heard from them this evening."

Justin nodded - reluctantly - before turning back to face Brian. "So, after tonight, I won't see you again until next week?"

"I'm sure you'll survive," Brian observed with a smirk.

Justin was quiet for a moment. "Okay, then," he said finally. "Time's a'wastin'."

"Meaning what?" McClaren looked confused.

"You need to go." Justin's tone was firm - reasonable, but unyielding.

"No, I . . ."

Brian, spotting the gleam in his lover's eye, chuckled his appreciation. "I think he's serious, McFed. You really need to go."

"But I . . ."

Justin moved toward the bed, eagerly pulling his shirt over his head before unzipping and stepping out of his jeans, to stand for a single moment, poised within the golden cone of light cast by the bedside lamp - gilded, nubile, and beautiful. "Either go now," he almost purred, "or get ready to watch. Makes no difference to me. Either way, I'm about to say good-bye to the love of my life, in such a way that he'll be thinking of me every minute he's away. When I'm done, he may never walk again."

"Shit!" McClaren didn't like having Brian out of his sight, as he knew that he was completely responsible for the man's well-being.

"Not to worry, McFed." Justin's voice was silky and taunting. "I promise to take excellent care of him, if you'll just be a good boy - and guard the door."

McClaren didn't so much walk out of the room as stalk, muttering obscenities under his breath. But he paused for one second as he reached the door and looked back, and there was a flicker of pain in his eyes - there and gone almost before it could form. He knew he would probably never see anything more beautiful than the tableau spread out before him. Ultimately, he turned away quickly, unwilling to see more; unwilling to know what would come next.

"You really shouldn't treat him like that," said Brian as Justin climbed into the bed and lowered himself to sit astride his partner's lap. "He's just doing his job."

"Yeah?" Justin breathed, leaning forward until he was close enough to share Brian's breath. "I'll
apologize tomorrow. Now why don't you just shut up, and let me do mine."

Ordinarily, just because he enjoyed being contrary and because, perversely, he usually reveled in a
good, rousing fight with Justin, Brian might have argued, but this time he was completely distracted
by a lapful of gloriously naked skin and soft irresistible lips that covered his own, as strong, insistent
fingers stroked his skin, wandered down towards his crotch, and completely blew his mind.

Time enough to pick a fight later.

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tbc
Chapter 53

I cannot say what loves have come and gone,
I only know that summer sang in me
A little while, that in me sings no more.

-- Sonnet XLIII --- Edna St. Vincent Millay

It was late in the day, and the western sky was ablaze with lava-like flows of crimson and beaten gold, emitting flares of copper and saffron to shoot off into the growing darkness of the heavens. On the other side of the sky, a few brave stars already rode the crest of the ocean's relentless surge toward the land. The tide was coming in.

Sometimes it seemed that the tide was always coming in, getting closer to covering the world with every onslaught against sand and shore.

Brian shook his head, annoyed with his own foolishness. The tide was exactly as it had always been, and, if the world was being systematically destroyed (or going to shit, in the immortal words of Debbie Novotny) it had nothing to do with the ocean's relentless pursuit of domination.

It had much more to do with Brian Kinney and his personal operating manual.

He would have to leave soon - in less than an hour - and his eyes were riveted to the eastern horizon where a schooner of some kind, looking like the shadow of a child's toy at this distance, was beating a path against the wind, gradually being consumed by the dark broken line separating sea and sky. He had always loved the ocean, ever since his grandfather and namesake, Brian Patrick Kinney, had picked him up one summer afternoon when he was seven and driven him out to the Hamptons so that he could get a glimpse of the real ocean instead of the hodgepodge of docks and detritus that composed most of New York's harbor. In his youth, the senior Brian had spent several years in the merchant marine, working in the engine room of a massive freighter called the Mariposa, which made regular round trip voyages along a trade route from New York to Cadiz, Spain. Finding the love of his life in a petite young woman named Jenny Malloy, and the irresistible appeal of marriage and family had put an end to his days aboard the freighter and prompted him to take up carpentry for a living, but nothing had ever dimmed his profound love of the sea - a love he had managed to pass on to his young namesake.

Brian still recalled that day and his own amazement in finding that not only was he tremendously small and insignificant against that unlimited vastness, but so was his grandfather who seemed as tall as a mountain to him then, even though he was actually only a bit over six feet. The memory remained sharp and detailed even after all these years, even though they'd never made it back there, settling instead for occasional subway rides down to Battery Park to stand at the water's edge and gaze out beyond Lady Liberty and remember the sense of solitude that simply could not be achieved in the city.

Brian's mother always claimed that he had taken after the senior Kinney, and that observation was always followed by a not-quite-sotto-voice sobriquet: "the old scoundrel". That was her term, of course; she would never resort to using a word like bastard, even though that was exactly what she meant. Her condescending attitude - a distorted reflection of his father's - was probably why Brian
had always loved the old man so much, and been so loved in return. In his own way - never verbalized but always understood inherently - he had found his grandfather beautiful. Later, he would sometimes allow himself to preen, just a little, over the fact that many among his parents' circle of acquaintances consistently remarked that Brian the younger was the spitting image of Brian the elder.

When lung cancer took the old man at age 63, nine years after that trip out to Sag Harbor, Brian's parents tried to put on expressions of grief, appropriate to the occasion, but both took advantage of the opportunity to point out that the deceased would have lived much longer if he'd just kicked that tobacco habit. In other words, he'd been asking for it all his life and had nobody to blame but himself.

Brian wasn't sure, but he rather thought that was the exact reason why he had chosen to continue to smoke, dating from his first Marlboro at age 12 through all the succeeding years to the present, despite knowing that it might very well kill him someday.

Losing his grandfather had been his first brush with death, and he'd been devastated, knowing somehow - even then - that he would spend the rest of his life wondering what his future might have been like if the old man had lived. It was a logical speculation because the senior Brian Kinney had been the only member of his family - maternal or paternal - who ever seemed capable of loving the junior Brian Kinney unconditionally.

With a slightly defiant smile, he lit a cigarette, and lifted it slightly in a wordless tribute to one who had been so important in his life, and who had spawned his fondness for the sea.

He would, of course, never see his grandfather again, but that hadn't mattered in the past because - somehow - he'd always felt close to the man whenever he could walk along a shore, gazing out across the endless swells of the waves, leaving footprints in damp sand and watching - fascinated - as the tell-tale wet shadow receded under the weight of every step.

And now . . . now that might be taken from him too. Would he never again be able to stand on a shore and take in the vastness around him, exulting in being a tiny unique spark in such a huge universe?

Would he ever see the ocean again?

Disregarding the condition of his designer jeans and freshly laundered shirt, he sank down on his knees in the sand and watched new stars sparking into existence as a steady breeze sprang up and caressed his face.

He spared a thought about how good a cold beer would taste at that moment, but knew that he was too lazy to get up and go get one. Thus, when a dark figure approached and a cold bottle was placed in his hand, he was almost ready to consider the possibility that a magic genie had come to grant him one final wish.

Trina Thomas seemed to guess the nature of his thoughts and laughed softly as she settled beside him. "No magic required," she assured him. "I just know you too well. From your perspective, what doesn't go better with a cold Boston Lager?"

He wondered if he was really hearing what he thought he was hearing in her voice - an underlying nuance of melancholy with a thread of wistfulness. "You're too good to me, Trina."

She gave a tiny shrug. "Isn't that what I get paid to be?"
He grinned. "I pay plenty of people to be that, but most don't put much heart into it. You do."

She was staring out toward the ocean, and seemed to be avoiding his gaze deliberately. "Truth to tell, you've been a godsend for me, Brian. Times are tough all over, and jobs not that easy to come by. In this part of the country, good cooks are a dime a dozen, and the economy has screwed us all over. Even vacationers are more inclined to watch their pennies and fend for themselves." Then she smiled. "And the fact that you paid almost double the going rate for my services, well . . . that made you just about my favorite client ever."

"I don't pay more than a service is worth." He paused then, turning over an idea in his mind. "Did Emmett talk to you before he left? About coming to Pittsburgh, I mean."

Her smile became soft, indulgent. "Oh, he spouted off about me following him up there so we could open a restaurant or expand his catering business or some such. I didn't pay much attention, I'm afraid. He was just being sweet - just being Emmett."

He turned to face her directly, eyes glinting with something - mischief, maybe, or even sparks of anger. "You disappoint me, Trina. I figured you were too smart to fall for Emmett's wide-eyed, addle-pated, ingénue act. He's a whole lot smarter than most people realize. And he uses people's willingness to accept him at face value to be able to slide right under the radar - mostly. But there's a lot more to him . . ."

She reached out and covered his mouth with her hand, gently but very firmly. "Careful, Stud Muffin. Your loyalties are slipping through the cracks in your armor. I know perfectly well that Emmett has hidden depths which he goes to great lengths to conceal. But he's also a dreamer, and inclined to believe that everything is possible, no matter how big the obstacles along the way."

Brian moved her hand - also gently but very firmly - and smiled. "And what are the obstacles that would stop you from doing as he suggests?"

She looked down then, scooping up a handful of sand before allowing it to stream through her fingers. "This is my home, Brian. It's always been my home. I wouldn't know how to live anywhere else."

Brian was silent for a moment, considering how to proceed, debating whether or not to push - hard - or simply let it go.

But letting it go wasn't really a part of his repertoire. "And you say that," he said finally, "because your life here has been so perfect? Because this place has made you happy and helped you find the perfect vantage point where you can sit and look back on your life and be satisfied with what you see?"

She turned to look at him, and he was both glad - and just a tiny bit alarmed - to read a simmering anger forming in her eyes. "And what do you know about it, Smart-ass? Why do you assume that you have the right . . ."

"Do I need to have the right to care about what happens to you? And yes, if you're saying we should lay all our cards on the table, I'll step up and admit that I know a lot about you and about your history. About the father who abandoned you and your mother when you were six. About the mother who worked herself to death - literally - to provide for you and your brother. About the husband you lost in Lebanon, and the lover you lost in Desert Storm. And the son who died in Bosnia." He paused a bit as he watched her struggle to contain her anger. "Come on, Trina. You had to know your life story would be an open book in order for you to be hired on here. The FBI doesn't do things by half measures. So - to get back to the heart of the matter - what is it that you have here
that would keep you from looking for something new - something better - somewhere else?"

"In Pittsburgh?" she scoffed.

He shrugged. "Unless you have someplace else in mind."

"But I have family here. I own a house here. I have a brother here and three nephews, and . . ."

"A brother that you speak to once or twice a year, and nephews who only come around at Christmas to pick up their gifts from you." Once more, anger sparked in eyes the color of dark chocolate, but he continued unperturbed. "You should know that the FBI doesn't just vet you; they vet everyone around you. So please don't keep using lame excuses. If you don't want to go, then that's fine, whatever your reasons are. But if you've convinced yourself that you shouldn't go because of some kind of obligation to your family, that's something else entirely. So what's the real point here? You think you have to tie yourself to this town because you have to be around every All Saints Day so you can put flowers on the family graves? Do you honestly think it matters to them?"

She did not answer; just kept trailing sand through her fingers, but her hands were trembling, and Brian was pretty sure she was only an inch away from smashing her fist into his newly-repaired face.

"Look, Trina, I'm going to say this once. Just once, because I don't want to bug you about it. God knows I fucking hate it when people do that to me, especially when I've already made up my mind. But if there's even the smallest possibility that you might want to go, then consider this. Emmett and I talked about it - just a little. Nothing specific, but enough to be able to foresee that this could be a good deal for everyone. I'll provide the start-up funds, and the two of you will plan it, put it together, open it, and run it. And we'll all get very rich. If you're interested."

She turned to study his face in the dying light. "You're already very rich," she observed, "so why would you do something like that - for us?"

He laughed, and she was struck - not for the first time - by how much she enjoyed hearing that sound. "Don't kid yourself," he replied. "I know a good investment when I see one, and there's no such thing as too rich. I'm not doing it for you."

Unexpectedly, she leaned forward and dropped a kiss on his shoulder. "Of course, you're not."

Then she got to her feet.

"Is that it?" he asked, shifting to be able to stretch out on the sand and cradle his head on his arms. "You're just going to pass on my very generous offer and . . ."

"No," she retorted. "I'm going to think about it."

"Yeah, well, don't think too long, just in case I change my mind."

She simply nodded and stood for a moment gazing down at him, and something in her face made him uneasy, made him feel like all of his defenses had been stripped away, leaving him naked and vulnerable.

When she turned and walked back toward the house, he breathed a sigh of relief and returned to devouring the vista stretched out before him - just in case.

He had done the exact same thing an hour earlier, when he and Justin had stood at the edge of the water and said their good-byes, but Justin, typically impatient and exuberant, had had little interest in ocean-gazing. Brian often wondered how the same beautiful individual could wear two completely
different faces - the artist who saw and found beauty in everything, and the hedonist who could focus so intently on the moment and his pleasures within it, that the rest of the world just faded into obscurity. He doubted he would ever figure it out, but he reveled in it just the same.

He had not changed his story, had not admitted that the entire trip to Washington and his testimony before an FBI investigative committee was a complete fabrication, though he'd been mightily tempted to just blurt out the truth and deal with the consequences. He'd successfully resisted the urge, but he wasn't entirely sure that Justin hadn't suspected something. No way could the blond have figured out the details, of course, but nobody had ever known Brian Kinney the way Justin did, and nobody was more intuitive about plans and schemes and what if's and maybes. Or truths and lies. Justin was almost impossible to deceive. The only method that had the tiniest hope of succeeding was distraction . . . and Brian had always been very good at distraction.

When his fingers worked their way inside the waistband of Justin's jeans - the baggy variety for comfort during the trip - down to the cleft in that perfect bubble butt and then proceeded to slide lower, to explore deeper, Justin stopped demanding explanations and time tables and mundane details, and settled instead for wrapping himself around the man who owned his heart and was trying to devour him, and sought instead to mark him with a proprietary brand. Brian wasn't a big fan of love bites - especially the kind that were almost impossible to conceal beneath one's clothing; thus he fumed a bit while Justin proceeded to suck persistently and hard . . . and then harder. But he didn't really make much of an effort to avoid the proprietary marking.

"Tell me again." Justin's voice was muffled as his lips moved against the skin of Brian's throat, and Brian had to struggle to suppress a groan as the blond shifted in order to nuzzle the intensely sensitive spot below Brian's left ear. Nobody else in the world knew about that spot, thought Brian with a fond smile. Only Justin. Most of the time, he enjoyed his young lover's knowledge, but Justin was not above using it for his own purposes when he wanted Brian to squirm and long for what was temporarily impossible.

"If you don't stop that," Brian murmured, burying his face in the thick mop of Justin's hair, "I'm going to tear your clothes off and fuck you, right here in front of God, Trina, the FBI, and anyone else who happens to be wandering by."

"Then tell me, and I'll stop." Giving absolutely no indication of stopping, of course.

"Why? Have you forgotten so soon?" There was laughter in Brian's voice, but also - just barely - a trace of irritation.

Justin pulled back and stared into eyes gone almost black in the waning light. "Tired of me already?"

Brian deliberately looked away, just a bit perturbed by the way his partner was studying his face. "Never," he breathed. "I could never get tired of you. Although I wonder if you can say the same."

Once more, Justin shifted to stare at Brian, seeing something new, something that he'd never noticed before, though he couldn't put his finger on what it might be. "Now why would you say that? Do I have to do a Mikey imitation, and remind you that you're Brian Kinney, for fuck's sake, that you'll always be young. You'll always be beautiful."

Brian grinned. "He does it better. Very passionate, and gets furious if I seem to doubt it."

"Yeah, but you never doubt me, do you?"

Brian really wanted to deny it, to snap at his young lover and wipe that smug smile off his perfectly
sculpted face. But in the end, he couldn't. He could only smile and lean forward to claim those temptingly swollen lips.

Justin's response was immediate, and just a bit surprising. He bent his knees slightly and leapt up to wrap his legs around Brian's hips, fitting his crotch perfectly against the matching bulge in Brian's jeans. And he didn't even try to brace himself, or catch himself - just in case Brian could not handle his weight and manage to keep them both upright. He had, after all, only just recovered from life-threatening injuries.

But Justin was, of course, proven right. There was no possible cause for worry. Brian slid strong steady hands under Justin's arms and around his back and adjusted their bodies so that they were more perfectly aligned, and if some small part of his sturdiness was based more on a stubborn determination to allow no nuance of weakness than on actual physical strength, that was just part and parcel of what it was to be Brian Kinney - a part which Justin knew full well and relied on regularly. Standing tall and steady, Brian just wrapped them both in the delight of the sensation, enjoying the fact that there was no air between them, and that Justin was exploring his mouth with a fiercely eager tongue.

When Emmett emerged from the cottage moments later to remind Justin that they had a commercial flight to catch, that's how he found them, still so lost in each other that neither noticed his arrival until he barked out both their names.

Reluctantly, Justin pulled back, but did not allow himself to slide down the perfect body that he loved so much. Instead, he simply smiled that intimate, knowing smile that was never given to anyone else, and went back to the subject he'd broached earlier.

"Say it." It was barely a whisper, but compelling nonetheless.

"I'll be back next week. I promise."

"Good, but that's not what I want to hear."

"Stubborn little shit, aren't you?" Brian's smile was indulgent.

"Learned from the best. So . . . say it."

It was Brian's turn then to lean forward and press his lips against Justin's ear. The "I love you" was just a breath, almost without sound. But it was enough.

Ten minutes later, when Justin climbed into the back of the SUV for the trip to the airport, he was still smiling and - just a little - walking on air.

The light was almost gone now; there was only a pale smear of lemon frost silhouetting a row of shallow dunes and a few gnomish, misshapen pine trees looming off to the west as Brian stood up - reluctantly - and brushed sand from his jeans.

A drift of smoke floated past him as he spent another moment gazing out across the breakers, wishing that a full moon would leap above the eastern horizon and allow him one last clear view of the Atlantic's surface. But it was not to be, although the stars were sharp and bright against the inky backdrop of space, so he could see the foam cresting on the waves as they plunged toward the shore.

He had known for a while that McClaren was standing behind him; he'd expected the FBI agent to speak up before this, urging him to get up and get on with it. But the exhortation had remained
"You ready then?" A laconic question, with no trace of urgency.

"Depends. You finished ogling?"

McClaren grinned. "In your dreams, Stud Muffin. Do you ever - even for a moment - consider the possibility that some people don't spend their lives fantasizing about your perfect little ass?"

Brian's response was a slow, insolent smirk as he lit a cigarette. "I'm surprised you waited this long. Aren't we running late?"

McClaren shrugged. "It's Turnage's private jet, so I doubt they'd take off without you. RHIP, you know. Besides, I figured you needed to . . ." He paused then, and Brian was surprised to realize that the agent was struggling to find the right words. Now what on earth could cause the ever articulate Chris McClaren to stutter . . . unless . . .

"Son of a bitch!" Brian's tone was level and very soft but cold as Arctic ice as he turned to read the expression on the agent's face. "You know, don't you? How the fuck do you know?"

"It's my job to know." McClaren did not flinch away from the anger sparking in hazel eyes. Instead he simply stood there, waiting for the outrage he knew he had probably earned.

"It's your job to know about the case, about my protection, about the safety of my family, and where I'm going when I leave here, so I couldn't very well object to you being there when the plans were made. But the law says you have no right to know anything at all about my medical condition, unless I choose to tell you about it. Which I didn't. So how . . ."

"Do you really think that there's a computer in this country - or in the whole world, for that matter - that our little FBI nerds can't hack? Come on, Brian. Although, to be honest, I didn't have to go that far. Your Dr. Griffin has made quite a name for himself. If you enter his name in Google, you get thousands of hits, and most of the info concerns his research into new treatments for something called AION, aka anterior ischemic . . ."

"Yeah, yeah, I know what it's called."

By virtue of a huge effort, McClaren managed not to flinch away from the undertone of hopelessness he heard in those simple words. "After that," he continued, "it was just a matter of putting the pieces together to see the whole picture."

"What kind of pieces?" Brian was still suspicious, not to mention angry.

McClaren stepped closer so he could look directly into Brian's eyes. "I get paid to pay attention to details, Brian. Things that most people wouldn't even notice."

"Such as?" Still sneering, but not quite so hostile now.

"Such as the fact that you've been avoiding bright sunlight lately, even though you used to love sunbathing - preferably raw - and you've been wearing your sunglasses even when the day is overcast. Such as the fact that your pupils are always dilated - sometimes unevenly - even when there's plenty of light and no one is blowing your mind with a spectacular blow job. Such as the fact that you sometimes stumble over things that you should have been able to see and avoid, and, once in a while, your hand/eye coordination isn't up to par."

He paused then, and looked once more into Brian's eyes, noting the blackness growing at their
centers. "Right now, I bet I could take you in handball, tennis, racketball . . . you name it, despite the fact that there was a time - not so long ago - when we'd have worn each other out fighting to draws. You're losing your vision, Brian. It's not rocket science. So the only thing I haven't figured out is how bad it's going to get and how soon it's going to happen."

Brian deliberately looked away, for once having no interest in enjoying an examination of a nearly flawless face. "Have you mentioned it to anybody?"

The FBI agent heaved an exaggerated sigh. "You can speak plainer than that, you know. What you want to know is whether or not I told Justin, and the answer ought to be obvious. If he knew, do you really think he'd let you get away with your story about going to Washington?"

Brian took a deep breath. "No. He wouldn't."

"Which begs a bigger question," said McClaren, his tone relentless. "Why haven't you told him? He has a right to . . ."

"What he has a right to," Brian interrupted, his voice cold and hard, "is a full life, filled with possibilities and opportunities to set the art world on fire with his talent. What he doesn't deserve is to spend miserable years tending to an invalid out of a sense of obligation." He hesitated then and turned back toward the sea, striving for one more glimpse of something too well loved. "I promised him a beautiful life, and that's what he's going to have."

"Without you?" McClaren scoffed. "You really think that's possible. Without you, he'll never be as happy as he should be."

"Yes, he will. If he'll just give in and see the truth that he's never been willing to see. I'm not the man he believes I am. I never was and - more to the point - I never will be."

"Do you really think that matters?" McClaren moved forward and took up a position at Brian's side, noting that the tide was rushing in now, eager to stake its claim on the shore. "Isn't it up to him to decide whether or not you're what he needs? Why do you . . ."

"Because I know, OK. I've spent my whole life knowing, and I'm not going through that crap again." He paused then to take a final drag of his cigarette, before tossing it into the surf. "I can't."

"Because I know, OK. I've spent my whole life knowing, and I'm not going through that crap again." He paused then to take a final drag of his cigarette, before tossing it into the surf. "I can't."

The FBI agent turned then, trying without success to read the expression concealed beneath features that suddenly appeared as hard and changeless as if they were carved in stone. Finally, he took a deep breath. "So that's it then. You're not doing this for him; you're doing it for you."

Brian's smile was brittle. "I'm always doing it for me."

He walked away then, moving quickly toward the house, eager to gather his things, say his goodbyes, and move forward into the next stage of his recovery.

McClaren followed more slowly, wishing . . . He sighed as he approached the house, because he actually didn't know what he was wishing.

God damn Brian Kinney! Nobody should be able to wreak so much havoc on the people around him, especially the people who lo . . .

God damn it!

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~
"Daddy, are you sure about this?" Lindsey adjusted the bow tie she had just tied for him, and tried to control the trembling in her hands. "If Mom senses what you're really up to . . ."

"Hush, now, Honey," he answered with a smile. "What am I up to, except going to a club event with old friends? And if I'm listening a little more closely or noting details more carefully, so what? She'll just think that I've come to my senses so we can reclaim our place among the crème de la crème of Pittsburgh society."

Lindsey stepped back and stared at him. "Did you always feel this way?" she asked softly. "Or have I corrupted you after all these years?"

"If that's your way of asking if you're to blame for my change of heart, then just stop, right now. This isn't about you."

"Then what is it about, Dad?" she demanded. "Why would you . . ."

"Lindsey," he said firmly, turning to face her, "sometimes a man just outgrows his prejudices. Not because he happens to have a daughter who marches to the beat of a different drummer, or a grandson whose origin might be non-traditional, but because he finally comes to a point in his life where he can no longer refuse to see the truth, without all the ugly preconceptions that were drilled into him in his youth. I can't tell you how painful it is for me now, to remember how we treated you when we learned that you were different."

She smiled, but there was a tiny spark of malice in her eyes. "You still have trouble saying the word, don't you? I'm not 'different', Dad. I'm a Lesbian. There are other terms, of course, but they tend to be a lot more explicit. Or downright nasty, I guess, but no nastier than the terms that so many ultra-conservative, churchgoing bigots use when they're tossing back a few at their exclusive men's club. Is 'pussy-licker' any worse than 'cocksucker'? Not really, especially when they mean essentially the same thing - to wit, the old guard is better than us perverts, because they happen to fuck the way God intended. Do you suppose they've actually managed to visualize the Almighty sitting down with toy figures in order to work out how to get part A into part B, and what has to happen next, and how it all comes together to create new life, which is, of course, the only acceptable motive for fucking in the first place."

"No, Dad. In the end, it's all the same. It's just prejudice for the sake of convenience, and for an opportunity to look down on those who are constructed differently. But I don't want you to go into this thinking that you have to atone for the past, or to earn absolution for some kind of personal failings. You don't have to do that. You're a product of the world you were born into, and I don't resent you for . . ."

"You know what?" he said suddenly, sharply. "If people like me, the charter members of those traditional, good-old-boy clubs - the social networks that existed ages before anyone even figured out what a social network was - if we don't step up and do something, don't raise our voices and admit that we were wrong and that our parents were wrong and their parents before them, then nothing changes, Lindsey. Then your son will grow up bearing the stigma of his parents' sexual orientation and endure the same kind of crap from the next generation of bigots."

He shot his cuffs as he turned to check his reflection in the antique cheval mirror near the window. "So keep that in mind. I'm not doing it for you. If I'm doing it for anyone, it would be for Gus, but the honest truth is that I'm doing it because I've finally, belatedly, realized that it's the right thing to do."

Lindsey paused for a moment, savoring a dawning certainty that her father was actually turning out to be the man she'd imagined him to be when she was very young - her hero. Her mother, on the
"Have you thought it through?" she asked finally. "You know she won't agree. I'm not even sure she'll forgive you if it all comes out. She'll think you betrayed everything you - and she - have always stood for."

'Maybe," he admitted. "But it's time to follow my conscience, and stop knuckling under to hers. I love your mother, Linz - warts and all. Always have. But it's been a long time since I've looked at her through rose-colored glasses. I see her for the person she is, and I love her anyway. But I can't pretend any more that she's perfect, or that our marriage is perfect. And if I don't stand up now . . ."

"What?" she said quickly, knowing that there was something more, something he was not saying.

But his only response was a smile and a light kiss dropped on her forehead. It was time to make an appearance downstairs, to praise the exquisite designer gown his wife had gone to New York to purchase for this very special occasion, the annual founders day/fundraiser for The Club - a true celebration of the preservation of a very specific way of life, distinctly separate from so many others.

"Where's Gus?" he asked as they headed toward the door.

"In the kitchen, playing hide and seek with Minerva."

His smile was very tender. "She'll love that. She's always remarking that this house is too empty and too quiet without the sound of children's laughter."

Lindsey quirked a skeptical eyebrow. "To which Mom replies with a stern, disapproving glare. Right?"

"Something like that," he admitted.

"So let me guess. The 'good' daughter . . ." She made quotation marks in the air with her fingers, "has yet to fulfill her promise to make you guys proud grandparents."

He stopped abruptly and turned to look down at her, his expression unexpectedly stern. "I know this is painful for you, Honey, and I wish I could change your mother's attitude. Unfortunately, I can't. The only thing I can do is insist that you remember that I am a very proud grandpa. Gus is . . . my God, Linz. I don't think the world is ready for a child like that. A dynamo who combines the intellect and the beauty and the sheer nerve of both his parents. I think he'll either set the world afire with the dynamics of his vision and his creativity, or he'll blow it to bits with his passion. Either way, I couldn't be prouder."

She took a moment to study his face. "I can hardly believe this," she said finally, slowly. "You really did manage to look under the façade that Brian presents to the world, and see some parts of the real man, didn't you?"

His smile was wry. "Enough, at least, to understand why you've always loved him."

She drew a deep breath. "Yeah, and that's a big part of the problem, I guess. I could never make Melanie understand how I felt about him."

"Are you sure, Honey? Maybe she did understand, and that's the real problem. Maybe she understood it even better than you do."

She laughed softly. "No, Dad. She didn't. I do love Brian, and I'm never going to let anyone dispute that again. I'll always love him, but it's not like the love I felt for Mel. Please don't fool yourself, or
get your hopes up by thinking that I'd revert to normality if Brian would just make an honest woman out of me. He's not a magic cure for what ails me, because . . . Look, I know the conventional right-wing wisdom is that homosexuality is an affliction that can be cured, but that's just bullshit, Dad. I don't love him like that. Our love is . . . it's just different. It's real - bedrock real, but it's not the soulmates, happily-ever-after, need-each-other-to-be-complete kind of love. It's just . . . you know I really don't know how to explain it, except to say that it's vital and deep and a big part of our lives, and I can't even begin to tell you how good he's been to me and Gus. But it will never transform either one of us into something else - something we're not."

His smile was slightly lopsided. "But you can't blame me for wishing it was possible. Not for me. Not even for your mother. This is your life to live, and our opinions don't really matter. But it matters for you and for Gus. Your lives would be so much easier, and simpler."

She nodded. "Yeah. I know. But I could never be happy living a lie, and I won't teach Gus that life in the closet is an acceptable choice. I hope you can understand that."

He reached out then and cupped her cheek gently. "I do, but I can't help but wonder how you managed to grow up so strong and so brave. You certainly didn't learn it from your parents."

"Oh, I don't know," she replied. "I think what you're doing now is extraordinary. Brian thought so too. He called you a gutsy old bugger."

He looked horrified, and Lindsey laughed. "Don't worry, Dad. Coming from Brian Kinney, that's a compliment."

His smile - slightly lopsided - said that he was unconvinced, but he would let it pass.

Nancy, perfectly coiffed and wrapped in bright blue sequins, was waiting for them when they reached the landing.

"Beautiful gown, Mom," said Lindsey, suppressing an urge to observe that the formal looked more like glitzed-up kimono than belle-of-the-ball gown.

"Isn't it?" Nancy replied, adjusting the shawl-like collar and the v neckline that showed just the tiniest bit of cleavage. "It's Diane Von Furstenberg, you know. From her latest collection."

Privately, Lindsey wondered when the New York designer had gone just slightly geisha, but she said nothing. The twinkle in her father's eyes approved of her discretion, although she was pretty sure that he shared her opinion.

Lindsey smiled as a shriek of laughter burst from the kitchen, but it was short-lived as she looked up to note the grimace that distorted her mother's features. "You really should show him how to practice an inside voice, Lindsey."

"Oh, come on, Nancy," Ron said quickly, sharply. "He's playing with Minerva. Don't you remember how Lindsey used to bellow when she . . ."


Lindsey stared at her mother for a moment before responding, realizing that Nancy seemed to need reminding that she wasn't the only member of the family who could project an icy chill. She adopted a lopsided smile and met her mother's eyes boldly. "Actually, in this case, it's probably more a case of like father, like son. Brian can hit a high C like you wouldn't believe . . ." She paused deliberately and allowed the smile to ease into a smirk that was definitely lascivious. "Given the right provocation. The hard glitter in her eyes made it very clear that she wasn't talking about a choral
Nancy was barely able to control her impulse to retort in kind. Instead, she allowed her eyes to drift down to inspect her daughter's attire, taking in the Stella McCartney silk blouse and the form-fitting True Religion jeans - ultra stylish and undoubtedly expensive, but not the kind of outfit she considered suitable for her daughter. But then again, this was the rebellious daughter - the one who refused to accept the enviable position that both family and society had granted her.

"You could come with us, you know," she said, with another hard glance at the outfit that she classified - silently - as hippie haute monde. "We'll wait if you want to change."

Lindsey tried not to laugh, but could not quite pull it off. She knew that her outburst would only intensify her mother's obvious irritation, but she couldn't help it. "I don't think your fellow Club members would approve of the invitation, Mom. They'd probably accuse you of sleeping with the enemy."

"That's ridiculous," Nancy snapped. "They've never snubbed you, Lindsey, or attempted to lock you out. You've done that all by yourself."

Lindsey went very still, her jaw rigid and clinched tight as she struggled to control the impulse to lash out. "Don't get your knickers in a twist, Mom. I wouldn't dream of crashing your party. Oh, and - just so you know - this is not a phase I'm going through. It's not a fad or a fling or a passing fancy. I'm not going to wake up tomorrow and realize that all I really want in life is a man's cock to play with. This is me; it's who I am. Live with it - or don't. Either way, your decision won't change anything."

Nancy's face went chalk white, and she gaped like a fish, but apparently couldn't find the breath to reply.

Ron, however, felt compelled to step in. "Lindsey . . ."

Deliberately, Lindsey placed gentle fingers over her father's mouth. "Don't say anything, Dad. I should have spoken up years ago. And now, I'm going to take my son home to our lovely new house - the one provided by the faggot father who isn't worthy of the right to draw breath, according to your social equals - and we're going to begin to build our new life. If you want to be a part of it, you know where to find us."

Her tone and the gaze she directed only to her father made it obvious that the invitation was not intended for her mother, who continued to gape as her oldest daughter collected her son from the kitchen, smiling as Gus was hugged and kissed by Minerva and gifted with a handful of cookies, waited as grandfather and grandson shook hands and laughed and hugged each other, before making her departure, not sparing another word or glance for her mother.

"You could have said something," Nancy said finally, her entire body trembling, once Lindsey was gone. "You could have stood up for me, defended me. Why did you let her speak to me like that?"

Moving slowly, Ron collected his keys from the table by the front door, and picked up the ornate, embroidered shawl she had left hanging on the coat rack. He moved forward to drape it over her shoulders and adjust it accordingly.

"You haven't answered me," she snapped.

"No, I haven't."

"Why not?" Her voice wavered, just slightly.
"Because," he replied in a strange subdued voice, "you wouldn't like hearing what I have to say."

Then he escorted her out the front door to the Mercedes waiting in the driveway. The drive to The Club was made in complete silence, and Nancy was suddenly stricken with the strange, unexpected notion that her husband might never choose to explain himself, might actually elect never to speak to her again. She had used heavy silences, long-suffering sighs, and wounded sulking as weapons against him throughout their married life, but she had never once been the target of reprisals.

She folded her lips together and wrapped her shawl more tightly around her as she consoled herself with the only comfort she could find. It was, of course, all Lindsey's fault.

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The Petersons were greeted warmly by long-time Club staff members as they walked up the steps to the main entrance, and Nancy was delighted to be back in such a comfortable, familiar atmosphere, noting with pleasure that the staff were dressed in perfect formal attire and seemed intent on catering to every whim of the distinguished members and their guests. She was not so delighted when Ron gave her a gentle push toward a group of wives gathered in the small pub area where a mouth-watering array of canapés and aperitifs was set out on the bar. He excused himself quickly, mumbling something about saying hello to Club officers. He was gone before she could register a complaint, but not before favoring her with a small, tight smile; it was not his natural relaxed grin, but it was enough to convince her that he was beginning to feel sorry for his earlier outrageous behavior and that she could expect a full demonstration of Ron Peterson in apologetic mode once the evening was over.

Later, she would think back on this moment and realize just how clueless she had been, but, for now, she had old bonds to rejuvenate and new acquaintances to evaluate for their potential contributions to her social standing.

It was only a matter of minutes before she was deep in conversation with a Gucci-clad Donna Hobbs, the buxom blond wife of Randolph, Sr., and Marilyn Stockwell, tall and svelte in forest green Versace, discussing the latest New York fashion week and the splendid creations of Badgeley Mischka and Vera Wang, and then moving on to the sad state of city politics since 'that uncouth peasant' had taken over the mayor's office and the decline of the police department since Chief Stockwell's unfortunate departure, making no mention, of course, of the reason for the loss of his position. After that, they ventured into opinions and speculations about the new production of *La Bohème*, scheduled at Schickel Hall in the summer. Then it was time to turn their attention to a new presence in their exclusive little group as they proceeded to compliment Craig Taylor's very young wife on the short, flirty blush-colored chiffon frock she'd chosen for the evening. It was a thoroughly enjoyable exercise for the three older women, allowing them to practice saying all the right things to prevent the newcomer from realizing that she was the target of a particularly nasty form of condescension, expressed only in the most genteel albeit slightly feline way, of course, and to observe, via discreet smirks and clandestine eye-rolls, that the dress was far more suitable for an ingénue than the wife of a successful businessman, more appropriate to spring prom than country club soiree. Nancy, Marilyn, and Donna smiled knowingly to each other, as young Leslie Taylor blushed and preened under their insincere compliments, and tried not to speculate on why she felt slightly muddled and confused. She had never been here before, and a little voice in her mind whispered that she should make a point of never coming back.

Ron, meanwhile, had slipped away into the crowd, taking care to avoid attracting any special attention and especially staying out of his wife's line of sight. He was mostly successful in his attempt at invisibility, until he turned to enter the main club room and collided with a very busy young waiter carrying a tray full of frozen silver goblets filled with perfectly prepared mint juleps - an affectation
of southern tradition that was a favorite among The Club's upper echelon. The waiter, young and agile, managed to avoid allowing any of the silver cups to crash to the floor, but was less successful in preventing the spilling of the contents, and Ron Peterson wound up with a shirt front dripping with prime cocktail.

"Oh, Mr. Peterson, I am so sorry." Nicholas Avolar was dressed in an immaculate white waiter's jacket, perfectly creased black trousers, and shoes so well shined that they reflected the room around him. He seemed to be mortified by his own clumsiness.

Ron smiled and accepted a spotless linen napkin from the agitated young waiter to attempt to mop up the liquid. "It's all right, my boy. Both the shirt and I will survive, I'm sure."

"Oh, no, no," Nicholas insisted, signaling to a passing server to replenish the tray of drinks and see that it was delivered correctly. "We have a supply of extra dress shirts in the cloak room just for such accidents. Please come with me, and we'll have you fresh and dry in no time at all."

"But you don't have to . . ."

"Please, Mr. Peterson," said Nicholas, a bit sharply. "It's my job, and you know how the lords of the manor feel about servants who don't follow protocol."

Ron Peterson was slightly puzzled by the young waiter's insistence, but realized that it wasn't worth causing a scene - especially under existing circumstances - so he allowed himself to be escorted into a dressing area in one of the more private men's rooms tucked away in a remote corner of the ground floor.

Once there, all was made clear, and he turned to offer Nicholas a congratulatory smile. "Oh, well done, young Nicholas," he said softly, wondering for a moment why the youth seemed to flinch away from that form of address. Jared Hilliard, handsomely clad in a short, deep red waiter's jacket that fit him perfectly and emphasized his muscular form, stepped forward and helped the older man strip off dinner jacket, tie, and the soaked shirt in order to affix a very small microphone and wire to Peterson's chest. He was then handed a fresh shirt, and his dinner jacket, spot-cleaned of course, and Nicholas was there to re-tie his tie. The entire process took less than four minutes.

"Nothing to worry about, Mr. Peterson," volunteered Hilliard. "This is state-of-the-art technology, so you're not going to be lighting up anybody's radar or shorting out the sound equipment. You're perfectly safe. I can give you my word on that score, because if I were to lose my mind and allow you to take any risks, one Brian Kinney would reach down my throat and rip out my lungs - among other things. Since I have no desire to wind up singing soprano in a children's choir, we're not going to take any chances."

"So what do I do?" Peterson looked completely bewildered.

"Nothing. You don't have to do a thing. Just . . . mingle. The equipment will record whatever happens around you, and the techs who are monitoring it control everything remotely. I won't go into detail here, because we don't have the time, but I can assure you that a major clean-up operation is taking place as we speak. The feds have decoded the information that Henry Flagg provided, and they're moving in to close the operation down from that end. As soon as that's completed, they'll be ready to step in here. So your part in this is very limited. Just walk around and observe and, if you hear anything that you think is pertinent, just edge a bit closer and listen a little harder."

"That's it?"

"That's it. If something should happen and you feel that you need help, I'll be right here." He flashed
a charming grin. "In my capacity as the men's room attendant. But I'm sure you'll be fine. And if all
goes well, you'll be witnessing the end of an era here tonight - an era that should have ended a long
time ago."

A burst of laughter and a short riff of piano music rose from the main dining room, and Peterson
paused only long enough to shake hands with both Hilliard and a hugely nervous Nicholas Avolar
before returning to the party to take his designated seat at a big table near the dais on which The
Club's senior officers - positions occupied only, according to Club by-laws, by descendants of the
original eight founders - were to be seated.

But, excepting only that rarified station, the Petersons place was among the best in the house. Seated
across from them were Randolph Hobbs, Jr., and his wife, Teresa, and Randolph's son, the notorious
Christopher, who'd made an indelible name for himself by attacking a young gay man with a
baseball bat on the occasion of his senior prom. At his side sat his fiancé, Allyson Fincher, daughter
of Fox television mogul, John Vincent Fincher, who was seated between his daughter and his wife, a
tall, thin woman with a pinched face that seemed uncomfortable in any attempt to smile. Fincher
spoke to neither of them, too engrossed in the script for his stint as master of ceremonies for the
evening's program to spare time for casual conversation.

Ron stared at Christopher Hobbs for a moment, and wondered if the Club-member-to-be even
remembered the night he'd almost killed an innocent young man, simply because the youth had dared
to perform a classic, beautifully executed dance with the man of his dreams, stunning the assembled
audience - his fellow senior class members - into complete silence. In remembering that occasion,
Peterson was sharply reminded of his own reaction when he'd heard the news, and he felt a pang of
guilt in his gut. Would young Hobbs feel the same, even if only in a small way?

Probably not, he concluded, as he watched the young man staring daggers at a waiter who was
serving young Miss Fincher a glass of champagne and apparently taking too long and looking at the
young woman too intently to suit her fiancé's notion of propriety.

Beyond Lydia Fincher, Craig Taylor was focused on his newly-acquired wife, who was obviously
slightly ill-at-ease in what must feel like a very senior setting to such a young woman.

On Ron's left were Marilyn and Jim Stockwell, who undoubtedly would have been a member of the
Club's upper echelon, if not handicapped by the circumstances of his humble birth. Further down sat
Virginia Schickel, widow of the infamous George, who was, of course, no longer discussed in polite
company (in public anyway) and her handsome escort for the evening whose name no one would
bother to learn or remember, although he did inspire some speculative looks from other matrons in
the crowd. Beyond them was William Wainwright and wife, Elaina, new to Pittsburgh but scion of
an old, well-connected Philadelphia family, a candidate for membership.

And that, thought Peterson, probably explains why Nancy and I have been placed at this very
prestigious table: Wainwright is the greatly desired new recruit, while I am the token prodigal son,
with both of us capable of making substantial contributions to the coffers of the institution.

"Don't look now," he whispered to his wife as he draped a perfectly starched linen napkin over his
lap, "but we're being wooed."

"Don't be boorish," she retorted softly. "I think it's charming that they're willing to welcome us back
into the fold."

"What they're hoping to 'welcome'," he answered with a smirk, "is my money."

Her gaze was icy. "You've been spending entirely too much time with Lindsey."
The discussion would probably have continued to devolve, perhaps even ending in a nasty little scene, but they were interrupted as Fincher made his way to the podium and waited in easy silence as polite applause erupted around the room. He needed no introduction, of course. His face was synonymous with Fox News in the metropolitan area; thus he was always instantly recognized - with warmth and approval from fellow Club members and advocates of ultra-right wing political causes, and with skepticism and distrust by members of the liberal establishment. There were, of course, none of the latter present here tonight, and Fincher's smug smile signaled his approval of that fact.

The welcoming speech was short, although it did allow the newsman to indulge himself in a few insider jokes that would have been incomprehensible to the great unwashed, the masses who were, of course, the target of the nasty comments. The laughter in the audience was of a kindred nature - the elite approving of the still more elite expounding on the flaws and fallacies of the other 99% of the world. Fincher concluded his opening remarks and then introduced the members of The Club's board of directors individually, who entered, one by one, from a discreet doorway at the rear of the room. Each then proceeded to make his way to the main dais, accompanied by appropriate polite applause, where they joined their respective spouses, already seated there. There was Hobbs, Sr., of course, and Richard Crandall - a scion of one of the oldest families in Pittsburgh; Samuel Boroughs, eldest grandson and great grandson of steel magnates; Victor Wells-Frampton, whose ancestors had established one of the first banks in the newly-incorporated city; Anthony Moran, former ambassador to the court of St. James and owner of Contemporary Publishing, and Nathan Foley, principle shareholder of the Astra Leisure franchise, with spas and resorts scattered throughout the country.

Next to emerge was the heir apparent to the chairmanship of the organization, his thick mop of silver hair perfectly groomed for this occasion. He was not really a "Junior", of course, but everyone in this place called him that, and he accepted it with good grace, realizing that it was a small price to pay for the reward he would reap later. So "Clayton, Jr." he would remain in these surroundings, while his friends, business associates, and beautiful trophy wife, Victoria, would continue to address him as Paul. Finally, bringing up the rear, of course, was the smiling Clayton himself - not so much senior as original - the most distinguished true lord of the manor, looking every inch the part of the aristocrat, accepting homage equally from his peers and those who aspired to become his peers. With a quick wave of his hand, he settled into his chair at the head of the table and exchanged greetings with his wife, who looked stunning in a charcoal gray Vera Wang gown. She was much younger than her husband - perhaps even a bit outlandishly so - but it was certain that no one among this assembled group would choose to mention it.

By time-honored tradition - unspoken but very real nonetheless - no one would begin to eat until the chairman of the board did so, after raising his glass in the annual toast, for which the entire assemblage rose to its feet.

"To the tradition of excellence," he intoned in a deep, steady voice, "and the power and will to protect, defend, and perpetuate its existence."

"Here, here!" was chanted by all, voices bright with cheer and camaraderie.

They drank before resuming their seats and tucking into the first course of the elaborate dinner, a mouthwatering shrimp and scallop ceviche. Conversation during the meal itself was desultory, even sparse, because one did not waste time on casual chit-chat when afforded the opportunity to enjoy a meal prepared by the legendary Rachel Charles and her staff. There was not a single diner who did not relish the succulent veal medallions with mushroom velouté sauce, garlic-smoked potatoes, and corn-leek gratin, with special reverence paid to the chef's trademark croissants. The chocolate-caramel mousse that completed the meal was also exquisite, and the entire assemblage joined the members of the board in sending profuse compliments to the chefs involved.

Ron Peterson ate well, like everyone else seated at the table; indeed, like almost everyone else seated
at every table in the cavernous room. He supposed, looking around, that there might be a few of the ultra-body-conscious wives - anorexic by choice - who resisted the urge to clean their plates, but they were very few indeed. He was still a bit nervous, of course, but it wasn't often that one was given the chance to savor one of Rachel Charles's legendary creations, and he was not going to miss out on the opportunity.

He made a point of enjoying every bite. But when the meal was finished, he was not to be given time to sit back and bask in contemplation of the food's excellence. Instead, he was summoned - albeit very discreetly - to adjourn to the privacy of one of the executive conference rooms in a secluded area off the second floor balcony, while the son and heir of the chairman of the board stood at the podium and presented a prepared speech - a recitation of the goals and values of The Club and a comprehensive summation of its long history, including a few legendary tidbits that had been carefully excluded from more official versions. Since everyone present was either a full-fledged member of The Club's very exclusive 'in' crowd - or soon would be - he detailed these unpublicized events with great gusto, and his efforts were welcomed with delighted laughter and periodic applause.

Peterson was not sorry to miss the speech; in recent years, he had begun to despise smug little 'insider' jokes, coming to the admittedly belated conclusion that they were usually cruel and unnecessarily condescending. He was, however, slightly puzzled to note that many others were also making their way toward the conference room, the chairman of the board among them, and he wondered if the son would notice and resent his father's desertion. But if he did, Junior covered it perfectly and went on speaking, apparently relishing his task as spokesperson for the establishment on this momentous night.

When the invited group was assembled in the conference room, the personal waiter to the board members - young Nicholas - served snifters of Remy Martin X.O. cognac for each of the men as they took seats around an oval conference table. Then, he proceeded to pass out Padron cigars - each carefully pre-cut - pausing each time to offer a light with a Cartier custom cigar lighter. Craig Taylor and Hobbs, Jr., seemed especially eager to light up. Peterson, with a glance around the room as he took his first shallow puff, realized that most of those present could be classified as 'old guard' - long time members of the inner circle, with only a couple of exceptions, including himself, Jim Stockwell, and William Wainwright, aka the new kid on the block.

This little conclave might prove interesting and informative. He sat very still, listening carefully.

It was, of course, the chairman of the board who spoke up first, from his position at the head of the table.

"Gentlemen," he said solemnly, "let us raise a glass of this extraordinary cognac to the preservation of the traditions of The Club. I'm sure that is one goal that we all share equally."

Ron Peterson touched his glass to his lips, but he did not drink.

When Clayton turned toward Peterson and Wainwright, seated side by side, the former had to resist an impulse to hold his breath, feeling certain that this moment was the culmination of the evening's purpose.

"We wanted to take a minute of your time, Ron, and yours, William, to express our appreciation for your presence here tonight. Ron, it's been a long time, and while we understand that family and business issues can sometimes make Club participation difficult, we are delighted that you've returned to the fold. And William, it's always a joy for me to meet new members who so perfectly fulfill the criteria for membership here. I can assure you that there are very few who are such a perfect fit for us. Thus, you are both most welcome."
"Now, as you undoubtedly know, an organization like ours is expensive to maintain, and we thought - before we hit you up for donations . . . " He smiled, and there was a low rumble of laughter from everyone around the table. "We thought you might like to hear some of the purposes for which the contributions of our generous members are used. Much of our work is done publicly, of course - charitable causes that are noble in nature and serve to enhance the good name of our Club: library funds, orphan's relief programs, St. Jude's, medical research labs, cultural and collegiate endowments - many other worthy causes. Others are more . . . discretionary, shall we say?"

He paused again, and his smile seemed just a bit cold, a bit self-satisfied. "Although I'd love to stay here and present the details for you, and enjoy your responses, I'm afraid duty calls, as I must maintain the public image and join my son on the podium. Frankly, I'm not very good with the details and nuances of our less well known causes, but I'm sure you'll get all the information you need from these good gentlemen here - sufficient, at least, to encourage you to loosen the old purse strings."

Another round of easy, not quite self-conscious laughter, disguising a genuine pitch for contributions beneath a veneer of genteel humor.

He rose then and made his way toward the door, stopping to shake hands with both Wainwright and Peterson, and complimenting both on the loveliness and lady-like demeanor of their wives. Ron Peterson only barely managed to control an urge to snort at the idea of Nancy being called "lady-like". He remembered her shrill, blistering tirade on the occasion last winter when she'd caught the neighbor's granddaughter chalking a hopscotch grid on the surface of their driveway. Sarah Wimbley had not spoken to either of them since, after stepping in to collect the trembling six-year-old and informing Nancy, in her perfect, plummy British accent, that she should "grow a heart" or "eat shit and die" - whichever came first.

There was a moment of silence as the old man left the room, and Nicholas stepped forward to offer refills of the cognac. Several took advantage of the offer, but, once he had finished, he was directed to leave the bottle and see to his other duties, by James Stockwell, who might not have the pedigree required to assume formal leadership duties, but possessed a sufficiently domineering personality to be able to pull it off.

"Well, then," said Randolph Hobbs, Jr., proud father of homophobic Christopher, "shall we get to it? If you gentlemen wish, I can go into all of the charitable causes with which we are affiliated, but I rather think that would be a waste of time. It's all a matter of public record, and you've probably already studied it. It's impressive, but - ultimately - boring." He looked up then and favored them with a lopsided smile. "However, there are other things - things that are not really part of the public record, but things that gentlemen such as yourselves would probably enjoy hearing about. If you're interested, of course."

Both Peterson and Wainwright nodded, but the former was hoping that the misgivings stirring in his gut would not be reflected in his expression. He had an ugly feeling that he knew what he was about to hear, and he suddenly didn't want to be any part of this. If he knew it for sure, would his prior association with The Club make him guilty of fomenting the same kind of ugliness against other people, in other times?

Hobbs, Jr. took a deep swallow of his cognac, followed by a heavy pull on his cigar. Then he smiled. "Let's start with our covert actions to defeat Prop 14, shall we?"

Ron Peterson, father of an out-and-proud Lesbian daughter and grandfather of the son of the notorious Brian Kinney, studied the other faces gathered around the table and noted that every one of them wore an expression of anticipation and smug satisfaction.
"After that, we'll get to the really good stuff."

With a small sigh, Peterson picked up his cognac glass and had to suppress a powerful urge to gulp it down, as he found himself wondering if this interminable night would ever end.

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It was almost nine when Ted walked out of the office and locked the door behind him, and he wished for a moment that he'd grabbed a jacket from the coat rack in his office as a gust of damp, chilly wind swept across the parking lot, stirring dust and debris and carrying the less-than-savory scent of Liberty Avenue. But it was only a dozen yards to his car, so he made a dash for it, hugging his suit jacket tight around him.

It was eerily silent in the parking lot, except for the muted moan of the wind, but then that shouldn't be surprising. Everyone else - excepting only security staff - had been gone for hours. No one else worked the kind of hours that Ted put in; not even the mighty Cynthia. But that, of course, counted for nothing in the Kinney scheme of things.

Once in the car, he took a moment to loosen his tie and collar. He wasn't entirely sure why he still insisted on wearing a suit - one of his very expensive, individually tailored suits - to the office every day. He knew full well that it wasn't necessary, and it didn't accomplish anything, since he was no longer privy to client interviews or creative brainstorming or executive conferences, and no longer an object of respect or envy to the other employees. He was just plain Ted - the uptight accountant who had once had the ear of the most powerful man in the company; a has-been, a sad remnant of the important person he'd once been. As far as the rank and file were concerned he could have wandered in wearing sweats and a baseball cap, and they would probably neither notice nor care.

So much, he thought, for having earned the loyalty of the singular core of Kinnetic power. There was no such word in Brian Kinney's vocabulary; thus, Ted knew that he must be really careful in what he planned to do next. He must perform so perfectly and generate such an amazing result that Brian would be dazzled and overwhelmed and forced to reconsider his previous hasty decisions. The big man would have no choice but to take Theodore Schmidt back into his inner circle, but there would be one major difference in the circumstances. Ted would never again allow himself to enjoy complacency; he would forever remember that Brian's 'loyalty' was contingent on the events of the moment. It could never be earned and kept; only earned and lost, or earned and re-earned.

He frowned as he adjusted his seat belt in the luxurious Audi he had bought for himself just a couple of months before the attack on Brian, simultaneously engaging the keyless ignition and adjusting the heater to its highest setting. The calendar might proclaim that it was spring, but, in Pittsburgh, that didn't always count for much. He was cold and tired and hungry, and he wanted, more than anything, to go home to enjoy a cozy fire in the fireplace of his newly redecorated den, a warm meal of his favorite comfort foods, affectionately prepared and served by his loving partner, and, last but not least, the lovely slender body of his young lover. Unfortunately, that wasn't possible tonight, because Blake was at a professional conference in Chicago, and wouldn't be home until the following day.

In truth, if he were brutally honest with himself, it might not have been possible anyway because Blake had been a bit distant of late, with a look in his beautiful eyes suggesting that he might be having second thoughts about their relationship.

Another thing that could be laid at the feet of one Brian Kinney. How many relationships, the accountant wondered, had faltered and died due to interference by the so-called Stud of Liberty Avenue?
Emphasizing the gloomy trend of his mood, his stomach rumbled, and he remembered that he had skipped lunch in favor of the online research he had been doing concerning his new pet project. He sighed then, knowing that there was virtually nothing worth eating at home, unless he was prepared to settle for canned soup and crackers.

So, a trip to the Liberty Diner was in order. At least, at this hour, it shouldn't be crowded. Everyone who was a member of the Liberty gay street scene - which was almost everyone who frequented the Diner - would already have made their way to Babylon or Poppers or one of the dozen other gay clubs along the street. Maybe he'd even be lucky enough to find that Debbie was no longer on duty, and he could get his food and eat in peace.

He didn't much relish the idea of one of her conversations on a night like this.

He was still smarting from his disappointment earlier in the day when he had tried to set up an after-hours meeting with Mr. Wylie to go over the latest data about the potential property acquisition which would make the members of the Schickel Foundation very, very wealthy - the amazing acquisition that had been presented to Ted as a special favor by Wylie, to allow him to get in on a golden opportunity in order to regain his position as Brian Kinney's right hand man - if only he could persuade his employer to invest in what would prove to be a financial bonanza.

He had hoped to arrange a late dinner at one of the city's better restaurants, where he could go over the latest survey information that Wylie had sent to him via messenger earlier in the week.

It was a phenomenal opportunity to reap huge benefits, while simultaneously courting favor with some of the most influential business people in the city, the state, or maybe even the whole Northeast section of the country. But discretion was vital, and timing was everything. He had to present the project at exactly the right moment, timing his presentation precisely so that there would still be time for Brian to take advantage of the opportunity, but not enough time for him to dither over it. And in order to do that, he had to be sure that every t was crossed and every i, dotted, with no surprises lurking in the wings to spring up and bite him in the butt at the last minute.

He'd whined a bit when Wylie informed him that he had a prior commitment which he could not reschedule, and the elderly attorney had quickly let it be known that he didn't appreciate being pressured. Ted had backed off, of course. Immediately. One did not, after all, risk offending a powerbroker of Wylie's stature. Without him, Brian would be shut out of the biggest money-making proposition of his life, and Ted would lose any chance of regaining his rightful place in the Kinney hierarchy.

He managed to ignore the insistent little snarky observation in the back of his mind that pointed out that he shouldn't have to grovel to secure the man's cooperation. But one did what one had to, or so he assured himself.

So - the Diner. But if Debbie was there . . . he briefly entertained the thought of stopping off at the McDonald's just down the street, but the thought of burgers, fries, and a shake just didn't appeal. Whatever he might have to endure - company-wise - at the Diner, he would, at least, get a decent meal. Nothing cordon bleu, of course, but tasty and rib-sticking and close enough to home cooking to satisfy his palate.

He tried very hard not to think about the casual conversation he'd overheard as he'd fetched a cup of coffee in the lounge at the office, when the Kinnetic receptionist - a delicious young morsel of Brian's choosing, of course - had been informed by Cynthia's newest assistant, who looked enough like her boss to make Ted wonder about the question of nepotism, that security would be sending a car to the airport in the evening to pick up a couple of new arrivals.
So the younger member of the prodigal couple was coming home, and so was Emmett; Emmett, who had once been the love of his life and had fought on his behalf against anyone who he deemed unworthy of Ted's trust, who had always been there to make sure he was cared for and fed and nurtured. If he called Emmett, maybe . . .

He heaved a deep breath. If he called Emmett, he could expect that cold, relentless tone of voice that he'd never imagined Emmett could direct toward him. And he could probably count on a beat-down by the very masculine, very protective Drew Boyd.

No. The Diner it would have to be.

Nevertheless, he was still engaged in a mental argument with himself as he pulled into the parking area beside the diner, trying to come up with a sensible alternative. There were, however, only two other cars there, neither of which he recognized so he heaved a sigh of relief before heading in.

The windows were partially obscured by moisture condensing on the glass, and when he stepped inside he couldn't see anyone for a moment, as he allowed his contact lenses to clear. He was grateful for the warmth and the aromas that filled the air: beef stew, and chili, he thought, and maybe some kind of chowder. And lemon bars, of course. It wouldn't be the Liberty Diner without lemon bars.

He looked up then, toward the counter, and saw that one wish, at least, had been denied. Debbie was there, in a characteristically colorful t-shirt, featuring a cartoon of two body-builder types wrapped in each other's arms, with a banner surrounding them reading "Queers Rule". She was pouring coffee for a single customer who was hunkered into a near-crouch at the end of the counter, a scruffy older man who was probably homeless, judging by the tattered condition of his clothing, and the way his hands shook as he gripped the coffee cup. Probably one of Deb's charity cases, he concluded. Not worthy of notice.

"Hi, Deb," he said quickly, figuring it would be better to take control of the conversation and guide it to where he wanted it to go, rather than risking her bringing up things he would prefer not to discuss.

"Hi, Teddie," she said, surprisingly subdued in her greeting. "You just getting off?"

He nodded and settled himself on a stool at the counter, as far away from the scruffy coffee-drinker as possible. "Gotta burn the midnight oil to keep up with the work load," he replied. "Can't disappoint the boss man, you know."

The voice that lifted behind him was cold enough to make him shiver. "Unless I'm mistaken," said Lindsey flatly, "you already did."

More than anything in the world, Ted wished he could figure out a way to just drop through the floor. He had not seen Lindsey since the last big confrontation in Brian's office, and he would gladly have avoided seeing her for the foreseeable future.

"How the hell did she get here? Melanie had the SUV and . . ."

Then it struck him. One of the two cars in the parking lot had been a brand new Buick LaCrosse, and he had glimpsed a child's car seat in the back as he'd passed. Of course. She would not need the old SUV any more, because someone had already provided her with something newer and better. Mel could keep the vehicle that Emmett had bestowed upon the couple during his very brief spate of inherited wealth. Lindsey would no longer need charity.

Ted spun around on the stool and regarded the mother of Brian's only son with a flare of rage in his eyes. "Well, hi there, Linz. And Gus." He spotted the boy sitting in a corner booth, working on a
plateful of French fries and a giant strawberry shake. "Guess I don't have to ask how you two got here, do I? Daddy's doing his thing, as usual, providing the biggest, baddest new car on the lot. All that's left to do is put a sign in the window to proclaim, 'Brian Kinney was here'. It's amazing what money can buy these days."

Lindsey was unperturbed, but her smile was sharp, almost brittle. "It's even more amazing what it won't buy. Like loyalty, that should have been paid for a dozen times over, at least, and not only with money."

Ted jumped to his feet. "Loyalty. You've got a hell of a nerve talking to me about loyalty. How about your loyalty to your partner? How about that? Left her high and dry when the mighty Kinney deigned to whistle for you to come to heel."

Lindsey studied his face for a moment, looking for . . . he wasn't sure what she was looking for, but he was pretty sure, judging by her expression, that she wasn't finding it. "Just to set the record straight, Ted," she said softly, "I never abandoned Mel. I simply made it clear that some of the things she had done - without my knowledge or consent - would have to stop, and that I was unhappy in Toronto, as was Gus. She was welcome to come back here and rebuild our life, but . . ."

"But," he almost snarled, "she'd have had to buckle down and allow the lord and master to set the terms of the agreement. How could you expect . . ."

"Expect what? Expect her to acknowledge that Brian is Gus's father and has always supported him - and us? That was all, Ted. She didn't have to like him, didn't have to associate with him or even talk to him. She just had to own up to the truth and admit that he's earned the right to be part of Gus's life and to have some say in how his son is raised. That's all. She was willing to grant those rights to Michael, who certainly loves J.R. and wants to be acknowledged as her father, but has never been able to contribute a shiny dime to her support. But not a single nuance of the same for Brian, who has been the bedrock provider for all of us ever since Gus was born, without ever expecting a thing in return. So you tell me, Ted: what would he possibly have demanded that she couldn't stand to concede? She was sure as hell eager and willing to spend his money, and just as much of it went to support her and J.R. as Gus and me. So you just think about that, Teddie, and figure it out for yourself."

He was silent for a moment, his mind in a kaleidoscopic whirl as he tried to put aside his own prejudices and put together a coherent thought.

"And me?" he said finally. "Why did he abandon me? What did I do . . ."

"Teddie." Unexpectedly, the warning tone came from Debbie. "You want to think about what you're about to say. Because - although I know you didn't mean to do it - the simple truth is that you did endanger Gus - and Lindsey - by telling people about their relationship to Brian, people who had no right or need to know. Given what had just happened to Brian, it was thoughtless and dangerous and . . ."

"Doesn't look that way to me." Ted's voice was almost a sneer. "After all, Brian's money will make sure nobody can get anywhere near them. Meanwhile, the rest of us just get tossed aside, to fend for ourselves."

Lindsey's eyes were full of ice. "Last I heard, Mr. Schmidt, you still had a job and a salary and an office. What exactly is it that you think you've been deprived of?"

"He owes me," he cried, his face gone red and splotchy. "Without me, he'd . . . he'd have lost everything. It's my work that's made it possible for him to be such a huge fucking success. He needs
me, and, without me, he's going to fuck it all up. Him and his precious Cynthia. And you're going to go right on expecting him to provide unlimited funds so you can play at your artwork, and Gus can go to the best schools, and he'll just . . . he'll just forget the rest of us. Like we were never a part of his life."

"Ted," Lindsey said softly. "It won't be that way. Yes, he might be angry right now, but Brian isn't very good at holding grudges. He'll come around if you'll just . . ."

"No. I won't be another charity case. He needs me, and I'm going to make sure he knows it. Soon enough, he'll see the truth, and he'll know how much he needs me. And then . . . well, we'll just see who matters in his life."

Debbie leaned forward and braced herself against the counter to study his face. "Teddie, what the fuck are you up to? You're not going to do something stupid - again, are you?"

His smile was glacial. "I never do stupid things, Deb. Everybody has a bit of bad luck sometimes, but I don't make stupid mistakes. You're all forgetting that there were tens of thousands of investors - smart, knowledgeable investors - who got bilked in that massive Ponzi scheme. With the information I had, it was all logical. There was no way I could have known. But I know plenty of other things, about how to recognize a wonderful opportunity when I see it. And you're all going to see that. Soon enough."

Debbie looked unconvinced, but said nothing more.

"Now, can I have some beef stew and lemon bars to go, please? Or are you going to tell me my business isn't welcome here?"

"Of course, I'm not," she replied, but there were still shadows in her eyes. She couldn't figure out what the accountant was up to, but she was absolutely certain that Brian was not going to like it.

She dished up a generous serving of stew and a couple of lemon bars, and handed them to him with a gentle smile. "You take care, Teddie. And try to remember that Brian might be willing to forgive certain things, but there's a point of no return, you know. Please don't go there."

This time, his smile was smug. "Don't worry, Deb. I know what I'm doing. You'll see."

As he made his way to the door, he could feel Lindsey's eyes upon him, and he had to fight to resist an urge to give her the finger. It wouldn't do any good, and she'd only run to Brian to whine about it, but, oh my God, it would feel wonderful, liberating . . . fucking perfect.

So he waited until he was through the door, where she wouldn't have a clear view, and then indulged himself, never noticing that he was still visible to the small figure tucked into a booster seat in the corner booth.

Screw Lindsey Peterson, and screw Brian Kinney too. And he allowed himself an ugly little snicker as he wished that they would just give everybody else a break and learn to screw each other.

"Mommie?" called Gus, as Lindsey and Debbie exchanged weary glances.

"What, Gus-Gus?" asked Lindsey, realizing that she would have to stop calling him that before long, as he would begin to resent it all too soon. Growing up was happening much more quickly than she would have liked.

The little boy was studying his hands intently, his tongue caught between his teeth as he concentrated, and looking so much like his father that it almost took Lindsey's breath away. "What
does it mean," he continued, using the fingers of his right hand, to manipulate those of his left to arrange them so that the middle finger was standing up alone, "when somebody does this?"

Lindsey blinked, hard, and then had to pretend to ignore the burst of laughter that Debbie could not quite stifle.

"It's nothing, Baby."

"But that's what Teddie was doing, so why . . ."

Lindsey frowned. "It's just something that nasty old men sometimes do, especially when they're making an ass of themselves."

"You said 'ass'," he intoned with great solemnity.

"Yes, I did," she agreed. "Sorry about that. Won't happen again."

He went back to slurping the last of his strawberry shake, perfectly content with her response. And she felt a lump form in her throat, reminding her of how much she loved him and how she could deal with anything, as long as Gus was safe and happy.

"Let's go home, Sonny Boy. And you can call your daddy, if you like."

His beaming smile told her that she'd said the magic words. She helped him into his jacket, and waited while he exchanged hugs with Debbie.

Everything would be all right, she thought, as they made their exit and walked out to the beautiful new car that Brian had provided for them. It bothered her a little, that she automatically thought of it in those terms, but she was determined that it wouldn't bother her for long because she was going to make certain that things changed for the better. She was looking for work already, had managed to schedule an interview for the following week with the curator of the Carnegie Museum of Art, and if a small voice in the back of her mind insisted on reminding her that the very elegant Mr. Grant Dorsett had once been team-mate, frat brother, and extremely good friend of Brian Kinney, she would just have to learn to accept certain things as coincidence and enjoy her good fortune. She was completely focused on making a new life for herself and her son and being able to support the two of them without having to rely on Brian to do so. But, for now, she would do whatever was necessary to protect her child and give him the life he deserved.

Everything would be all right - everything had to be all right - and if there was an undercurrent of desperation buried beneath her determination, well . . . she would worry about that later.

Deep in the shadows provided by a stand of sturdy elm trees, at the end of a cul-de-sac that bordered on the north end of the grounds of The Club, a dark, nondescript panel truck was parked at the edge of the turn-around. It was designed to avoid attracting attention in any setting and even more so in a virtually uninhabited area. The only thing that might have made it stand out among others like it was the number of antennae and aerials attached to various spots around the roof and chassis, but there was really no one around to notice. There were few houses on the little street, and no traffic to speak of, although anyone who might have bothered to check would have noticed that there had been a surprising number of vehicles and even occasional pedestrians coming and going over the course of the evening. Still, all around the truck there was a heavy stillness, broken only by an occasional strain of music from the only brightly illuminated structure in the area: The Club - just visible through thick veils of foliage.
Inside the truck, there was sound and light and motion, but no trace of what it contained was allowed to leak out into the night around it.

The atmosphere in the interior was subdued, but hardly silent, as the instruments packed into every available inch of space created a soft, incessant whirring, with occasional beeps and blips, and the monitors which displayed views from cameras concealed all around the perimeter of the subject of study - and within it, in a couple of cases - hummed softly as well. And then there were the sounds picked up by various microphones, concealed in strategic spots within the mansion, and others hidden beneath the clothing of various individuals on the premises. In addition, there were regular reports and comments from the two-way radios in the headsets of those patrolling - discreetly, of course - within and around the grounds.

But from the individuals actually seated within the electronic command center, there was not a sound, as Carl Horvath, Alexandra Corey, and Lance Mathis sat motionless, stunned by what they'd just heard.

The first hour of surveillance had yielded little that could be considered incriminating, although it was certainly revealing of the general attitude of the elite members of a still more elite organization. But then, the private conference had begun, and they had listened in growing horror, determined to hear every word, to miss nothing of the narrative delivered by Randolph Hobbs, Jr., but they quickly realized that they needn't have worried. There was nothing subdued or clandestine about the man's comments; he had been only too willing to tell the story, even to provide certain gory details when questioned.

The questions had come from several members of his audience, and some of their remarks had been almost gleeful, but the individual wearing the wire - Ron Peterson - had not spoken at all. That did not indicate, however, that he had not reacted to what he'd been told. His breathing had grown harsh, almost labored, even loud enough to be heard through the wire he was wearing, as he realized how little he'd known of these people whom he had at one time considered his peers. The casual recitation of the parts they had played in the atrocities committed in the name of "preserving tradition and Christian morality" left him stunned, and the dismissal of fatalities and grave bodily injuries resulting from the clandestine support of "the cause" was somehow more horrible for being so casually referenced, coming under the heading, according to Hobbs, of "necessary collateral damage".

The voice speaking so factually was pleasant, almost soporific, making the horrors he spoke of seem even worse somehow, as did the occasional laughter of his audience members.

He did not go into specific details of who exactly did what and when and to whom, but he made it very clear that Club funding had contributed heavily to the bombing of Babylon in protest of the "vile, perverted purposes" of Proposition 14, regular attacks against members of the gay community - especially those "strutting their stuff and displaying their wares" in the vicinity of Liberty Avenue, and - last but certainly not least - the campaign to free the city from the influence of one of its most flamboyant, out-and-proud perverts. The incidentals about what had been done to Brian Kinney - and why - were provided with a relish that was almost gleeful.

Carl Horvath had been studying his hands throughout the ghoulish recital, realizing when it was done that he would almost certainly never be quite the same person he had been before. He looked up then to study the face of Alex Corey - to find out if she could maintain her air of blasé professionalism in the presence of such unmitigated evil. The answer was not quite as obvious as he'd expected, but she would endure. Of that he had no doubt.

"Heard enough?" he asked. "Can we go in now?"

She raised one hand to silence him as she responded to a message on the computer console she was
When she smiled, it was not pretty and had nothing at all to do with happiness or warmth and everything to do with a thirst for justice. Or maybe revenge, although she would probably deny any such venal emotion.

"They got 'em," she reported to the two men watching her so closely. "They picked up the so-called broker who acted as liaison between the sponsors, AKA the patrons of The Club, and the thugs who actually did the dirty work. And Mr. Lawrence Previn was only too willing to spill his guts in exchange for a guarantee that he would not be forced to serve out his sentence in the prison's general population." Her smile widened. "Seems he's a 'pretty little thing', according to the head profiler who questioned him, and is more afraid of winding up as somebody's bitch than any retaliation from his high and mighty clients. He talked long and hard, and provided names and addresses and volumes of evidence, and teams of agents are rounding up the other perps as we speak, leaving us to seize the big boys, including those that footed the bill while keeping their distance so their hands would stay clean."

"Clean," echoed Mathis. "You can't deal with filth like that and not come out of it smelling of shit. So what comes now?"

"So-o-o," she drawled, with a quick wink, as she activated her two-way and issued a string of orders, short, pithy, and precise. Then she rose and grabbed her jacket, while the two men watched her warily. "What are you waiting for?" she asked as she moved toward the door. "Better hurry, or you're going to miss the fun."

Neither waited to be asked twice.

But the journey was short-lived for Kinnetic's security chief, as a call came in on his mobile just as the team was assembling to make a grand entrance.

He was deeply disappointed that he would miss all the fun, but he knew where his duty lay and what he would face at the hands of Brian Kinney if he failed to do it.

Those privileged to have been invited to attend the private conference returned to the dining room to participate in the closing ceremonies and witness the actual induction of new members. Or, on this occasion, the new member - singular. Only William Wainwright had been found worthy this year. He had demonstrated his suitability, thought Ron Peterson, by indicating his loud, enthusiastic approval of The Club's affiliation with other groups, clandestine by necessity, and by thoroughly enjoying the recitation of their exploits.

Peterson had managed to suppress his revulsion as he'd listened, but only barely. When he resumed his seat at the banquet table, he sat for a moment watching his wife planning a day at the spa with Teresa Hobbs. Did Christopher's mother know, he wondered. Had anyone ever recited the gory, crimson details of the acts sanctioned by The Club's political agenda for her amusement?

Then he looked at Nancy and wondered. What would she think and feel once she learned the truth about these individuals that she admired so much? For he had no doubt that she would find out - and very soon now, unless he missed his guess. He had not contributed a single word to the conversation in the conference room, because he had realized that there was no need to do so. Hobbs, Jr., had said it all.

William Wainwright was making his way toward the podium, all smiles and eager handshakes, when
the double doors leading to the main vestibule smashed open, to reveal the figure of Shirley Harper silhouetted against the brighter light of the corridor. She stood very still, her chef's jacket still spotless despite an evening of fast-paced, potentially messy labor over a hot stove. She completely looked the part she had played throughout recent weeks. Except for her eyes, which seemed larger than usual - and darker.

It was Randolph Hobbs who rose to his feet, his face twisted with anger. "Ms. Harper," he said loudly, "you have not been summoned."

"No," she replied sharply, "but you have."

And with that, every door around the vast room swung open to admit a host of police officers, FBI agents, and Kinnetic security forces, the latter operating strictly under the oversight of said officers. The only noticeable difference between the private staffers and the members of the force was the fact that they did not carry weapons, but there was no need for them. The police and FBI had the situation well in hand.

Still, there was always safety in numbers, and the authorities were determined to make sure that every avenue of escape was covered and every perpetrator surrounded.

Jared Hilliard moved forward to stand beside his alleged "sister", and the two shared huge smiles, both reflecting that this moment had been a long time coming, while, out in the driveway at the front of the house, a taxi rolled up to the door, barely coming to a halt before a lean, blond tour-de-force erupted from the back seat. Only Lance Mathis's immediate move to intercept the newcomer prevented Justin Taylor from crashing the party prematurely. The security chief tried to convince the younger man to get back in the car and allow police and FBI and security personnel to do their jobs unencumbered, but one look at that determined face assured him that he was doomed to failure. Therefore, he did the next best thing, the only thing he could do, by planting himself at Justin's side and refusing to release his grip on the young man's sleeve. He then dismissed the cabbie, and dispatched one of his team to retrieve the company sedan that was parked in the cul-de-sac behind the building. The situation inside seemed to be well in hand, but Mathis was damned if he was willing to take a chance on allowing Justin to throw himself into the scene and risk injury - or worse.

At last, the young man realized that he was not going to manage to overcome the security chief's determination, so he settled into silence, but no way was he going to be persuaded to go.

Mathis rolled his eyes and resigned himself to missing out on the opening act that was playing out at that moment within the mansion.

In the vast dining hall, a stunned silence was followed by a voice that was raw with fury. "What is the meaning of this?" demanded John Vincent Fincher. "Do you have any idea who you're dealing with? This is a private organization, and you're trespassing . . ."

He fell silent abruptly, mouth gaping in amazement, as Carl Horvath stepped forward and snapped handcuffs around his wrists.

"How dare you?" That was Randolph Hobbs, Jr., so angry that he couldn't think of a thing to say that would express his outrage. "You have no right."

"I beg to differ," replied the FBI Special Agent Alexandra Corey in a cold, steady voice, as she lifted a hand holding a batch of official documents, including a stunning array of arrest warrants and search warrants, covering every possible variation of search that might be needed to secure any physical evidence on the premises. With the other hand, she set a miniature tape deck on the table, and depressed a button to activate it. The voice that rang out was instantly recognizable.
"... carried away, and took it further than we intended, but that's the price you pay when you have to maintain some distance from the actual event. Couldn't risk having our involvement exposed, could we? To maintain that margin of safety, you sacrifice a bit of control and can't be sure that the thugs who get paid to carry out orders will do exactly as they're instructed, and not get too enthusiastic in the grip of their bloodlust. It's a shame, I guess, that people got killed, but they really asked for it, didn't they. I mean, these weren't exactly men of honor or the flowers of femininity, were they? Anybody who frequents a place like that or demonstrates on behalf of an outrage like Prop 14 is just asking for trouble. Plus, there was one unforeseen benefit of the intensity of the attack in that it made sure that Babylon was shut down for a nice long time, ridding Liberty Avenue of the stench of the place. For a while, anyway. Until the biggest pervert of them all stepped in to rebuild it and make it worse than ever."

The FBI agent stopped the tape then, and hit the fast forward button to reach another significant part of the conversation. "... should appreciate this, Ron, since you have more reason than most of us to despise that nasty little faggot. I brought this disc especially for you to take home and watch. I think you're going to enjoy seeing the bastard that corrupted your daughter get his just deserts. The lighting wasn't great, of course, because we had to be careful. Pervert or not, he's a smart little bastard who doesn't miss much, so we couldn't take a chance on being recognized, since the plan wasn't to kill him outright. Just to mess up that pretty face and infect him with the AIDS virus so he'd have time to repent his sins, and never be in a position to have his way with anybody, ever again. Shame it didn't work out that way. If we'd only been a little faster, and the rescue team had been a little slower..."

Corey stopped the tape there and looked around the room in silence, gauging reactions. She saw horror reflected in a number of faces, but not nearly as many as she thought there should be. Then she moved forward and stopped directly in front of Ron Peterson. She did not speak; instead, she simply extended her hand and waited until he reached into his suit jacket and extracted a small, flat plastic case which he laid in her hand.

She nodded her thanks in a way that did not indicate any prior contact with the man, before stepping up to the podium and adjusting the microphone. Then she waited for a few moments, to allow the squawks and protests of the various suspects to die down and to be sure that they were all paying attention.

"Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen," she said finally, but the expression on her face belied the gentility of the address. "I am Special Agent Alexandra Corey of the FBI. Please listen closely. Randolph Hobbs, Samuel Boroughs, James Stockwell, Craig Taylor, Randolph Hobbs Jr., and John Vincent Fincher, you are under arrest for conspiracy to commit murder, for conspiracy to commit assault with a deadly weapon, for the attempted murder of Brian Kinney, for insider trading and fraud, for interfering with a federal investigation, and for violation of the recently-enacted federal hate crimes legislation. Each of you has the right to remain silent. If you choose to give up that right, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to consult an attorney and to have that attorney present during your questioning. If you cannot afford legal representation, an attorney will be appointed for you by the courts. You have the right to decide at any time to exercise these rights and refuse to answer any questions or make any statements."

She paused then and allowed her eyes to move from one to the other of the suspects, all of whom had finally realized that struggling and mouthing off would not serve them well. They all glared back at her, but nobody dared to utter a word of defiance.

"Do you understand these rights as I've explained them to you?"

Dead silence, and Corey walked around the podium to stand directly in front of the shackled group.
"We will stand here for as long as it takes," she said quietly. "Until you answer my question. Now, let's repeat it, shall we? Do you understand these rights as I've explained them to you?

Shuffling and reluctant, each of the men nodded.

"Aloud, please."

There was a guttural chorus of "yeses" and a couple of "I dos".

Then Alexis turned and moved down to the middle of the main table, where the chairman of the board was regarding her so coldly that she wondered if she would suffer frostbite if she lingered there too long.

"These," she said, raising her voice to be everyone in the room could hear her as she held up the sheaf of documents once more, "are search warrants, which grant us the authority to search the premises of this establishment, any adjacent grounds and buildings, vehicles found on the premises, as well as the personal belongings of staff and members, if it is deemed necessary. The search will be thorough, and will begin at once. Club members, guests, and staff will be required to depart immediately, after providing names, addresses, and contact information to the officer stationed at the main entrance. Please remember that you may be called in for questioning should the need arise.

"That is all."

The chairman rose to his feet, and adjusted his bow tie, before looking out across the audience, noting the looks on the faces of the assembled audience - horror, confusion, anger, and - in a few cases - an ugly glitter of excitement.

"Please do as you've been asked," he said, striving for serenity in order to reassure anyone who might be feeling panicky, such as Craig Taylor's baby-doll wife, who looked as if she might swoon at any second. "The Club has survived such outrages before and will do so again. You have my pledge that the proper authorities will be contacted immediately, and heads will roll for this impertinence."

Alexandra Corey turned to study the smug look on his face and smiled her characteristic cold, implacable, FBI-caliber smile. "Impertinence? I don't think so, Sir. But we'll see, shall we? And - just so we're absolutely clear on this - you should consider yourself and your family on notice. For the moment, you are confined to the city. This investigation is barely out of its infancy, and I promise you that there will be more arrests before we're done. Furthermore, for the moment, this building and the grounds around it are under police jurisdiction, so that we can be sure that all pertinent information and evidence has been retrieved before anyone is allowed access. Understood?"

"Perfectly." She did not flinch away from the ice in his voice or the smoldering anger in his eyes, but she was suddenly sure that she knew exactly how it must have felt to be a Jew on the streets of Berlin during the Third Reich. The man exuded arrogance, and the bitter smile he directed toward her was that of a monarch barely tolerating the presence of a stinking peasant.

Corey stood taller and leaned closer. "You and I will meet again, Sir. You can count on it."

Then she turned and walked away, and did not see the glitter of rage in his eyes. But she didn't need to see it; she felt it anyway.

As the crowd stirred, looking lost or mystified or simply in need of guidance, the prisoners were hastily escorted out the front entrance where a large police van, known colloquially as a paddy wagon, was waiting.
The six men seemed to have regained control of themselves and regarded the officers escorting them with cold glares, but none of them spoke or bothered to protest as they were pushed steadily forward. Their minds were far too occupied with visions of lawyers standing before judges sympathetic to conservative causes, and charges dismissed, one after another. Still, they remained silent, none of them speaking at all until . . .

The group came to a stop at the door to the van as the narrow opening could not accommodate an entry en masse. Thus each of them was encouraged to climb up the short steps quickly, but a certain amount of jostling and delay was unavoidable. Craig Taylor waited with the rest, fuming but managing to control any urge to spit in the faces of his captors. He knew that would not be a good idea. But then, he made the mistake of looking up only to find himself staring directly into eyes filled with blue ice and tears, eyes filled with loathing - and pain, terrible pain, such as he had never imagined to see in the eyes of his only son.

Justin was standing beside a dark sedan, which bore a discreet logo on a rear window: Kinnetic. At his side was a tall young man wearing dark pants and shirt which was not - quite - a uniform, but spoke of authority and security just the same. One of Kinney's minions, no doubt.

Almost as if by virtue of some kind of signal, the crowd gathered around them went dead silent and completely still as the younger Taylor stepped forward, shaking off the attempt by Lance Mathis to hold him back and moving into his father's personal space deliberately, and then - just a little bit closer.

"You were a part of this," Justin said softly, but very clearly; clearly enough to be heard by everyone in the vicinity who cared to listen. "You destroyed people's lives - people who never did anything to you. People who just wanted to be allowed to live and love as they chose. And then . . . then, you tried to kill Brian. You stood there and watched what they did to him, knowing . . ." He paused and swallowed around the huge lump in his throat. "Knowing that he is everything to me, that killing him was like killing me. You did this, and you'll have to live with it - forever."

"Don't speak to your father like that, Boy." That was Jim Stockwell, in full police chief mode, which was, of course, ridiculous under the circumstances.

But Justin merely smiled - a cold, bitter smile that was completely devoid of any nuance of sympathy or warmth or forgiveness. "What father?" he replied softly. "I used to think I had one, but I was wrong. I have no father."

Craig Taylor's eyes widened, as something cold and sharp, like shards of frozen glass, seemed to stir inside him. It shouldn't hurt. He had lost Justin a long time ago - the very same day that his son had found his so-called soul mate and turned his back on everything his father believed in. It shouldn't hurt at all.

But it did.

Justin didn't linger. One second he was there (and why, wondered Craig Taylor, had he never really noticed the beauty of his offspring); the next he was gone, and the elder Taylor climbed into the van, driven by the firm hand that grasped his arm. He glanced out the wire-reinforced window as he was propelled into a seat while the officer in charge of him attached his handcuffs to a vertical steel bar at his side, and he was just in time to see Justin slide into the back seat of the dark sedan and be driven away, vanishing quickly in the darkness of the night.

It shouldn't hurt at all. He'd resigned himself long ago that any hope of a relationship with his son was impossible. So it shouldn't hurt. He faced forward, with his face as still as a stone carving, as a small voice in his mind told him that he was a liar; that he'd always hoped for a reprieve, for a way
back. And now - he did not even notice the tears welling in his eyes; now that hope was dead. Now it was time to face the ultimate truth; he had no son.

Inside the dark sedan, Lance Mathis did not speak and or try to catch Justin's eye in the rear view mirror. He wanted to offer comfort, but knew that he had none to give. And that he wasn't the right person to give it.

The drive to Babylon was made in silence that was broken only by the occasional harsh breath that Justin could not quite suppress. When they pulled into the owner's special parking spot, Mathis quickly turned off the motor, leaped out of the car, and opened the back door before Justin could even think to do so.

"Come on," said the security chief. "We need to get you inside and upstairs - now."

"Why?" said Justin wearily. "What difference does it make? I don't want to ..."

"I don't care what you want," Mathis said firmly. "It's what you need that counts."

"Such as?" Justin had grown accustomed to doing pretty much as he pleased, without interference, and found that he didn't care much for ... 

"You have a phone call to make." Mathis took his arm and pulled him toward the private entrance, "and sooner would be better than later."

Justin's eyes grew huge. "No. No. I'm not going to let him ... see me, like this. He doesn't need to have to step up and take care of a sniveling baby."

"You know," Mathis said, with a strange grin, "sometimes I can't figure out which one of you is more stupid. Now you get upstairs and make that fucking call, or I'm going to tie you up and do it for you."

Justin's jaw dropped.

"Now! Move it."

Justin took one deep breath, gauged the intensity of the spark of - he wasn't quite sure what it was in Mathis's eyes but he realized abruptly that he'd be wise to do as he was told, for once in his life. 

The hum of the engines was smooth, almost soporific, almost as relaxing as the deep amber liquid in his brandy snifter. He wasn't really sleeping, but he wasn't entirely awake either. He was, however, awake enough to notice when Chris McClaren moved toward him and paused to pull something from an overhead storage bin. He was glad to be conscious enough to notice as the light behind the FBI agent was perfectly placed to cast his body in relief and emphasize every perfect line, every perfect muscle, not to mention a more than perfect ass.

He would not renege on the promise he had made to himself. Somehow, that took priority in his mind, even over the promises he might have made to Justin. So - no matter which promise he chose to keep - it left the luscious Mr. McClaren's body strictly off limits. But that didn't mean he couldn't enjoy the view.

"Quit ogling my ass," said McClaren as he settled into the luxurious leather armchair that was the twin of the one in which Brian was semi-sitting/sprawling.
"Quit pretending you don't enjoy it," Brian replied softly, closing his eyes completely and losing himself for a moment in the Coltrane jazz coming through the sound system.

"I need to tell you something," said Chris. "One part of what I have to say, you're going to like. The other part . . . not so much."

Brian stretched and sat up to take a sip of the excellent Courvoisier brandy with which Dr. Turnage stocked his bar. "Shoot," he said with a nod.

"The raids happened this evening, all over the city of Pittsburgh, and in a few other places too. And they got 'em, Brian. They got the perps and the planners and a mountain of evidence, and apparently, that's just the tip of the iceberg. They're turning up more and more as they go through everything."

Brian looked down at his glass, his eyes gone distant and dark. "They got them . . . all?" he asked finally.

"All of the ones we knew about, but they're still turning up new evidence to identify the rest. And this is huge, Brian. Network news is going nuts, and that's just the beginning."

Brian took another sip of his brandy, before looking up to nail McClaren with one of those stern gazes that saw everything, even though the eyes themselves weren't actually seeing very well at the moment.

"Hobbs?" he asked. "And Stockwell?"

"Two Hobbs for the price of one, actually - Daddy and Junior - and they're all being booked as we speak. Only Randolph Jr., was present to witness your ordeal, but the paper trail and the cooperation of our star songbird-witness was more than enough to get an arrest warrant for both. And Stockwell too."

Brian closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Taylor?"

When McClaren took the time to light a cigarette before answering, Brian knew that this was the crux of the matter, the part that he was not going to like.

"Yeah. He was taken in too."

"But?"

"Not but, exactly, except that there was one unexpected little complication."

"Which was?"

"Justin was there when it happened. He confronted his father before the policemen could get him loaded in the wagon." He said it all quickly, in one breath, in order to get it out and get it over with.

Brian seemed to freeze for a moment, his body rigid and trembling. "Shit!"

"Yeah. Bad timing, I guess."

"You're not really trying to make me believe that it was just coincidental, are you? Because if you are, I'm disappointed in you, McFed. You should know there's no way I'm buying that. So let's just save time and breath and you tell me exactly how it happened."

"Well . . ."
"Bottom line. How did he know about it at all? According to my watch, his flight only got in ninety minutes ago. So how could he possibly have known . . ."

McClaren sighed. "He just walked out of the arrival gate at exactly the wrong moment. Drew Boyd had gone out to the airport to pick him up - and Emmett, of course - and was getting last minute instructions from Mathis about how to avoid divulging anything. He was just a few seconds late in realizing that Justin was standing right behind him, listening to every word. Boyd swears that he didn't say much of anything at all, but your little twink is too smart by half, Brian. He figured it out and jumped in a cab. Boyd immediately called Mathis, of course, but there wasn't much he could do except wait outside The Club in order to intercept him before he could go racing in there like a knight on a charger, ready to take on the world."

Brian had turned to stare out through the windows and note the patterns of moonlight on the cloud bank that stretched away toward the West. "Is he all right?" he asked finally, barely audible.

McClaren leaned over and picked up the satellite phone that sat in its cradle on the nearby desk. "That," he answered softly, "is for you to say."

For a moment, Brian didn't move, staring at the object in the FBI agent's hand as if it were as lethal as a coiled cobra. McClaren caught a glint of near panic in eyes grown darker than the night outside the window, but he refused to back away or allow Brian to do so. Instead, he pushed closer, laying the handset against Brian's chest as he leaned in to drop a quick kiss on the velvety softness beneath that perfectly sculpted ear. "He needs you now, Brian. You're the only one who can help him figure out how to live through this."

Brian was still for a moment, but his hand was perfectly steady as he took the phone and lifted it to his ear as he pressed the right button to accept the call. "Hi, Sunshine. I hear you've been busy."

"Brian?"

The man who was known for having the brassiest balls in the entire state of Pennsylvania was forced to pause long enough to take a deep, rough breath in order to overcome the devastation that enveloped him as he identified the tone of defeat in that hopeless, broken voice. "I'm here, Justin. I'm right here."

"Why . . ." There was a slight gasp, followed by a sniffle before Justin could try again. "Why are you still flying? You should have landed by now."

"Personnel problems, Sunshine," Brian lied smoothly. "Regular pilot came down with a nasty virus, and we had to wait to call in a replacement."

"Oh. So there's nothing . . . wrong?"

Brian glanced toward the window and saw the glow of a city coming up ahead and knew that they would arrive soon and he would begin the next stage of what was turning into an interminable journey. He turned then to look up and read the terrible sympathy in McClaren's eyes and knew what he had to do. With only the barest tremor in body and voice, he did it.

"No, Baby. Nothing's wrong. I'll be with you soon. I promise."
Chapter 54

And it seems like the time when after doubt
Our love came back amain.
Oh, come forth into the storm and rout
And be my love in the rain.

-- A Line-Storm Song - Robert Frost

Sometimes he loved the mountains almost as much as he loved the sea. Each setting had its own unique mystery, its specific aura of secrets held and closely guarded. Each had at least as much darkness as light, and each - sometimes - seemed to speak to his own darkness, the one he never really shared with anybody.

Each had its own song of solitude.

He wondered sometimes just how shocked all his friends and acquaintances and fuck buddies - and others - would be to learn that some part of him loved the solitude and longed to wrap himself in it forever.

For a moment - just one unguarded moment - he entertained a wish for Justin to be here, to appreciate the pristine gleam of snow on the high peaks as the incredibly detailed full moon rode low in the sky above the eastern horizon, pouring liquid silver across the landscape. Overhead, the stars were like chips of hard, polished diamond, cast by a careless hand across a plane of textured velvet, and the air was equally hard, crisp and almost painful against the warmth of the throat and lungs.

He told himself that the yearning passed quickly - was just one of those old habits that die hard. It was easier to believe that than to face the alternative possibility - that the yearning would always be with him, that he would have to live with it forever.

He'd shared such moments with his blond partner on a few occasions, basking in unexpected bonuses of beauty and serendipity, but . . . He needed to stop letting himself sink into those old memories.

Brian braced his hands against the balcony outside his third floor bedroom at the Griffin-Chatham Clinic - named after the doctor, of course, and a famed Colorado entrepreneur and philanthropist who had coughed up the original funding - and tried to ignore the eyes drilling into his back. Chris McClaren appeared to be relaxed, still wearing his 501's and a dark indigo, long-sleeved shirt, gaping open at the throat to expose a deep V of golden flesh. He was stretched out full length on the day bed that was provided to accommodate family members too paranoid to leave patients alone in the grasp of the medical staff - or bodyguards with the same motivation. It was roughly six inches too short for him, but he compensated for that by propping his pillow against the wall and pushing up against it.

It was incidental that he looked delectable, and Brian was ignoring him. Mostly.

The FBI agent was currently not a happy man, as he didn't like being ignored; he particularly didn't like it when he was not getting the answers he was seeking - answers he felt he had a right, even a duty, to know.
He'd known it from the very beginning, but he knew it more with every passing day. Brian Kinney was, potentially, the most infuriating person he'd ever known, even if he included a twin sister - his senior by 11 minutes - who, he had once believed, would ultimately drive him to uncontrollable alcoholism or rampant paranoia or both. Then he smiled as a stray thought struck him; it was really too bad that Brian was gay. He and Christina would be a match made in heaven - or hell, depending on one's point of view.

But he couldn't quite suppress a lopsided smile then, as he allowed his eyes to drift over the perfect body limned in the lamplight glowing through the window, and recognized the blasphemy of his musings. Bare-chested and clad only in dark silk pajama bottoms, Kinney was the perfect icon of a gay man, destined to be the object of sexual fantasy for every young man - top or bottom - who had never developed any interest in vaginal exploration, and nothing in that observation was altered by the fact that plenty of women would fall under the same spell.

"Brian," he called finally, running out of patience, "it's fucking frigid in here, and you're supposed to be getting some sleep."

"Chill out, Nurse Ratchet." Pure Brian Kinney snark, and the FBI agent realized that he and the man who had become his primary responsibility had been around each other too much for too long as he had an almost uncontrollable urge to leap up, charge out on that balcony, and plant his fist in that perfect face.

Instead, by virtue of a herculean effort, he stayed where he was, adjusting his body to accommodate the confined space around him. "Come on, Brian. Talk to me. I know you've remembered something else. Or . . . I don't know - maybe you have a question that's just occurred to you. I can't read your mind, you know, although I'm pretty sure I come a lot closer to figuring you out than anybody else in your life ever has."

Interested despite himself, Brian turned just enough to meet McClaren's all too piercing gaze, which seemed to see so deeply into him that he was puzzled and annoyed and - just a little bit - uneasy. "You're deluding yourself," he said finally, sharply. "I don't have a clue what makes you say that, but you're . . ."

"Save your breath," McClaren interrupted, his voice slightly rough and displaying more raw emotion than he usually allowed. "I read you because I can separate what I see from whatever fucked up feelings I might have about you. That's the hallmark of a good agent, you know - to be able to put the feelings aside and deal with what's left. So if you don't want to admit it, suit yourself, but that doesn't change the fact that something's on your mind, and it'll be a whole lot easier on both of us if you just stop swanning about and spit it out."

Brian was startled into a reluctant smile. "Swanning? I do not swan."

"Yeah, whatever. Why don't you stop dodging the issue, and just tell me."

Brian turned back to spend another moment gazing up toward the highest peaks of the rough and tumble majesty of the mountains, before allowing himself one reluctant sigh and abandoning his study of the landscape. McClaren was right about one thing; it was fucking frigid on the balcony, and any warmth his room might have contained had been leeched away into the night.

He shivered as he closed the French doors and reached for his robe.

"Corey's coming tomorrow, right?" he asked as he moved to the vanity and quickly adjusted his hair to its customary perfect tousle.
"Right. Along with members of your entourage."

"Such as?"

"Liam Quinn, Matt Keller, Turnage possibly. Who knows? Diane Sawyer may put in an appearance before we're done here. She's probably hot on the trail of the story of the Hero of Liberty Avenue."

Brian's response was predictably dry. "Could I have Stephanopolis instead? He's more my type."

The FBI agent suppressed a sigh; he had been looking for a way to jolt the patient out of the sense of melancholy which had clung to him throughout the day. Not that Brian had said anything; in fact, he'd been unusually quiet since they'd arrived at the Denver airport late the previous night. Quiet, but not quite brooding; not quite morose. Just . . . apparently having little or nothing to say, no matter the provocation. Thoughtful, but unwilling to share the direction of his musings.

McClaren could not speak to the two hour period when Brian had been alone with Andrew Griffin. Even though he had gone to the physician himself, following that consultation, and tried to persuade him to share information about the results of the tests he had conducted so far, he had run into a steel wall. Surprisingly, he was pretty sure that the doctor's reticence had little to do with things like Hipaa regulations, or medical ethics in general. This was about Brian, who had - somehow - managed to impress the ophthalmologist sufficiently to gain a tacit loyalty. If the FBI was going to learn the extent of Kinney's optical damages, it was not going to come from Dr. Griffin. And, so far, it hadn't come from the patient either.

McClaren sighed. "Brian, you have to talk to me. You have to tell me . . ."

"Why? Why do I have to tell you anything?"

"Because it's in your best interest. Because your life - literally - is in my hands. That's why."

"For the moment, maybe. Or the hour. Maybe even the day. But soon enough, you're gone, and it's all down to me figuring out what I need to do. So why . . ."

"You think I'm just going to walk away from you, don't you?"

Brian's smile was bittersweet. "I think you're doing your duty, and, once it's done, so are you."

The FBI agent was silent for a moment, observing the stone-like stillness of Brian's face and considering his response with greater care than the comment seemed to warrant. "Has it occurred to you - at all - that this whole mess might be a long way from over?"

Brian frowned and couldn't quite suppress the tiny glint of confusion that flared in his eyes. "Why do you say that?"

"Because the attack against you was just the tip of the iceberg. Or haven't you figured that out yet?"

"Yeah, but the rest of it has nothing to do with me."

McClaren allowed himself a tiny smile. "You know better than that. It might have been that way - in the beginning - but you're too smart not to have realized that this thing has a long way to go before we even begin to get to the bottom of it. There are major players involved, and the bashing of a so-called 'gay icon' is only the most visible example of a much broader criminal enterprise, generated by a network of shadowy groups dedicated to preserving time-honored 'Christian values' and - of course - finding new ways to make sure the rich keep getting richer at the expense of the masses. It's not about homophobia, or . . . let me rephrase, it's not only about homophobia. It's about using the
ignorance and petty prejudices of the lower classes in order to manipulate them into accepting the twisted logic that convinces them that they're defending the American way of life while they're actually digging themselves in deeper and relinquishing more and more of their independence with every passing day. They're not just drinking the Kool-Ade; they're taking a bath in it. The people in charge of this massive effort use misdirection and tired old clichés to rant about the 'gay agenda' while it's not really the gays who have an agenda; it's the good old boys network that figured out - a long time ago - how to grab the public by the balls and squeeze just the right way to herd them in the desired direction, like sheep."

"Wow!" Brian's eyes were suddenly very bright, blasted pupils notwithstanding.

"Wow, what?" McClaren's tone was heavy with suspicion.

"I never would have taken you for a classic bleeding-heart liberal."

"Oh, shut up!" The FBI agent had always prided himself on never allowing anybody to get a glimpse of his political identity, and Kinney had just - well, best not to dwell on the ribbons to which his customary dauntless armor had been reduced.

Brian shrugged. "Okay. Why is Matt coming here?"

"You'll have to ask him yourself. His response to me - when I attempted to persuade him to stay out of it - was a clipped reminder to mind my own business, and no amount of persuasion would convince him that you are my business."

"Am I?" It was not spoken with the characteristic Kinney brand of snark. Instead, it was - almost - a plea.

"You are."

"For as long as the feds think I'm useful."

McClaren sighed. "What do you want me to say, Brian? That I'm yours forever? We both know that would be a lie. Because I'm never going to be what you want. Because nobody's ever going to be enough to fill his shoes."

"But that's not the real reason."

The FBI agent didn't argue - didn't say what he wanted so much to admit, that to yield to the almost irresistible urge to give himself to this man - forever - would be to court destruction, for both of them. They might, with time and a large investment of caution, learn to co-exist in a kind of mutual orbit, but any attempt to merge would result in the kind of nuclear annihilation that neither would survive. And that was in addition to the irrevocable truth that Brian would never achieve a stable orbit with anyone or anything unless Justin was the primary component of the dynamics involved. Without Justin, there simply was no stability for Brian.


"You've got to tell me, Brian," he said finally, very softly. "If for no other reason than you need a sounding board. Someone to listen, or to argue, or to take it out on. What did Griffin tell you? And what have you remembered? I know there's something; I can see it in your eyes."

Brian moved around the foot of his bed and stopped in front of the full length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. "Lucky you," he said finally. "Because I can't."
McClaren frowned. "You can't what?"

"Can't see it in my eyes. Can't really see anything in my eyes - or yours."

The FBI agent drew a deep breath, struggling for composure. "Tell me how bad it is."

Brian's smile was lopsided. "I can see you well enough to know you're still hot - that I'd still like to fuck you through the floor, but that's just a general impression. I can see your shape; I can see that you're tall and fit, beautiful, golden skin, darkish hair, but if I didn't know who you are, I wouldn't be able to identify you across the room. And, if you move a little bit too much to the side, into my peripheral vision area, then you're just a shadow. Not even enough to be sure you're real."

"Jesus! And Griffin - what did he say?"

"Bullshit, mostly. A pep talk designed to make the ones he can't cure believe that they can live a perfectly normal life, with just a few adjustments. Then he spent the next hour explaining all the reasons why he can't be sure yet if a cure is possible. Although he did venture an educated guess about how extensive the treatment would be, if it works at all."

"And how extensive would it be?"

"Months, at least." Brian reached out and touched a forefinger to his image in the mirror, and wondered if he was really touching the reflection of his chin or missing his goal entirely. "Maybe longer. And - when it's all over - still no guarantee that it will work."

He took a deep, shuddering breath before continuing in a near whisper. "I could still be blind, forever."

McClaren was moving almost before he realized he meant to, coming up behind the man who had somehow become the focus of his life and wrapping gentle arms around his waist. "You'll still be Brian Kinney, you know," he said softly. "Nothing changes that."

"Bullshit!" It was sharp enough to cut glass - and flesh. "You, at least, know better than that. I don't want empty platitudes. Not from you. There are only three people in this world that I trust to be honest enough to speak truth, no matter how ugly it might be, and you're one of them. Plus, more than the others, you have the ability to detach yourself and not be swayed by any . . . whatever it is you might feel for me. So don't fuck that up now, because . . . because I need to be able to trust you. For now. You'll be gone soon enough, just like you should be. But, for right now, no easy lies; no empty comfort. Just truth, okay?"

"But . . . ."

"I'll be Brian Kinney. You know, the guy that used to be the king stud of Liberty Avenue. The guy that everybody wanted to fuck. Poor thing. Just look at him now - lost and blind and can't even tie his own tie or be sure that his socks match or recognize the difference between Beauty and the Beast and . . . well, you get the idea."

"I do, but that will never be you. If you wind up alone, Brian, it'll be because it's your choice. You think I don't know that? You think I don't understand that you've convinced yourself that a blind Brian Kinney is a burden no one should have to bear - that taking care of you will be a duty that no one will want to be saddled with? Fuck, Brian! Whether you see or you don't see, the person who lives inside you will be the same person who's always been there - smart and brave and full of piss and vinegar and ready to take on the world. That's who you are."

"Yeah. Take on the world, as long as there's somebody around to tell me when to duck."
"So what? So you can't live your life totally alone. That doesn't make you less than who you are. And I'm not the only one who knows it. He won't leave you, you know; he won't stand for being pushed away."

"Why not?"

McClaren almost flinched away from the note of bitter defeat in that soft voice, those clipped words. He did, in fact, step back a bit, and grasp Brian's shoulders in a brutal grip to force him to turn and meet his gaze directly, hoping to see some shadow of doubt in those hazel eyes - some shadow beyond the one that was always there these days. "Because . . ."

"No, don't try to answer," Brian interrupted, shaking his head. "Because there is no answer. He'll let himself be pushed, because that's what he's always done. He'll cry and he'll hurt and he'll scream that it's not fair. But, in the end, he'll go. He always does."

"Because you give him no choice."

Brian's smile was bittersweet. "There's always a choice. And he always makes the one that's right for him."

"And you? What happens to you when he walks away?"

"I watch him go, and know that it's the right thing for him to do."

McClaren wanted to argue, wanted to shout and bluster and deny . . . but he didn't, because, in his heart, he wasn't sure that Brian was wrong. He had heard all the old stories - everything from Justin and the fiddler, and the Pink Posse, and the trip to Hollywood and his hook up with the actor playing his comic-book super-hero, and the relocation to New York, and . . . the list was pretty long. Could it be that Brian was right? The FBI agent did not doubt that Justin Taylor loved Brian Kinney, but did he love him enough to sacrifice his life for him? Even if Brian would allow it - which he wouldn't - would there come a time when the young man would take a step back from the life they shared and remember the life he'd given up and then . . . what?

Brian seemed convinced that he knew the answer to that, and was determined that he would not be a part of it, and McClaren wanted - more than anything - for him to be wrong. But he couldn't be completely sure, could he?

"What else?" he said finally, cupping Brian's chin for a barely-there caress before stepping back. "I know there's more. You remembered something, didn't you?"

Brian sighed and moved away. "You don't happen to have a flask on you, do you?"

McClaren grinned. "Did you get a good look at Griffin's chief of staff? Even you wouldn't want to face off against that dragon-lady. She might be the first person you've ever met who's immune to your charms."

Brian grinned. "That sounds like a challenge, McFed."

"Stop trying to change the subject."

The grin faded to a knowing little smile. "You do know me well, don't you?"

"Yeah. So answer my question."

"I can't. Not really. It's not something I can put my finger on. It's just . . . something keeps telling me
that we've missed something. Or someone. I'm not sure why I think so. But I do. Someone's avoided the trap; someone important. Someone with the power to call the shots and make everyone else step up and shield him from the consequences."

"How do you know that?"

Brian flopped down on the bed. "That's just it. I don't know how I know it. How's that for cryptic bullshit? I don't know how I know, but I know. Maybe we should call in Mystic Marilyn."

"Who?"

"Never mind. Look, I . . . can I have some time alone? I need . . ."

McClaren moved closer to the bed and looked down into that perfectly restored face. "What? What do you need?"

"Space."

"For what?"

Brian laughed. "You don't trust me, do you?"

"Only to a point."

"Relax, Chris. I'm not planning on taking a swan dive down the mountain. This is not a suicide watch, you know."

"Isn't it?"

That seemed to penetrate that superficial layer of composure that Brian so often wore like a cloak. "No. Why would you think that?"

"Because I can always see when you're weighing your options."

"Yeah, well, not that one."

"Not yet anyway."

"Kiss my ass, and get the fuck out of here. Leave me alone."

McClaren nodded. "All right, but . . ."

"Yeah, I know. If I need you . . ."

"Yeah."

Brian reached over and picked up a couple of pillows from the daybed, and placed them into McClaren's arms. "The floor is cold and hard in the hallway."

"Right. So don't sulk all night, okay?"

"Good-bye."

Abruptly, acting on nothing but impulse, the FBI agent leaned forward and pressed a quick kiss on the patient's forehead, before walking away without another word, leaving Brian to frown. He didn't want his keeper to grow fond of him; he didn't want McClaren to care or to feel empathy or to be
bothered by his unease or worried about his future.

He didn't want to matter - to anyone.

He closed his eyes, seeking escape, but realizing quickly that there was none to be had, for the image that formed behind his eyes was much sharper and clearer and brighter than the one that he would confront if his eyes were open and the object of his scrutiny standing before him.

Justin - his image more precious and beautiful now than it had ever been, since Brian knew that there was a very real chance he would never actually see his young lover so clearly again. What would it do to him? How would he live with not being able to watch as time left its marks on that perfect face and body? How could he expect to know someone, to understand someone, to intuit someone's needs and wants and desires if he couldn't see that person's face, couldn't read expressions or note the darkening in sky blue eyes?

The answer was simple and unavoidable; he couldn't. Justin would grow away from him, even if they were perpetually bound together by his own helplessness. Justin would continue to expand his horizons and yearn for the dreams he'd always dreamed and - one day - he would look around and realize how much his devotion to a damaged individual had cost him. And love would turn to hate, as joy twisted into resentment and bitter anger.

That was what life would hold for Brian Kinney, if Dr. Griffin, AKA the miracle worker, could not restore his sight. He did not need a crystal ball or a fortuneteller to spell it out for him; he had seen it happen before.

But that brought up memories that he was not prepared to examine - the image of a painfully beautiful face with violet eyes, reflecting unendurable loss erupted into his mind, and he found it suddenly hard to draw breath. But no - he would not go there. Not tonight, and maybe not ever if he could find the will to resist. Revisiting the past would only intensify his own sense of impending loss, and that required no reinforcement. It was already far too real.

Brian Kinney considered himself strong enough to endure almost anything, but not that.

It was time to consider alternatives and prepare to walk off into the sunset, leaving behind a minimum of damage and a maximum of potential.

Quinn would arrive in the morning, and that was good. It would allow Brian to decide how to set things in motion in such a way that no one would be able to interfere or work around his intentions. And Matt’s presence might also prove beneficial, even though he knew for a fact that the physician - best friend of his youth - would fight him tooth and nail to try to change his mind, but, in the end, would carry out his wishes no matter how much he might disagree with them.

Thus, there would be only one person missing - one final piece of the puzzle.

He picked up his cell phone and hit speed dial, knowing that it didn’t matter what time it was or what he might be interrupting. Cynthia would answer; Cynthia would always answer. And she would do what he asked her to do, even if she hated it. She would do it, because . . . he told himself that it was because she believed that she owed him a huge debt of gratitude. That was easier to accept than the alternative.

He didn't want to matter to her. He didn't want her to love him.

His smile when he heard her voice was slightly rueful, as he realized that nobody gets everything they want.
"Hi, Tink. I need you to do me a favor. If you don't dawdle, you can be on the morning plane that's going to bring Liam Quinn and Alex Corey here."

"Okay," she said slowly, obviously perplexed. "But why should I . . ."

"Because I need you here."

She didn't hesitate. "Then I'll see you in the morning."

"Good girl."

She did not - quite - snarl at him, but he knew it was a near thing. So, when she arrived, she might be impatient, and out of sorts - even angry. But she would still come.

He knew better than to doubt that.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

The house that was now publicly acknowledged as the residence of Emmett Honeycutt - and friend - was almost too beautiful, thought Justin, as he sat cross-legged on a sumptuously soft leather ottoman, and tried to visualize the transformation that Emmett was describing, his enthusiasm typically Emmett - slightly over the top - but enough to generate an incredibly indulgent smile on the face of the 'friend' in the equation.

Drew Boyd was sitting at the bar, enjoying Emmett's latest dessert concoction - a multi-cultural trifle, combining elements of classic French cuisine with accents of Italian and Caribbean origin, blending the richness of crème brulee and ginger with accents of tiramisu and bananas foster. The ex-football hero could not even venture a guess about what it contained or how it was prepared; nor did he care. He only knew that it was almost as sweet and mind-blowing as its creator.

Almost. But then he remembered that he had actually enjoyed his very favorite dessert earlier in the day when he'd arrived home to find Emmett lolling in the hot tub, up to his eyebrows in scented bubbles and more than ready to welcome his lover into his arms and his body. With that memory playing out in his mind, Drew knew that no mouth-watering concoction - sweet, savory, or otherwise - would ever compare to the beautiful young man who was now the possessor of his heart.

He had been a fool when he'd allowed Emmett to walk out of his life, when he'd believed that he needed time to grow and explore and experience all the incredible pleasures of life as a gay man before he'd be ready to commit to any relationship. He had explored; he had experienced so much. He had sowed his wild oats and tasted forbidden fruit and submerged himself in physical pleasures so intense he'd never even imagined them before. But - in the end - he'd recognized a simple truth. None of it was worth losing Emmett. He was very thankful that he'd come to his senses in time to avoid burning the bridge that would carry him back to the love of his life, and that Emmett had been wise enough to allow him that time to grow and mature and run face first into the solidity of his own epiphany.

He didn't need to fuck every beautiful boy that crossed his path; he needed to fuck Emmett - and only Emmett.

Surreptitiously, Justin studied his hosts and realized that he was a tiny bit reluctant to admit that what he was seeing appeared to be very real. He had not expected to be treated to a demonstration of such deep commitment, since commitment had never been a part of Emmett's modus operandi, unless one counted the kind that rose and fell within a span of hours. Emmett had "loved" many times - the
voluptuous curl of perfect lips, the sparkle of laughter in bright, beautiful eyes, the hand-pleasing shape of a flawless ass. All of these things, Emmett had loved - for a while. But he had never loved the complete package of a specific individual over an extended span of time, except once, perhaps. But that was a memory too painful to examine - painful for Emmett and even painful for his friends who remembered how broken he'd been by Teddie's betrayal.

Teddie - another memory best left unexplored for the moment and another speculation to avoid. The future of Ted Schmidt, as it related to the group that Brian always referred to - with a mocking smile - as the "Liberty Avenue Regulars" was problematic, at best, and tonight, with Brian temporarily out of reach and a big empty bed awaiting his return to the loft, Justin found that he didn't want to deal with "problematic".

He frowned as he scraped the last of his creamy dessert from his bowl, savoring the sweet coffee flavor that was somehow more dominant in the final bite. Was he just a bit jealous of the ambiance in this lovely place, this warm, comfortable setting which was about to undergo something that Brian had once described as "Modifications by Emmett" - capitalization intended? That was silly, and he knew it. Why on earth should he be jealous, especially given the project that he was preparing to take on?

"I am so-o-o-o-o excited for you," Emmett crooned, as he sank into the plush easy chair at Justin's side. "And you don't have to worry about a thing. David LaMont is the architect who's done the updated design for this place, and he's always begging Drewsie to let him bring potential clients in for a tour, so he'll jump at the chance to develop a little quid pro quo. And I am going to put myself at your disposal whenever you want. Just you wait; when all is said and done, you're going to create a house - no, strike that! Not just a house - a palace that is so fabulous, Brian is not going to believe his eyes. Just you wait and see."

Justin's expression was carefully, deliberately neutral, as he looked down at the sketches Emmett had drawn up, detailing the changes he planned to make in the house that Drew had bought for him. Colorful changes. Very colorful changes, involving bright shades of iris and honeysuckle and mimosa, which would translate, in the unambiguous language of Debbie Novotny, to purple and pink and yellow.

"Emmett," he said finally, "I'm overjoyed that you want to help, but do you really think you're going to have the time? Between your project here, your oversight of Babylon, and your catering business. Didn't I hear something about you getting the contract for the Overstreet/Haxell wedding? And weren't you talking to Trina about opening a restaurant? How the hell do you think you're going to work my little project in to that kind of schedule?"

Emmett looked momentarily stunned. "I don't know," he admitted. "I never intended to get into so many different ventures. I just . . . I want everyone to be as happy as I am." He paused and looked up to meet the gaze of his significant other. "I want to share it with the world, and the best way I can do that is to cook for them. It's what I do."

"Yeah," agreed Justin, "but if you spread yourself too thin, you're going to lose your focus and forget what's really important." He nodded toward Drew, and was pleased to note how Emmett's eyes softened.

"I don't think I could ever forget that," Emmett said softly. Then he sighed. "But sometimes I'm so frazzled that I have to leave notes to myself to remember everything. I wish Trina would reconsider my offer. I could really use her help."

Justin sat up straight and blinked, thunderstruck by an epiphany and unable to imagine why it had never occurred to him before. "Oh, Emmett," he said with a happy smile, "I think I just might have
the perfect man for the job."

It was Emmett's turn to blink. "Thanks, Honey, but I can't allow just anyone to stroll in and start whipping up their mama's version of chicken stew, now can I?"

"Of course, you can't. But how about someone who's got loads of experience, cooking in the culinary mecca of the South - someone who can prepare a praline bread pudding that will make you weep with joy?"

Realization sparked in Emmett's eyes. "Your Cajun friend? But would he be interested? Why would he . . ."

"Look, he's trying to rebuild his life. And he loves to cook. Right now, he's doing janitorial work at Kinnetic; Brian let him use the studio apartment in the loft there. But that doesn't require a lot of time, and believe me when I tell you that it's better if he doesn't have time to get bored and thirsty. So . . . what do you think?"

"I think . . ." Emmett fell silent, his mind suddenly bursting with images and ideas and thoughts about a lovely little building near Parquet Square that had once housed a junior boutique, but was now sitting empty - a place with a view of gardens and willow trees and a tiny fountain and a second floor balcony with wrought iron railings and a trellis overgrown with clematis vines. He grinned and leaned forward to hug his youngest friend. "I think you should bring him to lunch - tomorrow - so we can get acquainted."

Through it all, Drew just smiled, and Justin felt the love that filled the house, as he realized an elemental truth. The ex-quarterback wouldn't care if Emmett draped the whole place in rainbow-colored silks, was tapped to cater celebratory dinners at the White House, and opened a roof-top, upper crust restaurant in New York, just as long as his beloved Emmett was the centerpiece of the décor of this home, coming back every night, always eager to slip into the arms of the man who loved him - always and forever Emmett, tight leather pants, tangerine shirt, and all.

Brian, on the other hand . . . Justin shuddered slightly, not even wanting to imagine the Kinney reaction to a décor inspired by Emmett's imagination. Still, he smiled, eager to accept his friend's encouragement even if he was less receptive toward his decorating suggestions.

"I gotta go," he announced, refusing to allow his gaze to wander to the crystal trifle bowl on the bar, still half filled with Emmett's delightful dessert. "My mom is determined to show me every upscale neighborhood within fifty miles, and she'll probably be banging on my door at the break of dawn."

"You know," said Emmett slowly, "there are plenty of building sites available around here."

Justin smiled, determined to suppress an urge to grimace as he imagined how Brian would respond to the idea of sharing a suburb with the Boyd/Honeycutts. In point of fact, he was pretty sure that the very term "suburb" was not one that Brian would embrace. Bri-Tin, much loved and much lamented, had been a true country home, without a single neighbor in sight. New Bri-Tin - silly name, of course, but it would do for now - would probably be the same.

On a hilltop maybe, he thought as he made his exit. Or overlooking a stretch of river.

He needed to start making notes - lists with headings such as "What would Brian like?" and - even more important - "What would Brian not like?"

Emmett and Drew had escorted him to the door, but they'd been so totally wrapped up in each other that he was not entirely sure they actually noticed when he was gone. He was glad he had brought
his jacket with him when he emerged from the house. The night had turned cooler, and there was a
fine mist falling, creating haloes around the street lights that lined both sides of the broad boulevard
that stretched back toward the main highway. A low pitched wind had risen and seemed to create a
faint moaning as it found its way through the stand of maple trees that marked the end of the cul-de-
sac, and he suddenly - inexplicably - heard the murmur of soft words in his mind: "No, Sunshine.
Nothing's wrong. I'll be with you soon. I promise."

He shivered - and didn't know why.

He paused as he reached his car and looked up just in time to watch the moon disappear behind a
tumble of clouds, as the wind suddenly gusted, tearing the mist apart and sweeping tendrils into pools
of shadow.

Justin shivered again. It wasn't really cold, but it was . . . He smiled and climbed in the car, feeling
foolish. It was just the winds and the clouds; it was just spring in Pittsburgh.

There was nothing to worry about, and if his inner voice felt - just a bit - like whistling in the dark, he
chose to ignore it.

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"You really thinking of hiring Justin's friend?" asked Drew, settling back in his favorite recliner, and
enjoying it even more than usual when Emmett curled up in his lap. "As I recall, he's no spring
chicken. And although I'd like to give him the benefit of the doubt, the truth is that he's an alcoholic.
So you need to be sure you want to take the risk. When you're trying to prepare truffles and foie gras
for the most elaborate wedding Pittsburgh has seen in the last twenty years, you don't want to
discover your assistant chef has drunk all the imported rum you'd planned to use in the mimosa
punch and passed out in the pantry."

Emmett grinned. "You do have a way with words, mon cher, and you're right. But I've talked to him
before, and I think he's making a genuine effort to get his life together. Still, I won't jump into
anything until I make him understand what's riding on this. Then we'll see. But now, let's talk about
something really wonderful."

He settled himself more comfortably, delighted to realize that the proximity of his bubble butt to his
lover's crotch had resulted in a wonderful, enormous stir of interest. Which would have to be
addressed very shortly.

Still, he wanted to broach the question that he had not quite dared to bring up in Justin's presence.

"Is it really all over, Honey? I mean, is it really safe for Brian to come home? Have they identified
and captured all the bad guys?"

Drew shifted slightly, even more aware of the 'stirring' than his partner, but also realizing that he was
not entirely comfortable with the question Emmett was asking. He had never been officially sworn
in, of course, or deputized or even recognized as a formal member of Brian Kinney's security staff,
but that didn't seem to matter. Because of his familial connection to Lance Mathis, he had been
present for a lot of confidential briefings; had even contributed suggestions and observations in
determining protocols for the best way for Mathis and his team to do their jobs.

And he had provided a sounding board for his cousin on more than one occasion - listening to
rambling thoughts and suppositions and intuitive speculations to which no one else had been privy.
He wasn't actually sworn to secrecy, but he still felt that to answer too frankly, to say too much was
to betray a trust - even to Emmett.
"I'm not sure I'd go that far," he answered finally, laying his massive hand on Emmett's thigh and beginning to work his way upwards. "I think this investigation is going to go on for a long time; the FBI isn't going to stop digging." He paused, loving the way his hand glided over the downy softness of the intimate skin beneath his fingers. Thus, his smile and his tone of voice became slightly distracted. "They're a bit like bloodhounds on the scent of their prey. They've realized that this corruption runs deeper than they expected and involves a lot more layers and more people. But I think that they've uncovered everything about Brian's attackers. I can't even make a guess how many people it took to do the job, or how hard they had to work to reach a point where Brian would be able to come home. Safely."

Emmett sat up abruptly, turning to look directly into Drew's face. "Oh, my God! You are a genius."

"I know," Drew answered, taking advantage of the adjustment of the lithe body braced against him to shift their positions and match swelling to swelling. "But what, exactly, do you . . ."

Emmett leapt to his feet. "We have to do something. We have to celebrate and recognize all these people, and show them how much we thank them for all they've done. And . . ." His smile was suddenly neon bright, as he literally danced across the room, "we don't have much time, because we need to coordinate this. It'll be huge. We'll do it at Babylon, of course. I mean where else is there to honor the heroes who made it possible, and . . . Oh, my God! I can see it all now. It'll take a massive effort to pull it off, but I think we can do it. I really think we can do it, and it's all because of your idea, you big, wonderful, sexy beast."

Drew grinned. "I like the sound of that, but . . ." His voice dropped low and took on a seductive tone. "But do you really have to do it right this minute? Don't we have another matter - of some urgency - to take care of first?"

Emmett's smile was brilliant, as his mind juggled a dozen ideas at once, and one other thought that might - just might - be within the realm of possibility. However, it would keep; it would all keep, for a little while.

"But, but . . . time is short, Honey," he answered with a coy demeanor that was classic Emmett Honeycutt.

Drew inhaled deeply. "Well, you little cock-tease, time may be short, but something else sure as hell isn't."

Emmett spun once more, hands waving wildly as he laughed, before tearing off his shirt, shucking his trousers, and proceeding to address the urgency, right there on the massive recliner that was just the right size to accommodate two writhing, lustful, sweat-drenched, naked bodies.

Celebration or no celebration, they both knew where their priorities lay.

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"Wakey, wakey, Stud Muffin." Justin's voice was annoyingly bright and cheerful, and Brian - after groping for the phone with one eye only partially open - had to suppress an urge to tell his young lover to go fuck himself.

"It's the middle of the fucking night," he managed to mumble.

"No, it's not."

"Well, it is . . . here!"
"Brian," Justin replied with a snicker, "you're on the eastern seaboard, two hundred miles away, at most. If it's nine o'clock here, it's nine o'clock there."

Brian had to bite down on his lip to avoid blurting out the truth of the matter; it was, after all, only seven A.M. here, an hour he ordinarily slept through. Of course, he frequently slept through nine A.M. as well, and Justin should know that, so he felt well within his rights to snarl a bit.

"How goes the grilling? Are they resorting to ugly tricks? Waterboarding? Electrodes attached to the testicles?"

"Are you asking - or fantasizing? Anyway, actually they're just boring me to death."

"Really?" The bright, cheerful voice suddenly dropped an octave and took on a note of erotic interest. "I could bore you, you know, as in . . . boring into you, over and over and over, and drilling right down into your tight ass, until my dick feels like it's lodged in your throat. What are you wearing?"

Despite genuine intentions to discourage this line of thought, Brian couldn't help laughing. "And you accuse me of having a one-track mind."

"You do, but I'm turning the tables here. For once, you don't get to visualize me lying on my back with my legs wrapped around your shoulders while you plunge that big, beautiful cock into me so hard that I'm bruised for a month and walk funny for a week. You don't get to picture it sinking into me, wet and thick and full of blood and making me beg for more. For once . . ." His breathing caught a bit, and Brian didn't need any further hints to figure out what he was doing. "For once," he resumed, slightly breathless, "you have to imagine that it's you under me, you opening up for my dick to shove its way into you. Come on, Brian. Touch yourself. Close your eyes and run your fingers around that beautiful tight little hole, and pretend it's me, nudging and pushing and fighting to get inside. Can you do that? Can you feel me?"

Brian drew a deep, rough breath. "I can always feel you," he whispered, as his hand seemed to move of its own accord, obeying orders to achieve a temporary resolution for his discomfort while longing for the big, beautiful real thing. Brian sometimes wondered if his friends and acquaintances would be surprised to learn that little Justin had a dick that was big enough to qualify him as a porn star. It had not surprised Brian though; he had expected it. The kind of nerve the kid had displayed just did not allow for the possibility of under-endowment.

"Where do you feel me?"

Brian smiled. "I think I'm in need of a rim job - followed by a blow job - followed by . . ."

"No way, Stud. Because I . . . " There was a rhythmic sound, and Brian closed his eyes to better visualize what Justin was doing. "I just need to fuck you, and fuck you, and fuck you."

"Come on, Sunshine," Brian laughed, surprised by how close he was to his own release just from the breathless voice in his ear and a few subtle strokes of his own hand. "Come for me. Come now."

"Ooohh, shit!" For a moment, there was only a low moan, followed by gasped breath.

"Damn, I'm good," observed Brian, sighing with his own completion and loving the non-verbal sound effects of Justin's explosive decompression.

"You're a dick!"

"That too. Was it good for you?"
Justin laughed. "A really, really big dick."
"No argument from me."
"Wish you were here." That was just a breath of sound, barely audible.
"Me too. It won't be long. I promise."
"Yeah, well, you better mean that. Otherwise I might just have to fly down there, and fuck you raw. . . . on the mall, I think. By the reflecting pool. Hell of a view from the Washington Monument."
"We'd make history."
"Yeah. Hey, you ever hear of a housing development called the Overlook?"
"No. But I'd hazard a guess that the developers are not Stephen King fans."
"Huh?"

Brian's snicker was very soft, barely a sound at all. "Never mind. Sounds like old money to me."
"Well, I don't know about the 'old' part. Unless they're bulldozing older properties to make way for new construction. But you're sure as hell right about the money part. My mom's going to pick me up in a few minutes and drive me out there. She says there's a piece of land that sits on a hillside overlooking a broad curve in the river that's just breathtaking. The perfect spot for a country manor."

Brian laughed, but the sound died on his lips as he looked up to find Chris McClaren watching him with speculative eyes. "Country manor, huh? Do you really think I'm the 'country manor' type?"
"I think you're any type you want to be," Justin replied firmly. "Now, I gotta go. My project waits for no man - or twink. You be sure to get a decent breakfast before you go face the inquisition. And get back here soon. I don't really enjoy fucking my own hand. Much better to fuck yours."
"Don't let your mother catch you saying that."
"She's used to it. Nothing shocks her any more. But she'll be here just any moment, so I guess I need to go wipe the cum off my belly before she walks in, so . . ."
"So be a good boy, and don't upset your mother. Go find your Xanadu."
"Ours," Justin corrected automatically.
"What?"

An impatient sigh. "Not my Xanadu. Ours."

Brian closed his eyes, but still felt the weight of McClaren's gaze on his face as he replied. "Yeah. Our Xanadu. Where fairy tales can come true if you're young at heart."

Justin chuckled. "Yeah. Where you can throw me across your shoulder and carry me off into the sunset. I'll call you later."

Brian did not answer. He rubbed his eyes with a weary hand as Justin disconnected.

"Why are you doing this?" McClaren's voice was glacial. "He's flying now, Brian, so high that he can't even see the ground. Do you know what it's going to do to him when he falls?"
Brian sighed and turned to look toward the window where the morning was pale and pearled with mist. "If he's high enough, he'll never hit the ground. He'll catch himself in time to rise again. And the 'project', as he calls it, will give him something to focus on."

"Something to build his hopes on. Isn't that what you mean?" The FBI agent's eyes were aglitter with icy disdain. "You never cease to amaze me, you know. But this time . . . this time you're really blowing my mind. I would never have believed that you could be so Goddamned stupid!"

Brian did not bother to answer, did not even resent McClaren for the fury in his eyes. He knew it was something he'd earned. But he also knew that he was doing what he had to do, that he was protecting the most precious thing in his life.

Everything else was just . . . minor details.

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Appropriately - as titular commander of this particular small army - Alexandra Corey lead the way into Brian's room, her expression hard and composed, revealing nothing. In fact, thought Brian, as he half listened to the over-the-top rambling of the voice on the phone, maybe a little too composed - the kind of composure one summoned up when facing an unpleasant duty.

Behind her, Liam Quinn looked exactly as he always looked - detached, confident, unintimidated - and gorgeous. Not that Brian was specifically looking, of course, but - oh, shit! He might as well admit the truth, to himself, at least. He would always be looking at someone as delectable as his new lawyer.

At the attorney's side, Cynthia was looking very Cynthia: controlled, determined, and deeply bothered by something she was obviously not free to bring up on her own, while Matt Keller was framed in the doorway, deep in conversation with Dr. Griffin.

Brian frowned, knowing that he was being unreasonable but still not happy with the fact that Keller, as his primary physician, had the right to expect to have his questions answered, without having to resort to threats or coercion. He had the right, but that didn't mean that Brian had to like it.

The constant buzz from his phone continued unabated in his ear.

"All right, Emmett," Brian said finally, speaking forcefully enough to break into the deluge of colorful verbiage that Emmett had launched with Brian's initial "Hello". One part of Brian's brain was yelling at him to reject Emmett's grandiose scheme out of hand; no review, no vague consideration, no possibility of parole. Just a resounding "No". But he didn't say it. He was playing with fire, and he knew it, but some small part of him was intrigued by his friend's enthusiastic proposal for the creation of a stunning pyrotechnic display; one part wanted to participate, while another part - quieter but just as determined - whispered that it could provide a memory that he might be able to live on as long as he needed to live on it - or forever, whichever came first. "You work it out, and keep me posted. But remember one thing, Princess. Brian Kinney doesn't do sleaze, so it's classy or it's dead."

"You really have a way of inspiring a man's best efforts," Emmett replied dryly, with just the barest thread of uncertainty in his voice.

When he hung up, it took a few minutes for him to regain his composure and convince himself that he wasn't really intimidated by the infamous Mr. Kinney; he wasn't really worried about Brian's reaction if he - Emmett - let things get a little out-of-hand, a little over the top.
Of course, he wasn't. He had envisioned lots of spangles and strawberry pink glitter and dyed-to-match feathers and go-go boys in hot pink Speed-Os and . . .

Okay. Time to rethink. Classy, huh? Classy - as in Breakfast at Tiffany's classy, or Phantom of the Opera classy or An Affair to Remember classy or . . . His smile was finally genuine. He knew then that he would have to avoid the clichés and concentrate on adapting the classics to Kinney-level elegance - black tie and all.

He could do that. He was Emmett Honeycutt, for God's sake - Pittsburgh's premiere party-planning ingénue on the rise. But he had to do it now - immediately - or not at all. In the vernacular of his Deep South origins, time was definitely a-wastin'.

_In all, there were nine people in the room, including medical staff. Turnage had turned up last, Brenda Herring in tow, having flown in on his own plane and been forced to navigate through customary airport protocols. Even owners of private jets were not immune to regulations instigated by Homeland Security. FBI jets, on the other hand, were free to come and go with impunity, which explained the early arrival of Corey and company. Since it was Dr. Griffin's clinic, it would have been logical to assume that he would have the floor to open up this discussion. But he didn't, because he knew - as everyone in the room knew - that there were several things that needed saying, things that had nothing to do with Brian's medical condition, but everything to do with the rest of his life.

It was Alexandra Corey who stepped up and took a moment to compose herself while examining the expression on Brian's face. Brian, who was looking back at her with an almost unnatural serenity, was the only person in the room who noticed that she was the one who looked away first.

_He knows._ She wasn't sure how she knew that - but she did.

"You're missing one, aren't you?"

So much for taking control of the conversation. "Yes. We are. How did you know?"

Brian shrugged. "I pay attention," he replied, which meant little - or everything. "In a nutshell, there were four. You've only identified three."

"So far." That was Chris McClaren, in a voice that tried not to admit that he was searching for straws. "And supposing that you were right. You _were_ a little busy getting the shit kicked out of you, you know. So . . ."

"Bullshit! You know me better than that, McFed. I saw what I saw. And now, your impressive federal task force has made its big move, which means that you've gathered all the evidence you can find. There's nothing left to check out. You're stumped."

"Maybe," Corey said slowly, looking more closely now and wondering why she had not seen it before. The darkness in his eyes was striking - frightening. "But maybe not. There's still one more option available to us."

His smile was dripping sarcasm as he leaned forward and whispered directly in her ear. "Then you
better hurry."

She stepped back involuntarily; the pure venom in his tone was almost more than she could bear, and she realized that she would definitely prefer to avoid finding herself on Brian Kinney's list of enemies.

"The bottom line here," she said finally, after a brief struggle to regulate her breathing, "is that we can't absolutely guarantee your safety, Brian. As long as this one final link in the chain remains hidden from us, you're still at risk."

Brian shook his head, still smiling. "Because the mystery man will think I can ID him." He looked up and exchanged glances with Chris McClaren. "But he'll learn different soon enough, won't he?"

It was Cynthia who stepped up then, unable to stand another moment of the negativity that was charging the room with particles dangerous enough to spark a conflagration. "Don't say that!" she snapped, reaching out to take his hand and willing him to look at her - only at her - and read the determination in her expression. She didn't yet know what was causing it, but she did sense that there was a threat that revolved around Brian - a threat that was too much for him to bear. But that couldn't be true, could it? It had to be a mistake. Surely, God couldn't be that cruel, could He? "You're going to be all right, Brian. You're going to be as good as new."

Brian reached up and touched her chin, and everyone in the room was amazed by the tenderness in his face - the very same face that, only moments before, had been filled with bitterness and resentment and something very like pure fury.

Brian sighed. "From your lips to God's ear, Tink. If wishing would make it so, we'd be home free."

Then he leaned back and glanced over toward Andrew Griffin, who looked ready to take the floor. But not, Brian decided, just yet. First, he had a couple of things to say.

He looked around the room slowly, waiting until each person met his eyes before moving on to the next.

"You all had your reasons for wanting to be here today, but I'm assuming you all realize that if I hadn't decided to allow it, you would have been shit out of luck. And before I turn the floor over to the good doctor, I want you to understand why you're here, and why you're going to swear to me - on your life - that what you hear today will stay in this room. You are not free to repeat it to anyone, even if your tender little heart tells you that you just can't keep it to yourself. Bottom line - that's bullshit. You can, and you will, or you'll have me to deal with." His smile was slightly lopsided. "Some of you may think that's not much of a threat, but I suggest you take a look at the faces around you - the ones who know me well - so you can rethink that idea. You really, really do not want me as an enemy. That much I promise you.

"And one more thing. I don't want your advice or your help in deciding what I do with the rest of my life. Again, that's my business, and mine alone. Whether you agree with my choices or not doesn't concern me. All you have to know is that I have my reasons, and your dramatic attempts to influence me are not going to change my mind. The only thing they might do is piss me off enough to decide that your voice is a squawk that I don't need to hear."

He smiled then, but there was no way anyone could ignore the icy glint in eyes gone cold and dark. "It's all yours, Doc."

Andrew Griffin wasn't accustomed to co-star status; ordinarily, he was center stage, with his audience rapt and thunderstruck over his brilliance and his dedication to his patients. That was obviously not going to happen in this setting, and he found himself suppressing an urge to smile over
the realization that he had been soundly upstaged by a cocky, arrogant young upstart. There was, he thought ruefully, a first time for everything, but, if he wasn't mistaken, it would not be the last. He was pretty sure that having Kinney in his life was going to open new doorways and expose him to alternative views of life that he'd never experienced before.

The physician moved to stand at the foot of the patient's bed, and his gaze was focused on the young man who was proving to be one of the most challenging patients he'd ever treated. He would do this Brian's way, but he would make certain that he retained some measure of control. "You understand, Mr. Kinney, that I am allowing this group to be present for the discussion of your condition only because you've specifically stated that you want it like this. But if - at any given moment - you have second thoughts, you must speak up. And I'll have the room cleared immediately. Even Drs. Turnage and Keller understand that your right to privacy supercedes everything else. Therefore, please be absolutely sure this is what you want, and tell me now if you've changed your mind."

Brian shook his head. "I think we've already covered the issues that I don't want to discuss publicly, but if I feel like you're venturing into forbidden territory, I'll let you know."

The ophthalmologist was quiet for a moment, wondering if he was the only one who noticed that Brian was no longer focused on the room or anyone in it; instead, he was gazing out into the brilliance of the morning, where the dawn mist had faded and the light was sharp and fine and almost glittering against the mountaintops - a vision in three dimensions and maybe more. Real; almost too real.

What is it he sees? What is it that he's afraid to look away from, for fear that it'll be gone when he looks back, that he'll never get to see it again

Griffin wondered, but couldn't quite define what he saw in those eyes that no longer harbored glints of emerald or topaz. So he took a deep breath, and paused to look down at the screen of his PDA. "First of all, please understand that everything I'm going to tell you is preliminary. We have some of the test results back; others will require a few days. Still others - those that had to be sent off for processing - might take a week or more. But I feel that we do have enough information to draw some conclusions.

Brian's eyes were once more fixed on his face, and the physician almost choked on the words that he desperately did not want to say.

"I'm going blind." There was nothing of uncertainty or denial in the statement.

"Yes."

"How long?" Brian deliberately ignored the gasp of breath from Cynthia and the flicker of dismay that bloomed in Liam Quinn's eyes.

"A few weeks, at most. Worst case? A matter of days."

Brian was silent momentarily, not really stunned but attempting to adapt. " Completely?" he asked finally.

"Yes. You might retain a slight ability to detect light and shadow, but not much more than that."

It was Cynthia who spoke up at that moment, swallowing her fear and struggling to put on a brave face. "And what can you do about it? That's what this is about, isn't it? That's why he's here. So . .."

Griffin sighed. "I can't promise anything yet. The test results that we're waiting for will tell me more, but - in the end - all I can do is give you my best guess. Yes, I think I can repair the damage; I think I
can restore your vision. But even that is provisional; it depends a lot on how much you're willing to trust me, how patient you can be, and - to be completely honest - a certain amount of plain, old-fashioned luck. Thus, when all is said and done, all I can really promise you is that I will fix it, if it can be fixed, but there are no guarantees."

Brian did not look surprised. He simply sat for a moment, looking down, drawing deep, steady breaths.

Then he looked up, and there was a deadly resolve in his eyes - so cold and so determined that even Cynthia had to fight not to flinch away. When he smiled, somehow it was even worse.

"So that's why you're all here."

He turned first to Alexandra Corey and Chris McClaren, who had moved to stand at her side. "If I can't see him, I obviously can't identify him, so, if there's to be even the smallest chance of my being able to point a finger at the final member of our infamous quartet, it's going to have to be soon - as in within the next week or two, at most. So you better get all your ducks in a row and make sure you're ready to take advantage of any opportunity that happens to arise so you can put together a line-up of Pittsburgh's rich and famous. In truth, I'm not sure - even now - if I could recognize him, but I'm willing to give it a try, but you have to do your part to make sure the circumstances are as ideal as possible. In other words, an 'accidental' encounter in a dark alley won't cut it. I won't lie and tell you that it wouldn't feel good to make sure he pays for what he did, but I can assure you that I'm not going to lose any sleep over it if it doesn't work out. What's done is done, and there's no going back to fix it. So just do what you need to do. If it works, fine. If not ... well, that sucks but life does sometimes, doesn't it?"

Both Corey and McClaren nodded, and neither was particularly eager to meet his eyes, but that was probably for the best. Especially for McClaren, who wasn't sure that he could stand to look into that growing darkness and notice all that had gone missing.

Then it was Cynthia's turn. "I think we need to be alone," she said softly. "Just the two of us, to discuss what you want me to do."

He smiled and took her hand. "You think?"

She took a deep breath and had to work to ignore the tears welling in her eyes. "I don't think; I know. Because we're probably going to have a hell of a fight, and I wouldn't want to scare the children."

He lifted her hand and touched his lips to it. "Yeah. We probably are."

"I won't like it," she warned him. "I'm warning you. I won't."

"I know, but you'll do it anyway." Then he glanced over toward Liam Quinn. "But I'm afraid it can't be just the two of us. There are legal preparations to make, and we'll need help."

He looked up then and allowed his gaze to sweep around the room. "I have things to do - private things - and I need to have a conversation with my assistant and my attorney in order to get everything in order." He paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts. "As for the rest of you," he said finally. "I'm assuming that you doctor-types want to shoot the shit about all the fascinating symptoms and prognosis for my slow but sure disintegration, and the incredible treatments that Dr. Griffin has developed, so feel free. If I understand correctly, I've got one more day of enduring tests here, so the next day, I plan to go home. Matt, you can go back with me, providing Dr. Turnage has no objection to us hitching a ride on his golden chariot."
"I don't recall volunteering to see you home," said Turnage mildly.

"But you will." Keller was grinning, knowing that the plastic surgeon would not refuse. Generally, when it came to Brian Kinney, people didn't.

Matt Keller, who had been silent up to this point, his green eyes shadowed - maybe even haunted - stepped forward then, carefully skirting Cynthia who had established herself at her boss's side and obviously had no intention of moving. He gave her a quick little hug, before turning aside and leaning close enough to his old friend to speak privately. "Brian," he said, his voice betraying his misgivings, "has he explained the risks? Do you understand what's at stake?"

Brian's smile was the sweet, loving one that only a very few people had ever been privileged to see, as he lifted his free hand to brush a stray curl back from the physician's forehead. "I do, but I'm grateful to you for asking. If it lets me see again . . ." The smile became a typical Kinney leer. "Well enough to appreciate your sweet little ass, then it's worth it."

Keller leaned even closer, so close that his lips brushed against Brian's ear. "I love you, you know. Even when I hate you enough to want to beat the shit out of you, I still love you."

Brian's eyes widened for a moment - sufficiently to allow him to notice some of the faces of the people who could not resist staring at the lovely portrait formed by two particularly beautiful young men - and he turned to whisper his response. "Me too, Doc. And if you're looking for something to cheer you up, the sweet curve of your ass is providing a mouthwatering display for a certain hot ambulance-chaser, if the bulge in his pants is an accurate indicator."

Keller laughed, momentarily burying his face in the dark softness of Brian's throat. "Asshole!" he muttered.

"Right back at you."

"But I'm serious about the risks. You understand that it could . . . that you're risking more than just your vision. It might . . ."

Brian's voice was rock steady. "If it does, then you know what to do."

Keller sighed, but said nothing, but Brian was not going to let it go at that. "You do know, don't you?"

It was not really a question, and Keller knew that there was only one answer he could give, but still could barely get the words out. "I do. I know."

Abruptly, to everyone's surprise - including, possibly, his own - Brian extended one arm and dragged the doctor into a strong hug, dropping a kiss on his forehead. "Thank you," he whispered. "At least, that's one thing I don't have to worry about because I know you'll do it."

"For you," Keller muttered, obviously not happy about it but determined nevertheless.

"For me."

"I'll hate you for it," the physician observed, almost idly.

"I know."

Neither would ever bring it up again because they understood that everything had already been said.
The entire medical team made its exit then, with Turnage still grumbling and Brenda Herring flashing the patient a brilliant smile and a subtle thumbs up.

Brian waited until they were gone, before turning to level an expectant gaze at Chris MacClaren and Alexandra Corey. "The two of you need to go with them."

"Brian, I . . . " MacClaren started, obviously ready to argue.

"Forget it, Chris," Brian replied sharply. "This is one battle you're not going to win. No matter what you think, I still have a private life, and there are parts of it that the FBI has no right to meddle in."

In the end, the FBI team departed, but not with good grace. Corey looked grim, her outrage at being evicted from the room barely contained, but the look in McClaren's eyes was worse, somehow - sharp enough to kill. There was, however, something more there, not quite concealed beneath the fury. Brian saw it and knew what it was, and found that he didn't want to know, didn't want to understand that - somewhere along the path that had brought them all to this point - he had gained the ability to hurt the man who was primarily responsible for safeguarding his life. That was a burden he didn't want.

Someday - when he had nothing better to do - he would compile a list of all the things that he knew and didn't want to know.

He sighed then, and shook off any lingering remnants of regret. He had other things to do and needed to focus his attention elsewhere.

Liam Quinn was leaning against the wall by the entry, his gaze directed toward the hallway where Griffin, Turnage, and Keller were standing in a group, deep in discussion.

"Nice view, huh?" There was a definite hint of laughter within the clipped tone of the question, but if Brian expected the attorney to be embarrassed at being caught out, he was doomed to disappointment. Quinn simply smiled - a rather lovely effect - and moved closer to the bed to give his client his undivided attention.

Brian, also smiling, waited until Quinn was close enough to look directly into his eyes, and he was content to note that the man did not flinch away from the darkness pooling there. Good. None of this was likely to be pleasant, and the last thing he needed was an attorney so caught up in drifts of compassion that he couldn't function efficiently. "As you certainly know, I already have a will, and I've taken steps to protect the people that are most important to me in the event of my death. But this . . . " He swept one hand around in a broad circle, indicating wider issues and matters. "This is unexpected, and I have to do whatever is necessary to make sure that I don't leave gaps, for lack of a better term. Gaps that would make it possible for someone else to take advantage of my mistake and interfere with my wishes, simply because I happen to be out of reach for a while." He paused for a moment, drawing a deep breath. "I've never tried to hide my relationship with my family, Mr. Quinn, but it's not something I've spent a lot of time thinking about either. It's unique, to put it mildly."

"Don't worry about them," Quinn volunteered. "I'm sure they'll do as you . . ."
only thing that matters - to them - is that the sinner got rich and they didn't. So you're here, Mr. Quinn, to make sure all the i's are dotted and t's crossed, so there are no loopholes for anyone to take advantage of. Your job is to protect my son, and my . . . and anyone else I might designate. You got that?"

Quinn nodded. "You have my word, Mr. Kinney. I'll get right on it, although you do realize, I'm sure . . ." He paused and looked up to meet the gaze of Cynthia Whitney. "You do realize that it'll be necessary to work out the terms with the principles . . ." Cynthia's smile was quicksilver and slightly smug, and the attorney realized that she was already leagues ahead of him. "In addition, I have a few things to discuss with you, regarding how you want me to proceed on certain other matters, matters of a slightly more peripheral nature, shall we say?"

Brian did not - quite - sigh. He was pretty sure he knew exactly which 'peripheral matters' required his attention, and he found that he wasn't looking forward to them. Settling things with Melanie, especially on Michael's behalf, was not something he would regret - but understanding what it might do to his son and his son's mother - that was something else again. Still, he knew there was no alternative, so he would do what he must. As usual.

There was also a looming question regarding his financial advisor, but that he wasn't quite ready to address. That would require more thinking than he'd had time to give it, but there was still time for him to ponder what he should do.

Meanwhile, he suppressed a sigh and looked up to meet crystal blue eyes staring down at him.

Throughout the discussion Cynthia had been watching the expressions on his face, noting the subtle indicators of distress that no one else would have noticed - mostly - although she was pretty sure that Chris McClaren had seen more than Brian had meant him to see before being banished from the room. Still, she saw the weariness when he spoke about his family and wondered if he would ever be completely free of the burden they'd imposed on him when he was still very young. She saw the slight wince when Quinn brought up those 'other matters' and knew that he would do what he had to in order to protect the people he loved, but not without sharing their pain and regretting that he had to be a part of it. She stepped a bit closer and leaned forward to drop a kiss on the hand that still held hers. She knew she was not going to enjoy the conversation that was yet to come, but she also knew that he was dead right about one thing. Whether she liked it or not, she would do as he asked. She owed him that; hell, she owed him a lot more than that.

And perhaps the time had come to begin the process of payback. Of course, he maintained - frequently - that she had already done more than enough to cancel out any debt she might have owed, but she knew better. Her daughter lived, because of Brian Kinney. She, herself, had a good, rich, full life, because of Brian Kinney. And she believed in herself, because of Brian Kinney.

When he turned to her, she spotted the tiny hint of apology in his eyes and moved quickly to head it off.

"If you apologize for what you're going to say to me, I'm going to punch you hard enough to undo some of Turnage's miraculous work." There was not a single note of uncertainty in her tone. "I'm pretty sure I've already figured it out, and yes, just in case you're wondering, I do think you're wrong." She drew a deep, shaky breath. "But none of that matters. The only thing that matters is what it's what you want. Even if you're wrong - and you are - it's still your decision to make. I'll back you up 100%. And I'm slightly pissed off that you even thought you had to ask."

His smile was achingly tender. "I didn't. Not really. Except . . . this goes a lot farther than you might have imagined, Tink. Think about it. What happens when . . . " His speech stumbled then, and he had to swallow around the lump in his throat before he could go on. "What happens if I can no
longer see the work of my staff? What happens when I can't judge the quality of their efforts, or determine if what they're saying in the ads they're creating is what I want said? What happens then?"

She took a deep breath. "Then you listen to what I tell you; then you let me be your eyes. Because, if you don't know anything else, you need to know this, Brian. I will never, never tell you anything but the truth. So you just tell me what you want - tonight or next week or next year. You tell me what the message is that you want to send out, and I will watch the work and paint it for you, in words you can virtually see. Understand?"

He didn't answer quickly. "And what if I no longer know? What if I lose the ability to understand, to make decisions? To guide anyone? What happens then?"

At that moment, she felt a huge knot of ice form around her heart, as she re-examined the shadow in his eyes and realized that he was talking about something heretofore unmentioned - a possibility that he knew about, but she didn't. Instinct told her that he would not answer any question she might raise - not now anyway - so it all boiled down to one basic issue. How much did she trust him, and how much would she endure on his behalf? She took a deep breath, bracing herself against whatever was yet to come. "Then you ride it out, for as long as you need to, and you allow me to act on your behalf. Until you're ready to do it again yourself."

He snickered quietly. "You really believe that'll happen? You really believe . . ."

"I believe in you." She could not suppress the tears that formed in her eyes, and, in the end, she didn't even try. "I have always believed in you, and I will never, never stop. You understand me?"

"Even when . . . " He paused, searching for the right words. "Even when I destroy the people that deserve so much more? Even then?"

"Even then." She did not hesitate. "I may cry for them; I may even hate what you do to them. But they're not you, and you're the one who earned my loyalty a long, long time ago. It's you, and it's always going to be you."

Brian's eyes were suspiciously bright - so bright that he knew it was time to defuse an emotional moment. "You know you're the only woman who has ever been able to make me wish - just for a moment - that I could go straight."

The two of them erupted in bright laughter.

"Wow!" said a soft voice nearby, and both of them started slightly, having forgotten that Liam Quinn was still in the room. "That's quite a testimonial, Mr. Kinney. You might want to just hand over half your company, to hang on to that kind of loyalty."

"He's already done way more than that," she replied coolly, turning to face the attorney and meeting his gaze squarely.

"Yes. I know."

It was Brian's turn to lift his eyes to examine the attorney's expression. "What the fuck does that mean?"

"Exactly what I said," Quinn replied, obviously unperturbed by the steely tone of Brian's voice. "I know what you did for Ms. Whitney, just as I know what you've done for other people in your life. You've actually done a remarkable job of hiding yourself from people who think they know you well, who actually should know you well, but it won't work on me. Maybe because I'm not emotionally invested in you. Or maybe it's just because I always do my homework, Brian, which
means I never take on a client unless I know all about him. And I do mean all."

Brian turned back to exchange glances with Cynthia. "Now why does that make me nervous?"

Quinn laughed. "Because one of your purposes in life is to make sure that nobody knows you that well - and because you're borderline paranoid. But you'll just have to deal with it. In your case, there are at least two of us who see right through you."

"Yeah?"

It was Cynthia who answered. "Yeah," she laughed, "so just deal with it."

Brian spent a moment considering what he'd been told, before coming to an unavoidable conclusion. His only viable option was to deal with it.

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It was the kind of day that was the answer to real estate agents' prayers - bright and beautiful and providing the perfect setting to appreciate the potential merits of a building site.

Of course, Jennifer Taylor wasn't really interested in a sale for profit's sake. She was interested in a sale for family's sake.

She almost held her breath as Justin exited from the passenger seat of her SUV and walked out into the golden rays of morning sunlight, allowing her to spend a moment in contemplative appreciation. He was her son, and she was allowed, she thought, to observe that he was quite stunningly beautiful silhouetted against such a perfect setting.

"Well," she said with a small smile, "was I right, or was I right?"

Justin inhaled deeply, almost at a loss for words.

"Oh, you were sooooo right, Mom. It's . . ."

"Beautiful?" she prodded when he seemed at a loss for words. "Exquisite? Breathtaking? Perfect?"

"All of the above," he answered finally. "It's Brian."

And that, she knew, said it all. For Justin, there would forever be only one gauge of true perfection.

"Can you picture it? The house you want to build here?"

Justin was tempted to close his eyes to pull up that vision, but, in the end, he didn't. It was silly to think he might miss something - some small but vital detail - if he dared to look away, but that was, nevertheless, the feeling that rushed through him.

The house would go here, where they were standing, in order to take advantage of a view that someone should have painted a long time ago - a painting entitled simply "Eden". It wasn't, of course, and it never would be, particularly if it became the site of the home of Brian Kinney and Justin Taylor; the Taylor-Kinneys would never be the type to preside over God's most perfect creation. But it would certainly look the part.

The land dropped toward the brilliant ribbon of the river in a series of soft stair-steps, bathed in the fresh green of new grass and strewn with wild bluebells and buttercups and daffodils. Each level was set off from the next by a low stone fence that wandered in random zig-zags down toward the water, ending in a jumble of stones splayed at the base of a weeping willow. The fence was dark with age
and draped in a variety of healthy vines, heavy with bright new foliage, including the lush lavender
and pristine white of wisteria erupting periodically on the fence, trailing off into the long grass and
even climbing the trunks of the scattered group of stately elms that provided the framework for the
left side of the landscape. To the right, a small stream danced in the sunlight as it leapt from level to
level, spraying rainbow droplets into the air as it encountered stones scattered across the shallow bed
of the brook. Beyond that, a shadowed woodland marched away toward the horizon.

Cumulus clouds towered overhead, and the air was rich with the earthy scents of springtime as
birdsong rose from the edges of the forest, while a lone hawk soared upon an updraft, reaching for
the sun.

It was perfect.

Justin thought about the house he would design - the house he and Brian would build - and sensed
that it would have to be completely unique; it would not be colonial or French provincial or Tudor or
Empire or Georgian; it would be Brian and Justin, unlike any other, and the design would come to
him, with time. It couldn't be rushed; he had to learn patience in order to . . .

"No, Baby. Nothing's wrong. I'll be with you soon. I promise."

Jennifer was standing behind her son in order to allow him to take in the full effect of the property;
thus, she did not notice the small frown that touched his face.

"So what do you think?" she asked. "I know the price is pretty steep, but they might be willing to
negotiate - a little. But if you think Brian would be interested, I can make a preliminary . . ."

"He needs to see it himself."

Jennifer stepped forward to study the look in Justin's eyes. "What? You think he won't trust your
judgment? Justin, you surely know that I'm not saying this because I want to close a sale, but because
it's the bottom-line truth. Even at this price, it won't last long. You just don't come across places this
beautiful very often. And Pittsburgh has more than its fair share of the rich and famous, who will try
to snap . . ."

"I know," he interrupted quietly, "but he still needs to see it. He needs to understand what it will
mean to us, what it can do for us. He needs . . ."

"Justin," she said slowly, "is something wrong? You and Brian . . . you're not having second
thoughts, are you?"

"No, Mom. I'm not."

Jennifer nodded, and wanted to drop the subject, but couldn't. "Is he?"

Justin's smile was bittersweet. "Brian doesn't do second thoughts, Mom. Brian always knows what
he wants and takes steps to get it."

Jennifer turned away abruptly, but not quite fast enough to prevent Justin from seeing a shadow of
doubt form in her eyes, and he wanted to reach out and hug her and reassure her and let her know
that everything was all right, but he didn't. He couldn't, because . . . he didn't quite know why.

"I wasn't sure I should mention it," she said slowly, "but it doesn't feel right to keep it from you."

"What are you talking about?"
She drew a deep breath. "Steven called me last night. He was . . . he didn't feel that it would be right to call you himself, but he's worried about you." She paused then, deliberately not meeting his gaze. "He really does love you very much, you know."

Justin was silent for a moment, allowing his eyes to sweep across the panorama laid out before them, and imagining . . . imagining a plethora of things, all good and sweet and beautiful. Except . . .

"No, Baby. Nothing's wrong. I'll be with you soon. I promise."

He and Brian had a beautiful life ahead of them; he knew that; he knew . . .

He tried very hard to ignore the tiny whisper in the back of his mind - the one that said, "You've been here before, standing in exactly the same place, and look where that took you in the end."

He couldn't quite suppress a sigh or resist the tiny tremor that touched him, as that memory resurfaced, and he heard it again - a bit louder this time.

"No, Baby. Nothing's wrong. I'll be with you soon. I promise."

Jennifer turned once more to look at her son and found that his eyes were suddenly very wide and very blue and filled with an emotion she could not identify. "Honey, what's the matter? What's . . ."

"He never calls me that. He never would call me that."

"What are you . . ."

"We need to go, Mom. I need to get back."

"Look, I'm sorry," she said hastily. "If I'd realized it would upset you, I never would have brought it up."

His smile was tentative but very tender. "It's not that, Mom. I do know that Steven loves me, and I'm still sorry that he was hurt so badly. But there's no going back. I love Brian, no matter what. And I will always love Brian. Now, I really need to go."

"Okay," she conceded, "but there's a lovely country inn just down the road, and you must be hungry, since you're always hungry. We could . . ."

"No. I need to go, now."

And that, apparently, was final. The conversation as they drove toward Pittsburgh was almost non-existent. It consisted of Jennifer asking for an explanation of what was going on in his head, and Justin ignoring her while he tried to raise Brian on his cell phone. Neither effort was successful.

And the words kept repeating in Justin's mind, louder and louder and finally generating a pounding headache.

"No, Baby. Nothing's wrong. I'll be with you soon. I promise."

Finally, weary of his mother's not-so-subtle questions and his own thoughts, he simply laid his head back and pretended to sleep, but Jennifer was not fooled. Understanding that he was frustrated and worried, she finally stopped pressing him for answers, but that didn't change the fact that she saw the single tear that escaped from the corner of his eye.

But surely, it was just jitters. Surely nothing else could go wrong. Surely they had endured enough trauma and outright tragedy to entitle them to at least one lucky break. Karma was supposed to work
like that, wasn't it?

She tried not to think any more about Steven, or about the momentary flicker in Justin's eyes when she had mentioned having talked to him. Steven was a good guy, and he loved her son very much. In fact, he was almost perfect; he only had one major flaw.

He was not Brian Kinney.

And that was the only explanation that would ever matter to Justin.

She watched clouds gathering in the West as she drove toward the Pittsburgh and was slightly disheartened when the first drops of rain began to fall before they reached the city limits. It was discouraging how quickly a perfect day could turn dismal.

And if there was a metaphor therein that could be applied to the vagaries of life, she didn't want to think about it.

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The crowd was huge, and the black-tie affair had been such a huge success that Emmett could hardly contain himself. He kept thinking that he should pinch himself to make sure that it was real, that he wasn't imagining things, because - in the beginning - he had hardly dared to hope that he could manage it all.

There was no denying that it had been a prodigious undertaking. He had not done it alone, of course. He'd had plenty of help, with his lovely Drewsie at the top of the list. Of course, Drew was accustomed to directing things, to being in charge of complex interactions devoted toward achieving a specific goal, and he had excelled in this effort, guiding the actions of the team and scoring beautifully at the end of the drive.

Emmett, of course, had been in charge of the more imaginative aspects of the enterprise - the décor, the menu, the presentation, and the program, and - in the end - Drew's practical efforts and Emmett's flare for the dramatic had blended together perfectly, and the result was all around them now.

An expanded crew of Babylon employees - from barmen to go-go boys - had done an incredible job of getting the entire population of Liberty Avenue and its environs to turn out for an awards ceremony that had been undreamt of until it was born in a flash of inspiration, in the gleam of bright green eyes. The residents of the area had turned out in droves, even though few among them had the slightest idea of what kind of awards might be presented or to whom such awards might go. But it didn't matter. It was a classic celebration in the bright, hot-blooded, high-spirited venue of Pittsburgh's hottest gay nightclub, so did it really matter why? It would, of course, in the end, but from its inception, it had met one very fundamental criterion: The booze was free and flowing. What else could one want?

Thus, the crowd had started the evening in a happy mood, and it had only gotten better as the hours passed and everyone came to understand the purpose of the night, and how they were contributing to it; to wit - one of their own had been attacked and almost killed, and that - even if one were not particularly fond of the victim himself - could not be tolerated or ignored. Instead, the people who had foiled that attack and rescued Brian Kinney from the clutches of the criminals must be recognized and thanked publicly. In addition, those who had followed up and aided in the investigation and apprehension of those responsible must also be rewarded for their courage and determination.

Discretion, of course, had to prevail. Thus, some of the heroes of the situation had to remain
nameless, out of necessity and for their own safety. Others - such as those of FBI persuasion - would refuse such public recognition, as a requisite of their professional position. But members of Brian's security staff who had gone beyond the call to protect and defend their employer, ordinary individuals who had stepped up despite having no connection to law enforcement, and a few everyday citizens who had taken it upon themselves to provide assistance to the investigation had been surprised and extraordinarily pleased to be recognized and singled out for public reward.

Some had been honored in absentia - necessarily - such as Simon Redding and Trina Thomas and some of the local security staffers who had stood guard throughout the duration of Brian's treatment by Rick Turnage. Others had mounted the steps to the stage to accept their awards from Emmett's hands with an air of uncertainty, as if not entirely convinced they had done anything worthy of recognition. Among that number had been Henry Flagg, who seemed astonished to be honored by a group of people he would once have regarded with disdain if not outright contempt.

Foremost among the civilian recipients had been Ron Peterson and Nicholas Avolar, who were both greeted with standing ovations when Emmett finished his brief description of the actions that had earned the awards for them. Both had attended the ceremony alone; Peterson, because his wife of forty years had refused to accompany him; had refused to even discuss the possibility and might very possibly never forgive him for 'betraying his own kind'. But Lindsey had been proud to escort him into Babylon, her smile amply demonstrating the degree of her pride in his courage and his commitment to doing the right thing. Nicholas, who vowed he would never again allow anyone to patronize him by prefacing his name with the label "Young", was also alone, because his mother simply could not accept his role in bringing down the people who had ruled the lives of so many of her friends and relatives; nor was she even willing to confront the possibility that her son might not be the "man's man" that she had always believed him to be. Her attitude - her scorn - had made it very hard for the young man to believe that his actions had been heroic, but the acceptance and approval granted to him by the Liberty Avenue patrons seemed to be adequate compensation for her disdain.

Also among the award recipients were Sharon Briggs, Jared Hilliard, and Carl Horvath, the latter intensely embarrassed to be singled out for attention, while both Briggs and Hilliard seemed completely at ease within a familiar comfort zone. Lance Mathis, on the other hand, had refused to be included in the list of honorees, and could not be persuaded to change his mind. He had, he said firmly, only been doing the job he got paid to do. No heroics involved.

Emmett, of course, had disagreed, remembering all too well the events of that fateful night, and how Mathis's actions had been key to saving Brian's life. Nevertheless, Mathis was adamant, and Emmett had to accept his decision. He realized that he would have to be content with making sure that Brian knew the whole story and the breadth of Mathis's part in it.

The evening had gone perfectly. The place looked elegant, and the crowd reflected the setting perfectly. Emmett had restrained his more florid instincts, and limited decorations to urns filled with stargazer lilies, deep crimson roses and spikes of creamy foxglove amid deep green foliage, tables dressed in snowy white linen with centerpieces of hurricane lamp candles amid Boston ferns and white crabapple blossoms, and the miniature stage draped with ivory silk with garlands of spring flowers forming a valance. It was quite lovely and very elegant, since - as Emmett had reminded himself throughout his creation of the setting - Brian Kinney didn't do sleaze.

Since this was an important event for Pittsburgh, the clientele was almost equally divided between men and women - obviously an uncommon event for Babylon. But the women had taken advantage of an opportunity to show off their finest fashions, and there was plenty of Dolce & Gabbana, Vera Wang, Badgley Mischka, and Carolina Herrera in evidence. The men, not to be outdone, sported Armani and Calvin Klein, and the champagne that flowed was a lovely Grande siecle, being served...
in Lenox crystal flutes.

Emmett was in his element, and the fond gaze of the ex-quarterback sitting at the bar was a constant comfort to him - an assurance that he had done his job beautifully.

It was the shank of the evening, and the party was in full swing, the general air of laughter and celebration making Emmett feel that his efforts had been successful in almost every way.

Almost, for some among the crowd were not quite as pleased as the revelers around them. A few were even wondering what the fuck they were doing there, and making little effort to conceal their displeasure.

Michael, for example, had lost patience early on, nagging Emmett constantly and whining to be told what was really going on. Okay, so the people who had rescued Brian and helped to bring his attackers to justice had deserved to be recognized, but . . . why now? Everything was still so confusing, and he was still reeling from the information provided to him just this morning by the lawyer that Brian had hired on his behalf. According to Liam Quinn, all necessary actions had been taken to safeguard Michael's interests, and there was nothing more to worry about. Melanie's hands had been legally tied, so she would not be able to keep his daughter from him. Ben had been delighted at the news, and had even gone so far as to hug the young lawyer, much to Michael's displeasure. The man might be a legal barracuda, but he looked like a cover model for GQ, and Ben - for all his high-minded ideals - was not immune to sexual spontaneity. Although Michael knew in his heart that Ben's intentions had been nothing but innocent, he was still bothered. Mostly, he admitted to himself, because everything seemed to bother him these days. Life had gotten far too complicated.

A second guest - here almost against his will, but knowing that to refuse to attend would not be in his best interests - had almost walked out the door any number of times. Ted was not a happy man, and every detail of this Emmett-generated extravaganza was a source of irritation for him. In addition, he had received a call earlier advising him that Blake was going to run late and might not be around at all to witness this tasteless example of Emmett's over exuberance. It did not improve his mood in the least when Cynthia walked in, her slender body swathed in a sleek Givenchy creation of bronze silk; she looked fantastic, but that did not change the fact that she had no place standing in the spotlight of a gay bar, even if she was nominally its chief operating officer for the duration of Brian's absence.

And then there was Melanie Marcus.

It was obvious from the expression on Emmett's face when he saw her in the crowd that she had not been invited. Yet here she was, and the expression in her eyes indicated that anyone who tried to evict her from the audience would be playing with fire. She strode to the bar and demanded repeated shots of Crown Royal which she consumed quickly, her eyes moving from face to face of the people around her, pausing sometimes as bright flames of anger flared in her eyes, before moving on to seek her next target. When she found herself locked in a gaze with Lindsey, the anger flared again but died quickly, and she looked away, obviously not comfortable with allowing her ex-partner to identify what lay behind her frozen expression.

Lindsey, for her part, simply returned her attention to the warm discussion between a scarlet-clad Debbie Novotny, Carl Horvath, and Lindsey's father, who was still somewhat overwhelmed by the elegance of the event.

This time, it was Lindsey who explained the ambiance; even though he might not be physically present, this event was being held under the auspices of Brian Kinney - who simply did not do sleaze.
Lindsey and Jennifer Taylor, both in black - Balenciaga and Alexander McQueen, respectively - were smiling as Ron tried to respond to the colorful conversation generated by Debbie with something besides amazement.

And then there was Justin.

Ted observed that it seemed as if Emmett couldn't do anything these days without Justin hanging around, interfering, kibitzing, running his mouth and offering unwanted opinions. Only tonight - Ted was slightly gratified to realize that the blond twink did not look particularly happy tonight.

In fact, he looked downright miserable.

Emmett had completed his awards ceremony and returned to the bar to stand with his significant other, and then turned to search the crowd, spotting Justin easily in the little nook that he and Brian had staked out as their own after the Babylon remodeling. By this time, the blond was looking so miserable that Emmett left Drew standing alone at the bar, enjoying his favorite brand of scotch, and moved through the crowd, to stand over Justin and lean forward to whisper directly into his ear. Then, for some reason, he linked his arm with the blond's and pulled the younger man toward the spiral staircase that led up to the office suites. Once there, he placed Justin on the bottom step, and bade him to stay put. Justin - having spent most of the previous day and night trying, unsuccessfully, to reach Brian - was not in a mood for games or theatrics, but found that he had no energy for resistance, so he stood there, his expression closed and suspicious.

Emmett, still watching Justin to make sure he remained in place, moved up the stairs to the landing where he snagged a microphone from its stand, before turning to look down at the crowd.

That's when the world went completely black, eliciting a sharp gasp and a sprinkling of nervous titters from the crowd. But there was no real fear. This was Babylon, after all, where one was encouraged to expect the unexpected.

The darkness continued for a few seconds, and everyone fell silent. Then, in the thick hush, a vein of music began to play in the background as, high up near the ceiling, a single spot of light - golden in color - began to glow and slowly, slowly sink toward the crowds below.

Emmett's voice was very mellow, very gentle, as he spoke into the microphone.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, the hour is at hand. The moment you've all been waiting for, even if you didn't know it."

The music grew louder then, as the golden ball of light sank lower, and, very softly, there were suddenly lyrics with the music.

"Nobody does it better.
Makes me feel sad for the rest.
Nobody does it half as good as you,
Baby, you're the best."*

Emmett's voice floated above the music.

"Ladies, Gentlemen, Boys and Girls of all ages, may I present to you, the only and ever true king of Babylon - Brian Kinney."

The point of light expanded suddenly to form a halo around the figure standing at the top of the...
stairs, and there was no way anyone is the room could fail to recognize who was looking down at them.

Clad in an elegant Armani tux, perfectly groomed, perfectly posed, Brian Kinney remained still for a moment and let the music swell around him. Then he smiled, a small, smug smile, reflecting the certainty that nobody knew how to play a crowd like the legendary king of Liberty Avenue.

When he started to walk down the stairs, the crowd seemed to come alive and find its voice, and the place erupted into a roar of applause, mingled with shouts of "Bravo!" and appreciative whistles.

Emmett was waiting at the half-way point and was momentarily stunned when the guest of honor stepped toward him and wrapped him in an affectionate hug. Then Brian pulled back and regarded his old friend with a sardonic grin. "Carly Simon? Really? You welcome me home with Carly Simon?"

"Oh, shut up," Emmett muttered, inordinately pleased with Brian's show of affection, but a bit embarrassed by his emotional response to the gesture. "Just be glad I didn't choose 'You're So Vain'."

Brian erupted in bright laughter, and repeated the hug, but said no more.

Then he turned and looked down, and, in that magic moment, the crowd disappeared, and there were suddenly only two people in the universe. The spotlight that had, until that moment, focused only on Brian, suddenly expanded to illuminate the young face that was staring up at him, still almost unconvinced, almost afraid to believe.

Brian continued down the stairs, studying the eyes that were fixed on his face, knowing instinctively that he had to wait to allow Justin to make the final move; that this might be Brian's big moment, but it was Justin's decision that would determine what came next.

The song ended, and the crowd seemed to hold its breath as the two beautiful men - one very young and one no longer so young - stared at each other.

Then another song started, and some of the people standing close to the two principals would later swear that they had sensed a spark of raw energy flare between the two, because they suddenly seemed to leap toward each other and become one, so wrapped up in each other that there was no way of telling where one ended and the other began.

Emmett had apparently edited the new song to start at a particularly appropriate moment, and the couple in the spotlight moved to the dance floor without ever breaking the deep kiss that connected them. The lyrics continued as they began to move together.

"When you touch me like this,  
And when you hold me like that,  
It was gone with the wind  
But it's all coming back to me.  
When you see me like this  
And when I see you like that,  
Then we see what we want to see.  
All coming back to me,  
The flesh and the fantasies,  
All coming back to me,  
I can barely recall,  
But it's all coming back to me now."**
The applause died down as everyone watched, spellbound, as the dancers seemed to occupy a world of their own.

Finally, Justin pulled away just enough to look up and meet dark eyes filled with warmth and desire. "Is it real?" asked the younger man. "Is it all behind us?"

Brian did not blink. "Yes. It's over."

The darkness of the room was a blessing, as it offered Justin no opportunity to notice any shadow that might have existed in those hazel eyes. He simply smiled - the smile that had long since stolen Brian's heart - and settled his face into the lovely softness of Brian's throat, where he could breathe the essence of the man he loved.

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*Nobody Does It Better -- Carly Simon
**It's All Coming Back to Me Now -- Jim Steinman

TBC
Chapter 55

The world breaks everyone and, afterward, many are strong in the broken places. But those that will not break, it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too, but there will be no special hurry.

-- A Farewell to Arms - Ernest Hemingway

The music played on, and the tux-clad dancers continued their effortless, graceful performance as Celine's voice soared and the spotlight followed them. The dance floor was reduced from its normal gargantuan size by the placement of the elegantly appointed tables provided to allow diners to enjoy Emmett's gourmet meal, consisting of roasted shrimp cocktail, chicken Kiev, bacon risotto, grilled asparagus, and fresh croissants, all prepared with the help of his new part-time assistant, Cedric Lasseigne. The dessert - a beautifully presented Kahlua tiramisu, garnished with glazed strawberries - was spectacular, but many among the crowd were simply too sated to indulge further.

Not to mention the fact that they were too enchanted by the vision before them, all realizing that the size of the dance area was unimportant now since no one else ventured onto the floor; nobody even thought of it.

This was the Brian-and-Justin moment, inspiring vastly differing responses for many in the audience, but not a single one among them would have considered interrupting or trying to intrude.

The dancers were achingly, stunningly beautiful - Brian in black Armani and Justin in midnight blue Ralph Lauren - and the dance was perfect. They moved together instinctively, as flawlessly as if the performance had been rehearsed, and - as Celine approached the end of the lyrics - Brian spun Justin once before shifting his weight and lowering his partner in a perfectly balanced dip to end the dance as the last soft measured lyrics fell into the hush.

"If you do it like this
(It's all coming back to me now)
And if we . . ."*

For a single moment, the final note of the song was the only sound, and - completely contained within that heartbeat of time - Brian was speared by the memory of another dance on another occasion, and was forced to brace himself against a resurgence of the trauma he had endured that night as he wondered if Justin might be in the grip of the same memory. But it was gone as quickly as it had come, as the silence was broken when uproarious applause started up again, accompanied by shouts of approval and joyful laughter.

The featured performance of the evening was complete, and new music - typical Babylon thumpa-thumpa - erupted from the speakers placed around the room, although not as loudly as usual, but if the crowd had any idea of filling the floor and taking the spotlight for themselves, it was not to be, as the enthusiasm of the onlookers led to a surge of bodies to surround the primary stars of the evening. Brian and Justin managed - just - to hold on to each other and not be swept apart, but they were both engulfed in a sea of stroking hands and eager arms and hugs and kisses. Debbie Novotny, first to be noticed - as always - in trademark scarlet, managed to get to them before anyone else and wrapped her arms around both. Her affection for the two was obvious, but she did make a small distinction,
managing to lean forward and whisper a word of gratitude into Brian's ear; he had, after all, saved her son - again - by making sure that he would not lose the right to be a part of his daughter's life, and a tiny little voice in her mind pointed out, with more than a nuance of sarcasm, that this was certainly not the first time.

Michael came next, with Ben at his heels, and he paused to pat Justin's shoulder with a gentle hand, but there was no gentleness in his greeting for Brian; he simply pulled his old friend into a rough, tight, full body press and then spent a long thirty seconds devouring those newly-restored perfect lips. Neither Ben nor Justin seemed particularly pleased with the situation, but neither had the heart to intervene. Thus, when Brian pulled away, both he and Michael were laughing with exuberance, and their respective partners couldn't help but join in.

Then it was Lindsey's turn, her father looking on with a small smile. He had accepted his award from Emmett - beautifully engraved Ravi Ratan sterling cufflinks - with humility and grace, but it had been obvious from the start that he was uncomfortable with the attention. Brian chose to believe that it had more to do with unfamiliarity with the spotlight than with any distaste for the setting. Others were less certain. But Lindsey obviously had no doubts at all, as she was radiant and smiling, leading Brian to wonder if she had finally managed to cast off old, painful shadows. She threw herself into his arms, giving Justin a momentary rush of uncertainty as he noted - to his own surprise - just how lovely Gus's parents were, clasped in each other's arms. He was remarkably relieved when Lindsey walked away, leaving Ron Peterson to share a quick, private exchange with the father of his grandson - too quick for it to encompass much substance, but Justin took a second to wonder what the older man might have whispered in Brian's ear as Brian seemed momentarily nonplussed. But there was no time for questioning as the crowd continued to demand the attention of the guests of honor.

Next in line were Matt Keller and Jared Hilliard who looked - to Brian's surprise - inordinately pleased with themselves and perfectly comfortable together. The physician hugged his old friend but was very careful to avoid areas of the body that he knew to be still tender, and responded to the question Brian whispered in his ear with nothing more than a grin - slightly lurid - and a wink while Hilliard looked on with a knowing smile.

It was Brian's turn to smile as he watched them walk away together.

Next up, trembling with a combination of impatience and joy, came Jennifer, with Tucker at her heels. Her greeting for Justin was only slightly more enthusiastic than the one she bestowed on Brian.

In truth, she wanted a private word with her son-in-law-to-be, but knew that such a hope was futile in this setting. She had concerns to share, but they would have to wait, so she contented herself with embracing the two of them and enjoying the happiness that sparkled in Justin's eyes. And in Brian's, of course, except . . . She frowned, briefly, but then allowed herself to be caught up once more in the spirit of the occasion, and promptly forgot whatever it was that had raised a question in her mind.

Cynthia - not usually known for her patience - had been waiting for a while, and stepped in before anyone else could approach, with Lance Mathis at her side.

"You two look good together," said Brian, as she wrapped her arms around his neck and took a deep breath, relieved to note that he once more smelled like Brian Kinney was supposed to smell - warm and sexy and sensual, a blend of the natural fragrance that was uniquely him, and the subtle scent of Christian Dior's Higher - his perfectly masculine cologne of choice. Most importantly of all, there was no trace of the awful chemical scents of medical ointments and antiseptic bandages and disinfectants and the hundreds of other smells that brought up memories of hospital corridors and
cold waiting rooms and red-bagged bio-waste, rather than warm skin and renewed life.

"Stop playing matchmaker, Boss," she murmured, "unless you want me to find Emmett and have him play the entire score of Hello, Dolly."

Brian suppressed a shudder. "Should I assume then that you don't need any help from me?"

She looked up at him, and he was hard put to avoid flinching away from the naked combination of relief and something that was disturbingly close to adoration in her eyes. "You should assume that it's wise to mind your own business."

He glanced over her shoulder and spent a moment observing how deliberately Lance Mathis was looking around the room in an attempt to avoid staring at Cynthia's curves in the tight-fitted black dress. Brian grinned. "More fun to mind yours, Tink, especially when your Prince Charming is having a hell of a time keeping his eyes off your ass."

Cynthia's flush was exactly the response he'd been seeking, and he smiled as he touched his lips to her forehead. "Take a few hours to cast your spell. Then meet me in my office tomorrow morning. There are a couple of things I need to go over with you."

"Tomorrow morning?" She did not quite squawk, but it was close. "You do realize that tomorrow is Saturday, and that . . . ."

"Tomorrow morning," he replied, before looking over and favoring Mathis with a conspiratorial grin. "But not too early, and I promise not to take up too much of your time, which could obviously be better spent."

"You really are an asshole," she muttered. "You know that, right?"

"Yeah." He hugged her just a bit tighter. "I know it. But you'll be there, right?"

She departed without answering the question, knowing that a response was unnecessary.

Justin watched in silence, noting the softness in his lover's eyes and wondered if Cynthia really understood how important she was to her boss. He was still slightly lost in his musing as another couple stepped forward - one that he did not recognize but, judging by the warmth of the smile on Brian's face, one that he should make sure to know in the future.

The young black woman was beautiful - Halle Berry beautiful, thought Justin. Maybe even a little too beautiful? When she stepped forward and Brian clasped both of her hands as he leaned forward to give her a quick kiss, Justin had another one of those uneasy moments, because - if Brian and Lindsey were lovely together - Brian and this unknown female were beyond beautiful, almost radiant. Drop-dead gorgeous and stunning enough to make him start thinking in clichés. No way, of course, would Brian Kinney ever fall for a woman, but . . . oh, what a vision they made together.

Time, thought Justin, to step in.

"Hi," he said, sounding only slightly awkward, "I'm . . . ."

"Oh, I know who you are, young Justin," said Sharon Briggs, her skin almost gilded by the contrast of the charcoal filigree of a Marchesa gown that left little to the imagination. "I'd have known even if you weren't standing beside him." She spared a little wink for Brian as she continued. "The smile kind of gives it away."

"The smile?" Justin glanced at his lover, obviously confused.
Sharon grinned. "Sunshine," she replied, her fingers creating quotation marks in the air.

Both she and Brian enjoyed the beautiful blush that flared over perfect, pale skin.

"Hello, almost son-in-law," said the man who had approached with her as he extended his hand to Brian.

"Hello, Mr. Briggs."

"You know - if you ever get tired of being the big-time ad exec - you could always come back to work for me. It's bloody disgusting how little you've changed."

"On the surface, maybe," said Brian as he shook the man's hand, and, for a moment, no one knew quite what to say next as they all realized how much he had left unsaid.

Until Justin spoke up, unabashed as always, and Brian was grateful for the reprieve from reminders of darker times.

"Aren't you going to introduce me, Brian?" The fact that there was just the tiniest vein of petulance in his tone was lost on none of them, and restored Brian's smile.

The introductions were made and Justin - with an artist's eye for detail - had a sudden epiphany. "I know you," he blurted as he took Sharon's hand. "You're . . ." He faltered abruptly as he realized that he'd almost identified her as one of the Liberty Avenue pros who trolled the streets every night, looking for Johns - or Janes, as the case might be. He was still sure that he was right, but he thought it unwise to speak of it in front of her father.

Sharon laughed. "It's okay, Justin. My dad knows what I do."

Justin's eyes, already wide and sparkling in the joy of the occasion, grew impossibly wider.

When Brian and the Briggs - father and daughter - broke into easy laughter, Justin blushed - again.

"What's so . . ."

It was Brian who leaned forward to whisper in his ear, providing the explanation, which, of course, embarrassed Justin even further as he realized that his comments, if overheard, might have had dire consequences.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly, meeting Sharon's gaze and noting - again - how beautiful her eyes were. Sable brown with topaz glints. "Can I paint you?" he asked abruptly. "Your face is remarkable, and I'd . . . ."

"Of course, you can," she said quickly. Now she was the one who was embarrassed. "But it would probably be best if I'm 'in character', so to speak. But tell me - is that how you recognized me? I mean I don't think anyone ever has before. Certainly not when I'm dressed like this. How did you . . . ."

Justin shrugged. "I only see the features. Not the clothes or the setting, so it wouldn't matter to me which 'character' you choose to pose in. Like I say, I only see the features."

"So sayeth the artist," said Brian.

Justin Taylor knew Brian Kinney better than anyone else in the world, but it was Sharon Briggs who picked up on something in her old friend's voice - something disturbing, maybe even alarming - that
Justin didn't seem to notice.

The undercover policewoman was, by necessity, a keen judge of character and a mistress of nuance, and she was suddenly studying Brian's face with a speculative gaze. He did not - quite - squirm, but she thought he'd come very close to it, which was a truly remarkable circumstance in itself. This was Brian Kinney, after all, who did not squirm, for anybody.

Abruptly, she leaned forward. "You okay, Studly?"

Brian grinned. It had been a very long time since she'd called him that. "I'm fine. Why?"

She took a moment to formulate an answer. "I don't know. Something in your eyes, maybe?"

It was his turn then to hesitate, as he tried to swallow around a sudden lump in his throat. He leaned forward quickly to whisper in her ear. "That's just lust, Beauty. You know how I am when I don't get my fuck-fix three times a day."

Sharon pulled back and smiled, lifting one hand to cup his cheek. But she decided to drop the subject, knowing that she would learn nothing more for the moment. There was no one in the world who could keep a secret like Brian Kinney when he decided to be stubborn.

So maybe she should seek answers elsewhere. She looked up and spotted Matt Keller in the crowd, and - her smile shifted slightly, became a bit more sensual, a bit more focused - Lindsey Peterson was standing beside him. Perhaps it was time to investigate from a different perspective.

Brian - being the Brian who never missed a thing - saw and interpreted her smile correctly, and allowed himself a brief bout of speculation. When father and daughter slipped away into the crowd, he watched for a moment and experienced a surprising burst of warmth when he saw one old friend seek out another.

Lindsey Peterson and Sharon Briggs. He smiled as he wondered why that match-up had never even occurred to him when they'd all been friends in the halcyon days of youth.

But when he turned back to look down at his young companion, he caught a glimpse of a face in the crowd - a face he had not expected to see in this place - and realized that he'd answered his own question. The wearer of that face - currently nose-deep in a martini glass - had been like a force of nature back then. A force that set its sites on one lovely young blonde, and staked a claim that discouraged trespassers. Even the intrepid Sharon Briggs might have been slightly intimidated, especially if Lindsey had shown no signs of resistance.

He did not waste time wondering how his life - or Lindsey's and Gus's - would have been different if Lindsey had refused to allow herself to be claimed, or if Sharon Briggs had chosen to trespass, but he knew everything would have been simpler.

So much for "love" conquering all, although - on second thought - if what Lindsey had endured from Melanie constituted "love", he knew they'd all have been better off without it.

More revelers crowded in then - acquaintances, friends, co-workers, clients, and even some well-wishers who did not actually know either of the two star players but got caught up in the exuberance of the moment anyway.

And finally, when everyone else had claimed a share of the spotlight, voiced their concerns and opinions, and congratulated Brian on his remarkable recovery, there stood Chris McClaren, the man who had played a major role - second only maybe to Lance Mathis on the night of the attack - in the salvation of Brian Kinney. The FBI agent had supervised and observed the preparations for this
entire celebratory occasion, despite having major misgivings about the wisdom of Brian's participation in such a public event. During the course of a very long, very hard day, he and Emmett had been constantly at each other's throats - one focusing on his desire to create a perfect fantasy, and the other on his determination to thwart any possibility of risk to his primary responsibility. They had survived, but only barely, and it was unlikely that either would ever willingly speak to the other again. Chris had ultimately agreed to the arrangements - reluctantly - but had adamantly refused to accept any measure of recognition for his own actions.

Justin felt it - the electrical charge in the air that erupted the very moment that Brian's eyes met those of his primary defender. He felt it, and fought to suppress the resentment that rose in his gut. He managed to achieve a measure of control, but only barely; thus his smile was slightly tremulous, and his eyes were not completely free of shadow.

"Brian," said McClaren with a nod. "You do realize that this . . ." He swept one hand around in an inclusive manner, "is thoroughly stupid. You're taking a big risk here."

"You worry too much," Brian replied, one arm still draped possessively around Justin's shoulders, but there was some small nuance of regret in his expression. "This is my castle, where I am invulnerable to the slings and arrows . . ."

"Oh, puh-leeze!" McClaren interrupted. "You do remember what happened to Hamlet, in the end, don't you? They don't call it a tragedy for nothing."

"Just give it a rest, McFed. After all, your people vetted every single person here, so how do you think . . ."

"Brian." McClaren's response was flat, almost icy. "There are more than two thousand people here, and that's only counting the guests. Do you really think - among a crowd that size - that there's not a single soul who might want to shoot you down like a rabid dog?"

Brian looked up at that precise moment, and became aware of a particularly intense gaze, as he turned to meet the eyes of his CFO, eyes so dark they were almost black, and so steady that any emotion behind them was indecipherable. Brian was slightly disturbed to realize that he had no idea what that gaze might mean, especially since he had long ago learned to read Theodore like an open book.

"Probably more than one," he admitted finally. "But no one willing to risk going head to head with you and yours."

The FBI agent limited his response to a raised eyebrow as he started to move away into the crowd, eyes constantly scanning for anything - even the smallest thing - out of the ordinary.

"McClaren!" The sharp, familiar voice stopped him cold and made him turn back to look at the couple who had been the center of attention for this entire extravaganza. His face reflected his confusion, as he wondered why Justin Taylor would call out to him to demand his attention.

"Yes?"

Justin stepped forward, gesturing for Brian to stay where he was - a development that obviously did not please his partner - and moved close enough to almost invade McClaren's personal space - almost.

"Look!" he said firmly. "There's no denying that we've never really hit it off. Given the sting you two tried to pull on me in the beginning, I think that's understandable. And I think it probably won't
ever change very much. But . . ."

He stepped closer still and looked up directly into McClaren's eyes, and Brian - watching closely in
spite of a determination to avoid appearing jealous - noted the sheer stunning quality of blue on blue.
"Whatever I might feel about you, I know you saved his life, and I owe you for that. That trumps
everything else, so, if you ever need anything - anything at all - you only need to say so.
Understand?"

To the surprise of all three members of this elite circle - especially McClaren himself - the FBI agent
lifted one hand and touched it to the exquisite silk of Justin's cheek. "I'm sitting here," he said softly,
"trying to figure out which one of you is the luckiest son of a bitch in the world, and which one I
should feel sorry for."

Justin grinned. "Confusing, aren't we?" Then he stopped smiling and stepped even closer in order to
be able to speak directly into McClaren's ear. "But having said that - and meaning every word of it -
you need to remember this. Gratitude is one thing, but blind stupidity is something else. I know how
you feel about him. I even know enough to realize that it's not your fault. He does that to people. But
owing you for saving his life doesn't make me willing to stand aside and watch you stake a claim."
He then stepped back and lifted one hand to adjust the FBI agent's tie. "Are we clear on that?"

McClaren - for a single moment - was able to focus only on the face looking up at him, shutting out
everything and everyone else. Even the not-easily-ignored Brian Kinney. "Crystal," he answered
firmly. "But . . ." He paused just long enough to spot the glint of unease flare in Justin's eyes,
"probably not for the reason you think. You're cute when you're threatening."

With that, the FBI agent turned to Brian, gently stroked his thumb across a perfectly-restored jaw-line
and leaned forward just enough to murmur, "Better muzzle your terrier, Hot Stuff. I'm pretty sure he
thinks he's a rottweiler."

Brian laughed, and reached out to wrap his fingers around McClaren's bicep, to hold him in place for
a moment. "Thanks, Chris. I owe you."

McClaren grinned. "I'll remember, and I'll collect - sooner or later."

"Smartass!" Justin's snarky observation was not quite under his breath, as he resumed his place at
Brian's side.

For his part, Brian confined his response to quick chuckle as he once more took his young lover into
his arms.

"Want to dance again?" Justin asked, as the unmistakable opening rift of Nirvana's signature song
erupted through the speakers.

Brian tilted his head to stare down into starlit blue eyes as he summoned up a lazy, Kinney-classic
smile. "No. I want to fuck."

Justin's response was instantaneous, as he donned his trademark sunshine grin, grabbed his partner's
hand and started to pull him through the crowd. "I thought you'd never ask."

"Three guesses where they're going," said a lazy, slightly gin-buzzed voice in his ear, as Ted turned
to observe the new body beside him at the bar. Melanie Marcus lifted a martini glass toward the
departing couple. "First two don't count."
The accountant watched as she drained the last of her cocktail. "I thought you were drinking whiskey."

"I was, but martinis are so much more elegant. So much more . . . Brian Kinney, don't you think?"

"Not really," he replied dryly. "Since Brian mostly drinks JB on the rocks, detouring occasionally into really good Scotch. Cocktails aren't really his thing."

"Yeah?" Melanie took a moment to lift the olive-laden toothpick from her glass to her mouth and crunch down - hard - on the offending vegetable. "I think cock-tails are exactly his thing, if you get my drift. And as for the bourbon, pity it's not hemlock - chased with arsenic."

"Mel, what are you doing here? Don't you think . . ."

"I think," she said slowly, carefully, "that I've earned the right to join the celebration, since I definitely contributed to the cause. Because I gave our dear Brian something he's wanted for a long, long time. I gave him an excuse to come between me and my partner; to take my son away from me; and - last but certainly not least . . ." She paused to gesture to the bartender to bring her another round. "Now where was I? Oh, yeah. I gave him a method to make sure that 'Mikey' will always know his place, as Brian's perfectly obedient little bitch. Because he'll never be free of Big, Bad Brian again. Not now that he owes him his life and his daughter. And me? I get to be the villain of the piece. How about that, Teddie? Ain't that a crock of shit?"

"Mel," said the accountant in a strangely cold voice, "you were the one who tried to use your daughter as a weapon, to coerce Michael into doing what you wanted. Are you really so surprised that you got caught in the act?"

"If fucking Kinney had kept his nose out of it . . ."

"Again," he interrupted, "you know him better than that. You can say a lot of ugly things about Brian, but you can't accuse him of refusing to come to the rescue of a friend in need." He shifted to look more directly into her eyes, and his voice took on a faintly mocking note. "On the other hand, you can question his motives if you like; I sure do. I wonder if he does it because he really cares about us poor little peons, or if he does it because he revels in playing the role of the white knight charging in to save the day. But - in the end - that usually doesn't matter to anybody, except maybe the people who get screwed in the process."

He then lifted his glass of sparkling water to propose a toast. "Welcome to the land of the royally screwed, an appropriate term in dealing with the perpetual 'only and ever true king of Babylon'."

Melanie's eyes went wide, and then she laughed, a harsh, strident bark that sounded as if it were forcing its way through her throat, damaging delicate tissues along the way. Teddie did not quite recoil, but he was forced to take a deep breath as he sensed the dark undertones of her mirth; he couldn't help but wonder when she'd laughed last, or even if she might ever laugh again.

"So," she said, once she regained a measure of emotional control, "what - exactly - are you doing about it?"

He shrugged. "What is there to do, except grin and bear it?"

"You're not grinning," she pointed out, eagerly accepting the fresh cocktail pushed toward her by the bartender. "And you're hardly the type to just 'bear it', are you? So - I repeat - what are you doing about it? I know you too well, Teddie. You may come across like an innocent little ingénue, but, under the sweetness and light, there's a layer of cynicism and a talent for subterfuge. In other words,
you're capable of being a devious little bastard. So what's up?"

He sipped at his water, taking a moment to look around him to make sure no one was close enough to monitor his words. "Best not to talk about private things, here. You know that."

"I do," she agreed. Her words were casual enough, but her tone was cold. "But I think I've earned the right to be included."

But Ted was shaking his head. "Not in this, Mel. I'm sorry, but this . . . this is my last chance. My last opportunity to reclaim what Bri . . ." He paused then, and swallowed around the lump in his throat. "My last shot at regaining what I've lost, and I simply can't take the risk."

But if he had imagined that she might back down - out of some notion of respect for his desperation - he was doomed to disappointment. She simply stepped closer and looked up into his eyes, and the fury he read in those inky depths served to remind him that Melanie was not a person to be taken lightly. Small in stature perhaps, but very large in her capacity for exacting vengeance from those she chose to target.

"I get it, Teddie," she said softly. "I understand that you can't let me in on this, but, if it's going to hold him accountable, then I should, at least, be allowed . . ."

"It's not," he replied calmly, refusing to look away from the fire in her gaze. "In fact, it's going to . . ." He paused, stricken by the flash of awareness dawning in her face. "It's going to make him richer than he's ever been. It's going to make him remember the debt he owes - the one he's always owed but chose to forget in his need to reclaim his boytoy. In the end, he's going to understand who should be . . ."

She lifted her glass, and there was no mistaking the cold resentment in her eyes. "No. Let me guess. His best friend? His good luck charm?" Then she smiled, but it wasn't a real smile. "Oh, no, wait. I know. This time, it's going to be different. This time, you're going to be the white knight, charging to the rescue."

He wanted to scoff, to deny it. But he couldn't.

She laughed again. "And you're not even going to give me a chance to watch, are you? Because you want to try to erase his image of you as my - what - my accomplice? Is that how you see yourself now? Jesus! You really have drunk the Kinney Kool-Ade, haven't you, Teddie? You want to distance yourself from me and suppress any suggestion that you and I might be friends."

She lifted her glass in a mock toast and continued, in a voice heavy with derision. "Well, congrats, Theodore. I guess the old saying is true. If you can't lick 'em, join 'em. Although, in this case, I think you better be ready to do a lot of licking, too. On your knees preferably - and eager."

"Melanie, I . . ."

"Ms. Marcus." The new voice was steady, firm without being loud or intrusive, but definitely determined to be heard.

Ted closed his eyes, suddenly wishing to be anywhere - anywhere at all - except here, in this typically chaotic, Babylonian atmosphere, about to witness a face-off between two legal piranhas.

Liam Quinn was dressed in a beautifully tailored Armani suit, a subtle charcoal gray plaid, with a Versace silk tie in a dark paisley print, all of which served to emphasize the changeable gem tones of his eyes. He looked dashing, sophisticated, cosmopolitan, and completely unassailable. And very, very focused.
"I'm a bit astonished to see you here," he continued, as Melanie seemed momentarily stunned to silence. "But it's a stroke of good fortune for me. Am I correct in assuming that you've been advised . . ."

"Oh, just cut the crap!" Stunned no longer, Melanie stared at her fellow attorney with eyes dark enough to reflect the deepest regions of hell. "Of course, I've been advised. As you most certainly know, since I had to sign an acknowledgement of receipt of the court order. So I'm assuming that you've already dispatched your minions to . . ."

"I don't have minions," he interrupted, and Ted was mildly surprised to note that there was an element of amusement in the man's tone. "And I wouldn't dispatch them, if I did. This is a family issue and should stay that way. Therefore, Mr. Novotny and his partner will be flying down to Miami Sunday afternoon, to pick up your daughter, although . . ." He paused, and the gleam of amusement grew a bit brighter in his eyes. "They will be accompanied by appropriate personnel."

"Appropriate," echoed Melanie slowly. "As in cops - at my parents' door?"

"Nothing so official," Quinn replied with a quirky smile. "As a matter of fact, in the interest of discretion, Brian has decided to send his chief of security along. To avoid any unpleasantness or confusion."

With a smile, he accepted a cocktail glass - salt-rimmed and brimming with a pale amber concoction - from the bartender before continuing. "Of course, I have no idea whether or not the FBI might choose to participate." His smile was only a tiny bit coy. "They don't feel any need to keep me informed of their actions. But, if Brian asked . . ."

"Of course." Melanie's response was almost vague, faintly pensive. "Even the feds fall under the spell of the mighty Kinney."

Quinn's attention was focused on Melanie's reactions, and he realized that he needed to look more deeply into the circumstances of Brian's history with this woman. If he were to have any hope of successfully safeguarding his new client's interests, he would have to be able to understand how and why Melanie Marcus hated the man so viciously, so that he could anticipate her actions in the future. He had little doubt that she would continue to be a source of trouble and controversy.

She was therefore his primary focus throughout the conversation, but he had noticed a faint shift in Ted's demeanor when he had disclosed that Lance Mathis would be a member of the support team involved in retrieving Michael's daughter. The accountant seemed to be listening more closely now, and the attorney suddenly wondered why. But there was no time to address that issue at this moment, as Melanie Marcus's demeanor had also shifted, and she was leaning close now, deliberately invading Quinn's personal space.

"Now you listen to me, Pretty Boy," she almost snarled. "Brian can dispatch his entire army of willing Nellie-bottoms if he likes. But if anyone does anything - even the tiniest thing - to threaten my parents . . ."

"No worries on that account," Quinn interrupted. "As long as no one takes any action to circumvent the court order, everything will be fine. I've checked out your parents, and I don't think they're the type, although I admit to being less certain - about you. Although . . ." He hesitated and leaned forward to make sure that his message was clear and unambiguous. "I'm sure you do understand that any attempt by you to interfere with the court ordered action would result in your disbarment. You'd never again be licensed to practice law in this country, and that - well - that would be a real shame, wouldn't it? You can't very well maintain a rep as a legal barracuda, if you are - in fact - not legal."
"Is that a threat, Counselor?" Melanie's voice was flat, uninflected, and intended to intimidate.

"Of course not." Quinn's quirky smile was a flagrant indication of her failure to get the reaction for which she'd hoped. "Just a friendly observation."

With that, he lifted his glass toward her in a not-quite-mocking manner and turned away to rejoin the celebration.

"Mel," said Ted softly, tentatively, "I'm . . ."

"Yeah?" she interrupted, her voice sharp and cold. "Well, you should be. You all should be." Then she smiled, but there was only ice in her eyes. "And one day, you will be. All of you, from pathetic little peasant . . ." Her expression revealed clearly who it was that she would cast in that role, "to the mighty king himself. You'll all be sorry."

She then drained her glass and threw it across the bar where it smashed against an etched brass panel. In a matter of seconds, security staffers were there, looking to intercept the culprit, but Melanie - looking every inch the part of a member of the social elite - had already made good her escape, wearing a self-satisfied smile. It had been a foolish thing to do, of course; it wasn't as if the mighty Kinney would ever even know about it - or care, even if he did know. But it had made her feel better. Just for a moment, and just a tiny bit.

Who knew that smashing something could be so cathartic? She was outside, noticing that the night had grown chilly enough to make her wish she'd worn something a bit less revealing than the sleeveless black Diane Von Furstenburg sheath with the plunging neckline. It was the smartest dress she owned (and the most expensive) but it didn't provide much in the way of warmth. As she walked toward the car park, the thought struck her again.

Smashing something - even something as small and insignificant as a cocktail glass - had provided a tiny little measure of comfort. Perhaps . . . she almost stumbled as the idea blazed into her mind . . . perhaps smashing something bigger - much bigger - would offer true solace; enough to ease the ache in her heart and the rage in her belly.

Perhaps it was time to aim higher.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Morning was just a glimmer of pale coral in the eastern sky when he awakened and had to sort through the touch and the feel of sensations around him, in order to be certain that he really was where his mind placed him. It had been too long, and too much had happened for him to feel safe in assuming.

He took a deep breath, opening his eyes as he reveled in the scent and the ambiance of his surroundings. The loft - elegant, serene, minimalist: home. This was home, as no other place else ever would be. And the body that was nestled, back to chest against him, wrapped within the shelter of his arms - that was home too. Even though he'd never actually admitted it; not even to himself. And even though he knew it would eventually be taken from him.

Nobody in the world was better at reading the handwriting on the wall than Brian Kinney. He'd had lots and lots of practice.

He buried his face in the lush silk of Justin's hair, and eased his body closer, snugging his crotch against the sensual swell of that perfectly molded little ass, waiting for the ideal moment. He hadn't long to wait. Despite the fact that Justin was not - would never be - a morning person, the young
artist emerged from the grip of beautiful slumber with a drowsy smile, turning to seek the mouth that nibbled at the softness of his nape, understanding, though still partially asleep, that the means to reach out and grab his ultimate dream was within his reach.

"Welcome home," he murmured, burying his face in the downy shadows beneath Brian's jaw-line. "This place . . . it's not the same when you're gone. It's just a big empty room - cold and dark and full of shadows."

Brian's smile was not quite a smirk, but it was close. "That's very Byron, you know. You going soft on me?"

"Byron, huh? If I remember rightly, Byron was classified as 'dangerous to know', which sounds delicious to me, and very appropriate, considering the company I keep." With a slow, lust-filled smile, Justin grabbed his lover's hand and nestled it against the swelling in his groin. "There is absolutely nothing going soft around here."

Brian folded his lips to hide his smile, noting that the sleepy purr in Justin's voice simply made him that much more irresistible, but knowing that Justin would not enjoy being regarded as an adorable young cub.

He extended his fingers to explore that hardness, and felt his breath catch in his throat, suddenly grateful for Justin's habit of dropping his clothes wherever he happened to remove them in his haste to get into bed, bare and eager; of course, that did not change the fact that he frequently complained that his young lover was a first-class slob. Nevertheless, for this kind of immediate access, he could deal with the slobbishness. He took Justin's mouth in a deep, probing kiss and thrust his hand more deeply into the V between his young lover's legs to explore the velvet of scrotum and testicles. Moving smoothly, enjoying the sensation of skin to bare skin, he shifted and rolled over to cover Justin, and Justin's legs opened to allow him to settle between them. He pushed further with his fingers and found the puckered rosebud of Justin's most intimate entrance, but refrained from pushing inside. He could have gone further, probing and thrusting his way into that sweet, dark channel, and he knew that Justin would have accepted whatever he chose to do without complaint. Beyond an occasional grunt or slight grimace, Justin never voiced displeasure when their sex got rough enough to cause him some measure of discomfort.

But Brian had endured enough pain of his own in recent months, and had promised himself that he would never again be guilty of inflicting it on his companion, no matter how willing Justin might be to endure it.

It was the matter of a moment to retrieve a condom and the lube from its customary niche in the bedside cabinet, and Justin was a writhing, incoherent tangle of desire by the time Brian had finished preparing him. Then, utilizing a strength that he hadn't been certain he could muster, he twisted his body and pulled Justin over him, adjusting their positions until his young lover was perfectly poised, the lovely pucker of his entrance just brushing against Brian's massive erection.

"Ride me," Brian whispered then, his voice rough with need, and he had the pleasure of watching Justin's pupils dilate as desire swept through him like wildfire, causing his nipples to harden and his rock-hard cock to swell even larger and tremble with need. The blond did not wait to be invited twice. Instead, he simply steadied himself by bracing one hand against Brian's chest while grasping his lover's erection in the other in order to guide himself down - no pause, no hesitation, no holding back. He impaled himself - hard and fast - and Brian, unable to resist the urge, simultaneously thrust upwards, adjusting slightly to gain the perfect angle, to bury himself in that incredible liquid heat.

Both gasped as the connection was completed.
"Too long," muttered Justin.

"You never . . . complained before," Brian managed to respond.

"No, Asshole. Too long . . . since we . . . did this. Too long apart."

Brian might have dredged up a typical Kinney retort, but found himself unable to form a single coherent thought as Justin lifted himself quickly, only to slam back down.

So this was how it was to be - no gentleness, no uncertainty, no easy pacing, no tentative jockeying for the right position. No romance. Just raw and hard - occasionally awkward - and each consuming the other.

Brian bit his lip as he braced his heels against the mattress and dug his hands into the creamy flesh of Justin's hips in order to gain leverage (not inflicting pain did not seem to apply to avoiding leaving bruises) to be able to meet power with power as they sought and fought to get ever closer, to drive ever deeper - to become one flesh. As his mind blazed with the pyrotechnics of ecstasy building, approaching that pinnacle of mindless perfection, he realized a fundamental truth. He'd been wrong . . . before. This - this right here in this moment - this was the only real home he'd ever known.

It was raining when he eased out of the bed and moved to stand silhouetted against the huge windows that looked out over Tremont Avenue. If there'd been anyone around to notice, it would have been inevitable that the image of his nude body - a slim shadow against the chiaroscuro patterns created by the rain - would have generated wonder and desire in the eyes of the beholder. But no one was around, except Justin who, sated and fulfilled and blissfully happy, had promptly snuggled back into the warm comfort of sleep once their lovemaking was done, happily putting away all worries and concerns to be addressed some other time, with an ease only the very young could ever achieve.

For a while, Brian simply stood there in the semi-gloom, watching Justin sleep. He would, of course, never admit to doing such a sentimental thing, should anyone ever catch him at it, but the sight of pale golden hair nestled against dark linens was curiously comforting - an image that he hoped he could hold on to for a very long time.

An image to remember.

Finally, with a soft sigh, he turned away and laid his palm against the glass, noting that the distortions created by the rain created a pleasing, abstract version of the view, which was ordinarily a bit pedestrian. He'd always enjoyed being able to stand in this spot and look out across the cityscape, but he knew it had more to do with feeling a certain smug superiority - the kind enjoyed by residents of those legendary ivory towers reserved for the socially elite - than any real fondness for the view itself. But this . . . Justin could paint this, he thought as the lights from a passing car reflected and refracted glints of amber and russet against the glass. Justin should paint this.

He lit a cigarette and moved to his desk which was buried under a helter-skelter pile of papers, his face touched by an indulgent smile. Justin - so perfect in so many ways - but always and forever a slob of the first order. A flaw, of course, but one that he could live with. The smile became a frown. A flaw that he would have liked to live with, but . . .

The papers were not arranged in any particular order, of course, but order was unnecessary for him to recognize what they were. He settled himself into the ridiculously comfortable desk chair and went through the stack slowly - sketches of a hillside setting with a river curving away into the distance; architectural sketches - rough drafts of different styles, different facades; even minimalist outlines of
floor plans and building details - an arched doorway here, a freestanding fireplace there, a mullioned window overlooking a courtyard, a small free-form pool with water splashing into it from a tiny, three-tiered stone structure. And - at the bottom of the stack - a sketch of him, sprawled in a lounge chair, asleap at poolside.

It was all very rough - barely even imagined at this stage. But there was already enough for him to realize that the house would be beautiful. Not a mansion in the classic sense. No towers or turrets; no wings or ells or sweeping staircases or soaring sprawl. Just a house in the end - but a perfect house. Perfect for the two of them.

The house that Justin would build.

Brian closed his eyes and allowed himself - for a single moment - to visualize the finished product. He knew nothing about architecture or floor plans or structural design, but he did know about beauty and style. Most importantly of all, he knew Justin. It would be a beautiful house, and he intended to make certain that Justin got the chance to design and build it - his own place in the world.

Time for coffee, he thought, as he looked toward the door that concealed the entrance to the chamber he usually thought of as his 'Justin Gallery', at those times when he wasn't thinking of it as 'Brian's Folly' - the one he'd built himself during a month-long span of sheer madness. If anyone ever asked for an explanation, he knew he wouldn't be able to provide one that wouldn't make him look like an obsessive stalker.

He frowned as he retrieved a mug from the cabinet and reached for the coffee pot. He had never been obsessive about anything in his life, except - perhaps - his grooming and/or his appearance. His work, maybe, or the condition of his loft or his car. His haircut or his manicure. Or his weight, or . . . Okay, okay. So he actually did have a few obsessive/compulsive traits. But not like this; not in the form of a desperate need to pull someone - one particular someone - into the protective circle of his arms and hold him there, safe and sheltered and . . . owned? Could that possibly be the right word? Did he really want to own Justin?

It was a disturbing thought - so disturbing that it stopped him cold in his tracks as he opened the refrigerator to check for breakfast supplies, and he stood for a moment, transfixed and unseeing and failing to notice that Cynthia had, as usual, thought of everything, including restocking his refrigerator. It was only when the chilled air raised goose bumps on his bare skin that he emerged from his musing sufficiently to evaluate his choices: milk, sweet cream butter, fresh-squeezed orange juice and a bottle of the ridiculously expensive guava juice that he favored, a crisper filled with a variety of fresh fruit, an assortment of Bruegger's bagels, fresh eggs and turkey bacon. Most of the bounty was obviously intended to assuage Justin's voracious appetite. But there - sitting dead center at eye level - was a box labeled simply Prantl's.

Cynthia was dead meat; he was going to kill her.

He opened the box slowly and found exactly what he'd expected to find: Prantl's delectable, irresistible, perfect apple strudel, which contained more calories in one little serving than he usually allowed himself to consume in an entire day.

This particular confection - prepared with loving attention to detail by the staff of the old bakery on Walnut Street over in Shadyside - was one of the few fond memories of his first years in Pittsburgh. He had given it up - reluctantly - when he'd reached a point where he could no longer deny that his addiction would eventually ruin the perfect body he'd spent a lifetime developing.

Cynthia would definitely pay for this.
Of course, he didn't really have to eat it. There were four slices there, and Justin could easily devour it all at one sitting. But... he told himself he was only taking a deep breath because the air was slightly chilly - even bracing; that it had nothing to do with the enchanting scent of cinnamon and brown sugar and whatever other lovely aromas he couldn't even begin to name.

"Shit!" he muttered, removing the box from the fridge and moving to the cabinet to retrieve a crystal serving dish from the cupboard. He could, of course, simply grab a plastic plate, except for two things: one - Prantl's apple strudel on a plastic plate seemed almost like sacrilege, and two - he didn't own a plastic plate.

Instead, he carefully placed the strudel on a china saucer and set it in the microwave, feeling a bit like he was guilty of something horrible - some kind of blasphemy for nuking such a culinary classic - but the strudel was, nevertheless, better warm, and he didn't know what temperature to use in the oven. So microwaved it would be, and he'd hope for the best.

Still, he was careful not to overdo it; he was willing to risk 30 seconds, but no more. The quiet ding of the timer rang out, and he retrieved the dish, hoping for the best.

The aroma was perfect so, with a tiny smile, he transferred the strudel to the crystal dish, poured out two mugs of the French roast coffee that was the only kind he would allow in his home, placed everything on a sleek, chrome serving tray, added silverware, cream and sugar, and two linen napkins, before carrying it all into the bedroom.

As he approached the bed, Justin stirred, shifting so that one foot found its way out of the cozy nest of bed linens to brave the chill of morning, and Brian stood, momentarily transfixed. Then he chided himself for his silliness.

It was a foot, for God's sake. Just a foot - like any other foot. Only, it wasn't, and he knew it. It was Justin's foot, and that was enough to make it special; even perfect - even if the foot in question could have used a good pedicure. Maybe later, he thought, with a smile that was unabashedly lascivious.

"Rise and shine, Sleeping Beauty," he announced, lowering the tray to the mattress as he sank to his knees. "Time waits for no man - or twink, as the case may be."

"s... s... a... d... G... w... o... w... "

The meaning of the words emerging from under the covers was clear, even if the words were not.

Brian grinned. "Come on, Sunshine. It's not every day you get served breakfast in bed. Especially by me."

A soft groan was followed by a moment of stillness. Then there was another shift of the covers and a pair of bleary eyes opened beneath a mop of golden hair and tried to focus on the figure waiting beside the bed.

"Breakfast?" The voice was hoarse, rough with sleep, but clear enough.

"Yep."

"In bed?"

Brian summoned up an impatient sigh. "No. I thought I'd toss it out the window and see if you can jump fast enough to catch it."

"Ver' funny." The eyes had disappeared again, as the body wriggled more deeply into the warmth of
the linens.

"Okay," replied Brian, a smug certainty in his tone. "Guess I'll just have to eat all this strudel by myself."

"Strudel?" There was no hint of drowsiness in that word, and the sleeping prince was suddenly wide awake and upright. "Really? You went for strudel?"

Brian spread his arms, allowing morning sunlight to emphasize the bareness of his body. "Do I look like I just went for strudel?"

Justin's smile was wicked. "Poor Prantl's. They don't know what they're missing."

Brian reached out and cupped pale perfect skin with his hand and leaned forward to kiss deliciously bee-stung lips. "Good morning, Sunshine."

He started to pull away then, but Justin had other ideas and reached out to pull him closer.

"Hey," he murmured around eager lips, "the strudel . . ."

"Isn't going anywhere. It'll be even better . . . after."

"After what?" Brian asked, as he carefully set the tray on the floor and slid back into bed, nestling into his young lover's arms.

"The main course," Justin replied with a grin. "I need my protein."

And he proceeded to demonstrate exactly how hungry he was and how he intended to get what he needed.

He was right, of course. Half an hour later, the strudel was still there.

It was perfect, but not - quite - as perfect as what came before.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Brian, though certainly not early, was the first to arrive at Kinnetik that morning, except for the security team that was always present, and the caretaker, upstairs in his own little apartment. But none of them would have any reason to disturb Brian's inner sanctum, on this morning in particular. They all seemed to have figured out that this needed to be a private moment; that Brian needed solitude to enable him to reclaim his eminent domain.

He found it exactly as he remembered it except for the one new feature - a large skylight situated directly above his desk which he had commissioned just a few days before he'd been attacked. In all the uproar and trauma of recent months, he had completely forgotten about it, and found that it made a bigger difference than he'd expected in that it changed the quality of the light in the large room, making every object appear just a bit brighter, every color just that much more intense. He decided that he liked it a lot, and he spent the first ten minutes there just soaking in the combination of sweet memory and new sensation and enjoying the easy solitude as much as the sense of belonging. It had been too long since he'd sampled either.

By the time Cynthia arrived, with her briefcase tucked under her arm and bearing fresh coffee and croissants, he was already ensconced at his desk, poring over files and photographs and sketches,
tossing some aside and laying others in a different stack, with great care.

"What's happened to Jack and Tony?" he barked as she bustled into the room. "They decide to go straight and leave all their gay fashion sense behind?"

"And good morning to you too," she replied, completely unintimidated. "I didn't expect you this early. Justin wear you out?"

He grinned, amused, just as she intended, and knowing he was being played, but not minding in the least. He glanced toward the ceiling as he pointed upward. "I'd forgotten."

She nodded, and suddenly seemed reluctant to meet his gaze. "I know. Me too. But when I found out you were coming back, I wanted to do... something. It just seemed like there should be some way to... Well, anyway, that's when I came across the paperwork for it, and I called in the contractor. He completed it in three days, so I gave him a bonus for his efforts."

"Good," he said softly. "It's perfect."

She took a moment to study his face. Then she smiled, a spark of mischief glinting in her eyes. "The light becomes you. Like you really needed something else to make you prettier."

She was expecting a smart retort and was a bit surprised when she saw the smile that touched his lips and noted a gentleness in his face that she had seldom seen before, but it was gone almost before she could identify it.

"So," he said firmly, "Jack and Tony?"

Cynthia tried to suppress a smile - and couldn't. "I think they're suffering under the mistaken impression that you're going to come back a changed man, demanding less flamboyance and more discretion."

"Yeah?" he looked up and favored her with a quirky grin. "Well, they need to get their heads out of their asses and get back to work with flair and sass. Fuck discretion. That's not what I pay them for."

"I'm pretty sure they'll get the message," she replied calmly, filling a cup with his favorite coffee blend. "If it comes from you. They've been pretty miserable without you around, you know."

Then she did turn and look at him. "Why are you wearing sunglasses?" she asked slowly.

He did not look up. "Just Dr. Mengele being his obsessive/compulsive self. Something about preventing infection in the fluids in my eyes. I won't be wearing them for long."

"Really?" she replied, trying to wait for him to raise his head and look at her. But he didn't.

"Yeah, really." He sounded impatient, almost annoyed. "Got your PDA?"

"When," she asked as she dropped into one of the smart, easy chairs in front of his desk, "do I not have it? What do you..."

"I want you to call Jennifer Taylor - I assume she's still using the bastard's name, right? - and get her to prepare the papers on that piece of property she showed Justin the other day. If she can convince the buyer to knock off a few thousand dollars, that would be great, but it won't change anything if she can't. I want the deal done - and quickly. And call Emmett to get the name of the architect who did their place. Justin mentioned him specifically, and I want to get him on a retainer to help Justin
with the details of the house. The artistic part he can handle on his own, but the structural requirements might require professional input."

She nodded, entering notes quickly. "So you're . . ."

"It'll be a good project for him - something for him to focus on."

She looked up then, hearing it in his voice - and not wanting to hear it. "And why, exactly, would he need something to focus on, unless . . ." She took a deep breath and felt a hard knot form in her gut. "Unless he'll need to be distracted, so he doesn't notice what's happening. Until it's too late."

He did look at her then, and something in the way the light struck his face gave her an answer, even if she couldn't really see beyond the lenses that covered his eyes. She found, in that moment, that she hadn't really wanted the answer after all.

"Brian," she said softly, "you have to tell him."

He sat back and stared at her, and she didn't need to see his eyes to know that there was anger sparking there. "Why would I do that?"

"Because he deserves to know. Because he loves you. Doesn't that count for . . ."

"Haven't we already had this discussion?"

"We have," she admitted, "but I keep hoping."

"You do recall Weinstein's definition of insanity, don't you?"

She shrugged. "I do, but I can't help it. This . . ." She stopped to draw another deep, shaky breath. "This is going to destroy you both, and I'm having trouble accepting it. I hate what it's going to do to Justin, but only half as much as I hate what it's going to do to you. Why must you . . ."

"Because he deserves better. Because I won't let him throw his life away out of some misguided sense of obligation. He doesn't owe me anything, Tink. It's entirely the other way around. He gave me back my life - my reason to live. This . . . this is how it has to be."

"Brian . . ."

"Tink," he said softly, not quite able to cover the note of desperation in his voice, "please don't do this. I need you to help me. This is . . . I can't do it alone."

For a moment, there was only silence, until Cynthia favored him with a weary grin. "Wow! Bet that hurt, didn't it?"

"You have no idea."

"Actually," she replied, reaching out to touch his hand, "I do. Sometimes I think I know you better than you know yourself."

She sat back and looked down at her PDA. "Okay. Let's get to the nitty-gritty, shall we? Have you made provisions for how the income is to be distributed - who gets what and how much and what happens in case of emergency?"

He shrugged. "I have, but basically, that's going to be your call. You're a full partner now, so you have the right to override any arrangements I might make. For all intents and purposes . . ." He paused and swallowed hard. "Kinnetik is now yours, to run as you see fit. I've had Quinn draw up
the documents to make it ironclad. No one will have the right to interfere. Your only obligation to me is to safeguard the company for my son's future, and to make sure that Justin has everything he needs to help him build a new life." He smiled wearily. "That'll be the hard part, I'm afraid. You'll have to persuade him for me."

She chose to remain silent as she turned to pull a sheaf of documents from her briefcase. "These are new contracts, for Remson and Liberty Air. You need to sign them, and I think it would be a good idea if you call Remson personally. He's going to freak out when . . ."

"What part of 'Kinnetik is yours to run' do you not understand? You don't need me to . . ."

"Brian," she said firmly, fixing him with an impatient stare, "if you insist on being stupid, I'm going to think those bastards managed to inflict permanent brain damage. All the official paperwork in the world is not going to change the fact that your special clients - the ones that put Kinnetik on the map in the first place - are never going to be satisfied with a substitute. They'll tolerate me, when they have to, but if you think they're going to stand by and watch you just walk away, think again. Like it or not, you're going to have to stay involved. If not, your big-money accounts are just going to steal away in the night, probably lured by the big boys in New York or LA, who, as you know perfectly well, would go orgasmic at the prospect of stealing your biggest clients. Most of them have never forgiven you for landing such major accounts in the first place."

He smiled, disgruntled but convinced. "All right. Give them to me."

She laid the documents - all nine of them - out for his approval. "Did you look at Myra's mock ups for Graciella Jewels? I think they're really excellent, but . . ."

He quickly reached out and pressed his hand to her mouth. "You gotta stop that. Your judgment is every bit as good as mine - especially on things like women's jewelry. But yes, I did look over them. She had a good idea with the Fantasia-style approach, but she needs to lose the Goth details. She's a little too fond of flat black. Have her rework it, concentrating on gem-tones, which will go nicely with the jewels. Oh, and concentrate on the red-headed model; the blond is a little washed-out against all the bold color and the brunette is a bit too Morticia Adams for my taste."

Her smile was indulgent. "You saw all that in what? A ten-second scan? Jesus, Brian, you're so good at this you're scary. Oh, and just so you know, we have a new client, although I understand he's not really new - to you."

He frowned. "Who are you . . ."

"Fremont-Briggs." She settled back into her chair and met his gaze squarely. "Apparently, Sharon's dad is convinced that he never found another model that lived up to your work in his Bare Bronze spreads, so he figures it's best to let you try to find one for him."

Brian quickly looked away, unable to deal with the affection and the uncertainty in her eyes. "One more thing I need to leave in your capable hands. There has to be a perfect surfer out there somewhere."

She grinned. "In Pittsburgh. You don't expect much, do you? However, it'll be my pleasure, I'm sure, but don't take it lightly, Brian. It's a huge national account, on the verge of going international. Pretty soon, the advertising world is going to be pea green with envy over your achievements."

"Yeah," he replied softly. "Brian Kinney, a big, fat success story."

She tried not to shudder as she heard the note of despair in his voice, and looked up quickly, to find
him gazing up at the painting hanging on his wall, a Justin Taylor original - bright and bold and beautiful - and she was surprised to realize that she was grateful that she couldn't see his eyes.

"Are you ever coming back?"

Brian was slow to answer. "I don't know," he said finally. "I hope so, but . . ."

She felt suddenly, unutterably weary. "But only if your new miracle doctor can fix the problem." She didn't wait for a response; she knew she was right. "You know, all you have to do is tell Justin the truth," she continued. "He'd wait for you . . . forever."

He took a moment to light a cigarette before taking off his sunglasses and looking up at her with eyes gone so dark now that she could barely determine where iris ended and pupil began. She looked away quickly, before realizing that he hadn't noticed her reaction. "No," he said softly, "he wouldn't. He never has."

She turned back to study his face, and her voice grew very gentle. "You can't see me, can you? Not really."

He sighed and lifted one hand to rub his eyes with thumb and forefinger. "I see you . . . well enough," he replied.

"So what happens if the treatment is successful? You're the one and only Brian Kinney again, and you come back, and he's gone?"

He shrugged. "Then he's living the life he was meant to live."

"Brian . . ."

"Enough, Tink!" She didn't think she'd ever heard him sound so tired. "I really don't want to argue with you."

"Since when?" she laughed.

She had, apparently, struck exactly the right note to drag him back from the brink of despair, as he responded to her challenge with a quick smirk. "Okay," he said slowly, before sitting up straight, replacing his shades on his face, and favoring her with a sardonic smirk. "Apple strudel? Really, Cynthia? Apple strudel?"

She shrugged. "You're too skinny."

"No. I'm perfect, and I intend to stay . . ."

Her grin was irrepressible. "In that case, you might want to try to make a quick get-away through the back door."

"Why would I . . ."

She huffed an impatient sigh. "If you think there's any way in hell that Emmett didn't notice how the two of you sneaked out last night without so much as sampling his culinary masterpieces, then you better think again."

Brian groaned. "So where is everybody's favorite fairy?"

"Right here," rang out a familiar voice, as Emmett swept into the room, his turquoise silk shirt brilliant in the midday light pouring in through the new skylight. He was pushing a large cart, loaded
with silver and crystal covered dishes, while his brand new associate brought up the rear with a silver wine cooler and a bottle of a vintage Pahlmeyer Chardonnay. "And if you think you're getting out of here without tasting the food that I prepared especially for you, then you got another think coming."

Ten seconds later, Justin was breezing in, looking famished despite the three extra large slices of apple strudel he had consumed earlier, and Brian knew that it was time to concede defeat. He was beaten.

Still he had one more thing that he needed to say to Cynthia. "Hey," he said softly, pulling her back toward him with a gentle hand as he handed her the stack of documents he'd signed, adding one new one to the group, "file this where it will be easy to find. I've put Liam Quinn on a permanent retainer, so he'll be instantly available if you need him - or if anyone else needs him. Comprende?"

She tilted her head and looked at him with affection. "You know what's totally fucking unfair?"

"No," he answered with a diffident smile, "but I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"You bet I am. It's horrible that you do whatever it takes to save everyone - except yourself."

There was no time for him to answer as she moved away, and Justin took a spot directly under the skylight, extending his arms and reveling in the warmth and turning in place, forming a vision gilded by liquid gold, his hair a halo of amber around his face. Brian was momentarily stricken speechless, wondering how he sometimes managed to forget how beautiful his young lover was.

He had little time to dwell on the thought because Justin quickly abandoned his light-hearted moment in the spotlight to come quickly around the desk and plop himself into Brian's lap, while Emmett and Cedric arranged lunch on the conference table.

"Are you done here?" Justin asked softly.

"Not yet. Why?"

Justin took a moment to nuzzle at a space beneath Brian's jaw. "I have needs."

Brian laughed. "Here?"


"If you don't stop, your new 'old' friend is going to get a show he won't soon forget, and Cynthia is going to take a bullwhip to the both of us."

Justin paused and looked as if he was seriously considering ignoring that threat. Then he smiled, dropped a quick but thorough kiss on Brian's lips, and stood up. "After lunch then," he murmured. "Better eat hearty, Old Man, because I promise that you're going to need all your strength."

Brian laughed, a full, robust laugh that was rare for him at the best of times, and Cynthia - busily sorting through all the documents he'd signed for her - took a moment to close her eyes and enjoy the sound of it. It had been too long since she'd heard that warm level of easy amusement from the man who had somehow become the center of her life, even if she'd never meant for him to be.

She looked up then and saw that Lance Mathis had joined their little group, and was watching her with a glint of laughter in his eyes. There was, of course, no denying it; Brian truly was the center of her life . . . for now.
The Kinnetik building was sometimes virtually empty on Saturdays, barring only cleaning and security staff, but this was no ordinary Saturday. Ted was not surprised to find the parking lot busy, and a number of staffers’ vehicles parked there. A glance through the various office windows revealed that a lot of people had decided to ignore the opportunity to take the weekend off, and show up for work after all.

This was not particularly remarkable. Brian Kinney demanded a lot from his employees and had never in his life chosen to suffer fools - gladly or at all, and he had a particular dislike for clock-watchers. But he was also incredibly generous to those who served him well, and always appreciative for efforts above and beyond the call - and the clock.

That was sufficient reason for many of his employees - particularly in the creative departments - to work weekends. Inspiration, after all, frequently struck at the oddest, most inconvenient times, and every person who had ever experienced such a moment knew that it was fleeting and best grabbed quickly. But on this particular weekend, there was an even better reason for them to show up here. Most had figured out that today would mark the return of the hero; Brian was back in town and chances were better than even that he'd drop in at his office. They were all familiar with his work ethic; Brian worked whenever there was work to be done. And he'd been gone a very long time.

Thus, when Ted stepped through the front door, it was to find a semi-party atmosphere and lots of bright, smiling faces.

The accountant paused in the vestibule, slightly bewildered. It went without saying that everyone here would be expected to put on a happy face to indicate their relief at the return of 'The King”; it was simple office politics, since they all knew where their bread was buttered. But this? This went way beyond a simple determination to do the smart thing.

To his left, down the hall toward the spacious no man's land designated as the Art Department, a fantasy land where one literally never knew what might turn up at any given moment, Barbara Knott and Chet Bayliss were laughing as they studied the display board she was holding. Knott and Bayliss? Laughing? Together? It boggled the mind. If Ted remembered correctly - which he was certain he did - the last time he had seen these two together in the hallway, they had been snarling at each other like rabid dogs, and she - famous for her particularly vicious tongue - had called Bayliss a "putrid pustule on the posterior of a pusillanimous pimp". Never let it be said, after all, that ad writers couldn't create wickedly vivid images with a minimum of perfectly chosen words.

And now, here they were - bosom buddies, apparently - and it didn't require a skill in rocket science to figure out the reason.

Long live the king!

Ted squared his shoulders and marched toward his office, deliberately ignoring the way the couple continued to giggle and the eye-roll they shared as he passed them without comment. In the process, he was pretty sure he caught a whiff of an excellent vintage of pinot grigio. He suppressed a sigh as he remembered how much he had once loved that particular vintage.

So, a party indeed.

But he had more important things to do than join in this . . . this . . . whatever this lunacy might be.

Moments later, just inches away from his door, he heard his name called - the shrew's not-so-dulcet tones immediately recognizable - but he chose to ignore her and hurry into his own private little
cubbyhole in the kingdom of Kinney.

He hoped Cynthia would take the hint.

She didn't.

Nor did she knock before opening his door.

"Have you come to join the reunion party," she asked in a flat, emotionless tone, "or is something else going on?"

"I have some work to do," he answered, equally cool and expressionless. "So, if you don't mind . . ."

"Brian would like a word," she replied, ignoring the vague hand gesture which clearly indicated his wish to be left alone. "He saw you drive up."

Cold dark eyes went colder and darker. "Did he now? Well, I'd like a word with him as well, but I'd prefer that it be in private. So after the orgy perhaps? Unless he'd be too exhausted to see me then. Would you give him my regards, and my message, please?"

She nodded and started to turn away. Then she hesitated and turned back to study his face while he tried to ignore the scrutiny. "It's a red letter day for us all, don't you think. But, if I may, I'd like to offer a word of advice, Ted." Her voice was deliberately soft, non-threatening, but she paused briefly when she noted how he stiffened in response to her words. Still, she would say her piece, and he could listen or not. His choice. "Don't push him too hard. No matter what you think, he really doesn't want to hurt you, but if you leave him no choice . . ."

"What?" he snapped. "What will poor, little, victimized Brian do if I don't shut my big mouth and accept his divine power?"

She smiled, but there was no warmth in it. "Whatever he has to," she answered. "Surely, after all these years, you know him well enough to know that."

Then she was gone, leaving Ted open-mouthed, stunned, and momentarily uncertain. Was he right in what he was planning to do? He had done his research, his due diligence, to the best of his ability, and the information he had been given was sound, as far as he could determine. Of course, there were areas of uncertainty, as in every investment opportunity - areas which he could not access due to security constraints - but those limitations did not apply to the individuals who had presented this opportunity to him in the first place.

This was his big chance, and he would not blow it. If he rejected it out of hand, that would leave him with only one alternative.

Unfortunately, he had never been very good at begging; it required a humility that he did not possess.

He took a deep breath and moved to the door, which he opened slightly, just to be sure no one was bearing down on him. The only person in the hall was Jack Welby - the senior half of the volatile Jack/Tony partnership that provided endless conversation and amusement around the office - lovers who were both artistic and intelligent separately but whose talents increased exponentially when they worked together as a team. Ted spared just a moment to appreciate the way the man's Calvins accentuated a perfect ass, but he had no time for voyeurism; not even the innocent variety. He waited until Welby disappeared into the Art Department entrance; then he closed the door and locked it, before moving to the credenza behind his desk and unlocking a double door at the base of the unit. From that compartment, he pulled a thick, rolled-up sheaf of documents and carried it to his desk.
He took his seat and spent a moment realigning the objects on his desk until everything was to his liking. Ted did not tolerate clutter and prided himself on what he liked to think of as minimalist elegance. Aside from the stylish desk lamp, the state of the art telephone, and his Apple computer, the only other objects on the warm wood surface were a leather blotter, to protect that perfect patina, and a photo - silver-framed - of Blake, his partner.

The rest of the office was equally streamlined, uncluttered, tidy: books in alphabetical order, all aligned perfectly and standing straight, with elegant pewter book-ends to prevent messy toppling; an asparagus fern on the window sill, perfectly pruned and shaped; his diplomas and academic award certificates tastefully matted in oak frames and centered against the dark, mocha-colored, raw silk of the wall across from the window. The only item in the room which was in any way connected to the focus of the business itself was the framed poster of the ad that Drew Boyd had done for Brown Athletics - the one for which Ted considered himself solely responsible.

He thought it was the best promotion the agency had ever done. So fuck you, Mr. High and Mighty Kinney. What do you think of that?

Of course, he never quite delved far enough into that memory to recall exactly how the quarterback had been persuaded to strip down to his skivvies in order to participate, or who had done the actual persuading. He also managed to ignore the fact that it was almost certainly Mr. Boyd's fledgling relationship with Emmett - revealed after the fact - that had allowed Ted to open that particular door in the first place.

Sometimes, Ted had a very convenient memory - a trait that he usually managed to ignore.

But this time . . . this time there would be no inconvenient little details to gloss over. This time the honor and the glory would be his to claim completely. He gently placed his hands on the roll of documents on his desk and centered it atop his blotter.

He paused and spent a moment chewing on his bottom lip as he swept the room with narrowed eyes. What if they'd installed a camera? What if Cynthia and her new boy-toy and that sneaky FBI bastard who divided his time between gazing at Brian with possessive eyes and scaring the shit out of everyone else - what if they'd put their heads together and decided to post a watch on him, to spy on him. What if . . .

He went stock-still and forced himself to take a deep breath. Now he really was being paranoid.

Very deliberately, he removed the clasp that bound the documents together and spread the sheaf out flat on his desk, his hands gently stroking the unblemished surface of the top sheet.

His future. And Brian's, of course. Mustn't forget that, since it would be Brian who could come up with the wherewithal to buy into an investment that . . . well, it boggled the mind, didn't it? He couldn't believe how lucky he'd been to be in the right place at the right time. But he wouldn't tell Brian that. Instead, he'd lead him to conclude that it had been Ted who had researched and discovered the project and even been a party to the original planning.

That would make up for everything - almost. Nothing, of course, would ever allow him to forget how he'd been humiliated during this debacle, but with this . . . He sighed. With this, he would be able to write his own ticket. With this, he'd even be able to get rid of Cynthia, because there was absolutely nothing that she could do that would ever earn her a place in the life that Brian would be able to build for himself - thanks to Ted Schmidt.

And Brian would always know it; that was the sweetest part of all. Ted would, of course, be magnanimous. He would never, for example, rub Brian's nose in the truth of how much he owed his
CFO or how horribly he'd wronged him. Never.

Well . . . almost never.

He looked down at the architectural sketch that was a builder's conception of the finished product and began a thorough perusal of all of the documents. He had gone over it all before - probably a dozen times if not more. But one couldn't be too careful or too meticulous when so much was at stake.

Today would be the day - the beginning.

The leap of faith.

For all his confidence in his own abilities - some might even call it hubris - Ted was not completely delusional. He knew he was taking a risk, because anyone who knew Brian Kinney would understand that it was never possible to predict his reactions to anything, with any degree of certainty. The man was a perpetual wild card, and he frequently looked at things from a unique perspective that no one else could anticipate.

So there was an undeniable element of risk. But my, oh my! The rewards! If Brian reacted logically, if he did the smart thing, if he did not allow himself to be swayed by pedestrian or overly sentimental concerns - the rewards were beyond calculation. For himself, and for Ted Schmidt.

With another deep breath, Ted retrieved a large magnifying glass from his desk drawer, and began a still more thorough review of everything laid out before him.

Being accurate and errorless would not be enough; it had to be brilliant, spectacular. Perfect.

The clock moved slowly through the afternoon, and Ted remained lost in the wonder of speculation and anticipation. Mentally, he was almost completely engrossed, but he did retain sufficient awareness to keep an eye on the parking lot, noting who came, who went, and - most important of all - who stayed.

When the shadows outside his window grew long, and the quality of light shifted from the crystalline clarity of a perfect spring day to the soft amber ambiance of late afternoon, he closed his eyes, and spent a moment striving for cold, calm clarity.

The time had come.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Brian sat back in his executive desk chair, and ran his fingers through his hair - a gesture that he did not often allow himself. He didn't like messy hair. Casually tousled was one thing, but Brian Kinney simply did not do "messy".

But he was tired and slightly stiff from hours spent at his desk after a rousing round of the kind of exercise that was his favorite thing in life, and was now considering a nice, long, hot shower in his private bath, so it didn't matter much if his hair was less than perfect.

Too bad, he thought, that Justin had made his escape with a long list of things he had to do. Shower sex - with Justin aglow from the heat of the water and the steam of his lust - was always the best.

He had not intended to spend the entire day in the office, but then, he hadn't intended to do a lot of the things he'd wound up doing today. Like the elaborate lunch that Emmett and Cedric had served, which he had consumed under the stern eye of his young partner who had insisted that he eat it. All
of it. Then there had been the "Interlude". He smiled when he realized that he was capitalizing it and thinking of it as a singular event, which it was, in terms of satisfaction achieved, but wasn't, in terms of rarity.

Door locked, shades lowered, telephone disconnected... and Justin, bare and beautiful in the liquid gold pouring down from the skylight, prowling like a sleek cat and slinking toward his lover, eyes aglitter with raging hunger.

They had spent an hour exploring, experimenting, and reveling in the pure, unadulterated pleasure of their joining.

Then there had been the half hour necessary for coming down off the high and recovering clothing tossed away in the impatience of rising passion, and a shared cigarette to slow the heartbeat and regain the natural rhythm of ordinary life.

Neither of them had been particularly surprised or embarrassed to find a small crowd waiting in the hallway when they'd decided to unlock the door, and the faces in the crowd hadn't appeared to be particularly shocked or outraged either, despite the fact that Justin looked - in his own sweet vernacular - thoroughly well-fucked.

Thus had begun the remainder of the day, when virtually every member of the art department found cause to "drop in" and chat with the boss. They all had legitimate reasons for being there, of course; many came in carrying mock-ups and sketches and PDA's filled with new ideas for new promotions, and they all sought Brian's input, which was - as always - valuable. Some of his suggestions were good; some were excellent, and a few were brilliant.

But that wasn't really why they'd come, and Brian had realized it quickly. In fact, he hadn't even needed Cynthia's whispered comment that they had all really come to him for reassurance. He had smiled at her, but said nothing. And everyone of his employees who had come and gone had done so with mixed feelings; they were all relieved that he was back; they were all grateful for his insights, and they were all - to the last one - slightly disturbed as they departed, although none could have explained exactly why.

When Cynthia came in, as the clock ticked toward five, he was staring at the revised display boards for Graciella Jewels that Myra Hendrix had brought in for his appraisal after she'd reworked them. Gone were the broad slashes of coal black, and the model who looked like she might have been a perfect candidate to portray The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, with her milk-white skin and coal black hair. Instead, the images were vivid and entrancing, details brilliant against backdrops of dark claret and a rich, deep russet - the color of chocolate diamonds. The result was stunning, and the red-headed model was a perfect foil for the products displayed.

"How do you like it?" he asked his associate, gesturing toward the display boards.

She took a moment to study the boards before responding. "You were right. It's stunning."

He smiled. "Give Hendrix a raise."

"Why?" she retorted. "It was your suggestion that . . ."

But he was shaking his head. "She provided the lily. All I did was gild it a bit."

"Anything else, not-quite-co-partner?"

He blinked. "What do you . . ."
Her grin was brilliant. "49% does not an equal partner make, you know."

It was his turn to grin. "I take it you read the terms of the agreement."

"Yup."

"Any objections?"

She laughed. "Should there be? Am I supposed to resent the fact that I can't - quite - throw you under the bus if the mood strikes me?"

"Some might. Especially since I'm leaving you to clean up the mess."

Her smile was gentle. "It's fine, Brian. And you didn't have to do this at all, you know. I'd have been perfectly fine just going on with the way things were, so . . ."

"Didn't do it for you," he said quickly.

"No? Then why . . .?"

"Because I need to leave it in hands I can trust, - sharp, smart, honest, capable hands - and I need to make sure that there is no one - anywhere - who can over-ride your decisions. Except me, of course, but I won't be around much, so you're it, Tink. You're my proxy, my guardian angel, and my last line of defense."

Cynthia found that she could not look into his eyes, eyes currently not obscured by dark glasses; eyes filled with more genuine feeling than she had ever been allowed to read in them before.

"Thanks . . . for the skylight," he said, very softly.

She laughed, valiantly trying to ignore the tears she could not quite manage to swallow, knowing how much he was leaving unsaid. In the end, she could only nod in response.

"Hey," said a new voice from the doorway, "isn't 'last line of defense' supposed to be my job?"

Chris McClaren did not seem the least bit embarrassed to be caught eavesdropping as he strolled into the office.

Brian folded his lips together, obviously suppressing an urge to smile. "Words designed to strike terror into the heart of every henpecked husband. Only . . ." He turned to look at McClaren, and his eyes were suddenly darker, colder, "I don't do 'henpecked', and I'm nobody's husband. So what's up, McFed. And why are you still here?"

"What?" the FBI agent retorted. "You think this is all over, just because you're back in your own safety zone? Jesus, Brian. Tell me, please, that you're not that stupid."

"So explain it to me," Brian said flatly. "What else . . ."
"I repeat. We need to talk." McClaren favored Cynthia with a soft smile, slightly apologetic. "Just the two of us."

"Sounds romantic," Brian retorted.

"In your dreams, Stud Muffin."

Brian's smile was suddenly lazy, laconic. "No. In yours."

Cynthia made a small production of gathering up display boards and fabric swatches and photographs, making certain not to look at the FBI agent as she realized that she really didn't want to see the look on his face, although she was pretty sure she knew what she'd see if she did take a peek. Still - maybe not, for McClaren was almost as skilled in concealing his feelings as the Liberty Avenue king of emotional control, now sitting behind the desk. Almost.

"So I'll just leave you two alone to figure it out, shall I?" she said.

"Hey," called Brian as she moved toward the door. "Is Theodore still here?" A small, cold note in his voice suggested that the accountant had better be, if he knew what was good for him.

"Holed up in his office, I think."

Brian looked up at McClaren with a speculative gaze before continuing. "Give me ten minutes. Then tell him I'm waiting."

Chris McClaren dropped into a soft, suede-upholstered easy chair and regarded Brian solemnly. "Sharpening your guillotine, Lord and Master?"

"Mind your own business, McFed."

The FBI agent leaned forward and regarded Brian with a steady, slightly defiant gaze. "Whether you accept it or not, this - all of this - is my business. No matter how secure you feel, here in your stronghold, you're still vulnerable, and your safety is still my responsibility."

Brian lit a cigarette. "I already have a guard dog," he replied. "In fact I have a whole fucking legion of them. So you can . . ."

McClaren shrugged. "They're not me."

"Which means?"

The FBI agent reached out and took a cigarette from Brian's pack and grabbed Brian's classic brass Zippo to light it. "Which means," he said finally, "that they may be good. I'll even concede that Mathis is beyond good, but I'm better. And until you actually stand up in a court of law and give your testimony, you're stuck with me."

"But . . ."

"No arguments."

"But . . ."

"Brian," the FBI agent said firmly. "I'm not going to waste your time - or mine - in lauding all the benefits of witness protection, because I know you'd only laugh in my face, even though it would make perfect sense when all is said and done in this situation. It's very likely that you're going to spend the rest of your life walking around with a big, fat target on your back, because these people . .
. well, let's just say they're not the type to forgive and forget. But that's an argument that we're not going to have. Not now. But for the moment, this is non-negotiable. I'm going to do my job, and you're going to let me do it, or I swear to God I'll have you locked up as a material witness. And don't fool yourself into thinking I'm bluffing. I'm not."

Brian leaned forward and clasped his hands in front of him and took a moment then, to steady his breathing. "With one proviso," he said finally.

"But . . ."

"My way, or not at all," he continued, daring McClaren to argue. "Now you listen up." He smirked and reached out to adjust the collar of McClaren's dark polo shirt. "Are you listening?"

McClaren's response was an eye-roll that spoke volumes.

"It's pretty obvious that subtlety isn't your style, but now, in the midst of this fucking mess, you're going to learn how to stand in the background and stay out of my way. If you feel compelled to watch over me, you will do it discreetly." He smiled then, and sat back in his chair to allow a shaft of afternoon sunlight to illuminate his face. "I don't usually mind being the center of attention, but not like this. So are we clear?"

McClaren took a deep breath. "And how - exactly - am I supposed to protect you if I have to keep my distance?"

"That's your problem. If you're as good as you think you are, I'm sure you can figure it out. Now, if you'll excuse me . . ."

McClaren stood up and leaned across the desk, bracing his hands on either side of Brian's laptop. "No."

"No? What the fuck does that mean? Didn't we just have this discussion?"

"No. You had your discussion. This is mine. If you insist on getting your panties into a twist, I'll stay in the wings, so to speak, as much as possible. But only when I'm certain that it doesn't put you at risk. And right now, you're getting ready to deal with Ted Schmidt, who is not, I grant you, much of a threat, beyond the nasty possibility of bleeding out all over you if he should throw an embolism or something in the middle of an apoplectic fit. But he's got a dangerous habit of opening his mouth at the wrong time and pushing you into places you're better off not being. So no, I won't excuse you. But I will make myself scarce - sort of." His eyes swept the room quickly; then he smiled. "Since it's your very own private bath, I think it's safe to assume that I can walk in there and enjoy my privacy, while monitoring the conversation and preserving an illusion of your solitude. Right?"

Brian stared at him through narrowed eyes. "What if I want to take a shower?"

"With Ted Schmidt?" McClaren laughed. "When pigs fly."

Brian pantomimed a shudder. "You know better than that."

"Yep. So why . . ."

"Dealing with Ted won't take long. So then . . ."

Abruptly, McClaren leaned forward and claimed Brian's lips with a quick, thorough kiss. "So then," he said softly, pulling away slowly, "I'll leave you to your lonely ablutions." He deliberately glanced down and spent a moment contemplating the swelling at Brian's crotch. "And you can take care of
your little problem, all by yourself."

With that, he strolled into the bathroom, deliberately ignoring Brian's muttered response.

* It's All Coming Back to Me Now - Jim Steinman

*tbc*
Chapter 56

When I'm tired and thinking cold,
I hide in my music, forget the day,
And dream of a (guy) I used to know,
I closed my eyes, and (he) slipped away,
(He) slipped away.*

-- More than a Feeling - Boston/Tom Scholz

The image in the mirror was . . . adequate, he supposed. He would have preferred to use a different term, like dashing, perhaps, or stunning, or roguishly attractive, but he couldn't because - even if he squinted his eyes and donned the mental equivalent of rose-colored glasses, there was another image in the mirror which would give the lie to any such claim he might care to make. Visible just beyond his left shoulder was a vintage advertising poster, hanging in a small alcove off the main corridor - an example of what all such promotional displays should aim for: the perfect sales pitch, featuring an iconic union of model and product: Brian Kinney, perfectly preserved and perpetually young and beautiful, poised on a surfboard, skin gilded and gleaming in a tribute to BareBronze, a suntan product that had enjoyed phenomenal national sales in the aftermath of that campaign. A thorough comparison of the image of that face and form and the flesh and blood version, sitting now at his desk in his private office, would leave any observer unable to comprehend that the photo was more than a decade old.

Brian had changed, of course. True timelessness was an impossibility. But he had not changed very much, and Ted could not quite suppress a small sigh. Brian had not, in fact, changed nearly enough to offer any measure of comfort for those forced to stand by and watch the years treat him with a ridiculous degree of kindness. From a certain point of view, of course. Ted deliberately chose to ignore the vivid, lurid memories of that perfect face defiled and bludgeoned and mutilated beyond recognition.

He remembered the day, just a month or two after Kinnetik's grand opening, when Cynthia had wandered around the building, seeking the perfect location for display of the poster and deciding that a sheltered area in the corridor leading to the art department would be more appropriate than a less private, more flagrant spot in the lobby. "In the interest of subtlety," she had explained, although Ted had not really understood her meaning. He had been less than convinced of the logic of her choice and even less convinced that it was a good idea to hang the poster in the first place, but she had been adamant as she supervised the actual placement. Brian had been away at the time, spending a couple of days in Chicago for client meetings. Upon his return, he had regarded the display with a frown, finally looking to his assistant for an explanation. Her words had been terse and slightly perplexing.

"When you've got it," she'd said with a smile that Ted could not quite decipher, "flaunt it . . . but with class, and you'll inspire others to do the same."

Brian - for a single moment - had looked like he might argue, but, in the end, he hadn't. Another example, Ted supposed, of him trusting the judgment of the woman to whom he had granted a great deal of power - far too much power in Ted's estimation.

So, on the one hand, there was Brian, Speed-o clad and mostly bare, the strong lines and glowing
health of a perfect body contrasting beautifully against the tropical jewel-tones of sea and sky; on the other, there stood Ted Schmidt, moderately well-dressed in a pricey Brooks Brothers pin-stripe suit, Hugo Boss dress shirt, Dolce & Gabanna crimson silk tie, and Prada shoes; freshly shaved, courtesy of the electric razor he kept in his desk, hair freshly cut and styled, nails freshly manicured. Perfectly, carefully groomed in order to appear . . . adequate.

He sighed again, knowing that it was an exercise in futility to try to estimate the depth or validity of Kinney's vanity, and a total waste of time to compare himself physically to his boss, since no amount of professional grooming or expensive skin care or creative plastic surgery could generate the kind of physical assets with which Liberty Avenue's #1 stud had been naturally blessed. On Ted's very best day, when he might have drawn an occasional interested glance from a stranger at a gay bar, he knew that such a moment would only last as long as there was no Brian Kinney around to steal the show. Or Justin Taylor, for that matter. Or . . . but enough of that. If he stood here all evening, trying to think of someone whose appearance would present no competitive threat to his own image, he would probably not be able to come up with a single, viable candidate, and the hours would be squandered for no good cause.

He stood for a moment longer, listening to the hum of voices in the art department where Chelsea Archer and Jerry Glynn were still working, apparently enjoying their collaboration on the next phase of the Liberty Air campaign, and he debated taking a moment to go in and take a look. Maybe he could offer some profound insight, some . . .

But no. It was time to stop dawdling around and fooling himself - and act.

He adjusted his shirt cuffs, straightened the knot of his tie, and prepared to enter the royal presence. Ordinarily, he would not be so formally attired for a week-end session at the office. But this, of course, was no ordinary week-end, and the task that lay ahead of him was no ordinary task. What was at stake here was his future - the form and function of the rest of his life, and he had to act now to seize his last chance to retrieve the stature and superior position that had been taken from him. In order to succeed, he knew that he had to present a professional image - stylish, confident, and self-assured. Thus, he was groomed for the moment.

Of course, he was pretty sure that he would find Brian in a wife-beater and fashionably ragged Levis - a circumstance that should put the big boss man at a considerable disadvantage - but wouldn't.

Shit! The bottom-line, unavoidable truth was that Brian Kinney could walk around in nothing more than a fig leaf and a smile - or not - in a crowd of Armani-clad sophisticates, and still - somehow - maintain his status as the dominant, alpha male in the room.

Taking a slow, deep breath, and checking to be sure the two files tucked under his arm were secure, he knocked, paused for a count of three, and opened the door firmly, as was his wont, without waiting for a response. He refused to consider the possibility that he no longer had the right to assume that he would be welcome within Brian's sanctuary, but the look on Brian's face when he lifted his head and regarded his visitor was sufficiently cold to make Ted wish he'd been a bit less precipitous.

The smile that graced those perfect lips was slightly mocking. "No, as a matter of fact, I wasn't too busy to see you, Theodore, so, by all means, come right on in."

No wife-beater and jeans, and the accountant was slightly discomfited by his employer's casually professional appearance. The perfect body was clad in custom-fitted gray trousers and a black long-sleeved shirt - simple, tasteful, and elegant, although in this case, it was the wearer that conveyed elegance to the clothing rather than the other way around, and Ted was briefly reminded of the old adage about clothes making the man. Brian Kinney was living proof that not all old adages were
"It's good to see you, Bri," said the accountant, moving to stand in front of Brian's desk and extending his hand firmly. No tremors allowed.

But Brian had never been predictable or subject to manipulation. There was a beat of silence as he regarded Ted's hand with obvious skepticism, before lifting a shadowed gaze to study the accountant's face. Finally, eyes glinting with some subtle trace of amusement, he offered his own, but the handshake was exceedingly brief and quickly released.

"Welcome back," Ted said quickly. "You look fabulous."

Brian's smile was inscrutable. "You were expecting something else?"

"No. Of course not. We all knew you'd come through all this with flying colors. Everybody was pulling for you."

The smile grew wider, but no warmer. "Well, not everybody." He then looked pointedly at the files tucked under Ted's arm. "I assume you've got things for me to look over."

Ted nodded and gestured toward one of the sleek armchairs beside him. "May I?"

The pause was brief, barely noticeable, but the cold spark in those dark eyes said that it was deliberate. "Of course."

And the small hesitation - inconsequential as it seemed - accomplished exactly what Brian had intended; it made Ted even more nervous than he'd been before; so nervous, in fact, that one of the files he was holding slipped free and fell open on Brian's desk, revealing a stack of spreadsheets, tax forms, accounting statements, and professional contract data.

Ted could only scramble to pick up the mess, while thanking all the gods - real and imagined - that it had not been the other file that had fallen open, the one that was the real focus and crux of this meeting.

Brian said nothing, settling back in his chair, content to observe, but, somehow, his silence spoke volumes.

"Look, Brian," Ted said finally, giving up on trying to restore order to the paper chaos. "We might as well talk about the white elephant in the room, since it's obvious that we're both thinking about it. I know you have questions about . . . what I did. Maybe you even doubt that I . . . I still deserve your trust. And I guess I couldn't blame you for that. But I'm . . . I'm trying to make up for my mistakes. I'm trying to regain your trust, because . . . because it's important to me."

"Is it?" Brian asked softly.

"Of course, it is. How can you . . ."

"Don't do that!" The laconic, laid-back tone was abruptly gone. "Don't pretend that you don't know why I might doubt you." Brian sat forward and laid his hands flat against the sleek surface of his desk, and Ted knew - somehow - that the gesture was a means to keep from clinching them into fists. "Your thoughtlessness and your scheming put people at risk who mean more to me than you can possibly imagine. And your tendency to run off at the mouth in efforts to prove yourself a member of the 'inner circle' might have cost me everything I care about - including my own life - if not for the skill and dedication of the people assigned to protect me."
"I don't know what you mean," Ted sputtered. "I would never . . ."

"What you never seem to do," Brian said firmly, "is remember that your actions - and even your words - have consequences."

"But . . . but nothing happened. To Gus, I mean, or, or Justin. Or you. So why . . ."

"Let's just say that there are still things that you don't know, Theodore. Things that will all come out when everything is said and done. But until then, I'm not ready to satisfy your curiosity. So, for the moment, just accept the fact that you still have your job - for now - although certain security measures have been put in place, to safeguard my investments and my family."

"You think you need safeguards - from me?"

Brian's expression was deliberately stern. "Do I really need to answer that question? Now, shall we get to the matter at hand? What is all this . . ." He nodded toward the polyglot of paperwork now clutched in Ted's hands.

"Yes. Yes, of course." Ted was careful to keep his voice steady as he bit down to suppress the outrage that was swelling within him. He wanted to let it all out, to let it erupt and douse his boss with the emotional lava of his fury. But he knew he couldn't afford to do so; he had to hold on, to reign in his anger in order to avoid ruining his one opportunity to repair all the damage and regain all that he'd lost.

So he held tight to his emotions, and took a small measure of comfort in envisioning how Brian would grovel and beg for his forgiveness once his plans came to fruition.

"Mostly standard stuff. A few proposals for variations in existing contract terms - Brown's squawking about the increase in the production costs for the television ads. As usual. And there are budget analyses of expenses on newer promotions, some contract renewal documents," he explained, once more trying to straighten all the papers he'd dropped. "Mostly standard forms that require your signature, nothing you need to bother reviewing. Some projected cost figures, that sort of thing. Just . . ."

"If you don't mind," Brian said slowly, "I'll be the judge of what needs reviewing. Just leave them, and I'll get back to you. As for Brown, he doesn't really expect us to cave in to his demands. He just likes exercising his right to grumble. Anything else?"

Swallowing around the lump in his throat, Ted nodded. "As you wish, of course. I was just trying to save you the trouble."

"My company - my trouble." It was spoken without any particular inflection, but the message was abundantly clear. "And I think it only reasonable for me to exercise a bit more oversight than before. Don't you?"

Ted's hands flexed so tightly that the papers he was holding trembled. "Are you . . . are you going to fire me, Brian?"

"Why? Do you think you deserve to be fired?"

"No."

"Then prove it. Accept my decisions. Accept the fact that you've given me cause for some doubt, and prove to me that it was all just a . . . momentary lapse."
"And how do I do that?"

"By doing your job, accepting any new ground rules I decide to put into effect, and trusting my judgment. Can you do that?"

"I think . . ."

"Don't think. Do. Now I repeat: can you do that?"

Ted took a deep breath. "Yes."

"Good. Now what else do you have for me?"

"Quarterly profit figures - I think you'll be very pleased. Also, summaries of projected expenses and earnings. There's a P&L statement in there, and a spreadsheet showing personnel salaries and potential income that will be generated from various projects that the artistic team is working on. Authorizations for specific expenditures. Investment options - that kind of thing."

"Good. I'll look over it all. Anything more?"

Another deep breath. "Actually, there is one last thing. It's, um, it's something that was brought to me for presentation to you. An investment opportunity that I think you'll find . . . interesting."

"Theodore, do I really have to remind you about the last 'investment opportunity' you tried to buy into - with my money?"

"No," Ted replied, cheeks stained with an ugly flush. "No, you don't. That was a huge mistake on my part. I trusted someone when I shouldn't have, when I should have been more skeptical and investigated more thoroughly, but I . . . I let myself be duped, and I am really sorry for the damage it might have done to you. But - in my own defense - let me just add that you weren't the only one at risk. The FBI stepped in and saved you from taking the loss, but nobody bothered to save me, or . . ."

"Or Melanie," Brian interrupted. "How big a bastard does it make me to say that I don't give a shit what it cost her? And frankly, Teddie, you're not a child. You're a grown man, a man who is supposed to be a financial professional. If you choose to invest in a scam like that, without doing your due diligence, can you really blame anyone for not saving you?"

"No. I suppose not, although . . . if they knew something was hinky about the deal, would it have been such a big deal to share their suspicions? What did I ever do to . . ."

"But you weren't trying to do anything to them, were you? You were trying to buy my loyalty, and it wound up costing you a bundle. But, if you'd succeeded, if this Ponzi scheme had turned out to be legit and made me a billionaire or something, what would you have expected in return? What do you imagine it would have bought you? My undying adulation, my favor over anyone else who might try to influence me to see things their way, my instant obedience to your every wish? Theodore, do you really think that anything could buy that? Don't you know by now that 'obedience' just isn't in my vocabulary? I mean - how stupid can you be?"

"No need to get nasty about it. I was only . . ."

Brian lifted one hand, his face suddenly lined with weariness. "Enough. Whether or not you choose to admit it, I know what you were trying to do, and until you know it too, and are ready to own up to it, I don't think we have anything more to discuss."
"No, no, no, wait. There is just this one thing. Brian, this is important, and I need . . ." He stopped and swallowed and struggled to regain his composure. "I need you to try to trust me, one last time. This is not the same as before. This really is a golden opportunity, and I've checked it all out. So please, for your sake and - yes, I admit it - for mine too. Please just hear me out."

For a moment, it appeared that Brian would simply turn his back and refuse to listen at all, but, in the end, perhaps because he was able to identify the desperation in Ted's demeanor and perhaps because he really wanted to be able to regain the trust that had been lost, he nodded and prepared to listen.

Theodore carefully opened and extracted the contents of the second file he was carrying - much thicker than the first - and arranged the display on Brian's desk with great precision. Then he took a deep breath and began to speak, choosing his words with exquisite care, knowing that this was his final option, his last chance to step away from the brink of disaster and reclaim his life.

Brian was not smiling, was not nodding or giving any indication of agreement or approval. But he was, at least, doing the one thing that Ted required him to do. He was listening.

From his vantage point in Brian's executive washroom, Chris McClaren watched as Ted Schmidt made his presentation - his very detailed, very focused presentation. Caring little for the nuts and bolts of the plan that Schmidt was trying to sell, the FBI agent amused himself by watching Brian Kinney try not to yawn in the accountant's face.

He'd told himself - repeatedly - that he hadn't been loitering in Brian's office for almost two hours. He had made a point of staying busy, of reviewing case files, making notes on points that needed follow up and allowing Brian to concentrate on catching up on everything that had happened during his absence.

But - in one way - he had been loitering. He had known, somehow, that Schmidt would put in an appearance at some point in the afternoon, and he had also known that he needed to be present when that moment came - present, but unacknowledged. Looking on. Defending. Watching.

Thus he had moved quickly when the accountant had knocked at the door, and positioned himself perfectly to observe while remaining unobserved.

The fact that Brian chose to remain silent about McClaren's presence when Schmidt made his entrance was proof that Kinnetik's chairman of the board also understood the awkwardness of the situation and the need for discretion.

Schmidt might one day regain the right to be trusted without question, but that day had not yet arrived.

McClaren was leaning against the door frame and had a clear view of Brian and the surface of his desk. Schmidt was not visible, unless the FBI agent leaned forward to catch a glimpse. Mostly, he didn't bother. He was not interested in studying the accountant's face or form, although he did occasionally take a quick look, just to gauge the man's emotional demeanor, which was very revealing.

This was not just a sales pitch; this was an act of desperation, clearly revealed in tense body language and a slightly shrill tone of voice, and desperation always made McClaren nervous. On the other hand, this was Ted Schmidt, who might - with a masterful exercise of self delusion - consider himself a formidable opponent to anyone who might choose to cross him; the reality was a far different thing. Schmidt survived now, subdued but still uncrushed, because Brian Kinney had decided to hold off
and weigh his options rather than allow the accountant to flounder and be ground to dust under the weight of his own guilt.

Nevertheless, McClaren was uneasy.

Brian, however, did not appear the least bit bothered; he even seemed to be mildly interested, looking through the documents Schmidt provided for him, and even studying the blue prints that the accountant had run (literally run) back to his office to retrieve, his haste and body language speaking volumes about his commitment to the project he was laying out for Brian's inspection. And the longer he talked, the more exuberant he became.

Of course, Ted did not share McClaren's perspective, the vantage point that allowed the agent to notice every time Brian's attention wandered, which happened repeatedly when Schmidt's lecture lapsed into pedantic enthusiasm. At those moments, hazel eyes lifted to inspect the increasingly amber hue of sunlight streaming obliquely through the skylight, or to gauge the balance and positioning of a grouping of Kinnetic's most successful promotional posters that adorned the wall opposite the desk, or, still more frequently, to relish the room's only true work of art - the Justin Taylor original that occupied the place of honor above the newly-renovated fireplace. Then, fairly often, his eyes would shift to his right, to intercept McClaren's gaze before sliding down - with a small, barely-there but still lascivious smile - to appreciate the way the dark wool of the FBI agent's trousers or the teal blue of his shirt emphasized the lines of his body and the narrowness of his waist or the way his hair curled against the back of his collar, inviting the exploration of eager fingers.

Chris McClaren was not a particularly vain individual - not even remotely in the league of the current subject of his visual evaluation - but neither was he given to false modesty. He knew that Brian's gaze was admiring, because there was plenty to admire. He also knew that, much as he might try to deny it, he was enjoying the warmth in those dark eyes.

Nevertheless, he refused to be distracted - mostly. He was listening to Schmidt's spiel, and was only moderately surprised to realize that Brian was listening too - mostly.

"Think of it, Brian. Think of the potential for profits. Think of . . ."

"All right, Theodore. I understand your enthusiasm, but I have to ask. Why would anyone bring this to you? I mean it's obvious that this might make someone very, very rich, and God knows, I got nothing against lots and lots of money. But - is it just me - or does this all feel a little too easy? A little too coincidental."

"Oh, ye of little faith," Ted replied with a grin. A real, honest-to-God grin, with no trace of glibness or snobbery. "Look, Bri, I know I messed up big time before. But this time," he paused to draw a deep breath, "This time my sources really are impeccable, and I've done my own evaluation of all the data, verifying everything. The property is just as advertised. It's beautiful and perfect for the purpose, and the corporation that's being set up is composed of the kind of people who don't get involved in suspicious activities. Pillars of the community, every single one of them."

Brian grinned. "Pillars of the community, and Brian Kinney? And that doesn't seem a little bit odd to you?"

"Brian, they're not like that. I think they're trying to reach out to you. To make up for what happened to you. This could be . . . this could really be a beginning of a whole new understanding between the upper echelons of the gay and straight communities. They approached me with it because they've dealt with me before - or tried to at any rate - and they trust my judgment. And you should too. This could be . . ."
Brian lifted a hand, forestalling an outpouring of visionary supposition, and turned in his chair, his eyes seeking some indication that Chris McClaren understood his misgivings.

The sign was quick in coming - a glint of silver in azure eyes.

"Look," Ted said, with a sigh that barely avoided impatience. "You don't have to commit. Not yet, although . . . well, time is getting short. But, for now, all you have to do is listen. One of the primary partners would like to meet with you, to answer your questions and explain the time frame and the scale of the operation. Honestly, Brian, this could be the biggest thing to happen to Pittsburgh in decades."

Brian looked down at the plans spread across his desk. The Symposium of Pittsburgh - a center for the promotion and appreciation of artistic achievements, featuring a state-of-the-art concert hall and a huge, multi-discipline museum of fine arts - to be built on a lakeside meadow overlooking the city, on property that was available for a fraction of its value due to mismanagement and squabbling among the heirs of the original owners.

A gold mine indeed.

He knew next to nothing about architecture and engineering. But he did know beauty, and this - this would be a beautiful thing, except . . .

The drawings were exquisitely detailed, the planning obviously created with style, grace, and professional skill. Perfect, and yet . . .

"All right," he said finally. "When, and who?"

Ted smiled. "Thanks, Bri. I swear you won't regret it. I promise . . ."

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, Theodore. I'm only agreeing to listen to what he has to say, and that's no guarantee of anything. If I decide, once I've heard his pitch, that I'm not interested, I expect you to accept my judgment, and shut-the-fuck-up about it. Capisce?"

"Absolutely. But this is going to blow your mind, Bri. Better than poppers; better than the best eighth of chronic you ever had. Better than sex!"

Brian grinned. "Bite your tongue, Teddie. You're getting hysterical. Now, I repeat - when and who?"

"How about Monday afternoon? I'll set it up as your last appointment for the day, so you won't be rushed, if that's all right with you."

Brian closed his eyes for a moment, considering. Then he nodded. "But no later than that. I might be unavailable for a while."

"Right," Ted replied, a quick frown the only indication that he was wondering what 'unavailable for a while' might mean. "I'll set it up then."

"Hold on," Brian said quickly. "You told me when, but not who, so . . . ."

"Oh, sorry." Ted took a deep breath. "It's C. R. Wylie." He managed to avoid flinching when he saw recognition dawn in those dark, hazel eyes, but only barely.

"Wylie," Brian echoed. "As in the C.R. Wylie of Schickel Hall fame? That Wylie?"
Ted stood very straight. "Yes. That Wylie. And I understand that you have reservations about him, but there's no cause for concern. The . . . the . . ." He paused and swallowed hard. "The fuck-up - spilling the beans about your relationship to Gus - was my mistake, Brian. He just happened to be the one to hear it. And nothing happened; there were no ugly consequences, and, before you can point out the obvious, I know I was lucky. That it was him, I mean - someone who would not take advantage of my lapse in judgment. He's an honorable man, and he was just as astonished as everyone else when he learned about the nature of that whole Bolivian charity scheme. I'm pretty sure he'd invested a bundle of his own money in it, since he's well known for his participation in charity work. And now he's taking advantage of this opportunity to reach out to you, to prove himself worthy of your trust by inviting you in on this project. It's a huge honor, Bri. I hope you understand that."

Brian's expression was inscrutable, as his mind moved back in time, dredging up a memory of Emmett Honeycutt's face after a confrontation with this self-same 'honorable man' who Ted was now so eager to support and defend, and he wondered how it was that he remembered, while Ted - who should remember vividly, given his role in Emmett's life at that time - apparently did not; then he smiled, but it was not the characteristic Kinney smirk, blending sardonic wit with droll humor. Instead, it was reserved and slightly enigmatic and . . . something else.

"Yeah, Theodore. I hope so too."

And standing in the shadows of the executive washroom, just out of Ted's line of sight, Chris McClaren heard the note of reservation in that steady voice and made himself a mental note to be sure to be back in this exact place at the exact time of the scheduled meeting on Monday. Schmidt was probably right; Wylie was probably every bit as upstanding and trustworthy as the accountant believed.

Probably - which was a far, far cry from certainly and thus, not nearly good enough.

When the accountant had gathered up all his paraphernalia and made his exit - juggling files and blueprints and still grinning - McClaren walked out of the washroom and stood looking at the object of his protection detail with one lifted eyebrow. "You sure you know what you're doing?" he asked finally.

"Care to be my date for the big event?" Accompanied by the real, absolutely unmistakable Kinney smirk.

The FBI agent grinned. "You could at least offer to buy me a drink first."

Brian laughed, but the shadow in his eyes lingered, giving the lie to his air of nonchalance.

"Wouldn't miss it," McClaren said softly.

Brian nodded, and tried to ignore the faint chill that seemed to be lingering at the base of his spine. It was nothing to worry about; he was sure of that - especially since his bulldog protector would be there to back him up and shield him from harm. So there really was nothing to worry about. Really. And never mind the fact that he didn't like the idea of needing protection, from anyone. He had been pretty good at providing his own defenses throughout his admittedly flamboyant life. Still . . .

With a deep breath, he rose and stretched and deliberately turned his thoughts toward what would be waiting for him at home, and the quick swelling at his crotch told him it was past time to go.

There was really no cause for concern.
Really - and never mind that the look in McClaren's eyes said otherwise.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Sunday morning dawned cool and bright in the area of Pittsburgh that Brian referred to as Stepford-ville, and Michael watched it come with weary, reddened eyes. He had tried to relax and get some rest during the night, knowing that this day would be filled with a mixed bag of events: long periods of anxious waiting - in the airport, on the plane - interspersed with periods of frantic excitement - racing to the address of Melanie's parents, and - finally and most important of all - seeing his daughter again and racing back to Pittsburgh.

J.R. would see it as a great adventure, and respond with the liquid, lyrical laughter that was the sweetest music to her father's ears.

He would bring her home where she belonged, where she could be spoiled properly by her two dads and her 'Mommie' and her grandmother Debbie and even - although with much greater restraint and much less emotional excess - her Uncle Brian.

But his attempts had been mostly unsuccessful. Thus, when bright rays of sunlight streamed through the kitchen window and settled a bit too sharply on surfaces that could have used a good dusting and floors that might benefit from a hands-and-knees scrubbing, he was wide awake to notice.

And now it was time to awaken Ben and Hunter and make an early start on the routines of the morning so they could make a timely departure to get to the airport in plenty of time to get through security and make their flight - Liberty Air # 1631 - departing at 10:26 and arriving in Miami at 1:15. All arranged, of course, courtesy of Brian Kinney - Liberty's miracle worker; the man who could do no wrong and for whom no favor was too much to ask.

The return flight would board at 6:18 this evening and arrive back in Pittsburgh at 9:10.

It would be a long day, but worth every minute of any problem that might arise. It had been too long since he'd seen his baby girl, and now . . . Michael sighed. Now it was time to deal with an elementary, unavoidable truth. If not for Brian Kinney and his determination and his willingness to help - and the power of his money - it might have been a whole lot longer. In fact, depending on the degree of Melanie's bitterness and spite, it might even have been forever, or, at the very least, throughout the duration of her childhood, which would provide her biological mother with ample time to poison her mind against her father and his relations.

He inhaled deeply, savoring the first waft of coffee aroma, and poured himself a brimming cup, adding a heaping spoonful of sugar just as his cell phone rang. He didn't need to look to know who was calling.

"Hey, Ma. Yeah, I'm up. Yeah, we're all packed. No, you can't come with us. Brian had to threaten someone's life just to get seats for us. The flight was all booked up. Guess everybody wants to go have fun in the sun on the beach, but . . .

"Yeah, I'll call you from the plane. Yeah, I'll let her call you as soon as we pick her up. No, I won't be rude to Melanie's mother; it's not her fault she's got a flaming bitch for a daughter. No, I won't say that in front of J.R. Yeah, Ma. Gotta go, Ma. Someone's at the door."

He was pretty sure his mother did not believe him when he made his excuse to hang up, but, as it happened, he was telling the truth. There was a soft but persistent knock at the front door just as Ben came stumbling down the stairs, still wiping sleep from his eyes, with Hunter at his heels.
When Michael opened the door just enough to peek through and identify the new arrival, his first thought was that nobody should look so fucking luscious at the crack of dawn. But then again, he was pretty sure that Liam Quinn would have looked just as luscious - given the perfection of both face and form - in a muu muu and flip-flops at high noon in Death Valley in the summer. That was, of course, a wild stretch of imagination, because the slender, young attorney was currently dressed in a lovely casual version of his normal garb, a pale blue designer cashmere sweater and charcoal slacks replacing the classical style of the Ralph Lauren suits that he usually sported.

Michael blinked, and told himself that he wasn't really blinded by the brilliance of the young attorney's smile, but, in his heart, he wasn't entirely sure of that. Quinn stepped inside to be greeted by Ben and Hunter, and seemed grateful for the offer of a cup of coffee.

"I somehow didn't expect you to be an early riser," said Ben, settling himself at the table and struggling to avoid staring at the swirl of brilliant copper-colored hair that contrasted so beautifully with sea-change eyes; Liam Quinn was a visual temptation almost impossible to resist. It was, in fact, almost impossible to reconcile this lovely image with that of the ruthless, implacable legal predator that he was rumored to be.

"Ordinarily, I'm not," Quinn replied with a rueful smile, "except when in the employ of one Brian Kinney, who seems to have no appreciation for the concept of 'personal time'."

Michael snorted with laughter, choking on his first sip of coffee. "That's an understatement if I ever heard one. So . . . why are you here?"

Quinn lifted a slim, elegant briefcase - alligator-skin if appearances were accurate - to the table and extracted a thick, manila file. "I come bearing gifts," he said with a smile. "The kind of gifts that make you aware of what you can do, what you should do, what you must do, and - above all else - what you must never, ever do. In here is the court order which guarantees your access to your daughter, and sets out the terms of your presence in her life - for the moment. Later, there may be changes. In fact, there almost certainly will be changes, but, for now, everything you need to know is included here. There are also copies of the documents which have been served to Melanie Marcus and her parents, which advise them of their rights, vis a vis J.R., and their roles in her life. I strongly suggest you read over everything carefully, but - if you haven't time for all of it - concentrate on the terms of the court order. Granted that there's a certain amount of legal jargon - unavoidable, I'm afraid - and some of it may seem as incomprehensible as a Latin version of Trivial Pursuit, but just ignore the legalese and concentrate on the common sense aspects. And use your own common sense. The document does not, for example, specifically state that you can't refer to Ms. Marcus as 'the dyke-bitch egg-donor', but it would be wise to avoid doing so. In fact, unless your daughter poses a specific question - which she probably will - it's probably best to avoid discussion of her mother at all. The conflict between parents can be very painful for children, and - at her age - J.R. is unlikely to understand the nuances."

Michael nodded. "So no plots to poison the bitch's Mogen David - right?"

Quinn sighed. "Right. And no slurs - however mild or indirect - toward her ethnic or religious background. Which would mean no slightly smug comments about the star of David she often wears or her taste in wine." He smiled, but there was no mistaking the hard glitter in those exquisite eyes. Liam Quinn had no patience with bigotry, no matter what its form or target.

"Right," replied Michael, with a slight blush. He hadn't meant it as a racial or ethnic slur, but it had come out that way anyway. "So what about Lindsey? Does she have any rights in all this, or . . ."

"From a strictly legal standpoint, no, she doesn't," said Quinn, a shadow washing those incredible eyes in a soft, melancholy gray. "I'm afraid the law - not to mention the majority of the citizens of our
great nation - hasn't yet caught up with social developments. In some ways, the justice system still exists with Neanderthal overtones. However, while J.R. is in your care, you set the standards. And while I wouldn't advise taking her down to Babylon for an evening of social revelation, you are perfectly free to allow her to interact with Ms. Peterson, as much as you like. For now, at least."

"What does that mean?" asked Ben. "Why 'for now'?"

Quinn frowned. "Because Ms. Marcus has demonstrated - on more than one occasion - a tendency toward rage and a determination to exact revenge. And while it goes without saying that Mr. Kinney is going to be her primary target - the person she holds most responsible for everything she's lost - she's not going to forget or forgive the part that other people played in what she considers her betrayal. Especially, I think, in the case of Lindsey Peterson. For a professed feminist and free-thinker, Melanie has some remarkably Victorian notions about spousal duties."

Ben's smile was weary. "Meaning that Lindsey was supposed to play the obedient little wife, no matter how distasteful she found Melanie's behavior."

"Distasteful?" Quinn's eyes grew colder, icier, even though his smile never wavered. "I think that's putting it mildly. Don't you?"

"Perhaps." Ben did not appear to be convinced, and Quinn studied the professor's face for a moment before speaking again.

"Has it ever occurred to you," he asked softly, looking from face to face around the table, "that Brian Kinney allows himself to be cast in the role of the villain - repeatedly - because it makes it easier for all of you. It's much less 'distasteful' for you if you can ascribe everything that happens to him as nothing more than Brian getting his just desserts."

He paused for a quick breath, and, in that moment, the devastating memories of the mutilation Brian had suffered erupted in all of their minds.

Then Quinn spoke again, the softness of his voice somehow intensifying the horror of those images. "His just desserts."

He got to his feet quickly, and they all realized that there was truly nothing left to be said. He handed the file to Michael and turned away, but he looked back at them just as he reached the door.

"There are still things that you don't know about what happened to him, and it's not my place to tell you. And I have my doubts that he'll ever decide to tell you, but you should know this. No one deserves to be treated as he was treated. Not your worst enemy." Then he looked straight at Michael, and there was no trace of warmth in his eyes. "And certainly not your best friend."

"Now wait a minute." That was Ben again, stepping forward - as always - to defend his partner.

"No." Everyone in the room went rigid at the note of anger in Michael's voice. "You wait. I don't need to be coddled or sheltered from judgment for my own failures. He's right. We have always found it easier to blame Brian than to look deep enough to discover the truth of why he acts the way he does."

He moved forward and stood almost toe-to-toe with the attorney. "Thank you, Mr. Quinn. You've known him what? A month? And you already see him more clearly than most of us ever have, in spite of knowing him for a lifetime. We've been willfully blind."

Quinn was silent for a moment. Then he smiled, and the warmth of it touched Michael and lifted the feeling of cold guilt that had gripped him. "Blind perhaps," agreed Quinn, "But capable of regaining
your insight, should you decide to do so. That's promising.

"Thinking - and rethinking - is good, but, in the meantime, just make sure you're at the airport at least an hour early. For most people, it would have to be two hours in order to negotiate security, but Brian Kinney's name is like a magic carpet when it comes to Liberty Air. Oh, and Chris McClaren will meet you there."

"McClaren! Why?" For the first time, Michael looked slightly perturbed. "Why would we need a federal agent to come along for the ride?"

Quinn's smile grew slightly condescending. "Have you met Brian Kinney? Do you know him at all?"

"Yeah, but he can't very well boss around the FBI, can he?" That was Ben, equally perturbed.

Quinn laughed. "Actually, I wouldn't be too sure of that, even in ordinary circumstances. But this case is hardly ordinary. At this point, the bottom line is that he's been invaluable to them in this investigation, and they're grateful enough to accede to most of his demands. Especially, since he's still the key to putting away a lot of very bad people, and, if he decides not to co-operate, they're screwed. So if Brian wants an FBI agent to accompany his best friend on a journey to retrieve his daughter from the camp of the enemy, then that's exactly what he's going to get. Although, I should point out that Melanie's parents have been victimized by their daughter in this mess. They've done nothing except try to provide shelter for their granddaughter. You should keep that in mind, Michael. McClaren's presence is to assure that everything goes smoothly, but the fact that you have an FBI agent with you might intimidate the Marcuses. So just walk softly, and don't make a big issue of him being there - unless it becomes necessary."

"Shit!" muttered Michael.

"Is there a problem?" Quinn asked, obviously confused.

"Not really," Michael answered, biting his lip. "I just don't think Brian's McFed likes me very much."

Once more, Quinn's expression became inscrutable. "Really? Can't imagine why."

And with that, he was gone, leaving Michael to ponder his parting words and realize abruptly that the attorney knew perfectly well why the FBI agent did not care for Brian's friends. Was it then so obvious, and, if it was, why couldn't those so-called 'friends' see it for themselves?

He only spared a moment to worry about it, before deciding that he was too pressed for time to indulge in idle speculation.

As usual.

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Brian Kinney had never been a morning person. For years, in fact, he had avoided any suggestion of watching the sun rise - unless, of course, it was to mark the end of a night of blazing passion. But that was yesterday; today was different. In the past, such moments had been about relishing a sense of triumph and lust satisfied, without any thought of appreciation of the glory of a new day.

It was amazing to realize how much things had changed.

For it was not yet dawn - not quite - and young Mr. Kinney was fully awake, even after a night
which he thought just might classify as 'one for the recordbooks'. After all, when one couldn't recall exactly how many orgasms had been achieved, it had to have been mind-blowing and spectacular.

His intellect might have failed to encompass the wild quality of their mating, but his body had not. It had only happened a few times in his life when he had wakened to the realization that the wild, frenzied, unbelievable sex he'd enjoyed during the night had resulted in an unexpected sensation. His dick was sore and throbbing and probably beyond any possibility of an erection. Very un-Kinney.

But oh, God, it had been so worth it.

His alertness now had nothing to do with any magical concept of sunrise or the fresh-faced dewiness of a new day. It was, instead, focused entirely on one thing: the vision of his young lover bathed in the first glow of pure morning light.

He was certain he had never seen anything more beautiful.

He was equally certain that he never would.

Most of all, he wondered - his mind filled with a growing darkness - if, having finally found the vision of ultimate beauty that he had spent a lifetime searching for, he would ultimately lose it, never to see it again.

In all his years of grappling and stroking and manhandling beautiful, young, male bodies, he'd never come across one that could even come close to matching this one, even though some part of his mind - the part that refused to be consumed by his feelings for Justin - realized that he was being ridiculously sentimental.

He thought about the various men in his life, some of whom - Hell! Many of whom, maybe even most of whom - could be correctly described as gorgeous. All the way back to the first man who'd ever seduced him - the perfect, muscular, beautiful young coach who had taken him in hand and taught him the joys of man/boy love. He knew that his parents would have prosecuted his first lover for statutory rape - Brian had been very young at the time. The senior Kinneys would have been outraged and hungry for revenge and would have hounded the man and pursued him to the gates of Hell itself if they'd ever learned the truth. Their fury, of course, would have had nothing to do with any love or concern for their son; it would have been a product of their embarrassment at having their name dragged through the mud. But it had never happened, because Brian had never told them the truth. He had never believed - and still did not believe today - that what Coach Grant - his beautiful, golden-skinned, green-eyed young mentor - had taught him was a crime. It was simply the beginning of the life he was meant to live.

Even today, after all these years, he could still recall the sensation of the coach's mouth exploring his hardness, so much better and sweeter than any pleasure he'd ever achieved with his own hand; could still remember the gentleness of big hands that moved him and positioned him and prepared him, still feel his breath catch in his throat in sympathy with the pain of the first time he'd been fucked - and how eagerly he'd gone back for more.

Stephen Grant had not forced Brian into the life of a gay man; he had simply opened the door to a whole new world, giving the teen-ager access to the courage and the conviction he would need to navigate the lifestyle he chose to inhabit, in the epiphany of realizing that he had always been gay - and always would be.

Some of his beautiful lovers were still a part of his life, albeit they no longer occupied his bed. He thought about Chris McClaren with eyes so blue they were almost like a raging flame; about Liam Quinn, only recently arrived in his life - and never bedded - but beautiful enough to rate among the
top ten in terms of physical perfection; about Matt Keller, friend of long standing but still lovely enough to touch the heart (and the heat) of any gay man - and any straight woman; about Jared Hilliard, tough as nails, strong as steel, but beautiful enough to elicit a throbbing hard-on with just a dark smile and a twitch of a perfect ass.

Even Lance Mathis qualified as beautiful, having a winsome smile and one of the most perfect slender bodies Brian had ever seen. Of course, Mathis wasn't gay, but nobody was perfect, right?

Well, almost nobody, he amended, as he watched a beam of sunshine spark topaz brilliance in Justin's hair.

Justin Taylor - a vision guaranteed to tempt the gods.

Brian took a deep breath, realizing that his vision was blurring, and hastened to wipe unshed tears from his eyes.

He had memorized every line of that perfect face and body.

Just in case.

When Justin opened his eyes, it was to find himself drawn into the currents of emotion that filled extraordinary hazel eyes - emotion that he couldn't identify - emotion that was gone almost before it could register. In its place, a classical Brian Kinney smirk which spoke of the incredible sexual exploration they'd practiced all through the night.

"How do I fuck thee?" the blond murmured. "Let me count the ways."

Brian threw his head back and laughed. "I'm thinking we're not exactly what the poet had in mind."

"Screw the poet," Justin replied. "And everybody else. Just as long as you continue to screw me."

Brian confined his response to a brief, intense exploration of the exquisite softness of Justin's throat.

"We're so fucking lucky," Justin murmured, lifting his lips to brush against the corner of Brian's mouth. "Do you have any idea how many people would throw themselves into the fires of hell just to be allowed to experience what we have together? Just to live our lives for one hour - although, on second thought, maybe not, because how would they ever manage to go back and live their drab little lives after getting a taste of heaven?"

"You are so full of shit," said Brian, his customary morning smirk morphing into a full-fledged grin. "According to most of those people, what we are doing is earning our place in the fires of eternal damnation."

Justin turned to nestle into the warmth beneath Brian's jaw. "If I have to burn for all eternity, it's worth it. I want you to fuck me - every day, every hour - for the rest of my life. Starting now."

Brian laughed. "You're kidding, right? Judging from the way my dick feels, your ass must be torn and bloody and sore as hell."

Justin grinned. "Yeah. It's pretty raw, but . . ."

"But what?"

"Yours ought to be perfect - soft and wet and slick."

"Slick?"
Blue eyes sparked with mischief. "Well . . . not quite yet. But give me a minute."

It didn't happen often, of course. Every day - almost - their roles were fixed: Brian was the infamous top - renowned throughout gay society; it was a given. With everyone, including Justin Taylor, who was, himself, a pretty impressive top, with everyone except Brian Kinney.

But sometimes - mostly spur of the moment - the roles shifted and reversed, but it was almost always Brian's call. His decision to make, since it went without saying that any effort at coercion would be useless against him.

Brian's choice. Thus, when he smiled at his young lover, dropped a kiss at the corner of that beloved mouth - and turned over, resting his face against crossed arms, leaving Justin to appreciate the feast that was spread out before him, the young blond felt a knot form in his throat, as he recognized the degree of trust being granted to him. Brian Kinney - nude and perfect and willing.

Justin's first impulse was to act quickly, to leap forward to take advantage of the moment, and - in truth - to deny Brian any opportunity of changing him mind. But that, he knew immediately, was unfair to Brian. His lover, his partner, his best friend, would not do that to him; Brian, averse to commitment in so many ways, never committed to anything unless he meant to see it through.

Thus, instead, Justin paused, took a deep breath, and made a conscious decision to take advantage of the moment and make it last.

"Not so fast," he whispered as Brian moved to give his lover perfect access to the perfect curve of his ass. "We have some preliminaries to enjoy before we get to the main event."

"What kind of . . ."

Brian gasped as he felt the warm sensation of Justin's tongue exploring the sensitive skin around his anus. He tensed for a moment, before forcing himself to relax and get ready to enjoy the ride.

Justin was nothing if not thorough, and as he thrust his tongue into that sweet opening, Brian felt a familiar stirring in his groin - a stirring he had not believed to be possible just moments earlier. He smiled as he realized that he had been a fool to underestimate Justin's ability to arouse him; the kid could inspire a granite statue to full attention. He felt his breath catch in his throat as Justin shifted, pausing to reach for a container of lube on the bedside table while rearranging Brian to gain access to the growing erection, before using that beautiful mouth to drive his lover to the edge of orgasm as he dipped his fingers in the slick gel and used them to begin preparations in earnest.

Brian fought to remain still, but knew that - even if his body appeared absolutely motionless on the surface - Justin was certainly feeling the tremor of his passage as fingers pushed in and pulled out, only to push in deeper, all to the rhythm and the powerful suction of Justin's mouth on his cock.

Oh, God! He was close; he was so close, and Justin's mouth was so talented. So very close . . .

And then he felt himself shifting, turning, as loving fingers stroked him softly while a huge, hot pressure found its way to his well-lubed opening.

Brian took a deep breath, willing himself to relax, to welcome this beloved intruder to a place that very few had ever been.

The pressure was intense, and the pain hard and fast and brilliant.

"Oh, my God!" Justin cried out, as he pushed into that exquisite darkness, and felt himself engulfed in the silky passage. "Gives a whole new meaning . . . to 'where no man . . . has gone before. It's like
virgin territory - every time."

Brian managed a soft laugh, relieved to note that the pain was going as quickly as it had come. "Now that's a word that no one has ever applied to me."

Justin lowered his head and dropped kisses across Brian's shoulders, without slowing his rhythmic in and out, and he continued to stroke his lover's engorged cock with skillful fingers. Brian could barely distinguish between the heat of his skin under the friction of that talented hand, and the furnace building within his core. He was mildly surprised that the two sensations seemed to intensify each other, and he couldn't resist a smile, recalling how many times he'd expressed disdain for any inkling of SMBD.

Perhaps there were still tricks to be learned, only . . . he smiled again, more gently this time, knowing that if deliberate pain was going to become an element of their sexual encounters, he would not be the one inflicting it.

Justin had been hurt too much in his young life, much of his pain coming at the hands of the man who was supposed to love him above all things, and soon . . . He deliberately pushed the thought away from him and concentrated on the incredible rush of ecstasy that was racing through his body.

He pushed up to meet Justin's thrusts as his young lover - finally unable to maintain any vestige of control as he was gripped by mind-bending passion - lost his rhythm and began to plunge into the sweet grip of Brian's body, as fast and as hard as possible, plunging both of them into a fugue state of semi-madness.

Breathing became gasping became a long-drawn expulsion of air as they exploded together, on cue, and then collapsed into each other's arms.

"Holy shit!" Justin managed to gasp, after several long minutes of recovery.

"Amen!"

"Best . . . ever."

Brian did not argue.

When they had recovered enough to enjoy that sweet, boneless somnolence that always seemed to follow really good sex, Justin turned to study his lover's face, enjoying the view immensely. Morning light was always good to Brian Kinney.

He almost snorted then, stifling a spurt of laughter, as he realized that any kind of light was always good to Brian Kinney.

How long, he wondered, would the passage of time spare his beautiful lover? How would he age, and how would he react to it?

Probably not well, but Justin would make certain that it did not become a major problem. He would take care of it; he would take care of Brian. He wondered sometimes if Brian realized that he was already being cared for.

Probably not. He would not react well to being coddled, so it was up to Justin to walk a very fine line, and walk it carefully.

"Hey," he said softly, "you free this afternoon?"
Brian sighed. "Not really. I have a proposal to review. I need to do some research before I meet with the principals tomorrow."

Justin looked pensive. Then he nuzzled for a moment at the soft darkness under Brian's jaw before jumping up and making his way to the kitchen, leaving Brian to luxuriate in the comfort of their bed and the wonderful smell of sexual gratification. But in less than three minutes Justin was back, with steaming mugs of coffee and a bowl of fat, juicy strawberries, topped with a cloud of whipped cream.

With a brilliant smile - the one that had earned him his nickname - he settled on the bed with his tray, allowing Brian to retrieve his cup of French-roast blend. Then Justin began to eat and to feed his lover in alternative bites.

"This morning then?" Justin asked, dropping a dollop of whipped cream on Brian's chest and licking it off slowly.

"Are you asking me out on a date? Aren't we a little past that? I mean, you don't even have to buy me a drink. You've got me."

"Such a romantic," Justin observed. "But it's not that. I want you to see something, and I know a great little place where we could have a wonderful brunch."

"A brunch?" Brian laughed. "Is that an approved social event for cocksuckers like us?"

With a quick eye-roll, Justin leaned forward and nipped at Brian's ear - just a bit too hard for comfort.

"Hey! What the . . ."

"This is important, Brian. To me anyway. I just want . . ."

Brian lifted up on one elbow and pulled Justin to him, ignoring the strawberries and cream that spilled over both of them. "You don't have to explain, and you don't need to try to think up things to tempt me. If you want it, that's good enough for me. So, where are we really going?"

"Home, I think." Justin looked slightly confused. "I hope. I've found the perfect place, but it's only perfect if it's perfect for you too. So . . ."

Brian's smile was achingly gentle. "Don't you understand that I'll abide by . . ."

"No, that's not good enough. I don't want you to want it just because I want it. I want it to mean as much to you as it does to me. And it can't, unless you look at it, and understand what we could build there."

Brian grinned. "In that case," he drawled, "maybe we need to get out of bed and work our way to the shower, because - in case you hadn't noticed - we're pretty much covered with strawberries and cream." His voice dropped to a whisper as he continued. "And I want to lick every bite off that luscious body."

Justin laughed as he allowed himself to be drawn from the bed and guided into the bathroom.

Insatiable was - apparently - a word that might have been coined to typify their lust for each other. For them, there was simply no such thing as too much.
Justin stood at the mirror, studying his reflection and rather liking the way the cardinal red of his shirt intensified the blue of his eyes and wondering if he should put on a tie. It wasn't, by any means, a formal occasion, but it was important. He didn't even try to fool himself on that score. Decisions made - or not made - today would have a huge impact on the life he hoped to build with Brian Kinney.

Yet he found himself unable to focus entirely. He was too busy remembering a scene from the previous evening.

Chris McClaren was not happy to be included in the little venture he'd privately titled, "Baby Daddy Melodrama". If there'd been any reason to foresee the kind of trouble that would require a legal presence, he might have felt differently, but there wasn't. He was, therefore, extremely disgruntled.

Of course, there was the little sidebar which explained Alex Corey's easy acquiescence to Brian's request for an agent to accompany the Novotny family circus to Miami. Undercover operatives - working in tandem with agents of the Miami-Dade police force - had provided reports of sightings of a man going by the name of Tommy Bradford who'd recently been hired by one of the city's pre-eminent families as a private nurse for the family patriarch, currently suffering from severe emphysema.

The family - LaSalle, by name - was comprised of multi-generational charter members of the rabidly conservative Heritage movement, and included very old links to Pittsburgh's Club through the current patriarch's great grandfather - a political and financial power in 19th century Pittsburgh who had married into old Miami money and found it to his advantage to pull up stakes and relocate. But the ties to the city and especially to The Club remained, based on certain fundamental beliefs that appeared nowhere in the charter documents of the organization, but were well understood and completely supported by the upper echelon.

The light surveillance of the LaSalle family had been initiated due to some questionable financial practices which had been discovered during an investigation of money laundering; the sighting of Bradford had been completely incidental.

A stroke of luck. It wasn't the kind of thing that the FBI ordinarily counted on, but, when it did happen, one could hardly fail to appreciate whatever opportunity it provided.

It wasn't a dead certainty, by any means, but it was the first clue they'd discovered concerning the possible fate of Thomas Bradford Jackson, and the possibility of finding the murderous therapist and hauling him to the nearest lock-up - preferably kicking and screaming and more than a little bloody - was almost enough to assuage the agent's concerns.

Almost

Nevertheless, it was nothing more than a sidebar, incidental to his primary purpose.

McClaren had accepted the assignment with scarcely concealed impatience and displeasure, treating Brian Kinney to a stern glare. "This is not my job," he'd protested.

"If part of your job is keeping me happy," replied the ad man with a smug grin, "then you'll go."

"My job," McClaren retorted, "is to keep you safe. Frankly, I don't give a shit if you're happy or not."

Brian's smile was soft, as bright in his eyes as on his lips. "Yes, you do."

"Sometimes I really hate you," replied McClaren. Then they both laughed.
"Do me one favor," said Brian stepping forward just enough to touch the FBI agent's chin with one finger. "If you find Jackson, give him a little love tap - for me."

"Hell," said a hard voice from the young man standing framed in the doorway. "Give him an even bigger one for me."

The words were friendly enough, but the look in Justin's eyes as he moved forward and deliberately inserted his perfect body into the space between his partner and the fed was icy and determined.

McClaren's smile had become a smirk, as he backed away, wondering if he'd ever tire of playing with this particular fire and its two component parts: Brian Kinney - temptation personified - and his little bull terrier, just as succulent and just as prickly.

Before turning away, he winked, and neither of his observers could figure out to whom it had been directed.

Justin continued to stare into the mirror, studying his face, running a hand through his hair, leaning close to examine his lips, and wondering why Brian - when in a particularly good, affectionate mood - would sometimes describe his mouth as 'irresistible'. From his point of view, it was just a mouth, like any other, but he loved it when Brian waxed poetic, about anything. It didn't happen often. Brian Kinney would probably have loved Lord Byron - man to man - but they would never have spoken the same language.

He was trying to concentrate on this day, on how Brian would react to his ideas, but he couldn't quite stop remembering that brief encounter with McClaren, and wondering why it bothered him so much.

He trusted Brian, didn't he? Of course, there was no denying that the FBI agent was smoking hot, and that he and Brian had shared a bed for a while, but that was not enough to make him doubt the reality of the love he and Brian shared. Hell, if that was enough, neither one of them would ever be able to trust the other. Fucking around had been a way of life - for both of them.

But that wasn't really what had him worried, and he couldn't quite figure out what it was that had put him so on edge.

He'd often laughed and taunted McClaren with accusations of paranoia, even though a tiny, obstinate little voice in the back of his mind frequently responded with that tired old codicil: It's not paranoia if someone's really out to get you.

It could be said, without a shadow of exaggeration, that there were plenty of people still out to get Brian, but the FBI, the Pittsburgh police, and Brian's private security force had erected a wall around him that should prove to be more than sufficient to guarantee his safety.

Should. Why had he said 'should'? Why couldn't he say 'would'?

McClaren would be gone less than 24 hours, and there were plenty of capable individuals to step in during his absence.

So why did he still feel a faint trace of ice touching his spine?

Because he was being paranoid. And because any possibility of losing Brian - for whatever reason - was more than he could bear.

He closed his eyes and lost himself in the memory of that perfect body, entwined with his own,
pushing, straining, bruising, growing stronger and more powerful with every thrust until - in a blinding burst of sensation - two suddenly became one.

He could not survive without that. He knew it; now all he had to do was convince Brian, because Justin Taylor, though occasionally oblivious to simple instances of cause and effect, was no fool. He knew that Brian had spent his entire life being blamed for every rotten thing that ever happened to someone around him; thus, when the King of Liberty Avenue loved someone - really loved someone - he would move heaven and earth to protect them and keep them safe. Even from himself. Perhaps even most especially from himself.

He had done it before: wrapped himself in a layer of impregnable ice and pushed away from those he loved. And Justin knew that he would do it again if he believed it to be necessary - that he would endure any degree of pain or loneliness in order to spare his loved ones from suffering caused by his presence in their lives.

It was bullshit, of course. There was no amount of pain or suffering that would be worse than losing Brian. Any other loss - and he did mean any - would seem insignificant by comparison. A quick thought suggested that he should probably feel guilty for feeling that way, but there it was. Brian was the one person he could not bear to lose.

Justin knew that; unfortunately, Brian did not. Thus, he would require some serious convincing.

Yes, a tie was the very thing, an Armani with gold fleurs-de-lis on a field of burgundy. A hint of formality and a nod toward the importance of the day, and a very subtle nudge in the right direction toward the effort to make Brian believe.

From the outside, it was just a rustic little diner, nestled against a copse of mountain ash and elderberry trees. On a narrow blacktop road just a mile down from a major highway exchange, it would not, at first glance, appear to hold much appeal for casual travelers. And it didn't; not until those travelers actually stopped there to sample the menu.

Once hooked, however, very few were able to resist the urge to go back.

It was called Collier's Lodge. It was homey, attractive with comfy furnishings and lots of rich wood surfaces, without coming anywhere near haute decor, and bustling from early morning until closing time around ten pm, almost all of its clientele composed of familiar, return customers.

Thus Brian and Justin were new enough to draw interested glances, although it would have happened even if they had been regular visitors since either of them, alone, would have been a treat for the eyes - all kinds of eyes - but together, they were a vision that almost no one could resist examining with a second look, followed by a third and a fourth.

"New in town?" asked the waitress, as she directed them toward a table in the front corner of the dining room - a table which took full advantage of the diner's most perfect physical asset: a view of the valley across the way with a stair-step waterfall making its way down the side of a cliff, amid thriving clusters of wild flowers in a riot of colors and thick groups of mountain laurel, spilling drifts of rose-tinted ivory down the hillside. Far below, the gleam of a small river flashed in the sunlight, breeding tiny scraps of rainbow along its path.

"Brand new," answered Justin, with a smile for the buxom waitress. "And hungry."

Brian laughed, eyeing the nametag of the middle-aged server. "He's always hungry, Marge. So what
do you suggest for the bottomless pit here?"

"Brunch or lunch?" she asked, glancing at the clock while deciding that she could really get used to that spectacular smile - and the blond's was equally bright.

"A bit of both?" Justin answered. "My breakfast was interrupted."

And just like that, gauging the smirk on the face of the man with the hazel eyes, Marge knew the truth - and didn't care in the least.

Her smile was speculative. "Okay. Maybe some blueberry orange French toast. Or - wait, I know. I think I've got just the thing for you. How about some banana ebelskivers, along with the best sugar-cured bacon east of the Mississippi. With home-made butter pecan syrup. And from there - your choice. Dessert maybe? We make a peanut butter/chocolate cheesecake that will knock your socks off."

"Ebel . . . what?" asked Justin. "I don't know what that . . ."

"Sort of a cross between a pancake and a popover - a Danish creation that'll blow your mind."

"Sounds great, for starters," Justin answered, still perusing the hand-written menu. "Except for the cheesecake." He looked up and favored his partner with a smile of such sweet tenderness that Marge felt obliged to look away, feeling as if she was trespassing on an intimate moment. "Allergies, you know."

"Okay. How about a strawberry trifle then? Or an upside down caramel latte crunch?"

Justin's eyes were suddenly huge, and Brian couldn't quite stifle a burst of laughter. "You're going to become his best friend in the whole world, Marge, and I'm going to watch that bubble butt double in size."

Justin grinned. "Not me, Old Man. I've still got the metabolism of a teen-ager."

"Famous last words," Brian retorted, but the look in his eyes was so tender that it was impossible for Justin to take offense.

"And for you, Sir?" Marge, who had been happily absorbed in the prettiness of Justin's face, now turned her full attention to Brian, and felt her breath catch slightly in her throat as she was forced to acknowledge a tiny nuance of jealousy.

What would it be like to be part of a union that included two such beautiful individuals? A tiny part of her mourned that she would never know, although she thought - hoped - that her husband, Art, saw some form of beauty when he looked at her. But nothing like this, she knew. This was the stuff of legend.

"Coffee," Brian replied, favoring her with a smile that set her insides aflutter, "and wheat toast."

"Is that all?" she demanded. "It's almost sacriligious to come here and nibble on toast. How about some lovely eggs benedict? They're exquisite, and you could stand to put on a few pounds, you know."

"Coffee and toast," he repeated, but his smile did not waver, and she found it so disarming - even with its small nuance of mockery - that she elected not to argue.

The two sat in silence for a while, enjoying the warmth of the diner's ambiance and the beauty of the
view, but Brian could tell that Justin's quiet was not easy and relaxed - that he was biding his time.

He did not speak of what was on his mind until after Marge served their coffee and disappeared back toward the kitchen.

"You haven't said anything," he commented finally, spooning sugar into his cup. "Not really. And don't try to deny it. A single 'pretty place' does not an observation make." He deliberately stared into his cup, avoiding lifting his eyes to meet Brian's gaze. "You didn't like it. You don't see it the way I do. I should have known . . ."

*Although, his mind insisted, there had been that one moment - a frozen, quick, but somehow unforgettable instant when Brian had stood behind him, arms wrapped around his waist, and been touched by . . . something. He had almost managed to convince himself that he had not really felt his big, strong, overly-protective lover tremble in that moment, but . . .*

"There are lots of things you should have known, Justin," Brian interrupted, a strange glint of something in his eyes. "There have always been a lot of things you should have been able to figure out. Such as . . ." He paused then and waited until Justin finally, reluctantly, looked up and met his eyes and was stricken almost speechless by what he saw there. "Such as that I prefer action to words."

"Meaning what exactly?" It was almost a gasp, barely audible.

Justin was sitting facing the window and so focused on Brian's expression that he did not notice a group of new arrivals, not even when they walked across the diner and stopped just behind him.

"Meaning," Brian answered, almost tongue-in-cheek, "that we have guests."

Justin blinked, confused, until his mother stepped into his view and settled herself at the table, followed immediately by Liam Quinn, Lance Mathis, and an elegantly-clad older man whom Justin did not recognize.

Greetings were exchanged quickly, and Justin was his usual charming self, but the confusion was still in his eyes, especially when no introduction of the stranger in the group was forthcoming.

"Not that it's not good to see you all," he said finally, "but what are you doing here?"

"For me, just my job," replied Mathis, picking up a menu and appearing to enjoy the read.

"He's been following us?" Justin's expression was one part annoyance over being followed at all and one part chagrin at not having noticed.

Brian merely shrugged. "These days, someone's always following us, Sunshine."

Reluctantly, Justin nodded, accepting what he knew he could not change.

"And you, Mom? What are you and Mr. Quinn . . ."

Brian reached out and covered Justin's hand with his own, squeezing slightly in order to cut off the flow of confused words. "Justin," he said softly, speaking in a tone more commonly reserved for their pillow talk sessions, "this very distinguished gentleman . . ." He turned and nodded to the stranger. "Love the Armani, by the way." The radiance of his smile grew more intense as he turned back to Justin. "This is Laurence Kissinger. His firm is based in New York, so he's done us a very great favor by coming out here today."
"His firm?"

Brian nodded, and Justin looked at the faces around him and saw that each of them was biting tongues and lips to avoid breaking into silly grins.

"What firm?"

Brian sat back and took a sip of coffee. "Ever heard of Andre Kikoski?"

"No, I don't..." Justin was growing more annoyed by the moment, but then - quite suddenly - something clicked in his mind. "Andre Kikoski? As in... the architect Kikoski?"

"The very same." At this point, Brian could not quite contain the tiny nuance of satisfaction in his voice.

"You bastard!" snapped Justin. "You mother-fucking bastard!" He was trying to be angry, to feel duped and used and... But all he could really feel was a rising euphoria. "You already bought it, didn't you?"

"No," Brian replied, hazel eyes bright with feelings he almost never verbalized. "But - providing you approve - I'm about to."

And it was at that moment that the entire staff and clientele of the diner was treated to a display of passion and sweet communication that rarely happened anywhere, especially in a country diner in rural Pennsylvania, as Justin threw himself into Brian's arms and attacked that beloved mouth with lips and teeth and tongue.

For a moment, there was dead silence, and then - with only one or two exceptions - there was applause from all the spectators.

When he came up for air, he was red-faced, realizing that he had made something of a spectacle of their joy, but he had no time to worry or regret as Liam Quinn was already laying out papers for their signatures - both signatures, since the property would be jointly owned. Justin, as always, tried to argue, but the look in Brian's eyes told him that he was wasting his time.

So they signed their names on multiple dotted lines, Justin and his mother shared a mutual exchange of hugs - punctuated by tears - and then Mr. Kissinger leaned forward to shake Justin's hand. "I am so looking forward to this," he said with a smile. "I saw the site yesterday, and we are going to design something that will take your breath away, Mr. Taylor." Then his smile grew wider, as a spark flared in gray eyes. "And may I just say that - as an old queer who remembers what life was like before it finally became semi-acceptable to be 'gay', back in the day when the sight of two gorgeous young men exchanging a kiss would have led to a brutal beating, not to mention jail time - building something for the two of you to share will give me tremendous personal satisfaction. In some small way, it makes me a part of your world. You are, you know, breathtakingly beautiful." Then he laughed at the tiny smirk that touched Brian's face. "But then, you already know that, don't you?"

The older man's eyes - a deep gray with glints of mossy green - were soft with the joy of sharing this moment, and Justin spared a thought to observe that, as a young man, the architect must have been a vision to behold. No Armani back then, probably, or Dolce & Gabanna, but Tommy Hilfiger maybe, or Polo. It was a pleasant thought. But, at the moment, it could not be his primary thought. That was reserved for another.

Brian rolled his lips as he affixed his final signature to the one remaining dotted line, and looked up
to find himself the object of intense scrutiny from his beautiful young lover. Neither spoke; neither needed to.

"Marge!" There was no need for Brian to shout, as the waitress had been standing nearby since the happy melodrama had begun. "This is a special occasion. Think you can dig up a bottle of champagne - or two?"

It had been nothing more than a group of strangers or - in some cases - casual acquaintances who'd wound up in the same spot to share a late morning, lazy Sunday meal, but it evolved and became something more, a kind of a meet and greet party, as almost everyone in the diner got a chance to get close to the new arrivals in the neighborhood and share their perceptions of the house that should be built on the beautiful land overlooking the river.

Justin, of course, was in the thick of the discussion, laughing, loving the attention. Brian was quieter, sipping his champagne and slightly aloof, but not to those who knew him. For them, there was no mistaking the soft glow in his eyes as he watched Justin work the room, and Jennifer Taylor wondered, for just a moment, how she had ever doubted him.

He loved her son; he loved him so much he would die for him.

It should have been a comforting thought, but - somehow - it wasn't, and she couldn't quite figure out why the idea bothered her so much.

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*With apologies to Mr. Scholz for tampering with the lyrics of his rock classic. Couldn't resist because there is no way that either Brian or Justin is going to fit into the 'girl' or 'she' or 'Mary Ann' category.

tbc
Though I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.
I am not done with my changes.

-- The Layers - Stanley Kunitz

By the time Brian had exchanged his Banana Republic linen cargo pants and his dark red cashmere sweater for 501's and a black Hugo Boss casual shirt - perfect for a Sunday afternoon at the office - Justin and his new best friend, the gay architect, were knee deep in drawings and sketches and internet research and details of other Kikoski projects, exclaiming over the elegance of an Italian marble pillar in an Etruscan terrace or the graceful multiple arches of a mullioned window fronting a charming pied-à-terre in Le Marais, or the positioning of a stained glass portal in a Côte d'Azur chateau for the purpose of catching and refracting morning light.

Brian paused for a moment as he stepped down into the loft's main room and enjoyed the vision of his young lover - entranced, enthused, engrossed - and beautiful.

Then he collected his briefcase and moved quietly through the room pausing just long enough to drop a quick kiss onto a shock of blond locks before heading on his way.

But as he reached out to slide the heavy front door open, he realized that he should have known better than to think he'd be able to slink away in silence. He was shoved forward against the metal of the door, and then forced to turn to find his arms filled with a lithe, luscious body as his lips were claimed by a mouth that would forever be his favorite taste in the world.

"I'm only going to work for a few hours," he murmured, as full lips moved to nibble at the softness under his jaw.

"That's... too long. What am I... supposed to do... while you're gone?"

"You'll think of something," Brian laughed, taking advantage of his greater height and strength to lift his smaller companion into his arms and kiss him senseless while Justin immediately adjusted his position to wrap his legs around his lover's hips and press crotch to crotch.

"I could leave you two alone," said their guest, with an indulgent smile. "Or I could just watch. I don't think that would be such a terrible hardship."

"Another time," Brian answered, stealing one last kiss. "Gotta go."

"Be home early," Justin called after him as his lover made his exit.

Brian nodded, then paused and turned back to fix the architect with a level stare that was slightly speculative. "You make sure he gets what he wants, no matter the cost."
"No, wait," Justin protested as Kissinger nodded. "It has to be what we want. Not just me, but you too. It's got to be what we both . . ."

"It will be," Brian replied with a soft, enigmatic smile, dropping one more kiss on an adorable upturned nose, before moving to the door.

Justin tried to protest, to voice his misgivings, but Brian was already gone, taking the stairs instead of the lift and laughing as he went.

Justin paused and listened, and felt a chilly echo of the sound stir in the semi-darkness of the stairwell - and tried to tell himself that it was not really ominous - that he was not really afraid.

He was simply being ridiculous.

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"It's Sunday."

Cynthia leaned back in her chair and regarded the young man framed in her doorway and enjoyed the view: black slacks, black shirt, black boots - a portrait in ebony. "I know," she answered.

"He doesn't pay you enough to make you work on Sunday."

She smiled. "Actually, he does. But he didn't make me do this; I have a few things to finish, and thought I'd take advantage of the quiet while Katy is out on a family expedition, with her godmother." Her eyes grew soft and slightly distant. "She's only here for a few more days, and I wanted to clear my desk so I can spend it all with her."

Lance Mathis strolled into the office and settled himself in front of her desk, his eyes dark with speculation. "She's very special, you know."

"Of course, I know," she answered with a gentle smile, "but I'm glad to know that you know it too. Some people don't."

"Yeah, well, some people are idiots."

Her laugh was bright and charming. "There are those who would say you've been spending too much time around Brian Kinney."

"Yeah? Well, he's . . . he's not at all what I thought he was. Is he?"

"No, he's not." She looked, for a moment, as if she'd expand on that thought, but, in the end, she chose to leave it alone.

The security chief studied her expression, wondering why he was so sure that she was troubled by something she didn't fully comprehend. "Anything wrong?" he asked finally.

She sighed and leaned back in her chair. "What makes you think that?"

"Because you're sitting here staring into space," he replied easily, sprawling comfortably. "And that's not you. You work; you concentrate; you cogitate - but you don't stare. So out with it, Woman. What's wrong?"

Her smile was suddenly weary. "That's what I keep asking myself."

"What do you mean? From where I'm sitting, we appear to be on the cusp of a very good time, for
"everyone."

"Yes," she admitted softly. "We do."

"But you're not convinced. Why?"

She settled back, one hand straying to play with a lock of her hair - a 'tell' that she probably had never even realized she had, but which was instantly recognizable to those who knew her well. Cynthia was worried.

"Why indeed? I wish I knew." Her eyes strayed for a moment toward a narrow storage closet in the back corner of her office. "It's like we're in the middle of a beautiful spring day - sun shining, flowers blooming, wind brisk and bracing. Everything perfect, but . . . somewhere off beyond the horizon, there's a low rumble that might be thunder. A storm that might never even come close to us, but it's there all the same, and I can't quite bring myself to ignore it."

"This is about Brian."

Her smile was lopsided. "Isn't it always about Brian?"

"Look, I know you've been hurt by everything that's happened to him. Hell, it even hurt me, and I didn't even know him back then. Considering what he's been to you, it's no wonder you're still concerned. But - unless I'm missing something - he's come through it all and managed to survive and thrive in spite of what those motherfuckers did to him. This morning, I was there when he and Justin signed the papers to buy that piece of property, and I watched him watching Justin, and he was . . . I don't know how to explain it. I've never seen him like that. I never dreamed that I would see him like that. You just don't think of using the words 'Brian Kinney' and 'love' in the same sentence, but . . ."

Her smile turned slightly sardonic. "No, you wouldn't," she answered. "But that's only because you never really knew him. Exactly the way that most people never really know him. Brian has always been capable of the kind of love that very few people ever experience - the completely selfless kind that is willing to give up absolutely everything for the person he loves. Most people have no idea how rare that is - or how rare he is."

Mathis was quiet for a time, thinking about what she'd said. Then he smiled. "The man just laid out a quarter of a million dollars to buy the piece of land that the light of his life wanted. What more can he . . ."

"Do you know how Brian reacts to any remark about how much he spends for anything?"

"No, I . . ."

"The customary response is, 'I can always make more money.' Yes, he's bought this land because he knows it's what Justin wants. And yes, he'll pay whatever it costs to build the house that Justin wants. But . . ."

Mathis waited, and watched storm clouds gather in cerulean eyes. "But what?"

"But something's not right. Not complete. Not settled." Then she looked again toward the closet in the corner. "For either of them."

The security guard frowned. "Why on earth would Justin hold back? What would he . . ."

"Do you remember the portrait he painted in Brian's office, before we had any idea when or if Brian was coming back? The big one of Brian holding the guitar?"
"Yeah," he replied with an uncharacteristically tender smile. "If I had a gay bone in my body, I'd have been having wet dreams of that image. It was . . . incredible."

"Yes. It was." She studied his face carefully. "And haven't you wondered why you haven't seen it since then?"

He shrugged. "I just assumed they'd hung it at the loft. In their bedroom maybe."

"No. It hasn't been hung in the loft or anywhere else."

"Why not?"

"Exactly." She stood up and walked to the closet to open the door, where a large, flat, rectangular object was wrapped in layers of plastic and padding, standing upright against the wall. "Why is it that Justin has decided to take what may very well be the best work he's ever done and leave it here, where no one will see it, or understand what it means?"

"Okay. I give up. Why?"

She returned to the desk and sat down, and he found that he was stunned by the sadness he saw rising in her eyes. "I can only think of one reason. Because it says too much. Because it reveals too much. It says that his love for Brian is so complete, so boundless, that he's left vulnerable."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning . . . that he's still reserving his options. It's what he's always done; it's what Brian always taught him to do. But it's the one thing that he absolutely must not do, if they are ever going to be able to build a life together."

"But if Brian . . ."

"Brian will never force the issue. Until Justin is prepared to let everything go, to release his hold on his individual identity and trust Brian with his heart, reserving nothing, denying nothing - forever - Brian will always simply stand still, and watch him just walk away. The option is always going to belong to Justin."

"That's Brian Kinney. That's what he does."

"And that," said a new voice from the doorway, "is exactly why we have to do something."

Emmett Honeycutt walked into the room with his customary swish and sway, a designer travel bag tucked under his arm, with Drew Boyd bringing up the rear, wearing a smile that was one part rueful indulgence and one part sheer pride.

The cousins exchanged nods as the ex-football player offered an explanation. "Sorry, I tried to convince him that he's making mountains out of molehills, but . . ."

"But," Emmett said firmly, "aside from Cynthia, nobody knows Brian and/or Justin better than me. Not even Mikey. And I'm telling you, People, we are walking into disaster here, and we can't just stand still and let it happen."

Cynthia sighed. "In point of fact, Emmett, I don't think you're wrong. But this is Brian we're talking about. Brian, who makes the Sphinx look like Jimmie Kimmell. If he doesn't want to tell us what's wrong . . ."
"McClaren knows," Emmett retorted. "I just know it."

"McClaren," Mathis echoed. "The only man I know who can be even more enigmatic than Brian Kinney. You don't actually believe . . ."

"What I believe," Emmett interrupted, "is that McClaren is currently checking out the criminal element in Miami, leaving Brian alone and unguarded. Where is he?"

Cynthia laughed. "Brian Kinney has never been 'unguarded' in his life. But if you'd like to take a crack at him, who am I to point out that it's probably a suicide mission? He's in his office."

Emmett's grin was insouciant. "That's why I don't go anywhere without my big, bad protector. Not even Brian would dare to tackle him."

The couple departed as quickly as they'd come, leaving Cynthia and Lance to exchange smiles. "If I were Emmett, I wouldn't be too sure of that," the security chief remarked, "And I'd be even less sure that Drew wouldn't enjoy an assault at the hands of Liberty Avenue's #1 stud."

Brian was staring at his computer monitor when Emmett and Drew hurried into his office, without bothering to knock. Though they obviously assumed that he would forgive the intrusion and grant them his immediate attention, he actually did neither. He simply continued to review the data displayed before him, clicking on a small icon to expand his focus and pull up more information.

It was several minutes - long-drawn and awkward - before he acknowledged their presence. By that time, Drew Boyd had sprawled in a leather arm chair, making himself completely comfortable, while Emmett paced back and forth in front of the desk, becoming more animated with every passing moment.

"Brian . . ."

One finger lifted - as expressive as any figure of speech.

"But Brian . . ."

The finger thrust upward - once.

Finally - completely frustrated - Emmett dropped into the second leather chair in front of the desk and contented himself with expressing his frustration with rolled eyes and a loud sigh.

It was almost five minutes later when Brian leaned forward and tapped a few keys on his keyboard, before looking up and regarding Emmett with a face almost carved in granite.

"I am in my office - with the door closed - for a reason," he said calmly. "And you'd better have a God-damned good excuse for interrupting."

"Well, of course I do. It's . . . it's Babylon business. So . . ."

Brian glanced at his watch. "By my count, Babylon doesn't open for another six hours, so what is it that can't wait?"

Emmett stood and opened the travel bag that he'd carried in and pulled out a silky garment of a yellow so bright it was almost sulfuric. "This," he explained. "We need to work on your costume for the grand re-dedication - a festival to celebrate survival and, and . . . everything. And this, I thought ,
would be . . ."

Brian's expression remained remote. "That's what you barged in here for?"

"Well, yes. This needs to be a big occasion, Brian. After all you've been through - and what Babylon's been through, we need to make a statement - a strong statement - for all of us. So I thought . . ."

"And when - exactly - is this soiree supposed to happen?"

"Well, I don't know, do I? That's part of what we need to discuss. Along with the parts that you and Justin are going to play in it. To recognize your commitment."

Brian regarded Emmett with a small frown. "Our commitment?"

"Well, it's about time, don't you think? I mean haven't you . . ." He fell silent as he noted shadows gathering in the depths of hazel eyes.

Brian sat back and folded his lips, refraining from speaking until the pulse in his temple stopped throbbing. When he did decide to speak, his voice was very soft, and Emmett was, at first, marginally relieved to note that the tone was devoid of anger. Then he had second thoughts as he noted that the soft tone was - almost - ominous.

"Putting you in charge of Babylon was intended to be a temporary measure, Honeycutt. But, after reviewing your performance, it seems to me to be a win-win situation to leave you to it, if you're so inclined. I've got other fish to fry, and, if you continue to perform as you have, it leaves me free to enjoy the benefits of the club without having to deal with the nuts and bolts."

Emmett managed - just barely - not to preen. But there was still that ominous undertone, so he confined his response to a small smile and waited for the other shoe to drop.

"Still, it's my club. So - in the event of emergency - I expect to be notified. If it's burning to the ground. If there's a toxic chemical spill. If people begin to drop dead from alcohol poisoning. Or if the fags and dykes of the Pitts decide to revolt against the fascist oppression of the city's breeder government and use Babylon as their rallying point. Then I expect to be called."

He rose then and moved around the desk to stand toe to toe with Emmett who had risen hastily to avoid being at a positional disadvantage. "But not - let me repeat that - not because you've got some wild hair up your ass about some kind of touchy-feely sentimentally orgasmic love-in that you need to organize to express your personal 'fuck you' to the establishment. And - just to be perfectly clear - any 'commitment' that Justin and I choose to make - or not make - is none of your fucking business."

He paused then and reached out to adjust the collar of Emmett's bright tangerine silk shirt. "As for my 'costume' . . ." His eyes dropped to the actinic brilliance of the fabric bunched in Emmett's hands. "It's yellow."

Emmett chose to ignore the unpalatable portions of the speech and concentrate on salvaging something positive. 'It'll do amazing things to your eyes."

"Yeah. Like blind them."

"No, it . . ."

Those remarkable hazel eyes lifted then and looked directly into Emmett's green ones, and Emmett blinked, and saw . . . something that struck fear into his heart.
Brian however did not seem to notice. "In all the years you've known me, have you ever - even once - seen me wear anything . . ."

"What's wrong with your eyes?" It was barely a whisper, but it hit Brian with the force of a closed fist, and he stepped back immediately.

"I don't have time for this crap, Emmett, so just . . ."

But Emmett - despite a well-deserved reputation as a flaming nelly-bottom/submissive - could, when an occasion demanded it, display an unexpected degree of determination. "Don't do that. Don't you dare push me away. What's wrong with your eyes?"

Brian hesitated before turning away and walking to the window to stand in silence, gazing out and watching a wayward wind pick up leaves and dust and bits of trash and lift it all in a swirling maze toward neighboring buildings.

"Tell me," Emmett demanded, moving close enough to stand at Brian's back, close enough to touch. Almost.

Brian closed his eyes. "Trust me, Auntie Em," he said finally. "You don't want to know."

"Yes, I do. Otherwise, I wouldn't have asked."

Brian hesitated, noting that Drew Boyd had risen from his chair and moved closer, his bulk surprisingly comforting as he gave off an air of concern and protectiveness that was, somehow, not directed exclusively toward Emmett.

"Tell me."

Brian turned around, his expression unreadable. "Well, you should just look on the bright side. Pretty soon, you might be able to dress me in that blinding yellow, or strawberry pink, or neon orange, and I won't even know it."

Emmett's eyes were huge. "I - I don't understand. When . . ."

Brian shrugged. "A day. A week. Who knows? And - incidentally - how did you?"

"Your pupils," Emmett answered, barely audible. "They're uneven. What is it?"

Brian sighed. "Collateral damage, from the attack."

Emmett swayed suddenly and was comforted by the warm pressure of his lover's body against his back. "But there must be something to do about it. Right? It's not . . . inevitable. It can't be . . ."

Brian looked as if he wanted to accept that rationale. But, in the end, he couldn't. It wasn't something he had divulged to any of his inner circle up until this time, but - somehow - it felt right to tell Emmett.

"Don't know yet. There are doctors - an experimental treatment - but no way to know if it will work."

Emmett leaned forward and touched Brian's face with a shaky hand. "It has to work. It just has to. You have to be okay, Brian. If not, then . . . God! It's just so unfair."

Brian's smile was sardonic - almost bitter. "You can't possibly still believe that fairness comes into it. It's just . . . I don't know . . . the luck of the draw. And by the way . . ." He leaned forward and
dropped his left hand to Emmett's crotch and began to squeeze - slowly but inexorably. "Just so we understand each other, if you tell anybody about this - and I do mean anybody - you are going to find yourself singing soprano - permanently - in a boy's choir. Understood?"

Emmett's eyes were filled with worry and despair, but his natural comic spirit was still irrepressible. "Oh, my God. Somebody grab a camera. Brian Kinney is playing with my balls."

But Brian simply tightened his grip. "Understand?"

"All right, all right." Emmett was able to avoid squirming, but only just. "I get it."

"Stop, Brian," said Drew Boyd easily, but there was definite steel beneath the softness of his tone.

Brian looked up to meet Boyd's eyes, and his smile suggested that, even at a time like this, he was still capable of enjoying the view. He found that he was glad for Emmett - really glad - but, under different circumstances, might have been tempted to try his hand at sampling the fetching merchandise on display.

"No excuses, Emmett," he said sternly. "Ordinarily, keeping a secret is beyond your abilities, but this . . . this better be the exception."

Emmett nodded, but couldn't conceal the sadness in his eyes. "Justin doesn't know, does he?"

"No. And you're going to make sure it stays that way."

"Brian, you can't do this to him. You have to tell him."

Brian's smile turned mocking. "And chain him to me by making him responsible for my care and feeding. By forcing him to spend a lifetime giving up his dreams and his hopes in order to devote himself to taking care of Poor, Blind Brian - is that really what love is? Is that how I prove how much he means to me, by taking away his choices and forcing him to sacrifice himself for me?"

"He'd do it, in a New York minute. You know he would, because that's how much he . . ."

"Yes," Brian interrupted, his voice not quite breaking. "I know he would. And that's why you can't tell him."

Emmett wanted to argue; it was obvious in the stubborn set of his jaw and the steely glint in his eyes. But, in the end, he didn't, because he knew that there was no way he could win this argument. He could, of course, follow the dictates of his romantic heart and march right over to the loft where he knew Justin would be and, with suitably dramatic flourishes, tell this tale of heartbreak and tragedy. But, in the end, much as he might want to do exactly that, he knew he couldn't.

Because it had to be Brian's decision, because . . . he blinked quickly as the unavoidable truth struck him . . . because Brian had earned the right to speak of it or keep it to himself.

But there was more to this story; there had to be.

"You won't be able to hide it for long," he said softly, reasonably he thought. "It's just sheer luck that he hasn't seen it already. I spotted it, for God's sake, and I almost never look you straight in the eye. Confrontation, in case you haven't noticed, isn't really my thing."

Brian and Drew Boyd exchanged wry grins. "I've noticed," Brian replied. "But it won't be an issue for much longer, so don't sweat it."
Emmett backed up another step, realizing that an unspoken truth - unpleasant and undeniable - was buried in that simple sentence. "You're going away," he said finally, flatly. "You're going, and you're not going to tell him where - or why."

Brian took a moment, the shadows in his eyes growing deeper. "I - will - not - lock him into a cage from which there's no escape. That's what this would do, and I won't allow it. I mean it, Emmett."

The big nelly-bottom finally nodded, albeit reluctantly. "Are you . . ." He paused and swallowed around the lump in his throat. "Are you going to at least say good-bye?"

Brian's smile softened then, and he leaned forward and dropped a quick kiss at the corner of Emmett's mouth, retreating before Emmett had a chance to shift and take advantage of the opportunity to explore those legendary lips.

"Good-bye."

Emmett could only nod and allow himself to be guided to the door by his big bruiser of a lover whose beautiful eyes were surprisingly bright in the reflection of radiance from the skylight.

There was, finally, nothing more to be said.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Miami in the spring. Chris McLaren was pretty sure he could get used to it.

Of course, other cities wore spring well; Washington, Atlanta - even Pittsburgh, although how much of the latter's beauty was real or just a reflection of his feelings about a certain individual who resided there, he could not say. More than that, he would not say.

The FBI agent was no fool, and did not pretend to be unaware of his own feelings. He knew how he felt about Brian Kinney, and suspected that it was an affliction which would - unfortunately - be with him for the rest of his life. Again, he did not fool himself; affliction was precisely the right word.

It would remain unspoken, unacknowledged, whether it lasted a day, a week, a year, or forever, but that wouldn't change the fact of its existence.

And this place, this city with its pure, crystalline light and its vitality and intense vigor - where colors were just a little brighter than anywhere else, and the scent of spring was just a little sweeter, where the beaches were just a little whiter and the waters just a little bluer - it might have been created as the perfect setting to display the movable feast that was Brian Kinney.

Unfortunately, at this moment, despite its beauty, it was displaying other things.

He glanced at his watch as the unmarked police car proceeded around a sweeping curve on N. Bay Road, a broad, palm-lined expanse where sprawling mansions sat amid perfectly cultivated grounds on one side of the road, with the beautifully manicured perfection of a designer golf course on the other.

"Beautiful neighborhood," he commented to the smartly-dressed, beautifully coifed young female detective who had been delegated to drive him to his destination. Sofia Rodriguez had been happy to accept the assignment.

"Yes," she replied, her eyes firmly on the road, although - occasionally - she took advantage of the opportunity to sneak a quick peek in the rearview mirror. It wasn't often than an FBI agent came packaged with a face and form like that of Chris McLaren, and she spent a moment wondering if
anybody could really have eyes that blue without some kind of artificial enhancement. But no; a closer look - quick but thorough - confirmed that they were absolutely natural, no matter how ridiculously beautiful. "This is the crème de la crème of Miami Beach. A million dollars wouldn't even get you inside the front door of any of these places."

His smile was classic. "The wages of sin?"

She nodded. "Undeniable proof that crime pays."

"Have you been a part of the investigation of the LaSalle's since its inception?"

"Pretty much." Her dimples were lovely when she smiled and definitely reminiscent of another set of dimples, equally lovely. "One of the perks of a Latino appearance for an undercover cop in this socially diverse city. Having a Cuban maid is one of the marks of status in a place like this, a not-so-subtle means of sticking the finger to Fidel and his socialist ideals."

"So you actually met this Bradford character yourself?"

She nodded and barely managed not to shudder. "A real piece of work. In fact, he's the reason I'm no longer undercover on the case. There aren't too many things I won't do for the sake of an investigation, but getting sexually assaulted by that pervert is crossing the line."

"He didn't actually . . ."

"No, but only because I know how to take care of myself. But my little self-defense routine - and the fact that the family matriarch refused to accept my version of what happened - made it impossible for me to continue."

"Why didn't she . . ."

"I'm Cuban," she replied with a shrug. "He's not. Not quite anyway."

"You've seen the photos of our suspect. Is it him?"

She shrugged. "If it is, he's made some changes. In the shots I saw, he was sort of pale and washed out. Almost colorless. And now - very dark hair, a dark goatee, and, I think, a heavy spray tan. He's going for a Latino look, but he doesn't quite pull it off. In addition, he's packed on a few pounds, but - if I had to guess - yeah, it's him."

"And nobody's been able to get fingerprints on him?"

She smiled. "No. Unfortunately, my little altercation with him came before somebody at HQ put two and two together to raise the question about his identity, and he's kept a pretty low profile, so we haven't really had probable cause to demand access. Do you think you'll know if it's really him?"

McClaren glanced off toward the ocean, its meringue-frosted gem-tones spread out like a natural framework for the vast estates and formal gardens lining the road to his right. He spent a moment remembering Brian's face when he'd found him unconscious and on the verge of death - the faint blueness that had tinted his lips, the pale suggestion of a frown expressing words impossible to speak, and the feel of his skin - cold and clammy and totally lacking in the warmth - almost heat - that was so characteristic of his normal body temperature.

"Oh, yes," he answered finally. "I'll know."

He checked his watch again, knowing that he was going to cut it very close to make the flight back
to Pittsburgh.

The retrieval - for lack of a better term - of little J. R. Marcus had been more complicated and taken longer than he'd expected. It had also been sufficiently confrontational to justify Brian's misgivings and determination that McClaren should accompany Michael on his errand.

Melanie Marcus had greeted Michael and Ben at her parents' door and proceeded to put on a show that started with relatively soft-spoken sarcasm, escalated into vitriolic shouting, and ended with near hysterical shrieks and threats which had alarmed her parents and frightened her daughter into broken-hearted sobs. It was at that point that McClaren had stepped forward, holding on to his patience by a mere thread and managing to persuade her - red-faced and hyperventilating - that she really didn't want her daughter's final memory of the occasion to be such a complete loss of control on her part.

After all, he had pointed out - using the cold, rational, ultra-controlled voice that he ordinarily used in witness testimony - if it happened that the courts should decide to intervene and limit her access to her daughter - all in the child's best interest, of course - she would regret that her daughter's final image of her would be of such a corrosive nature.

He had been careful to avoid phrasing it as a threat, and there had been no violence in his eyes. But there had been a promise - very deliberate, very focused - and Melanie Marcus, while hell-bent on having her own way and exacting revenge for every slight - real or imagined - she had suffered at the hands of Brian Kinney, had found herself not quite capable of ignoring the nuances of the comment that went unspoken, but not unrecognized. Early in her association with the woman who had become her partner, she had learned that one crossed Kinney at one's own risk; she had been surprised on this occasion to realize that there were others who might turn out to be just a dangerous, even when such an individual's eyes - as blue and guileless as a sunlit sky - seemed to belie the possibility.

She had wondered for a moment how many people made the fatal mistake of underestimating Chris McClaren simply because he was so pretty, and, by the time she was able to shake off that rather alarming thought, the confrontation was over and J.R. was being buckled into a car seat in the back of the deliberately anonymous dark sedan that would take the Novotny party back to the airport.

McClaren, meanwhile, had stood by, watching in silence, until the car drove away. Then he had simply nodded at her - apparently granting her his approval for managing to exercise some small measure of restraint - before making his own exit in a different vehicle.

He had adjusted the car's side mirror to allow him to observe Melanie's demeanor as he'd been driven away, and made a mental note to keep a metaphorical eye on the furious young woman. She might have had no choice but to accept what had happened today, but the level of her outrage was so extreme that he doubted she would give up the fight.

Melanie Marcus was not done yet and would bear watching.

He sat back in the soft leather of the car seat, enjoying the ambiance of the vehicle, sweetly accented by the delicate scent of Donna Karan's Cashmere Mist cologne that his driver wore in exactly the correct amount to emphasize the smart but feminine cut of her Evan Picone suit, and by the soft, dulcet tones of Jim Croce's matchless interpretation of *Time in a Bottle*.

What a concept - one that the FBI agent dared not allow himself to contemplate too intensely. And yet . . .

*If I had a box just for wishes
And dreams that had never come through . . .*
But enough of that. Unlike the one in the song, his box would be...

Soon, Brian Kinney would be only a memory - one case in a lifetime of work. One face in a crowd.

Of course he would.

"Is this going to be a problem for you?" he asked, eager to turn his mind to more productive thoughts. "Won't the family or the staff recognize you?"

She grinned. "Are you kidding? I'm wearing a suit that cost more than I made in a month of bowing and scraping in that house. And besides, Madam LaSalle never bothers to look at the faces of the female hired help, although she does a fair job of inspecting the bodies of the male members of the staff."

She glanced toward him, and he couldn't quite make out the expression in her eyes behind dark-tinted glasses. "You should watch yourself. She'll be tempted to eat you alive."

His smile was cold. "Not to worry, Sergeant. Like you, I know how to defend myself."

*I bet you do.* She did not - quite - say it aloud, but he heard it anyway.

"But what about the others?" he went on. "Won't the hired help realize who you are?"

"I doubt it," she shrugged. "They tend to keep their eyes and their heads down. It's safer that way."

He turned to study her face again, noting the smile that was, at best, bittersweet. "God bless the USA?" he ventured.

She sighed. "I don't mean to make it sound like we're the poor, poverty-stricken Hispanics around here. Or victims of the upper crust. Though bigotry is as alive and well here as anywhere else, the truth is that most people have come to accept us as facts of life. They're not all thrilled with the fundamental truth of it, but they realize that we're here to stay. And for many of us - like me - the opportunities have been great. I got my degree, paid my dues in the ranks, and wound up doing exactly what I wanted to do. So if I occasionally run into a bit of the kind of nasty racist crap that so many people have to deal with, I just count it as part of the price of my success." She turned then to study his face, glad that he had not yet donned the aviator sunglasses tucked into his shirt. "Surely you know what I mean. The kind of prejudice that you have to face is even uglier, isn't it?"

His smile was slightly lopsided. "Gay-dar going off, Sergeant?"

"Not really. It's just..."

"Just what?"

"Sorry. Didn't mean to offend." she answered, only a tiny bit embarrassed. "Are you sure about this? If he is who you think he is, he's going to recognize you immediately. What if he runs?"

The smile grew just a bit colder. "Then you get the chance for a little payback. Only - do me a favor and try not to kill him, okay? He's the missing link in my case - the final connection between the powers behind the throne who planned the whole thing and the victim." He felt his breath catch in his throat as he uttered that word, discovering that he didn't much care for using such a term in reference to Brian Kinney, and reflecting that there was something dreadfully wrong with a world in which such a man could be defined by such a tragic misnomer.

"Besides," he said softly, "There are others who have a better claim to the right to kill the bastard - as
slowly and painfully as possible."

She pulled into a broad, curved, cobblestone driveway, and stopped the car, hesitating for a moment before opening her door. "You wanted to know about my so-called 'gay-dar'? I actually don't have any. But this Kinney guy - when you talk about him, you . . ."

He paused in the process of making his own exit, not sure he wanted to hear what she had to say but knowing that he had little choice. "I . . . what?" he asked, when she did not continue.

"There's something in your voice," she answered finally. "Something different. He must be . . ."

"Yeah," he answered. "He is." Knowing that she understood that there were no words that could quite explain that 'difference' - no words, at least, that he was willing to speak.

She sighed again, dramatically this time. "You know, the truth really hurts sometimes," she said sharply.

"What? What truth?"

"All the good ones are either taken - or gay," she replied with a grin, and he could not quite contain an urge to blush.

They shared a quiet laugh as they walked up a flagstone path to the entrance of the sprawling 2-story, Tudor-style mansion, with its elaborately carved arched front door, embellished with a wrap-around beveled glass transom, and set within a wood-paneled alcove.

The FBI agent had not been entirely certain that his companion would prove correct in her assumption that no one would recognize her, but his doubts proved to be groundless.

They were admitted into a large, high-ceilinged foyer, wainscoted with richly-carved teakwood, a perfect contrast for lustrous pale mocha-colored, raw silk-covered walls, all awash in afternoon sunlight streaming in from mullioned windows arranged in stair-steps along the exterior wall of the broad spiral staircase that swept up toward the second floor. On the opposite wall, centered and perfectly illuminated by soft, indirect lighting from below, a huge painting hung - bright and enormously complex and drawing the eye into a fantastic, abstract landscape wrapped around a solitary figure in shadowy distance, a brilliant display of light and imagination. McClaren wasn't an expert, of course, but he had been involved in an investigation of art fraud a couple of years earlier, so he was pretty sure he recognized the work as a Hernan Bas oil - an original, not a copy. Proof - if further proof was needed - that the LaSalle family dwelt in the upper echelon of the moneyed elite.

The soft-spoken young servant - a lovely Latino with golden skin and deep chocolate eyes - who had admitted them never looked directly into their faces, except for a brief glimpse at McClaren when he identified himself as a federal agent. In truth, she spent more time examining his ID badge than his face.

"How can we help you, Sir?" she asked finally, still not looking at him or his companion.

"I need to speak to Mr. Douglas LaSalle, please."

The young woman shook her head. "Mr. LaSalle does not currently receive visitors, Sir. His health is delicate." The tone and cadence of her voice suggested that this was a speech she was often called upon to repeat.

McClaren took a moment to formulate a response, considering his options and making sure to keep his demeanor gentle and respectful. "I'm afraid I have to insist. It concerns events which occurred at
the clinic that Mr. LaSalle attends for his treatments. Unless he is borderline comatose, I must speak to him. And, in that event, I would need to see the medical staff member who accompanies him for his treatments."

"I'm sorry, Sir, but . . ."

A stern voice - sharp with annoyance - rose from a shadowy area beyond a graceful archway at the end of the entry corridor. "Inez, who is that?"

The maid, with a tiny sigh, turned to face the imposing figure who had stepped out of the shadows, answering with the barest trace of a tremor in her voice. "It's the FBI, Mrs. LaSalle. They insist on speaking to Mr. Douglas."

"Nonsense," came the reply. "That's not possible. Send them away."

Alicia LaSalle was tall and slender - almost willowy - and imposing in pearl gray silk with exquisitely soft draping - a Gucci design by the look of it - and she walked forward with deliberate hauteur. Her expression was cool as she approached, but relaxed slightly as she got close enough to study the young man standing before her. She was, of course, immaculately turned out - freshly coiffed and manicured, with diamond teardrops in her ears and carefully applied make-up, and her face was totally free of even the smallest of lines or wrinkles. Nevertheless, this was not a young woman, and the skin covering her cheekbones and brow was so taut that she appeared perpetually startled. A perfect specimen of the both the advantages and the hazards of a regular association with a skilled and willing plastic surgeon.

Her eyes - pale gray and deep set - regarded McClaren with a combination of prurient interest and cultural disdain, obviously expecting him to accept her decision without demur. But Mrs. LaSalle was about to learn a harsh lesson and be forced to acknowledge that the slogan she had lived by throughout her entire life - namely, that rank hath privileges that trump everything else - was not always fundamental truth.

Without waiting for invitation or permission, Chris McClaren moved past the young woman at the door and strode down the corridor to come face-to-face with the lady of the manor - so to speak. Her expression was, of course, anything but ladylike as she prepared to cut down this impertinent intruder, only she never got the chance as McClaren flashed his badge once more and decided, based on the unmistakable flicker of appreciation in those small gray eyes, that charm might work better than coercion in this instance. "I'm sorry to be a pest," he said, with a maximum wattage smile calibrated to entice and enchant, "but I'm afraid our investigation is at a critical stage, and Mr. LaSalle may have some vital information for us. He was present at the clinic when an incident occurred involving a matter about falsified credentials in a member of the medical staff, and that's something we can't dawdle over, as I'm sure you'll appreciate. It wouldn't do to have unqualified staff members treating the patients at such a prestigious facility, now would it?"

Alicia LaSalle clung to her annoyance for a full five seconds, before caving in before a wave of much more pleasant emotions, her eyes missing nothing in her inspection of the strapping young man who was looking at her with a remarkable degree of warmth.

"Of course it wouldn't," she agreed, but mostly just to say something, as she actually had no idea what he was asking; she was much too busy staring into those incredible blue eyes. "How can we help?"

McClaren smiled again, understanding that her offer had nothing to do with any desire to help his investigation and everything to do with keeping him at her beck and call. "I'm afraid there's nothing that you can do yourself, Mrs. LaSalle. It's your husband I need to see, or - if needs must - his nurse."
She turned and led him back through the archway at the end of the hall into a large sitting room that was the epitome of English Country House, right down to the chintz-covered sofas, the vintage Savonnerie rug that covered a portion of the parquet floor, the Wedgwood tea service sitting on a dark cherry traditional coffee table, and the antique Waterford china pieces displayed above a mahogany-framed fireplace. She proceeded to seat herself on a raw silk settee and patted the cushion beside her in invitation. "I am really sorry, Agent McClaren, but I'm afraid it's quite impossible. Douglas isn't here." She had not spared a single glance for his companion, who watched and struggled to control an urge to grin, knowing that it was probably unprofessional to enjoy a small taste of payback as her previous employer fell victim to an application of deliberate guile, but she was enjoying it anyway.

McClaren accepted the wordless invitation, managing to maintain some small distance between him and his hostess - very small - as he seated himself and glanced toward Sofia Rodriguez and saw her respond to his unasked question with a quick shake of her head. If the elder LaSalle was, in fact, missing in action, it was news to the police officers tasked with keeping an eye on the family.

"Are you sure?" he asked with a diffident smile. "I realize it's an imposition, given the state of his health, but . . ."

Mrs. LaSalle, however - no matter how smitten - was not accustomed to dealing with deliberate impertinence and would not stand for it now. "I'm quite sure," she replied firmly. "He flew out last night, and I don't mind telling you it was most inconvenient. These medical people have no respect for their patients' schedules. My daughter was supposed to take our Lear jet to Jamaica last evening and had to delay her trip because my husband's physicians waited until the last minute to schedule him for evaluation for a possible transplant at Presbyterian hospital. We only found out yesterday that he had to be there this morning. So, you see, it's just not possible for you to speak to him."

McClaren could not suppress a small sigh. "And his nurse? Um. . ." He took a moment to pretend to consult a notebook. "Mr. Bradford?"

Again, the desire to create a sense of intimacy with such a delectable young morsel conflicted with a desire to squelch such blatant disrespect. "Tommy is where he's supposed to be," she replied coldly. "At Mr. LaSalle's side. Doing his job."

"At Presbyterian Hospital?" McClaren replied, seeking clarification.

"Yes."

"In New York?"

Mrs. LaSalle did not - quite - roll her eyes. "No, of course not. He's at UPMC. In Pittsburgh."

Alicia LaSalle would later call the FBI public information office to complain about the unforgivable rudeness of the delectable young man who leapt to his feet almost before she'd finished speaking and ran for the door with his young, Hispanic companion at his heels, without so much as a thank you or a word of farewell.

Young people today! Not an ounce of respect to be found in the lot of them!

The FBI representative would accept her complaint, soothe her outrage, assure her that appropriate action would be taken, and promptly toss the record of her call into the trash can figuring - rightly - that wounded egos of the rich and famous did not fall under the agency's purview.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~
There was a trace of droll amusement in Cynthia's voice as she leaned into his doorway. "For a man contemplating something that's supposed to make him obscenely rich, you don't look particularly pleased."

Brian leaned back in his custom-made leather chair and offered her a smile that was non-committal - almost weary. "And you don't look like a young mother who's enjoying her day with her daughter, as instructed."

She moved toward him, carrying a small tray which held a covered dish, a couple of wine glasses, and a bottle of Talley Vineyards Pinot Noir, pricey but not outrageously so. "You skipped lunch," she said firmly, "and my daughter is currently either at the movies with her godmother, probably deciding whether or not she should give up her obsession with Robert Patinson and defect to the Justin Bieber camp. Or getting ready to attend the circus at the civic center. So . . ."

"So you could have gone with her," he pointed out.

"I don't care for circuses," she replied, "They bore me."

Brian spent a moment recalling a liaison that had occurred during his senior year at Penn, a vividly spectacular week-end involving a trapeze artist, a juggler, and a young and eager version of himself, and considered pointing out that she might not know what she was missing, but then - given the participation of her very special daughter - he decided to keep it to himself. But the memory made him smile, and Cynthia - ever attuned to his moods and methods - was grateful to have been able to inspire whatever memory had spurred his reaction.

"I'm not a child, you know," he said softly, "and I can take care of . . ."

"I know that you can," she interrupted. "But lots of times, you don't. Especially when you get caught up in a project."

She set the tray on his desk, removed the domed cover to reveal an appealing presentation of chicken cordon bleu, a broccoli-tomato salad, and a bacon-topped baked potato, and sank into a chair to wait for the *di rigueur* Kinney response.

"Are you trying to fatten me up?" he asked without a trace of a smile.

"Now why would I do that?" she retorted. "One of the major perks of my job is being able to ogle my boss's perfect ass, so I'd be the last person to want it buried under rolls of disgusting fat."

"So why . . ."

"Because I know you too well, oh, captain, my captain. You went out to brunch with Justin this morning - as part of your perfectly prepared little plot to surprise him with the gift of a lifetime - and while he downed stacks of pancakes and rashers of bacon, you nibbled on some wheat toast and drank a gallon of coffee. And tonight . . . well, Babylon awaits, does it not? And while you can and do enjoy a whole host of delights within those hallowed walls, food is not among them. So eat, Fearless Leader, and I promise that nobody's going to stand over you with a cane to make sure you finish every bite."

Brian tried to conceal the smile that tugged at his lips, but couldn't quite pull it off, which said plenty about his associate's ability to manipulate him. It was a privilege granted to very few.

"So what's up with the project?" she asked, as he uncorked the wine, taking a moment to enjoy the
rich aroma, tart with a hint of vanilla and violet.

"What do you know about it?" He asked, pouring the garnet-colored liquid into her glass and pushing it toward her.

"Nothing, except what my nosy little eyes have observed. Namely, Teddie acting all squirrely and scurrying around like a James Bond wannabe, carrying files and plans and alternating between looking like the man holding the keys to the kingdom and the one waiting for the axe to fall. Doesn't take a genius to figure out that something's up. Plus, you're here on a Sunday afternoon, when Justin is probably sitting at the loft, waiting for you to come home to get your reward for what you did this morning. Yet, here you sit. So . . . something's bothering you - bothering you enough to keep you here digging through computer files like you've discovered a clue to the location of the Holy Grail. So . . ."

He smiled. "You're wasted here, you know. You should be working for the CIA or the FBI or some kind of special-ops, Jason-Bourne type secret agency."

"Don't change the subject," she replied with an eye-roll. "Eat, and tell me what's bothering you?"

He sighed again, his eyes trained on his computer screen, but he did pick up his fork and begin to move food around his plate. Whether or not he would actually eat it was yet to be determined. "I don't really know, except that there's something - something that doesn't add up."

Her smile was diffident. "Why don't you show me what you're working on?"

"No way," he retorted, realizing that he was, actually, a bit hungry, as he began to eat. "Katy's waiting for you."

"Not yet. I've got another couple of hours at least. So fess up, Boss. Two eyes are always better than one, you know."

Brian sighed. "One hour," he stipulated, as he plied knife and fork to slice into the succulent stuffed chicken. "After that, you go, whether we've figured it out or not."

"Agreed." She moved around his desk and leaned forward to study the screen on his monitor which was currently displaying an architectural sketch of a vast complex of contemporary buildings and lush gardens, all arranged around a central plaza featuring a series of eternity pools forming an arc around a cascade of water descending from a towering abstract sculpture. It was stunningly beautiful.

"Wow!" Cynthia's voice was hushed, almost awed. "That's . . . that's exquisite, Brian. What is it supposed to be?"

"A new art and entertainment complex - museum, gallery, concert hall, theater, etc," he replied. "And you're right. It is beautiful and - supposedly - I'm being invited to be a part of an elite group of investors who'll sponsor the project and make it all possible."

Her eyes widened. "So, it really could make you a multi-multi millionaire. Not to mention gain you entry into the exclusive ranks of the rich and famous."

"So it seems," he replied.

"And yet . . . you're not smiling."

Then he did smile, but it was lopsided and slightly sardonic. "Somehow, I just can't wrap my mind around the possibility that these 'rich and famous' pillars of conservatism, people who have spent
their entire lives despising me and everything I stand for - and not being afraid to say so - have
suddenly decided to give up their prejudices and welcome me into the fold. Is it just me or is that a
little like the villagers in Transylvania deciding to discard their crucifixes and welcome Dracula into
their homes?"

She couldn't suppress a grin. "Nice analogy, Count."

She frowned as she noted that he was back to toying with his food instead of eating it.

"Yeah. The thing is . . . I'm sure there's a catch somewhere. Even though Teddie has done his due
diligence and gone through it all with a fine-toothed comb and vouches for every detail. Even though
I've done the same and come up with zilch. It all looks right. It all seems straightforward, and I don't .
. . " His smile was weary. "If I pass this up, Tink, just because my gut is telling me something is
wrong, and then find out that it was simply my paranoia working on me, what kind of fool does that
make me?"

"You're not a fool, Brian," she replied with a gentle smile. "You've just been burned and burned
too many times. It's God-damned hard to just forget that and trust in the good intentions of people
who've never given any indication of considering you to be worthy of simple courtesy, much less a
golden investment opportunity."

He folded his lips together and regarded her with the glint of affection sparking in his eyes. "You
realize, of course, that you're only reinforcing my paranoia."

She shrugged. "It's not paranoia if someone really is out to get you."

"Well said," he said. "So help me figure it out, Milady. What am I not seeing?"

She stepped away, moving toward the door. "Send the files to my laptop, and I'll try a different
approach."

"What would I do without you?" he called after her, giving voice to an emotional attachment he
rarely admitted.

"Flounder around like a beached whale," she replied with a grin, "and ruin that spectacular face with
ugly frown lines."

Brian did not - quite - shudder.

Alexandra Corey sat behind her desk in her cluttered office on the upper floor of the J. Edgar Hoover
Building in Washington, and wished she could have ignored the minimal traces of alarm that she'd
identified in her subordinate's voice as he'd related what he'd learned in Miami. More than wished,
actually; wished desperately. There was, she was (almost) certain, nothing to worry about.

Brian Kinney was in the best place he could be, security-wise, safe within his own version of an
ivory tower, with his own security people in place, supplemented by a veteran FBI staff, although -
at that precise moment - those staffers were dispatched on other errands. Necessary errands, but,
hopefully, of brief duration. So, in a matter of a couple of hours, the wall of security surrounding the
FBI's star witness in this case would once more be impregnable. More impregnable - but only
slightly - than it was right now.

It would take an act of sheer idiocy - not to mention desperation - to make any attempt to get to Brian
now. She had good reason to know that his own security personnel were both highly skilled and
intensely motivated to protect their employer; in addition, both Delia Perkins and Eugene Spalding - extraordinary agents in their own rights - were there in Pittsburgh, only minutes away should their presence be required.

But still, they weren't on site, which was a bit troubling. McClaren - the primary agent in charge of Kinney's protection - was on his way back from Miami; the purpose for the trip had been multi-fold, and even he had been unable to argue with the wisdom of his assignment, all things considered. At the same time, Eugene Spalding was currently working in the cyber-crimes lab at Pittsburgh police HQ, deeply involved with Priscilla Young and Sharon Briggs in retrieving masses of data from the files retrieved from John Vincent Fincher's office and the encrypted Club records provided by Henry Flagg, while Delia Perkins was babysitting Flagg himself, at an agency safe house, pending the arrival of a Wit-Sec team to take over the task. Said team was scheduled to arrive on a late flight from Chicago, and Corey had agreed with an assessment by Briggs and Jared Hilliard that the accountant would not handle being left alone well. The consensus was that, if given the chance, the elderly man might take advantage of the opportunity to disappear into the night.

It had nothing to do with his sense of moral duty; once shown what his employers had done, he had been horrified and appalled. But one could hardly conclude that he had not suspected that things were very, very wrong during all the years he'd engaged in creative accounting to cover the things The Club did not want seen. And he was frightened - a not unreasonable reaction to realizing that his testimony would be key to bringing his former bosses to justice. Leaving him to his own devices was not smart; thus, the FBI team was temporarily unavailable to oversee the security of Brian Kinney, but that, in itself, was not cause for alarm.

Kinney's personal security team was more than equal to the job required of them, but . . .

Despite the large number of people involved in the investigation, there was no ignoring the fact that there was an even larger number of individuals requiring protection (according to Brian Kinney, anyway - the golden boy whom the FBI could not afford to cross). Thus she could not deny that the defenders were spread a little thin.

In light of all this, she had taken Chris McClaren's uneasiness seriously enough to employ her contacts in the Pittsburgh area to address his concerns.

With a single call to Detective Carl Horvath, she had set in motion a series of inquiries that yielded the information she'd been seeking. To wit that - A. Douglas LaSalle was, indeed, currently confined in a private suite at UPMC Presbyterian Hospital. B. He was scheduled for rounds of testing and treatment for the next two days involving preparation for a possible organ transplant, and C. his medical attendant - one Thomas Bradford - was on duty at his side, constantly available to see to his every need.

She could certainly understand McClaren's misgivings, but every possible scenario had been addressed to make sure that no one - Bradford or anyone else - could gain access to young Mr. Kinney. He was, to use a phrase that her mother - a native of the village of Wickenby in Lincolnshire, England - had always favored, safe as houses, although she had never been entirely sure what that meant, but it sounded good, sounded reassuring.

Additionally, there was still no proof that this Bradford character was, in fact, the individual who had come so close to succeeding in a clandestine attempt to end Brian's life. Everything was still a matter of speculation.

Alexandra Corey did not enjoy speculation.

It was going on seven when she picked up her phone and directed an assistant to call Dulles and
have the FBI jet prepared to lift off within the hour.

The image currently displayed on his monitor was pleasant enough, though not exactly prepossessing. If he looked hard enough and allowed his imagination to flourish, he could just make out how the stretch of riverside property could be transformed into the architectural triumph suggested by the drawings he'd spent the entire afternoon studying. The physical features were all present and accounted for - the semi-dramatic drop-off to the river, the silhouette of a broken precipice in the distance, and the narrow curving ravine that would be transformed - via the tender mercies of a master landscape artist - into a stunning path for nature lovers who might tire of the more contrived offerings to be found in the stunning array of buildings on the site.

It would be breathtaking, and he could be a part of its creation.

Brian Kinney - pillar of the community; mover and shaker; cultural maven; philanthropic entrepreneur, and - oh, yes - multi-millionaire.

Of course, in point of truth, he was already a multi-millionaire. But only just, since "multi" - by definition - indicated any number greater than one. So he qualified, barely. But this project, if it played out as presented, would enroll him in the ranks of the very, very wealthy.

That was a prospect that he found extremely enticing.

Plus - he hardly dared to think it - would it also buy him . . . With an impatient slap of his hand, he moved away from the photograph and pulled up a more prosaic document, the details of the land purchase. He had spent his entire life not giving a royal fuck whether or not society approved of him and his lifestyle, and he was damned if he was going to start now.

So this was about the money. Not his place in the community. Nor the respect of his financial peers. Nor taking his place among the social elite.

Just money. But not just money. Money - as in enough money to guarantee that he would never again be put in a position of dire need, and - more importantly - that he would be able to provide for his son and Justin, so that neither of them would ever lack for anything. And there were others, of course - people who were enormously important to him, even if some of them had never realized just how important they were.

Section 78 - 40.3N - 79.9W: that certain tract or parcel of land, containing 23.7 acres, more or less, being located in the Northwest Quarter of Northeast Quarter of Section 78, Township 40 North, Range 70 West, Borough of West Hampton, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, bordered by a .347 mile frontage on the Monongehela River, adjoining a lateral stretch of . . .

Blah, blah, blah. Pages and pages of details on arcane things like mineral rights, rights of way, adherence to environmental regulations, zoning issues, etc, etc, etc.

The bottom line was, of course, the one thing that required no esoteric knowledge of realty. Sales price: $7,990,425.00.

And that, of course, was merely the cost of the land, unimproved, to be divided equally among four investors. He did not yet know the identity of the other three, but he could make a fair guess about one of them.

He did not know C. R. Wylie. Had never met him, or had any desire to make his acquaintance. But he already didn't like him - a circumstance for which he made no excuses. He didn't need to know
the man in order to determine that he was the kind of breeder power-broker that would have been
front and center in the defense of Proposition 14. That was a given. Still, he had done business in the
past with people he didn't like; personal fondness was not required for a successful business
relationship.

Liking did not really matter, but trusting - that was something else entirely.

Brian folded his lips and resisted an urge to massage his temples with rough fingertips. It was
patently ridiculous to have a headache pounding in his skull over something that he could not
resolve. He never indulged in false modesty; if anything, he was more inclined to be over-confidant,
a trait that had frequently driven his lover, along with many of his friends, to distraction. But in this,
he didn't want to admit that he was in over his head, but he was.

He didn't know enough about the real estate market to make an informed judgment. And - in spite of
his insistence to the contrary - neither did Ted Schmidt.

Brian needed some independent advice, knowledgeable advice from someone with no stake in the
outcome of the deal.

He was mildly astonished to realize that he really wished that he had not sent Chris McClaren to
Miami. Which was extremely foolish, of course. McClaren might be ridiculously well-informed, and
intelligent to the point of brilliance, but he wouldn't recognize a golden investment opportunity if it
stared into those incredible blue eyes and explored his mouth with a hungry tongue.

It wasn't his area of expertise. Nevertheless . . .

Soon, it won't matter. Soon, he'll be gone. Just like everybody else you've ever . . .

His maundering was interrupted by the ringing of his phone, and he was grateful for the diversion. A
glance at the caller ID caused him to smile, and he answered by engaging the speaker function.

"Sunshine," he purred with a smirk, as he lit a cigarette and ran a hand across his jaw, noting the
stubble that he decided to ignore for the moment. At one time, he would never have tolerated it, but
things were different now. Way different. "I thought we were going to meet at the club."

"Change of plans," Justin replied, his voice just husky enough to inform his lover that he'd been
indulging in a bit of smoking of his own, and not of the strictly legal variety. "Debbie's here, with
enough puttanesca to feed a small army and a whole box full of cannoli."

Brian suppressed a groan. There were very few things - nutritionally speaking - which he found hard
to resist, but cannoli was in a category all its own.

"My way of saying thanks." Debbie's voice was just as loud and just as brash as always, but there
was a new note there - a soft note that he was unaccustomed to hearing.

"You don't have to say anything," he replied gruffly. "Didn't do it for you."

"Of course you didn't," she retorted. "What was I thinking?"

"Anyway," Justin said quickly, "you need to come home before we go to Babylon. To eat, to look
over what Mr. Kissinger and I came up with today, and, um, to, um . . ."

"He's trying to be discreet, Stud Muffin," said Debbie with a laugh. "And I promise to be long gone
by the time you get here, so you two can do . . . whatever it is you do when you're alone. After all, I
have a welcome home celebration to prepare. Which, by the way, you guys could join, if you can
"tear yourself away from your fuck-fest for a while."

"Now let me think," said Brian, with a droll smirk. "A Novotny house party - or plowing . . ."

"Enough of that," Justin said quickly. "Just get your ass home, okay?"

"You hungry, Sunshine?"

"You have no idea." That was just a whisper, definitely not meant for Debbie's ears.

"OK, but it'll be a while yet." Brian pretended not to hear Justin's harsh sigh. "I've got a few things to finish here."

"What's more important than . . ."

"Nothing," Brian said quickly, "but I need to finish up so I don't have to deal with all this again."

"Deal with what?"

"Details," Brian said easily. "Just details. Cleaning up some of Teddie's mess."

Justin sighed again, more gently. "Okay, but just don't be too late, huh? I miss you. I need you here, with me. Now."

"Just relax, Twink. I'll . . ."

"McFed's not there, is he?"

Brian frowned, hearing the note of uncertainty in Justin's voice, and wishing he could think of a way to soothe it. "No. He's on his way back from Miami."

"And he hasn't called you?"

Brian sank back in his chair. "Now why would he call me? It's not like we keep tabs on each other."

"Wrong. You might not keep tabs on him, but he sure as hell keeps . . ."

"It's just his job, Justin."

"Yeah. Right."

Brian spent a minute staring blindly at the image on his computer screen, debating what to say next. "You jealous, Sunshine?" he asked finally, allowing a note of impatience to color his tone.

Justin mumbled something.

"What was that? I didn't quite . . ."

"Yes, Goddammit. All right. I'm jealous. You satisfied?"

The impatience was gone, and the tone was gentle and filled with affection. "Yeah. I am. And when I get home, I'll show you how much."

Justin was still laughing when Brian disconnected and looked up to find Cynthia watching him, her eyes bright with warmth. "What?" he asked. "Aren't you going to tell me that I shouldn't tease him?"

"Nope. I figure you've earned it. And he's not a baby any more. If he can't take it now, he needs to
learn to."

He regarded her steadily. "Okay. Who are you, and what have you done with my Tinkerbell?"

"Your 'Tinkerbell' grew up, Peter. You should try it sometime."

His smile was sardonic. "And there she is. In character once more."

She nodded toward his computer. "Find anything?"

"Not really. You?"

She hesitated, apparently considering how to word her response.


"It's probably nothing," she replied finally, reluctantly. "Just a typo, but it needs checking out."

"What kind of typo? What did you find?"

She flopped into an arm chair. "Like I said, it's a tiny discrepancy. I'm not even sure why I did it, but I fed the coordinates provided in the legal plat description into the Google Map app, and . . . and the image that came up didn't exactly match the photos provided by the realtor. Not quite."

"What do you mean? How was it different?"

She took a deep breath. "The configuration of the river-front looked rougher to me - more deep-cut - and there were remnants of what seemed to be old construction. Nothing major - mostly just a few pieces of old stone and a couple of piles of rubble - which might mean nothing except that the Google image was an overhead shot, and the photos weren't. So it might just be that the photographer was working from a different angle, or that the remains of the structure would only be visible from a certain altitude. So, tomorrow, I'll go down to the clerk of court's office, and . . ."

She was interrupted by the sound of Katy Perry's "Firework" erupting from her iPhone - the ringtone that identified the call as coming from her daughter.

Brian, realizing who was calling, prepared to shout out a greeting, but the words died on his lips as he watched Cynthia's face blanch to a startling pallor within a matter of seconds as she listened to her daughter's voice.

"Katy, Katy, wait, Honey," she gasped, lifting one trembling hand to her forehead and trying to understand the shrill outpouring of broken words that Katy could not seem to organize in order to make sense. "What happened? Where's . . ."

"What's wrong?" Brian demanded, leaping to his feet.

Cynthia's eyes were huge and tearful. "She's lost. She can't find . . ."

Without ceremony or hesitation, Brian grabbed the phone. "Katy, it's Brian. Now I want you to take a deep breath, and listen to me. Can you do that?"

For a moment, there was only a keening sound, interspersed with sniffling. Then - finally - a small, tentative voice. "O... kay."

"Okay. Now everything's going to be fine. Just tell me where you are."
"I don't know," the girl wailed.

"Yes, you do," he answered, deliberately calm, almost serene. "I want you to look around, and tell me what you see."

Meanwhile, he was scribbling a note on his blotter, which he pushed toward Cynthia. "Get Mathis to track her phone."

Cynthia nodded and went racing out of the office.

"Talk to me, Katy. Tell me what happened."

"I just . . . I had to go to the bathroom, and Aunt Mona was getting popcorn for us, and when I came out, I - I couldn't find her, and then this lady came up and grabbed my hand and said that Aunt Mona was sick, so I had to go with her, and . . . and she pulled me downstairs and down a long hall, and . . . and then there were a lot of people, and I . . . she pushed me away and let go of my hand, and I . . . there were no more people, and . . . Brian, I'm scared. I don't know where . . ."

"Katy," he interrupted, sensing the hysteria rising in her voice, "I want you to look around, and tell me what you see."

She sniffled loudly, and took a deep breath. "It's dark," she said finally, "and it smells bad."

An insistent beeping interrupted the sound of her voice, and Brian glanced at the caller ID to identify Cynthia's aunt, but he dared not cut Katy off. The aunt/godmother would just have to wait.

"What else?" he asked gently, as he scribbled another note, directing Cynthia to call Mona immediately. "Come on, Katy. Talk to me. Are there people there, or . . ."

"Not right here," she answered. "But I can hear them. They sound busy and . . . and cross And . . . and there are bars behind me. I can feel them. And there's hay on the floor. And . . . Brian?"

"Yeah, Baby Girl?"

"I'm so scared."

"I know," he said softly. "But you're going to be all right. I promise, Katy. You just keep talking. Just tell me everything you can think of. What do you hear?"

"Someone is shouting," she answered, "but I can't tell what they're saying. And I hear some kind of animal growling. It's . . . it's not far away."

Brian took a deep breath. "All right, Katy. This is what I want you to do. I need you to sit very still, and . . ."

"Got it," shouted Lance Mathis, as he hurried into the office. "She's still at the fairgrounds, although I can't tell exactly where."

"She's in the staging area, where they keep the animal cages. You go with Cynthia. Right now."

"Brian," said the security chief, obviously torn and reluctant, "my job is to protect you."

"Your job," Brian retorted coldly, "is to do whatever the fuck I tell you to do. And I'm telling you to go get that child. Now."

Mathis hesitated for a moment, before nodding. "All right. But you make Goddamned sure that you
stay right here. Hilliard and Boyles are both on duty, and Schmidt is still around somewhere, and LaFleur is upstairs, so you should be OK. But you don't leave this office, Brian. The timing on all this is a little too suspicious for my liking, so you make sure you stay put."

Brian ignored his security chief and handed the phone to Cynthia, who was shrugging into her jacket.

"Keep talking to her," said Brian. "She's close to panic, so you need to reassure her."

Cynthia's smile was lopsided as she headed for the door. "Probably can't do it as well as you, but . . ."

The rest was lost as she made her exit, with Mathis at her heels, and Brian found that the subject he'd spent the afternoon investigating suddenly held no interest for him. He reached out and turned off his computer, and grabbed his remote to activate the stereo system, leaned back and propped his feet on his desk, and tried to lose himself in the plaintive softness of Bono's voice as it filled the room.

* Is it getting better?
* Or do you feel the same?
* Will it make it easier on you now?
* You got someone to blame."

Katy would be all right, he thought. She would be fine. She had to be fine.

He fought to relax into the music, to slow his breathing and his heart rate. Most of all, he fought to restrain an impulse to get up and smash his fist through any suitably breakable surface, but, in the end, it was hopeless, although he did manage to confine his violent urges to throwing a vase across the room and watching it splinter against the wall. His mind repeatedly turned to the question of what had really happened to Katy, and whether or not it was connected to the continuing melodrama that his life had become.

In the end, he turned back to his computer and resumed his research, deciding that Cynthia's small discrepancy deserved further investigation. It might be nothing; on the other hand, the money he would have to contribute in order to purchase the one-quarter interest in the land was sufficiently substantial to make it worthwhile to check out everything. Any discrepancy was potentially lethal.

It took a while, but he was finally able to immerse himself in the research, although he kept his iPhone at hand, caring more about the call that his chief of security would make once the little girl was recovered than about any results he might discover - even though he quickly realized that the results were well worth his effort.

The people who existed in his heart were the most important things in his life - a fact which would have surprised acquaintances who knew him as a shallow, materialistic hedonist. But beyond those special individuals, money also mattered - a lot; a fact that would not have surprised those same acquaintances at all.

The office had undergone quite a transformation since Emmett had taken on management of Babylon. When Brian had occupied the managerial desk, the room had been elegant in a spare, uncluttered way, depending on clean lines and subdued lighting for an ambiance of sophistication and professionalism, with only small, personal concessions to the lifestyle inherent in the nightclub's existence, and the only color in the room provided by a Justin Taylor original painting - an abstract of soft jeweled curves and brilliant, sunlight-kissed angles.
The painting hung undisturbed; even Emmett knew better than to disturb such a masterpiece. But the rest of the room was different now - different in a way that proclaimed, "Emmett Honeycutt is here". Proclaimed loudly. Black leather and dark gray suede, and smoked glass had been replaced by rich woods and gem-toned prints and banks of silken pillows. He had reined in his most over-the-top inclinations and avoided bright pastel florals and lace accents out of deference to the fact that this was still - officially - Brian's office, and he couldn't ignore the fact that Liberty Avenue's #1 Stud would go ballistic if the transformation were carried too far.

He reached out and switched on the Tiffany floor lamp that poured soft golden light across the surface of his French empire-style writing desk and took a moment to enjoy the rich finish of the rare bird's eye maple parquet top that almost glowed in the reflection. It was a reproduction, of course. He could not afford the original, genuine article, and he could only imagine Brian's reaction if he'd been asked to fork over the cash for such an item.

Brian appreciated beauty - more than most; but he had little interest in antiques, preferring contemporary designs and minimalist elegance. Except in cars, of course, and classic guitars, as witness the perfectly preserved sapphire and cream-colored Stratocaster that he'd paid a not-so-small fortune for at a charity auction of items donated by Eric Clapton. The instrument, autographed and encased in glass, occupied a place of honor behind the desk.

Brian often claimed to have little interest in tradition, and, given his family history, Emmett found that he could hardly blame him. He usually tried not to think about the childhood that Brian had endured, but, occasionally, it would rise in his mind and leave him virtually gasping for air and fighting off intense bouts of sympathetic pain.

Still - Emmett sprawled back in his leather chair and studied the face of the man featured most prominently in a panoramic photograph that hung on the wall before him: a portrait of Babylon - BtB. Before the bombing. It was a black and white reproduction of a group of patrons gathered around the bar, featuring a crowd of happy, laughing, beautiful faces, filled with the kind of exuberance that was a product of being young and openly gay. And in the forefront, surrounded by his adoring (mostly) public, stood Brian Kinney, lifting his glass to toast whatever was being toasted, and basking in the lust-filled attention of those around him - people like Michael and Blake and Teddie and Emmett himself, and dozens of other sweet young things that would have gladly allowed Brian to have his way with them. All he'd have needed to do was say the word. And that included the lovely young blond who was standing at his side, gazing up at him with huge, star-struck eyes - the one who would, not too long after the occasion of the portrait, claim the heart of Babylon's star stud.

Brian and Justin - a most unlikely match, but one that, somehow, seemed meant to be. Unless . . .

Emmett closed his eyes and remembered, saw the huge shadows obscuring the brilliance of Brian's eyes, and saw, just as clearly, the determination that drove the man. Then he thought about what he had not seen; he had been unable to identify a trace of despair or fear, but he knew instinctively that both were there. Brian would die before he allowed anyone to see what was eating him away inside. Brian Kinney was lost - lost as he had never been before. But he would never permit Justin to see it, or to sacrifice his ambitions and his dreams on the altar of 'taking care of Brian'. Justin, Emmett knew perfectly well, would never see it that way, but convincing Brian . . . he was afraid that would prove to be an exercise in futility.

So what, he thought, do I do about it? He did not fool himself; Brian's threats had not been idle. If he made an attempt to circumvent Brian's orders, he would pay for it, possibly pay more than he could afford to lose. And yet . . . for too long, people who were supposed to be Brian's friends had stood by and allowed him to stand alone, to suffer the consequences of actions that should never have been
his to bear. If someone loved him - really loved him, as a friend should - shouldn't that someone refuse to just watch Brian sacrifice himself? Shouldn't someone do something?

He was still debating and wrestling with his conscience when the office phone rang, startling him out of his reverie.

He answered impatiently, not yet having made his decision and not happy to be interrupted, but his impatience did not last long. In a matter of seconds, he had completely forgotten his musing as he was confronted with something much more alarming.

Randy - the new bartender with the adorable cleft chin and bubble butt - was hardly coherent as he almost shouted into the phone.

"Wait, wait, hold on," Emmett said loudly. "Calm down and tell me . . ."

"There's a bomb. They said there's another bomb."

"Who said . . ."

"A guy. On the phone. He said . . . he sort of sung this little poem, and then he laughed, and said we all better run, if we didn't want to be blown up, like last time."

Emmett was running for the door before the phone settled into its cradle, and, in the blink of an eye, an ordinary Sunday descended into chaos, as he raced downstairs into a scene of fragmented madness. But he wasn't allowed to linger for long. Drew was taking no chances, assuming authority over the staff and making sure that everybody got out, even before the arrival of the first police car.

"Don't just stand there," said Brian, in his coldest, most implacable lord-of-the-manor voice, as he cradled the phone against his shoulder. "Go!"

"Brian, I can't just leave you here," replied Jared Hilliard, as an intense flash of lightening poured molten brilliance into the bleak landscape outside the window. "My job . . ."

"Is to protect my property. Now move, damn it! If Babylon explodes again . . ." He did not finish the sentence, because he knew there was no need to do so. The horror reflected in his eyes said more than enough, emphasized, somehow, by the rumble of thunder that announced the approach of a late storm. "Too many people have died already."

"I know that," said Hilliard, his voice surprisingly gentle as he was stricken by the realization that he had just joined a very exclusive club, membership restricted to the vanishingly small number of people who had ever been allowed to see Brian Kinney's vulnerable side. "But we're already short-staffed here, with the feds neck-deep in their investigation and with Chuck and Angel deployed to keep an eye on Justin and Ricky staked out to watch Gus. Besides, it's not like the Babylon staff is going to have to face the threat alone. Half of Pittsburgh PD is probably on the way, along with SWAT and specially-trained bomb units. And, since you sent Mathis out with Cynthia, it's only me and Boyles left here, so we can't . . ."

"Yes, you can," Brian interrupted, allowing a trace of warmth to bleed into his tone. "Mathis just checked in to say that they found Katy, and she's okay. Shaken, but okay. So he'll be back here as soon as he can drop them off at home, and make sure they're all right. And I'm going to call Chuck and have them bring Justin here. I don't want him to know about the bomb threat; not yet. But I also don't want him alone at the loft."
"So you see, there's nothing for you to worry about. You lock everything up when you leave, and I'll stay here, safely tucked away in my ivory tower, until everyone gets back. What I really want to do is go to Babylon myself . . ." He paused and rubbed his forehead with thumb and forefinger, "but I know I'd just get in the way, not to mention the fact that everybody and his dog would be screaming bloody murder at me for risking my sweet little ass." The sardonic smirk in his voice was unmistakable. "So I want you to go. You know as well as I do that the only way anyone could break in here when this place is locked up tight would be with a tank or a cannon, and I don't think there are any of those lurking out there in the streets."

"But . . ."

"Besides, the old man is upstairs, so you're not leaving me completely helpless and alone, and McFed should be back soon. So just . . ."

"Bri . . ."

"Either you go, or I will!" There was not the slightest nuance of uncertainty now. Just raw determination.

Hilliard took a deep breath, and muttered something under his breath.

"What was that?"

The security guard responded with a glare. "I said that if you get yourself bludgeoned and mutilated while I'm gone, I'm personally going to kick your 'sweet little ass' myself."

The smile that touched Brian's lips was the very same one that had inspired outbursts of lust in a vast number of the younger citizens of Pittsburgh - both gay and female. "That might be interesting. But I'll be fine. Now get the fuck out of here, and make sure you call me and keep me posted on everything that's happening."

Hilliard wanted to argue more, to say more, but, in the end, he didn't, finally conceding that, in a contest between an irresistible force and an immovable object, there could be no real winner.

He activated all security protocols, collected his team-mate, locked the building down, and raced out into the growing darkness, telling himself that the clouds boiling overhead and the ozone scent carried on a fitful wind were not really omens of approaching doom.

Kinnetik was secure, he assured himself, knowing that the building was completely impregnable now - knowing with his mind, even if his heart insisted on suggesting otherwise. No one could break in; no one could get in, at all, unless alarms and locks were to be deactivated, either from the inside or by virtue of the closely guarded, constantly monitored remote control devices, access to which was limited to security supervisors and upper management.

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It had not been the smoothest of flights, and Michael had never been particularly fond of flying in the first place. Still, having his beautiful daughter by his side, content now and recovered from the distress of the confrontation between her parents, with Ben sitting just across the aisle, compensated for his unease. Mostly.

What did not compensate for anything - what actually made everything just that much worse - were the storm clouds that obscured the normally crystal blue eyes of his FBI escort. Chris McClaren had not spoken a word to any of their group since take-off, although he'd spoken plenty into his sat phone.
Michael wasn't sure which was worse: the FBI agent's perpetual scowl during the phone calls that actually went through and connected him to someone on the other end of the call. Or the other expression - the one that Michael could not actually identify - which distorted McClaren's features into a complex caricature of his ordinary stoic demeanor when his calls went unanswered.

More than anything, Michael wanted to demand an explanation, so that he would know what had happened during the two hour span when the FBI agent had gone off on an errand of his own, while the rest of the group enjoyed an early dinner at Sbarro at Miami International Airport - a choice that Michael had come to regret as the taste of garlic lingered too intensely in his mouth. Adding to the sense of anxiety and discomfort was the fact that McClaren's attitude when he'd originally departed from the airport had been jovial and relaxed; his demeanor on his return, however, had been tense and impatient - almost grim - and he had literally herded his charges onto the plane, ignoring all requests for an explanation for his change of mood.

And now - Michael looked up as the seatbelt signs came on, and the flight attendant's voice came over the intercom.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, the captain requests that you all take your seats, please, and make sure your seatbelts are fastened. We expect to encounter a small degree of turbulence as we approach our destination, and have been requested to enter a holding pattern until the weather clears below us. Our arrival will be slightly delayed, but . . ."

"Son of a bitch!"

Michael blinked. He was sure that he'd heard Chris McClaren swear before; the guy had successfully taken on the role of Brian Kinney's new boy toy during the sting stage of the investigation, so it went without saying that the man knew his way around some pretty colorful language. But he was equally sure that he'd never heard him snarl an epithet in a voice thick with pure venom. It was also telling that the FBI agent had taken a swing at the seatback in front of him, although he had managed to restrain himself sufficiently to avoid inflicting actual damage.

It was Michael who opened his mouth to speak, but it was Ben who beat him to it.

"All right, Agent McClaren," said the professor firmly. "It's obvious that something is very, very wrong, and I think we've earned the right to hear it."

The glint of ice in the FBI agent's eyes was intimidating, but Ben refused to back down. "What's wrong?"

For a single moment, it was uncertain how McClaren would react, and neither Michael nor Ben was entirely certain that he would not lash out - physically - in reaction to Ben's demands. But, in the end, he didn't, although Ben was fairly convinced that the man had come close to losing his temper altogether, and somehow, Ben thought that he wouldn't want to be around when that happened.

"Babylon," the agent said finally, his voice soft, subdued. "There's a bomb threat."

Michael felt something heavy settle in his chest, as he closed his eyes and remembered. The memory was still fresh enough in his mind to be sharp and piercing and extremely painful. "No," he breathed. "Not again. They can't . . ."

"They won't," McClaren said quickly, realizing - belatedly - that revealing the existence of the threat to Michael was probably a very bad idea, given how narrowly the young man had escaped death.
from the last attack on the club. "It was a threat, and they've got the police department there, with bomb squads, along with all of Brian's security people. So just don't worry. They got everybody out, and they're searching the place now."

Michael took a deep breath, and felt the hard lump in his chest ease off. "Okay, but that's not all of it, is it? What's got you so paranoid?"

"Paranoid? What makes you think . . ."

"Because," said Ben easily, "you've been antsy ever since we got on the plane. If everything is being handled on the ground, why are you so . . ."

"Because not everything is as clear as it should be." He hesitated and seemed to choose his words with care. "I've managed to get through to all of my own people, and to Detective Horvath, and to Mathis and Hilliard. But I can't get through to Brian. Every time I try, I just get his voice mail."

Michael barely avoided rolling his eyes. "You, of all people, should know what that means. If he's not picking up, it's because he's busy with a different kind of pick-up. Justin's probably sitting in his lap, feeding him . . . something. So just . . ."

"No, he's not. I just talked to him. He was just getting out of the shower and getting dressed to go meet Brian at Kinnetik. So that raises the question again. Why isn't he answering his phone?"

"No," said Ben, after a thoughtful pause. "The real question is why you're so alarmed by not being able to reach him." He leaned forward and studied McClaren's expression. "What is it that you found out in Miami?"

But that far, the FBI agent was not willing to go. "It's probably nothing," he said finally. "I just need . . ."

Michael sat back then, and wrapped his arms around the little girl who had fallen asleep with her lovely little face braced against his shoulder. He did not attempt to elicit any more information, realizing that the effort would be useless. But he did realize something that he was certain McClaren did not want him to know. The FBI agent was undoubtedly concerned for Brian's safety, but that was just the tip of the iceberg. He thought that the agent's last few words were very telling; he did - indeed - 'just need'.

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Almost time to go.

Ted heaved a sigh of relief and congratulated himself on a job well done.

He had not intended to do a full analysis of Kinnetik's current financial status, nor a projected profit and loss statement when he'd come in to work that morning. He glanced at his watch and noted that he'd actually put in more than a regular full day, and that it had grown dark and stormy without him noticing as he'd hovered over his computer.

He had meant to be home much earlier; had, in fact, promised Blake that he'd return in time for them to drop in at Babylon and spend the evening with their friends. Of course, these days the relationships between him and those so-called friends was a bit strained. But that would all be resolved soon.

Because Ted knew the fundamental truth. He did not require forgiveness from most of their crowd. In the end, it wouldn't really matter how Michael or Ben or Debbie or Emmett felt; it would only
matter what Brian felt.

When he wormed his way back into the good graces of Brian Kinney, all would be forgiven.

A sudden rumble in his belly reminded him that he hadn't eaten at all today. But it would be worth it, as the documents he'd produced would prove him right. Kinnetik had made a lot of money so far this year - enough money to justify the withdrawal of a substantial portion of its profits for investment in a new venture - a venture that would transform a moderately well-to-do Brian Kinney into a member of the financial elite. Brian would be rich, and Ted - well - in the final analysis, little old underestimated and constantly-ignored Theodore Schmidt would be credited with creating the opportunity.

He could definitely live with that.

And now, everything was ready. All the supporting data was correlated and printed and assembled. All he had to do was wait for the next day, make sure that Cynthia Whitney was otherwise occupied during the course of Brian's meeting with Mr. Wylie (no point in taking a chance on the blonde bimbo interfering with his plans) and sit back to rake in the profits and the praise.

He sat back in his chair and allowed himself just a moment to daydream, to enjoy the first faint taste of the sweetness of revenge.

Another glance at his watch. He should call Blake; if he hurried, there still might be time to make a night out of it. Babylon and bright, neon-washed bodies and music loud enough to deafen. Oh, yeah, that would be . . .

When his phone rang, he almost believed that it must be Blake, reading his mind. But it wasn't Blake at all, and he realized as soon as he identified the caller that his plans would have to be put on hold for at least a little while longer, for this was the one person, out of everyone he knew, that he could not afford to ignore or offend.

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For the most part, Brian had given up any hope of completing his research, although he'd already learned plenty. Probably even enough to make a final decision, but he would wait to get official documents just to be prudent.

There was, after all, a staggering amount of money at stake.

But there was nothing more to be done tonight; he was much too busy playing trauma counselor to some of his employees and stern taskmaster to others.

He'd managed to reach Mathis as he was leaving Cynthia's house and divert him to Babylon, so he could get firsthand reports from his security chief about the progress of the evacuation and the search of the premises. And Mathis had proved his worth - again - leaving Brian to observe that he needed to buy Drew Boyd and his big nelly-bottom partner a really nice gift, both to celebrate their commitment ceremony, if that was what they deigned to call it, and as a thank-you gift, for it was Boyd who had brought Mathis to his attention in the first place.

The man was turning out to be worth every dime of his generous salary - and more.

As an exceptionally loud rumble of thunder erupted overhead, shaking the building to its core, he had Mathis on speaker phone providing a blow-by-blow description of the police search of the Babylon premises and Emmett, just recovering from a bout of hysterics, on speaker mode on his cell phone with Justin listening in on his own phone.
It was chaos, compounded by the ferocity of the storm breaking around it, but it was slowly evolving into some kind of fractured order. Emmett was much calmer now, probably due to the soothing utterances - a basso descant to the ongoing conversation - coming from the big, strong athlete who had assumed the place at his lover's back and refused to be moved. Mathis, as always - almost - was a paragon of control and organization, watching everything that was going on, and reporting the salient points to his boss, as well as soliciting and observing Brian's comments and recommendations in return. And Justin, after a few initial squawks and squeals - mostly because he'd been kept out of the loop at the beginning of the crisis, had settled into listening mode, as he changed clothes and waited for his escorts to bring the car - another of those ubiquitous anonymous black sedans that law enforcement found so useful - around to drive him to Kinnetic.

As for Brian - well, mostly he just listened, unless he felt some comment was justified, content to know that everyone was safe and catastrophe had been averted. For the moment, although he did wonder how long it would last.

With a vague sense of events still in motion, he took a glance at the call log on his cell phone and noted that McClaren had been trying to call him, so he decided to disconnect from everyone and find out what was urgent enough to have made the FBI agent try to reach him a half dozen times in the last twenty minutes.

He said his good-byes and terminated the calls, and was just preparing to hit the appropriate button on his speed dial, when there was an unexpected disturbance at his door, heralding a new arrival. Only - no one was supposed to be here. And it was then that he felt the first frisson of unease. It was probably nothing, just a trace of paranoia brought on by the over-protective attitudes of all his security team, but . . .

When he realized that it was Ted rushing into his office, he wanted to feel reassured, to assume that his chief accountant was harmless and that he had no just cause to be nervous. And yet . . .

He took a moment to glance at his watch. "Theodore, what are you doing here? I thought you'd gone."

"Sorry, Boss." Ted's eyes were wide and strangely glossy, and his voice was more shrill that usual. He was definitely nervous about something. "I know this seems like an imposition, but it's really not. And it's very important. There's someone here, you see. Someone who needs to see you now - urgently."

Brian went very still. "You . . . let someone in the building?"

Ted jerked to a halt, and there was no mistaking the gleam of irritation in his eyes. "Well, of course I did. Is there any reason why I shouldn't?"

Brian looked up then, ignoring the frown on the accountant's face in order to focus on the two figures standing in the doorway, silhouetted against the brighter light in the corridor behind them.

"I know our appointment was scheduled for tomorrow, Mr. Kinney," said the taller of the two, striding into the room and extending his hand in what was supposed to be a show of camaraderie. "But I've just learned that I have to fly to Zurich tomorrow, on an urgent matter, and I hoped you could make a few minutes for me now. I'm C. J. Wylie."

Brian sat back then, his eyes focused on the other man who was still standing in the doorway, a brilliant flash of lightening catching and emphasizing the bright silver in his hair.

And that was the final detail, of course, as Brian felt a cold certainty flare in his gut. It was all so
clear now - so clear that he wondered why he'd never figured it out before.

"I know who you are," Brian said softly. Then he shifted his eyes to meet those of the tall, lean individual standing in front of his desk. "I know exactly who you are."

"Yes," said C. J. Wylie, better known to his acquaintances in the upper echelons of society, as Clayton. "I thought you might."

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*Time in a Bottle - James Croce

** One - Scott David Graham, Andrea Britton

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There was still a light rain falling when Liberty Air Flight 3126 finally touched down on runway 5, and the tarmac was gleaming with standing water as the big passenger liner made its way toward the terminal. Fortunately, the landing had been delayed by only fifteen minutes, although, from McClaren's perspective, that fifteen minutes had felt like an eternity. The storm that kept them circling the airport, waiting for a break in the weather, had moved on to the northwest quickly, though the towering cloud bank off in that direction was still brilliant with random flashes of light, suggesting that New Castle and Youngstown were next in line for heavy downpours and damaging winds.

The big black sedan awaiting the arrival of the aircraft was parked adjacent to a wide, shallow puddle, and Chris McClaren was wet to the knees by the time he had made his way to the vehicle from the spot where the Boeing 747 had paused in an unscheduled stop to allow him to exit. He was, however, so grateful that the car was there, waiting for him as promised, that he barely noticed any discomfort.

It was an added bonus that Alexandra Corey was already seated in the car's back seat, having landed just minutes earlier aboard one of the FBI's charter jets. He'd hoped that her presence might help him find some measure of detachment, perhaps even serenity, but it didn't.

Their driver - a field agent from the local office - obviously realized that they had no time to waste and was already rolling toward the nearest exit as McClaren closed the door behind him. By the time the passengers from the big plane were unfastening their seatbelts and lining up to debark, the black sedan was already several miles down the freeway, navigating the moderately heavy traffic as rapidly as possible. Michael and Ben had assured their federal escort that they did not require a bodyguard when they'd been waiting to land, and the near panic in Michael's eyes when he'd realized why the FBI agent was so alarmed had only served to reinforce McClaren's misgivings.

As they wove in and out of traffic on their journey, the ominous dark mantra in his thoughts grew steadily stronger and louder: *Hurry, hurry, hurry.*

His superior did not bother to try to persuade him to relax and allow common sense to prevail. She was much too familiar with the validity of what she privately referred to as the "Fire-in-the-belly phenomenon". She had never been able to predict it or even define it completely, but she knew that the very best agents managed to develop an uncanny ability to sense a certain 'wrongness' during an investigation - a gut instinct that was seldom wrong. And that was what was driving McClaren now; she did not necessarily share it, but she would not discount the possibility that he was right, considering that this phenomenon was a gift usually reserved for the very best agents, and Chris McClaren, though still maturing in the job, promised to be one of the best she'd ever encountered.

Thus she did not even flinch when he shouted into his cell phone, finally getting an actual live
answer on his seventh attempt, after trying a half-dozen other numbers and getting no response from any of them except for bland voice mail messages. "Goddammit, Mathis! Where the hell have you been?"

Corey could not make out the words spoken on the other end of the call, but she could plainly hear the outrage and impatience in the growl of the response. "I know that," snapped McClaren, not waiting for the security chief to finish his snippy comment, "and I don't give a fuck if it burns to the ground. Now you listen to me, Hotshot. Brian is at Kinnetik, and from everything I can tell, he's by himself there, and he's not answering his phone - not even his private office line. So think about this. I get sent to Florida to help retrieve Novotny's kid. All other available FBI staff is busy putting together the evidence on the case. Cynthia's daughter gets threatened, so that pulls you out of the action. Then the bomb threat, and Brian sends everybody else to Babylon, assuming - like he always does - that he can take care of himself. Now tell me, Mr. Security Expert. Doesn't that all strike you as just a little too coincidental to put down to random chance?"

A quick beat of silence, and then, "Oh, shit!"

Corey didn't need to actually hear the words; the sharpness of the tone was enough.

"Yeah. Deep shit. Look, I don't care what you're doing. I don't care if Babylon is imploding into a sinkhole, and I don't care who is crying on your shoulder and expecting you to soothe egos or protect bodies. You get your ass to Kinnetik right now. But don't, whatever you do, go busting in there like an invading army. If someone is there with him, they might be compelled to take advantage of the moment to get what they want before you can stop them."

"And what they want is . . ."

"You're not that dumb, Mathis. From their perspective, the only good Brian is a dead Brian."

"I'm on my way."

"Me too. But I mean it. No sirens, no bells & whistles. If you get there before me, you deactivate the alarms, and go in silently."

"Right."

McClaren started to disconnect, but changed his mind and spoke again. "Mathis?"

"Yeah?"

"You're armed, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then make sure you're ready to shoot first and question later. If you hesitate, you're dead, and so is Brian, because they won't hesitate at all."

He disconnected and leaned forward to check the speedometer on the big Buick, opening his mouth to comment, but deciding otherwise when he saw the glint of disapproval in Corey's eyes.

"Relax, Chris," she said firmly. "Unfortunately, one can't simply wish the traffic away."

"Should've taken a chopper," he muttered.

"And what?" she demanded. "Skydive onto the roof? In case you hadn't noticed, there's nowhere
around there for a helicopter to land."

"I'd have found a way," he replied, shifting to retrieve his Beretta 38 from his shoulder holster to make sure it was fully loaded, offering silent thanks to the powers that be that his professional identification had allowed him to retain possession of his gun during the flight. In fact, that was just about the only thing he could think of to be thankful for in this calamity-in-the-making. He then checked his pocket for the spare clips he carried there, and - knowing the effort was futile, but unable to resist the urge - he hit the speed dial to Brian's cell phone again. Again, it went straight to voice mail.

And all the while, Alexandra Corey watched him, her eyes bright with speculation. She chose to remain silent until he looked up and met her gaze directly.

"What?" he prompted as he dropped his phone into his pocket. He didn't actually want to hear what Corey had to say, but he was pretty sure she was going to say it anyway.

"Do I need to take you off this case, Agent McClaren?" she asked, her voice steady and without emotion. Professional - it was the word that always suited her perfectly. "And please don't pretend that you don't understand what I mean. You know the rules."

He wanted to scoff at what she was not - quite - saying, but couldn't manage to do so. "I don't think so. I don't think anyone else could step in and understand all the ramifications of the case, or do a better job of protecting him."

"And that's what it all comes down to, isn't it?" she replied. "It's all about protecting Brian Kinney. Nothing else matters."

"Isn't that what it's supposed to be about?" he retorted. "Isn't it true that - without him - we have no case to pursue?"

"Maybe," she conceded, "but that's not what drives you, is it? It's Brian. It's only Brian, and don't insult me by pretending that you don't know what I mean."

McClaren sat back and closed his eyes. "What do you want me to say, Chief?"

She stared at him for a moment, before giving him an answer. "I want you to tell me that you're still capable of doing your job. That the way you feel about him won't distract you from your duty. So . . . can you do that?"

His gaze was steady as he turned to face her. "Since the first day I met him, my job has been to protect him. That was my primary purpose, and it still is. I can guarantee you that nothing will prevent me from doing that, and that the way I might feel about him is beside the point."

"Is it?" she replied. "Because I want you to understand this. You have to . . ."

"I do understand," he said softly, his eyes no longer focused on her face. "I'd die for him."

Corey took a deep breath before turning away to stare out her window and watch raindrops trickle down the glass. "Yes," she said softly. "That's what I was afraid of. You've allowed yourself to get too close to him, and that's dangerous. You know it as well as I do."

He didn't bother to argue. "Maybe, but nobody can protect him better than me, and you know that as well. Because he let me get close; he let me in. And if you know him at all, you've figured out that he almost never does that. That means it's all on me, doesn't it?"
Corey wanted to argue, wanted to make a case for dismissing him from the investigation, but ultimately, couldn't. Because he was right. It would take more time than they had to spare to work another agent into Brian's inner circle, where McClaren had already made his place. Only . . . she turned once more to study his profile, a view that almost any woman would enjoy . . . and wondered. Failure was not a viable option for any agent, especially in such a momentous case; but failure here . . . It didn't bear thinking about.

She closed her eyes finally and willed their driver to move a little faster and the traffic to grow a little thinner, because she wouldn't allow herself to consider what would happen if they were too late.

Without Brian Kinney, all of the evidence they'd gathered would probably still be sufficient to prove multiple cases involving corporate corruption, but for the more serious charges - such as conspiracy to commit murder - his contribution was vital. He was the key. But more urgently, if he was lost, she would not only lose the case; she might very well lose the best young agent she'd ever supervised. The fact that she also liked him very much didn't make things any easier.

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Brian's private office was not completely silent, of course. The strong beat of a rock classic rose full and rhythmic from the music system.

It was not the most well-known version of the song, as it was not the tenor of Tom Petty's perpetually callow voice that sang the words. Instead, it was Eddie Vedder's husky baritone that doled out the lyrics and injected them with raw emotion, punctuated by the occasional perfectly pitched arpeggio, underscored by the thumpa-thumpa of a solid drumbeat. Somehow, it seemed appropriate, harmonizing perfectly with the swirl of smoke from Brian's cigarette as well as the heaviness of the atmosphere in the room. In the same way, the words of the song felt almost prophetic.

*Every day you see one more card.*
*You take it on faith. You take it to heart.*
The waiting is the hardest part.

The music continued, but around, above, and beneath it, the silence was stifling, like a thick mist - translucent but palpable nevertheless.

Brian made no effort to stand up to greet his guests; nor did he extend his hand to grasp Wylie's - a double omission that elicited a fierce frown from Kinnetik's CFO.

"I know you weren't expecting company, Bri," Ted said quickly, deliberately using the nickname that he knew Brian hated, "but this is just too important, and time really is money, so there's none to waste."

"Theodore, I . . ."

"I am truly deeply sorry, Mr. Kinney," said Clayton Wylie quickly, pretending that he had not noticed the physical snub of having his proffered hand ignored. Still, his move to lower that hand was almost smooth enough to qualify as unflappable aplomb. Almost. But as he moved closer to the desk, he inserted his left hand into his pocket, turning just enough to grant Brian - and only Brian - an unobstructed view of that pocket . . . and the outline of what it contained. "But I'm afraid this really couldn't wait." The elderly man smiled, and Brian was immediately reminded of a death's head image, observing that the word 'skeletal' might have been coined just to describe Wylie's face and form. "You might even call it a matter of life and death."
"Yeah," said Brian coldly, suddenly certain - and even a tiny bit flattered by the thought - that he was probably the only person who had ever troubled the man enough to persuade him to pick up a gun. "I can see that."

He reached over to shut off the sound system, cutting Vedder off mid-growl, and pausing just long enough to allow the heaviness of the silence to make itself felt. Thus the vibration from his cell phone, lying on his desk, was disturbingly loud. With a single glance at Wylie to confirm what he already knew, he reached over and rejected the call.

Wylie smiled again, taking his time to choose his next words carefully - as if what he chose to say mattered in the least - but his eyes were frigid, almost lifeless. "But where are my manners? I was especially anxious for you to meet my son, C.J., Jr. Mostly, we just call him Clay. Although, now that I think of it, you two have probably met before. He's very active in the community."

The other new arrival stepped forward then, moving to stand beside his father and giving Brian a better view of the thick brush of bright silver hair.

But the close-up was unnecessary. A single glimpse had done the trick.

He shivered suddenly, and told himself he was just being silly. The room had not suddenly grown cold, but the power of memory would not be denied.

It had been much colder then - the kind of cold that turns warm breath to cold mist - and the light had been sporadic, interwoven with thick, writhing shadows and the hard hungry glitter of flames, creating shifting patterns and compounding the nighmarish quality of the violent movements of the group of boisterous, muscular men - drunk with physical power and lurid eagerness to draw blood - moving through a chiaroscuro landscape. The fire inside him - sharper and deadlier than the one leaping and sparking in the darkness and waiting for a chance to devour his flesh - and the stench of sweat and unwashed bodies - and . . . pain, pain so pure and sharp that it was like furious molten eruptions of boiling lava in his mind and body, blinding red and redder still, reflecting the crimson splash of his own blood. But even then, even through the chaos and the agony and the near certainty that he would not survive the ordeal, that bright, almost metallic thatch of silver had glittered like frozen fire.

"Oh, yeah," replied Brian, his voice surprisingly steady, "I'm sure we have."

Wylie Jr.'s smile was almost a carbon copy of his father's, but he did not bother to pretend to want to shake hands. The glint of venom in his eyes was as hard as steel. "It was my pleasure," he said as he leaned against the desk, obviously relishing the sensation of looking down on the individual he would always categorize as a lower life-form, worthy of nothing but his contempt. "Nice place you've got here, Mr. Kinney. Nice and private."

Finally, Brian got to his feet, irrationally glad to realize that he was roughly an inch taller than Junior. At the same time, he offered up a mental apology to Lance Mathis and Chris McClaren, both of whom had insisted that it was foolish to refuse to allow surveillance cameras to be placed in his executive suite. Foolish indeed, he thought. Deadly foolish, perhaps.

Still, given the kind of activities he frequently enjoyed in the privacy of his office, he knew he would not have agreed to the placement of the cameras under any circumstances. Though many might accuse him - rightfully - of exhibitionist tendencies, there were some things which were simply none of anyone else's business.

He thought then about Justin, and allowed himself a very small sigh, understanding that there was the very real likelihood that he would never again have the pleasure of gazing upon the young man to
whom he had finally, irrevocably given his heart.

But with that thought, he stood a bit taller, recognizing that particular truth as the only good and positive option of this entire debacle. If he was lucky - very, very lucky - Justin would be spared. No, not spared. He didn't even want to consider the pain his young lover would endure. But he would, at least, survive, and that was a blessing much to be desired. He would be damaged; no doubt about that. But he would endure.

He opened his mouth to suggest some way to get Ted out of the room, avoiding more collateral damage, but the elder Wylie was way ahead of him. The old man's expression remained pleasant as he turned to face the accountant, and his smile grew wider and sharper. "There are important things you and I need to discuss, Mr. Kinney, but first, I wonder if I could persuade dear Ted to do me a favor."

"Dear Ted's" eyes were suddenly huge, and Brian thought he looked like a recently punished puppy begging for a chance to be redeemed. It was something of a relief to realize that the Wylies had no interest in expanding the focus of their hatred to include other members of Brian's circle. On the other hand, Ted would not really be spared, as he would soon come to understand that the 'golden opportunity' which had looked so promising was really nothing more than an ugly scam designed to relieve his employer of the bulk of his money. Brian found that he was almost glad that he wouldn't have to watch it happen. "Of course, Mr. Wylie. Anything."

"I'm afraid our time is short, and Clay needs to be at the airport within the hour, to make his flight to Chicago for an important meeting. If you could give him a ride, Ted, then Brian and I would have time for a complete discussion about our project. I would be very grateful."

Ted didn't hesitate. "I'd be happy to, Mr. Wylie. It's the least I can do, after all the effort you've put into including us in your project."

"Excellent," exclaimed the senior Wylie. "That way, my driver can wait for me here, and Mr. Kinney and I . . ." He hesitated and favored Kinnetik's owner with a still more brilliant smile. "Although, I'm hoping we can avoid so much formality in the future. May I be presumptuous and call you Brian?" He did not wait for a response. "Brian and I can go over all the pertinent data on the project, so we can put our plans in motion."

Ted looked just slightly disappointed, but only for a moment. "Should I come back here then, once I've dropped Clay at the airport? I'll need to set up. . ."

"No," said Brian sharply. Then he took a deep breath before continuing in a softer tone. "Tomorrow will be soon enough."

Once again, Ted looked like he wanted to disagree, but instead, he simply nodded, trying not to look too pleased with himself. After all, he could afford to be magnanimous; he had carried the day, and the future was golden.

He took a moment to favor Brian with a smile that was only slightly smug, but . . . the smile was short-lived, as something in Brian's eyes seemed determined to take away his sense of victory. Oh, well. That was just Brian, being Brian; he had never been very good at giving credit where it was due. And if a tiny voice in the back of his mind was scoffing at that observation, he chose to ignore it.

"Run along then," said Wylie, Sr. as he settled into the chair directly across from Brian, who was glad to reseat himself, as he was not entirely certain his legs would continue to support him. He managed to maintain a surface calm - by the hardest - but his heart was pounding, and he couldn't
quite manage to control the tremor in his hands, so he placed them firmly on his desk, rather than allow any physical evidence of the fear that gripped him. He shifted to brace his knee against the right-hand pedestal of his desk, trying to ground himself, as he was determined to give this vicious old bigot no measure of satisfaction by cowering before him - not even when the man said, "Oh, and would you ask my driver to bring my briefcase in. It contains some vital information that Brian will certainly want to see."

Brian knew perfectly well what that meant; the elite did not, after all, dirty their own hands with wet work.

"You bet," said Ted, his enthusiasm giving a bounce to his step and a glint to his eyes.

Wylie, Jr., nodded to his father, took one moment for a final triumphant smirk at Brian, and turned away, assuming - in a confidence characteristic of those born to privilege - that the problem was solved, and all was once again right with the world. Father always knew best.

Neither Brian nor his visitor spoke again until the two had made their exit, at which point, Brian's cell phone vibrated again.

"It's better if you just shut it off," Wylie observed, in a tone of voice he might have used to comment on the weather outside the window.

Brian nodded and obeyed. He then sat back in his chair, and managed a small sardonic smile. "I figured you'd be around, sooner or later."

Wylie kept his hand in his pocket, but did not bother to reinforce his actions with a verbal threat, knowing that it would only serve to leave a bad taste in his mouth, and that it was unnecessary anyway. "It's a shame you're not a better actor, Mr. Kinney. I was hoping that we could conclude our business, and that you would never realize who my son is."

"He should have dyed his hair," said Brian, actually managing a disdainful smile. "It's very distinctive. And, as for our business, I assume you're referring to your little scam?"

"Ahhh, yes. So you really are as smart as people say. How did you know?"

At that point, the phone on Brian's desk began to ring.

"Persistant, isn't he?" Wylie observed wryly, knowing he need say no more.

Brian hit the appropriate button to reject the call, glancing at the display just once to confirm what he already knew. McFed was not going to be happy with him, but - then again - that hardly mattered now.

Wylie was still watching him expectantly.

"I didn't actually know anything yet. But I'm pretty sure a few specific inquiries with the land management offices would reveal the true nature of this so-called bargain piece of property. But now - since the deal is never going to happen - why don't you show me the bottom line, just to satisfy my curiosity."

Wylie favored him with another one of those death's head smiles, without a trace of warmth or remorse.

"It's simple enough, really. The parcel of land is exactly as described, as far as the description goes, although the photograph provided with the data is not precisely correct. It features a different site, in
the same area but more... pristine - unspoiled. I'm told that the actual property was quite beautiful once. Would have made a perfect site for a project like this, except that it bears an unfortunate legacy from its previous owners. Back in late 30's and 40's, there was a factory there that produced ceramic ware, and back then, no one knew anything at all about toxic waste or contamination. Anyway, during the 17 year span of its operation, the ground water was contaminated with hazardous waste products. Primarily lead and asbestos, with traces of arsenic and benzene and other equally unpleasant compounds."

Brian was shaking his head. "And for this, we were supposed to pay almost eight million dollars?"

The smile flashed again. "Don't be silly. In actual fact, only you were going to pay your share of the price. It was all arranged perfectly, so that our investment advisors would uncover the dastardly plot just in time to spare the rest of us, while the lowlife owner of the property would vanish into the great unknown, with your money, of course. You alone would have paid the price."

Brian took a deep breath. "And my two million or so would buy this owner a quick trip to a country where there is no extradition treaty with the US. Right?"

Wylie nodded. "Of course. But there is something that you should know, if you haven't figured it out already. It was never really about the money. It was always about you, and putting you in your place, and making sure that you stayed there."

"My place," Brian echoed coldly. "And that's why you're here, to put me in my place - permanently."

"I understand that you have a son, is that right?"

"That," Brian said firmly, "is none of your business."

"Relax," Wylie replied. "We have no interest in your son. I don't buy into that old biblical nonsense of holding a child responsible for the sins of his father."

"How noble of you!"

"On the other hand, you will understand that I had to be sure. If you had not reacted to the sight of my son, I would have been content to confine our actions to taking away your money and consigning you to perpetual poverty for the rest of your life. From what I can see of your lifestyle, that would have been enough, if I could have been sure that you would not recognize my son, that he would be safe from your determination to get your revenge, because - whether you believe it or not - there is a certain loyalty among those in our station. The others involved would never have betrayed his trust. It just isn't done. So you were the only threat to him. Only you could destroy him, and I'm sure you can understand that I can't allow that. Beyond that, there's also the fact that you've caused a lot of trouble for people who are an intimate part of my social circle, and that's just not acceptable, from someone like you."

"Has it occurred to you," asked Brian, "that it's not revenge I want? It's justice."

"Of course it is," Wylie said with a soft chuckle. "From your point of view."

"Then let's . . ."

"Oh, come now, Brian. Do you really think I'm going to sit here chatting with you, wasting enough time to let some of your lackeys come running back to protect the king of the queers." He turned then and raised his voice. "Come on in, Tommy."
Brian looked up, and, for just a moment, was confused by the sight of the man who came through the door - a slightly chunky, broad-shouldered individual who was carrying a cognac-colored old leather briefcase and wearing a dark suit and a chauffeur's hat that partially obscured his face.

But when the new arrival walked forward, recognition came swiftly - even before he doffed his hat and regarded Brian with a mocking smile.

"Jackson," said Brian coldly. "Why aren't you skulking around redneck country, fucking your sister or something?"

"You know," replied the one-time therapist, "there was a time when I almost regretted what was going to happen to you." With a smug smile, he removed a large, semi-automatic pistol from the briefcase. Then he leaned forward and reached out to grip Brian's face with brutal fingers. "But now? I'm actually going to enjoy this. In fact, it's a shame I can't take enough time to do the job properly."

"And how's that?" Brian pulled back, his expression reflecting nothing but contempt.

"Slowly - with maximum pain. Instead, I get to shoot you fast and dirty - like putting down a rabid dog."

Brian folded his lips and returned Jackson's gaze, apparently unphased by the ugliness of the threat. "And you think I'm going to just sit here and take it?"

Jackson shrugged. "It won't matter in the end. Although, if you did choose to fight, I might just have to visit other members of your family later. Just to sweeten the pot, so to speak."

When the desk phone rang again, it was Wiley who reached out and yanked the chord from the wall. Then he chuckled softly. "No worries, Tommy. He's not going to fight back, because he understands the consequences. In fact, he's going to give me a key card to use to deactivate the alarm systems and open the front door. Then he's going to stand up and show me out to the hallway, where we will shake hands and part company - all within view of the security camera in the corridor."

Brian's eyebrows lifted. "And what?" he demanded. "Your little lap dog here is going to shoot me and then stick around to take the fall for you?" He turned his head to favor Jackson with a contemptuous smile. "What a good little piece of cannon fodder you are!"

Wiley laughed again. "Oh, don't worry about Tommy. He's very loyal, and we always take care of our own. With the right contacts, anyone can just disappear. Until his particular brand of skills are needed again."

"And when would that be?"

Wylie leaned forward, and this time, there was no trace of a smile on his face. "When the next nasty little pervert tries to force his way into a society where his kind don't belong."

"Now - the key card, please, Brian. Then you get up and walk with me. And be careful. A single gesture out of place means that your son - and maybe a few others - will share your fate."

Brian's mind was working furiously, trying to figure out a way to outsmart his would-be assassins, as he provided the coded card and got to his feet, but, in the end, he could not take the risk. If he died here, at least he died without bringing harm to those he loved.

In the hallway, standing in the open doorway and noting that the security camera was focused on his face, Brian managed a small smile as he accepted Wiley's proffered hand, painfully aware of the gun
barrel pressed against his spine, just beyond the scope of the camera. "I hope you burn in hell," he muttered pleasantly.

Wylie laughed. "You first, Mr. Kinney. There should be plenty of your kind there to greet you."

Brian stepped back, turning and closing the door behind him quickly so that he wouldn't be tempted to take off running. The gun remained steady, pointed now at his chest and assuring him that he wouldn't get far. He would die anyway, and leave behind a legacy of pain for his son or his lover or maybe even his friends. It was a risk he could not take.

"Back to your desk," said Jackson, gesturing with his free hand, while maintaining a deadly aim with the gun.

Brian obeyed and sat back down, careful to keep his hands in plain sight, flat on the desk, as he positioned himself, pushing forward and trying to avoid trembling. His mind was moving frantically, looking for a way out, a means of escape, or - at the very least - a method by which he might improve the chances of his killers being identified - but the prospects were bleak, at best.

He had done all he could. The rest was up to random chance.

Meanwhile, Clayton Wylie, carrying his briefcase and whistling to himself, made his way to the front entrance and used Brian's key card to allow him to make his exit and avoid setting off the security alarm.

Overhead, the clouds were moving off, and he could even see a drift of stars - rarely glimpsed in the reflection of the city's hard brilliance. He took a deep breath, and caught a trace of spring flowers riding on the night wind, also rare in the smell of humanity that pervaded the area around Liberty Avenue.

He thought it was going to turn out to be a wonderful night, with problems solved and things restored to the way they were supposed to be.

With Brian Kinney finally, happily consigned to memory.

Cedric Lasseigne sat staring at his television set, noting that the clock on the DVR read 9:32, and wondering if he'd manage to stay awake to watch the rest of Desperate Housewives, which was occasionally, marginally funny, so he could get to the show he really wanted to see, Brothers and Sisters. It was one of his favorites because he'd always been fond of Sally Field, and he enjoyed the performance of the young Welsh actor who played the gay son as he tried to discern traces of a Welsh accent in the usually perfect California dialect. It was silly, of course; young Rhys almost never missed his mark. But he was pleasant to look at, and Lasseigne was comfortable enough in his own skin to accept the occasional twinge of homo-erotic attraction.

The elderly Cajun thought that he just might have explored that possibility if he'd ever come face-to-face with an actual personification of someone like Kevin Walker/Matthew Rhys, although he was pretty sure that - until very recently - he had never allowed his mind to turn in that direction or dwell on that idea.

He smiled to himself, realizing that one is never too old to learn new lessons.

At that point, inevitably, he thought about his current circumstances and the environment around him, and the smile became a chuckle. He was certainly living in the right place should he decide to act upon that notion.
Only - he allowed himself a weary sigh. A man knew when he was well into the grip of old age when he reached a point at which he couldn't be sure that he could stay awake long enough to indulge a sweet, sexual fantasy. Eleven o'clock seemed very far away, and his eyelids were growing heavier by the moment. His job at Kinnetik was not particularly taxing, but it did require him to be alert and available during regular 9 to 5 office hours. Sometimes, the day could seem very long.

But this was Sunday, and he had not been called on for anything. Once in a while, he did have week-end tasks, but not today. So there was no reason for him to be so tired, but that didn't change the fact that he was.

Compounding the problem, he was out of the special tea bags that Miss Cynthia always provided for him. In just a matter of days, he had become downright dependent on the rich, ginger taste of the sunflower jasmine brew that she'd introduced him to during his first week in residence here. It helped him in two different ways - as a mild stimulant to help him stay awake and as a lovely relaxant, to let him sleep like a baby when he decided the time was right, completely content in his private space.

His apartment was small - hardly more than a studio - but it was comfortable and contained all the conveniences he wanted, thanks to Justin's oversight and Brian's unexpected generosity. There was even a sizeable flat-screen television, with DVR and Blu-Ray, a tiny full bath with a spa-style tub - small but adequate - and a fully equipped kitchen with a mini-fridge, a two-burner cook-top, and a toaster oven. And, if he ever had the urge to flex his culinary muscles and prepare a huge meal, there was always the big kitchen downstairs, to which he had been given total access.

He could hardly believe that this small space - this private area - had begun to feel like home.

All down to Brian Kinney. Justin had, of course, instigated, and pleaded, and urged, and cajoled, and even pouted a little, when necessary, but the final say had been Brian's, and Cedric was moderately surprised to realize that he had been summarily judged and found acceptable; he had no idea why.

He had lived in bigger places. He had, in fact, during the more lucrative phases of his life, lived in luxury apartments and once even a penthouse. It was also true, however, that those circumstances had happened during a phase when his best boon companions had gone by names like Captain Morgan and Johnnie Walker and Jack Daniels, so his memories were less than clear and not nearly as fond as he would have expected. There must surely have been good times - even fantastic times - but the recollections were filtered through an alcoholic haze that rendered everything in a soft, gray blur, neither good nor bad - just there, unworthy of any attempt at total recall.

He was surprisingly happy now. His history of substance abuse had long since cost him any connection with a family he barely remembered; thus, he had grown accustomed to being alone. Given the spotted nature of his past, he had not expected to make friends among members of the Kinnetic staff; he had hardly dared believe such relationships possible. Even more unlikely, he had become fond of the puzzling young individual who was the owner of the place. Although he didn't always understand the man, he had come to believe that the things that Brian did might appear inexplicable at first, but, in the end, they always turned out to benefit the individuals who were beloved of Brian Kinney.

The man could certainly have served as the inspiration for Churchill's famous observation: a riddle inside an enigma, wrapped in a mystery. Cedric doubted that anybody really knew Brian well enough to predict what he might do in any given situation, but he was beginning to think that he himself might be in a unique position to figure it out. It was possible, he thought, because - unlike so many others that hovered around the man like bees to honey - he was not in love with Brian, and that, he was pretty sure, gave him an edge that no one else had. Of course, he was fond of Brian; people were either drawn to the man or repelled by him; neutrality did not happen in the Kinney
He took a peek out his window, noting that the rain was beginning to slack off, and he wondered if the big boss was still working downstairs. For a man with a widespread and well-deserved reputation as a playboy of the first order, Kinney sure worked a lot. Perhaps, in a little while, he'd go down and check, maybe . . . he'd even . . .

He came awake with a jerk, realizing immediately that he had dozed off while nestling under a cloud-soft duvet, in the cozy comfort of the plush recliner that Justin had found for him at Ikea. On the tv screen, the very talented and quite lovely young Mr. Rhys was doing a bang-up job of portraying a heartbroken husband, betrayed by the equally lovely young man who was his partner. It was, of course, a rerun; Cedric had seen it before, but he still thought that the Welsh actor should have gotten an Emmy for it.

Oh, well! He also thought that both Mad Men and The Good Wife were melodramatic, overacted, and ultimately boring. It was, in the end, all a matter of taste, and he preferred his own to everyone else's.

Time, he thought, as ABC shifted into commercial mode, to go downstairs and learn if there was a box of his addictive tea tucked away in the employee kitchen. And on the way, he'd just have a listen at . . . well, he wasn't quite sure what to call it. He'd only discovered it recently, quite by chance, and was still debating over whether he should mention it to the powers-that-be - and risk their displeasure - or leave well enough alone and do his best to resist temptation when it came his way.

He was almost certain that it was just one of those things that happen during renovations - an oversight, a happy - or unhappy, depending on one's point of view - coincidence.

He could not deny that Brian Kinney would be extremely upset to learn that - at certain times and under certain circumstances - what was said or done in his executive office could be monitored from a specific spot at the top of the spiral stairs leading to Cedric's apartment.

The first time it had occurred, Cedric had put it down to happenstance - a fluke of circumstances that would not be repeated, as he listened in on a very personal exchange between Brian and his young lover. But then it had happened again, on another very intimate occasion, and he had decided to investigate, to figure out what was happening. The chimney that ascended toward the roof from the sleek, modern fireplace in Brian's office intersected the curving stairway at one point, and had to zig where the stairs zagged, to avoid flooding the upper level with smoke and ashes, and someone - the artisan who had been charged with the job - had not been careful to seal it off completely. The chimney itself was adequately sealed, but the space around it was not, functioning as part of the building-wide ventilation system.

Thus, sometimes, when the cooling and/or heating systems were inactive, Cedric had a first row seat - in a strictly auditory sense - to the goings on in that office. He had been careful not to milk the opportunity too frequently; it felt more than a bit like voyeurism, especially on some particularly memorable occasions. But - sometimes - he found himself yielding to temptation.

He would never speak of it to anyone, of course, and he wasn't entirely sure that he would even admit his eavesdropping, if asked, but sometimes, the conversation and accompanying sound effects of the meetings between Brian and Justin were extremely intriguing.
Invasion of privacy? No way to deny that, of course. But virtually irresistible? Absolutely.

And then there were the other times, when it served as nothing more than a casual contact point to confirm whether or not Brian and/or Justin was present, and that would be his motive on this night. Maybe he could even take the opportunity to introduce the big man to his special, semi-addictive tea.

He paused to slip into a terrycloth robe - the central heating thermostat was usually turned down a bit at night - and made his way toward the stairs. He hesitated just for a moment, hearing nothing at first, and assuming that the boss had made his escape to enjoy the enticements offered up by Babylon. So he was alone, except, of course, for the security staff who were always around. He proceeded to take the first step down, and that was when he heard the quick, staccato rhythm of words, spoken by a voice filled with characteristic Kinney impatience.

"What the hell are you waiting for?" That was Brian all right - arrogant, annoyed, sharp with anger.

So he was still here, and he wasn't alone, and - given that ugly tone of voice - Cedric rather hoped that it was not Justin he was speaking to. In fact, it did not sound like a conversation anyone would want to overhear. Cedric sighed, unwilling to eavesdrop on one of the scores of arguments that Brian had every day, with a dozen different co-participants. He continued down the stairs, so that he almost missed hearing the answer from the second party.

The response was slower, lower-pitched, and flat, without inflection. It was also unfamiliar. "Don't be dense, little Brian. It wouldn't do to have our distinguished friend make his exit - on camera - one minute and for you to get yourself killed the next. I'm waiting for him to give me the all clear. Besides, why are you so eager? I thought you might want to beg me to let you live."

"No, you didn't"

A cold chuckle. "You're right. I didn't. I doubt you've ever begged for anything in your miserable, faggot life. Too proud, right? Too convinced that you're God's gift to every little queer on the planet."

Brian paused, and his voice was vaguely sardonic when he chose to answer. "Most of them would agree with that. In fact, I seem to remember a couple of times when you were a little too focused on massaging my ass to . . ."

"That's enough! You shut your mouth, or I might just forget to wait for my signal."

"What? I get a little too close for comfort?"

"Shut up!"

Cedric Lasseigne had frozen in place when he'd realized what he was hearing, but now he knew he had to move, had to do something. But the question was . . . what could he do? And where in God's name was the security staff?

He moved down the stairs slowly, carefully skipping the one step that always creaked under his weight. He wasn't sure that Brian's assailant would have heard it, but he dared not take the chance.

But then he was at the bottom stair, and he froze, trying to figure out which way to go. Should he try to find help and alert security, or should he take it upon himself to barge into Brian's office and put a stop to this debacle? The latter was what he really wanted to do; only - the man obviously had a gun, and he was just a helpless, sleepy, little old man in a bathrobe. What could he do that would make a difference?
He hesitated for a moment, wringing his hands and noting the headache that was beginning to pound at his temples.

What could he do? What . . .

Then, quite suddenly, he was stricken by an obvious truth. He was an old man, and he had lived a full life, even if he had wasted a lot of it. But Brian Kinney was in his prime and still had everything ahead of him, including a chance to share his life with a young man who loved him without limit, without reservations, and an adorable son who needed his father to help him grow up.

He couldn't do much; Cedric knew that. But he couldn't just stand here and do nothing, like a craven coward, while the man who had given him a new life and, more than that, the man who was the beloved center of Justin's heart was murdered. Thus, he would do everything possible to make certain that didn't happen. He had never really had a reason to risk himself in order to save someone else, and it surprised him to realize that it actually felt pretty good.

He quickly, silently, made his way toward Brian's private bathroom, the one that had a discreet rear door that was seldom used and always locked, but - as the janitor - he had keys to every lock in the building. On his way, he paused by Cynthia's desk to retrieve his keys from the cabinet by her door. In addition, he also took the time to dial the security office. When there was no answer, he knew that his suspicions had been correct. Something drastic had happened to empty the building and leave Brian alone, at the mercy of his assailant.

So it was up to one slightly dilapidated old Cajun, with restricted vision, a slight hearing loss, arthritic limbs, and occasional heart palpitations - none of which mattered now.

Okay! It was time to stop obsessing and start doing.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Emmett had not had a good day.

The evacuation of Babylon had been loud and frantic and nerve-wracking, with everyone flinching away from any sudden noises or sparks, constantly afraid that each was the prelude to a deadly explosion that might take lives - again. In addition, many of the staff - and Emmett did not exclude himself from that group - were inclined to jump at shadows, panic-stricken when sighting a nondescript box or a stray container, and he didn't even want to try to count the amount of glassware that had been smashed during the crowd's chaotic exit. Luckily, it was not the Waterford crystal stemware that was locked away upstairs for the private use of select patrons. But it would still cost a nice hefty bundle to replace it all.

In addition, they would probably have to replace a few members of the staff, as well. One waiter - relatively new to the job - had actually erupted in hysterical sobs when he grabbed his own coat from a rack by the door and noticed something long and tubular wrapped inside it. It proved to be nothing more than the umbrella he had stashed there himself when he'd arrived and come in out of the rain, but he was too shaken to continue to help with the evacuation or the clean-up and had to be escorted home by an area patrolman.

Too bad, really. He'd had a nice smile and an adorable ass.

It had not stopped there either. Throughout the ordeal, every eye darted around constantly, looking out for bombs, of course, but also watching for suspicious strangers who might prove to be crazed serial killers, frustrated by the failure of whatever explosive device they might have planted and looking for new victims to make up for the ones that had escaped.
And now, just when he thought things might be settling down and getting back to normal, when the bomb squad had finished their search and announced that the warning had been a false alarm, and the general air of hysteria had begun to spin down into a curiously breathless aftermath, with sighs of relief interspersed with occasional bouts of shaky laughter. Now, he had to notice that Drew was nowhere to be found.

"What the fuck?" he asked of no one in particular as he moved back inside and strode to the bar. "Where's Drew? For that matter, where's Mathis?"

"Not sure," answered Jared Hilliard, bending over to gather up a messy bundle of large, wickedly sharp shards of a huge mirror which had been shattered during the mayhem. A waiter nearby was gathering debris in a large, portable trash container and changed direction to come over and help when he saw what the security man was doing.

Emmett, fully conscious of the fact that his partner was among the missing, along with the security chief responsible for all of Brian's business holdings, still could not resist taking a moment to enjoy the imminently enticing view. Jared Hilliard's ass, straining the seams of tight designer jeans, was a sight to behold.

"But wherever they are," Hilliard continued, still intent on his task and still distracting Emmett with the prominent display of perfectly formed muscles and a beautiful swath of dark tan skin peeking from beneath the back of his shirt, "they're together. I saw Mathis making a beeline for the door about ten minutes ago, and he grabbed Boyd and pulled him along with him. They went outside, and I haven't seen them since."

Emmett went very still, trying to ignore the tiny alarm that was building to a shriek in his mind. "Maybe I'm asking the wrong question," he said slowly, as Hilliard straightened up and turned to look at him. "Maybe the real question should be, why isn't Brian here?"

"Because McClaren and Mathis both threatened his life if he so much as thought about straying into something like this, and I personally reinforced that just before he sent me over. I promised to kick his ass if he showed up here."

Emmett spent a few seconds wondering how such a perfect specimen of the black race, with beautiful skin like creamy chocolate, had turned out to have eyes like blue arctic ice. "And you think that would stop him?" he asked finally, mentally cautioning himself to pay attention to the matter at hand, and to stop ogling the entirely too comely help.

For a moment, there was only silence, and the answer, when it came, was filled with a sense of dread that was almost enough to overpower the weariness of the moment. "No. It wouldn't. Why don't you try calling Drew? I'll try Mathis."

It was the logical thing to do, but somehow, both knew that it would prove to be a futile attempt.

Still, they tried.

"Straight to voice mail," Emmett announced.

"Yeah. Me too."

They exchanged quick glances, not bothering to voice their misgivings.

"I'm going," said Hilliard. "You coming?"

"Yeah. Just let me tell Horvath. He might want to provide some back-up."
"Good idea, but let me. You . . ." Hilliard took a moment to swallow around the lump in his throat. "You should call Taylor. Make sure he's where he's supposed to be and stays there."

"I don't know," Emmett replied uneasily. "He's very good at sussing things out, especially things that you don't want him to know."

Hilliard hesitated. Then he nodded. "You're right. Better that I call Chuck and clue him in on what's going on. Then he can sit on Justin if he has to."

"And I'll go drop the news on Horvath."

"OK. But hurry, because I'm not going to wait for you. Meet me at the back entrance, and we'll cut across through the alley."

"Wait. We're going on foot?" Emmett sounded vaguely outraged.

Hilliard resisted an urge to roll his eyes. "You can drive if you want, but it's faster to run."

Emmett did not argue, except for grumbling under his breath as he went to find Horvath. The distance from Babylon to Kinnetik was roughly five blocks - not far at all - but Hilliard was right. By the time they managed to extricate a vehicle from the parking nightmare surrounding the club, maneuvered it to reach the correct intersection, and were finally able to drive the required distance, they could have already reached their destination with several minutes to spare. But he wasn't particularly happy with the prospect. He knew that he could dance all night; he'd done it on more than one occasion. He could even fuck all night - also a proven fact. And, given sufficient motivation, he might even manage to jog all night. But running? Nobody even considered running anymore - for anything - unless maybe they were training for a marathon. And yet - he kept coming back to that cold hard truth. Hilliard was right, and, in this case, minutes mattered.

Shit! Now he not only had to run; he had to try to keep up with Hilliard, and that, he was certain, would prove to be damned near impossible.

Could this day possibly get any worse? Then he shuddered, and wondered how he could possibly be stupid enough to ask that question.

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This job should have been a piece of cake. That's what Chuck Valencia kept telling himself. So why did everything have to go all pear-shaped and transform a simple duty into a nerve-wracking ordeal?

The answer could be summed up in two words: Justin Taylor.

Or maybe, he thought with a big sigh, two additional words were required: Brian Kinney.

He listened carefully as Lance Mathis explained the current situation and realized that the degree of 'complication' had just risen to stratospheric levels.

He disconnected with a quick, "Ten-four, Chief. I'll take care of it."

Mathis did not bother to explain how dire the consequences would be if Taylor's security squad failed to perform as directed.

The young man could not be allowed to leave the loft, and, even more importantly, no one else could be allowed in. Any other situation was simply unacceptable.
He looked around for Angel, who was doing a circuit of the premises, a practice that the two alternated between them, making sure that the timing was sporadic and entirely unpredictable. No sign of him yet, but that was hardly alarming. Each of them made sure that their recon trips around the perimeter did not actually look like security checks. The route taken changed from one time to the next, and the pace could vary from a business-like, determined stride to a casual, just-moseying-along stroll, with random stops along the way to check out places of particular interest or risk, such as the dark entrance to the narrow back alley that intersected the area behind the building. It was a place where one or both of them paused frequently, ostensibly to light a cigarette or retie a shoelace or perform some other random task in order to sneak an in-depth look into the deeper shadows at the entrance.

The two young men complimented each other well; Chuck was faster, quicker to react, more talkative, and more concerned with the big picture while Angel tended to mosey along, taking his time and concentrating on the smaller details, thinking things through before opening his mouth. The mix worked well, for the most part.

Chuck glanced up then at the big windows that fronted the seating area of the loft, and was gratified to notice a shadow move across the bright façade. Debbie Novotny had made her departure almost an hour earlier, and young Taylor had appeared a few minutes later, bearing paper plates full of warm, spicy puttanesca, and paper cups of light beer, along with a handful of cannoli wrapped in a napkin.

Chuck smiled, recalling that the food had been tasty and filling, and that Taylor had apologized for the “light” characteristic of the beer, acknowledging that he himself would have provided a stronger, more intoxicating version if he’d not been under strict orders from both Brian Kinney and Lance Mathis to do nothing of the kind.

Taylor had certainly meant well, but both members of his security team would have refused the strong brew even if he'd offered it, because they understood that to indulge a moment of weakness meant they would have to face their boss later and fess up. And then, there would be the matter of facing the boss's boss, and nobody in his right mind would take a chance on calling down the fury of Brian Kinney on one's own head for nothing more than a quick beer-buzz.

Still, a cold beer would have been nice, although - he tucked his hands up under his arms and shivered slightly - a hot coffee would probably have gone down better.

He moved away from the front entrance of the building, turning his collar up and jamming his hands into his pockets to shield against the chill of the fitful cool breeze that was rustling nearby trees and dislodging globules of rainwater that hit the pavement with rhythmic splats, like a muffled drum-roll. As intended, he didn't look like a security guard; he looked like a drifter, an aimless teen-aged vagabond with too much time on his hands and nowhere to spend it. It was the persona he always assumed when he was on duty on the streets, in order to blend into the somewhat seedy background of Liberty Avenue - an area with more than its fair share of lost souls and angry young men. He wasn't really angry, of course; he considered himself to be one of the lucky ones. He had a job that he didn't hate, making a decent salary with good benefits, and working for one of the hippest companies in the area. In addition, it was rarely boring. What else could a young man want?

Of course, there was another side to it. He usually avoided thinking about what had happened to Brian Kinney when a group of homophobic thugs had kidnapped and almost killed him. He couldn't let himself dwell on that, although he did, occasionally, imagine what he would do to that group of bullying cowards if he ever found them in his sights.

That was something else he shouldn't dwell on. Only, sometimes . . .
He heard the sharp clang of a sliding door being closed hard, followed by the thunder of footsteps on the stairs - a sure indicator that the person on the move had insufficient patience to wait for an elevator to answer an electronic summons. Chuck sighed, and allowed another question to rise in his mind. What else could a young man in his position want? Well, a little bit of luck wouldn’t be too much to ask, would it?

"Chuck?" It wasn't spoken; wasn't even yelled. It was bellowed.

"I'm right here, Justin. You don't have to . . ."

"Where's Angel? We need to go, right . . ."

"Hold on. Go where?"

Justin froze in his rush toward the corner of the building where a walkway led to the parking area, and leveled a look filled with pure ice at his security guard. "Don't do that! Don't pretend you don't know about it. It's on fucking TV! So you had to know that they tried again. And I have to be there. I have to be. Brian is . . . he . . ."

"Justin," Chuck said softly, aiming for a soothing tone of voice and almost pulling it off, "he's not there. I swear he's not."

"And you know that . . . how? Because he's not answering his cell phone or his office phone, and I can't get through to Babylon, or to Kinnetik. Which makes no sense at all because someone is always there."

"Look," Chuck replied quickly, "I just spoke to Mathis. He says the cops have cleared Babylon - no bombs. And he wants me to make sure you stay put. There's no need for you to . . ."

"Where - is - Brian?" Justin's tone was icy and harsh. "Why isn't he . . ."

"Because he's coming here, so you should . . ."

"You're lying, Chuck." Justin's gaze was steady, unflinching. "And I don't think you've ever tried to do that before. So something's wrong. Isn't it?"

"Justin . . ."

"No lies." The tone was even sharper and colder. "Where is Brian?"

Chuck sighed. "They're not sure."

"What do you mean by that? How can they not . . . Oh, my God! They left him alone at Kinnetik. Didn't they? Because of the bomb threat, he sent them there, and now he's . . ."

Without another word, he turned and started running down the street.

"Justin, wait!" shouted Chuck. "You can't go down there."

"No?" The young blond didn't even slow enough to look back. "Watch me."

Chuck took a deep breath, and grabbed for his radio as he started running after the kid. "Angel," he shouted, "get back here now, and bring the God-dammed car. Justin is headed for Kinnetik at a dead run, and if we don't stop him, it's our asses on the line."

Justin was younger and had the lungs of a healthy individual who rarely indulged himself with a
cigarette - not the kind that was composed of tobacco anyway; those factors worked to his advantage. But Chuck was able to compensate for those assets by being almost four inches taller and longer of limb. Thus he was able to close the gap between them until he was almost close enough to reach out and snag the back of Justin's jacket, if sheer bad luck had not intervened. Just as he reached down inside himself to find the strength for an extra burst of speed, he failed to notice a wide, slick patch of mud before him. Justin had seen it and managed to leap over it; Chuck was not so fortunate and went down hard.

Still, he did not take the time to evaluate his condition; broken ribs or limbs or not, he had to shake it off and move or risk losing sight of the young man whom he was sworn to protect. By sheer luck, Angel pulled over beside him at that moment, so he jumped into the car and made ready to jump out and grab Justin once they caught up to him.

But Justin Taylor was nobody's fool and apparently had kept one ear focused on keeping track of where his pursuers might be. Thus, when he reached a narrow opening - less an alley than a footpath - behind a small apartment complex, he ducked in and increased his speed. Chuck had no choice but to follow him, since the path branched in several directions at the far end of the property.

"Go around," he shouted, flinging himself out of the car as it slowed, and only barely managing to keep his footing.

Angel did not argue; he simply stomped on the accelerator, peeling out and heading for the first turn, as Chuck plunged into the shadows behind the building.

The security guard was worried for his job, of course, and for the tongue-lashing he would receive if he didn't manage to catch up to his wayward charge. But it was more than a concern for keeping his job and avoiding any charge of failing to perform as directed that drove him.

A lot more.

His boss had been very explicit. The only possible conclusion, when all pertinent facts were considered, was that some people - powerful, determined people - were dead-set on doing terminal, fatal harm to Brian Kinney. The fact that he had been left alone to fend for himself was bad enough. The fact that the young man for whom he would willingly lay down his own life was - for the moment - in the wind and getting closer to disaster with every moment, was even worse.

Chuck ignored the grinding pain in his rib cage and ran faster.

"You weren't there," Brian said softly, staring across his desk at the face of the man who sat looking back at him, his big Glock semi-automatic pointed directly at his victim's chest.

Jackson's smile was lopsided. "You mean the first time they worked you over? No. I wasn't there."

"Must have broken your heart."

"Actually, it did. But then I got a shot at the brass ring - a chance to prove that I could accomplish what they couldn't."

"Yeah? And yet here we are. If you were as good as you think you are, I'd have been dead already."

The smile became a sneer. "Don't flatter yourself, Kinney, by assuming that your survival had anything to do with how clever you are or how tough you pretend to be. You're still alive because of the willingness of stupid people to put themselves in harm's way for your sake. In fact, you should be
ashamed of letting other people fight your battles for you. What'd you do? Offer to suck them off for their efforts?"

"So says the little man who's so proud of doing his masters' dirty work." Brian sat back and took a deep breath. "And if you're waiting for me to try to bribe you with one of my legendary blowjobs . . . " He managed a tiny, derisive smile, "you better be prepared for a very long wait."

Jackson shifted in his chair, deliberately adjusting the position of the gun so that it was pointed directly at Brian's forehead. "You know," he said softly, almost purring with contentment, "you might want to rethink that attitude and make some little attempt to be nice to me. That might persuade me to make it quick and painless, rather than slow and agonizing. Did you know, for example, that there are certain areas of the human body that bleed out very slowly, inflicting maximum pain over an extended period of time? And the really good thing - the fun part, you might say - is that the best way to make sure it will work as planned is to pump in five or six shots in a narrow little circle. Does maximum damage and hurts like a son of a bitch. I know that because I've had medical training and experience."

Brian grinned. "Oh, yeah. You're a regular Dr. McDreamy, although you two don't look at all alike." The grin morphed into an unpleasant smirk. "I'm betting nobody's ever mistaken you for him."

"Keep it up, Smart-ass, and maybe I'll just amuse myself with a bit of fun and games." He shifted to reach into his pocket with the hand that wasn't holding the gun and withdraw a slender silver cylinder. "I always carry one of these - just so I'm never unprepared for any trouble that might come my way." With a flick of his thumb, he opened the tube to display a small scalpel, pristine and wickedly sharp.

"I wouldn't have taken you for the Boy Scout type. And by the way, what should I call you? Obviously, your name's not Jackson. Your master called you 'Tommy', so is that . . ."

"He's not my master, Dirtbag, and he only calls me that because it's the role I'm currently playing. But, if you're really interested, my full name is Bradford Jackson Hobbs. I guess it's appropriate for you to know the name of the man who's going to actually put you out of your misery - and everybody else's."

Brian pondered that response for a moment; then he grinned. "That's not really your name, is it? Not your legal name anyway. I'm guessing it's really just Bradford Jackson. The Hobbs is just you bidding for a place on the Hobbs family tree. But you know what, Tommy Boy - or whatever your fucking name might be - that's never going to happen. Why do you suppose Wylie and company selected you to do the wet work? Because nobody in their elite brotherhood would ever dirty his hands that way."

The expression on his attacker's face confirmed that Brian had hit the jackpot in finding Jackson's ultimate vulnerability. He had scored a direct hit, but there was no way it was going to garner him anything but more trouble than he'd expected. Still, he could not quite swallow a rush of satisfaction. He had done what he'd hoped to do; he'd exacted a tiny measure of payback, but it would not be without a cost.

Jackson's face was flushed an ugly red when he replied. "Yeah? Keep running that mouth, little fag, and I might just decide to carve my initials into that pretty face. You know, it's pretty obvious that the thugs who worked you over the first time were just amateurs. They had no idea where to cut in order to make the damage permanent." He smiled again, running his thumb lightly over the blade and then sticking the bloodied digit into his mouth to suck away the bright trickle. "But I do."

Brian simply watched him, his face completely still, giving nothing away. Not even a nuance of the
despair rising within him as he struggled to find a way to accept the inescapable truth that he would die tonight, so it shouldn't matter if his face was slashed to ribbons, but, somehow, it did. Somehow, he didn't want Justin to have to confront the mutilation of the man he'd loved.

It was stupid, he knew. But, if given an option, he would do something completely outrageous, so that his killer would have no choice but to kill him quickly and run. He was on the verge of accepting the inevitable conclusion to this little drama, but he would, at least, spare Justin that much.

And there was, ultimately, no time like the present, so he pushed away from the desk and took a deep breath, gathering his courage, so that he could . . .

He froze in the chair, hands braced on the arm rests, uncertain of what had made him pause. Something . . . something that wasn't quite as it was supposed to be, something glimpsed out of the corner of his eye, perhaps. Something or . . . someone.

His eyes grew huge as he opened his mouth to . . . well, he wasn't exactly sure what he could do, since the explosiveness of the moment was beyond his power to change, to . . .

When Jackson's cell phone buzzed, he knew that his time was up. It was move now, or never move at all.

And he shifted to do so, but he was too slow. *Shit! Tyson Gay would have been too slow!* In the duration of a single heartbeat, any small advantage he might have had was nothing more than a lost memory. All he could do was watch and wait and entrust his life to a providence that - for the most part - seemed disinclined to intervene.

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They had not exactly enjoyed serendipitous timing throughout this interminable day, but - for once - Lance Mathis and Drew Boyd and Chris McClaren had cause to offer up a silent prayer of thanks for one tiny bit of divine intervention, although none of them actually took the time to utter it. By sheer happenstance, they arrived at the employee entrance to the Kinnetik building at exactly the same moment, and it was a toss-up to figure out which of them was quieter. Not the sound of a single footstep betrayed their presence, and, when possible, they used hand gestures rather than spoken words to communicate.

When Mathis used his electronic master key to shut off the building's alarm system and unlock the door which opened into a rear hallway near the primary security office, McClaren took the lead moving inside, while Mathis took a moment to whisper in Drew Boyd's ear, explaining that he'd received a call from Chuck Valencia just moments earlier, advising that Justin Taylor was on his way to Kinnetik. It would be Drew's job to apprehend him before he could come tearing into the building and screw up everything; him - and anyone else who tried to muscle in. Extra amateur bodies - vulnerable to a hail of bullets, likely to get in the way of those who were better trained to deal with this situation, and providing ample opportunities for a would-be hostage-taker - were the last thing the professionals needed right now.

With a grim nod, Boyd moved toward the front corner of the building, careful to stick to the shadows as he walked and taking up a post where he would have a clear view of anyone approaching from the street in either direction and have time - if the Fates were kind - to intercept any inbound potential disaster.

One base covered, McClaren acknowledged with a nod, slightly surprised to realize that he actually trusted the ex-quarterback to handle the task assigned to him. The FBI didn't ordinarily depend on non-professionals in such a critical situation, but this . . . this was different. He admitted to himself
that he needed all the help he could get. He had done everything he could do to stack the deck in Brian's favor, and Alexandra Corey was certainly still busy stacking. Calling out the cavalry, as she'd phrased it. But none of that changed the fact that what he did or failed to do during the next five minutes would either save a life or lose it. He deliberately refused to think about the identity of the potential victim. It might tear his heart out to find himself accountable for the death of Brian Kinney, but that shouldn't matter.

An individual was in danger, undoubtedly fighting for his life. Period. Nothing else was pertinent to the moment.

Yeah, right!

He moved down the corridor toward the central hub of the building, but Mathis reached out and touched his shoulder to get his attention, and nodded toward the door to the main security office. The FBI agent almost shrugged the man off, remembering - with more than a little surge of anger - that the monitoring screens there would reveal nothing of what was happening in Brian's office, since he had absolutely refused to have security cameras installed there. But Mathis was quick to offer him a whispered reminder that there were other ways to keep track of what was happening in any section of the building.

True, there was no camera in the boss's office; Brian Kinney valued his privacy too highly. But there was a microphone, indicating that he was determined enough to refuse anyone the opportunity to spy on him, but not so stubborn that he would fail to recognize the need for his security team to be able to check in on him periodically. To a man, they were well paid and trustworthy, and well acquainted with the penalty for indiscretion, so they would all understand their obligation to preserve the boss's privacy. Thus, Brian had yielded - with some reluctance - to the installation of listening devices on which both McClaren and Mathis had insisted, with the proviso that they should be turned off unless there was some sort of major screw-up.

From McClaren's point of view, things just didn't get any more screwed up than this.

In silence, the two entered the security office, prepared to activate the listening devices, but found - to their surprise - that someone had beaten them to it. The murmur of voices was low-pitched but definitely audible, channeling from the executive office through the security monitors.

"What the . . ." Even when surprised, Mathis remembered to speak in a whisper.

McClaren could not quite suppress a grin. "Brian," he whispered. "Has to be."

And Mathis understood the truth of it. With no one else left to man the security system, only the boss could have tripped the switch to activate the listening devices. A single glance at the panel revealed something else as well. Not only were the bugs functioning perfectly; so was the recording device that was attached to the system.

Thus neither spoke, choosing instead to listen in silence as an ugly, bizarre event played out in Brian's office.

". . . you're still alive because of the willingness of stupid people to put themselves in harm's way for your sake. In fact, you should be ashamed of letting other people fight your battles for you. What'd you do? Offer to suck them off for their efforts?"

They listened for a moment longer - long enough to be appalled and disgusted by the degree of hatred and murderous intent they could hear in the words spoken by Jackson or Hobbs or whatever his real name might be. Quickly, Mathis retrieved two earwig devices from the equipment cabinet,
inserting one in his own ear and handing the other to the FBI agent. The tiny instruments would allow them to monitor what was happening in the executive office as they proceeded toward it and to communicate with each other.

"Okay. What now?" asked Mathis, as they moved back into the corridor.

"We split up," replied McClaren, inserting his own earwig and pausing briefly to make sure it was functioning correctly. "I'm going to Brian's office. Is there another way in?"

Mathis nodded. "There's a rear door in his private bath, but I'll have to make a bit of a circuit to get there without being heard or seen. Give me a couple of minutes."

The FBI agent swallowed around the lump in his throat as he tried to monitor the conversation between Brian and his would-be assassin and control an impulse to go racing into that office, shooting first and thinking later - an act that would almost certainly get Brian killed or maimed, not to mention costing his own life. "I don't think we've got minutes to spare. Make it fast."

"I'll let you know when I'm in place."

Mathis didn't wait for a response, moving quickly into an intersecting corridor and disappearing around a corner. If McClaren remembered correctly - and he was sure he did - the security chief would be circling around the art department and the break room before gaining access to the door he was seeking.

But he couldn't wait for confirmation that the man had made it to the private doorway. He had to get to Brian's office immediately because - judging by the content of the conversation of the two protagonists - he was running out of time. And so was Brian.

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Just a block to go, but he wasn't sure he'd make it. Chuck was closing in. He shouldn't be, Justin thought, but he was. Probably because the security guard was terrified of losing his job if anything happened to Justin on his watch.

But Chuck's determination to hold on to his job paled beside Justin's determination to get to Brian, to keep Brian safe.

He knew, of course; how could he not know? Knew that Brian believed that Justin could survive without him. Maybe he even believed that Justin would actually be better off if Brian was removed from his life.

But Justin knew something else - knew it surely, with no nuance of doubt. Without Brian, he could not survive. He might live on, of course, but that was not really survival, because the person who lived on would be forever changed into someone else, someone that no one would recognize as the Justin Taylor he had always been.

So - just a little extra kick of speed. Just a little more . . .

So intent was he on the man sprinting in his tracks that he did not see the man - larger, tougher, and stronger - that stepped out of the shadows to grab him when he was only a few yards away from Kinnetik's front entrance.

Simultaneously, two other individuals approached from the opposite direction, and it was only due to the strength of Drew Boyd and the flexibility and perfect balance of Jared Hilliard that they didn't wind up in a windmill of floundering limbs and bruised torsos. They all retained their footing, but
only barely. More important, from the viewpoint of Chuck Valencia who arrived on the scene just in
time to witness the collision, it all happened in complete silence.

Justin, of course, opened his mouth to protest - loudly - but Boyd anticipated the young man's action
and placed his hand over Justin’s mouth, limiting the protest to an infuriated but muffled humming -
barely audible.

To put a stop to the possibility of a shriek of anger, Boyd pulled the young blond to his side, and
whispered urgently in his ear.

None of the others could hear what he said, but his words must have been sobering because Justin
went limp immediately and stopped struggling.

"I can't just stand here," he said finally, barely louder than a whisper.

"Yes," replied Boyd gently. "You can. Unless you want to go tearing in there, and get him killed.
And yourself as well."

"But I . . ."

"Justin!" That was Emmett, facing his young friend squarely and touching Justin's face with gentle
fingers. "I know how you feel. I know you can't stand the idea of someone else saving his life." He
paused to take a deep breath. "Especially McClaren. But you have to face this. He's the one who
knows what to do - the one who's trained his whole life to safeguard the people he's responsible for.
You have to let him do it."

"But . . ."

He didn't actually voice his uncertainties, but Emmett, who knew him better than almost anyone else,
recognized them anyway and leaned closer to speak in a whisper. "I know that you're scared. And I
know that you're angry, that you'd give anything if it could be you that saves him, instead of the man
who has somehow become a part of his life in a way you don't understand. But . . ." He put a finger
under Justin's chin and lifted to force tear-filled blue eyes to meet his own. "It doesn't matter. The
only thing that matters is that he's saved, so he survives long enough to grow old with you. Brian
loves you, Justin. Nobody else - just you. Please tell me that you know that, because, if you don't,
you're not nearly as smart as I thought you were."

Justin looked away, not because Emmett was wrong, but because he was right.

"So what do we do?" he asked finally.

It was Jared Hilliard who responded; he was the ranking professional in the group. "You and
Emmett need to stay out of sight. Find a handy shadow and stick to it. Boyd, you stay here and keep
watch, and Chuck, you stand look-out at the other end of the alley. Needless to say, nobody goes in
that door. Not even the cops if they show up - not unless you get an all clear signal. Comprende?"

"And you?" That was Justin again, understanding that he had to do as he was told, but still not liking
it very much.

"I'm going in," Hilliard replied as he removed his Glock pistol to make sure it was fully loaded. "To
see if I can help."

"Then why . . ."

"Because I know what to do. You don't." He turned to go inside, then paused and turned back to
face Justin. "I'll let you know as soon as I can."

"Please . . ." Justin started, but didn't know what to say next.

"I know you're scared, but try to stay positive. Whether you like him or not, you need to remember that McClaren is really good at his job. If he wasn't, he never would have been assigned to do this. So cross your fingers for us, and try to be patient. We'll be back - soon."

With that, he opened the rear door and headed in. He'd taken only a few steps when he heard the sound of gunfire - two rapid shots, then a slight lull, followed by at least five more, one immediately after the other.

At that point, there was no holding Justin Taylor back, and Emmett was right behind him as they raced inside.

From his position just inside the executive washroom, Cedric Lasseigne could only see the back of Brian's head and body, but he could hear everything perfectly. Actually, he wished he couldn't hear it at all. It was the kind of vicious filth that he figured he would never be able to wash from his mind.

But that didn't matter.

He had waited as long as he dared, in the hope that someone - anyone - would show up to assume the task of protecting Brian. This kind of duty was most certainly not included in his job description.

One part of his mind scolded him for his foolishness and reminded him that, if he just stood here in silence, refusing to show himself at all, this would be over soon, and he would be safe.

Then all you'll have to do is look into Justin's eyes and explain to him how you could just stand by as the love of his life was put down like a rabid dog.

One part of him wished that he was brave enough to face that. But he wasn't.

He was still standing there when Brian pushed back and started to rise. He took a deep breath then and inched forward; it wasn't much of a move, but it was apparently enough to register in Brian's peripheral vision, because Kinnetik's owner froze just as his would-be killer's cell phone rang.

There was at that point no more time for thinking.

Lasseigne tightened his grip on the broom stick he'd retrieved from the maintenance closet and raced forward, shouting at the top of his lungs - a string of Cajun French profanity which no one present could translate, but that didn't matter since the words were only used to bolster his own courage - arriving at his chosen vantage point at the exact moment when the assailant raised his gun toward his intended target, just as Brian leapt from his chair, crying out a frustrated, "No," as he realized that he was too late to make any difference, but he still had to try.

Odds against the old Cajun making an actual difference were certainly high, but he had the benefit of surprise in his favor, so the gunman was confused by the unexpected assault and unprepared for the overhand blow from the broom handle. Lasseigne was not particularly strong, and the strike was not hard enough to do any permanent damage, but it did impact solidly on the gunman's hand, solidly enough to affect his aim. The pistol fired, and Brian gasped, clasping a hand to his chest as he was thrown backwards by the force of the bullet. But Jackson, who was forced to turn immediately to defend himself from the old man and his broom handle, had no opportunity to follow through with the second shot at his intended victim to make sure he'd completed the job he was sworn to do. Then,
adding injury to insult, he was forced to turn away from both Brian and Cedric and fire at the tall individual bursting through the front door, gun in hand.

Chris McClaren was torn between wanting to kiss the old Cajun for interfering with the assassin's aim and wanting to yell at him for getting in the way, for making it impossible for him to fire his gun until he could be certain he would not injure Lasseigne.

Thus, he could only throw himself forward and to the side as a second shot emerged from Jackson's pistol. He felt the impact of the bullet in his left shoulder as he went down, but had no time to ponder how much damage it might have done. Instead, he braced his elbows against the floor, and coldly, deliberately aimed his Beretta and fired four quick shots into the gunman's chest and one additional shot - slightly delayed - to the middle of his forehead.

Jackson was still falling when Lance Mathis leaped in from the washroom and Jared Hilliard burst in from the front corridor.

Both held their firearms at the ready, but neither needed to use them.

Jackson was very dead.

The only question was whether or not he had accomplished his mission before dying.

McClaren, ignoring the blood pouring from his arm, stood up and leaped across the expanse of Brian's desk, and found the man he was charged to protect sprawled against the wall, with blood covering the side of his neck and saturating his shirt.

"Brian?" The FBI agent swayed slightly as he knelt amid a growing pool of blood.

But if he'd fooled himself into thinking that he would be the one to offer comfort or to cradle lovely Brian in his arms, he was quickly disabused of that notion. He had only just managed to lay his hand against the bloody surface of Brian's throat - just long enough to ascertain that there was still a pulse there; at that point, he allowed himself to slump forward on his knees. It was no guarantee, of course; there was a lot of blood, and the injury might still prove to be fatal, but at least, he had not had to be the one to find that beautiful, mighty heart stilled forever. He took a deep shaky breath, and was shifting to lean forward to examine the wound, when he was pushed aside, and Justin Taylor was there, gathering his unconscious lover into his arms and murmuring constantly, saying nothing in particular, but saying everything that needed saying with the love flowing through his voice as Lance Mathis, utilizing extensive first aid training, took care of checking out the extent of the damage and staunching the blood flow while Hilliard dialed 911. Others arrived - Emmett and Drew Boyd among them - with FBI agents, including Alex Corey, and policemen bringing up the rear.

So this was it, McClaren thought as the crowd surged around them. He took a deep breath and struggled to rise, clasping one hand against his wounded shoulder. The case would go on, and he would continue to be involved, but the intimacy, the closeness, the . . . whatever-it-was he had developed with Brian Kinney would be gone. Those who had used their massive resources and willing underlings to put an end to the infamous Stud of Liberty Avenue were finished; they would never threaten anyone again. It ended here, and Brian would need him no longer. He should go; he should really, really go - now. But when he turned to make his escape, he was astonished as young Taylor took a moment out of his chanted soliloquy to look up at him, blue eyes bright with tears - could they really be tears of gratitude? - and lift one hand to wrap it in the fabric of his shirt and pull him down again, drawing him firmly into the circle that surrounded Brian as they waited for paramedics to arrive.

It was an elite circle with only one criteria required for inclusion: a love - one way or another - for
Brian Kinney.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~
tbc
When my life is through
And the angels ask me to recall
The thrill of it all,
Then I shall tell them I remember,
Tell them I remember you.

- I Remember You - Victor Schertzinger, Johnny Mercer

By the time Ted turned his Audi into the driveway of the upscale two-story townhouse he shared with his boyfriend, the rain had stopped, and the sky was as filled with stars as it ever was in the Pittsburgh urban area. The city lights were too bright and glaring to allow the swarm of stars to sparkle brilliantly against the ebony fabric of night, but the view was sufficiently clear to proclaim that the storms of the day were over. Night would be peaceful and serene - weather-wise anyway.

Ted sat for a moment in his car and thought about the day behind him, and felt a ridiculous urge to seek out a tobacconist and buy himself a big, fat, expensive, Cuban cigar. On his XM radio, Dylan sang one of his characteristic stories of a soul lost and found . . . and lost again.

Good and bad, I define these terms,
Quite clear, no doubt, somehow.
Ah, but I was so much older then;
I'm younger than that now.*

Probably best not to dwell on those lyrics. Ted was much too high on himself to ponder such complex - and depressing - truths as provided by the voice of America's counterculture.

He switched off the motor and pushed back a bit, enjoying the cool softness of the leather as he nestled his nape against the headrest, and thought - for a fleeting moment - about howling at the moon just peeking over the eastern horizon. He wouldn't, of course. It would be beneath the dignity of a hugely successful investment guru, soon-to-be canonized into the semi-religious pantheon of the financial world's upper echelon.

Instead, he thought with a brilliant grin, he would stroll into his home, inform his sometimes skeptical young lover of the degree of his success, and claim his reward - all night long maybe. He felt almost like a kid again; maybe his sexual prowess would feed on all that positive energy and make this a night to remember.

Occasionally - when things were bleak and hope was hard to find - he had surreptitiously watched Brian seducing a succession of gorgeous young men - sometimes Justin, sometimes not - and felt just a bit pale and ordinary by comparison. But from this point on, he would never have to feel inferior again, to anyone. True, his young lover was not quite the specimen of physical perfection that certain other members of Pittsburgh's gay elite were; he often laughed and described himself as "scrawny", but that wouldn't matter any more. Blake was easy enough on the eyes and - more importantly - honest and loyal and totally devoted to Ted, and he would be first in line to lavish praise on his...
partner and applaud his success.

He could hardly wait.

Yet, it would be gauche and crude to act too eager. Better to be cool and nonchalant and allow Blake to do a little digging to discover the reason for the happy spark in his eyes. He would bide his time and modestly decline to brag - for a while. Knowing Blake, Ted was sure he could predict how diligent his young lover would be in his search for the reasons for Ted's happiness and how delighted he would be to lavish affection and congratulations on his partner once all was revealed.

Curtain time, he thought with a smile as he retrieved his bulging briefcase from the passenger seat. As he exited the car, he pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and found that it was switched off. Strange. He didn't remember turning it . . . oh! Yes, he did. When he'd led the Wyatts - father and son - into Brian's office, he hadn't wanted anything to interrupt their very important conversation, so he'd turned his own phone off, and planned to suggest that Brian do the same. But in the confusion of the initial meeting and the rush to get to the airport in order for Wyatt, Jr. to catch his flight, he'd forgotten all about it. Ultimately, the rush had proven to be unnecessary, as the flight to Chicago had been delayed, and he had insisted on buying dinner and drinks for his passenger at the City of Bridges Café. Young Wylie had been somewhat reticent and a bit preoccupied, but Ted assured himself that it had nothing to do with any distaste for his company and everything to do with the business meetings awaiting him in Chicago.

Even then, he was sure he would have noticed the status of his cell much sooner, if not for his impatience when his departure from the airport had been interrupted by the arrival of an entire fleet of police cars, local and federal, sirens and strobe lights shattering the night. He had been forced to pull over and wait for the chaos to pass before being able to resume his trip.

God only knew what was going on now. There was always something, and airports seemed to dominate the news these days, what with terrorist threats and security issues and botched take-offs or landings.

Nothing to do with him, he was sure, or his passenger. Young Wylie was certainly safe and sound in his first class seat, well on his way to Chicago by this time, probably enjoying a glass of single malt whiskey and the fawning attention of a comely flight attendant.

Soon, he thought, as he walked up the paved path to his doorway, he and Blake would be able to fly first class any time they chose to fly - a perk of his new station. But, for now, he had more pleasant things to think about, as the soft golden glow that filtered through the draperies of the bay window seemed to beckon to him, like the flicker of candlelight at a romantic dinner, urging him to quicken his step.

Now, he would have the pleasure of telling Blake . . .

He had just reached the front entry and was preparing to insert his key into the lock when the door was yanked open and Blake surged toward him, arms stretched out to engulf him and pull him into a fierce embrace.

"Thank God!" cried his young lover, as he buried his face into the hollow under Ted's jaw. "Thank God you're all right. I was so scared. I thought . . ."

"Thought what?" Ted interrupted, trying to suppress the note of panic in his voice. "What's going on?"

Blake leaned back and studied Ted's face, his own eyes wide and filled with uncertainty. "It's all
over the news. About Babylon and Brian and the guy who tried to kill him. You mean, you didn't know?"

"I've just come from the airport. What on earth are you . . .

"The airport? Jesus, Ted. Were you there when they caught that guy? According to the tv, they had to stop a plane from taking off in order to arrest him."

Ted stood very still, a chill just touching his spine. But he was being silly. It couldn't be, could it? It simply couldn't be.

"What guy?" he asked, trying to still the tremor in his voice, determined to maintain a positive demeanor.

"They haven't given out a name yet," Blake replied, taking Ted's arm to pull him across the threshold and into the den where the news broadcast was still ongoing.

The front façade of Babylon was displayed on the screen, with fire and police trucks all around and people milling about - cops, firefighters, civilians, employees, many familiar faces that Ted recognized, as well as a whole squadron of police dogs with their handlers.

Ted did not remember sitting down, but suddenly found himself hunched on the sofa, Blake at his side, as the reporter on screen summarized information about the bomb threat that had shut down the infamous nightclub, reminding watchers that the place had been bombed once before, resulting in massive damage and loss of life and concluding with the news that this time, tragedy had been averted. The bomb squad, with their specially trained bomb-sniffer dogs, had gone over the place thoroughly and found no traces of any explosive device, but - in the interest of public safety - they were continuing their search, rechecking every nook and cranny to be certain nothing had been overlooked.

By this time, Ted's hands were so tightly clinched that his knuckles were bone white, and his breathing was labored, almost asthmatic.

The pretty blond reporter - Philippa Marsh of WPXI, Pittsburgh's NBC affiliate - continued with her statement as Ted recovered enough of his rational mind to comprehend the data she was providing. ". . . were evacuated immediately once the threat was received, but most elected to remain in the vicinity, worrying for the physical safety of friends and acquaintances and for the facility itself, a favorite haunt of the city's upscale gay scene. Authorities have offered no statement concerning the origin of the threat. In addition, Brian Kinney - the owner of the club - has been conspicuous in his absence. Many of you may remember that Mr. Kinney was himself the target of a vicious attack a few months ago, and has only recently returned to the city after an extended absence. Rumors were rife that he was recuperating from his injuries while he was away, but that remains unconfirmed.

"What is known is that there have been plenty of emerging developments in the FBI's investigation of the assault on Mr. Kinney, and that warrants were issued earlier this evening for the arrest of a number of individuals in connection to that case. One of those individuals - identified only as a person of interest by FBI spokesmen - was scheduled to fly out of the city this evening on Liberty Flight 2116 to Chicago. The plane was actually taxiing toward the runway when the FBI and a large company of police officers swarmed onto the field and stopped the aircraft before it could take off, in order to take the man into custody."

The woman's voice-over continued, but the scene shifted to a new location: the façade of the remodeled bathhouse that now housed the heart of Brian Kinney's businesses, and Ted's breathing faltered again, forcing him to struggle to fill his lungs.
"Coincidentally, perhaps," the reporter continued, "subsequent to the search of the nightclub, a small force, composed of police officers, FBI agents, and private security, were called to the offices of Kinnetik - a local advertising agency also owned by Mr. Kinney. Again, no public announcement has been made to explain the details of the incident, but an emergency 911 call summoned ambulances to the scene, and bystanders report that at least two individuals required medical attention and were transported to a local hospital.

"We will continue to monitor events here and inform you of the full details once the police and/or the FBI issue further statements.

"For WPXI, this is Philippa Marsh, live on the scene at the Babylon nightclub."

The images on the television remained unchanged for several moments after the reporter signed off, and Ted realized that some of the faces on the scene at Kinnetik were familiar. Drew Boyd was there, and so was Emmett, his face buried in his partner's massive chest. And there, standing in the shadows by the doorway, was Lance Mathis talking to someone who had his back to the camera, but Ted was pretty sure it was Carl Horvath.

"What . . . what could have happened?" he murmured finally, his voice only a faint whisper. "When I left them there, everything . . . everything was perfect. What . . ."

"Them?" Blake's voice was sharp, almost cold. "Who are you talking about? Who's . . . them?"

"Uh, Brian, of course. And Mr. Wylie. They were going over the details of our deal. It was all settled. It's perfect. It will . . ."

When he fell silent, unable to summon the words to continue, Blake watched him for a moment, trying to figure out what his partner was unable to say. Understanding came slowly, reluctantly, and he felt the first small tremor of a world on the verge of crashing at his feet. "Oh, Ted," he said softly, knowing and wanting not to know, "what did you do?"

Ted looked up and saw a strange look in Blake's lovely blue-gray eyes - a look he preferred not to interpret. Thus, he didn't even try; he simply chose to assume that he was entitled to defend himself with an angry response. "What do you mean 'What did I do?' I didn't do anything wrong. All I did was . . ."

He paused for breath and stood up, deliberately stepping forward and invading Blake's personal space. "Are you going to add your voice to all those others that condemn me for claiming my place in his life? That's all I've ever tried to do, you know. To make his life better, to build . . ."

"Stop, Teddie!" Blake's voice was firm, but very gentle. "I know you've convinced yourself that you're an innocent bystander in all this, but . . ."

"But?" Ted's voice was blade sharp now, almost a snarl. "But what? What are you trying to say, Blake? Are you . . ."

"Just stop. Okay?" To Ted's surprise, Blake was not backing down or offering an apology for having the nerve to speak out of turn. "If there was another attack on Brian, that means that his assailants found a way to get to him. They had to find a way to avoid setting off the security alarms. And Teddie, I've seen that system. There are only two ways to disarm it. From the master control board in the primary security office, or by using a coded keycard, and access to those is restricted. Correct me if I'm wrong, but, in order to get inside, you have to have one of those cards and an entry code, but to open up from inside, all you need is the card. So . . . I'm sorry, Honey, but I have to ask. When they
check security footage and records to see how they gained access, what are they going to find?"

"How should I know what they'll find?" Ted's voice was hard and flat and bitter. "What are you saying? You think that I had something to do with this? Why would you think that? Why would anyone . . ."

"Because lately . . ." Blake hesitated. Then he took a deep breath and continued. "Lately, you haven't been yourself. And you've allowed yourself to forget that . . . that the last time you got involved in one of these investment schemes, it cost you more than you dreamed it would. It not only cost you all the cash you could scrape together, it cost you your secure place in Brian's life. And Wylie was already hanging around you when that went down. Teddie, have you ever stopped to ask yourself why he's so determined to include you in this project? Did he just wake up one morning and decide that it was time for him to put up a flag of truce and find himself an amenable little fag to patronize? Do you wonder . . ."

"Is that how you see me?" Ted demanded, an ugly flush staining his cheeks. "Am I just a 'little fag' to you? Can't you understand that this is the deal of a lifetime - that Brian would spend the rest of his life thanking me, being grateful to me. I would be . . ."

"What, Teddie?" Blake was speaking softly now, his eyes brimming. "What do you think Brian would do for you if you succeeded in turning him into a billionaire? Would that buy you the place in his heart that you want so badly?" He stepped back then, and took a deep breath. "No matter what you do for him, he is never going to love you. Not the way you think he . . ."

"I don't want him to love me, you idiot. I want him to know who I am, to know that I'm the one he should trust, the one he should turn to whenever he needs someone. That should be me, not fucking Cynthia, or stupid Michael or Pretty little Justin. It should always be me."

"Did you open the door for them?"

"What? Why do you think . . ."

"Because I know you, Ted. Because you were so obsessed with making this thing work, with bringing Brian into agreement, that you'd have done anything Wylie wanted, and you wouldn't have spared a thought about what his real motive might be."

"You don't know anything about it!"

Blake just looked at him for a moment longer, before turning away and walking toward the door.

"Where . . . where are you going?" Ted sounded less certain then, and less angry.

"I'm going to the hospital. Someone tried to kill Brian again tonight, and, so far, we have no way of knowing whether or not they succeeded."

"Wait! I'll go with you."

Blake shrugged into a lightweight jacket and opened the door without a pause. "I think you should go to Kinnetik," he said firmly. "Better that you make yourself available to answer their questions, than to force them to come looking for you."

"But I didn't do anything wrong."

Blake hesitated briefly, and turned just enough to meet Ted's gaze. "You let them in, Ted. You know you did, and so do I. Now you have to decide how to face the consequences."
Then his face - that face that was ordinarily a study in gentleness and affection - twisted into an ugly sneer. "Maybe you'll get lucky. Maybe they managed to accomplish their goal this time. Maybe Brian is dead, and will never have to know how you betrayed him."

He was gone then, quickly climbing into his compact Prius and driving away, never once turning to look back at the man who had been the center of his life.

Ted stood in the doorway, motionless, and thought about what Blake had said and realized the truth of his lover's words. Or should he use the term 'ex-lover' now? What was it he'd seen in those eyes which had always gazed at him with affection and the willingness to forgive almost anything?

He realized that he didn't want to know, and that, in itself, was answer enough.

How many dreams had he lost today? Everything he'd hoped for had simply crumbled into ashes so quickly that his head was spinning, and now - now there was no way to avoid the consequences of his actions.

Unless . . . No, not that. He couldn't do that. He couldn't just run away. Could he? Leave everything behind - lover, friends, profession, reputation - life?

Or stay, and endure scorn, disappointment, fury, the loss of his job and the respect of his colleagues, and any prospect for a brighter future. And the look of disdain in Brian Kinney's eyes. That might be the most painful thing of all. If . . . Oh, God! Blake had been right. Brian might have died tonight, and here sat Ted, worrying about his trivial little problems.

He would go to the hospital. He would face the music stoically, bravely. He would . . . but maybe not right now. Maybe he would bide his time, and maybe - with a little bit of luck - he would never have to stand in a cluttered hospital waiting room and feel his blood run cold as an exhausted and broken-hearted Matthew Keller provided the details about how Brian Kinney had died.

Maybe he would not have to be present and accounted for when the world as he'd known it came to an end - one way or another.

He was slightly surprised to realize that he understood the truth of that premise and wondered when it had become true - when Brian had become the glue that held them all together. Brian - the most egotistical, narcissistic, self-centered, arrogant, perpetually skeptical individual in the world. How had time and destiny and the laws of probability twisted back upon themselves and warped into a reality that allowed him to become the center of their existence? And now . . . what would they do without him? What would hold them all together?

He swallowed around the huge knot in his throat as the answer hit him with the force of a fist to the gut.

What would hold them together?

Nothing.

Many of the thoughts and images running through Ted Schmidt's mind as he mulled over the train wreck of his life were logical and realistic. But one in particular was dead wrong. Matthew Keller was rushed and semi-frantic and operating on some hyper-level of awareness, but he had never been less devastated or heartbroken in his life.

For Brian Kinney - vivid, beautiful, and very much alive Brian Kinney - was stretched out on his bed.
in the recovery room, breathing without a respirator and beginning to regain consciousness as the anesthetic administered during his surgery wore off. Brian was alive, and going to stay that way. For a very long time if Keller had anything to say about it, and he intended to make sure that he did.

It had not actually been touch-and-go; the big 45 G.A.P. slug that had crashed into his body and sent him reeling had entered on the right side of his chest where it had nicked a rib and been deflected upward so that it just grazed his lung and then erupted through a pocket of flesh at the juncture of his neck and shoulder.

Still, he had been very lucky; the Glock 45 cartridge was meant to inflict major damage, and if it had missed the rib entirely, it might very well have mangled his liver, pancreas, and/or lungs. Even with the ricochet, it had plowed a relatively large path through muscle and tissue, but without causing any damage to major organs. On the other hand, had the bullet struck four inches to the left, a deflection off a rib would have sent the projectile directly through the nexus of the heart and major arteries. Instead, the most critical factor in the wound had been blood loss, to be expected in any injury inflicted by such a large slug. That, in itself, might have proven fatal if Brian had not received immediate emergency treatment, but there had never been a chance of that. Thanks to the people around him, both those who were paid to protect him and those who did it simply because they loved him, first aid at the scene had staunched the external blood flow, and quick action by the ambulance attendants had avoided further problems. Surgery had still been necessary to patch a relatively simple lung perforation and repair internal bleeders, but it had gone well, and he would be left with nothing more than a couple of angry red scars.

The surgeon, having divested himself of bloody scrubs and gloves and mask, stood now beside the bed and looked down at the face of his old friend, and wondered. So far, by his count, he had saved Brian's life twice, although, in this case, he might be overreacting just a bit. Still, he wished, as his patient stirred toward consciousness, that he could be sure it would never be necessary again, but that was a stretch he couldn't quite manage. Brian, in some ways, was born to be a target, and the surgeon doubted that he would ever develop the slightest nuance of the kind of discretion that would keep him out of trouble. Of course, Brian would not phrase it quite that way. He would smirk, toss back a shot of Jack, and proclaim that he had never spent a single moment in the closet and had no intention of ever walking in there voluntarily.

Keller understood the feeling; he embraced it himself, but a little less flagrantly perhaps. It was not his raison d'être. Nor, to be fair, was it Brian's. But it was a bit more a factor of his primary identity. If anyone ever doubted that Brian was gay, they didn't doubt for long - not because he was in any way effeminate or over-refined; in fact, he was exactly the opposite. No. What identified Brian as gay was something unexpected. It was the swagger. Not the swish, but definitely the swagger. Which was not usually associated with gay men either, but with Brian? It fit perfectly and was completely indefinable as well.

Enigmatic Brian Kinney. The iconic description.

Who was now looking up at him with eyes that were remarkably shadow-free for a man just emerging from an anesthetic stupor. "Hey, Gorgeous," he whispered. "I didn't expect to wake up to your face."

"No? What did you expect to wake up to?"

Brian swallowed hard. "I didn't."

Keller leaned forward and dropped a gentle kiss on his patient's forehead. "Not an option, Stud Muffin. I plan to make sure you always wake up, to me, or to someone equally as handsome - unlikely, I know, but I'll do my best."
Brian's smile was weary, but classically Brian. "So what happened?" Then, without waiting for an answer, he gasped and tried - without much success - to push himself upright, his eyes suddenly alight with panic. "The old man . . . he . . ." He stiffened as pain flared in his chest and had no choice but to allow Keller to ease him down on his back. "Why would he do that?"

"My understanding," Keller replied, his voice as soft and soothing as he could make it as he made sure that Brian would not make another attempt at getting up, "is that he saved your life. If he hadn't interfered, you'd be dead."

"But is he . . . oh, God, please don't tell me he's dead."

"Relax! He's fine. The only person who's dead is the guy who shot you."

The panic is those incredible hazel eyes subsided and morphed into a grim satisfaction. "Jackson's dead? Who . . ."

"Don't be an idiot. Who do you think?"

"McClaren."

"The one and only."

Brian closed his eyes. Perhaps he wasn't quite as ready to wake up as he'd thought. "I thought I dreamed him. Wasn't sure he was really there."

Keller studied his old friend's face and found a strange wistfulness in those beloved features. "Wishful thinking, Bri?"

"Apparently not." The answer came quickly, but the eyes remained closed.

"Well, I'll be damned," Keller whispered. "I had given up hope of ever seeing anyone break through that armor you wear, and now . . . now I've seen it twice."

Now the eyes opened, and there was no missing the spark of anger igniting in their depths. "What the fuck are you . . ."

"Save it for someone who doesn't know you so well, Bud. It took Justin years to break down those walls, but your FBI chum managed it PDQ."

"Justin? Was he . . ."


Brian sighed. "It's not the same thing."

Keller smiled. "No. I can see that. But he made you care about him, and that's pretty remarkable."

"Kind of hard not to care when someone is willing to risk his life for you."

"Yeah. And he did, by the way."

"Did what?"

Keller looked away, turning to study one of the monitors that was displaying Brian's vital signs, and thus not noticing the color drain from his patient's face as he replied. "Risk his life for you."
He did notice it quickly however when the numbers on the monitor began to fluctuate as Brian went cold and still. "No . . . Please . . ."

"Shit!" Keller, only realizing now what he'd said and how Brian might have misinterpreted it, braced Brian's face with his hands and hastened to reassure him. "Brian, he's all right. I swear it. He took a bullet in the shoulder, but it was minor. He's fine. In fact, when I let you out of here, I fully expect him and Justin to be arm wrestling to determine who gets to see you first."

Brian looked up then and studied his old friend's expression. "You wouldn't lie to me, would you, Matt?"

"Never, Baby. I promise you. He's fine. Everyone's fine, except for the pond scum who tried to kill you."

For a moment longer, Brian stared into the physician's beautiful green eyes, wanting to believe, but still not entirely sure he could. Then he sighed and nodded. "So I can stop worrying about my murderous ex-therapist, at least."

"All thanks to your McFed, who pumped four shots into the bastard's heart and one right between his eyes. Your very special agent was taking no chances."

"I probably shouldn't be happy to hear that, but I am. At least, I won't have to worry about him causing any more trouble for me or mine."

"Oh, you can do a lot better than that," Keller replied with a broad smile, "but it's not my story to tell. It's McClaren's - more than anyone else's, so I won't spoil it for him. But let's just say this was a red letter day for the Pittsburgh gay community. Hell, they'll probably have a float for it when Pride rolls around again."

"What are you . . ."

"Nope. Not gonna steal his thunder, because he earned it, but I will tell you that you need to stop worrying and try to relax. Everything's fine."

Brian looked up then and waited until Keller's gaze locked on his eyes. "Not quite everything, Doc," he said softly.

"But it will be," Keller answered, making no attempt to hide the fact that he could easily discern the problem in his patient's eyes but making every attempt to allow no trace of doubt to inflect his tone. But Brian did not have to hear it; he knew it already. "You don't know that."

"Okay, but I choose to believe it. You will always be you."

Brian did not argue, but neither did he agree. He simply looked away and allowed himself to slip back into the warmth of semi-sleep, the pain in his side fading into a pale descant that he could choose not to notice.

Chris lived. He had to believe that, had to accept that Matt would not lie to him, not about something like that. Chris lived and Justin lived and Justin's spunky old Cajun lived. For now, it was enough. The rest he would worry about later.
He didn't know how many times he had walked back and forth across the waiting room; he had stopped counting at eighteen, and that had been over an hour ago, when Chris McLaren had shifted his position from one plane of his chosen corner to the other and fixed the blond with a look that promised dire consequences if he continued to mutter under his breath and semi-invade the agent's personal space. After that, he had adjusted his course so that he maintained a safe distance from that corner while simultaneously avoiding Debbie Novotny's repeated attempts to pull him down on the sofa and smother him with an excess of motherly affection. Already, his own mother was fidgeting, obviously fighting off an urge to take him in hand and insist that he stop pacing.

All to no avail. It was either pace, fall to his knees and start sobbing, or barge through those ominous double doors that barred entry to the surgical suites and scream for Matthew Keller to tell him that everything was all right - that Brian was better than all right, that he was Brian again, quintessentially Brian, with the familiar smirk, the hot body, and the eyes that could skewer a man like a saber and drill down into his soul. That was the Brian he wanted - no reticence, no hesitation, no uncertainty. Just Brian, all the time. Which had not been the case of late, and Justin couldn't quite put his finger on why he should think that. He just knew that he did.

He had not realized how much he missed the Brian who was the center of his world until this very moment, when he was forced to concentrate on the starkly realistic now, and speculate on the future.

Brian - his Brian - had been missing in action for a while, and that simply would not do. He had never found it easy to beg; he and his lover had that trait in common. But this was too important to let his fear of appearing weak prevent him from doing what needed doing.

If he had to beg, then so be it.

He knew the right thing to say - knew that it would be quick and simple, neatly wrapped up in a few fundamental words. "Come back to me. I can't live without you."

And if saying those words made him look like a wimp, so what? It was only the truth, and it would be enough, because it had to be. Any other alternative was unthinkable.

He changed direction and walked to the water fountain, to splash cold water on his face, wondering if this interminable night would ever end.

When he looked up, it was to find that Ben and Michael had arrived, the latter looking every bit as panic-stricken as Justin felt.

"Sorry," said Michael as he moved toward his mother. "I couldn't leave until we got J.R. to sleep. Any word yet?"

"Don't you even think it," Ben said it quickly, before Michael could snap it and earn his mother's annoyance. "If Matt Keller doesn't think it appropriate to call in the so-called family, it's not up to you to make the call for him."

"But..."
"Ma." There was no patience or apology in Michael's tone. "What part of 'Brian would not want her here' do you not understand? 'Mother' is just an empty title to Joan Kinney, and you, of all people, should know that. You saw what she did to him - what both of his parents did to him. Why on earth would you think she has a right to be here now?"

"But she's his . . ."

"No, she's not." That was Justin, staring at Debbie with an angry glitter in his eyes that she'd never seen before. "She never was, and you can't make this right between them. The only thing that matters now is what Brian needs, and he sure as hell doesn't need her. She was never there when he did, and now it's far too late."

He turned away then to resume pacing, and the entire waiting room was wrapped in an uneasy silence, as if everything that needed saying had already been said, which, for Debbie, was an entirely unprecedented sensation.

Luckily, the silence did not endure for long. Michael had barely settled into the seat beside his mother with Ben balancing on the arm of the sofa, when there was a stir in the corridor, and two new arrivals bustled in - Alexandra Corey, FBI brass, and Carl Horvath, the ranking police officer on the scene at Babylon and later - Kinnetik.

Carl took a bare moment to exchange hugs with his life-mate - an unusually subdued Debbie - as Corey found McClaren standing where he had been standing since he'd rushed here after being released from the emergency room where the staff had cleaned, stitched, and bandaged his wound; with his back braced in the corner of the room, looking for all the world as if he was supporting the weight of the building on his shoulders. She did not waste time speaking to anyone else, although everyone in the room watched her as she moved toward him. She was not smiling - exactly - and her expression was impossible to read. And yet there was an unexpected glint in her eyes.

"Can you come with me?" she asked when McClaren straightened and faced her. "It's important."

"So's this," he replied, making a slight adjustment to his bandaged arm nestled in a canvas brace. The wound had not been anything major, but it had been painful. In fact, it still was, but any suggestion by medical personnel of painkillers - oral or injected - had been dismissed with a scowl sufficiently fierce to discourage anyone from asking again.

Corey could clearly read the discomfort in his eyes, but chose to pretend otherwise. Besides, she was pretty sure the news she brought would work better than a shot of morphine, and her smile reflected that thought. "But you can turn this watch over to someone else, for a little while. Because you've earned the right to be in on what comes next."

"Which is what?"

"We've got him. Between what was on the tapes and the evidence collected elsewhere, we had enough to get a warrant. And God bless Brian Kinney for being smart enough and sneaky enough to activate that recorder. So I think you need to be there, so you can provide a firsthand play-by-play for him when he wakes up. He'll need to hear it from you."

For a moment, McClaren's eyes darkened with a shadow of uncertainty. But only for a moment. Then he nodded, and moved away from his preferred corner, looking around to identify all the faces in the room, observing that - under happier circumstances - a chorus of "Hail, hail, the gang's all here" would have been completely appropriate - almost.

There was Justin, of course, center stage and prowling like a hungry wolf. Then there were Debbie
and Michael and Ben, looking lost and afraid. And Emmett and Drew, the smaller man pulled tight against the ex-quarterback's side, almost in his lap as they whispered together with neither caring at all whether or not any onlooker might approve of their obvious affection for each other. Sitting across from them, on a small metal-framed sofa, were Lindsey Peterson and her father, and Cynthia and her daughter, with Lance Mathis standing guard over the two. They talked softly among themselves, but tight-clasped fingers and shadowed eyes revealed the depth of their concerns. Rounding out the group were Jennifer Taylor and Blake Wyzecki seated in a corner, with Jared Hilliard and Liam Quinn nearby, talking quietly.

McClaren spared a moment for a stray thought - the beauty of the crowd made the plain, dowdy little room look even worse than usual.

There were, of course, two major members of the group who were not present.

Brian's son, Gus - deemed too young to be a part of the vigil, as well as too vulnerable should things not go well - was in the care of Justin's friend, Daphne. And there was no sign of Ted Schmidt. McClaren noticed, but did not spare the time to consider what the absence meant. In a way, he was rather glad that Kinnetik's CFO had not bothered to show his face here. It was hard enough to suppress the simmering anger that he felt in his gut without having to confront one of its primary sources in the flesh.

With a jerk of his head, he gestured for Justin Taylor and Jared Hilliard to follow him out into the corridor as Alexandra Corey and Carl Horvath said their good-byes and moved away to wait for him to finish his business. Unexpectedly, Liam Quinn followed the group until they were far enough from the waiting room to speak privately.

"Hilliard," the FBI agent said firmly, "I have to leave for a while and . . ."

"Leave?" That was Justin, an angry flush rising in pale, pale skin. "Why on earth would you . . ."

"Because I'm going to arrest the motherfucker who did this," McClaren replied firmly. "Because we can't assume that Brian's really safe, until we put this bastard away. Understand?"

"Yeah, but . . ."

"No buts, Blondie. Hilliard knows what to do. I wouldn't leave him to take over if he didn't." Then he smiled and stepped forward until he and Hilliard were almost nose-to-nose. "Right?"

"Right." Hilliard's incredible eyes were steady and filled with resolve.

"And you," McClaren said firmly, turning back to face Justin, "you remember to behave yourself. He's going to be fine; Keller will make sure of that, but he's not up to handling a squirming armful of horny twink. Not yet. Got it?"

With that, he stepped back and started toward his boss, but Justin was not quite finished with the conversation. "Chris, wait."

With only a tiny grimace of impatience, McClaren paused and turned back to face the young man who had succeeded in creating so much havoc in his life. "What is . . ."

It was uncertain who was more surprised by what happened next - Chris McClaren or his companions, all of whom were totally unprepared for Justin's actions as the young blond threw his arms around the FBI agent's neck and kissed him solidly and deeply on the mouth.

McClaren stood as if turned to stone until Justin completed the kiss and stepped back, allowing one
hand to trail across the agent's face as he pulled away. "What . . . what was that?" McClaren asked after several stunned moments.

"That," answered Justin huskily, "was thank you. I didn't know how else to say it."

McClaren huffed a deep breath and dredged up a shaky smile. "Well, you're welcome. Just . . . don't do that again. I'd hate to have to kick Brian's ass - purely defensively of course."

"Of course. And, Chris, you'll hurry back, won't you?"

"That I will."

Justin simply nodded and turned away, but everyone else continued to stare at McClaren for a few more seconds - mouths agape.

"What?" he said finally, impatiently.

"Nothing," they chorused, as all of them gathered their wits to go about their business.

All except Quinn, who fell into step at McClaren's side. "Would you mind if I tagged along with you?"

The FBI agent turned to study the attorney's face before replying. "It's not a party, you know. We're going to make an arrest."

"I know."

"Then what . . ."

"I've spent all afternoon going over the data on this case and studying the characters of these people and figuring out how to protect my client's legal interests. While you protect his life. And I've realized something."

"Such as?"

"Such as, there is absolutely nothing I would enjoy more than seeing the mastermind of this ugly plot get his ass kicked - physically, if I had my druthers, but figuratively, if that's the only way."

McClaren looked to Corey for her approval, and she nodded with a smile. "As long as you keep your mouth shut, Mr. Quinn. And you go in your own vehicle. That way, you have no official standing in the matter and can't be targeted for retaliation."

"Agreed," said the young lawyer. "Although you shouldn't concern yourself about protecting me. Retaliation is something I deal with every day, as does anyone who is recognized as a member of the gay rights movement." Then he turned to regard McClaren with a quizzical smirk. "Care to ride with me? I don't know Pittsburgh all that well. I'd hate to get lost and miss the fun."

Again, McClaren looked to his supervisor who nodded her agreement, so he turned back to the lawyer and surprised a small, enigmatic smile on his face . . . and found that he suddenly had no memory of what it was he'd meant to say. He was too busy trying to remember if he'd ever before seen eyes like that - eyes that were teal blue, and violet, and jade green and pearl gray all at once.

"What do you drive?" he asked finally, swallowing to cover the slight awkwardness of the moment.

"Aston Martin DB9."
He managed to summon up a small smile. "Fuel economy be damned, Mr. Bond?"

Quinn chuckled. "I could never summon up much interest in his girls, but I always loved his cars."

McClaren confined his response to a small smile, carefully avoiding any temptation to look again into those incredible sea-change eyes.

Only - he couldn't quite resist another peek. And then he was glad of it because it occurred to him that the eye color was just a trick of the light, a chance reflection of the dark teal color of the lawyer's Versace dress shirt.

Yeah. That must be it.

By the time the party of four reached the front lobby, McClaren had regained his customary equilibrium and refocused on the matter at hand. His steady mindset endured until they reached the car park, where Corey and Horvath went one way, while he and Quinn went another. But, just before walking away, his supervisor leaned toward him and whispered something in McClaren's ear. Then she made her departure, wearing a tiny enigmatic smile.

"Anything I need to know?" asked the lawyer as he unlocked the door of the sleek deep red coupe.

"No," McClaren replied, admiring the car but saying nothing.

When they were safely strapped in, Quinn started the motor, and its throaty growl was deep and somehow satisfying. "So," he continued, as he eased into reverse, "what did she say?"

"Nothing really."

Quinn simply stared at him, one brow quirked to ask again.

"Really," McClaren repeated. Then he smiled. "She just said that if we got lost, she wasn't going to wait for us."

There was a quick, barely-there beat of silence as their eyes met. Then Liam Quinn grinned and glanced into his rear-view mirror. "In that case, I guess we better not be late."

McClaren could only nod, telling himself that he wasn't really speechless - that he could have spoken, if he'd wanted to.

Of course he could.

What the hell?

As it turned out, Quinn would have had no problem following the small fleet of vehicles that cruised through the city, heading north towards the exclusive residential area of Bradford Woods: three Pitts police cruisers, two black FBI SUVs, and the chauffeured sedan in which Alexandra Corey and Carl Horvath were riding made a very noticeable procession.

The Aston Martin trailed behind the group, the muted rumble of its motor announcing that it could - if necessary - leave all of them in a cloud of dust, but Quinn drove easily, handling gears and equipment effortlessly and only occasionally sparing a glance for his silent passenger.

"Nice wheels," McClaren observed finally, suddenly embarrassed by his reticence.
"Thanks. She's my one indulgence. Hired a guy to drive her here. Figure I'll be here a while, and I
got tired of the rental."

McClaren turned and took advantage of the opportunity to study the young lawyer's profile, but he
was careful not to study it for too long.

"So you're planning to stick around for the trial?"

"For that, and a few other things. Gotta take some long hard looks at Brian's accounting records. It
might be necessary to get a forensic accountant in to do some auditing."

McClaren sighed. "Ted Schmidt."

"Yeah. I wish it were possible to ignore his part in whatever we might find, because I don't believe
he would have set Brian up deliberately. But there's no way of being sure without a thorough review
of everything that's happened in the last few months. If I just assume that everything's on the up-and-
up and walk away, how am I gonna excuse my lack of oversight if something turns up later that
brings Brian's financial structure crashing down around his ears?"

The FBI agent nodded. "Yeah, but if it's any consolation, he wouldn't blame you. For a guy who's
reputed to be the most selfish SOB this side of the Big Apple, he's surprisingly mellow when he has
every right to play the injured party."

This time, it was Quinn who took a moment to study McClaren's profile, a tiny smile betraying his
response to the view.

"You should listen to your own advice," he said finally, gently.

McClaren frowned. "I'm sorry? What do you . . ."

"You're blaming yourself," said the lawyer firmly. "I could see it in your eyes. Hell, everybody in
that waiting room could see it. And you're wrong. It wasn't your fault that it happened, but it was
due to your actions that he survived."

McClaren laid back against the exquisite softness of the coupe's leather seat and closed his eyes. "I
left him. I never should have . . ."

"Oh, I see." Quinn's voice was heavy with sarcasm. "So you can refuse orders from your superiors.
Funny, I had no idea the FBI worked that way. So what's next? You tell your boss that you've
decided you deserve to be demoted for your failure to protect your client, and she can either go along
with it, or what? Explain to her bosses why she can't control her junior field agent? Is that how it
works now?"

"Don't be stupid," McClaren retorted. "You're too smart to spout that kind of drivel."

Quinn smiled. "I'm not the one that sounds like a raving lunatic here."

The FBI agent smiled; then he actually chuckled. "You probably don't suffer fools gladly. Right?"

Quinn shifted slightly and reached out to drape one hand over McClaren's shoulder. It was a
completely spontaneous gesture, with no hidden meaning or agenda, but the FBI agent found that he
was enjoying the contact. "Gladly? Friend, I don't suffer them at all."

"No wonder you and Brian get along so well."
"Maybe. And if you're right, he's going to tell you the same thing I said when he comes around and is able to talk to you. The fact that the psycho got to him in the first place was not your fault, but the fact that you figured out what was happening and managed to get there in time to save his life - that was entirely down to you. So, after we get to watch this dirtbag learn that all his privilege and his money and his blue blood are not enough to save him, I'd very much like to buy you a drink. Or a bottle if you prefer."

McClaren did not offer a verbal response, but he did smile and look over at the lawyer as the shadows that had clouded his eyes since his return from Florida simply dissolved and faded to nothing, leaving the incredible blue depths once more as bright and lovely as a summer sky at twilight.

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The soaring coloratura of Natalie Dessay's *Il dolce suono* aria from the so-called "Mad Scene" in the third act of Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* provided the perfect background music for the savoring of a Bolivar Royal Corona cigar, accompanied by a snifter of Courvoisier Napoleon cognac.

A treat for all the senses provided one could close one's eyes and visualize the blood-stained bride in the palatial gloom of Lammermoor castle.

Clayton Wylie sat in the comfort of his personal study - a place never trespassed upon by family or friends or anybody uninvited - and reflected on the satisfaction of a day well spent, marking a pinnacle finally reached, accomplished, at long last, by the successful removal of a very large, very painful thorn in his side.

He sat back against the sueded leather of his favorite arm chair and gazed out at the perfectly manicured grounds of his estate, reveling in the serenity and security of his space and time. His wife was out, of course, doing what trophy wives did - shopping perhaps, or attending a dinner meeting with her latest charitable cause, or - less likely, but possible - dining with the grandchildren. He seemed to remember that she'd mentioned taking them to watch a performance of *The Lion King* at the civic center; was that tonight?

He couldn't remember. And didn't really care since it really didn't matter. The only thing that did matter was that he was able to sit here and enjoy the silence and the prospect of having life settle back into expected, acceptable patterns. There were, of course, servants in the house, but they all knew better than to disturb him. If he wanted them, he would ring for them; otherwise, they were accustomed to living up to a certain standard; the help, in homes such as this one, were seen - when summoned - and unseen and unheard otherwise.

Wylie closed his eyes and visualized the face of the man who had spent so many years at the center of the volcano that had disrupted the life of himself, his family, and his social equals. A face that wore a perpetual smirk, with eyes that glinted with scorn and sarcasm and smug, self-important laughter. A face that shouldn't have been as beautiful as that of any woman. A face that made a real man feel an overwhelming need to bring the creature that wore it to heel, to make him bleed, to make him beg. To make him want to . . . please his betters.

A thought that was, in itself, vile and hideous - the kind of thought that a man of his stature should never be forced to suffer.

Such ugly temptations would be finished now, pushed back where they belonged to the darkness beneath the notice of the true leaders of Pittsburgh, who could take back their dominance of social issues and political power, without ever having to spare another thought to defending themselves
against the kind of perversion that Brian Kinney had introduced into their society. Until the next upstart came along. Unfortunately, there was always another upstart waiting in line.

He shuddered briefly as he allowed himself to visualize what that too-proud, arrogant face must look like now. He had not bothered to instruct his willing enforcer in how to perform the task assigned to him; that, he knew, would have been distasteful and unnecessary. Jackson - as the group called him these days - would have taken advantage of the opportunity to enjoy his work.

The fact that he had not called in to report the outcome of his adventure was not unexpected. On completion of the job, he would have followed his orders and vanished into the night, leaving no trace of evidence that might link him or his actions to the group that employed him.

All was as it should be.

Wylie had considered turning on the flatscreen television built into his wall-to-wall entertainment center, but had decided against it. Too many upstarts pushing themselves into levels where they did not belong. That was why most news casts annoyed him these days - stories about lazy, good-for-nothing, jobless protestors - the so-called 99% who expected government and big business to support their worthless asses - and political chicanery - indicators of a country that had forgotten its origins and a population that had forgotten its place. Although - come to think of it - he was pretty sure the pundits had the percentages right; as a member of the 1% who were responsible for the greatness and the economic superiority of the nation, he believed himself qualified to make that judgment.

But the ridiculous claims about the exploitation of the great unwashed and the lack of accountability among the rich and powerful - he had heard quite enough of that kind of empty, meaningless rhetoric.

Instead, he would just sit here and enjoy his . . .

The knock at his door was soft, barely audible, but completely shocking in the degree of its intrusion on his privacy.

What in the world was . . .

"Mr. Clayton." That couldn't possibly be the voice of Fitzroy, his butler. The man would have literally cut out his own tongue before disturbing his employer when he was closeted in his study. So it couldn't be . . .

And, of course, it wasn't. Or rather, it was, but only as a preliminary to the group of individuals who waited for Fitzroy to open the door, before surging inside to trespass on Wylie's private sanctuary.

In the lead was a grim-faced woman in a dark suit; Wylie had seen her before, of course. He could hardly forget the female who had led the assault against the bastion of tradition that was The Club. But he chose to ignore her and address his protest to the man at her side, a man who was highly placed in the Pittsburgh Police Department and thus, should have known better than to participate in this outrageous invasion of his privacy.

"Detective Horvath, what is the meaning . . ."

"Mr. Wylie," said the female abruptly, cutting him off without any trace of apology, "we have a warrant for your arrest on a charge of conspiracy to commit murder, which, I am confidant, will be only the first of many charges to be leveled against you."

Wylie's face flushed an ugly, splotchy red as he opened his mouth to protest. "You can't just walk in here and . . ."
"Of course, I can," she replied coldly. "You obviously have assumed that you are above the law, which you are not. Now, for the formalities. You have the right to remain silent. If you give up that right, anything you say . . ."

In addition to Carl Horvath, there were three members of the Pittsburgh PD present, one of whom stepped forward to cuff the elderly Wylie as Corey continued her recitation of the Miranda cautions. Also present was the FBI agent who had served as Corey's driver, and other agents were posted at entrances around the sprawling Tudor-style house. And, at the back of the small crowd, saying nothing but taking in everything and enjoying it thoroughly, stood Chris McClaren and Liam Quinn, neither bothering to try to conceal small, smug smiles. The effort would have been futile anyway.

Then Quinn leaned over to whisper in the FBI agent's ear. "It's no acceptable substitute for a good, solid kick in the balls, but the woman knows how to wield a verbal switchblade, not to mention demonstrate a plentiful supply of balls of her own - metaphorically speaking, of course."

McClaren tried not to respond verbally, and almost succeeded. Almost.

Corey was in the last phrase of the standard precautions, the "if you cannot afford an attorney" part - ludicrous under the circumstances but mandated nevertheless - when there was the smallest suggestion of a cut-off chuckle from the rear of the group, and Clayton Wylie Sr. finally identified a suitable target for his rage. It was unfortunate for him, however, that - in his fury - he somehow forgot that he was handcuffed, and in the grip of a young police officer with the physique and strength and implacability of an adolescent grizzly. Wylie tried to jerk free, to get to the face - the beautiful face - of the blue-eyed FBI agent who was fighting valiantly but ultimately failing in his attempt to swallow an urge to laugh.

But the elderly lawyer did not forget for long. He made one concerted effort - a writhing thrust and twist that looked more like a seizure than a bid for freedom - and found himself flat on his back, staring up at a ring of faces - all of them smiling now - except for the young Goliath who had deposited him on the floor as easily as if he'd been handling a rag doll.

No one laughed - exactly - but it was clear that a number of people wanted to.

For Wylie, it was the last straw. Thus, his previously docile - if outraged - manner was instantly discarded for a vicious, twisting tirade as he tried to get to his feet and lurch forward to confront Chris McClaren, who continued to smile at him.

"I know your kind," snarled Wyatt. "I can see exactly why you're so happy to do your boytoy's bidding. It's Kinney, isn't it? You and him - you make me sick, what you do together. I can see it now, and it turns my stomach, what the two of you get up to when you should be throwing yourselves on the mercy of good Christian people, and begging their forgiveness for . . ."

"For what?" That was Liam Quinn, wearing a particularly beatific smile and pushing himself forward to confront the old bigot. "For having too much taste and sense to ever willingly come within ten feet of your ugly, scrawny old cock?"

By this time, McClaren was almost choking with an urge to laugh, and Wylie was close to apoplexy, actually foaming at the mouth.

Alexandra Corey felt compelled to step forward then, to forestall any further conversation, but - when she tried to frown at McClaren and his companion - she couldn't quite pull it off. Her lips were certainly frowning, but there was no disguising the glint of amusement in her eyes.

When the group had made its exit, in fits and starts as the prisoner put up a pathetic effort to struggle
against his restraints and his guard, and Wylie was finally ensconced in the rear seat of a police cruiser with his beefy young escort at his side, McClaren and Quinn lingered for a moment on the torch-lit portico of the elegant mansion and watched as the various vehicles made their way back toward the main road.

"Sorry about that," Quinn said quietly. "I shouldn't have interrupted but . . ."

"Are you kidding me?" McClaren laughed. "The only way that could have gone better would be to have it on film. Brian would have loved it."

Quinn's eyes were bright with approval, but there was still a shadow there that McClaren saw, but could not quite identify. "Is that what counts most for you? That Brian would have loved it?"

"What . . . I don't know what you mean."

The smile shifted, and the young lawyer lifted up slightly to align his lips to McClaren's and pressed forward quickly to deliver a gentle kiss, lingering just long enough for the FBI agent to note the luscious softness of those lips. Then it was over, and Quinn was looking up at him, that shadow still there in his eyes. "Yes," he whispered, "you do."

He stepped back, and the shadow shifted again, became invisible. Yet, somehow, McClaren knew that it was still there - waiting.

"Come on then," said the lawyer with a pensive smile. "I'd bet good money that your primary purpose in life is awake and in a really bad mood. Let's go see."

McClaren did not offer a verbal response because he found that, once again, he could not think of a single thing to say.

The second time he wakened, when he rose to full consciousness for the first time, it was to find a familiar face staring down at him, a beautiful face with huge blue eyes containing an entire galaxy of starlight.

"Hey." Justin's whisper was barely audible, but his breath was warm and sweet as it caressed his lover's face.

"Ummm." Brian could not quite summon up an actual, verbal answer.

"You're a complete shit, you know." The words were harsh, but the voice remained velvet soft. "You could have died tonight, and you wouldn't call for help. And if - if you had, what would . . . how would . . ."

"Justin?" It was just a breath, not even audible, but the note of desperation was clear. "Don't."

"Why? I need to understand. Why would you . . ."

"Because, I needed . . ." a pause and a quick grimace as Brian tried to shift his weight to ease the throbbing pain in his side. "To keep you . . . safe."

"You don't get it, do you?" The tone was harsher now, and the voice louder. "You just don't . . ."

"Enough." There was no uncertainty in that voice, and no tolerance for the smallest nuance of disobedience. "He doesn't even know what he's saying, Blondie, so . . ."
Justin's response was quick and hot. "Don't call me . . ."

Matt Keller, hands and arms and body strength all focused on adjusting his patient's position on the bed to relieve his pain, did not even spare a glance in Justin's direction to signify that he knew or cared why the young man might be holding on to his patience by his fingernails.

Instead, he responded knee-jerk style, as Keller the physician, rather than Keller the friend or companion or sympathetic listener. "What I call you, what you feel about all this, whatever complaint you might feel compelled to lodge - none of that matters now, Justin, because this time - maybe the only time in the entire saga of Brian and Justin, Star-Crossed Lovers - this is not about you. Later, maybe I'll take the time to feel some kind of compassion for what you're going through, but - right now - I only care about one thing. My patient is in pain, and you're not helping. So, either help - by biting your tongue to quit your bitching - or get the hell out of here, cause I'm dead certain that there'll be somebody willing and eager to take your place and concentrate on his needs, instead of yours."

Justin went dead still, his eyes grown huge and glossy and . . . then he blinked. How dare the physician speak to him like he was some kind of spoiled, self-indulgent little . . . Oh! Oh, God! Was it because . . . had he earned that tongue-lashing? Had he really made it all about him, when . . .

He reached out then and very gently grasped Brian's hand and pulled it to cradle against his heart, taking care to avoid jostling the IV needle buried in his arm, or the oxi-sensor attached to his finger, or the blood pressure cuff wrapped around his bicep.

Could it really be true? After all this time and all these years when he'd managed to convince himself that he'd been the injured party in this relationship, that he'd been the one deserving the sympathy and compassion of friends, only too eager to offer a shoulder to cry on . . . was it possible that he'd been wrong? That he'd simply interpreted everything in a way that would leave him feeling innocent and self-righteous, a perpetual victim of Brian's . . . Brian's . . . what? And there it was - a question that had no answers. A victim of Brian's . . . willingness to let Justin make his own choices; Brian's refusal to trap him in a prison composed of feelings of guilt or obligation; Brian's determination to allow him to fly free, unfettered by any sense of entitlement or emotional bondage.

The failure of their relationship - the mythic relationship of Justin Taylor and Brian Kinney - was not down to Brian's refusal to grow up or make a commitment.

It had not been Brian who had held back, refusing to take the final step, even though he had often joked about his commitment phobia. But it was just a joke. The real problem was Justin; it had always been Justin.

His thoughts - and the near panic they induced - were reflected in his face, and he went so pale and still that even Keller, almost totally focused on his patient's condition, finally had to notice. With a last caress of Brian's face - a gesture that had nothing to do with professionalism and everything to do with personal affection - the physician moved quickly to pull a chair from the wall and place it to receive Justin's adorable little bubble butt, his timing immaculate as Justin had just realized that the tremor in his legs was about to send him crashing to the floor, an exercise which would, of course, not be the least bit productive.

Once he was seated, still clasping Brian's hand, Keller leaned over to do a quick assessment of his vital signs and his ability to draw breath. Thus, face to face, he saw the light of epiphany rising in those huge, bluer than blue eyes, and he was surprised to feel a quick flash of sympathy for the young man who had stolen the heart and soul of Brian Kinney. So he crouched beside the chair and laid his hand over the one that was clinging to Brian as if to a lifeline.
"Having a come-to-Jesus moment, are we?" The words were not particularly gentle or compassionate, but the tone was. Whether he approved or not, this was the person who had accomplished what Keller had once believed to be impossible - the person who had inspired a deep and abiding love in Brian Kinney; thus, he deserved more than a brusque dismissal of his abrupt confrontation with hard truth.

Justin looked down into eyes as green as a forest in summer, and wondered. Keller obviously knew the reality of it all; had probably always known. Did anybody else . . .

"Stop worrying about what anyone knows or doesn't know," the doctor advised with a smile, causing Justin to gasp at the accuracy of the man's perceptions. "Just concentrate on the things you know, on what you've learned and how it colors your world."

Justin bit his lip, and turned to stare at Brian - Brian who was looking back at him, ignoring his physical pain, ignoring his own needs, and . . .

"Leave him . . . alone, Matt." It was muttered through a broken breath, and around a gasp of pain, but there was no mistaking the determination that compelled it.

Keller looked at Justin, and smiled. "See?"

It was all he said, and all that needed saying.

Four days later on a warm Thursday afternoon, Brian observed the golden purity of the shaft of sunlight pouring through his window, and concluded that it was a perfect spring day. Though not ordinarily given to waxing poetic over a fortunate juxtaposition of climactic coincidence, he could not quite stifle the smile that touched his lips.

Not, of course, that he had an unmitigated reason to smile. In fact, he thought, as he glanced out that window and was reminded - forcefully - of the steady decline of his vision, the smile was almost a triumph over the stark quality of his reality. He could still see, but, with every passing day, it was becoming more and more like peering through a tunnel that narrowed and darkened constantly.

But, for the moment, he couldn't do anything about that. His wound and recovery from the surgery Keller had performed had delayed his trip to the clinic where the world famous Andrew Griffin was waiting to work his magic - or not, as the case might be. And most important of all at this stage, he was going home.

He shouldn't complain about the care he'd received from the hospital staff, although he couldn't resist an occasion grumble; it had, in fact, been exceptionally good. He was pretty sure that was down to Matt Keller and a few well-placed threats of retribution; it might also have something to do with the fact that a few of his nurses seemed to have a certain fascination with his body - a situation that fed the pride he wore around him like a suit of armor. An interesting analogy, and very appropriate. He sometimes found it interesting that Keller was the only person who had ever figured out that the pride was a defense mechanism used to deflect the acidic properties of his parents' attitude toward their only son. Did that mean that his old college chum was the only person who'd ever bothered to look long and hard and evaluate the data from his careful observations?

Or did it mean he was the only one who'd ever been interested enough to dig for answers?

That, he found, was an avenue of thought he preferred not to explore. It was somehow more satisfying for him to reflect on the fact that there seemed to be a growing appetite among hetero
young women for watching beautiful young gay men making love to each other.

A smile touched his lips as he entertained the thought that this development was only fair since hetero young men had been enjoying the female counterpart for centuries.

A quick check of the bathroom to make sure he'd forgotten nothing, afforded him a chance to examine his reflection in the mirror, and observe that he looked really good. The Armani shirt - black with small, wide-spaced scarlet stripes - and the black denim 501's emphasized the slender sculpture of his body and the flatness of his stomach, in perfect proportion to the broadness of his shoulders, and the color emphasized the darkness of his eyes - more sable in this light than hazel, but still reflecting hints of molten amber. His hair was a bit longer than usual, but fell in its usual natural styling, emphasizing the squareness of his jaw and the perfect curvature of his lips, and the golden tan of his skin, only slightly paler than usual as a remnant of the injury.

Ready to fuck - the description he valued most. Only . . .

He didn't allow himself to pursue that thought.

For the past couple of days, Justin had been going through one of his characteristic bouts of maundering. He would work his way through it, as he always did. Only - this time, he'd better make it quick, because time was moving at breakneck speed toward a deadline which was invisible to most.

Even invisible to Justin - a situation that Brian had the ability to alter, if he could only convince himself that it was the right thing to do.

Meanwhile . . . the FBI, in the person of Alexandra Corey, had filled him in on all the developments in the investigation of his assault. He had been gratified to hear that the Wylies - father and son - had been arrested and were currently being held without bail in the maximum security section of the Pittsburgh jail. She had also gone over all the newly discovered evidence, and given him a play-by-play of everything that had happened after he'd been shot and all the newly discovered details of the case. She had been very forthcoming, hiding nothing, answering every question.

Except one.

When he'd asked for the location of Chris McClaren, she had been vague and evasive, and had excused herself quickly, suddenly remembering a vital appointment she could not afford to miss.

Since then - the day after his surgery - he had not seen the man who had saved his life, and every question about him had been deflected or ignored, and Brian had begun to wonder. He had assumed that Keller would not lie to him; then he had assumed that someone surely would have told him if McClaren had been . . .

But no, he would not go there. Could not go there.

He looked into the mirror once more and adjusted a lock of hair that was not quite where it should be.

He was ready to face the world and to allow the world to face him.

When Matt Keller strode into the room, he was busy going over the data on Brian's chart, and thus, did not at first take in the full sight of his patient. When he did, his reaction was imminently satisfying to his old friend: a classic double-take, green eyes widening and filled with lusty approval.

"Damn, Boy, you don't do anything by halves, do you?"
Brian smiled. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, don't bullshit me! You know exactly what I mean. Nobody just recovered from a gunshot wound and surgery should look like that."

"Like what?" His voice was innocence incarnate.

Keller grinned and stepped forward, pulling Brian into his arms and flush against his body. "Like you need a good fucking, and if you don't cut it out, you're liable to get it."

They chuckled together, exchanging a quick, passionless kiss, before moving apart just as Chris McClaren came into the room and froze mid-step, noticing the closeness between the two, and Brian felt the grip of cold fingers around his heart begin to ease.

"Sorry," the FBI agent said quickly. "If I'm interrupting something . . ."

"What?" retorted Keller with a smirk. "You going to volunteer to leave us to it?"

The FBI agent never even glanced at the physician's face; he was much too busy examining Brian, head to toe, and pretending that it was all just a matter of professional interest. "If that's what you want," he said finally, without inflection.

For Brian's part, he was momentarily speechless, so overcome with relief that he thought he might actually fall to his knees as an almost nonsensical litany repeated in his mind: *He's not dead, thank God, he's not dead, he's not . . .*

"If you two are finished with the pissing contest," he said finally, his voice almost steady as he turned back to take another look in the mirror in a deliberate attempt to cover his confusion. He then adjusted the collar of his shirt one more time, "I have a question."

"What?" said Keller, but McClaren remained silent.

Brian turned and stumbled, exhibiting an uncharacteristic awkwardness, as he moved forward slowly, deliriously invading the FBI agent's personal space. Then he waited, until McClaren - after a sharp indrawn breath - looked up to meet those intriguing dark eyes and read the question there.

"What?" he said finally, softly.

"Where the hell have you been?" The tone was gentle, but there was an element of steel buried within it.

"Doing my job," McClaren replied, his voice still flat and cool.

"I thought I was your job."

The FBI agent shifted slightly, and moved aside, refusing the meet Brian's gaze. "You were, but that's over now. Right? So, if you're ready . . ."

"No. I'm not ready. I want to know why you haven't been around. Not once since I regained full consciousness. Why wouldn't you . . ."

"Time to move on. Busy life. You know how it is."

Brian said nothing for several moments, his eyes studying the features of the young man who had saved his life - not once, but over and over again. A young man who had somehow earned some measure of loyalty and respect and concern in co-opting a special place in his heart, and now . . .
now seemed to want nothing but to be done with it - and him.

Brian Kinney had known heartbreak in his life, and he was pretty sure he would know it again. He had even known betrayal, although he had never allowed himself to use that term in reference to those who had hurt him so badly.

But this was something else. He would survive this; given his strength and tenacity, there were very few things he could not survive.

Nevertheless, he couldn't remember ever feeling so disappointed in his life although, if pressed, he would have had a hard time explaining why.

But he nodded, finally, accepting that which he could not change, no matter how much it might hurt. He had no right to demand anything more from the young agent than he was willing to give.

Another door was closing; time to move on.

Still, there was one more thing that he was determined to say, whether the FBI agent wished to hear it or not. "As you wish, Agent McClaren. But I still want to express my gratitude. You saved my life. Again. And even more important, you saved those who are more important to me than my own life. That's a debt I will never be able to repay, but if there's ever anything you want - anything at all that I can do for you - you just say the word. All right?"

He turned away then, to smile and offer a quick hug to his old college chum; thus, it was only Keller who saw the terrible flash of anguish that darkened McClaren's eyes. It was there and gone almost too quickly to notice, and the agent took a deep breath as he pushed it down below the surface of his consciousness. He had more important things to do, and a few debts of his own to repay.

"Actually," he said, still using that deliberately uninflected voice, "I do have one more thing to do here - something I think you might want to see."

Brian looked confused, and Keller, at that moment, had an almost irresistible urge to toss McClaren through the plate glass window. Brian Kinney was never meant to wear that kind of expression of uncertainty; it was alien to everything he was. Nevertheless, the FBI agent turned and gestured for Brian to precede him toward the door, but Brian moved slowly, pausing to pick up his carry-all and heft it to his shoulder. When McClaren would have relieved him of it, he shook his head and walked out into the corridor, deliberately avoiding any limp or slouch that might have suggested any residual weakness from his wound.

He was orienting himself and starting down the hall toward the nearest elevator when a couple of new arrivals swept around a corner and cut him off. He suppressed a sigh and managed to put on a pleasant expression for the hospital's chief administrative officer and medical director.

The former - a doctor via a Princeton PHD in economics - ordinarily had a steady, baritone voice and a serene manner, but, at this point, he was slightly shrill, a bit breathless. "Mr. Kinney. I am so glad to have caught you. Believe me, I would have been here much sooner, but your protectors . . ." a very thin smile directed toward both McClaren and Keller, "kept your presence here under wraps, which I understand, of course, but I don't quite see why Dr. Woodridge and I only learned this morning that you were here. And believe you me, I have informed my entire staff that such an oversight will not be tolerated in future. How can I ever make it up to you? I hope our service wasn't completely un . . ."

"Dr. Cavanaugh," said Brian firmly, striving for patience and the will to care whether or not he offended the CAO and CMO of the hospital. "Please don't worry about it. It's all good, but, if you'll
John Cavanaugh had spent too many years as an executive administrator and too few relating to his associates on an equal social footing to remember how to interpret an individual's attitude, and Ralph Woodridge - currently engrossed in the information on his iPad - was obviously too distracted to care. Right now, neither of them looked much like corporate big shots; they simply looked confused.

"But, but . . . I'm sorry, but I was told that you wanted to be present for the next step in this process. Was I misinfo . . ."

It was Chris McClaren who stepped in with an answer, hoping to allay everyone's misgivings.

"No, you're correct, Doctor. It's just that we haven't had time to inform Mr. Kinney about what's about to happen."

Thus the confusion was settled - except for one member of the group - the one most uncomfortable with being out of the loop. When McClaren turned and looked into Brian's face, he almost recoiled from the hard glint of fury he saw there, hard and bitter and growing.

"What's this about, McFed?" There was no indication that the nickname was being used to express fondness.

"Bri . . ." 

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, Stud Muffin." The voice was bright and filled with warmth and affection, and Sharon Briggs was a vision in a Stella McCartney color-blocked dress of rich blues and greens with a deep teal cropped blazer and spiky suede Jimmy Choos as she strolled up to greet her old friend.

Brian smiled and pretended not to hear when McClaren breathed a quick, barely audible "Thank God."

"What are you doing here?" asked Brian, eyes bright with an appreciative glow, both for the chic lines of the fashion and the perfect curves of the body that wore it. While it was true that he had absolutely no sexual interest in women - any women - he nevertheless had a discerning eye and a fine appreciation for beauty in any form.

"Getting a little payback," she replied, tucking her arm through his and nudging him to fall in step behind the two hospital authority figures as they moved off down the corridor. She then favored him with a brilliant smile that contained just a faint trace of smugness - a tacit taunt of knowing something that he didn't - but he had an idea that he would not be in the dark for long "You should really enjoy this," she continued. "And, as to why I'm included in this little party - well, I actually got here first and had the pleasure of blowing the whistle on this particular little cockroach, so it's only fitting that I get to be here for the finale."

"And me? Where do I . . ."

She silenced him in the simplest way, but laying her hand over his mouth, and leaning close to inhale the quintessential scent that was unique to Brian Kinney. "You get to shut up, and do as you're told - for once."

He leaned back a bit and once more let his eyes drop to examine her avant garde style and very expensive garb. She looked fantastic, but he realized that it had been a long time since he'd seen her in her designer-clad persona. "You're a little out of character, aren't you?"

"Not any more, Old Friend. Due to my work on this case, I just got a big, fat promotion, to what is
euphemistically referred to as the 'white collar' crime division - you can probably thank the ultra luscious Mr. Bomer for that one - and a corner office. So it's good-bye to the bad girl of the streets, and welcome back to the socialite."

Brian's grin was infectious. "I'd be more than happy to express your gratitude - and my very personal appreciation - to said luscious Mr. Bomer. Meanwhile your father must be so proud."

She made a face and pursed her lips. "Almost as much as if I'd decided to go straight."

Brian managed to look horrified. "Truly a fate worse than death. But congratulations are definitely in order - for taking a step up professionally and for remaining true to the cause of fags and dykes everywhere. I won't pretend that I'm not going to miss watching you work the streets in your dominatrix chains and leather, but I'm assuming you'll be safer now, so your dad's got a right to be happy."

She nodded and looked up to note that they were approaching the main nurse's station at the junction of the two primary corridors on 6 East - the surgical wing - and that there were three individuals currently working there, two nurses and one lab tech. There were also two gentlemen in dark suits standing near the elevator, apparently waiting for something or someone. She took a deep breath and leaned over to whisper in Brian's ear.

"You just sit tight right here, Sweetie, and watch." She started to move away, but then turned back to smile up at him. "And don't interfere. I promise it will be worth your while, and . . ." She quirked a finger toward McClaren to bring him to their side. "Do what your favorite bodyguard says, for once."

The FBI agent stepped forward and took his place beside Brian, close enough to rub shoulders.

"You're not, you know," Brian muttered, moving away just a bit.

"Not what?" McClaren looked puzzled.

"My favorite bodyguard."

Blue eyes narrowed and focused on Brian's face, searching for some indication of the truth or falsehood of that statement. Then, very slowly, the FBI agent smiled. "Yes, I am," he murmured.

"No, you're . . ."

"Will you please just shut up," McClaren interrupted, stepping close again, close enough to lean forward and touch his lips against Brian's temple, "and enjoy the show."

"Don't tell me what . . ."

Finally, the FBI agent adopted a tactic that he'd seen Briggs use, and silenced the complaint by placing his hand over that semi-pouting mouth. When Brian's eyes widened, and he looked like he was about to protest, the hand tightened a bit, and McClaren nodded his head toward the nurse's station where Briggs was walking around behind the desk and approaching the lab tech who was seated at a computer - a lab tech who looked unpleasantly familiar, Brian realized.

Then he noticed that Briggs had reached into a pocket in her jacket and extracted a set of hand cuffs. Oh, this really was going to be good.

For his part, Monty Peabody was not having a very good day. Already this morning, he had been
dispatched on a half dozen senseless errands, the kind of trivial, mindless assignments that could have been - and should have been - handled by some nameless file clerk with nothing better to do. Then he'd been grilled by one of the junior IT programmers about why he had been logged in to certain areas of the hospital system for which he should not have had sufficient clearance. And now . . . now he was finding himself unable to pull up specific patient information on a program that he used every day.

It was all probably down to new HIPAA rules and some ridiculous regulation about confidentiality. He knew the rules, of course, and generally abided by them, even though he thought most of the precautions were far too restrictive. It wasn't as if he'd ever gone out of his way to violate the protocols.

Except that one time, but no one knew about that. Luckily, because none of that had worked out quite the way it had been planned, which was a shame, of course. If anybody had ever deserved to pay for the wild seeds he'd spent his life sowing, it had been . . .

"Mr. Peabody."

The voice was very cultured, obviously accustomed to the exercise of authority, and very cold.

"Yes?" Monty turned and found both Dr. Cavanaugh and Dr. Woodridge standing across the desk, staring down at him; neither was smiling.

"I think it would be best," said the chief administrator, "if you logged off the computer now."

"I . . ." Monty - partner of Eli Gruber, neighbor of the Novotny-Bruckners, perpetual caustic critic of Brian Kinney and anyone who might be fond of him, and perennial self-styled socialite with his nose stuck firmly up the asses of his social superiors - looked up and started to retort in his typical manner, which was to say slightly snippy and inclined to hauteur, no matter who he happened to be addressing. "Why should I . . ."

And then he saw the woman standing beside him, dark eyes looking down at him in much the same way most people would look at a rodent or a snake. "What's this all . . ."

"Stand up, Mr. Peabody," said Sharon Briggs pleasantly. "It will be much easier if you simply co-operate, because failing to do so would be a huge mistake."

"Co-operate with what?" Monty squawked.

Briggs rolled her eyes and reached down to grab his arm - but Peabody made a near-lethal mistake at that moment and tried to jerk free. In a blink of an eye he was face-down on the floor with Briggs' knee planted firmly in his back as she snapped the cuffs on with a certain degree of malice. She was glad to note that they were slightly too tight.

"What's the meaning . . ." The perp - as Sharon thought of him - tried to bellow but found it almost impossible with the pressure on his back. Then, when the two men in dark suits stepped forward and jerked him to his feet, he seemed to begin to get the message and shut his mouth, sensing that protesting would only make things worse.

"Montgomery Peabody," said Briggs, speaking slowly and clearly, as if to a mentally-challenged individual, "you are under arrest for violation of Subsection E, statute 162, paragraph 32 of HIPAA regulations, in that you did - knowingly and with malice aforethought - provide restricted medical information of a patient in this hospital to a member of the press, for which you received payment for services rendered. Now, you have the right . . ."
"This is ridiculous," shouted Monty, face gone beet red. "You have no proof. How could you . . ."

Briggs smiled. "You should be more careful in your choice of victims, Mr. Peabody. Sometimes - for some people - even the walls have ears. Now, these gentlemen are representatives of the Department of Justice, and they're going to escort you to your new home and explain your rights to you, because - just in case you didn't know it - this type of HIPAA violation is a federal crime."

The suits moved in then, and read the prisoner his rights, and prepared to escort him - by force, if necessary - to their vehicle, one of those ubiquitous black SUVs while Sharon looked on with a satisfied smile. "Oh, by the way," she called as the group moved toward the elevator. "you'll probably be happy to know that your counterpart on the other end of this little caper is being arrested as we speak. I'm sure there will be a lot of excitement when John Vincent Fincher is booked with you. It'll be your greatest claim to fame."

At that point, all the blood appeared to drain from Peabody's face as if he suddenly realized that this was not a joke, but rather a consequence of his own stupidity.

Brian had watched it all in silence, his smile growing wider and brighter until - at the very end - he could not quite resist a parting shot.

"Enjoy Canaan, Monty," he laughed. "I'm sure the population there will just love you."

No doubt the verbiage that Peabody spat back at him would have been ugly and acidic, except that he was, by this time, so incoherent that no one could understand a word of the rant.

Chris McClaren looked directly into Brian's eyes and tried not to smile. "I hate to burst your bubble, Sunshine," he said, deliberately appropriating a nickname that was ridiculously inappropriate for the mighty Kinney as he reached out to adjust the collar of the dark shirt that emphasized the lines of Brian's body so perfectly, "but they won't put him in a maximum security prison. He's got no history of violence."

"No?" The look in Brian's eyes made a pretty compelling argument. "I might beg to differ, but you're probably right. But he doesn't know that, does he? So let the little fucker sweat for a while."

At that point, McClaren felt his already overtaxed defenses collapse completely. He had been doing his very best to keep a distance between himself and his charge, had absented himself from Brian's room and presence and monitored his condition and his recovery remotely. He had always been nearby, of course; he could not provide protection in absentia. But it had been the right thing to do since Brian would soon not need him any more, and since . . .

McClaren sighed, and closed his eyes against a sudden onslaught of memory - a memory that was with him every waking hour and frequently invaded his sleep: Brian thrown back by the impact of the bullet and the bright red eruption that had painted Pollock-style artwork on the wall and the floor around him. Blood; so much blood.

Brian had not said it. Justin had not said it. Actually, no one had said it, and many had disagreed emphatically.

Still, Chris McClaren knew the truth. He had failed the man who had - somehow, at a moment when he’d forgotten to reinforce his defenses - established a death grip on his heart; he had almost gotten him killed, and - if that had happened - he did not try to avoid the fundamental truth. If Brian had not survived, then neither would he. Not that he would have died or taken his own life; that was not his style. But he knew the truth, nevertheless. He would no longer have been able to find the will to be the man he'd been before. The failure - and the guilt it fostered - would have left him twisted and
forever changed.

But Brian had survived, and the FBI agent knew that he had dodged a bullet, and now - now he found himself compelled to adopt evasive maneuvers, to remove himself from temptation.

Not an easy thing to do when those incredible hazel eyes were gazing at him, into him, and seeing much more than he was willing to have seen. "Chris, I . . ."

"Brian!"

McClaren looked up and sighed, only barely managing not to offer up a prayer of gratitude.

Justin was everything bright and beautiful and young and fresh as he came barreling out of the elevator in a Tommy Hilfiger polo and jeans just that much too tight, and threw himself into the arms of his lover, who managed - by the hardest - not to wince away from the impact of that firm young body against flesh still bruised and vulnerable.

"Watch it, Blondie," McClaren cautioned, loath to interfere but compelled to do his job. "He's still fragile."

"Ooh. Sorry." Only Justin could have managed to sound ashamed of his thoughtlessness and eager to repeat the offense at the same time. His grin generated its typical thousand-watt brilliance. "Guess we won't be playing any of our regular private games for a while."

"Wrong!" retorted Brian, pulling his young lover closer. "We need to get home - now - or I might just have to prove you wrong right here in front of God and everybody."

"Brian!" That was Matt Keller, stern and very professional, his mouth set in a frown, but there was no disguising the spark of amusement in his eyes.

"What?"

"Do I have to repeat myself about what you can and - more important - cannot do?"

But Brian was much too focused on the lovely face looking up at him to pay much attention. "Not fair, Doc. I don't tell you what you can or can't do when you and Hilliard are behind closed doors, do I?"

"No," Keller admitted with a quick snort of laughter, "but neither one of us is liable to bleed out if things get a bit out of control."

"Don't worry, Doc," said Justin, lost in the wonder of those incredible hazel eyes - but not so lost that he would not remember the risk. "I'll take good care of him."

When Brian leaned close and whispered something in his ear, the young man laughed, and his face shifted into a new softness, a look of love so profound and intense that it made those around them feel a need to look away, all of them ashamed of trespassing on such a tender moment.


Brian smiled and thought that - all things considered - that might just be the most beautiful thing anyone had ever said to him.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

* My Back Pages -- Bob Dylan
tbc
Chapter 60

"Him that I love, I wish to be free -- even from me."

- Anne Morrow Lindbergh

"This is different," said Justin, as he braked for the red light at Finley Avenue. "How often do you let me drive you around?" He didn't really expect an answer and didn't wait for one. Instead, he leaned over and touched his fingertips to Brian's face, noting that the bruises obscuring the perfect skin of that perfect jaw were beginning to fade, although Brian was still pale. It was not unattractive; it would take a lot more than a bit of discoloration and an ashy pallor to accomplish that. But it was just not Brian.

Like so much else these days.

"I kinda like it," he continued, wishing for a moment that his beautiful lover would remove the mirrored aviators that he'd taken to wearing of late, to allow him to gaze into those deep, liquid hazel eyes - even if it could only be for a moment, until the cars behind him got impatient enough to start blowing their horns.

Since the dark SUV riding on their bumper was an FBI vehicle, he figured he could even get away with ignoring the horn blasts for a minute or two.

But it was not to be. Brian seemed hyper-sensitive to sunlight these days, even when the brightness of midday softened into the golden haze of sunset or when, as now, it was filtered through layers of altostratus clouds, glowing scarlet and amber in the west as the sun sank toward the misted horizon.

Brian's smile was of the droll, lips-folded variety. "Yeah, well, don't get used to it."

Justin grinned. "Just like everything else, huh? It always has to be the mighty Kinney in charge."

When Brian did not offer a typically snarky response, Justin frowned. "Are you really all right, Brian? I mean, I know you hate being in the hospital, so you tend to, uh, exaggerate your recovery, but if you're really not . . ."

"Will you please stop doing your cute little fag impersonation of Debbie Novotny - and drive. I need a drink."

That brought a bright, sunshine smile. "No, you don't. You're on Vicodin - remember? But maybe - just maybe - I might have something else that will, um, serve to distract you from your little ouchie."

Brian went very still. "Ouchie?" he repeated coldly, as if the word itself were an offense to his senses.

"Yeah. You know. Your boo-boo."

"One more word," snapped Brian, "and you're walking."

"You are such a diva!" Justin retorted, patience on the verge of exhaustion as he depressed the gas pedal a little too abruptly so that the car jerked forward as the light flashed green, thus almost
catching the rear fender of a dark BMW sedan as it sped through the yellow light.

The pallor of Brian's face was suddenly gone, replaced by a bright flush of anger. "And you're the perpetual version of little Mary Sunshine, living in a world where everything's coming up roses and rainbows and lollipops. So - just for the sake of a little reality check, Spanky - it wasn't a fairy bite or one of Cupid's arrows that plowed through my body. It was a 45 slug - a big, ugly motherfucker that's designed to kill and to do as much damage as possible in the process. So just . . . shut the fuck up."

Justin felt his breath catch in his throat as he caught a glimpse - just a fleeting, barely-there glimpse - of what Brian had been holding inside himself since the beginning of this whole, traumatic ordeal: a dark twisted maelstrom of anger and frustration and desperation, wrapped around a core of hatred of his own vulnerability, threaded through with molten streaks of guilt at having endangered those he loved more than life itself, all roped and banded within steely bands of determination that kept it all contained and controlled - but only barely. At the same time, Justin knew instinctively that the man who strayed too close or tested those bands too carelessly would regret his folly. It gave him a tiny sense of satisfaction to conclude that he was the only one who'd ever been allowed to see it, but . . . oh, but wait. That wasn't right. Someone else had seen it; of course, he had. McClaren had undoubtedly been first to see it and recognize it. And he had sure as hell not been stupid enough to minimize the damage or the pain by referring to it as if it were a skinned knee or a paper cut.

"You think I don't know that?" he said softly, struggling to suppress his own surge of the bitter, sour-tasting rage that gripped him every time he stopped to consider what might have happened - what he might have lost. "You think I don't see it - in vivid living color - every time I close my eyes? Every time I try to go to sleep. You think I don't think about that moment, about what it did to your body, about what it did - to you? And the fact that I wasn't actually there to see it - that doesn't make it better, Brian. It makes it worse, because I can't stop thinking about it. I've never been able to stop picturing what those bastards did to you the first time. When I remember your wounds, when I read the police reports . . . it was all right there, like a fucking slash movie playing out in my head. And now - just when I was beginning to be able to shut it off and push it into the past - it happens again, and I almost . . . almost lost the only . . ."

"Hush!" Brian interrupted suddenly, sitting back and closing his eyes, not quite successful in his attempt to conceal the grimace of pain that touched his face, and they both knew it was much more than a simple, physical ache. "You need to stop . . . You need to think of something else - something beautiful. For you, there should always be something beau . . ."

Justin braked abruptly and pulled over in front of a tiny kosher deli, slamming the transmission into park while simultaneously unbuckling his seatbelt and twisting to allow him to crawl into Brian's lap. He moved quickly but very carefully, making sure to avoid the areas of his lover's body which were still not recovered from his injury.

"There's only one beautiful thing that I want to think about," he murmured, "and one thing I want to see. I - I just . . . I want to make you smile. That's all. I miss seeing that smile - the one that's only meant for me; the one that says that I'm trying your patience and that you can't believe how stupid I am and that you sometimes want to paddle my ass and you don't know why you put up with me, but . . . but that you can't stop loving me anyway."

His kiss was incredibly gentle - at first. But then Brian began to kiss back, and it was not so gentle any more.

Finally, realizing that the horns blowing from the street were directed toward the FBI vehicle that was blocking traffic as its driver waited - not so patiently - for Justin and Brian to resume their
journey, Brian sat back and regarded his young lover with a lopsided grin.

"There!" laughed Justin. "That's the smile I wanted to see."

The smile morphed into a smirk. "You get all that - from a smile?"

"Yeah. You get downright chatty when you're feeling romantic."

The smile changed again, taking on an element of . . . something Justin could not quite identify, something he didn't think he liked at all but chose not to explore. "Are you?" he asked quickly, swallowing around an unexpected lump in his throat.

"Am I what?"

"Feeling romantic?"

Now the smile was that of a hungry wolf. "Depends on what you have in mind."

Justin grinned, moving back to his place behind the wheel while dismissing the momentary shadows that had gripped him as he took his cell phone from his pocket and entered a quick text message before pressing 'send'.

"What was that?" Brian asked, eyes closed once more against the last hard glitter of the sun as it clung to the western horizon.

"What?"

Brian shifted in his seat, not quite able to hide a grimace of discomfort. "Don't tell me you've taken up tweeting."

Justin's grin was just slightly venal. "Why not? It's the latest thing, you know. Don't tell me you're getting too old to keep up with the younger generation, Geezer."

Brian turned his head and stared at his young lover, and, once more, Justin had an urge to yank those aviators off that not-quite-perfect-yet face, to figure out what emotion might be lurking in those beautiful dark eyes, but - again - the moment passed too quickly, and he had to accept that he would never know what Brian might have been feeling in that moment, because Brian was never going to tell him.

"Stop being so nosy," he said firmly as he pulled out of their makeshift parking spot. "Sometimes, it's good to be surprised."

Brian - who was definitely not a huge fan of surprises - settled once more against the soft leather headrest and confined his response to a semi-snort, eyes once more closed to indicate his indifference, and Justin - with a slightly wolfish grin of his own - pushed down on the accelerator, suddenly out of patience with the rush hour traffic around them.

It was definitely past time for them to be home - together - alone, free from prying eyes and listening ears. Despite his fondness for PDA's, which he shared enthusiastically with his gorgeous lover, he knew that there were some things - things only shared with one particular individual - which should remain intensely and forever private, and he was hoping that this night would prove to be one of them.

He had made his preparations, set the stage perfectly, engaged his accomplices, and paid attention to every detail.
Now, if fate would just smile on his efforts, maybe - just this once - dreams might actually come true.

It was a fact that inspired no discussion, no arguments. Any individual - on meeting Brian Kinney for the first time - would be confronted with two undeniable truths: that he was the walking definition of 'smoking hot' - no matter which side of the plate one happened to bat from - and that, even when standing absolutely still or drifting on a pot-induced high or lounging poolside to redefine a perfect tan, he was always a barely-controlled physical force, constantly on the verge of an eruption of energy.

Always.

Only - not now, and Justin Taylor was finally being forced to come face to face with a bizarre distortion of reality that he did not want to confront. Brian felt . . . absent - almost empty, and that was at least as scary as the vulnerability that was so totally foreign to his nature.

It was time to come to terms with all that had gone wrong and put it right.

When they arrived home, Justin literally bounded from behind the wheel and raced around to the other side of the car to be there when Brian opened the door and pushed himself to his feet. Though he managed it smoothly, it was lacking in his customary easy grace, and he did not refuse Justin's arm when it was offered. Seconds later, Jared Hilliard emerged from the building entry and rushed over to offer another hand to guarantee stability, and the driver of the FBI cruiser pulled back into traffic, after getting visual confirmation that private security staff was on the job.

By this time, Brian's patience was at an end, and he was not loath to express it. "What the fuck are you doing here?' he demanded of the security guard. "Since I know - for a fact - that you've got better things to do. Matt should be waiting for . . ."

"Matt knows exactly where I am and why I'm here. Like it or not, my number one job is still protecting you."

"Was," Brian retorted. "Your number one job was protecting me. But that's all changed now."

"Not until my boss tells me so," Hilliard replied, the spark of laughter in his incredibly blue eyes belying the sharpness of his words as he steadied Brian with a casual grip that was a lot stronger than it looked.

"That would be me," said Brian, his voice almost as firm as he wanted it to be, as he pushed away from his determined helpers, "and I'm . . ."

"Wrong," Hilliard answered. "You may sign my paycheck, but Mathis is my boss, and he says you're still my first priority, until you're not."

"I could fire you," Brian pointed out, obviously annoyed and trying to ignore the steady ache in his side that reminded him of Matt Keller's suggestion that he consider using a cane for a while, just to brace him against the discomfort and any lingering weakness. He, of course, had refused, as if the very suggestion was a monstrous insult. But Hilliard was accustomed to dealing with Brian in high dudgeon, so his only response to the snarky comment was a smile which held just a tiny trace of seduction - which caused Brian to respond in kind, only slightly annoyed that an employee should know him well enough to employ such a tactic.

Nevertheless, sensing his growing impatience, both boy friend and bodyguard stepped back, allowing him room to maneuver and maintain his dignity, but staying close enough to catch him if he
should falter.

He didn't, but it was more a matter of mental determination than physical strength that made it possible for him to walk unassisted to the doorway.

Once there, he paused to take a deep breath while Hilliard turned to Justin and used his best casual tone to ask, "Need any help?"

"No. I got him."

The look in the bodyguard's eyes said that he wasn't so sure about that, while the expression on Brian's face revealed his growing dislike of being treated like an invalid.

"Tell Matt I made it home just fine," he said sternly, "and that I hope not to see him again any time soon."

"I'll do that," Hilliard replied with that same sexy smile, seeing absolutely no reason to inform the man, who was poised on the brink of a major temper tantrum, that he wasn't going anywhere, having been charged with standing guard for the duration, until his relief arrived.

Brian was already intensely irritated; no point in making it worse. With the culmination of the investigation and the arrest of the principals involved, he had assumed that he was no longer at risk, and it was even possible that he was right, but that was an assumption no one else was willing to make. The final ruling on that would not come from Brian Kinney, nor from any member of his staff or family.

In fact, it would come from the only source that every one of them had found worthy of the trust needed to make that call.

It would be up to Chris McClaren to determine when it was safe to lower the guard and let Brian walk free - and he alone would have to live with the consequences.

Hilliard found that he did not envy the man his task.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

In the dull gray of twilight, the room was mostly unremarkable, almost cavernous, and the details that made it such a sensual delight when infused with golden light were only formless blobs now, undistinguishable within the growing darkness. Even the paintings on the walls - so vibrant when sunlight was pouring through the skylight - were just rectangles of variegated shadow at this point, their artistry lost in the gloom.

The crime scene had been diligently preserved; he had made sure of that. No one except police, FBI and CSI staffers had been allowed inside since the attack that had almost succeeded in killing Brian Kinney; garish yellow crime scene tape still blocked the doorways. Murder had been attempted here; a man had died here.

Not a good man, of course; that would have made everything worse. But a death was a death, and there was no way to erase the bitterness of that truth.

It was not the first death for which the FBI agent had been responsible. He had killed before - twice; once during the rescue of a ten-year-old kidnap victim and once in defense of a federal judge targeted for assassination. Both shootings had been justified, and he had been exonerated of any charges after the compulsory investigation required in all agent-involved killings. Just as he would be in this one.
But this one was different; he knew it, even if no one else did. This one had been personal, and it had not been Christopher McClaren, consummately professional FBI agent, who had fired those lethal shots; it had been Chris McClaren, a man much too involved with the potential victim to be able to maintain any professional distance from the situation.

He was not even certain why he had come here again except . . . he felt a compelling need to think things through and - somehow - this had seemed like the perfect place to indulge himself.

He had killed the infamous, multi-named-and-thus-almost-nameless Jackson in self-defense and in defense of the man who he was charged to protect, but - most of all - he had killed the son of a bitch who had tried to murder Brian. Brian, specifically. He wanted to believe that he would have done the same for anyone under his protection; he was pretty sure of that much. But he was also sure that he would not have been consumed by the towering rage that had raced through him when he'd seen Brian thrown against the wall by the force of the bullet that tore through him.

He had never felt that way before.

He had never . . . God, could he really admit that? He had never loved that way before.

Jesus! He was in love with Brian Fucking Kinney.

What the hell was wrong with him? He knew what Kinney was - knew him for an arrogant, stubborn, promiscuous, self-centered rogue; he was all those things and more. The problem was that he also knew what lay beneath that glittering persona; knew the man who almost never allowed anyone to glimpse what existed under the surface of that glossy veneer.

He would not tell anyone; he knew that Brian had his reasons for maintaining the identity that obscured the vulnerable individual living beneath that brash exterior. He also knew that almost no one would believe the truth anyway, even if he told them. A small, rueful smile touched his face as he realized that he was presuming a little too much. Those who knew the real Brian Kinney were remarkably few, but he was not the only one. He could not lay claim to that singular achievement.

He sighed and clasped his hands against the back of his neck, noticing the tightness in his upper body that felt as if it had been with him forever. He couldn't pretend not to know why.

Claiming, of course; that was the true issue. He could not lay claim to any exclusive knowledge - or anything else. He knew that with his mind, but other parts of his body remained unconvinced.

Chris McClaren sat in Brian's obscenely comfortable executive chair and debated whether or not to turn on some lights or to just sit here and absorb what was left of Brian's essence from the atmosphere. Surprisingly, there was quite a bit of it that remained, despite the conflicting physical residue of the crime scene. There was even a trace of his scent lingering beneath the chemical smells of forensic substances and the faint coppery stench of blood. But it was more than that; the room was a physical expression of the man himself - elegant, confidant, classy, sassy, brilliant, roguish. Seductive.

The FBI agent was more than a little annoyed to note the stirring in his groin.

Shit!

He leaned forward abruptly and switched on the sleek floor lamp that stood at the corner of the desk; then, suddenly impatient with silence that seemed to be growing heavier by the moment, he turned to the sound system control panel and hit a button at random. Music - any music - had to be better than this.
Moments later he wasn't so sure.

*Love me like there's no tomorrow.
Hold me in your arms; tell me you mean it.
This is our last good-bye, and very soon it will be over,
But today just love me like there's no tomorrow.*

Of course. It was unavoidable that Brian would be a Freddie Mercury devotee; given his appreciation for beauty, he would have realized that the man's voice was so incredibly rare that it should have been identified as an eighth wonder of the world, not to mention the fact that the rock star's glamorous, deliberately flamboyant public persona constituted a perfect contrast to the carefully preserved mystery of his private life, presenting a meticulously balanced, yin/yang paradigm that Brian would have been tempted to take as his personal sigil

*Tomorrow God knows just where I'll be.
Tomorrow who knows just what's in store for me,
Anything can happen, but . . .*

And that was enough of that, he thought, as he quickly killed the music.

But as he turned, he caught a glimpse of the Pollock-style spray of splashes and droplets on the wall and the floor behind him; Brian's blood, which could have cost Brian's life. And now . . . now he was approaching a moment of truth that he was not sure he could handle.

Soon - very soon - it would be time to take a deep breath, take one last look at that face that would exist forever fresh and beautiful in his memories, and walk away. Within him, he felt a huge flare of hot anger, as something shouted against the unfairness of it all. He loved Brian Kinney in a way that he was pretty sure no one else ever would, but . . . He sighed and lit a cigarette, reluctant to follow that thought to its logical conclusion.

He loved Brian - would give up his life for Brian without a second thought - and Brian loved Justin Taylor. He didn't even try to deny that cold hard fact even though he knew that plenty of other people would argue the point, would scoff at the possibility of Brian being in love with anybody. But he knew, just as he knew that Brian would sacrifice anything - everything - to protect the love of his life, another thing that most would refuse to believe.

How the hell had he let himself get caught up in this bloody mess?

He understood that it was time to make his exit, in more ways than one. If he asked to be reassigned, to have someone else step in as Brian's protector until protection was no longer deemed necessary, Alex Corey would not question the wisdom of his choice - not out loud anyway. In point of fact, he was pretty sure she'd already figured it out.

Yes. Within a matter of days, Brian would be off to Colorado, seeking treatment for the deteriorating condition of his eyes, and that would be the logical time, a perfect opportunity for bringing in someone new - someone who would be able to treat the assignment with professional detachment and ignore the charms of the subject in need of protection.

He had no doubt that such an action would be best for everyone. *Everyone, except you . . . and Brian.* He tried to ignore the snide little voice, tried to put aside his certainty that no one else would ever be able to give Brian what he could give him, because, in the end, it didn't matter. Brian Kinney loved Justin Taylor - loved him so much that he was determined to set him free, to allow him to choose his own path even if that choice should be to build a life with someone else. If Brian could love like that - so selflessly - could anyone who loved Brian in turn grant him less than the same
So it was time.

He stubbed out his cigarette, consoling himself with the thought that he could, at least, actually stop smoking once he was no longer part of Brian's life. He pressed his hands against the surface of the sleek, designer desk, allowing himself a single moment to enjoy the mental vision of Brian in the same place - the king of his own variety of castle, master of his own realm. Then he stood and walked away, retrieving his jacket from the brass coat rack and moving into the dressing room to straighten his tie and reassume his professional demeanor.

He was heading for the exit, trying not to take notice of the garish display of blood spray on the wall, when the door opened and a new arrival looked in.

"Mr. Lasseigne," said the FBI agent. "You're not supposed to be in here."

Cedric Lasseigne nodded but did not withdraw. "I know that's what we were told, but Miss Cynthia also told us that Brian should be back here tomorrow, for a little while, at least, and I'm thinking he's not going to be happy if he finds the place still looking like this."

McClaren smiled. "I think you're right, but I'm pretty sure arrangements were made to get a cleaning crew in here first thing in the morning, so you don't have to bother."

The elderly Cajun regarded the younger man with a stern frown. "It's no bother, Sir. In fact, it's my job, and frankly, Brian likes things done a certain way, and no part-time cleaning crew is going to know that, so . . ."

McClaren lifted one hand to fend off a pending tirade. "I understand, but . . . sorry, Mr. Lasseigne, but are you well enough to tackle a job like this? You were pretty well shook up last time I saw you, so . . ."

"I'm perfectly fine, Agent McClaren. What - you think a man my age can't handle a little blood on the walls?"

McClaren shuddered. "I think you'll find there's more than a lit . . ."

"I know. I was there - remember?"

The FBI agent was suddenly ashamed of himself. "Of course I do. And I should've sought you out sooner, to tell you how much I appreciate what you did. If it hadn't been for you, he would have . . ."

He paused, unable to verbalize the rest of that thought.

"You can say it, you know." The old man's voice was curiously gentle. "The man you love would have died."

McClaren looked up quickly, a spark of bright resentment flaring in his eyes. "What do you . . ."

"Oh, please don't insult me, young man. I've been around the block more than a few times, and I can tell when a man's in love. Even when he doesn't want to admit it to himself."

To his own surprise, McClaren decided not to argue. "Are you offended?" he asked instead, genuinely curious.

Lasseigne chuckled. "I'm from New Orleans, Cher. It would take a hell of a lot more than two beautiful men making love to each other to offend me. But it's not my place to comment on
something you obviously don't care to share."

The FBI agent took a moment to consider his response, feeling slightly pleased at being referred to as 'beautiful' in conjunction with Brian Kinney. "Don't you think it's smarter to let it remain unspoken, especially when there's no point in bringing it up?"

"Meaning?" Lasseigne's voice was gentle, as if he already knew the answer.

"Meaning that it's never going to matter. Brian has made his choice."

The old man moved further into the room and stood for a moment looking down at the chiaroscuro blood smears that were more black than crimson in the lamplight. "And that makes you angry, doesn't it?"

"No. It makes me sad, but it's . . ."

"Why sad?"

"Because . . . never mind. It doesn't matter."

Lasseigne looked up then and turned to study the FBI agent's face, his dark eyes strangely conflicted. "Shall I tell you why?" he asked and then continued without waiting for an answer. "Because you think that you love him in a way that no one else ever could. Because you believe that the man he loves doesn't love him in return, and it's not fair. You offered up your life to save him and now . . . now you just have to let him go. Is that a fair assessment?"

McClaren turned and walked to the window to watch street lights flare to brightness against the growing gloom. "You know what I've learned in all this? With this group, you don't have to ask questions, you know. If you just listen, they'll tell you everything, including a lot of details you'd just as soon not hear. Let's face it; if nobody talked but Debbie Novotny, you'd still get the skinny on everybody who ever had an impact on little Mikey's life. But she's not the only one; there's Michael himself, and Justin and Emmett and Ted and Lindsey and Melanie - not to mention every gossip on Liberty Avenue. Virtually the only one who doesn't talk is Brian. And they all tell the same story. They all talk about how Brian repeatedly broke Justin's heart. About how he cheated on him and hurt him and refused to commit to him and treated him like shit and ultimately drove him away. But what they never seem to mention is how easily Justin allowed himself to be persuaded - how eager he was to play the victim and take advantage of opportunities to venture out into the big bad world and explore everything it offered him - the fiddler and the art world and his pink posse and Hollywood and New York and . . . well, you get my drift. And Brian always let him go - refused to try to hold him in a place he obviously didn't want to be. So Justin got to experiment - with the whole 'Brian-is-a-bastard' mutual admiration society cheering him on - while Brian wound up alone, with everyone assuming that he deserved it and taking every opportunity to say so. And besides, it didn't matter anyway, because they all knew that Justin didn't have the power to hurt Brian; indeed, in their estimation, nobody had the power to hurt Brian. So every time it happened, Brian just pulled a little more into the protective shell that he built for himself when he was still a kid and first realized that he should never rely on anybody to be loyal to him. And all of his so-called 'friends' stood back and watched it happen and congratulated themselves on being so much more enlightened. So much nobler and better, which was some consolation for the fact that none of them could ever hope to be as smart or talented or desirable."

"Wow!"

McClaren jerked around at the sound of the new voice, a distinctly female voice.
"You really have been paying attention, haven't you?" said Cynthia, exchanging smiles with Cedric Lasseigne.

The FBI agent cleared his throat, hoping against hope that the heat he was feeling in his face did not indicate a bright red blush of embarrassment.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "Time for me to go."

"No!" Cynthia's response was sharp and definitive, even though something in her eyes suggested that she was struggling to justify a decision she'd only just reached. "You need to come with me," she continued, "and leave Sir Cedric here to get on with his job."

"Sir . . . Cedric?" McClaren echoed.

"Royalty," she replied, "according to Brian. A title given to anyone who puts himself in harm's way to save a man's life. So if Cedric is a knight, what does that make you?"

The FBI agent smiled. "A blithering idiot?"

Cynthia chuckled, reaching out to touch his face with a gentle finger. "Or king of the world, perhaps."

The old man nodded his approval, as McClaren turned to face him. "A little recognition is nice," he observed, "but I hope he thanked you properly."

Cedric grinned, visualizing the stylish new furniture and the huge flat-screen television and the new library of books upstairs in his apartment and the sleek, silver BMW Z4 convertible tucked away in its private berth in the parking garage across the street. "Trust me when I tell you that Brian Kinney's gratitude is a very good thing to have."

"And Justin Taylor's," replied the FBI agent. It wasn't a question.

"Yes," said the old man firmly. "And Justin Taylor's. He does love Brian, you know. I hope that you can take some comfort from that."

"He's right," said Cynthia, regarding the FBI agent with an enigmatic look in her eyes. "And if you come with me, I'll show you."

McClaren suppressed a sudden urge to sigh and confined his response to a nod, before following Cynthia into the hallway, leaving Lasseigne to set about his tasks. He would need several hours, at least, since dried blood was a bitch to clean. Even so, he thought, his job might be messy and difficult and time-consuming, but it was nothing compared to the ordeal the young FBI agent was going to face.

How did one go about re-closing a heart that had only recently been opened for the first time after a lifetime of existing under lock and key?

The old Cajun didn't know and found that he had no particular interest in learning.

When the elevator arrived at the top floor, Brian moved toward the door of the loft, only to pause when Justin reached out and grabbed him to pull him close, fitting his smaller curvy body against his lover's taller frame, leaving very little room to maneuver.
"Patience, Sunshine," Brian laughed, dropping a quick kiss at the corner of Justin's voluptuous lips. "We're almost there."

"Yeah, I know, but . . ." Justin moved slightly to retrieve something from his jeans pocket - something very soft and very red, even in the dim lighting of the corridor. "I told you I had a surprise, so I need to get you ready."

"You expect me to strip - in the elevator?"

It was Justin's turn to laugh. "If I recall correctly, it wouldn't be the first time - but no, that's not part of the plan today. But this is." He held up the bright scrap of fabric and simultaneously pulled the aviators off Brian's face.

"What the . . ."

"I need to blindfold you."

Brian looked suspicious. "Have you gone kinky on me?"

The sunshine smile was brilliant and steady. "Like you wouldn't like that. But no - not this time. This time I just need you to trust me. Can you do that?"

For a moment, a shadow bloomed in dark eyes - eyes that were already too dark to read due to the dimness of the light around them - but in the end, Brian simply smiled and nodded and allowed Justin to tie the blindfold over his eyes, easily identifying the silk of one of the handkerchiefs he sometimes tucked in the pocket of an Armani jacket. Then he remained motionless as Justin moved forward to open the big metal sliding door.

The darkness bothered him - more than he was willing to admit as a nasty little voice in his mind whispered that perhaps he should get used to it. Perhaps he should listen harder and learn to navigate by senses other than his sight - by sound, by scent, by touch. But he shook off the feeling and allowed Justin to lead him forward once the way was clear.

He was a bit surprised, however, when he felt the ambiance of his loft envelop him; perhaps there was some truth to all those urban legends about the loss of one sense heightening the strength of the others. He inhaled deeply and quickly identified the pleasant fragrance of the lemon oil his housekeeper used for polishing wood surfaces and the light ginger smell of the cleanser she used for granite cabinet tops and porcelain; a rich trace of fine brandy - probably perpetual but never before identified - under a fine layer of the Caswell Massey almond body soap that he used in the shower. Covering it all, there was a heady aroma of something sumptuous - paella, maybe - simmering on the stove. A sense of movement then, and another scent - lightly spiced - a signature fragrance that suggested the presence of Emmett Honeycutt, which was confirmed almost immediately by a ghost touch of lips against his temple, and a whispered, "I hope it pleases you, mon amis," followed by the immediate sound of quick footsteps and the door closing behind them. There was a whisper of air, warm and pleasing, against his skin - a product of a ceiling fan, no doubt - and soft, sensual strains of music - Coltrane, melancholy and perfect in his best version of It's Easy to Remember, but so low in volume that it was almost subliminal.

"Stand here, for just a moment," Justin murmured, his lips moving against the softness beneath Brian's jaw-line.

"Smells good," Brian observed. "What are we doing - candlelit dinner?"

"Eventually," came the response, slightly muffled, "But not just yet."
"Then what . . ."

"Just trust me." He was back at Brian's side, whispering in his ear and exerting slight pressure to get him to move forward, but he changed direction several times so that, in the end, Brian had no idea where they were going. No steps up meant no bedroom, and he was pretty sure the delicious food aroma came from somewhere on his left, but beyond that, he couldn't venture an educated guess.

Until Justin pulled him to a halt, stepped close to spend several seconds exploring his mouth with a determined, slightly mint-flavored tongue before finally whisking away the soft fabric mask and stepping back - but not very far.

Brian blinked, adjusting to the light - light from everywhere, provided by dozens, maybe even hundreds, of fat, flickering candles - but it was not garish or brilliant enough to require some readjustment of his vision. He saw perfectly - the room that he had helped to build with his own two hands; hands which - until used to complete this project - he had never believed capable of such manual labor. The room was beautiful; it had always been beautiful in its design and purpose, but now - on this occasion - it was gilded and bathed in an amber glow that seemed perfectly appropriate for the moment.

"So," he said slowly, a note of uncertainty in his voice, "you've redecorated."

"I hope it meets with your approval."

Brian's only response was a diffident smile as Justin stepped closer to speak more softly. "I don't have the words to tell you what it means to me that you did this. That you - the Brian Kinney who never lets anyone get inside his defenses - would do this for me."

"I didn't do it for . . ."

"Oh, just shut the fuck up," Justin interrupted with a characteristic sunshine smile, as Brian looked around, noting both what had changed and what had not.

Most notable was the one significant difference in the ambiance - an alteration in its basic purpose. It had been designed as a gallery to pay homage to the incredible variety of Justin's talents, to present a constant revolution of the beautiful complexity of his art, with the seating unit turning to allow the examination of each painting in a wash of pure light. But tonight, nothing moved, beyond the flickering of the candlelight, and a faint susurration of air from the AC vents. The illumination, which usually highlighted one lovely painting at a time, was expanded now, to illuminate three - three which were perfectly displayed, each in glowing contrast to the next, each existing in a steady, motionless pool of light.

The first was achingly familiar, an explosion of vivid color and form that expressed exuberance and emotional rebirth which Justin had named *The Hallelujah Chorus*, a surrealistic representation of joy and life regained after the dark months of Justin's affair with his fiddler. Buried within the freeform brilliance, there were fragments of facial features - an eyebrow here, a scrap of profile there - myriad bits and pieces but none recognizable, except for those intimately acquainted with Justin's work, knowledgeable enough to figure out the meaning. It was youth and spirits soaring in infinite flight.

It always made Brian want to laugh.

Unlike the one beside it, which was one that Justin had never planned for Brian to see at all; had, in fact, gone to considerable lengths to conceal, for fear of his lover's reaction. In fact, it had been something of a shock when Brian had come across it, tucked away in the storage area of the loft, wrapped tight in plastic beneath a half dozen worn blankets and tarps. Luckily, he had been alone
when he found it; otherwise his initial knee-jerk reaction might have compelled him to read his young lover a riot act of rampant rage.

But it hadn't worked out that way.

Instead, he had carried the painting back into the loft and set it down near the big front windows, in a space filled with filtered sunlight. He had then poured himself a generous portion of Scotch and taken a seat in his favorite Barcelona chair, to examine the work of art at his leisure and decide if he could deal with what it portrayed.

It was an almost full-size portrait of himself and Justin - completely nude and sprawled in the bed they shared. In that, it was not so different from many other works of art that Justin had done. But it was different in one major way.

Brian Kinney was nothing if not the master of any relationship - the top to any lovely bottom. But not in this case. This was Justin making love to Brian; Justin pushing inside Brian's body while simultaneously stroking Brian's massive, dripping erection. And it was something more; it captured a vision of perfect ecstasy on Brian's face and total concentration and triumph on Justin's - triumph and a bottomless, endless love.

The image had somehow penetrated the wall he usually maintained around his emotional center and driven him to a moment of realization - an acceptance of Justin's right to claim him and make him as much owned as owner.

Later, when Justin had come home and found his lover still studying the portrait, the young artist had hesitated to approach too closely, had hung back - waiting to gauge Brian's reaction, liquid blue eyes consumed with shadow.

Until Brian had risen from the chair and moved forward quickly, to wrap his arms around Justin and drag him toward the bedroom.

"Can I name it?" he'd asked, as he was ripping off Justin's shirt sending buttons flying everywhere and simultaneously reaching for his belt.

"You mean you're not mad?"

Brian's grin had been brilliant. "I don't think I'd want it on display at the Met, but - between you and me - it's growing on me."

"So what do you want to name it?" Justin had asked, shivering as Brian's fingers stroked a nipple to hardness.

The grin had grown wider as sparks of mischief flared in hazel eyes. "What else? Fucking Brian Kinney."

Then they had laughed together, and spent the rest of the day making love and smoking pot and experimenting with new positions to find new ways to drive each other into divine madness.

The portrait was still as perfect today as it had ever been, but it was not named Fucking Brian Kinney.

The name it bore was simpler, more cryptic, but still - somehow - said everything that needed saying. I Don't Want to Miss a Thing.

In his heart, it had become his favorite of all the portraits Justin had done of the two of them,
although he had never admitted that to anyone. Still, it was obvious that Justin had figured it out; otherwise it would not have been a part of this display.

He doubted that any other piece of Justin's art would ever claim its place in his heart, but there was now a new painting - something unlike anything the incredibly talented young artist had ever done before; something not designed to inspire sexual fantasies or warm feelings of security; something touched with frost.

Brian stepped forward to get close enough to read the title of the exquisitely detailed work.

*Never Again.*

And he knew immediately that it represented a composite of different events that had happened in the course of their relationship, but that the original moment was the primary source of inspiration. It was an image of Brian, standing under a spotlight amid a crowd of shadowed dancers; it was Babylon, with bodies writhing to a thumpa-thumpa beat, all young and strong and beautiful, but without identifiable features. Except for him. His face, his expression was sharp against the anonymity around him.

He remembered the moment; he remembered the emotion coursing through him like acid. He remembered standing there, watching as Justin walked away with his new love.

He remembered the struggle to maintain his strength, to survive the agony that he would never let anyone see.

Yet - obviously - someone had seen, for it was there in his eyes, in the lines of his body and the set of his shoulders.

"Why?" he asked, barely audible. "Why would you . . ."

Justin moved close against his back and wrapped strong, young arms around his waist. "Because I need you to know that there are no secrets between us - to understand that I know what I did to you and what it cost you to stand there and let me go. And that I finally realize - after all these years of acting like a stupid ass - that it was all for me. That you loved me enough to let me go, because you believed it was the best thing for me."

"But . . ."

"No buts. That's what I did to you - what you allowed me to do to you, and it's a promise I need to make. To swear to you that it will never, never happen again. You are my life, Brian. Without you, nothing else matters, and I hate that I let you do that, that I let myself be maneuvered into hurting you like that. Do you understand?"

Brian turned then to gaze down into the perfect sculpture of that perfect face, where he could have drowned himself in those ocean-blue eyes, and forced himself to take a moment, to improvise the perfect answer.

"I do," he said finally, gently. "I understand better than you think."

Justin's smile was brilliant. "I knew you would." Then he reached over to retrieve a remote control device to activate the sound system.

"What now?" Brian managed to conceal the degree of his weariness as music swelled around them.

Justin did not offer a verbal response. Instead he simply placed his hand in Brian's and began to sway
to the rhythm as the voices of Peter Cetera and Cher drifted from surround-sound speakers.

Well, here we are again.
I guess it must be fate.**

Brian grinned. "Does the phrase 'ridiculously romantic' mean anything to you?"

"Yeah. It means I love you."

For a moment, Brian remained still, almost rigid; then he lowered his head and claimed Justin's lips in a kiss so gentle, so achingly sweet, that Justin thought he might never need a breath again and wasn't sure he ever could anyway. Then they began to move together, bodies perfectly in sync as the song continued.

After all that we've been through,
It all comes down to me and you,
I guess it's meant to be,
Together you and me, after all.**

With a sudden burst of soft laughter - and a determined effort to ignore the discomfort in his side - Brian tucked Justin against his chest and managed a spin and a dip which might not have been quite as elegant as the dance they'd performed at Justin's infamous prom, but made up for its lack of fluidity with the intensity of the emotion that drove them. The weariness was still with him, but it was yielding before a more powerful physical need.

The song played on as they went still, lips touching lips, bodies entwined, and neither would ever remember exactly how they wound up sprawled across the luxurious seating unit, clothes strewn across the floor, more soft melodies drifting around them to provide a perfect accompaniment for what would come next. They would remember none of it except the need that drove them, as Justin explored Brian's body with lips and fingers and tongue, suckling at hard nipples before moving down to swallow the massive cock that dripped with pre-cum and throbbed with a violent pulse. At the same time, Brian's hands cupped Justin's perfect butt, hard enough to bruise, before growing gentle and trailing caresses down to the pucker of his most intimate opening, lingering there to explore for a while with tender fingers before moving farther to fondle the velvet softness of testicles and then farther still, stroking and clinching along the length of Justin's beautiful shaft, its head red-purple now, gorged with blood and desperate need. Finally, when neither could stand another second of the sweet torture, Justin pushed Brian to lie flat on his back and positioned himself above Brian's rock-hard manhood, barely able to breathe around the intensity of his desire as he impaled himself, not taking his time, not waiting to adjust, choosing instead to slam his body down and take it all, to feel it claiming him, wondering if he really could feel it all the way up into his throat.

Maybe - or maybe it was just the blood rushing to his head. In the end, it didn't matter; it only mattered that he was invaded by a formidable force of nature and filled completely, that Brian inhabited his entire body, consuming their shared perceptions, by bracing his heels against the surface beneath them and pushing upward, his hands gripping Justin's thighs to anchor them and give him leverage to increase the power of his thrusts.

"Yessss!" Justin groaned. "Fuck me, Brian. Fuck me harder. Fuck me like you've never fucked me before."

"Jesus!" Brian muttered through gritted teeth. "After a thousand times, how can you still be so fucking tight?"

"Only," gasped Justin, "because you're . . . so fucking . . . big."
And then there were no more words, no conscious thought, nothing but the ecstasy burning through
them, and then even that was not quite enough, as Brian grabbed him and flipped their bodies over to
place Justin on his back with his legs draped over Brian's shoulders in order to create the perfect
angle, to allow him to plunge back into the furnace of that dark, tight passage, to revel in the perfect
fit of Justin's body around him and pause at the exact second when his shaft surged through the
constrictive band around Justin's opening to flare into spontaneous combustion within that molten
heat. Sometimes - at that precise stage of their joining - Brian wondered if he might not die from the
intensity of the raw sensations that raced through his body like wildfire, knowing that - if he did - it
would still be worth it.

He realized that he would pay for his efforts later; his body was not sufficiently healed to allow him
to indulge in such intense exertion without incurring a hell of a physical cost, but it didn't matter.
Nothing mattered but Justin and the exquisite grip of that perfect body clinching around him, and this
moment - this mind-bending, glorious moment - and building it into a memory which just might have
to last forever.

Later they would dine on Emmett's fabulous meal, share champagne and more music, shower
together, look over sketches that Justin had made of design details for the house he dreamed of
building, and make love again - and again. But nothing would compare to that initial moment, that
joining that would live in their memories as nothing else ever could.

And Brian would smile down at his young lover, treasuring the moment and trying to forget that it
could not possibly last forever.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

The exterior of the KinnetiK headquarters was never going to win any awards for beauty. It was
what it had always been - a structure designed to house a bathhouse catering to gay men. For Brian,
that was part of its appeal, and he had done nothing to change it except for hiring professionals to get
rid of the grunge factor.

The interior, however, was another matter entirely. A team of designers, working under Brian's very
specific instructions, had transformed the suite of offices into a physical expression of the owner's
individuality - elegant, sleek, stylish, almost sensual, and designed to inspire a combination of desire,
envy, and creativity.

They had succeeded beyond all expectations, and Brian always enjoyed a quick sensation of
homecoming whenever he came through his private entrance. It was the same this morning, although
it turned out to be less private than usual.

The welcome-back ritual was not unexpected, and he endured the hugs and handshakes and kisses -
both platonic and deliberately not - and happy comments with a smile. He declined to make a speech,
accepted his glass of Dom Pérignon without a single snarky comment about how much it was
costing him to celebrate his own return, and regarded non-employee friends with a lopsided smile
without once demanding to know why they were there.

He was, in fact, charming and diffident, maintaining a demeanor that garnered him a whispered word
of approval from Cynthia and a sardonic grin from his FBI bodyguard as he spoke briefly to
everyone who had come here to participate in his triumphant return, and expressed thanks to the full
compliment of employees who all seemed relieved to have him back. He paid special attention to
Cedric Lasseigne, making sure that the elderly man was fully recovered from his ordeal and
understood the extent of Brian's gratitude for the intervention that had saved his life.

He then looked around the room to find Michael and Debbie and Ben standing together, all beaming
down at J.R. as she laughed and twirled around in a bright pink dress; Emmett happily arranging 
trays of canapés on the conference table while Drew looked on with pride; and Lindsey looking 
particularly elegant in a teal print Dolce & Gabbana sheath as she, Sharon Briggs, and Liam Quinn 
stood silhouetted against bars of bright sunlight, deep in conversation, while Gus sat in his father's 
executive chair, laughing as Justin spun him around while Ron Peterson looked on with a smile.

Brian noticed that his son's grandfather was paler than the last time they'd met, and had lost a 
significant amount of weight, but still looked relatively sound. He doubted that the man would be 
able to maintain that façade for much longer.

When he moved to his desk, he ignored the protest of his abdominal muscles when he picked up his 
son and settled into his chair as Gus wrapped his arms around his father's neck and buried his face 
into the softness beneath Brian's jaw.

Justin stood nearby, eyes large and sharply focused, as Brian turned to him with a smile. "Are you 
responsible for this?" he asked, with only a tiny note of disapproval in his voice.

"Not guilty, your honor," the blond replied with a smirk. "But I can't even begin to tell you what I'd 
give for a canvas and a brush right now. I want to paint the two of you - just like this. Okay?"

Brian twisted to gaze into his son's beautiful face and smiled. "Sure, but if you think he's going to sit 
still to pose for you, think again. Right, Bud?"

"Right, Daddy." Gus was already squirming. If true to form, he would shortly find a reason to go 
exploring, spend a few minutes satisfying his wanderlust before returning to spend a little while 
wrapped in Brian's arms, followed by another round of physical activity.

It was the pattern of their existence.

Brian waited until his son climbed down to pursue whatever might have caught his eye before 
looking up to find Chris McClaren standing nearby, face carefully expressionless.

"No champagne, McFed?"

"No, thanks. Not on duty."

Brian grinned. "I don't recall that ever stopping you before. Weren't you 'on duty' all the time when 
we were vacationing at the beach?"

McClaren nodded. "I was."

Brian's smile went cold. "You're a credit to your profession, Special Agent. Willing to do anything 
necessary - all in the line of duty."

Very deliberately, McClaren leaned forward to be able to speak for Brian's hearing only. "Not quite 
anything."

"Then have a drink." Brian did not bother to lower his voice.

"Brian . . ."

"Now!"

For a moment, the entire room went silent as everyone turned to stare at the FBI agent and the man 
he was assigned to protect, and McClaren sensed that something unexpected was happening between
them. But he couldn't quite figure out what, and he quickly decided it would be unwise to prolong the confrontation, especially since both Justin and Michael Novotny looked on the verge of demanding some kind of explanation for the harsh words.

"Sure," he replied easily, accepting a champagne flute from the tray proffered by Garrett Delaney and settling into a chair adjacent to Brian's desk.

Brian's smile was sardonic as he lifted his glass. "Hard to imagine that this nectar of the gods was created by a Benedictine monk, isn't it?"

McClaren merely sipped at his drink, offering no response.

Brian sat back and looked around the room, noting that most of his employees had made quick work of their champagne and samples of Emmett's culinary skill and were returning to their tasks, every one of them aware that Brian, as an employer, had two singular attributes that distinguished him from almost all others: he was extraordinarily generous to those who did their jobs well and completely unforgiving to those who did not. It made for an interesting *quid pro quo* arrangement.

As the crowd thinned, it was easy to determine who had joined the celebration; it was even easier to determine who had not.

"Where is he?" Brian asked finally, turning to find Cynthia and Lance Mathis standing nearby, obviously waiting for that exact question, as their boss lifted one hand to massage a spot on his right temple.

Cynthia took a deep breath as both Chris McClaren and Liam Quinn stood and moved to stand on Brian's left and right respectively. "He's in his office. Blake's with him." She studied her partner's face for a moment, obviously reluctant to say more, but Cynthia was nothing if not determined to provide whatever support Brian might need from her. "Have you decided what to do about him?"

He did not bother to suppress a sigh as he looked around to note the number of celebrants who appeared determined to linger in the office. "Yes, I have. But I need to clear the room before I call him in. If you'll herd the remainder of our guests to the break room, I can get on with it."

She nodded and turned to go, but Brian was not quite done. "Once you've done that, please come back in here. You're a partner now, and you need to be a part of what happens."

Cynthia's smile was rueful. "Guess that comes under the heading of taking the bad with the good - right?"

Brian nodded, his dark eyes soft with sympathy.

When Cynthia and Mathis began to encourage the assembly to transfer to the employee's break room, a few guests appeared reluctant - Lindsey, Justin, and Michael among them - but one look from Brian told them that protest was useless. This was business, and no one was going to be allowed to intrude where they did not belong. Not even Justin, even though - technically - he was now a part of the official KinnetiK hierarchy. Still, he favored Brian with a sweet smile before taking Gus in hand to steer him toward the lobby where Garrett Delaney kept a supply of coloring books and Crayons on hand to amuse young visitors while their parents were engaged in agency business. Nevertheless, the blond paused in the doorway to watch Michael take his leave.

For his part, Brian's childhood buddy knew that he was expected to walk away quickly, but he hesitated for a few moments, his dark eyes regarding his best friend with a mixture of understanding and regret. He knew what came next; knew what had to be done and why Brian had to be strong and
stern and unrelenting. Still, he couldn't help but wish things could be different. But he didn't waste breath in pleading or arguing. He confined his actions to leaning forward and expressing himself with a gentle, almost asexual kiss - almost - which had both Ben and Justin debating whether or not they should intervene. In the end, neither did, but Michael thought, judging from the look in both pairs of eyes, that they had been extremely tempted. Still, Brian's response - a gentle smile and a tender caress of fingertips against Michael's throat - assured him that his message had been received and understood.

When he and his partner, along with J.R., Lindsey, Emmett, Drew and an unusually quiet Debbie passed through the elegantly appointed lobby, Justin and Gus were already kneeling beside a glass-topped coffee table, debating what color should be used for Captain Hook's coat, as Cynthia returned from her assignment, with Lance Mathis following behind her, escorting two individuals who had not been present during the welcome back celebration.

Michael and Ben paused near the front entrance, as Debbie helped J.R. into a cute little pink jacket, all watching in silence as the small procession moved toward Brian's office, and Justin even attempted a smile when he felt dark eyes looking down on him, but he found that he couldn't quite manage it. Instead, he chose to focus on Gus's artistic efforts, and avoid looking up to meet that gaze, knowing that his eyes might reveal some foreknowledge of what was to come, not to mention sparks of the anger still simmering in his gut toward the betrayal of his lover by a man who should have remembered how much he owed Brian Kinney. Should have - but hadn't.

For a moment, he debated standing up and following Ted Schmidt into Brian's office, to be there when Brian's particular brand of justice was dispensed, to witness the end of something that had been a part of their group existence for as long as he'd known Brian Kinney. Ted Schmidt had been there, after all, on the night that Brian had walked into Justin's life and staked a claim that would endure forever. But in the end, he remained still, smiling at Gus and deciding that he actually didn't want to be a part of that confrontation. Justice, after all, was noble and much to be desired, but that did not change the fact that it often left a bitter taste in one's mouth.

Instead, he would remain here, choosing to preserve older, sweeter memories, and spend this small, peaceful interlude accompanying Gus in his exploration of Never Never Land.

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There were seven people present in Brian's office, but there was no sense of crowding. The room was large and uncluttered, and the clarity of the light streaming through the windows and the skylight made it appear even larger. It was also climate-controlled - never too warm or too cool - but now... Ted Schmidt stood very still, determined not to shiver even though the air around him felt too cold for comfort.

Brian was, of course, seated at his desk, a perfect model of sartorial splendor in his Armani jacket, his Alexander McQueen dress shirt, and his Fendi tie. The only flaw in his appearance was the faint bruising still visible beneath his jawline and something dark and indefinable in his eyes.

Ted found it difficult to meet that cold stare and chose instead to look around, noting who was to be privy to this kangaroo court.

"Brian," he said finally, coldly, attempting to achieve a stoic demeanor that he could not quite pull off.

"Theodore." The reply was equally cold and clipped.

"Must we have an audience for our discussion?" Still almost without inflection, almost calm.
But Brian was not fooled; he knew what was happening beneath that chilly façade. "Yes, we must. So, if there's anything you want to say to me, now's your chance."

Ted took a deep breath and stood a bit straighter. "Despite whatever you may have been told, by certain people . . ." He did not quite glance toward Cynthia and Lance Mathis, but the flicker in his eyes made his meaning clear. "I have always acted in your best interest, trying to protect your financial holdings and promote potential growth. The information that I received indicated that the profits from the ventures I recommended could have been . . ."

"Could have been," Brian interrupted. "Could being the operative word, Theodore, and I have to point out that the information required to confirm the validity of those claims - or the lack thereof - was available to anyone with the willingness to pull off the blinders and take a good, hard look. I'm assuming that you've been advised of the circumstances of the plot hatched by Wylie and his compadres. Right?"

"I have."

Brian stared at him for a moment, waiting for him to continue. When he didn't, Brian turned to gesture for Liam Quinn to join the discussion. The attorney's manner and tone were precise and professional. "Have you gone over all the particulars, Mr. Schmidt? Specifically, have you reviewed how the details of the plot could have been exposed had you bothered to take certain fundamental precautions and looked into the condition of the land itself?"

Ted frowned. "I don't think anybody could have discovered the truth without . . ."

"Wrong." Brian's voice was deadly quiet. "In a matter of a few hours, the sordid details of the deception were exposed, and all that was needed to accomplish that was a determination to investigate elements of the deal that didn't quite ring true. In other words, you could have exposed it all if you'd bothered to do even a tiny bit of digging. But you didn't. Want to explain why?"

"Well, it all seemed above board to me. I mean, it's not as if we were dealing with the kind of scum who . . ."

"Who what?" Brian had surged to his feet and was now staring at Ted with a hard gleam of revulsion in his eyes. "Who paid a gang of thugs to mutilate me; who threatened my son and Justin and my family; who plotted to strip me of my money and my place in this company and reduce me to poverty? Who did all of that - and more, including collusion in Ponzi schemes and charity frauds and the kind of bigotry and hate crimes that make the KKK look like some kind of harmless social club? Are those the kind of 'non-scum' you decided to entrust with my life and my family's safety and my money?"

"Brian, I . . ."

"Answer - my - question, Theodore."

"I didn't know." It was a wail now as dignity fell away from Ted like a discarded cloak. "I only wanted . . ."

Brian sat back down. "What? What exactly did you want?"

Ted found that he couldn't stand to confront the ice in Brian's gaze. "I just wanted you to . . . to understand . . . to acknowledge that I was . . ."

"Was what?"
Ted mumbled something that was not quite audible.

"Was what?" Brian repeated, his patience growing thin.

"Worthy," Ted said finally. "I wanted you to acknowledge that I was worthy of your loyalty, your trust. More than . . ."

"More than me." That was Cynthia, her voice flat and without inflection.

Ted hesitated for a second; then he nodded.

"So this was all about me failing to appreciate your service. Right?" Again, Brian's tone was cold.

"Well," Ted replied, still looking down, "I do think I deserved to be your good right hand."

"Right," said Brian softly. "I suppose I should be the one apologizing to you. Obviously the fact that I made you CFO of my company and paid you an obscenely generous salary means nothing."

"No. I didn't say that. I just . . ."

Brian looked down then, lifting both hands to massage his temples, suddenly so weary that he didn't think he could say another word. Thus he turned to face Liam Quinn again, nodding for the attorney to take over.

"Mr. Schmidt," said Quinn, stepping forward and laying a document down on the desk for Ted to examine, "this is a copy of the conditions of your discharge from Mr. Kinney's employ. You may, of course, refuse to sign off on it, but, if you do, it will not change the fact of your dismissal. It will, however, change what happens next."

Ted's eyes were suddenly huge. "Brian, you . . . you're firing me?"

Brian did not blink. "I am."

"But you can't. You need me to . . ."

"Correction, Theodore. I did need you, once upon a time. But the simple truth is that you're more interested in staking a claim on my loyalty, than in doing your job. That's all I ever asked of you. And by giving you my trust, I endangered everyone and everything I care about. I won't take that chance again."

"But . . ."

"Do yourself a favor, and sign the document," Brian went on. "If you agree to the terms, you leave here with your reputation mostly intact, and with a favorable letter of recommendation from me. Even a personal intro to a friend in New York that might get you an extremely good job. Plus a severance package that is damned generous, all things considered."

"And what exactly are the terms?" Ted's face was no longer chalky white as color bloomed in his cheeks.

Brian sat back, his gaze hard and relentless, as Quinn provided the answers. "You are to make yourself available for interrogation by law enforcement officials and KinnetiK investigators. You will testify concerning the financial plot perpetrated by Mr. Wylie and his co-conspirators. You will also confess to the release of confidential medical information about your employer to individuals engaged in HIPAA violations. You will agree to maintain total confidentiality regarding any other
financial or personal data pertinent to KinnetiK or Mr. Kinney. You will relocate to a different city -
of your choice - although Mr. Kinney recommends New York as your new base. You will have no
further contact with Mr. Kinney or any member of his staff or family, and, in exchange for your full
co-operation, you will be granted full immunity from any criminal charges or fiscal penalties that
might otherwise apply."

During the recitation, Ted had gone from rosy-cheeked to rage red, and he huffed an impatient breath
that was not quite a snort. "And if I don't sign it?"

Liam Quinn opened his mouth to respond, but Brian beat him to it. "Then you're fired, Theodore.
Publicly, loudly, and immediately. No severance package, no references, and everything that
happened here, every action you took - including your cooperation in a conspiracy to defraud me and
endanger my family - becomes public record. It's even possible that charges might be filed against
you."

Ted stared at Brian. "You won't do that," he said coldly. "You don't like to get your hands dirty and .
. ."

Brian leaped to his feet and leaned across the desk to wrap his fingers in Ted's tie and jerk it tight.
"Fuck you, you little bastard! Because of you, the people I love were put in danger. Because of you,
I almost lost everything I've spent a lifetime working for. And frankly, Theodore, you have no
fucking idea how dirty I can get when it's necessary, but you're on the verge of finding out."

He jerked once more, and Ted spent a single moment wondering if the King of Liberty Avenue was
actually angry enough to strangle him, and whether or not anybody else in the room might intervene
on his behalf. Even Blake, the man who was supposed to love him beyond all reason, was standing
by and watching like a disinterested observer.

Then Brian smiled - a thin, deadly smile - and released his grip, eyes filled with ice as he spoke his
final words on the subject. "Sign it, or don't. Your choice. But either way, get the fuck out of my
office and out of my life. And you need to remember one thing: if you ever try to hurt me or mine
again, you'll live just long enough to regret it. Think about it, as you're making sure my door doesn't
slap you on the ass on your way out."

Ted took five seconds to straighten his tie, and five more to lean forward and sign the agreement and
accept a copy of it from Liam Quinn. Throughout those moments, Brian did not bother to look at him
again, acknowledging nothing as the accountant turned and went running out of the room. Blake
Wyzecky followed more slowly, his gaze soft with understanding as he met Brian's eyes just before
he made his exit.

The office remained silent for several seconds after the door closed behind the two.

Then Lance Mathis stepped forward and regarded his boss with a sardonic smile. "Remind me never
to piss you off," he remarked. Then he laughed, and so did the rest of them. It wasn't a huge,
booming roar of laughter, but everybody assumed that it was better than the alternative, even if
nobody wanted to waste time figuring out just what that alternative might be.

As they disbursed, each to return to the jobs they were paid to do, only McClaren remained to take a
seat across from Brian and study his face. "You okay?" he asked finally.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Brian's voice was raw with impatience.

"Well, you did threaten to kill him, you know. I should probably arrest you."
Brian's smile was wicked. "Oh, please, Officer. If you let me go, I promise I'll figure out a way to make it up to you."

McClaren chuckled. "Careful, Stud. If I throw you down across that desk and fuck your brains out, I'm pretty sure the boytoy is going to come running in here and threaten to castrate us both."


"Don't do that," the FBI agent interrupted. "Don't put on that stoic Kinney face, because I learned to see through it a long time ago. What you just did was painful, even if it was the right thing to do. It's always hard to discard a friend, even one who deserves it."

"Yeah, well, if you're expecting tears, you're going to be disappointed."

McClaren grinned. "Perish the thought."

"Why are you still here? Don't you have something better to do?"

"In point of fact, I do. We've got a crew of forensic accounting people working with your IT staff to co-ordinate all the evidence in your files and change all the access codes, just in case your system's been compromised." His smile was sympathetic. "Which it very well might have been."

Brian took a deep breath. "You really think he would have done that?"

McClaren stood and looked down into Brian's eyes, knowing that he was seeing what almost no one else would notice - what he would not have noticed either had he not been forewarned. "I think he was so desperate to establish himself as a newly-admitted member of the elite that he'd have done almost anything, and you can't afford to take the chance."

"Right."

The FBI agent leaned forward and braced himself with one hand as he studied the details of those previously perfect hazel eyes. "How bad is it?" he asked.

Brian frowned. "Bad enough. So just . . ."

"Yeah. Okay." McClaren knew better than to argue. "Are you still flying out tomorrow night?"

"That's the plan."

McClaren stepped back. "Okay. I'll make the arrangements, but . . ."

"But what?"

"Have you told Justin yet?"

Brian turned to look out the window. "He knows I have to go for a follow-up appointment."

"And?"

"And he flies out tomorrow afternoon for meetings in New York about a new gallery showing. He'll be gone a few days."

McClaren nodded. "And he expects that you'll be here waiting, when he gets back."

"Something like that."
"Brian, you can't . . ."

"Don't presume to tell me what I can or can't do."

The FBI agent paused for a moment, a speculative gleam in his eyes. "Okay, but . . . how long are you going to be here today?"

Brian looked up then, sensing something different, something unexpected in McClaren's demeanor, but uncertain what it might mean. "I've got a lot of details to work out, so I'll be here all day. Why?"

McClaren turned away and walked toward the door, speaking without looking back. "Because there's something you need to see. But not now. Later - when there's no one else around. So call me when you're ready. I won't be far away."

Brian sat back and watched as the man who'd saved his life so many times walked out the door, and he took a moment to wonder just when it would be that the agent walked out of his life just as easily.

Then he turned back to his work, determined to waste no more time mauldering over things that were inevitable and other things that might never happen at all.

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The iconic cottage once owned by Ted Schmidt and Emmett Honeycutt was just down the street from the one now occupied by the Novotny-Bruckners, and it had benefited from the loving attentions of the young professionals - one physical therapist and one IT specialist - who had purchased it when Ted had been arrested and lost virtually everything - his home, his business, his professional reputation, his lover, his friends . . . almost.

For the last few years, since he'd been granted absolution for his sins and a reprieve from the punishment he'd earned, he'd made a habit of studying the façade of the little house whenever he visited the neighborhood. He'd conceded - reluctantly - that the new owners had a certain stylishness and a flair for original design as evidenced by the stained glass transoms that topped newly-installed leaded glass windows, the copper containers of tree roses that flanked a new flagstone entry, the freeform design of raised flower beds illuminated by solar-powered pewter landscape lighting, and the small, intricately carved redwood pergola that provided support for a healthy trumpet vine rampant with new growth. Despite the overall appeal of the place, he'd always taken a certain amount of pleasure in noting that it was smaller and older and less refined - not to mention considerably less expensive - than the townhouse he now shared with Blake. It was a measure of his emotional state on this occasion that he never even glanced at it as he hurried toward his destination - the home of the one person to whom he could plead his case and hope for help in appealing the arbitrary nature of the sentence handed down by Brian Kinney.

Blake, walking at his side, had said very little since they're made their departure from KinnetiK and gone home to discuss what to do next. But there had actually been very little discussion; instead, there had been Teddie's venomous soliloquy - an explosive recitation of his list of complaints against Brian's actions. Blake, on the other hand, had remained mostly silent, declining to so much as offer an opinion when Ted had pointed out that the one person who might be able to help him, the one person who could always be counted upon to manipulate Brian into changing his mind, was poor, innocent, little Michael; Michael, who had at one time been the focus of Ted's forbidden desires; sweet, naive Michael who had never known how Ted felt about him because he'd been far too busy mourning the fact that Brian Kinney would never love him the way he longed to be loved. Ted wondered if Ben Bruckner knew that he was nothing more than a consolation prize for what Michael really wanted.
He did not stop to examine how he felt about that fundamental truth, for, if Ben was simply a substitute for Michael's fondest dream, what did that make Ted?

He took a deep breath. It wasn't about what it made him; it was about how allowing himself to be so hopelessly enslaved to a man who didn't deserve it made Michael a total soft-hearted pussy, a pussy who - with a tiny application of the right kind of pressure - could be easily manipulated. It had taken Ted no more than a few minutes to decide that his only logical recourse was to go to Michael and have a face-to-face conversation in order to convince him to intervene on Ted's behalf. Blake had agreed to accompany him, but with minimal comment, offering little in the way of encouragement. He had maintained his silence throughout their trip, his eyes downcast and shadowed, making it clear that he did not share Ted's optimism.

Well, tough shit! Ted knew what he had to do.

Unfortunately, on arriving at his destination, he did not find the quiet, serene atmosphere he'd been hoping for. He had counted on being able to speak to Michael privately, to take the opportunity to remind him of all the good times they'd shared and how Ted had been such an integral part of their group and how much he had done for so many of them - up to and including the mighty Kinney - thus convincing Michael that Brian's retaliatory actions were unnecessarily harsh and grossly unfair. He'd been sure he could do that, until Ben opened the door of their little house to expose a scene of pure pandemonium.

While waiting on the porch of Ben and Michael's home, where a small wicker plant stand held a variety of spring annuals just budding into bloom and a group of hanging baskets displayed an assortment of lush, healthy ferns and ivies, Ted had managed to arrange his features into a small, smug smile that he thought appropriate for approaching Michael with his request for a serious conversation. But he could not maintain that expression as he stepped into the house to witness Michael's daughter and Brian's son running around the Novotny-Bruckner den in pursuit of the small white dog that darted back and forth across the room, barking non-stop and exhibiting an uncanny ability to evade the small hands and bodies that pursued it. The noise level was almost deafening, but not the least bit ominous as it consisted mostly of childish squeals of giggles providing a shrill descant to the baritone rumble of masculine laughter and verbal encouragement.

"Get him, Gus," called Michael, grinning as the pup wriggled through J.R.'s legs and zigzagged around the base of Ben's favorite recliner to make good his escape into the kitchen where Lindsey Peterson and Sharon Briggs were chatting with Debbie Novotny as she removed a baking sheet from the oven, laden with golden brown, aromatic chocolate chip cookies. Seated at the bar, focused on a set of panel drawings, were Justin and Hunter, Michael and Ben's adopted son, along with Daphne Chalmers and another young woman that Ted did not recognize, all of whom turned away from their subject to inhale the mouth-watering fragrance of the cookies and to offer indulgent grins for the children and the dog.

Ted's eyes were huge and agleam with bright sparks of resentment as he glanced around to identify each member of the crowd. "Having a party, are we? My invitation must have gotten lost in the mail."

"Teddie?" That was Michael, his tone betraying his misgivings at seeing Ted in his home following the events of the day. "What are you doing . . ."

But the question went unfinished as Lindsey stood up and stepped forward. "It doesn't matter why he's here. It only matters that he can't be. He agreed to stay away from . . ."

But Ted was not about to take orders from any charter member of the Kinney fan club. "Staying away from Brian's so-called 'family'," he drawled, "doesn't mean that I can't pay a visit to an old
friend. How was I supposed to know that Brian's whelp would be here?"

He stared at Lindsey, his cold smile daring her to respond.

But it was not Lindsey who chose to speak up, nor any of the guests of the so-called party.

It was Michael.

"Is that what you think of Gus, Ted?" Michael's voice was very soft - and ice cold. "A whelp? What about J.R.? Does that term apply to her too?"

"Of course not," Ted replied with a smirk. "I'd never refer to your child as . . ."

"Oh, so it's only Brian's blood that offends you. Is that right?"

Ted frowned, hearing something in Michael's voice that he couldn't quite identify. "So did he tell you what he's trying to do to me? He apparently thinks somebody died and made him king of Pittsburgh, and gave him the right to decide where I can live and who my friends are. So who the hell does he think he is?"

The house was suddenly silent; even the children and the dog had gone still and quiet, alarmed by the ugly tone of his voice.

"He thinks he's my brother," Michael said softly.

"But . . ."

"And he is, Teddie. In every way that matters, he's always been my brother, and I'm ashamed to admit that the only one that never realized that . . . was me."

"Don't be a fool, Michael," Ted snapped. "You were never anything more than a convenience, so don't . . ."

"That's enough." A new voice, from a new direction and a different gender.

Debbie Novotny walked out of the kitchen and moved to stand directly in front of Ted, her expression stern and relentless. "Michael is right, and the only thing wrong with what he's saying is that it took way too long for him to say it - for all of us to say it. We all got into the habit of walking away and leaving Brian to stand alone against the world and clean up the messes we left him. We got used to taking the easy way out, because we let ourselves believe that we didn't owe him anything - not our loyalty or our gratitude. Not even a moment of our time to try to figure out what was really going on. We all simply assumed that it was just a case of Brian being Brian, just acting like the asshole we all judged him to be."

"But . . ."

"And we were all wrong," Debbie continued, a small, rueful smile touching her face. "Not about him being an asshole. That'll never really change. But about why he did the things he did, and why he just stood there and watched as we all turned our backs on him. It wasn't because he didn't need us or want us or care about us." She paused and looked around the room, seeing the soft understanding in all the eyes that looked back at her. "It was because he was the one strong enough to bear up under the load - sometimes the only one. We all congratulated ourselves on making it through the storm, when the simple truth was that - without Brian - we'd never have survived. We took the easy way out, and he protected us. That's what he did, over and over again. And we let him, and you . . . you were one of us, Teddie. You let him protect you, just like the rest of us. The only difference is that
we took advantage of him through ignorance and carelessness, while you . . . you deliberately made it worse. You tried to force him to sacrifice everyone he cares about to prove his loyalty to you. He could have died, Teddie. Have you realized that yet? He could have . . ."

"So that's it then," Ted snarled. "He says 'frog', and you all bust your asses to see how high you can leap. After everything I've done for you. After . . ."

"Ted," said Blake suddenly, sharply, "we need to go. Now."

"No. If they're going to stab me in the back, they're going to have to face up. . ."

"That's enough, Teddie," said Michael. "Blake's right, and Mom's right. You crossed a line, and there's no going back. So just go quietly. While you can."

"Who the fuck do you think you are?" Ted's face was flushed and blotchy now, as he lost control and bellowed his defiance.

He fully expected Michael to do what Michael had always done - to back down and offer apology and conciliation. No one was more amazed than Ted when that didn't happen.

"I'll tell you who I am. I'm Brian Kinney's brother, and it's about damned time I remembered it."

Ted gaped, and struggled to breathe, to find the air to challenge Michael's certainty, but, in the end, he couldn't find the words or the strength to speak them, and his effort was cut short by the actions of the individual who came through the front door at that juncture, took a moment to size up the situation and did what was necessary to put an end to the unpleasantness. Drew Boyd, with Emmett stepping aside to allow him access, took the most direct action available to him by picking Ted up and depositing him back onto the front porch, as easily as if he'd been discarding a broken doll.

When he then slammed the door in Ted's face, everyone in the group waited with bated breath, wondering what would happen next.

Which, as it turned out, was nothing. There was no sound from outside; there was only the breathless stillness of the shadow that remained near the doorway for a while before slowly turning and moving away.

It did not escape anyone's notice that Blake Wyzecky had not been ejected from the room along with his erstwhile partner. In fact, he lingered for a few minutes, a mute apology writ large in his eyes as he turned to face the group.

"I should go," he said finally. "He'll be overwrought, so I . . ."

"Blake," said Emmett softly, "how do you feel about what he did?"

The young counselor sighed. "I didn't know about most of it until it was too late to change anything, but I did try to dissuade him. He was so sure that he was right, that Brian would be grateful in the end. That's all he wanted, you know. For Brian to . . ."

But he fell silent, apparently at a loss for words, until Michael finished the thought for him. "For Brian to owe him a huge debt of gratitude."

Blake nodded. "Either that, or . . . to love him."

Emmett's expression was gentle. "In some ways, I think that's what he's always wanted."

Blake's smile was bittersweet. "Proving that we all want what we can't have, and the more
impossible it is, the more we want it."

"So what will you do now?" That was Justin, his voice soft with sympathy.

Blake moved to the window and looked out to find Ted standing on the sidewalk, staring up at the house - staring at him.

"He's changed," he answered absently. "Sometimes I don't think I know him any more."

Emmett nodded. "If there's anything we can do . . . "

Blake sighed. "Thanks, but I think this is something I have to handle myself."

"Do you think he'll do what Brian wants? Will he leave town?"

"Yeah. He will. He talks a good fight, but, at heart, he's afraid of Brian. He'll bluster and threaten and pretend to be outraged, but, when all's said and done, he'll go."

It was Justin who looked up to study the young man's expression, apparently hearing something melancholy in his voice. "Will you?" he asked.

But Blake only smiled, and Justin was pretty sure that the reason no verbal response was offered was because Blake, himself, had not yet figured out what he wanted to say - or do.

Things felt a bit awkward for a moment, as Michael saw Blake to the door and took a quick look outside to confirm that Ted had finally tired of waiting and taken off - out of their yard, out of the picture, and - apparently - out of their lives. Michael turned back to find Ben at his side, dark eyes filled with concern. Concern for Michael, of course. As always. But, in this case, the younger member of the Novotny-Bruckner partnership was slightly surprised to find that he was not particularly in need of comfort. It might seem harsh and unfeeling to admit it, but, sometime during the last few days, Michael had come to realize that automatic forgiveness - given perpetually and unconditionally - became meaningless after a while. Actions had consequences - a fundamental truth that Teddie had chosen to ignore as he'd betrayed Brian; betrayed one of their own, and thus earned the justice he'd received. On occasion, he would be remembered fondly and missed accordingly, but life would go on, as it did at that moment, settling back into its customary shape within the happy ambiance of the household without a noticeable glitch, as Gus and J.R. resumed their game of tag with the lively little dog, and the rest of the group enjoyed the occasion while feasting on Debbie's fresh, hot cookies. There was laughter and warmth and happiness in the little house, and not a single shadow to be found.

Spring was finally in full flower in the city; it had lingered just off-stage for several weeks, teasing the residents with an occasional splendid morning or a golden afternoon, but had not put in an extended appearance until winter had finally given up its cold grasp and faded into obscurity. Thus, the season would not be long-lived, but Pittsburgh wore it beautifully nevertheless. Once primarily an industrial center - a city of steel - the metropolitan area had been transformed in recent years, with dramatic natural features being emphasized and enhanced by careful planning and imaginative landscaping. It had always been located in a potentially lovely setting, but industrial pollution and a lack of attention to aesthetics had left it - at one time - buried in a toxic grime that obscured the natural beauty of the area.

Society matrons, dedicated philanthropists, and young environmentalists had noted its condition and worked together to pull it back from the brink of ugly ruin, and they had succeeded beyond all
expectations.

Sometimes, Brian thought the city had become so pleasing to the eye that it could hold its own against those most renowned for natural beauty, those which had never had to recover from a plague of industrial pollutants.

But it wasn't a subject he dwelled on; the environmentalist cap did not exactly fit his image. Still, he stood at the window in his office, looking up at a sky of perfect, crystal blue, and studying a tree growing in a small circular bed beside his private entrance. It was strange, he thought, that he couldn't remember noticing it before, but, since it stood almost twenty feet tall, he was sure he must have just overlooked it. Which was hard to credit since it was also smothered with sprays of lavender/white flowers - vaguely lily-shaped and exuding a rich heady fragrance. Beautiful; so beautiful that he thought Justin should paint it. So beautiful, indeed, that it almost made him ignore the fact that he could only appreciate its full beauty when he focused on it directly, trying not to notice that the space around it - the space that should have been pale and still lovely in his peripheral vision - was little more than a shifting landscape of dark shadows.

It was definitely time to make his exit from Pittsburgh. He would not dwell on the possibility that it might be for the last time - that it might prove to be his final exit from the life he had known.

Thinking about it wouldn't change anything.

He was still standing there, enjoying the warmth of sunlight on his face, when someone opened his door and stepped into his office.

He didn't turn to identify his visitor. He had no more appointments for the day, and he knew that Justin was having dinner with Daphne and some old friends, catching up on everything that he'd missed during his prolonged absences. If the young artist had known that the evening might prove to be the last he could share with his lover, he would have abandoned his old friends and spent every moment in Brian's arms.

But he didn't know - couldn't know. That was the plan.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

Brian smiled. He had not expected to like Cedric Lasseigne. He had hired him because of Justin, because the old man had proven himself to be a true friend to the young artist and - unexpectedly - a voice of reason in a world gone wonky and distorted. In truth, Brian had an almost non-existent record for good relationships with members of the older generation, excluding his grandfather, of course, but that had ended when Brian was still a child. Beyond that, there had only been Vic Grassi, Michael's uncle and Debbie's brother. He supposed he should include Debbie in that number too; she was certainly considerably older than he was. In years, anyway, but not so much in wisdom. He grinned with that thought, certain that she would dispute his opinion - colorfully.

Still, he was a bit embarrassed to concede that he did feel a certain reluctant affection for Lasseigne - probably because the man was a New Orleans original, a product of a society that valued pleasure and physical indulgence as much as Brian did.

"Yeah. It's beautiful," Brian replied. "But what the hell is it, and where the hell did it come from?"

The old Cajun moved to stand at Brian's side, in order to peer up at the lush spray of blossoms. "It's a royal empress tree, according to your senior partner, and she planted it last spring. But she calls it something else."
"Such as?" Brian asked, obviously puzzled.

"She calls it 'Brian's Song'."

Brian's face went very still. "You're shitting me," he said faintly.

"Swear to God," Lasseigne responded.

"Why would she . . ."

"Pretty sure she's got her reasons."

Brian was surprised to find that he couldn't think of a single smart-ass remark to employ to generate the sarcastic attitude he wanted to display.

Lasseigne continued to smile as he turned to see to straightening the office and grooming the double stem phalaenopsis orchids that sat on the low glass tables flanking the raw silk sofa. Brian was not smiling as he continued to gaze out into the parking lot, noting that day's end was approaching.

The end of the day - possibly the end of the final day, the last day he would ever spend with Justin Taylor playing a major part in his life, the last day he would ever go home to find his blond lover awaiting his return.

He took a deep breath. Time to go. Time, perhaps, to let it all go.

Except . . . had he forgotten something? Was he supposed . . .

The door opened, and Chris McClaren walked in, and that was when Brian remembered what he'd been supposed to do.

"You done?"

McClaren looked tired, looked like his day had not gone particularly well and more than that. Looked like he was facing something that he didn't want to face - something that he dreaded, that he wasn't sure he should do, but was nevertheless determined to go through with. Whatever it was - like it or not.

"Yeah." Brian sounded uncertain, which was totally unlike Brian. "Why? What do you . . ."

"Good. Then come with me."

"Why?"

The FBI agent went very still, his face without expression. "Because I asked you to."

Brian smiled, but there was no warmth in it. "Sounded more like an order."

For a moment, the stillness remained, but then McClaren blinked, and there was a definite flash of irritation - almost anger - in his eyes. "Take it any way you want. But, for once, just do as I say."

"But . . ."

"Just fucking do it!" Now there was no mistaking the anger, which was growing steadily into something resembling rage.

Brian took one last glance at the beauty of the tree - *Brian's Song*, his ass - and moved away from the
window, stepping forward into McClaren's space. "And if I don't?"

"Then I swear to God, I'm going to pick you up and carry you."

It was Brian's turn to blink. "You mean that, don't you?"

"I suggest you don't try me."

"Chris, what . . ."

"Don't call me that. You've never called me that; don't start now. Just . . . walk."

Blue eyes were not the only ones agleam with anger at that point, but Brian decided - for a reason that even he did not quite understand - to do as he'd been told, as Cedric Lasseigne looked on with a sympathetic smile.

When McClaren led Brian down the corridor and proceeded to step into Cynthia's office, Brian was puzzled. He had assumed that the FBI agent wished to speak to him in private, so why would he go instead to the one place in the building where someone else was sure to be, as Cynthia was almost always the last to leave the building - excepting Brian himself.

"Hey, Boss," said his partner, turning away from her computer to regard the two of them with an inquisitive expression. "What's up?"


Cynthia turned then to examine the look on the FBI agent's face. It took only a moment for her eyes to widen as she began to shake her head.

"No, Chris," she said softly. "You can't. Don't you understand. I promised I wouldn't. You can't show him . . ."

But McClaren was regarding her with grim determination in his eyes. "Exactly, Honey. You promised. But I didn't. And . . ."

"But it's not up to us."

The agent walked across the room and opened a slim door in the corner of the office. "Yes, it is," he replied firmly. "Because somebody's got to. If nobody steps up, then he may never see the truth of it, and that's not fair. Not to him - or anybody else."

"But . . ."

"And we're out of time, Cynthia. Tomorrow, it's too late. The chance is gone."

"What chance?" Brian demanded, suddenly tired of being talked around and about. "What are you talking about?"

McClaren did not bother with a verbal answer. Instead, he simply leaned forward and extracted a large, flat object from the storage closet, and set it against the wall.

Brian felt something catch in his throat. He had no idea why, but he had a sudden urge to turn around and leave the room. But he couldn't; the look on McClaren's face held him there, frozen in time and space. "What . . . what is that?"

"It's what you need to see," replied the FBI agent in a tone that was surprisingly gentle, "before you
"Chris . . ."

"Save your breath, Cyn." McClaren did not bother to look at her; he was too busy staring at Brian's face; staring as if to commit every feature, every shadow, every eyelash to memory. "If I don't do this, I'm going to spend the rest of my life trying to believe I didn't have selfish motives for keeping my mouth shut, and I'm pretty sure I'll never be able to pull it off." Then he smiled - a lopsided, bittersweet smile. "You, Stud Muffin, are never going to understand what people go through because of you."

With that, he simply reached down and pulled off the canvas and plastic that was wrapped around the object he'd pulled from the closet; then he stepped back, leaving room for Brian to move forward, to have an unobstructed view of the item on display.

But, for the space of a heartbeat, Brian did not move; he simply stood, looking down into a rendering of his own face, his own body - his own image as he had never seen it before.

"What . . . what is this?" he asked finally, his voice barely audible as his breath caught in his throat. "Where did this . . ."

"Don't be deliberately stupid!" McClaren was not in the mood to tolerate uncertainty or confusion. "You know what it is. You know who painted it. And, above everything else, you know what it says."

It was at that point that Brian went to his knees, and Cynthia found herself holding her breath, knowing - despite the determined look on his face - that he'd done so because he'd had no choice. She had known for her entire adult life that there were few sights more beautiful than her boss's face, but she had never seen it quite like this before: Brian Kinney, struck dumb with wonder and stripped of any ability to maintain the sardonic demeanor that was his trademark expression. His eyes - even crowded with the shadow that was constant in them now - were wide and soft with . . .

Cynthia deliberately looked away. It wasn't as if she'd never seen tears in his eyes before; they'd been friends for too long, and not even the mighty Kinney could maintain iron control in the face of the kinds of overwhelming devastation he'd been forced to endure from time to time. But she found that now - this time - she didn't want to see them again.

It was up to McClaren to acknowledge them, to address them. "Do you see it, Brian?" he asked gently. "Do you see what it says, and why he never showed it to you? Do you understand that it strips away every defense he might have, that it bares his soul and leaves him completely at your mercy?"

Brian, still wordless, leaned forward and laid a hand against the canvas, devouring the vision of his own eyes - undamaged, unguarded, perfect - looking back at him.

"Look at the light," McClaren urged, laying one hand on Brian's shoulder. "It doesn't fall on you; it doesn't illuminate you. It . . . Brian, it is you. Do you get it? Does it explain why you can't - you simply can not just walk away, without telling him the truth?"

For a while, Brian said nothing, unable to dispute what McClaren was pointing out. He saw himself, holding a guitar, smiling as he looked up, bathed in radiance against beautifully textured shadows. Glowing. Not reflecting light; not absorbing light; not refracting light. Generating light.

He smiled and turned to look into Chris McClaren's eyes. He knew exactly what the man was trying
to tell him; though it was in a new form, a different language, it was not unfamiliar. He had always known its truth. The title, scribbled in the lower right corner in Justin's unmistakable scrawl, only confirmed it.

_The Fire._

Confirmation that could not be ignored or disputed, confirming the most fundamental of truths.

Now he had to find out if he could make someone else see it.

"Do you understand what it . . ."

"Do you?" Brian interrupted softly, reaching out to cup McClaren's face with gentle fingers. "You're right when you say that the truth is there for anyone willing to see - the truth, as far as it goes."

"So you understand. You know that you have to tell him."

"I understand perfectly." Brian rose, his eyes constantly drawn back to the perfection of the portrait, and McClaren watched him, hearing something odd in his voice - something that he didn't want to hear or understand. "This is one chapter," Brian continued. "But there's another. Do you know what he says to me, every single time he addresses the other facet of his feelings? Do you know what's in his mind and his thoughts when he remembers . . ."

"Remembers what?"

"Other times. When I wore a different face."

"I don't . . ."

"He needs forgiveness. Not from me; it was never about me."

"I don't get it. You're saying he needs someone to forgive him, someone besides you?"

Brian nodded. "Without it, nothing works out the way it should."

McClaren frowned, eyes full of shadow. "But I don't understand. Who does he need forgiveness from?"

The smile was achingly sweet. "Who do you think?"

"Brian," said Cynthia, sensing a pain beneath his words that went too deep for casual exploration. "You can't do this. He'd die for you; you have to understand that."

He looked up then, his eyes meeting hers, before turning to catch McClaren's gaze, looking for something, looking for an inkling of understanding. Looking - and hoping.

"I understand it better than you know. That's why I can't tell him."

"You're going to just walk away," Cynthia accused, spots of anger bright against her pale skin. "You're going to go; you're going to destroy him, and we're supposed to just stand here and watch, and do nothing."

Brian turned to go, pausing for just a moment at the door, not bothering to turn back to face either one of them. They couldn't see the sardonic smile that touched his lips, but - somehow - they could hear it. "Is that what I said?"
Then he was gone, and the silence that lingered behind him was heavy with dismay and a sense of defeat.

McClaren turned to look at Cynthia's face, hoping to find a spark of hope, a glimmer of optimism.

But there was nothing except a reflection of his own despair, punctuated by the ridiculously prophetic chiming of the pendulum mantel clock on Cynthia's credenza.

Symbolically, virtually, and realistically, time was running out.

One day led to the next, and the weather reversed itself. Spring reverted - for the space of a few hours - to winter, determined to breathe its last gasp. Dawn - wet and gray and rimmed with frost - found Justin wrapped tight in Brian's arms, snoring softly and oblivious of the dark eyes that feasted on the pale perfection of his face.

The loft was still in shadow, deep enough to conceal two assortments of luggage - Brian's neatly-packed stack of Louis Vuitton cases - distinctive in the brown-gold pattern instantly recognizable all over the world - and Justin's scattered mismatched group of canvas and nylon carry-alls, and the one beautifully designed Coach travel bag that Brian had bought him on a weekend trip to Chicago when he'd managed to break the zipper on his favorite army-surplus-style gym bag. He had, of course, protested that the bag cost more than the entire trip, but Brian had silenced him in the most, direct, convenient way - by kissing him senseless - and he'd never bothered to bring up the subject again.

This morning, Brian had surprised himself by waking so early, and surprised himself even more by being willing to lie still and relish the sight of his young lover. It would not last long, of course; he could already feel a stirring in his groin, but he was content for now. Watching. Memorizing. Wondering if he'd done everything that he could do.

Wondering if he'd done enough - if the message had been received and understood. He was pretty sure it hadn't - yet - but he had to believe that it would, finally, serve its purpose. Otherwise, the last flicker of hope would fade and die.

He closed his eyes, and let his mind wander, but it wasn't really wandering, because he knew instinctively where it would lead him - to that face. That face in the painting - not the new one that sang of life and passion and bright tomorrows, but the other one that was almost frozen, frosted and cold and filled with pain too deep to verbalize or acknowledge. His own face, as he'd watched Justin walk away from him - forever, or so he'd believed at the time. As Justin had believed at the time. And now, every time Justin remembered that moment and the others that contained a trace of the same devastation, the young artist was gripped with such a massive bitterness - a bottomless hatred - and Brian knew that no one else had ever realized what it meant or at whom the hatred was directed.

Justin needed forgiveness, exactly as Brian had told McClaren and Cynthia. But there was only one person who could give him that. One person who held that power.

Justin needed to be forgiven - by Justin.

And that was why Brian could not confront his young lover and tell him that he was leaving him and why. Because, if he did, he knew that Justin would never allow it, would never consent to letting him walk away and give up his place in Justin's life, for Justin's own good. The refusal would not be motivated by love or passion or destiny; it would happen because of guilt - Justin's guilt. If Brian
stood there bold as brass and told Justin about the damage to his eyes, about what might happen and how he might be blinded, about everything that he might lose, Justin would automatically and immediately prostrate himself and pledge undying devotion to saving Brian from himself, because he would not be able to tolerate the look of hurt and betrayal that would flare in Brian’s eyes if he chose to react differently.

Which was exactly why Brian could not tell him. He could not trust himself to be as strong as he needed to be, to swallow those feelings and be the rock of confidence and purpose that would be required of him.

Yet, he could not deny that Justin had a right to be told, to be given the opportunity to make his choice, based on logical thought and a modicum of self-interest. And if, in the end, he chose to spend the rest of his life with Brian - living and loving all the days of their lives, or so long as random chance favored them - then so be it. But if he decided differently, it was only fair that he should not have to face Brian's disappointment or despair as a result, for it would only increase the weight of guilt that he would bear for the rest of his life.

There were moments when Brian wished he was bold enough and arrogant enough to make that choice for Justin, but he just couldn't quite pull it off. Because - he took a deep breath to steel himself against the primal ache he always experienced when he allowed himself to explore these thoughts - because he believed, deep in the darkest parts of his being, that Justin deserved better; that someone else would give him a better life. Thus he had to accept that he simply didn't have it in him; he was not strong enough or unselfish enough, and he could not quite release the hope that Justin really did love him that much, whether he deserved it or not.

No. There was only one fair way.

Brian could not tell him. Nor could he write the script for someone else to use to paint the scenario for Justin to examine; it was a painful reality, but undeniable nevertheless. He knew Justin too well, knew exactly what words to use, what pressure to bring to bear to influence him to do what Brian wanted him to do, without stopping to consider whether or not it would be best for Justin. Not only could he not speak those words himself; he would not coach anyone else into using those words to manipulate Justin.

The truth - the whole truth - had to be laid out for his beautiful young lover, by someone who would present the entire scope of the drama, without pressure or preconceived notions. The facts - and only the facts. And who better for that, he thought with a grim smile, than his own personal reincarnation of Joe Friday.

His FBI special agent.

He conceded that it was bizarre to have lived most of his life without falling in love with anyone, only to find - once he’d passed that damnable threshold of thirty years, that he was not only capable of being swept into a love affair he’d never wanted or believed in, he was also vulnerable to a second kind of love - reluctant, angry, resisted-every-step-of-the-way, but still real enough.

It was not a contest, of course; Justin would forever rule his heart. But Chris McClaren would also forever own a tiny piece of it.

And now - now he had to rely on the decency and honesty and integrity of the man he loved a little to do the right thing and preserve his chance to spend the rest of his life with the man he loved a lot.

He'd always known that life was unfair; he just hadn't known how ridiculously unfair it could be.
A sudden gust of wind rose and blasted heavy raindrops against the big loft windows, and Justin stirred, coming awake enough to snuggle deeper into the arms that held him so gently.

"Hey, Sunshine!" Brian leaned forward, burying his face in the soft warmth beneath Justin's chin. "Sweet dreams?"

Justin stretched and moved to give Brian better access to his throat. "Ummm, dreaming about your lips. I could write poetry about your lips, you know - the shape, the taste, the way you fold them when you don't want anyone to see you smile. Best lips ever."

Brian laughed and inhaled deeply, relishing the scent of his young lover. "Very romantic, but counter-productive, I think."

"Why?" The touch of those much-appreciated lips against a particularly sensitive spot under his left ear brought a tremor to Justin's voice. "You got something better in mind?"

"Yeah. I do."

"Such as?" Still sleepy, but smiling now.

Brian lifted his head to stare down into crystal blue eyes, still shadowed with sleep. "Want to fuck me?"

The sleepy eyes blinked once, and opened wide, marking the inception of a brilliant smile. It was an offer that happened only rarely, and - when it did - it required only immediate, direct action - not allowing any opportunity for a second thought in which Brian might change his mind.

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Babylon - silent, dark, and almost empty - always felt wrong; haunted, somehow, and it was even worse when the weather turned sour and windswept rain beat against the exterior walls creating a hollow roar and emphasizing the lack of young voices, manic music, and writhing bodies. Still, despite its well-deserved reputation as the party center for Pittsburgh's thriving gay community, it was also a hugely successful business venture requiring periodic managerial oversight to keep it running smoothly.

Like now, especially with the owner/chief executive, and perpetual King of Babylon leaving town for a while. There were details that Emmett handled, but the overall policies of operation were down to Brian, and he sat at his sleek, black executive desk in his sleek, mostly black office and signed the documents that Emmett laid out for him but never blindly. Brian Kinney did not sign what Brian Kinney did not first read.

It was time-consuming and annoying, but not for Brian.

The relatively small office was crowded, and even darker than usual because the banks of security monitors arranged around two walls were momentarily shut down. Since the building was locked up tight, and a more than adequate security team was on duty, there was no need for executive management to watch the empty building. Thus, Michael and Ben, Debbie and Karl, Lindsey and Gus, Justin, Drew Boyd, Lance Mathis, and Chris McClaren had little to do for the moment, but stand by and watch as Brian and Emmett reviewed the various documents and decisions requiring executive approval.

The only missing face belonged to Cynthia, who had stopped in just long enough to beg off, citing a need to spend the day with her daughter. That, of course, had been a convenient excuse, but Brian had accepted it without comment; his eyes had informed her that he knew the real reason but chose...
not to argue.

She had paused in turning away to make good her escape, but could not manage to ignore a tiny voice in her head which whispered that - if fate chose to be horribly cruel - she might never be granted the chance to look at him again. So she had; she had turned and looked and then walked around behind his desk and wrapped her arms around him and kissed him. Just once. For luck, she told herself, but both knew that it was a surprisingly passionate kiss for such a mundane cause.

"Come back to us," she'd whispered. Then she'd done a runner.

And now - now he was trying to hurry, trying to finish all the paperwork and dry details so he could indulge himself for the few moments remaining, for Justin was waiting - with virtually no patience - to show him the new details of the drawings he'd done of features to be incorporated into the house plans.

Finally, with a sigh, he signed off on the last of the contract proposals that required his approval and looked up at Emmett with steely eyes. "Is that it?"

"Well, we could always discuss my plans for a *Twilight* celebration. Maybe we could even get R-Pat . . ."

"Emmet!" That was Drew Boyd, the grin on his face somewhat at odds with the skepticism in his eyes. "I think you've pushed your luck far enough."

"But . . ."

"Emmet!" That was Brian, sitting back in his desk chair and shifting to work tired shoulder muscles. "Listen to your stud muffin."

Drew blinked. "Stud . . . muffin?"

Brian just laughed.

"But . . ." Emmett was still unconvinced.

"Honeycutt." That got his attention; Brian only called him that when he was dead serious. "The day I approve a *Twilight* celebration in my club, you better get on your knees and start praying, because the Apocalypse is upon us."

Justin grinned and stepped forward, while Chris McClaren remained in his spot in the corner, where he'd been since Brian arrived. He had not spoken, had not even responded when addressed by other members of the group.

He'd simply watched Brian - watched him intently, as if waiting for some horrible specter to materialize out of thin air to cut the man into tiny bloody shreds.

Brian chose to ignore him, as he'd done throughout the hours since his arrival, and the FBI agent continued to brood, his face blank and stoic and revealing nothing of the thoughts behind that perfect façade, as he remembered - and wished he could forget.

"I understand it better than you know. That's why I can't tell him."

Emmett, sighing but resigned to disappointment, had stepped aside to allow Justin to appropriate the surface of Brian's desk, eager hands sweeping aside everything that might get in his way as he unrolled a bundle of papers - a mixture of blue prints and diagrams and sketches - and launched into
his sales pitch. In moments, Brian was laughing, not because the data provided was comical, but because Justin was flying so high in his enthusiasm that his lover could not have resisted him if he'd asked him to build a bridge of rainbows to the entrance of their new castle.

"And look at this, Bri. Look how the light will catch in the mullioned glass and refract into the . . ."

McClaren wasn't really listening to the boytoy, although even he had to admit that the blond's enthusiasm was charming, almost enchanting. But still, his mind lingered in the darker thoughts, the darker moments of the previous day.

"I understand it better than you know. That's why I can't tell him."

It was at that point that everyone in the room stepped forward, each eager to add thoughts and suggestions for the house, each eager to claim their spot in the sunshine that was the approval of Brian Kinney. Even Gus, who had climbed into his father's lap as Justin flipped pages and pointed out details, seemed eager to participate as he asked about the structure of the infinity pool as sketched in the center of a private courtyard at the rear of the house.

But McClaren still stood back, remaining aloof from the conversation, still remembering.

"I understand it better than you know. That's why I can't tell him."

Brian looked up then, and - for the space of a heartbeat - hazel eyes met blue and said . . . something. McClaren frowned. Said . . . what?

What was Brian trying to . . .

"I understand it better than you know. That's why I can't tell him."

He'd gone over it a hundred times - maybe even a thousand times. But it was always the same. It always came back to the ugly truth that Brian would walk away from the young man who needed his love . . . no, that was the wrong word. Not needed. Deserved. He didn't want to admit it, but could not bring himself to deny it.

Justin deserved to be loved - adored by Brian Kinney. So why . . .

"I understand it better than you know. That's why I can't tell him."

It was always the same. It was always a terrible, heartless decision - a cruel rejection.

But . . . McClaren went very still. Brian Kinney was many things - many negative things, but he was never needlessly cruel. There was always a reason, even if he was the only one who could see it. So why . . .

"I understand it better than you know. That's why I can't tell him."

Always the same, only . . . not exactly.

When his eyes widened, and he could not quite suppress a quick smile, Brian laughed, and no one else was quite sure why.

"I understand it better than you know. That's why I can't tell him."

The inflection had been subtle enough to require some additional thought - a lot of additional thought, but now that he examined it, he realized that, somehow, he had known it all along. He just hadn't really wanted to know.
Well, shit! So it's up to me, to save him for you, and you for him.

It was at that moment that the FBI agent stepped forward, leaned over the desk and stared directly into Brian's eyes before pointing to a drawing Justin had laid out on the desk - a sketch of the view from the master bedroom which looked a lot like a royal realm ready to worship at the feet of its king.

"That'll be your favorite," he said, never breaking eye contact as Brian stared back at him. "Maybe you'll want to name it after me."

Brian grinned while Justin tried not to squawk. "Maybe I will."

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The crowd had ultimately just refused to go away, so their good-byes had been a lot more public than either of them would have preferred; Debbie had even commented that she'd bet they weren't accustomed to farewells that involved clothed bodies. Justin had winced at that, remembering the last time he'd left to go to New York - remembering the beautiful body, nude and perfect, stretched out on the bed, as Brian had pretended to be asleep while Justin made his departure.

But this time would be different. Three days from now - or five, maximum - he'd be back, and he'd walk into the loft to find Brian beautifully au naturale, ready to speak to him - to greet him in the way they'd always communicated best.

Physically.

Still, although they refused to go away, the crowd did grant them a few private moments, everyone pretending to be otherwise occupied as Emmett activated the music system, and a perfect, mellow voice swelled through the speakers.

When all our tears have reached the sea,
Part of you will live in me . . .***

Brian had stalked forward then, circling Justin as if inspecting him, staring at him as if fulfilling a need to memorize him, as . . .

"Stop it," he'd whispered, stepping forward, and reaching up to wrap his arms around his lover's neck. "I'll be back in less than a week, and then . . ."

"And then?" Brian was busy exploring the velvet softness of Justin's throat with hungry lips.

"And then we spend the rest of our lives figuring out new ways to drive each other crazy. How's that?"

"Sounds like a plan."

"Brian?"

"Hmmm?"

Justin pulled back and stared up into dark eyes, and wished, for a moment, that the room were less shadowed so he could get a better view of the emotions stirring there. "I love you."

"I know."

Justin grinned. "Not good enough, Stud."
Brian sighed. "I love you too."

Justin surged up to claim those beautiful, perfect lips, molding himself to the body that accepted him and claimed him in return.

Finally, inevitably, it had to end, and Justin, desperate for breath, stepped back. "You . . ." He had to take a moment to fill his lungs. "You just hold that thought. I'll be back."

"I know," Brian replied in a gentle whisper.

It shouldn't be so hard, Justin thought. It was only for a few days. Yet he had to tear himself away, and force himself to head down the stairs, pausing just long enough to wave good-byes to the group.

As he reached the first landing, he turned and found, to his surprise, that Brian had followed him to the railing and was standing now, looking down at him, backlit by overhead lighting that was as soft as starlight. Brian in shadow - perfectly beautiful.

It was an image he would carry with him for a very long time.

The music continued; the song was familiar, of course, but not the singer. He'd have to remember to ask Emmett for - though the McGraw version was quite pleasant - this one was better somehow, threaded through with warmth and a deep abiding melancholy.

*Remember me when you're out walkin',*
*When snow falls high outside your door,*
*Late at night when you're not sleepin',*
*And moonlight falls across your floor,*
*When I can't hurt you anymore***

Justin paused at the exit, a cold shiver touching his spine as he looked back just once more, noting that a trick of the light seemed to be silhouetting Brian's figure against the shadows beyond him.

Beautiful, he thought again.

It was his last thought as he walked out into the rising storm.

*Love Me Like There's No Tomorrow -- Freddie Mercury*

**After All -- Dean Pitchford, Tom Snow**

***Please Remember Me -- Will Jennings, Rodney Crowell***

**tbc**
Chapter 61

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Epilogue"

And still I dream he'll come to me,
That we will live the years together,
But there are dreams that cannot be,
And there are storms we cannot weather.

-- I Dreamed a Dream -- Les Miserables -- Herbert Kretzmer

It had been a long, hot, dry summer - significantly hotter and drier than in years past - and the
countryside had suffered for it. But autumn was finally ascendant, and the landscape had softened in
its wake, bursting into the unique hues and gem-tones of Indian summer. Areas that had been semi-
parched, in a drought resulting from a growing climactic crisis that was such a political hot potato that
almost no one dared to address it, were now awash with color - garnet and coral and topaz and
amethyst that contrasted magnificently against resurgent greens. Even the towering old trees along
the river looked to have regained some measure of vitality, regenerating in shades rivaling the
exuberance of spring just for a little while, just long enough to flare into brilliance in an act of
rebellion against the onslaught of winter's first cool breath.

A respite, perhaps, from the catastrophic effects of the perpetually ignored elephant in the room that
was rapidly becoming the legacy - and the bain - of the human race, the American persuasion, in
particular.

It was late in the day when the motorcycle topped the hill and slid to a stop, throwing up gravel in a
thick arch over a restraining rail and disturbing the silence in a narrow lay-by that overlooked a bend
in the river and the valley spread out around it. The amber quality of the afternoon light - tinted by
strata of storm clouds gathering in the northwest - tended to emphasize the fire-touched ambience of
the landscape, softening lines and blurring silhouettes and blending scarlet into auburn into beaten
gold, and turning the waters of the river into a blue so intense it almost seemed artificial, as if
drabbled onto a canvas from a painter's brush, its mirror surface not quite perfect in effect, as the
water's current distorted its reflections into a Matisse-style collage of expressionistic form and
function.

It had been beautiful in the spring; breathtaking in fact. He had been unprepared for it to be even
more beautiful in the fall, but then again, he had not been entirely certain that he would retain the
ability to examine the vista and judge it for himself. And was it, he wondered, that it was as beautiful
as he found it, or was it simply that he could not quite suppress the exultation of being able to see it at
all? It had only been a couple of months since such an experience would have been beyond his
reach.

He shuddered a bit, feeling the cold even through the exquisite warmth of his custom-crafted
Langlitz leathers, which did not quite fit him perfectly - yet. He was glad that the new set had been
ordered prior to his forceful reintroduction to the concept of his own mortality, for it went without
saying that he could never bring himself to wear the old jacket again - even if it hadn't been mutilated beyond repair. He had been relieved to find the new outfit waiting for him when he'd been ready to step back into his former life, and doubly relieved to note that the exquisite garments had been tailored to fit his PT - pre-trauma - body.

He was not quite back to that perfect form yet, but it was getting closer each day. He was working hard to regain it, despite the fact that his doctors - all of them - had tried everything short of tying him down and dosing him with morphine to dissuade him. They'd all claimed he wasn't ready, that he was still too weak.

He alone had known better; he . . . and one other.

He closed his eyes for a moment, and allowed himself a scrap of memory - a scrap he seldom examined at all.

It was a striking face, still alive in his mind - classic and beautiful and incredibly seductive. And now it always would be. He did not consciously acknowledge that he would never see it again, but he knew it just the same.

Incredible eyes that could shift from glints of laughter to storm-cloud shadows of anger at the turn of a phrase or the lift of an eyebrow, aglitter with impatience or afire with passion. He had never quite been able to determine which he found more alluring.

He had never intended to end it all with what McClaren had termed a 'fare-thee-well fuck', but it had happened that way no matter what he'd intended. One moment they'd been standing on the terrace of his private room in Dr. Griffin's clinic, feeling something drawing near in the darkness, sensing the end at hand as they gazed out toward a storm looming in the West that bathed the mountains in garish flickers of liquid metal, and the next they'd been reeling back into the room, smashing into furniture, tearing off clothes and fighting through obstacles, scaring the hell out of the young nurse's aide who'd come in bearing a supper tray only to have it sent flying through the air by a stray elbow and the two firm bodies that were so intent on getting skin-to-skin with each other that they'd never even registered the girl's presence.

It had been fast and bruising hard and desperate in an attempt to etch the moment and the sensations indelibly on minds that could no longer pretend to be unaware that this would be the last time, that all the times during recent months when they'd resisted the urge to take each other would surely come back to haunt them now when the opportunities were fading into memory, when 'could have' was morphing into 'should have - but didn't'. Few words had been spoken, but fewer still had been needed - especially at one particular moment when the entire world had frozen into a brilliant silver vignette within a bold streak of lightening, as hazel eyes had looked down to meet faceted blue and read the truth there, a truth that was reflected from one to the other and then back again, but would forever go unspoken.

Afterward, when darkness had fallen and the room was only a chiaroscuro pool of shadows, patterned in the flicker of street lights refracted by sluices of rain assaulting the windows, McClaren had risen from the floor (they had never actually managed to find the bed), gathered his clothes, and hesitated just long enough to look down and read the expression on that sculpted face and identify the soft pain reflected in eyes now miraculously restored and regaining strength and focus with every passing hour. The FBI agent had knelt then - barely long enough to drop one last kiss on lips swollen from the passionate force of their encounter - before standing up and walking away.

Brian had risen and moved toward the window, naked and cold, to stare out into the downpour that continued outside even though the storm front had already moved on. Neither had turned to look back.
It had been a betrayal, he supposed; not his first, probably not his last. Just as there had been other betrayals, wrongs done to him as much as ones done by him; he knew all about those. He had received information from a variety of sources, from almost everyone he knew - almost - and all of them had seemed eager to insert knife and twist, accordingly.

Old habits, it seemed, died very hard.

Yet, he had surprised them all with his calm acceptance of their words and his lack of passionate response, because he understood what they did not - that the details they were so eager to relate were simply trivial examples of idle moments - that they hadn't actually meant anything. Not yet.

Perhaps they would become more important later; perhaps his own indiscretions would be redefined in time as well. But not, he was fairly certain, his final parting from Chris McClaren.

That had been different; that had been something separate and apart and forever private; he was pretty sure it would probably be discerned sooner or later, although he doubted it would ever be mentioned or discussed.

Now, in the waning light of day, he sat astride his bike - a brand new Road King Classic, vintage bronze and black, with an engine that rumbled with a primal, guttural roar - and looked out across the valley.

He had been right when he'd looked upon it for the first time and sensed that it would form the perfect framework for the perfect house, the construct that would be a perfect expression of the art and creativity of its co-designer. He had even anticipated that; it had gone without saying that Justin would be unable to resist an urge to adjust and adapt and transform any proffered blueprints into images that reflected his own eye for beauty.

Brian did not know its name; did not know if it even had one; but he knew the title it would always bear in his mind: Chateau Justin.

Ridiculously romantic, of course, but no one would ever have to know about it, unless . . .

His smile was classically sardonic Brian Kinney, as he reflected that it was not quite time yet to examine that thought and follow it through to its natural conclusion.

The house was exactly as he had foreseen it - not feature by feature, of course. Brian knew no more about architecture than about coal-mining or bridge-building or oil-drilling, and felt no compulsive need to learn about the subject. But there was one thing he did know; he knew style; he knew perfection of form, and it stood before him now, in its final stages of completion.

He turned off the bike's motor and pocketed the keys, sitting for a moment to enjoy the silence before pushing the big Harley further into the lay-by, positioning it so that it was partially concealed among a small cluster of white birch saplings. It wasn't really an effort to hide it. This was, to all intents and purposes, a private road, and traffic was almost non-existent.

Still, there was a certain amount of risk in leaving it unattended, but there was no help for it. He would not announce his arrival in the roar of an engine and a cloud of dust.

He would walk into his future - good or bad. It was ridiculously symbolic, but it was the right thing to do.

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He had never expected to develop a fondness for wine. He associated products of the vintner's art with his mother's generation, or with . . . other people. Still, he was forced to admit that he became rather fond of the chocolate undertones of the Foley Petit Sirah he had discovered in the pantry/cum wine cellar tucked away behind the kitchen area of the Kinnetik office building. It had been Cedric Lasseigne who'd introduced him to it, and now it had become a part of his sunset ritual - a reward he gave himself at the end of every productive day.

Lately, all his days had been productive, although not in the way casual acquaintances might have expected.

Except for one thing - one thing which involved the art that everyone expected him to pursue. But this pursuit was of a different variety.

He was sprawled on a thickly cushioned chaise beside the swimming pool that occupied the heart of the courtyard that lay within the wings of the U-shaped house, with a rattan and glass table at his side holding the chilled wine bottle, ready to refill his Baccarat goblet at his convenience. If this day proved to be like most others recently, the bottle would be empty by the time he decided to call it a night. To his left was the covered lanai that fronted on the more public areas of the house - living and dining areas, study, and media room, all overlooked by a balcony area that was the sensual heart of the house - the ultimate in luxury and comfort - and could just glimpse the flicker of the flames that danced within the fireplace fronting on a sunken seating area. He had started building a fire every afternoon of late. The temperature outside wasn't really cold yet, but the fire produced a sense of comfort that he welcomed after a long day.

The area behind him housed the main entrance, central hall and stairway, along with the kitchen, serving, and utility areas. It was practical and useful, but no less beautiful than the rest of the structure.

To his right was the wing devoted to bedrooms (one upstairs, two down) baths (one each per bedroom) and a cozy private lounging area which led to the large space that was reserved for private use: a spa, a private office, and his studio.

It had been little used of late. In fact, it only contained two easels, displaying two paintings. One was still in its early developmental stage; just bits of sketching and shadings - a line here, a shadow there, a dash of color connecting two blank areas. Its subject was, nevertheless, recognizable to anyone who might get close enough to take a good look. So far, no one had been allowed to do so.

The other easel displayed a finished product - familiar, encompassing a mélange of memories, and yet . . . At one time, he'd believed he knew exactly what message it conveyed. Who could possibly know better, after all, as he had created it himself? And yet it now seemed to reach out through the space between them and challenge him to reevaluate that message, to see it and interpret it as someone else had done.

He looked up to the north, where a jetliner was leaving a contrail across pale scraps of cirrus clouds, and lifted his glass to his lips, noting in the process that his hand was still streaked with drips of the bright enamel he had used in the filigree details of the ceramic squares he was customizing for completion of the work on the rim of the hot tub that occupied an elevated space beside the spiral stairway leading down from the master suite - copper and bronze and a subtle, acidic green. The perfect colors for . . .

No. Not ready yet to examine his motivations for choosing those colors, which echoed the creams and rusts and mocha richness of the suite itself.

He had been careful to avoid certain themes and colors: no grays, no blacks, no frigid blue light, no
silver. As different as he could make it from the place which had previously been designated as home.

He had even, at one time, considered decorating the entire house in brilliant pastels and floral prints - chintzes and satin moirés and brocades - a complete defiance of everything he had once shared with the man who had always called the shots, always been the maven of taste and arbiter of beauty.

Only, in the end, he couldn't do it.

He still did not know whether or not he would ever share this house with the man who had claimed his heart so long ago, but he had been unable to convince himself to give up on the possibility and turn it into a place from which Brian would retreat in horror, probably without ever actually addressing its hideous nature.

Thus, he had created it and decorated it and told himself that it was all an exercise in style and fashion and artistic endeavor, never acknowledging the little voice in his head that laughed at him and crowed over the fact that every fabric, every texture - from raw silk to hand-polished wood to gleaming granite - and every hue, every shade of sable or moss or amber, was something that would co-ordinate with every splinter of color within the wonder of Brian's eyes or the dark gleam of his hair.

He would fit in perfectly - provided he ever saw it.

Oh, he would come. Of that, Justin had no doubt, but he would not intrude; would not force his way in. Would come and stand in silence, waiting for the verdict. Justin's verdict.

For - in the end - that was the sum of what he had learned as he'd gone about building this house and trying to find a way to forgive Brian for what he had done.

Only . . . he looked up again and found the painting looking back at him.

Never Again.

That had been his name for it; that had been the truth of it, but he had come to believe that it was only a version of truth, a façade that he had never understood until forced to look at it through new eyes.

He stared at that face - that perfect, beloved face - and closed his eyes to remember.

By the time the knock sounded at the door of the loft, he was close to panic. He had tried everything he could think of, called everyone he knew, and ranted, raved, cajoled, threatened, even tried a bit of bluster and coercion - all to no avail. It had been four days - four days since he had come sailing through that door, so eager to claim his place in his lover's arms that he had barely registered that the loft was dark and silent.

It had taken several minutes - and an exhaustive search of the premises - for him to accept that his eyes were not deceiving him; Brian was nowhere to be found.

In a matter of hours, he had come face to face with an unbearable truth. Brian was gone, and he could not figure out where he should look next.

It was not, of course, that no one else knew where Brian was; it was that no one would tell him. He had spoken to Cynthia, to Lance Mathis, to Michael and Emmett and Liam Quinn, and - in desperation - to Debbie Novotny. All to no avail. Some of them obviously knew more than they were willing to say, but none of them offered him so much as a clue for finding the truth. They did, of
course, offer sympathy and commiseration and a willingness to assign blame and express indignation. They were obviously hoping to make him feel better, but it hadn't worked. None of the vitriolic denunciations of Brian as a 'selfish asshole' or a 'cruel little prick' made him feel any better, while the other responses - the strange silences and the furtive, sympathetic glances - only served to alarm him more, because the final, unavoidable truth was that Brian himself was beyond reach; no cell phone response, no voice mail, no email or Facebook or Skyping, no nothing.

He was just . . . missing.

When the knock finally came, he had been so convinced that it had to be Brian - completely disregarding the obvious truth that Brian would have no need to knock at his own door - that he had raced through the loft, torn open the door, and thrown himself into the arms of the man standing in the corridor.

He'd been very lucky that Chris McClaren had been strong enough - and braced enough - to catch him and save him from a tumble down the stairs.

He interrupted his musing just long enough to pour himself another glass of wine. He had no idea how many times he'd gone over that memory in his mind - many more times than he'd have liked at any rate - but he'd never been able to put it behind him. He sometimes wondered which of them had been more bothered by what had come next.

"I had no idea you'd miss me so much," McClaren drawled, while making sure that the young blond was sturdy enough to stand on his own feet.

"Oh, fuck you!" Justin almost snarled. "What are you doing here?"

McClaren walked into the loft and took a seat at the bar, taking one quick look around to note the chaotic condition of the ordinarily spotless apartment. "I'm here to deliver a message, if you want to hear it."

Justin went perfectly still then, the door behind him gaping open, and the lyrics spreading out from the sound system suddenly more ominous than he would have dreamed possible.

"Another shot of whiskey, can't stop looking at the door, Wishing you'd come sweeping in the way you did before. And I wonder if I ever cross your mind . . ."*

Why on earth, he'd wondered, had he selected Lady Antebellum to keep him company while he drank and worried?

He moved quickly to shut it off, leaving a deep, pregnant silence in its wake.

Finally, Justin took a deep breath and moved to stand behind the bar where a bottle of JB sat, awaiting his attention. He poured out two generous portions, and nudged one toward the FBI agent before looking up to study the expression of the man to whom he owed so much in some ways - and so little in others.

"He sent you then?" he said finally. "Guess that in itself should tell me what I need to know."

"Actually," replied McClaren, "he didn't. He didn't exactly 'send' anybody. In point of fact, I volunteered. Sort of."

"Why would you . . ."
"Do you want to hear this, or not?" There was no way to avoid noticing the spark of bright, bitter anger flaring in icy blue eyes. "Because frankly, it's not exactly my idea of a fun experience. I didn't want to do this; he knew that, so he never pressured me. Never asked me to do it. I could have just walked away - exactly the way you did, every single time you got the chance."

"What? What the . . ."

"Just shut up and listen - and, if we're both blessed with a little luck and a little patience, maybe you'll see the whole picture once I'm done. Or maybe you won't, but, in either case, it'll be your choice, and that's the part that meant the most to him - and the reason, by the way, that he never asked anyone to speak on his behalf. So . . ." He paused to take a deep draught of the pricy bourbon, before launching into the narrative that he'd rehearsed over and over again during his flight back to Pittsburgh.

He took a glance at his watch before resuming. "Right about now, Brian is being wheeled into a recovery room where he'll be monitored until he regains consciousness. He's just undergone the first of several surgeries that might - if he's lucky - save his vision. Or might not."

"What? What do you mean? What's wrong with his . . ."

"He's been losing his sight, Justin. Ever since the first attack. The beating damaged something in his optic nerve center, and it's been deteriorating ever since. The doctor who's treating him has come up with an experimental procedure that might be successful. But there are no guarantees. Prior to this, there was no treatment for it. Nine out of ten of those afflicted with it went blind. A few were lucky enough to retain some percentage of their sight, but not many and not much."

Justin blinked and felt as if the world had just twisted beneath him; he managed - barely - to stagger across the room and collapse into Brian's favorite Barcelona chair, just before his strength deserted him completely. For a while neither of them spoke, as Justin struggled to take it in, to understand what he had learned and to . . . but no. That explanation was beyond him.

"Why . . . why didn't he tell me? I mean, he sent you here to make this announcement . . ."

"No. He didn't. He wouldn't even tell me what to say or how to explain it. He wouldn't 'write the script'. That's how he phrased it."

"But . . . I don't understand. Why . . ."

McClaren shrugged, and opened a leather binder that he'd been carrying under his arm since he'd walked through the door. Within was a slim manila folder. "That you'll have to figure out for yourself. As for his condition, I've brought you a file that explains how the damage happened, and what he can expect, while giving some idea of what the treatment entails and what his chances are. The program is still experimental, so nothing is certain, but it'll fill in the blanks for you - including providing some kind of timeline, so you get some idea of how long the treatment will take, and when he might know if it's going to work."

Justin sat forward and clasped his hands between his knees, hard enough to render his knuckles white and bloodless. "Brian - blind! It . . . I can't even imagine it. He must be terrified."

"Is he? Is he terrified?"

McClaren smiled. "What do you think?"

Justin sighed. "I think he wouldn't admit it if he was panic-stricken."

The FBI agent nodded. "Shows that you know him well - almost as well as he knows you."
Justin stood then, and walked to the window, noting absently that a soft rain was falling, reducing sharp lines and angles to blurs of color as afternoon crept toward twilight. "What the fuck does that mean, Man? You keep hinting about how well he knows me, which seems to suggest that there are things about myself that I need to learn - or to change. Why did he . . ."

"I have a confession to make," the FBI agent interrupted. "The day before you left, I . . . I showed him your painting - the one you called 'The Fire'. The one you hid in Cynthia's office."

Justin's eyes were huge by that time, and thick with shadows that served to emphasize a hard glint of resentment. "Did it never occur to you that I'd have shown him myself - if I'd wanted him to see it."

"Of course, it did. So . . . why didn't you? What was it that you didn't want him to see?"

"I don't think that's any of your . . ."

"Would you like to know what he said when he saw it?"

Justin tried to swallow around the lump in his throat, tried to speak but found himself incapable of forming an answer.

McClaren did not wait for one. "He said that it was half of the story of who you were, and of the part he plays in your life. Only half."

"I don't understand."

McClaren rose then, and walked to the semi-shadowed entryway into the private gallery that Brian had built for Justin's artwork. He did not hesitate when the coded lock was before him, entering the correct sequence of numbers without a second thought. The door opened silently, and he stepped into the small, elegant room, pausing only long enough to allow Justin to follow him inside.

The young artist approached in silence, and his steps seemed reluctant, but he came nevertheless, obviously unable to resist the compulsion to learn what else the FBI agent might have to say.

When they stood side by side before the portrait of Brian named Never Again, McClaren hesitated briefly, obviously struggling to find the right words, but knowing he had come too far to stop now.

"This is the other half of the story, according to Brian. When he realized that I was going to come to you, to tell you where he was and what was happening, he refused to tell me what to say. He wouldn't tell me why, but I think it was because he knows you too well. Rightly or wrongly, he believes that any explanation he might offer would coerce you, would manipulate you into doing what he wants you to do. You call this painting Never Again. But that's not what he calls it."

"What . . . what do you mean?"

"He calls it Unforgiven. Can you guess why?"

Justin closed his eyes as a dull, throbbing pain formed inside him. "Because he thinks I've never forgiven him, or maybe because he's never forgiven himself. But how can I . . ."

"No." McClaren's voice was curiously gentle. "No, you've got it wrong."

"Then what . . ."

"Sorry, Boytoy, but that part of the equation, you've got to figure out for yourself. Think about it; think about Brian and what he really believes."
"Did he ever love me?"

Roughly, McClaren reached out and grasped Justin's face with bruising fingers. "You're not that stupid. Or - if you are - than you don't deserve to have a chance to put it all right. What is he giving you, Boy? What is he offering?"

He turned to walk away, but Justin reached out and grabbed his shoulder. "Wait. How did you know about this place - this painting? Nobody knew . . ."

The smile was the one that McClaren usually reserved for Brian Kinney, and it made Justin's inner ache feel stronger and harsher. "Brian did," came the answer, "and he chose to tell me. Now, what does that tell you?"

Justin turned away. "It's not fair. I can't even call him. I can't even ask him . . ."

McClaren shrugged, and dug into his pocket to pull out a brand new cell phone. "Of course, you can. His new number is already programmed in. Only - if I were you - I'd think about it for a while. If you call now, he's only going to ignore the ring."

"Why? Why would he . . ."

"Because a knee-jerk response isn't enough, Justin. He wants you to think about it. He wants you to examine it all, and figure out what you need to know, and he wants you to do it without allowing anybody else to influence what you choose to do - including him. Maybe even especially him. This is all about you, and the steps you choose to take."

"So I can't even ask for help?"

"You can do anything you like, but if you let someone else choose for you - no matter who it might be - then all of this is for nothing. And nothing changes."

Again, he turned to go.

"Are you going back to him now?" Justin tried desperately not to sound like a jealous prat, but was pretty sure that he hadn't pulled it off.

"Soon. Until his treatment is over, he's still my responsibility."

"And then?"

McClaren smiled. "Stop worrying about what I might do next; it has nothing to do with your choices."

"But what if he's . . . what if the treatment doesn't work? What if he's blind? Will you leave him then? Will you . . ."

The FBI agent took a moment to study Justin's face, obviously looking for something in those crystal blue eyes, searching - but not really finding. "What if he is? Will that change who he is? Will Brian Kinney be someone less than Brian Kinney, just because he can no longer look in the mirror and see that perfect face?"

"That's not what I meant."

The new smile was slightly smug and a bit sardonic. "Wasn't it?"

By this time, Justin was more than a little confused and uncertain and lost, but he let the moment
pass as McClaren made his exit.

He had too much to think about to worry over extraneous details, even if a small voice in his mind whispered that dismissing McClaren in such a contemptuous way would probably turn out to be a big mistake.

Still - he turned back to look into the dark eyes that dominated the beautiful face in his painting, to try to read the layers of pain and betrayal that lingered there below the surface.

To try to figure out what it was that Brian saw there that was so different from what Justin had intended.

He thought it would probably be a very long night.

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He had been right; that one night had seemed to stretch into forever, and so had many others that followed. - night after night after night, that ultimately stretched into more than five months. Five silent, lonely months.

He had spent most of that time seeking answers, but one thing spoken to him by Chris McClaren he had taken to heart. His search had happened within the limits of his own mind, his own experience.

To occupy his time and give him some external focus, he had worked with architects, designers, builders, decorators, and landscape artists to build the house of his dreams - the house that was his to keep to himself or to share, according to the legal documents Brian had signed before his departure. The land and the house belonged to Justin outright - no codicils, no red tape, no mortgages or liens. It was his, and he had built it as he chose, breaking ground as spring had turned to summer and working almost every day thereafter.

Now, it was done. Now it was time to determine what would come next.

Brian was coming soon. He knew that much. Brian - whole and healed, vision restored . . . and still silent.

They had not spoken during the entire term of his absence; the new cell phone had never been used, and Justin only knew that the experimental treatment had been successful because Brian had kept Cynthia appraised of his condition, and allowed her to pass on the news once it was all done.

Brian was coming soon, and Justin was more frightened than he'd ever been in his life.

He believed he had finally figured out the whole truth, but - if he was wrong - then nothing else would matter much, and this house - this beautiful expression of everything most precious in his heart - would become a mausoleum, a final resting place for the only hopes he had left. In that event, he had no idea where he would go; he only knew he would not be able to stay here.

He drained the last of the wine into his glass, and decided he would take a stroll around the house. It had become almost a ritual, and the approach of nightfall had become his favorite time of day, allowing him to evaluate the house and its setting as automatic landscape lighting flared to brilliance to emphasize perfect lines and angles.

The sky, by this time, had deepened to shade like liquid sapphire in the east, which seemed to deepen all the colors of the landscape around the house as bars of amber sunlight streamed from the west. Everything seemed to be gilded and beautiful, with accents of gem-toned glitter.
He walked to the front of the house, still sipping his wine and pausing to snip off a drooping branch of Japanese viburnum, thick with deep purple foliage, and to remove a faded sprig of snowberry, its bright crimson fruit soft and fading to black. He was pleased with virtually every aspect of the house, but he was particularly happy with the landscaping, designed to emphasize the way the structure fit into its natural setting.

The colors of the foliage were particularly pleasing now, but in spring, it would be . . . He took another sip of wine, suppressing a sigh. Best not to speculate on what spring would bring, as it was possible that he would not be here to see it.

Despite the fact that the house and land was legally his property - every square inch of it - he knew that it would never be truly his, unless it was also theirs.

So maybe he should just break open another bottle of wine; or maybe he should take a run into the city. Babylon - as always - awaited his coming. He had taken to dropping in on occasion, whenever the itch required scratching. He was always welcomed, always greeted with smiles, and always successful in his search for companionship. And always - always - alone when he returned home.

Was it cheating? Sometimes he thought so; other times he knew better. One thing though was certain; the people who occupied space in his life were all supportive of whatever he might choose to do to indulge himself.

He deserved his pleasures; he deserved his choices; he deserved his . . .

He closed his eyes and visualized the faces of his friends who had gone to extreme lengths to make him feel good about himself, to feel that his actions were justified. According to all of them, he was entitled to his anger, and more than a bit of revenge.

Only - it wasn't revenge he'd gone seeking. It was enlightenment - something that Emmett and Drew and Michael and Ben and Lindsey and Cynthia and Debbie (especially Debbie) might have helped him find, if he'd only told them what it was that he really needed. He didn't need to avenge himself on Brian; he needed to understand why Brian had done what he'd done, and no amount of commiserating comments, of the "He's always been a selfish asshole, and he always will be" persuasion, was going to help him find his way to the truth.

His visits had become less frequent as the months went by, as he'd realized that he enjoyed their affection and reveled a bit in their unqualified support of his right to be outraged but, in the end, it hadn't helped him.

In the end, only two people had provided any insight at all, one deliberately - or so he believed - and one quite by accident.

He had not expected to see Ted Schmidt again after that last disastrous confrontation at the Novotny-Bruckner home; had certainly never expected him to turn up at the site of the new house, but that was exactly what had happened.

*Summer had set in after a short, cool spring, and the land was already semi-parched by the time July rolled around. The building site was still in its earliest stage at that time, and Justin was deep in conversation with the primary builder when the Audi pulled up in the driveway.*

*By that time, it had been two months since Brian's departure, and Justin had not seen Ted at all during that time - had not, in fact, spared him a single thought. Thus, it was something of a shock when the man climbed out of his car and stood looking around, a strange, unreadable look in his eyes.*
Justin finished his discussion quickly before turning to regard the visitor with some measure of uncertainty. Finally, putting aside his misgivings, he moved forward to greet the newcomer.

"Ted," he said, his voice without inflection, "what are you doing here?"

The accountant shrugged. "I figured this was going to turn into the eighth wonder of the world - for the gay community, anyway - so I thought I'd take a look at it before anyone thought to ban me from the site."

Blue eyes glinted with barely suppressed anger. "Do you really think that's a good idea?"

"What do you care?" The response was sharp. "He's turned his back on you now, just like he did on me, so I thought I'd just check in to see how it feels to be on the outside looking in."

"Is that what you think you see here?"

Ted laughed. "Oh, you're good, Junior. He's off - doing his martyred hero act - and you're here, playing the good little trophy wife, building his perfect house for him to come home to and enjoy, until he screws you over again. When are you going to learn?"

Justin had to bite down on his tongue to suppress an eruption of raw rage. "You don't know a thing about it, Ted. You never did."

That had given the accountant cause for a moment of reconsideration, but if Justin had expected the man to concede his own ignorance, he'd been in for a rude surprise.

Ted laughed, but there was no joy in it. There was only snide derision. "I get it now, kid. I see exactly what you're doing. And I gotta say it - more power to you. He's going to get exactly what he deserves."

The young artist felt a stir of unease in his belly. "What . . . what the hell are you talking about?"

The laugh became an ugly smirk. "Only that it's good that you finally figured it out and a shame that it took you so long. But now - now you've realized that he gave you the weapon you need, the power to bring him to his knees, and I hope you don't think twice before you use it. You can destroy him, and you should. He deserves whatever . . ."

"What the fuck are you going on about? I wouldn't . . ."

But Ted remained unconvinced. "Oh, I'm going, Boytoy. I'm on a flight tomorrow to Miami, and I'm never looking back at the Pitts again. Except to remember this - to remember how he handed you the ammunition to destroy him."

"I wouldn't . . ."

"Yeah, because we all know that sweet, innocent, vulnerable little Justin would never take advantage of the chance to make the King of Babylon eat humble pie and drown in his own guilt. He knows what kind of pain he's caused you; Brian always knows, you know. And you'd be a stupid twat not to
use it against him. You can lock him up tight and throw away the key. And he'll let you do it." His face twisted then, becoming ugly and distorted and filled with bitterness. "All in the name of love, pretty boy. All in the name of love."

Then he laughed again. "So you just be sure to stick that knife in good and deep - and twist hard."

He walked away then, still chuckling, climbed into his car and drove out of sight.

Justin had barely slept for days, as he kept hearing that ugly, taunting voice in his mind. He knew that the man had been speaking out of the bitterness boiling in his own heart, knew that there was no validity in his judgments.

But he also knew that there was some glimmer of truth wrapped up in all the nasty speculation - an ugly truth, a truth he ultimately chose to ignore.

He went on building his house, filling his days with physical and mental labor and his nights with wine or bourbon or - occasionally - a little fruit of the weed. Still, even the most rigorous exertion did not completely silence his thoughts, and seeds, once sprouted, were damned difficult to root out.

It was more than two months later, when the tiny seedling that sprouted from an attack of pure vitriol saw light - and nourishment - for the first time.

The house had gone up in record time, aided by the fact that the summer was remarkably dry. An occasional shower would come along in the afternoon, causing minor delays, but, all in all, everything developed ahead of schedule.

The exterior was done; the painting was done both inside and outside, and only minor decorative details and technological installations remained to be completed.

Justin had expected to take some satisfaction from being able to begin the moving-in process, and had decided that his first step in that direction would be a symbolic one. The main drawing room of the house was huge, featuring a wall of glass, beautiful hardwood floors, and stunning architectural components, including a massive stone fireplace surrounded by a sunken seating area. The space above the mantel had been designed to capture natural light and equipped with customized lighting in order to focus attention on whatever might be placed there.

He had thought about it long and hard, knowing what he wanted to do, but reluctant to leave himself so open, so vulnerable to disappointment.

Still, in the end, he’d had no choice.

He was on a stepladder, struggling to balance himself and the massive canvas he was carrying, when there was a knock at the door.

Unable to turn and unwilling to lay his burden aside and start over, he simply called out to advise the new arrival to enter. Only afterward did he realize that it was probably a reckless thing to do. The house was very secluded, and the security system not yet installed so a universal cart blanche to an unknown visitor was almost certainly a bad idea.

Still, he was lucky. When he turned to identify the newcomer, he was relieved to see Cedric Lasseigne standing in the doorway, carrying a covered basket in one hand and a bottle of Veuve Clicquot champagne in the other.

"Bonjour, Cher," said the old Cajun, with a winning smile. "I thought it was time to christen the new maison." Then he paused and quickly set aside his burdens. "But mon deaux, my young friend, did
no one ever teach you that it is unwise to go mountain climbing without a rope? Here, let me help you."

Justin sighed. "Thanks, I was just beginning to figure out that this is a two-man job, at least."

Cedric moved forward to help, pausing only for the space of a heartbeat when he got a first clear look at the painting Justin was trying to hang.

He chose not to comment, but Justin knew him well enough to assume that he would have much to say - later.

When it was done, they stood side by side looking up at it.

The setting, the lighting, the arrangement was perfect, and the painting - newly framed and with its title etched in a brass plate at the bottom - was most perfect of all.

The Fire.

Lasseigne spent several minutes studying it, renewing his appreciation for his young friend's huge talents.

"Has he seen it yet?" he asked finally.

"So I'm told," Justin replied. "I wasn't there. I don't know if I'll ever be there."

The old Cajun turned to study the face of his young friend - a face every bit as beautiful as the one captured in the portrait. "You could make sure of it, you know," he said softly. "You have the means - the opportunity."

Justin's smile was pensive. "What are you talking about?"

Lasseigne shrugged. "You climb to the top of the ladder - the fact that you're in the process of hanging his most pleasing portrait would add a nice measure of relevance - and you manage to take a tumble. Nothing fatal, of course. Only, you manage to damage your spine. Spinal injuries are tricky, you know. Many times, they can't even be properly diagnosed. But they can change your life, leaving you damaged. Forever. And needy, and all because he left you alone. Because he wasn't here when you needed him, and he needs to pay for it, to suffer for his negligence. Now . . . how do you think the infamous Mr. Kinney would react to that? How many speed limits would he break in order to get to you - and where would he spend the rest of his life?"

Justin . . . blinked. "You know I wouldn't . . ."

The old man's smile was lopsided - hard to read. "I do. I know you that well, but how well do you know the man you love? What would he do if . . ."

It was at that moment that Justin went to his knees, gobsmacked, overwhelmed, and drowning in truth. "Oh, my God! It can't be that simple - can it?"

The smile was warmer now - sweeter. "He knows you so well, Justin. He knew you'd find your way to the truth. Just as he knew that it would never work if somebody else tried to guide you there. You had to find it yourself. So now just ask yourself: is this a palace, or a prison? And for whom? The choice is yours."

From that day to this, he had explored every facet of the scenario Lasseigne had laid out for him, and come to understand it all - even the difficult concept of why Brian had been unable to speak of the
problem himself. If Brian had told him, had gone over the reasons for his reservations, Justin would
simply have waived them all aside, swearing his undying love and allegiance because . . . because he
would have been able to convince himself that he was doing it out of love, out of his devotion to the
man who owned his heart, when the truth - the truth was much more complex. The love was real; he
knew that. But the motivation was complicated; he didn't just want to be loved by Brian Kinney; he
wanted to be needed by Brian Kinney, so needed and necessary that Brian would lock him into a
prison cell and keep him confined - a confinement that he deserved because of the things he had
done to Brian.

It hadn't been love alone that had motivated him; it had been guilt, a feeling of responsibility for all
that Brian had endured.

But a prison was still a prison - even if one accepted that one deserved it - and he had slowly come to
realize that, in time, he would have grown to hate the confinement, hate the chains that bound him to
the man who would inevitably hold the key, and finally, ultimately, hate the man himself.

In the end, the truth had been so simple that he had at first been angry at himself.

He could not lock Brian into a cage if he himself were unwilling to be similarly confined.

The bottom line was even simpler.

He had no burden of guilt to carry, and neither did his beautiful lover, and a partnership based on
guilt was no true partnership at all.

He still sometimes thought back to that horrible time in their lives when Brian had been fighting off
the effects of testicular cancer; he thought back to what he had said to his lover when he'd forced
himself back into Brian's life after the man had tried to force him out - to spare him the trauma and
the ugliness of what might have happened next.

"I thought we had a commitment."

That was what he'd said, and he'd taken Brian's failure to fight him off as a silent acquiescence - an
acceptance of that motivation. In truth, it had been something much more elemental. Brian had
simply been too sick and too weak and too tired to fight any more, for any reason. He had believed
that he was dying, and that engaging in the battle would not be worth the effort.

Only now had Justin come to realize that a "commitment" was not a sufficient motivation for
building a life together.

He would not say that now - providing he ever got a chance to say anything at all - but he knew
what he would say. It was carved into his consciousness - a script written not in his mind, but in his
heart.

"I love you, and my life without you will never be as precious as my life with you. If you feel the
same, then let's find our way - together."

That's what he would say, if he ever got the chance.

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The colors of the day faded into a soft, lavender gloom as the sun sank below the horizon, and the
house seemed to settle into the landscape, so natural and perfect for its setting that it almost appeared
to have grown there, created by the loveliness around it.
Justin paused near the front entrance to look off down the hill, to note the gleaming perfection of the river as it absorbed the dying light of day. He thought again about going to Babylon, or maybe even to the diner, to grab a box of lemon bars, but in the end, he didn't think it was worth it. He had a huge selection of food in the freezer - all courtesy of Auntie Em's catering service - and a new blu-ray of the *Star Trek* revival movie to watch; he had seen it in theaters, of course, and imagined - every time - how Brian would react to the delectable new embodiment of Captain Kirk. Anyway, he thought he'd just . . .

He could not have said exactly what it was that made him turn around - a sound perhaps, or a peripheral perception of movement - but something did. Afterward, he would never remember going to his knees.

In the fading light, with the sun glistening on the western horizon, the figure that was standing there before him was only a silhouette, a concentrated darkness against growing shadows. But that ultimately made no difference; he didn't know how he knew. He just knew.

Brian Kinney - all in black - tall and strong and still.

And beautiful - oh, God! So beautiful.

"You came." It was a stupid thing to say, but he couldn't think of anything else.

The lips folded in, swallowing a grin. "Did you think I wouldn't?"

"You . . . you never called."

"Neither did you."

"I couldn't."

Brian nodded. "I know."

Slowly, fighting for balance and strength, Justin got to his feet. "Do you want to come in?"

A slight shrug. "It's your house, so it's up to you."

Justin simply nodded and turned to walk inside, knowing that Brian would follow.

Still, he paused when he reached the doorway, and turned back to look up into dark eyes. "It's not my house," he said softly.

"Yes, it . . ."

"Can you see me?" It was not quite the non-sequitur it appeared to be.

Brian lifted one hand to touch the incredible velvet softness of Justin's cheek. "Yes. I can see you."

"And am I . . ."

"The most beautiful thing I've ever seen," Brian said swiftly, his breath catching in his throat. 'I'd forgotten how . . ."

"You have pictures."

"Not the same."
Justin simply nodded and continued into the house - through the front hallway and into the living room with its sleek, beautiful furniture, its luxurious sunken seating area, its fully stocked bar - and its fireplace.

Brian moved forward slowly, his eyes sweeping around the room, taking it all in, absorbing the details, and coming to a stop when he saw the portrait that was somehow the focal point of the room.

Justin, meanwhile, moved to stand beneath it, but his attention was not on the painting. He was staring at Brian, staring as if to commit every feature to memory - just in case.

"Tell me what you see when you look at it."

Brian spent another moment studying the artwork; then he looked down and spent an equal amount of time studying the artist.

"I see a deep, bottomless love, a love that should last forever."

"Should?"

Brian shrugged. "That depends, doesn't it?"

"And what do you see when you look at me?"

"I see the man capable of that love."

Justin moved forward then, and came to stand toe-to-toe with his former lover. "Do you understand what you did to me?"

Brian nodded. "Do you understand why?"

Justin moved closer. "I will answer that - truthfully - if you will tell me one more thing. One more absolute truth."

The Kinney sardonic smile had not changed since the last time he'd seen - and loved it. "I'm not keen on absolutes, but I'll try."

"Do you love me?"

"That was never the question."

"Maybe, but it's the one I need answered."

"All right. Then yes. I do love you; I think I've always loved you."


"Yes."

Justin closed his eyes. "And will you stay with me?"

"Is that what you want?"

Justin smiled, knowing that the moment was right. It came easily, naturally, not sounding in the least like it had been rehearsed a thousand times. "I love you, and my life without you will never be as precious as my life with you. If you feel the same, then let's find our way - together."
Brian smiled and lifted his hands to cup Justin's face. "Then know this. I will love you and keep you and hold you and protect you every day for the rest of my life, for as long as it's what you want. Your life will be beautiful and filled with joy and as perfect as I can make it, but you will never, never be anything less than free to fly - with me or away from me. Your choice."

Desperate now, feeling need course through him like a flow of lava, Justin threw himself forward, knowing that Brian would catch him. Knowing that Brian would always catch him or - should the reverse be necessary - that he would always catch Brian.

They made love there on the floor as darkness swelled across the sky, and the room was awash with shadows, until the only light was the flicker from the embers in the fireplace, and the pale, perfect illumination of the portrait looking down on them, its radiance something that would endure forever.

"The Fire."

The artist could not have guessed how prophetic that name would prove to be.

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*Need You Now - Dave Haywood, Charles Kelley, Hilary Scott, Josh Kear

The End

Chapter End Notes

And thus ends the saga of the beginning. Maybe - one day - I'll write the story of what comes next, but, for now, I think this says it all. My thanks for everyone who stuck with me to the end. It was, after all, a massive effort, and I hope the end does not disappoint.

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